



Understanding Cities

Encounter or Containment?

Michael

Recognising this property of cities, noting the juxtaposition of diversity within them, allows something to be made of the presence in cities, of those who aren't members of business communities. This for Saskia Sassen is an important step.

Saskia

Any big city you have a collection of minorities who make claims. Now often the people that I'm thinking of can be described as lacking power, but when they make these claims, when they do their politics in these cities, they gain something – it may not be power, but it is something that one could call presence, and that is a presence that signals the possibility of politics. What the actual politics will be that they wind up with. I don't know that, you know that comes out of the world or real life.

Michael

And again there seems to be something about cities that helps us signal the possibility of different voices being heard. It seems to me that these same powerless groups in a small town would have less of a chance to emerge as a political actor, to emerge with something that we need to distinguish from simply absolute powerlessness which I'm calling presence, it's an inadequate term but it's a way of capturing something that happens. Now what is interesting is that these claimants will lack power but gain presence, also have an ambiguous relationship like the international business community to this full question of citizenship has historically constituted. On the one hand they often are not citizens in the narrow sense of the term citizen; on the other hand if they're citizens they do not necessarily identify, their notion of membership is not as fully captured in the notion of being a citizen of that country as more advantaged groups would say, as the middle class would have, you know they are citizens of the UK, of the US that carries meaning. For people who feel oppressed because of race, because of immigrant status, because of whatever, it's an ambiguous condition so what I find interesting is that the global city emerges as a strategic space – on the one hand for the kind of valorisation mechanisms that are necessary for global corporate capital that constitutes itself as such – and on the other hand a strategic site where disadvantaged people can gain presence and hand signal the possibility of a new politics. Now both of these political actors enact that project in a place, the city. But both of them are part, in one way or another, of changes, of broader trans-national networks so there is a sort of a sort of trans-national nature to both of these actors, and at the same time their encounter which is characterised by enormous confrontation, not maybe direct engagement but confrontation in terms of their claims on the city, happens within this bounded space of the city.

Michael

Ash Amin takes this further.

Prof. Ash Amin

We've got used to an idea of urban politics as something in the gift of the local state or local politicians to enact through policies of one sort or another, better housing, better infra-structural policies; we might begin to think about the politics of everyday uses of the city, not the politics of big design handed down by the local state or the official politicians of the city – city fathers, city mayors. In short a rainbow politics centred around building up urban public life, and largely from below. So the idea of mixity, the sense of the city as a place of daily life, daily an experience begs in my mind at least questions about what makes democracy. We have got used to the idea that such representative politics might produce cities which are acceptable to all within cities, but we know that this kind of politics by and large serves the

interests of political dominant groups within cities, whereas a different idea or different definition of politics allows us to see the city, and its social groups, and its public spaces as a source of active participation. In other words, a perspective on the city which emphasises mixture, movement, the city as a meeting place, allows us to think about ways in which you can use the resources of a city, its community, its living communities, as a vehicle for improving cities from below through active participation and mixture.

Michael

This seems a very hopeful view of cities, one that insists on starting from an idea of cities as part of wider scheme, as places of encounter, not containment, yet as places of difference, of different aspirations, different powers and different life chances.

Prof. Ash Amin

The bringing together of different communities in the same space or sites within the city which are close to each other, and I think increasingly in the case of the contemporary city that ambivalence is heightened by the, if you like, mixed set of allegiances that communities have towards each other, possibly a sense of loyalty because communities feel they belong to the same city, but also a sense of, intense sense of disloyalty because the communities also see themselves as part of other communities spread around the world. So I think the ambivalence has at least two sources: one is diversity placed in close proximity, but also communities with social aspirations which only derive in part from a shared set of resources which the city provides.

Michael

If cities are places of encounter then hope lies in what people can do with a mix of ambivalence and tension the results. Globalisation may be a huge influence working on and through cities but its influence can be contested – other futures can be imagined.