How Cities Can Transform Democracy

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How Cities Can Transform Democracy

Ross Beveridge & Philippe Koch
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1 Why Cities?

The purpose of this book is to show that urbanites across the globe are transforming democracy as we know it. Scepticism may initially meet such a claim, a feeling that this is overstating the case. However visible and effective community organizers, housing activists and – some – public officials can be in cities, are they not marginal figures in the bigger picture of politics? Certainly, urban activists and politicians rarely dominate politics, either in numbers or impacts. However, in their actions we can often discern a different, distinctly urban way of doing democracy rooted in the principles of people working together for the common good. Seeing global politics on your doorstep, organizing with or against your neighbours, co-producing local services – many will understandably reply that, while all this seems very reasonable, is it not too far removed from, and insignificant to, the mainstream politics of national political parties, state institutions and media? Surely this is where we should look when we want to transform democracy, where real political power is at stake?

The book will contest this conventional view of politics. Indeed, it will turn it on its head to claim that democracy can never be stored up in formal institutions, assured and distributed by state power. National politics may indeed be the source of most formal political power, and in most places it provides the legal framework for representative democracy. However, it can never be the primary source of democratic power, that of the demos, the people, coming together in collective self-government. If we live, as many
claim, in an urban world, then democracy belongs to those urbanites doing just this, finding common cause in the urbanity they produce. Democracy as understood here is a project of empowerment and equality, one that necessarily stands in opposition to, chafes against, subverts and is opportunistic towards, established forms of power, including state systems of democratic politics. Adopting such a view of democracy raises difficult questions as to how it can be extended and sustained in relation to existing political systems. The book attempts to address such concerns. It does not claim to have all the answers but it plots a way forward.

Cities play a crucial part in this. The ‘urban’ is not merely an incidental stage for democracy, but rather provides the conditions in which we propose a revival of the democratic imaginary of the ‘city’ as both a material and imagined place for the demos to come together. Urbanites in different locations across the planet are working collectively to reinvent the way we understand and practise self-government. Advancing global urbanization increasingly appears to be the frame within which such ideas and practices of democracy are developed.

Urbanization is a world-making process, always simultaneously material, social and symbolic. It is best understood less as the process whereby archetypally urban forms of dense built environment expand (indeed, research shows that new urban form is very often suburban) than as referring to the centrality of urban spaces and places to global systems of economy, culture and politics – the sense that the world now has an urban horizon. This might be seen in the extent to which certain big cities (London, New York, Tokyo) are crucial to the functioning of globally interlinked economies and societies, as nodes transmitting and receiving money, goods, services and even lifestyles, be they of the ‘alpha’ elite, the hipster and so on. But the
potency of the urban goes even further: it is the very grounds upon which the global economy is generated, where diverging interests take shape and compete for profit and prestige, justice and democracy.\textsuperscript{2} The urban is where the local and global truly meet, as the housing crisis shows, with international real estate firms and the like capable of rapidly transforming housing and rental prices through investments in towns and cities of all sizes and strengths from Munich to Mülheim an der Ruhr.\textsuperscript{3}

Urbanization alters places in uneven ways, generates new ones and shifts the meanings of existing ones. Prosperity and poverty can move from one place to another as globalized economic relations reshuffle themselves through urban form, expanding and shrinking urban places, giving rise to new \textit{glocal} political and social constellations. Even though the forces of urbanization have been the subject of intense academic and public debates, the implications for democracy have yet to be fully considered. Against this background, this book tackles the question of the effects of urbanization on the possibilities for democracy.

