Working notes on a relational model of urban politics

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> Without transgression, without the red boundary, there is no danger, no risk, no *frisson*, no experiment, no discovery and no creativity. Without extending some hidden or visible frontier of the possible, without disturbing something of the incomplete order of things there is no challenge, no pleasure, and certainly no joy (Okri 1997: 32).

> Limitations are… conditions of possibility. However, to accept given limitations as that which determines all that is possible would make being unbearably heavy. Limits are truly enabling when, having given something its form, […] the form engages with its own limits to fashion its own style. Foucault's notion of transgression signifies work on *enabling* limits (Simons 1995: 3).

Cities are slowly but surely rising to the surface of the South African political landscape. Yet, scholarship and policy development on the city and new institutional initiatives seems disjointed and partial. As the opening quotes intimate, I am particularly interested in the prospects of a transgressive urban politics that can attend effectively to questions of inequality, distributive justice and cosmopolitanism. In a situation of rising inequality within and between urban areas in South Africa (and elsewhere), these are pivotal concerns to address as new political frameworks and identities are being assembled. At present, it seems difficult to conceptualise what a transgressive politics could look like in practical terms because analyses tend to be fragmented and partial.

Despite the speed and intensity of urban change it is clear that agency is flourishing and much remains to be done to recast political practice in the city towards a more comprehensive understanding of what is going on, where things may be leading to and, crucially, how democratic politics can be tilted towards social justice and equity concerns.[i] Many intractable problems beset the current urban political landscape in South Africa. Ongoing reflection on these problems is a driving force for this paper. I will mention a few salient issues as a lead into the main focus of the paper. Firstly, it seems as if the democracy-enhancing aspects of the new local government dispensation are being under-realised under the weight of technocratic rationality within municipal government.[ii] Secondly, many metropolitan authorities seem determined to follow, somewhat uncritically, mainstream policy ideas about the importance of being 'world-class', 'competitive' and globally integrated at any cost.[iii] This seems to produce a neo-corporatist tendency that crowds out other equally legitimate forms of political engagement through direct action and symbolic contestation in the public sphere. The valorisation of long-range strategic planning, such as *Joburg 2030* of the Johannesburg metropolitan authority, is but one example. Unicity councils in Cape Town, Durban, Pretoria, amongst others, are following similar paths.[iv]

Thirdly, community-based militancy seems to be on the increase in the wake of toughening-up policies of municipal authorities. The resoluteness of municipalities is stoked by conditionalities of the National Treasury, the ideological commitment of the ruling party to public-private service delivery 'solutions', and the non-collaborationist ideology that inform many of the organisations in this 'movement'. As a result, we can see a new landscape of conflict and contestation that is seemingly becoming mired in an oppositional iron cage logic that undermines cooperative or consensual outcomes. (My understanding of cooperation and

consensus will be made clearer below.) Fourthly, the interlocked conditions of pervasive inequality, impoverishment, institutionalised racism, poor health (caused in part by sweeping epidemics such as HIV/AIDS) and systemic violence are producing a growing class of people who are falling by the wayside of society as embodied reminders of our political impotence.[v]

Urban politics and policies are more likely to address the complex and intractable conditions in our cities if these become more effective in animating social citizenship, drawing on the disciplining power of radical democracy, and fostering a culture of agonistic engagement that is institutionally mobilised and embedded. Such a project requires a more lucid conceptual framework on urban politics than is typically found in current scholarship on the city. By drawing on these diverse theoretical influences in the wake of the 'cultural turn', I am seeking to develop a conceptual model that can incite further research and critical debate as part of a larger process of animating the public sphere about the potentialities of vibrant politics—a politics of transgression, pleasure, joy and social justice.[vi] In the next section, I summarise the conceptual premises that underpins the relational model of urban politics, which comprises the bulk of the paper thereafter.

