Urban power and political agency: Reflections on a study of local economic development in Johannesburg and Leeds

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ABSTRACT

"Does politics matter" is an enduring question in urban studies. This paper contributes to the debate by exploring the agency of city leaders in local economic development policy in Johannesburg (South Africa) and Leeds (UK). In place of the conventional (though valid) focus on structural constraint under neoliberalism, we show how decisions by leaders ostensibly committed to social inclusion contributed to outcomes aggravating social exclusion. Whatever structural constraints pertain, the failures of local economic development must be attributed, in part, to decisions made and actions taken in response to acknowledged policy dilemmas. An agency-centred perspective poses important questions about the potential for city government to pursue progressive and inclusionary policies.

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Introduction

This paper addresses a puzzle at the heart of the relationship between power and public policy in cities. From the mid-1990s, Leeds and Johannesburg sought to advance 'social inclusion', understood as the commitment to ameliorating multiple inequalities afflicting individuals and communities. Both cities developed local economic development (LED) policies in pursuit of this goal. Yet, if anything, LED aggravated socio-economic exclusion. We do not deny that structural power and structural pathologies are a vital part of the explanation (Davies, 2011, 2012). However, this paper focuses on a neglected dimension of the urban problematic, the political agency – and thus political responsibility – of decision-makers in city government.

We first discuss a continuum of perspectives on urban political agency, arguing that they pay insufficient attention to the agentic dimensions of decision-making. We proceed to explain our approach to researching agency and report insights gathered from studies of the governance of LED in Leeds and Johannesburg. We explore the agency of key political and managerial leaders, finding that purposeful decisions enacted through the institutions of city government were crucial in perpetuating exclusionary dynamics.

To reinforce this perspective, we argue that because neoliberalism is mutative, heterodox and constituted through multiple tactics and strategies, policy actors must select from a repertoire of options in response to dilemmas. We conclude by considering the implications of these findings for possible urban transformations.

Political agency in urban studies

Urban theories accord differing degrees of agency to city government. Some endow it with little, or none. For structuralists, agency is a category error. Castells (1976: 83) saw actors as bearers of structural contradictions in cities shaped by industrialisation, and urban politics as the function of a 'pre-existing theoretico-ideological field' (Castells, 1976: 83). In Foucauldian approaches, by contrast, we are afflicted not by exogenous structures but our own dispositions forged in an encompassing discursive field, defined by the shift from formal to informal modes of control and exercised through networks (e.g. Swyngedow, 2005). In the Foucauldian genealogy of embodied constraints, elites are enveloped in the webs of power they weave and sources of agency, emancipatory or otherwise, are elusive.

In classical Marxism, the state is primarily an agent of capital accumulation (as a whole) and an impediment to social justice. Marxism invests non-state actors with emancipatory agency. It maintains that because capitalist crises tend to become wider and deeper, policy may alter the spatio-temporal contours of boom

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and slump but cannot reverse the underlying supra-urban trends (Davies, 2011, 2012). Choice-horizons tend to diminish as system pathologies multiply. Agency of a special kind, the pursuit of revolutionary goals by a conscious collectivity – the proletariat becoming a class 'for itself' – is required to solve this paramount contradiction (Callinicos, 2004). Marx's (1871) account of the Paris Commune is the foundational text in Marxist urban studies, revealing the city as a locus of revolutionary agency.

At a time when neither states nor proletarians are leading emancipatory social change, many urban scholars seek agency in the purported autonomy of local action (Cumbers, Helms, & Swanson, 2010). Levebvre (1971) is an important influence, for his repudiation of structuralism and avowal of emancipatory potential in the everyday. Lefebvrian revolutionary agency occurs in the asymmetries between capitalist promises and alienation in everyday life. Lefebvre never suggested that crises of capitalism could be solved by 'socialism within one city' (Harvey, 1989: 16). However, post-Lefebvrians take the concept of the everyday further, seeking a politics free of burdensome concepts like 'capitalism' and 'the state', or even 'the city'. Such big ideas are viewed as fetters on agency, as 'oppression through ontology' (Nickel, 2007: 215). Agency subsists in deciding to act against delusions of structural domination, the capacity of insurgents to foster new worlds by thinking, speaking, working and associating 'differently' (Biesta, 2008: 176). The practices of 'community economics' (Gibson-Graham, 2008) exemplify LED inspired by this voluntarist zeitgeist: local people build small-scale non-capitalist practices in the fissures and cracks of the profit economy.