The main argument being made here is that the diverse political practices and organizations found in urban spaces point to an alternative horizon of democracy, but one that can only be appreciated if we are prepared to relinquish conventional, increasingly dated understandings of the where, what and how of politics. Urbanization forces us not only to consider its potent real world implications. It also compels us to reconsider the way we look at politics and the vocabulary we use to think about democracy. A new and distinctly urban democratic project is already visible and real in many places – in housing struggles, in claims to citizenship, even in survival strategies – but has been overlooked by many scholars and politicians because of the dominance of state-centric understandings of democracy. Changing from what we term the ‘state lens’ on politics to
the ‘urban lens’ helps to make sense of a wide range of practices, struggles and experiments that aim for self-government, articulate citizenship and interrogate the complicated relationship between urban society and the state. The notion of the ‘city’, so key to democratic theory, is crucial in many contemporary political projects not so much as a spatial entity but as a political idea and pledge about a place and the wider world. Urbanites struggle for the ‘right to the city’ by taking over urban space and reorganizing how it is produced, enjoyed and governed. Their claims to the ‘city’ may indeed encompass a place called a city (like Athens or Medellin) or may simply refer to a struggle for a stake within urban places, such as housing. Aims, strategies and practices are diverse, but the assumption that democracy is a spatial project is ever present. Taking inspiration from ongoing political projects, the book argues that now is the time to reimagine the city as a democratic idea, one that links a specific locale to collective practices and thereby contributes to this emergent urban democracy. Throughout the book, we will consider ideas or imaginaries of the city as important for past, present or future democratic projects. By using these terms, we foreground the city as a horizon of collective experience and imagination connecting political aspirations to material places in which people live and act.4

The reintroduction of the city in a world of nation states might appear a little obtuse. But the democracies of the nation states are currently in crisis, perhaps even retreat. At least since the global financial crisis of 2008/9 and the imposition of austerity in many countries worldwide, the legitimacy and efficacy of mainstream political parties – indeed of whole political systems – in mediating between the rights of citizens and the interests of business have been ever more contested. If, as some claim, the nation state experienced a revival during the Covid-19 pandemic,
it was surely primarily one of crisis management rather than democratic legitimacy. After decades in which neoliberal rationality has reshaped politics in the mould of economics, the demos has been undone, to paraphrase the title of the political theorist Wendy Brown’s book. Democratic ideas of citizenship and equality have been degraded through their exposure to market ideas of consumerism and competition. The resulting disenchantment of democracy has seen the rise of far-right populism in the mainstream of those democracies usually keen to emphasize their stability and longevity, like the USA, the UK and the Netherlands. Scholars such as Cornel West trace causal links between the failings of (neo)liberal democracy and the rise of a contemporary fascism associated with Donald Trump and others. Such developments are occurring on the back of at least twenty years in which growing numbers of scholars and commentators have countered widespread complacency about the state of democracy, observing growing political disenchantment and depoliticization. Shaping these processes is globalization and the growing strength of global corporations in the affairs of all nations, be they formally democratic or not. At present, it is legitimate to ask not what we can do to save nation-state democracies, but if there might be a more democratic way of doing politics.

But isn’t the idea of the city as the realm of democracy an ancient one, entirely unsuited to an urbanizing world? That the city has a special relation with democracy does indeed go all the way back to the roots of political theory in ancient Greece. The small-scaled, bounded and exclusionary Athenian Republic is not, however, the source of inspiration for our arguments, at least not in the sense it is commonly referred to. The starting point has to be the often intense heterogeneity and global interdependence of
urban societies. The ‘city’, understood as a distinct spatial form, social configuration or ‘authentic arena of political life’, to borrow Murray Bookchin’s term, offers us little hope in a context in which cities are blurring into variegated urban-social forms, suburbanized, regionalized, even ‘rurbanized’. Instead, the point of departure must be the process driving the spatial, economic and political transformations of contemporary societies – urbanization – and the purpose is to resituate democracy in this encompassing process.

In this project, the city is nevertheless instrumental. Not, however, in the conventional sense where the city is synonymous with urban cores often with historical meaning and a distinct spatial and political form. The argument of the book is that the city is the imagined and actual place where people come together in their aim to access and govern their immediate socio-material environment. By doing so, they change the way we can understand and practise democracy in the age of urbanization. This can happen in cities conventionally understood, like Amsterdam, Buenos Aires or Tel Aviv. But the city can also have no name, no clear institutional or spatial form, and yet still be apparent as a claim to democracy, an horizon of political practices. Against a pessimistic reading of our predicament – namely, that the democratic project collapses with the nation state, or that the nation state dismantles democracy to reclaim sovereignty – this book detects a more hopeful political future, one that reclaims the city in and against processes of urbanization.