Conceptual premises

The conceptual model that follows draws on a variety of recent theorisations in urban studies, political science, policy studies, urban planning and development studies. The common denominator is a concern with culture as constitutive of the social, alongside the economic and political. With the cultural turn in urban theory, and social theory more broadly, comes an awareness that language, discourse and symbolic meanings are central to the incessant processes of identity construction and the realm of agency in the spaces of the everyday. Conceptually, the challenge is to adopt an approach that recognises the structuring effect of the economy, bureaucracy and discursive diagrams of power without relinquishing an appreciation of agency.[vii] The following conceptual reference points fall squarely within this tradition of theorisation and serves as a foundation for the alternative approach to urban politics that I propose in the next section. Due to space constraints it is unavoidably abbreviated and at best suggestive.

1. Urban politics must be imagined, practiced and institutionalised on an ethical basis. Ideally, this is a human rights-based framework that legally guarantees access to opportunities to flourish as a creative individual ensconced in multiple communities of affinity, which may or may not be in close proximity.[viii] For example, in South Africa, a strong basis for such an approach exists due to the constitutional entrenchment of all human rights: political, civil and socio-economic and it is of course also endorsed in the good urban governance campaign of UN-Habitat. It is vital to maximise this political potential in all spheres of citizenship and political practice.

2. Democracy is a necessary precondition for a vibrant political space that allows for regulated contestation of perspectives that are invariably imbued with particular interests. Formal liberal democratic norms and institutional procedures that rest on representative democratic institutions and the rule of law are inadequate to address the structurally embedded relations and systems of inequality that characterise capitalist modernity.[ix] More is needed. In this regard, the ideas of scholars who espouse the benefits of radical democracy are most convincing and promising.[x] More on the institutional expressions of radical democracy will be explored below.

3.   The institutional design and functioning dimensions of urban politics are crucial for the effectiveness and democratic content of political practices. Institutions are not merely containers of political intent, but rather mediate in a fundamental sense how interactions between diverse political actors (and agendas) are structured and channelled.[xi] This awareness brings into view the importance of organisational dynamics and cultures of both state and non-state political actors, but also the importance of translating new political agreements into "the routine practices of frontline officials [in government] if they are to make real differences to people's life chances and to give real respect to people's individual life circumstances."[xii] In many ways, the conceptual model put forward in this chapter adds up to an attempt to illuminate the institutional inter-dependencies between various political domains in the city.

4.   The conceptual distinctions between 'government', 'governmentality' and 'governance' are useful to understand and recast the potential and limitations of the local state, especially in an era of neoliberal dominance. In my usage, government refers in practical terms to the structures, institutions and organisations of the state that regulate social practices.[xiii] Governmentality is a Foucauldian concept, which refers "to the complex array of techniques—programs, procedures, strategies and tactics—employed by both non-state administrative agencies and state institutions to shape conduct of individuals and populations."[xiv] Governance denotes the relationality of power as it flows through networks between the state and institutional actors in the market and civil society. However, "governance is not a homogenous agent, but a morass of complex networks and arenas within which power dynamics are expressed and deployed."[xv] The purpose of this alternative conceptual model is to bring these multiple networks and arenas of urban governance into view so that more fine-grained critical research can be conducted. I also hope to provoke investigations into practicable visions about radical politics that can produce more socially just and environmentally conscious outcomes, i.e. political discourses that emerge from practical struggles to test and transcend the discursive limits of governmentality practices of the state.

5.   The full measure of the urban political terrain can only be apprehended via an appreciation of spatiality. Cities can be understood spatially in terms of densities, proximities, intensities and their effects. Furthermore, the particular form of the spatial configuration that arises in a city shapes the horizons of possibility.[xvi] If the horizon is extremely limited, spatial configuration continues to produce segregation, fragmentation and exclusion. Alternatively, if the horizons are more open, we are more inclined to use the rich multiplicity of spatial practices to unleash new ways of interaction and engagement. However, if the multiple spatialities of the city are repressed or erased (in official texts and regulations), it is virtually impossible to construct a radical democratic 'cosmopolis' in the parlance of radical planner, Leonie Sandercock. In other words, recognition of the inherently heterogeneous time-spaces of the city feeds into political questions about how the city is imagined and represented. At its core, all urban struggles are in one sense or another about the politics of recognition and determination of identity.