However, the most influential urban theories proceed from the view that city government matters. Poulantzas (2000) argued against classical Marxism that the state is not fundamentally subordinate to capitalism, but rather reflects the condensation (institutional balance) of class forces. His conception of the state sought to warrant the claim that socialists can use the levers of power for emancipatory ends (Pickvance & Preteceille, 1991: 8). Saunders' (1981) conception of the 'dual state' introduced further scope for agency by distinguishing the capitalist functions of production and consumption. He argued that distributive activities such as public welfare are more amenable to democratic influence than the fields of production and exchange (Pickvance & Preteceille, 1991: 9). City leaders can therefore choose progressive consumption policies. By implication, agency is not a fixed property; it is situationally contingent.

Stone's paradigmatic conception of regime politics (1989) sought to rescue the city from enduring legacies of structuralism. He situated urban regime theory in a conception of power anchored by the systemic division of labour, where control of productive assets rests primarily in the hands of business and the machinery of government is subject to popular control. However, elected city governments must leverage business resources to govern effectively. These dual pressures mean that governance is dilemmatic and policy cannot be inferred from the structural positions of actors alone. He further argued (Stone, 1993) that human motivations span a continuum from instrumental rationality to collective social purpose and that motivational diversity makes progressive regime formation possible. However, Stone argued in a manner redolent of dual state theory that progressive regimes are easier to build in the policy domains of education and human capital than in economic development (Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001). Again, agency is situationally contingent.

The lacuna in these accounts is that whether they assert or reject agency, they do not adequately explain its parameters. For example, the diversity of human motivations in itself says nothing about agency. In urban studies, the concept retains what Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 962–3) called its 'elusive' quality. However, in

arguing that regime-governance requires effort, Stone (1989) gave an important clue to the way forward. As we argue below, the effortful nature of decisions made in response to recognised dilemmas constitutes evidence of agency in LED policy.

Conceptualising agency

Unable to answer questions about whether humans have 'free will' or laws of nature determine actions, we adopt a sociological perspective. Since we have no option but to live "as if" agency exists, we treat it as an ontological presupposition and an intrinsic quality of individual and collective action (Joas, 1996). From this starting point, we discuss three issues: of what does agency consist, how do we assess its contextual efficacy and how can we study it?

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) famously defined agency as 'the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal–relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations' (1998: 970). The key to understanding agency is to 'view it as composed of variable and changing orientations within the flow of time' (1998: 964). Agency is organised through the assemblage of three cognitive orientations centred on past, future and present: iteration, projectivity and practical evaluation. These orientations merge in a "chordal triad" with myriad recombinant tones and sub-tones, within the temporal–relational contexts of action.

The locus of iterational (or habit-centred) agency is the 'schematization' of experience: our capacity to 'recall, to select, and to appropriately apply the more or less tacit and taken-for-granted schemas of action' developed 'through past interactions' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 975). Crucially, however, iteration does not imply automaticity of the kind implicit in governmentality. The agentic dimension is how actors 'recognise, locate and implement' their schemas. Being selectively reactivated, even habit 'has its moment of effort' (1998: 976). In other words, reasoning maybe structured by embodied dispositions and cognitive scripts, but we are compelled to select, re-select and revise them in framing and confronting dilemmas. Or, as Bourdieu argued (1990: 108) in response to critics who saw his work as deterministic, embedded sub-conscious dispositions (the habitus) are disrupted when they do not provide actors with cues for action in a novel situation (field), and are superseded by 'other principles, such as rational and conscious computation'.

The projective dimension of agency is the capacity for 'hypothesization', to invent new possibilities for thought and action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 984). It refers to goal formulation, creativity and planning, especially but not only when confronted with novel challenges (in Bourdieu's terms, when the habitus falls out of alignment with a social field). Emirbayer and Mische argue that the way we imagine the future through reflection, negotiation and deliberation can change our manoeuvrability in relation to structures. The concept of projectivity refines Stone's point about the diversity of human motivations by adding that motivation itself entails agency. Goal selection is effortful. If building resource coalitions takes effort, so does dilemmatic and iterative decision-making about who needs to mobilise which resources to what ends.

The agentic focus of practical-evaluation is contextualization, or judgement, at the point of action. The study discussed below did not examine in-situ judgments, but as explained further below considered respondents' reflections on the past and future-oriented reasons and justifications for decisions and actions as key players in the field of LED policy.