Our arguments draw on global examples of contemporary political practices and collective acts which are distinctly urban in their attempts to expand democracy. They are urban as they are situated within, targeted towards, use and develop resources from urbanized spaces. They can
be read as aiming for an *urban* democracy in their pursuit of a project of urban collective life. To ‘read’ these practices, the book draws, necessarily, on multiple literatures within the field of urban studies, and brings them into dialogue with the radical democracy tradition in political thought. There is much ground to cover. The book is not a work of high theory nor deep empirical research, nor one offering falsifiable hypotheses and the like. It is, rather, an ‘intervention’: an attempt to shape political ideas, debates and practices. There is sustained engagement with the state of the art in urban studies, and more particularly with the implications of ‘planetary urbanization’ for how we imagine and practise the ‘city’ and ‘democracy’. We find inspiration in radical traditions of democracy. Here institutions are less important than practices. An understanding of democracy in which the demos is forged through shared political experiences, and situated rather than given, runs through the book. Of course, frictions are present at times, but the spirit is one of an ‘engaged pluralism’, aiming to advance not a single school of thought or discipline, but ideas and arguments on the urban conditions of politics and democracy. The rest of this chapter provides the basis for the arguments that follow by sketching the relations between democracy, the city and urbanization, before briefly outlining the chapters to come.

**What is left of the city after urbanization?**

Scholarly discussion on the relation between the city and democracy has witnessed something of a renaissance in recent years. Some scholars see the city as the great hope of democracy because cities, rather than nations, are best placed to organize politics in a context of deepening
globalization and advancing urbanization. In this view, the city(-state) should be sovereign because cities are more cooperative, pragmatic and innovative than nation states, which are, in contrast, captured by ideological, competitive politics and the anachronistic dreams of nationhood.\textsuperscript{13} Such optimism is, however, countered by those writers who direct our attention to the manifold ways in which cities have become more unequal and elitist, driven by a post-democratic consensus founded on neoliberal principles and practices.\textsuperscript{14} To complicate matters further, there is a third position in the debate, which states that it is pointless even to think about the city, whether in hopeful or regretful terms, because – in a context of fragmentary global urbanization, which is generating (sub)urbanized regions and hollowing out cities – the city is a spatial and social form that no longer exists.\textsuperscript{15} In this view, rather than being an agent of political change, the city haunts politics like a ghost of an urbanity past. And whatever urbanization has left of the city has often been turned into sites of speculative capitalism, extraction and dispossession. Many city centres are dominated by global chain stores and apartment blocks that lie empty because they are investments not homes; suburbs sprawl with rich enclaves nestled amongst densely populated slums and low income areas, carved up by road and rail infrastructures. These bitty remains do not seem the best places to look for democratic renewal. All in all, this begs the question: what, then, is the democratic potential of the city in times of urbanization?\textsuperscript{16}

Urbanization not only transforms the physical surface of the globe, it also undermines the dominant conception of politics and democracy constructed around the nation and the sovereignty of the state and its bureaucratic institutions. Urbanization, as other scholars have argued, contributes to an informalization and de-centring of the
state.\textsuperscript{17} It destabilizes many boundaries on which nation states depend, inducing different densities and proximate diversities in various ways all over the world. To be sure, urbanization is by no means a uniform process homogenizing the globe. It is, fundamentally, a process by which the form and meaning of land, its various uses and the social relations around it, get transformed. What is more, the process of urbanization is often violent and rooted in longstanding practices of accumulation by dispossession. From the US subprime mortgage crisis and housing repossessions that triggered the global financial crisis, through broader processes of gentrification and displacement, urban renewal and forcible removal, to the financialization of housing and the crisis of rising rents, urbanization can be a brutal, profit-seeking process, loyal only to the so-called rules of the market and those who benefit most from them.\textsuperscript{18} To say that the politics of the nation state is partly undermined by this process does not imply, however, that the power of the state is not vital to spur urbanization in the first place. And yet, the effects of urbanization on the authority and steering capacity of state institutions are often detrimental. This is not per se emancipatory or liberating for urbanites.\textsuperscript{19} Often market forces are unleashed in ever more destructive ways in the shadow or absence of the state. We are well aware of this reality: this dark side of urbanization runs through the book. Nonetheless, the effects of urbanization on state politics are also generative of democratic possibilities. We are thus mainly interested in how urbanization can (re-)awaken alternative modes of collective organization and self-rule. Some of them are still nascent, others are already flourishing across the globe, albeit often in a fragmented way, based on distinct histories and ambitions.

