City-Regions, Neoliberal Globalization and Democracy: A Research Agenda

MARK PURCELL

Abstract

This paper argues that research on city-regions could benefit from more sustained and critical attention to the question of democracy. That is, it should examine more closely how decisions in city-regions are made, why they are made that way, and how they can be made more democratically. Much current research on politics in cities has framed the issue in terms of citizenship. That work has produced great insight. However, the attention to citizenship has prompted very little attention to democracy, even though the two concepts are deeply intertwined. Current interest in city-regions opens up the possibility that a vibrant line of research on democracy can be added to and engage with that on citizenship.

Introduction

Growing attention to the city-region has produced much excellent work. There remain, however, important areas for further exploration in this body of research. Ward and Jonas (2004), for example, argue that recent work has focused mostly on questions of economic production and that more attention to social reproduction is needed. This paper makes an analogous claim: most attention to date has been focused on the economic dynamics of city-regions; there is much more work to do to understand their political dynamics. More specifically, I argue that there is room for more sustained and critical attention to the question of democracy. While more attention to democracy would certainly include descriptive understandings of current trends in decision-making practices, what I think is even more urgent is a prescriptive exploration of the role democracy may play in shaping a more progressive future for city-regions. Urban scholars have analyzed in detail how neoliberal globalization has negatively impacted cities and city-regions. What we require now is an active search for creative and progressive alternatives to the current situation. A politics of democratization offers much hope for creating more just urban places. Democratization, however, is a slippery concept, and it can just as easily serve more reactionary ends. Therefore, we badly need a critical and sustained examination of how we might democratize city-regions in the context of contemporary political and economic realities. Such an examination is currently absent from most research on city-regions.

I begin with a brief literature review that sketches the absence of research on the interrelations among city-regions, neoliberal globalization and democracy. The paper then goes on to suggest three elements of a research agenda for examining democracy in city-regions. These are debates about the best form of democracy, the relationship of democracy to neoliberalism, and the relationship of democracy to geographical scale. These themes are not meant to be exhaustive, but they represent critical areas of inquiry in the project of understanding and advocating greater democracy in city-regions.

Existing work on city-regions, neoliberalism and democracy

The research agenda I advocate involves bringing together three distinct strands of research: the work on city-regions, research on neoliberal globalization, and debates about democracy. The first two have a fairly close relationship, and much work engages the two topics by analyzing the changing relationship between urban agglomerations and global economic and political restructuring. The work on democracy involves contentious debates about the various forms and prescriptive values of democracy. This tradition has recently come into some contact with the globalization work, but rarely if ever in the context of city-regions.

Firmly a part of the work on cities and globalization, the dominant strain of research in geography on city-regions tends to see them in terms of economic competition (Ward and Jonas, 2004). To the extent that it examines politics, it does so mostly with respect to the regulation of the regional economy — how governance and policy can help create coordination that can make the region more competitive in the global economy (e.g. Hauswirth *et al.*, 2003; Leibovitz, 2003; Knapp *et al.*, 2004). This focus is shared, albeit within a different set of political values, by neoliberal writers such as Kenichi Ohmae (2005). I do not mean to say that this work is economistic, or that an examination of governance from this perspective is not needed. It is to say that the examination of politics in this work does not go much beyond an analysis of how policy is mobilized to manage economic activity (Purcell, 2002b). Rarely does this work address democracy. It does not examine how regional governance may play a role in democratizing the city. Even when democracy is addressed, it is only briefly and in the context of managing social tensions that can limit economic growth (Scott, 2001b). Other work in this vein, in the literature on cities and globalization more generally, addresses democracy more frequently. However, it is usually evoked without critically engaging the concept. There is a widespread sense among many in this literature that neoliberal globalization undermines democracy, but the complex specifics of this relationship are left undeveloped. The meaning of democracy is usually assumed; it is presented as a unitary and commonsense concept, rather than as a variegated and contested one (Appadurai, 2001; International Network for Urban Research and Action, 2003; Hay, 2004). The democracy imagined in this work is usually some form of social democracy, a very particular form of democracy that must be explicated and defended quite a lot more fully than the literature currently does.