6.   This 'multiplex' perspective of the city rests firmly on a non-essentialist conception of identity and community. Kian Tajbakhsh explains that "identities are not expressive of a deep 'essentialist' core, but are best seen as contingent and articulated through interdependent and overdetermined practices structured by both conscious intention and unconscious desire." In other words, "complexity is the *a piori* feature of social identity."[xvii] Invariably the same applies to the notion of 'community'. Frances Cleaver (amongst many

others) has successfully demonstrated how " 'community' in participatory approaches to development is often seen as a 'natural' social entity characterised by solidaristic relations."[xviii] She then goes on to systematically critique this approach, by pointing out the absence of "coterminosity between natural (resource), social and administrative boundaries."[xix] Furthermore, she points out how processes of conflict, negotiation, inclusion and exclusion have been poorly analysed in the development literature with a tendency to romanticise community relations. This has arguably gotten worse with rise of the social capital literature during the past decade. The same argument can then be extended to the notion of the 'urban poor', which is often used interchangeably with 'community'.

7. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that political contestation unfolds around specific, discursively constructed, points of crisis and imperatives to reproduce the political economic system. What is regarded as a *crisis* and finds its way into the public domain via the media is an important area of contestation. Representative democracy, collective and insurgent practices of poor classes, and mundane practices to realise development projects rely on the public recognition of certain issues as valid political problems. Usually this is reflected in the discourses that circulate in (popular) media via newspapers, radio, television and increasingly cyberspace. Increasingly, successful political mobilisation of interests relies on capacity to set the agenda and frame the issues of the day. This point brings me back to my first assertion about the importance of an ethical horizon in political engagement. It seems clear that the potentiality of a rights-based discourse can only be realised through practical struggles that translate everyday violations into claims, demands, remedies and solutions that find recognition and expression in the public domain. In other words, politics is mainly about substantive content, but also about, performance. The question is: how does one re-imagine political agency at a subjective and collective level in ways that can transcend governmentality through performative practices in *all* domains of political action? Hopefully, the conceptual model elaborated in the next section will serve as a suitable starting point to answer this question.

Sketches of a Conceptual Model of Urban Politics

In this section I aim to capture the multiple, interconnected and overlapping spaces of political practices in the city. In conceptual terms it is possible to delineate at least five domains of political engagement between the state, the private sector and civil society at various scales, ranging from the global and national to the local: (1) representative political forums and associated participatory mechanisms; (2) neo-corporatist political forums such as the ones that develop city development strategies, which are comprised of representative organisations, typically the government, the private sector, trade unions and community-based organisations; (3) direct action or mobilisation against state policies or to advance specific political demands; (4) the politics of development practice, especially at the grassroots; and (5) symbolic political contestation as expressed through discursive contestation in the public sphere. Figure 1 below depicts these five political domains in addition to distinctions between the political and public spheres that are continuously (re)constructed through engagement in each of these five spheres and their interfaces.

The value of this exercise is that it allows one to rethink political practice from multiple angles. Moreover, it opens up new ground for imagining more creative progressive political strategies to undermine and subvert the oppressive functioning of dominant interests in the city. The model rests heavily on Foucault's understanding of power and therefore locates discursive and symbolic dimensions of political practice as central to re-reading political institutions and agency.[xx] I will

briefly elaborate each domain in terms of key defining features, types of political practices, inter-connections with other domains and possible pitfalls.