What the city’s role is in furthering or even transforming democracy in the age of urbanization is a question with no
easy answer. As said, in morphological terms, the city has lost its shape and boundaries. Where the city begins and the hinterland starts is no longer obvious – if it ever really was. The city seeps into the countryside as infrastructure networks extend and intensify, as housing and commerce edge outwards and urban cultures and economies circulate, with lifestyles, tourism and goods moving and blurring the distinctions between urban and rural. Glimpses of what might be associated with the ‘countryside’ often pop up in the city as urban nature and even wilderness. The expansion of the built environment, economic relations and interdependencies across cities and states and across the urban/rural divide undermines traditional notions of the city as a self-evident category or a distinct type of settlement, and problematizes ‘the city lens’ often implicitly used in scholarly work. On what grounds, then, can it be argued that the city retains political and democratic purchase?

A way forward can be found in the ‘southern turn’ in urban studies, which offers a means of reimagining the idea of the city for current conditions. In these postcolonial debates, the city or the urban have never been self-evident or ‘natural’ categories of political analysis. Instead, Ananya Roy and other scholars engaging with urbanization in the global south are concerned with ‘the processes through which the urban is made, lived and contested’. What these perspectives share is an understanding of the city as always already intertwined with the politics of urbanization. The city is of interest as a ‘category of practice’ instead of a category of analysis. Indeed, this body of literature forces us to think about how new theories and vocabularies of the urban might give way to more democratic modes of practice and engagement.
The city, as with most ‘everyday’ concepts, has an undeniable affective and political power, albeit, or rather because, it distorts our view of things. The city as a political idea can not only generate objects of contestation but can also be used and channelled for space-shaping practices and to connect different struggles in and against urbanization. As some scholars have argued, in terms of politics, urbanization levels the differences between centres, suburbs and urban peripheries. Yet, the city as an actual place where material things, infrastructures and bodies come together, and at the same time where a distinct idea of common-wealth and collective purpose prevails, has democratic potential in the age of urbanization.

In the rest of the book we explore examples of the city as a democratic project from around the world. These include the coming together of social movements and city governments in the ‘new municipalism’ in places like Barcelona and Naples, which re-set relations between urban society and the state. But inspiration is also drawn from housing struggles in different parts of the world which often strive for urban self-government. Throughout the book we discuss a multitude of practices, collectives and movements that are not always directly associated with conventional democratic politics at all. From stateless ‘insurgent citizens’ on the urban peripheries in the global south, through housing cooperatives and Critical Mass cyclist activists, to many others, we can detect an urban way of not just thinking about, but also doing democracy. What we see in these practices is a common democratic impulse focused on the aim to self-govern urban spaces. Of course, these places and practices look different, have contrasting histories and embody different meanings; but they all claim and realize a right to the city, to be a part of, to enjoy and to co-determine their immediate environment.
The city in this perspective is where citizens meet to deliberate and act in common, driven by a democratic ethos, no matter the spatial form of the place.\textsuperscript{29} It is in this way that we think the city still has a part to play in the project of democracy, as a ‘concrete utopia’, already there in fragments, the project of politically creative beings embedded in urban collective life.\textsuperscript{30}