The work more specifically on democracy, however, critically engages its complexities. It explores the many theoretical debates about the nature and value of democracy (Robinson, 1998; Young, 1999; Dempster, 2001). For instance, current debate just within progressive circles surrounds the radical challenge based on the work of Foucault, Mouffe, Fraser and others to the more established tradition of deliberative democracy based on Habermas' communicative action theory (Lauria, 2000). These debates reveal how plural democracy is, and they point up how critical it is to be clear about what kind of democracy one advocates. However, this democracy work rarely engages questions of neoliberal globalization or the particular challenges of city-regions (but see McGuirk, 2001). Among those that address both democracy and globalization (Held, 1995; Hutchings, 1998; Watson, 2002), few have examined the urban or city-regional context, preferring to focus on the scale of global and international governing institutions. What is needed, then, is research that draws together these three main themes — city-regions, neoliberal globalization and democracy — and gives each one its due critical attention. Moreover, we need to channel that work into a prescriptive political exploration of if and how democratization can resist neoliberalization and produce a more progressive city-region.

Research agenda: city-regions, neoliberal globalization and democracy

What kind of democracy?

I argue that an important first step in any normative examination of democracy in city-regions is to ask just what we mean by 'democracy'. As the above review of the current literature suggests, this question is not asked often enough. In both popular discourse and academia, democracy has become so accepted as a political idea that its desirability is rarely questioned. It is widely touted by both the left and the right as the best way to make public decisions. At the same time that left radicals call for democratization in the global political economy, the so-called Bush Doctrine also calls stridently for expanding democracy around the world (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Bush, 2002). Clearly the term is enormously elastic. We cannot use the word as though its meaning were self-evident. The literature on democracy I cite above has done an enormous amount to chart the terrain of democratic thought and politics, and its insights are an excellent way to begin building a democratic agenda for cities.

The currently dominant meaning of the term, the one meant by neo-conservative crusaders like Paul Wolfowitz, refers to the formal structures of *liberal-democratic* government. They imagine governments that provide their citizens certain basic freedoms (such as speech and religion), defend property rights, protect free markets, and provide social stability by enforcing the law. All of these principles can be found within liberal-democratic theory; they draw particularly on the works of Locke. On the other hand, *revolutionary democratic* theorists imagine a very different vision, one in which 'the people' have power. They argue that the great mass of people are marginalized and disadvantaged in the capitalist world economy, but the fact of their overwhelming numbers means they have the potential to radically upend current power relations, if they can constitute themselves into a coherent political subject (Lummis, 1997). Here revolution and democracy are twinned, since democratization is conceived as a process whereby the currently powerless multitude seize control of the global political economy (Hardt and Negri, 2004). The *social democratic* tradition, favored latently by those in the cities and globalization literature mentioned above, constitutes a more pragmatic (and less radical) version of the revolutionary democratic model. Against the liberal-democratic model, this tradition emphasizes collective provision of social needs. This last tradition, therefore, intersects most closely with the question of social reproduction and collective consumption in the city (Castells, 1983).

Yet another view is offered by *radical pluralists*, inspired by postmodern critiques of the kind of revolutionary politics just mentioned. They argue that the essence of democracy is struggle among different groups (Connoly, 1991; Mouffe, 1999). The particular strength of democracy is that it encourages political difference and therefore produces a vibrant and tolerant political culture. The unitary 'people' that revolutionary democrats advocate is fundamentally undemocratic, they fear, because it wipes away difference and produces a totalizing if not totalitarian politics.