Figure 1: Domains of political engagement in the relational city
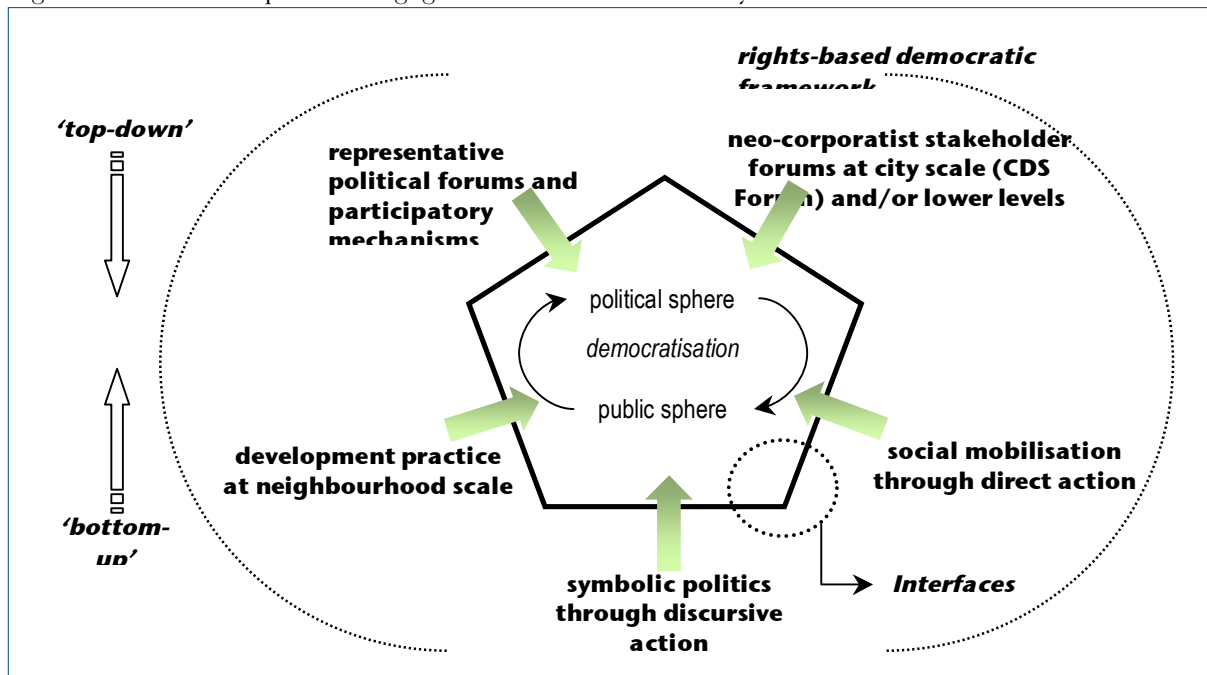
Domain One: Representative Politics

Political representation refers to the formal political system that characterises national, provincial/regional and municipal government. At all levels, the main avenue of political participation in this process is through political parties that are elected. The democratic effectiveness of electoral systems depends in large measure on the democratic nature of the respective political parties along with their rootedness in their constituencies.[xxi] It also depends on the quality and maturity of the institutional rules and systems that structure the functioning of political chambers, council and committee meetings and associated mechanisms for transparency, responsiveness and accountability.

Interestingly, the mainstream policy framework in the UN-Habitat concept paper on urban governance provides a strong foundation for participatory local governance where the full diversity and conflictual interests of the city can be expressed.[xxii] Naturally this depends on 'political commitment' to formulate more practical policies to create various participatory governance mechanisms such as citizen juries, participatory budget councils, integrated development planning forums, area-based political committees, citizen opinion surveys, participatory action research studies to test policy preferences and options, transparency guidelines and support systems, and so forth.[xxiii] Beyond political commitment, it also depends on the tangible accountability of the elected politicians.

The literatures on urban regimes, growth coalitions and elite pacts demonstrate the subtle and blatant ways in which (organised) business interests that rely on public investment frameworks and spending (for transport, land-use zoning and preparation, environmental guidelines, etc), exert their influence over the decision-making and functioning of local government.[xxiv] If one approaches participatory instruments with a naivety about these relations they easily becomes a camouflage for what is really going on in the city. The point about participatory local governance is to increase the democratic oversight of active citizens, especially those whose

human rights are systematically denied due to inadequate services and lack of opportunities. However, this is unlikely to take root unless citizens are well organised and supported by municipal government to actively organise themselves into independent and articulate voices.[xxv] These qualifiers point to the importance of the political values and practices of the political parties that hold majority power in the council. Even though it is a neglected subject in the literature, it is clear that the democratic culture – open or closed – within political parties is a vital aspect in embedding meaningful participatory local governance.