\textbf{Seeing democracy like a city}

To see and appreciate the democratic potential of the city, however, we need to take an urban view of politics. By this we mean looking at politics not from the perspective of the nation state, but from the midst of things, within and through the spaces of the urban collective life, scanning the horizon of democracy shaped by urbanization.\textsuperscript{31} Our arguments rest on the premise that we need to flip the common understanding of the relation between city and democracy. Cities are not merely the physical locations, political stages and sovereign institutions in the drama of democracy. If we want to draw on the historical relation between the city and democracy, we need to reflect on it in a different way. Urbanity shapes a different political life marked by proximate diversity, the deferral of sovereignty, and the complicated patterns of (self-)government situated in urban collective life.\textsuperscript{32} Contemporary urbanization has moved the goalposts of democracy: as stated above, we cannot think of the city as a discrete form. However, urbanity can provide the conditions of democratic politics, and the city can provide the horizon of democracy.\textsuperscript{33} The political practices we discuss here are attempts to realize this idea – they act upon the city as a political idea for democratization.

But what does this idea imply for our understanding of democratic politics more generally? We might think of
democracy as being a political project concerned with the alignment of three constitutive elements. First and foremost, democracy is the rule of the people, the demos, to use the Greek term. But rule over what? Over their own lives? Yes, but it is more than that; it is about self-governing societies, finding common ground across difference, or what we call urban collective life. Achieving the rule of the people requires an engagement with the multiple forces shaping urban collective life – the struggle requires tools. This second element leads us to the third: the state, the dominant modern political actor, and for many the decider of the fate of democracy. In modern times, the project of democracy has been imagined largely in terms of the nation and representative democracy. The demos has become equated with the citizens of a nation, voters in elections; societies are after all national, and the state is organized along national lines. This has provided the conditions of democracy for the high modern period. But if the grip of the nation and representative politics on democracy is slipping, then it must be possible, and may also be necessary, to reconfigure democracy.

One way to reimagine democracy is to start from the assumption that it has no self-evident or privileged locus and is a process rather than a condition which can be institutionally shielded. Practices of democracy might emerge everywhere. Parliaments, town halls, city squares are just some of the locations amongst many where democracy happens. Democracy can be articulated through a multitude of practices which do not necessarily comply with a distinct and enclosed form. Democratic meaning is not bound to a set of arrangements, like the nation state, or to any other formation for that matter. Consequently, this book does not offer a different model of democracy to be evaluated against others. Taking our cues from radical strands of democratic theory, we understand democracy as
an open-ended project based on situated practices. The project of democracy is nurtured by an ethos of equality when it comes to defining shared troubles and the ways in which they should be addressed.\textsuperscript{37} To detect a different imaginary of democracy, one which is aligned with urbanization, entails dropping the essentialist idea of a congruence of country (geography), people (society) and nation state (politics).

Democracy as rooted in the self-fashioning practices of the demos shifts us far away from abstract citizens, norms, values, preferences or (strategic) interactions and towards the material actions and tacit understandings of real people, citizens-in-action.\textsuperscript{38} Hence, a shift from institutions to practices implies that we focus more on the (democratic) knowledge that is expressed in practices than on the sort of knowledge that institutions call their own and try to spread. For example, we are more interested in how neighbourhood collectives shape in a pressing fashion the urban spaces around them than in how established formal political actors design participatory planning processes. In this view of democracy, the physical space and the material transformations through which that space has been shaped become more important. This contrasts with most accounts of democracy, which do without the material environment in which democracy ‘happens’. Further, for an urban democracy, place is more important than scale. Place is always multi-scalar, where the local and global merge.\textsuperscript{39} Ultimately, if we avoid essentialist notions of country, nation and people then we can think differently of the collectives and political subjects that make up democracy.

This way of looking at the relation between the city as an idea and democracy as practice comes with a number of implications. First, ‘cities’ are not our empirical cases where we land in order to discover a new democratic model
for the urban age. Rather, we are interested in democratic practices, places and publics situated in urban collective life and performing, as it were, the democratic vision of the city. The city is therefore a generative space of difference, akin to Henri Lefebvre’s idea of ‘differential space’, a place where democratic urban society can come together, and as such the idea of the city has an imaginative and political force.