Other proponents are less concerned with political outcomes and more concerned with political process. *Participatory democracy*, which has recently enjoyed a great surge in popularity, especially in urban planning, stresses that participation in democratic processes is itself a primary goal. Drawing on Aristotle, participatory democrats suggest that a citizen only reaches his or her full human potential by participating in public decisions (Pateman, 1970; Barber, 2004). The end goal of such democracy is the development of energetic, wise and active citizens, more than it is the realization of a particular political agenda. However — just to complicate things — this tradition is often linked with the revolutionary model above to claim that the greater the level of popular participation, the more the needs of the poor and marginalized will be met. This confluence is particularly strong in the work on the participatory budgets in Brazil

(Baiocchi, 2003). As with the more traditional participatory democrats, *deliberative democrats* are less interested in outcomes than in process. Their vision is that it is possible to minimize the effect of conflict and power relations if we can only communicate in the right way (Habermas, 1984; Innes, 1995; Dryzek, 2000). If participants listen seriously to and understand the claims of other groups, a greater collective awareness of the public interest will emerge, one that is truly in the interests of all. Hence they emphasize procedures of communication that can produce greater intersubjective understanding.

And this list does not exhaust the many traditions. Schumpeterian, social choice and direct democracy are just a few additional examples (Cunningham, 2001). To say the least, there is a vast range of very different politics that are compatible with democracy, depending on how the term is used. As we explore the role democracy might play in contemporary city-regions, it is almost pointless to proceed without first getting specific and detailed about which form of democratic politics we mean.

Does democracy resist neoliberalism?

In thinking though democratic politics in the context of the city-region, it is difficult to avoid the issue of neoliberal globalization. The great strength of the city-region literature is its meticulous charting of how wider political–economic processes have shaped city-regions (Scott, 2001a). When democracy is used in the common-sense fashion mentioned in the literature review, there is frequently an intimation that democratization will resist neoliberalization. Here authors usually imply (and sometimes discuss explicitly) a return to the pre-neoliberal, more nearly social-democratic regimes in Europe that seem to have been toppled by neoliberalism. However, rarely is this social democracy expounded upon sufficiently to constitute something more than nostalgia for 'what we used to have'.

Democratization, as we have seen, is a complex politics. Neoliberalization is an equally complex set of political and economic processes (Larner, 2005). It is not possible to define in general what their relationship is. We must rather be specific about which elements of neoliberalization we mean and which form of democracy we propose to resist it. There is tremendous potential in using democratic principles to imagine alternatives to neoliberal urbanization. But such a politics demands that we take seriously the complexity of both concepts. In many ways, asking the first question about democracy helps greatly to answer the second question about democracy resisting neoliberalism. If by democracy we mean conventional liberal-democratic principles and state structures, the answer to the second question is almost certainly no. Democracy in this sense actually moves in close partnership with the open markets, individual economic agents, and property rights associated with the neoliberal agenda. Again, the Bush Doctrine's desire is precisely to spread these two forms of social organization across the face of the globe.

If, on the other hand, we mean the revolutionary democracy of Lummis or Hardt and Negri, we would answer starkly yes. If we imagine 'the people' to be those currently marginalized by the capitalist global economy, then democratization — by which the people form themselves into a historical subject and overturn the current power relation — would mean a thoroughgoing end to capitalist economics. Such a result would clearly be antithetical to neoliberalism, in whatever sense we might use that term. If by democracy we mean the social-democratic tradition, then there are clear lines of resistance to neoliberalism's 'roll back' agenda (Tickell and Peck, 2003). However, the social-democratic alternative to neoliberalism is currently in such rapid ideological retreat it is difficult to see how it holds much immediate pragmatic potential.

