Book review: Agonistic Articulations in the ‘Creative’ City: On New Actors and Activism in Berlin’s Cultural Politics
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it provides a means of thinking through both old questions of urban studies such as who has the right to the city, and more contemporary queries around informality and inequality, by questioning representations and understandings of state–citizen relations.

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**References**


**Reviewed by:** Mohamed Saleh, University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Recently, there has been a debate within urban studies on revisiting the city as an arena for articulating new political subjectivities. Traversing diverse bottom-up mobilisations and organisations, interlocutors in this debate seek a spatially oriented theorisation of ‘the political’ in its broader sense as a societal condition of inherently possible contestations among opposing voices. This condition is distinguished from ‘politics’ in the narrower sense that is limited to institutional practices aiming to govern the city. *Agonistic Articulations in the ‘Creative’ City* constitutes a welcome intervention into this debate by using empirical material from Berlin’s arena of urban cultural politics and policymaking in order to advance a nuanced conception of the transitions, or rather ‘oscillations’, between politics and the political. By tracing the progress and strategies of a particular transdisciplinary artist action platform, the book shows how groups of artists and cultural workers collectivise their different position-abilities into a new collective political subject, framed by Landau as an ‘agonistic actor’, that contests an institutionally dominated narrative of the ‘creative’ city. The case study takes us to the conflictual backstage of Berlin’s widely known brand as the epitome of Western creative cities, due to being a magnet for a myriad of artistic genres and urban activisms.

Written by political theorist and urban geographer Friederike Landau, the book develops conceptual tools to theorise and distil new insights from the political tensions between the city’s cultural institutions and cultural producers from the ‘independent scene’ aspiring to be recognised as legitimate political actors. To do so, Landau draws on interdisciplinary theories and concepts from political philosophy, urban geography, sociology, critical policy studies and governance theory, with a specific focus on Mouffe and Laclau’s understanding of the agonistic model of democratic practice and political articulation. Although the book is structured into six chapters with clearly
differentiated scopes following a sensible train of thought – given the book’s kaleidoscopic nature – this review piece does not follow the chapters sequentially, but rather provides cross-sectional reflection on their theoretical and practical contributions to urban studies, concluding with comments on how the book can be used and extended by urban scholars.

In her approach to revisiting the political, Landau’s stated intent is to shift theories of the political away from the claim that we live in a post-political age that would imply an impasse for actors seeking to represent the political alongside the domain of official politics (i.e. the political must emerge as disruptive practices from outside of politics), and to move towards ‘post-foundational political representation’ that allows for exploring manifestations of the political at work within institutions governing the official narrative of the ‘creative’ city (Chapters 1 and 6).

Adopting this exploratory approach, the book uncovers artists’ self-organised ways of acquiring legitimacy through forging and negotiating new modes of representation. The book analyses a horizon of change agents of (radical) urban politics in order to ground this line of theorisation in Berlin’s context. In the second chapter, Landau takes a broad sweep of artist-led collectives who merged their actions into an overarching collective that is called Koalition der Freien Szene (Coalition of the Independent Scene). The post-foundational political representation of this Koalition can be subsumed under two broad strategies of rejecting traditional channels of political representation in order to sustain their emancipatory potential, and, at the same time, engaging in an agonistic exchange with the city’s arts and cultural funding institutions and administrators with the aim of unsettling a hegemonically imposed script of what and who constitutes the ‘creative’ city.

By learning from the impactful interventions of the Koalition, the third and fifth chapters articulate how agonistic actors creatively adapt and strategise in the policy-making and governance arenas. Tracing the contingent change between such interventions and official institutions of politics and administration illuminates the role of arts and creativity in transforming urban politics. Landau’s empirically grounded approach of theory building conveys three conceptual developments to readers. First, it operationalises post-foundational political thought to understand the conflicts and political dynamics undergirding contemporary cultural production. In particular, the book systematically advances Mouffe’s (2005) concept of ‘conflictual consensus’ as a productive avenue for grasping how stakeholders articulate their collaborations on the basis of conflict, instead of searching for a unifying consensus that may act as a hegemonic device blocking future political subjectivities from emerging. Second, this approach provides an empirically saturated understanding of the political, highlighting its multiple tangents within institutionalised politics and the factors that keep it alive in the cracks of hegemonic structures. Third, it challenges the pessimistic assumption that the political is devoured by the wide spread of post-politics. Instead, the book promotes a hopeful view by introducing theoretical tools with which one can identify conditions increasing the potentiality of counter-hegemonic movements to emerge and survive.