Second, if the city as an idea and practice is also an alternative to the nation state, it is not a nation-state politics writ small. With the city comes an urban way of being political, one distinct from the state form. Over the course of the twentieth century – it seems – the idea and practice of democracy was bound closer to the institutional architecture, the collective identity and the capacity to act that the nation state promised. The urbanization-globalization nexus has, however, undermined the nation state in far-reaching ways. The current crises of democracy associated with nation states cannot be resolved by saving the nation state as a political locus and trying to recuperate it at the more flexible scale of the city.

Third, we see emergent political ideas and practices rooted within urbanization and aiming to democratize it. Urban collective life becomes the locus of democratic politics as collective claims arise in relation to the problems posed by urbanization itself. We identify a project of democratizing the urban: Who is entitled to be part of the urban? Who defines urban territories and projects? And who gets the surplus value produced by urbanization itself? Hence, the urban democratic project is an attempt at being urban and becoming a political subject confronted by and confronting urbanization.

Democratic projects of the city
If the city is the democratic idea we want to advance in this book, what kind of politics can we expect? What inspiration can be drawn from the past and how must the present be navigated? In urbanized space, past visions of democracy are materialized and visible like sediments of long-gone experiments: in memorials to political leaders and struggles, in grand town halls, in vast social housing estates and in the spaces where infrastructures of water and sanitation emerge overground. Cities were often and still are places of democratic longing – as the German mediaeval phrase *Stadtluft macht frei*, ‘city air makes you free’, indicates. The city has offered in the past, and continues to offer today, resources, spaces of action and horizons of democracy. In the early 2000s, for example, cities across Latin America became subject to diverse and often transformative projects of popular sovereignty.\(^{41}\) The new municipalism of the contemporary period, in Barcelona, Berlin and Amsterdam, actively engages with ideas of urban democracy.\(^{42}\)

Yet, just as there is no single idealized urban form of the physical city, there is no single democratic vision of the city. As our reflections below show, changing patterns of urbanization and shifts in urban form are bound up with democratic visions and the political forces advancing them. Over the last 150 years, the urban – in particular how it is produced and who benefits and suffers within it – has become ever more central to political life, in a way that it was not earlier. It follows that the dream and fate of democracy is ever more entangled in the struggles over these processes of urbanization. And as the old political ambitions are sometimes still visible in the urban fabric, the visions of the present are interwoven with those of the past. The city and its democratic potentialities have a history to which current urban movements contribute and from which they also derive and depart.\(^{43}\)
Arguably the most dominant perspective on the democratic potential of the city in political science and media commentary is that which ties its fate to that of the state. The outlines of this project have resonances with the classical city-state, even if the sovereignty of modern projects is encased within the sovereign system of nations and, increasingly, the global economy. Democracy here is aligned with the institutions of the state, legitimized through political representation. Once won, the state was to be used to transform urban space. The city in this project is a top-down political institution representing urban society. There is an identification of society and the public with the state. Forms of government are established which shape urban everyday life but remain at a distance from it. The goal is the democratization of housing, transport and other urban infrastructures and services. But ‘democracy’ is filtered through the state system. The highpoint for this project was the municipal socialist projects of the late nineteenth century and, particularly, the early twentieth.  

**Municipal socialism**

Municipal socialism has left lasting marks on the urban. Think of the iconic social housing projects of (Red) Vienna. Less visibly, but just as embedded, are the ways of organizing, community symbols and places of struggles in many cities. Municipalism has been understood as a diverse set of ‘laboratories of decentralised economic life’. Much of the governmental activity in the industrializing and urbanizing societies of the global north of this period was taking place at the municipal level. Alongside ‘municipal enterprise’ projects, where the state simply took ownership of a service but continued to pursue profit as before, ‘municipal socialism’ represented the first attempt to disrupt liberal logics of privatization and profit-
making that prevented fair access to basic resources in the city.\textsuperscript{48} The project of municipal socialism largely dried up as a general movement in the post-Second World War context of growing centralization and the emergence of a new state mode of production scaled to the national level. Before that, the local state, the municipality, became a project of democracy. In Weimar Berlin, the city’s electricity, gas, water and sanitation utilities, along with its large public housing and transport programmes and parks, were important for many urbanities (and many since) ‘not merely in providing basic services for a growing metropolis, but in making democracy real, both in terms of urban policies enabled and political aspirations contested’.\textsuperscript{49}