For other forms of democracy, the relationship would be less clear-cut. Participatory democracy's stress on process could produce a range of outcomes. Citizens building their democratic capacities through political participation could produce decisions both hostile and friendly to any of neoliberalism's principles. When mobilized in a more

politically inspired context, it could undermine neoliberalism. In the case of Brazil's participatory budgeting, for example, participation occurs under the auspices of the Worker's Party. The goal is to include poor and uneducated residents in budgeting decisions at the urban and regional scale so they can advocate for their interests. Ultimately, the hope is to carry any success up to budgeting scales beyond the city-region. To the extent poor people are able to advocate for their interests, they directly counteract neoliberalization's tendency to increase capital's influence over public investment decisions. However, many fear that the outcome in Brazil is quite dependent on the sponsorship of the Worker's Party. Very different outcomes could result if another party were to sponsor and shape the participatory process (Nylen, 2003). In the American context, it is not difficult to imagine well-educated homeowner activists with professional expertise in law, planning and civil engineering steering such a process to their own ends (Purcell, 2002a). While the latter result may or may not subvert neoliberal aims, it would certainly not be a progressive outcome. Worse yet, the rhetoric of participatory decision-making has been used to legitimate neoliberal policy-making. It is not very difficult to shape a participatory process to ensure a narrow range of decisions compatible with neoliberal ends. For example, private property rights are routinely part of the starting assumptions that participatory forums must work within. Similarly, the powerful narrative of competitiveness can form a restrictive context that disciplines possible decisions in favor of neoliberal agendas (McGuirk, 2001). One participant might advocate greater environmental regulation, but other participants — even those who would benefit most from such regulation — might raise the specter of capital flight and the loss of jobs in the local economy.

The deliberative model is similar in many respects to the participatory model, except that it lacks the latter's progressive overtones. Here the stress is less on mobilizing and developing the political potential of people and more on generating intersubjective understanding, on coming to a shared framing and solution to public problems. For deliberative democrats it is critical to seek out and include as wide a range of stakeholders as possible. Because those stakeholders will generate shared solutions, presumably the resulting decisions will be in the interests of all, and no participating group will be unduly disadvantaged. Therefore, even if deliberative processes include more marginalized participants than had been included previously, they tend to reinscribe existing social hierarchies, since all groups must gain from each decision. Moreover, they tend to legitimate those existing hierarchies with a stamp of democratic process. Therefore, deliberative democracy, managed thoughtfully, can be a particularly powerful tool for advancing the neoliberal agenda. It cannot produce a raw, Dickensian neoliberalism in which corporations rule absolutely. But it can produce a much more sustainable neoliberalism in which capital is able to consolidate its recent gains in influence. Here the assumptions of private property, competitiveness and economic liberalism could be codified as part of the shared understandings that frame public decision-making. No fundamental challenge to the existence and interests of capitalism (such as revolutionary democrats imagine) could be brought successfully under the deliberative model, since public decisions cannot run strongly counter to the interests of any particular group.

While radical pluralists share some of deliberative democracy's insistence on all players remaining in the game, they are far more attuned to the need to restructure power relations in more progressive directions. Like deliberative democrats, radical pluralists reject as anti-democratic the unitary vision of revolutionary democracy. However, they also reject deliberative democracy's claim that it is possible, through better communication, to reach public decisions that equally benefit all groups. Rather, all politics are seen as struggles for hegemony in which some groups win and others lose. Such a politics cannot, however, take the form of a war of existence in which some groups and social relations are expunged from the polity, as in the revolutionary model. But radical pluralists do leave significant room for a politics very much along the lines of the social movement model in which an alliance of groups (what Laclau and Mouffe,

1985, call 'chains of equivalence') press claims to systematically favor disadvantaged groups in order to redress current social and political inequalities. For radical pluralists the goal of such movements would not be revolution, but what Nancy Fraser calls 'participatory parity' through which formerly marginalized groups gain full voice and status in both decision-making and in society more broadly (Fraser, 2001). Here radical pluralism shares important elements with Castells' (1983) model in which urban social movements agitate for greater collective service provision and consumption. Such a democratic politics resists neoliberalism in the sense that it advocates a radical pluralization of power in the current political economy. The current hegemony of neoliberal tenets such as property rights, capitalist economic relations, deregulation and competitive relations among cities would be challenged. However, neoliberal strategies like devolution of authority to local-scale polities (see below) could be quite a lot more compatible with radical pluralism. And a revolutionary democrat would certainly point out that radical pluralism dampens and qualifies the more complete opposition to neoliberalism that revolutionary democracy offers.