Agonism is a highly persuasive theme among urban theorists interested in understanding new modes of becoming political that may invigorate the democratic grounds of city-making. However, translating the abstract tenets of Mouffe’s conception of agonism into concrete empirics has been recently problematised. McAulife and Rogers (2019: 5) lament the lack of
‘empirical knowledge about the conditions that might precipitate a transition from antagonism to agonism in the urban development political sphere’. Similarly, Verloo (2018: 2367) posits that ‘there is little understanding of discursive and tangible practices for enacting this ideal’ of democracy. Landau precisely offers a compelling answer to this challenge of empirical translation by advancing so-called ‘matrices of conflictual consensus’. Through a dense dialogue between theory and practice, these matrices unpack the strategies of ‘self-legitimisation’ that the Koalition adopts towards becoming recognised as a political actor (Chapter 3). These strategies demonstrate four aspects of the way agonism is practised in Berlin’s urban cultural politics: (1) the contingency that characterises the entangled web of (de)legitimisation, out of which new political formations emerge; (2) the oscillatory transition of agonistic actors between particular and universal claims-making, a constant movement that enables the rise of temporary collectives to stand together against hegemonic consensus; (3) the way the Koalition channelled the artists’ previous antagonisms into agonistic engagements with the cultural administration, allowing them to secure funding for small artistic organisations and individual artists; and (4) the fact that the groups of cultural workers who constitute the Koalition resemble a ‘chain of equivalence’ that sustainably (re)politicises the shared symbolic space of cultural production beyond the ephemeral moments of mobilisation.

Aside from the predominantly theoretical contributions, there are a number of reasons that also make the book a valuable contribution to urban practice. It reveals the underlying contradictions and conflicts of cultural funding schemes and policies related to the ‘creative’ city, which might lead to agonistic policy solutions (or not). The book synthesises fragmented strategies and stages of re-imagining the political. This offers a guide for future-oriented politics, which could prove useful for urban scholars concerned with the political ramifications of (cultural) civic initiatives. When it comes to Berlin’s context, the book exposes international readers to success stories of urban activism that are only locally known due to the language barrier. Moreover, the book foregrounds two ethical implications. First, by shedding light on alternative modes of (re)politicisation, it expands the horizon of the legitimate agents who can define what and who counts in the planning processes of the creative city, to include artists’ non-confrontational, agonistic disruptions within institutions of cultural production. Second, the author herself plays an ethical role in letting voices speak that are self-organised, pointing to the precarious nature of (unpaid) volunteer political activism and policy work.

Overall, *Agonistic Articulations in the ‘Creative’ City* constructs a needed springboard between political philosophy and evidence-based research on urban politics. This book is a pivotal resource to understand the value of creativity in politics, which might inspire cultural administrators and policymakers to consider conflict not as a problem but as a starting point for innovative governance and policy solutions. It is broad enough to inform and inspire policymakers, activists and urban and artistic scholars. In particular, it is recommended for those working on the nexuses of these fields, as well as interdisciplinary scholars interested in new forms of political agency, representation and governance. However, it is limited in terms of theorising a concrete notion of space. Also, it does not apply for understanding urban politics of the Global South in which agonistic politics may also empower undemocratic voices. To extend this springboard, further research could examine how the introduced matrices and dimensions of the self-legitimised political practices may capture the dynamics of actors
seeking to anchor their actions in space after gaining ground in the policy arena.

References


Reviewed by: Cécile Gauthier, Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, France

The book Everyday Resistance, edited by the sociologists Bruno Frère and Marc Jacquemain, is in large part an English translation of their book Résister au quotidien? (Frère and Jacquemain, 2013). Some edits have been made in the authors’ chapters and there are three additional chapters which will be detailed below.

Drawing on the pragmatic sociology of criticism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005 [1999]), the contributions of the book are almost exclusively set in a French context and focus on daily resistance to the current dominant system. The reflection on contemporary activism offered here is situated at the intersection of different disciplines: sociology, political science, geography, economics, etc. The authors agree on what brings together the forms of contemporary activism – that, despite the weakening of criticism of the capitalist system (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005 [1999]), an aversion to injustice remains present in our societies and takes several forms. Indeed, the book is not an advocacy of a renewal of contemporary activism that only takes up with the novelty of ‘new social movements’. Instead, the authors focus on describing these forms of actor engagement through actors’ concrete daily practices, based on an empirical analysis of actors’ repertoires of actions and justificatory discourses.

Thus, the authors approach the continuities and transformations of contemporary activism through three major characteristic features. First, they raise the issue of the pressure of necessity as one of the main motivations of contemporary activism. Then, they focus on the ambiguous relationship of these collectives with the state. Finally, they address the difficulties linked to the ‘rise to generality’ of everyday forms of resistance.

First, this ‘pressure of necessity’ is addressed in the book through forms of engagement born of a ‘moral shock’. Indeed, in Chapter 2, the authors Lafaye and de Blic present the emotional shock of parents and teachers discovering the threats of expulsion faced by pupils from their school. This pressure of necessity is then addressed in the face of the urgent need to help victims of injustice (Chapter 2). Marta Roca i Escoda (Chapter 3) discusses the pressure to help sick people in the community, describing the emergence of homosexual militancy with the advent of AIDS. Three grounds for engagement are described in Chapters 2 and 3: moral or emotional shock often linked to an experience; belonging to a community (a neighbourhood or linked to an individual’s identity); and urgency of action (due to deportation or illness). This same ‘pressure of necessity’ is also present in the chapters on the diversity of anti-capitalist economic movements (Chapter 5), where their development may sometimes be linked to inhabitants’ living