The state was the locus of this democratic project, the provider of political resources and the democratizer of urban resources. Its reshaping of urban space in certain places should not be underestimated. It established socio-political spaces in which working-class people, previously excluded not only from formal politics but from the city itself, could access basic amenities and opportunities.\textsuperscript{50} But even where municipal socialism was most successful, not all urbanites were included in this democratic project. Forces of capital may have been marginalized in many aspects of urban life, but they remained untouched more generally, continuing to drive urban economies. Furthermore, municipal socialism was mainly a project of the organized working class and social democratic parties aiming to represent what they perceived to be their interests. Municipal socialism was selective in terms of policies and organizational means. The marginalized position of the Siedler (Squatting) movement in the history of housing policy in Red Vienna is illustrative. In short, during the extreme housing crisis after the First World War, working-class families built their own homes at the edge of
the city. These unorganized and unregulated Brettldörfer were, however, a thorn in the side of the local state, who wanted control of housing. The social democratic government was quick in tying them to their own approach of cooperatives and other political associations, which linked them to the party and the state. The autonomy of the self-building movement – or the alternative in the alternative – was thus co-opted by state logics of municipal socialism.51

Contradictions were therefore at play in this project of democracy.52 On the one hand, we can characterize it as a move to open up the resources of the city to a wider section of urban society, and to establish universal standards in the basics of urban everyday life.53 It was an outcome of the growing strength of the labour, working-class and social democratic political parties. On the other hand, it was also a project of expanding local state power over urban space and its inhabitants. The horizon of democracy was framed by the state, its institutions and the rules and logics which shaped its functioning. Democracy existed only within the limits of this state-framed horizon.

Urban social movements

If the history of the state in modern urbanization offers highly ambivalent potential, its ‘force’, and main resource, is unequivocal: sovereignty. The rightful and ultimate use of violence and the capacity to make and remake law may rest on an oddly mythical centre, but they provide a clear political sphere as well as coordinates for a project of the city: win the state and transform the city with the power of the state.54 In this sense, the local state becomes a locus for democratic projects intent on its sovereignty.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the city was the site and source for a different democratic struggle, one
rooted in urban society, not the state. The city as a field of economic processes, cultural identities and social relations becomes productive in democratic terms because it creates a specific political subject, the urban social movement, which strives for urban democracy. As Castells argued, urban social movements of the 1970s and beyond were not political organizations that derived from class or other political associations. Rather, they were indicative of an ineluctably urban demos that took shape against the homogenization, bureaucratization and commodification of urban space. The collective social power of cities had long been apparent in uprisings, riots and protests. However, the late 1960s and 1970s marked a transitional moment in urban politics and politics more generally. The student and workers’ movements of 1968, the emergence of the New Left, and the urban social movements represented a shift in political thinking and acting. Rather than formal politics, the everyday was foregrounded as a plane of political action. Diverse collective forces mobilized against capitalism, but also against the state, seeking new forms of democracy based on participation and the empowerment of the marginalized and excluded: racial minorities, women, gay people, alternative communities, as well as the working class.

These political projects became bound up with the emergence of the city as an idea of the ‘globalized urban society – an unbounded metropolis – in the capitalist West’. In the global north, the spatial transformation of cities themselves was reshaping political practices and democratic demands. Urban issues like housing and transportation were foregrounded in struggles for justice and democracy, criss-crossing with movements resisting racism, homophobia, imperialism, colonialism, militarism, capitalism, consumption and patriarchy. Urban social movements in the 1970s sought to mobilize urban