The question of scale

As the literature makes clear, city-regions stand out as a point of interest because they seem to be emerging as a key spatial unit in the ongoing restructuring of the global political economy (Scott, 1996; Storper, 1997). As political communities and as democratic publics, city-regions are both made up of smaller-scale communities and embedded in larger-scale ones. It is important to think through how the various scales of political community should be democratically related. Scale is a fundamental (but under-examined) element of democratic politics because it goes to the heart of the eternal tension between particular and common interests. A classic example is when a neighborhood-scale community opposes the construction of a sewage treatment plant in its area, even when the site is the best option for the regional-scale community. The same tension of course plays out at wider scales as well (urban–national, national–continental, etc.). There is no clear democratic answer to such tensions. Liberal models stress the protection of the minority (the relatively smaller-scale community), even as the *democratic* element of liberal democracy favors decisions by majority. Radical pluralist models are also inclined to value the particular interests of smaller-scale groups, especially in cases of environmental injustice where the sewage treatment plant is yet another hazardous land use in a poor community. Deliberative models, by contrast, would search for mitigation that could forge an outcome that (they believe) could be equally in the interests of communities at all scales. However, they would insist that the local community make their case against the site in terms of the collective interest, not in terms of their particular local interest. Communitarian and civic republican models would ask that the local community subordinate their interests for the interests of the wider community. Strict participatory democrats stress that decisions should be made by communities small enough to meet and engage in person, and so they are ill equipped to handle decisions that affect communities too large to meet face to face, such as communities at the city-regional scale. Less strict participatory arguments allow for communities as large as the city-region. Yet they still believe regional polities are preferable to national or global polities because they are best able to produce the kind of affective solidarity among citizens and robust civil society institutions that democracy requires (Hirst, 1994; Putnam, 1995; Storper, 1997; Leibovitz, 2003).

As this heterogeneity suggests, it is very difficult to determine *a priori* the most 'democratic' scale at which to organize governance. Governance structures at the city-region scale may or may not be more democratic than smaller or larger-scale structures. This claim is consistent with the insights into the theoretical work on scale in political and economic geography. That work argues that scales and scalar relationships are socially produced. Therefore, the particular qualities of a given scale, such as its extent, its function or its interactions with other scales, are never eternal and ontologically given

(Smith, 1993; Marston, 2000). Rather, they are contingent: they will result from particular political struggles among particular actors in particular times and places. Scale is better seen as a strategy, as a way for particular interests to advance their political agendas (Swyngedouw, 1997). It is those agendas, not the inherent properties of the scales themselves, that will produce social and political outcomes. Therefore, it is not possible to claim that national or city-regional or local-scale governance has any particular relationship with outcomes such as democracy or competitiveness or justice, etc. Rather, it is the agenda of those empowered by a given scalar strategy (such as the city-regionalization of urban governance) that will produce democratization, competitiveness, inequality, etc.

Current work on the city-region is in some danger of making such *a priori* assumptions. There is a strong sense in much of this work that coherent and empowered regional governance entities must be created to respond to the particular challenges posed by the emergence of city-regions (Ohmae, 1993; Storper, 1997; Scott, 2001a; Evans, 2002). In order to remain competitive, the argument goes, city-regions must formulate coherent regional policy that coordinates the various economic advantages of the region (Scott, 2001b). This argument is a new take on a larger tradition of work on US cities that argues for regional governance as a way to overcome political fragmentation and ensure better land-use coordination and fairer resource distribution (Rusk, 1995; Orfield, 1997; Pastor *et al.*, 2000).

The opposite mistake is widespread in the literature on what is called 'community' or 'neighborhood' development, where many assume that the local scale and localization are inherently more democratic (for a critique of this 'local trap'; see Brown and Purcell, 2005). Here the assumption is that community groups, especially the many NGOs that have sprung up to fill the void left by the retreat of federal funding, should be granted more power to make community development decisions. Such devolution is advocated by both progressives and neoliberals as the most democratic approach to community development. Both would resist upscaling governance to the city-region as inherently undemocratic. But neither is correct: localization of development decisions can produce both democratic and undemocratic results depending on the particular constellation of agendas that are empowered by rescaling.