I started off with a discussion of the representative domain of political practice, because it is in this domain that an enabling climate can be constructed for the flourishing of political agency in other domains of social action. This is why the reforms advocated for through the Good Urban Governance Campaign are so important but also dangerous if left under-theorised in terms of power relations in the city. Specifically, municipal government (with visionary leaders) is an important precursor for the establishment of 'neo-corporatist' forums to undertake strategic planning regarding the future trajectory of the city. In fact, close synergy between the municipal development policies and the broader Coty Development Strategies (CDS) that emerges from multi-stakeholder governance forums is essential. However, given the built-in bias towards more organised, well resourced and articulate voices in multi-stakeholder forums, the elected politicians have a vital role to play in ensuring that marginal and poorly organised interests in the city, who should be the primary beneficiaries of the developmental local government mandate, can also find their issues infused in the deliberations. There are few guarantees that this is likely to happen, but this does not negate the conceptual assertion. When I elaborate on autonomous agency by marginal and poor classes and groups below it will become clearer that I locate this conceptual assertion within a larger theoretical diagram of agonistic, conflict-ridden contestation between various political agendas in the city. Seen from that position, it is legitimate to invoke the democratic expectation about the ideal role of elected politicians.

There are many other dangers when it comes to the functioning of representative politics, which underscore the danger of vesting all hope for radical democracy in the emergence of effective representative democratic institutions. Much more is required as the remainder of the paper seeks to demonstrate.

Domain Two: Neo-corporatist Stakeholder Forums
Stakeholder-based forums refer to formal deliberative institutions that provide a regulated and predictable space for negotiation and contestation between state, civil society and private sector representative organisations on urban issues of (mutual) concern, even if for different reasons. Commonly they are referred to as multi-stakeholder forums. In their book, *Local and Global*, Jorge Borja and Manuel Castells set out the case for the necessity of these kinds of deliberative spaces to co-create strategic plans for the city.[xxvi] They frame their argument against the backdrop of the impact of globalisation processes on cities. Such impacts make it more important than ever that public infrastructure investments (especially transport and communication) are carefully made in terms of a larger strategic vision of where the urban economy is headed. By definition, such a vision cannot be the fabrication of municipal planners but must arise from properly structured processes of participation and deliberation, because it must not only be viable but also politically embedded amongst the diverse stakeholders in the city. Without legitimacy, strategic plans are bound to run aground on the banks of political conflict and corruption. The perspective of Borja and Castells clearly operates on shifts away from master planning to strategic planning to accommodate the complexity of urban life. It also builds on the strong participatory thrust that propels discourses on greater decentralisation and

deliberative democracy. This is an orientation that is echoed in the literature on city development strategies by the Cities Alliance.

There is of course an important and growing body of literatue that is very critical of CDSs.[xxvii] However before one becomes completely dismissive of these arenas of political engagement it is worthwhile to remember that the stakeholder forum mechanism was key to the political resolution of the South African crisis of apartheid in the early 1990s. At the dawn of the South African transition process (in the late 1980s), a number of negotiation forums started to emerge at a local level as white municipalities entered into negotiations to end or circumvent rates and service charge boycotts.[xxviii] These institutional forms became somewhat paradigmatic throughout the transition because they provided a model which allowed oppositional political organisations to retain their relative autonomy whilst renegotiating the terms of their relationship as the process of democratisation shifted power to the black majority and their representative organisations (former political liberation movements such as the African National Congress, Pan-Africanist Congress and the like). In other words, the forums provided a guarantee against unilateral decisions that would radically alter economic and political relations in society. It is for this reason that many regard them as reformist corporatist institutions that simply serve to entrench vested elite interests by diffusing militant social action by subjugated classes.[xxix]

Should these criticisms lead us to reject the role multi-stakeholder forums in advancing radical democratic urban politics? I think not. It is crucial to remain aware of the depoliticising dangers of such forums along with the built-in tendency to cater for well organised, resourced and articulate political groups. Yet, given the complexity of urban development challenges it is imperative to build broad-based agreement, even if provisional and continuously renewed, about the future direction of the city and how to get there. The obligations entrenched in the UN Habitat Agenda to progressively realise everyone's socio-economic rights must be the touchstone for the institutional rules and agenda of such forums. In other words, in terms of institutional design and functioning, provision must be made for ensuring adequate representation of potentially marginalized groups and ensuring that the search for consensus does not rule out the necessity of agonistic engagement. The work of Michael Gunder and Jean Hillier, amongst others, points to a series of useful principles that can be used to ensure fair and critical deliberation which does not preclude non-institutionalised direction action or opting to exit.[xxx]