As we move more fully into an examination of democracy in city-regions, therefore, it is critical to avoid privileging the city-regional or more local or more global scales as somehow integral to democratization. The city-region concept, insofar as it makes the case that a particular scale is currently vibrating with special political–economic importance, is in danger of contributing to such *a priori* privileging. The concern here is that the special importance of the city-regional scale would lead researchers to assume that scale was somehow the key scale for democratization. However, governance institutions at the city-regional scale could both promote and hinder democratization, depending on the agendas those institutions empower. The focus of both descriptive and prescriptive research must be to examine those agendas and how they articulate with democracy. And the first question we asked — about what kind of democracy — still applies. In thinking about which scalar strategy can best produce democratization we must always be specific about what form of democratization we advocate, and which scalar strategy is most likely to produce it in the particular context in which we work.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by saying that I hope I have made a convincing case that 'democracy' is a question that must be woven into our current understandings of city-regions and their ongoing political and economic restructuring. I hope I have also made the case that such integration is a major undertaking. Democracy is complex and contested concept. Even if I have begun to specify more fully the various models of democracy, the

particular characterizations I have offered are far from universal. To take just one instance, most deliberative democrats would take issue with my contention that it is complicit with neoliberalism. But that kind of debate, among others, is exactly what I want to encourage in the city-region literature. Does deliberative democracy, so very popular among planners and urban policymakers as a progressive way forward, help or hinder the neoliberal project? Would radical pluralism be a better or worse alternative? Are the participatory experiments in Brazil and elsewhere transferable to more developed economies? Do they require the sponsorship of a left political party? Are they practicable on a city-regional scale? Work to date on city-regions has yet to engage such debates.

I should also mention one other element of this research program that my own focus on US cities routinely underrepresents. As we investigate democracy in city-regions it is critical to understand the context of both developed and underdeveloped economies. In the former, democratization often means a progressive alternative to existing liberal-democratic structures. In many places in underdeveloped economies, democratization means a transition away from non-democratic regimes, which is a very different process. It is critical for democrats in each context to learn from new ideas and practices in the other context. It is especially important for democrats in advanced economies to realize that even if their democratic traditions are older, the most exciting new democratic movements are just as likely to arise in South America or Africa as they are in New York or Brussels.

Lastly, it is worth reiterating that the agenda I have laid out here must be seen as partial. While I think the questions I have stressed are central to understanding and advocating democracy in city-regions, there are certainly many more I have not mentioned. There are at least as many possible research directions as there are forms of democracy. And whatever this agenda grows to become, it remains critical. In a world where neoconservatives and neoliberals are both raising the banner of democracy at the head of their movements, it is essential for progressive urbanists to offer a rich alternative view of democratization that rejects neoliberalism and imagines a more just, sustainable, and truly civilized city-region.

Mark Purcell (mpurcell@u.washington.edu), Department of Urban Design and Planning, University of Washington, Box 355740, Gould 410, Seattle, WA 98195, USA.

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Résumé

Les recherches sur les régions métropolitaines feraient bien de porter une attention plus critique et constante à la question de la démocratie. En effet, elles devraient étudier précisément de quelle façon les décisions sont prises dans les régions métropolitaines, pourquoi elles le sont ainsi, et comment elles pourraient l'être plus démocratiquement. La plupart des travaux actuels sur les politiques des villes inscrivent cet aspect en termes de citoyenneté, apportant des éclairages pertinents. Toutefois, cette perspective a suscité très peu d'attention pour la démocratie, même si les deux concepts sont profondément liés. L'intérêt présent pour les régions métropolitaines donne la possibilité d'ajouter toute une effervescente série d'études sur la démocratie, à combiner avec celles qui existent sur la citoyenneté.