However, the progressive potential of these mechanisms can only be secured if civil society actors maintain their autonomy and actively pursue political strategies that unfold in spheres of engagement and communication outside of the chambers of stakeholder forums. The leverage power of groups representing the interests of the poor and future generations in forums, will be dependent on the power of such constituencies in the public sphere. In particular, the power that comes from direct action to shape agendas and lay claims to constitutionally defined rights and entitlements. Furthermore, strong social organisation at the grassroots potentially strengthens the accountability of elected politicians. This relational dynamic can be harnessed to ensure that conservative agendas that will further exploit the poor become inconceivable for the political class. The multi-stakeholder forums can then become discursive spaces where a more redistributive 'consensus' can be constructed and consolidated. The fact is, unless business interests and the middle classes are publicly and incessantly compelled to ascribe to the importance of redistribution, it is virtually impossible to use local government service provision and taxation as effective tools to achieve greater equity in the city. Multi-stakeholder forums can be important sites of contestation and engagement to socially construct such political

agreements. This is dependent on the social power of the poor and other marginal groups established through effective organisation and mobilisation around everyday struggles. It is also dependent on the circulation of alternative discourses and substantiating knowledge that demonstrates how distributive justice can work to the benefit of all citizens in the city. As stressed earlier, it is crucial to appreciate the *relational* inter-dependency between various domains of political practice.

Domain Three: Direct Action
Direct action involves various forms of collective action by (disadvantaged) groups aimed at stretching the liberal democratic constitutional framework to its limit.[xxxi] This implies that social movements and looser, issue-specific, social groups must claim their rights and entitlements through non-violent social action focussed on concrete issues that shape the quality of life of their constituencies. In a sense, the primary function of progressive direct action is to maintain political momentum for redistribution and realisation of human rights, especially socio-economic rights. Of all the political practices in the city, this type pushes most blatantly at the boundaries of the possible (in discursive, political and juridical terms). Direct action seeks to disturb the tranquillity of 'business as usual', whereby local governance unfolds at an arms length from the citizenry and politicians nestle snugly in the bosom of elites. It potentially shakes up the middle-class disinterest in life beyond the suburb; that is, livelihood challenges in the slums and other spaces of marginalisation. Street conflicts, clashes and destabilisations that spark off direct action are prerequisites for political agreements to address urban inequalities. Such agreements will invariably involve attitudinal and behavioural change amongst the middle-classes, because they will have to fund more aggressive redistribution and more effective government. (Not that their financial contributions are proportionately more significant than those the poor already contributes to simply survive despite inadequate support from the state.)

To be sure, direct action is not about consensus. Invariably, it raises political temperatures and solicits conflict from those who stand to loose if demands are acceded to. From an agonistic political perspective such conflict is necessary to combust crisis, which in turn can produce political engagement and provisional agreements between opponents to allow governance and management to carry on. The challenge is to foster a political culture that is embracing of social mobilisation politics along with institutionally defined pressure-valves to absorb and channel the energy that is unleashed by direct action. Participatory mechanisms associated with representative political domains can be useful mediating channels to ensure that the demands of claimants are articulated to actual plans, agendas and budgets of local government as requisite in terms of annual and medium-term planning processes. Similarly, task teams that undertake the work of multi-stakeholder forums can expand their deliberations to address the claims and issues of those on the streets. The oft forgotten relational dynamic of urban politics come to the fore yet again.

In this light I am often frustrated with radical proposals for urban politics that simply call for the poor to rise up and militantly refuse to accept their conditions but then says nothing about what happens when such claims are potentially acceded to for any political gain must be institutionalised in some form to be enduring and comprehensively adhered to. In other words, my conceptualisation rejects social mobilisation for the sake of it; that is, militancy without a purpose, without a potentially winnable demand. For example, it remains unclear whether the recent wave of social protests in many South African cities are merely reactive or premised on a clear strategy to articulate the diverse domains of political practice in the city. Hard, ideologically-pure rhetoric tends to militate against reflexive and adaptive political strategy. Such rhetoric is impervious to strategic, contingent political praxis.

Collective action through embodied public displays of protest, celebration, defiance or whatever, is not inherently progressive or conservative. In my view, progressive direct action is marked by the political philosophy and agenda of the movement and more importantly, the values of the actors who constitute the movement. In many cities of the global South rightwing fundamentalist groups are very effective at mobilising their members to engage in public displays of opposition, and sometimes, even hate-speech. Participation by the poor and marginalised citizens in social movements or processes can have a profoundly empowering psychic effect as we know from the works and examples of Steven Biko, Paulo Freire, Mahatma Gandhi, Commandante Marcos, Franz Fanon, Malcolm X, amongst others. However, this is contingent on the democratic culture of such organisations and the space for self-realisation through experimentation and performative play. Ostensibly progressive agendas do not automatically translate into progressive inter-personal relations between activists, nor do they translate into self-realisation as part and parcel of the larger social change desired by the movement. What I have in mind here is a form of politics sensitive to issues of interiority (psychic health) as well as exteriority.[xxxii] This culturally attuned understanding of political agency is a vital part of re-defining progressive political agency in our times. Surely our research of these movements needs to be as attuned to the political strategies and ideas as well as the politics of self-realisation. This is particularly important in the next domain of political practice.

Domain Four: Grassroots Development Practice

> So long as we confine our conception of the political to activity that is openly declared we are driven to conclude that subordinate groups essentially lack a political life, or that what political life they do have is restricted to those exceptional moments of popular explosion. To do so is to miss the immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt, and that, for better or worse, is the political environment of the subject classes. It is to focus on the visible coastline of politics and miss the continent that lies beyond.[xxxiii]

The public heroics of social movements are usually what grab our attention when we think about political agency in the city. However, as the work of John Scott suggests, the political terrain is much broader and more variegated than this. I am particularly interested in drawing attention to the everyday spaces and practices of grassroots development projects and their institutional frameworks. The politics of development practice unfolds at the neighbourhood scale (and beyond), where autonomous and state-dependent projects are undertaken to improve the quality of life and livelihoods, to protect against the vicissitudes of crime, violence and other shocks, and to deliberate future trajectories for the community in relation to other communities and the larger regional economic-ecological system.

In development studies there is a vast literature on the institutional dimensions of community-based development processes with particular reference to anti-poverty programmes that are most urgent for the urban poor.[xxxiv] In a similar sense, one could categorise shopfloor struggles to improve the quality of work and establish workplace democracy in this category. Both types of social practice involve the establishment of practical rules and norms that can regularise interactions between powerful interests (e.g. government departments with bundles of resources for specific programmes) and the various categories of poor citizens in terms of effective ways of meeting the minimum standards of 'human dignity' as espoused in national policies. In addition to clarifying norms and standards, grassroots development practice also involves the active construction of systematic projects to address a variety of consumption, productive, information and political needs. For example, savings associations, community gardens, neighbourhood

watches, public art clubs, soup kitchens, shelters for the abused, community creches, drama societies, religious clubs, sports organisations, primary health care circles, and so on.

It is vital to appreciate the *experiential* importance of participation in community-based associations aimed at improving the quality of life of oneself and fellow residents. The recent work of Arjun Appadurai on slum dweller associations in Mumbai argues for the importance of taking seriously 'the capacity to aspire' in thinking about this issue. Appadurai develops a layered argument that development, and especially its imagining, is deeply embedded in local cultures that people draw on to function in a day-to-day sense. Some of these cultural resources will be consistent with dominant societal values and norms that reproduce the acceptability of perverse inequalities. Other cultural resources may hold the germ of critique, of thinking about alternative social configurations that can lead to an improvement in quality of life and sense of self. The challenge is to use the future-shaping essence of development practice to expand 'the cultural map of aspirations' and in the process expand social citizenship and especially voice.[xxxv] It is inconceivable that such political faculties can be cultivated outside an associational context. The argument can be extended. Social learning that arises from development projects can socialise uninformed and unrecognised citizens into democratic values such as accountability, transparency, (agonistic) deliberation, inclusivity, review and majority decision-making. In this sense, it prefigures the democratic rules of the larger political game that unfold in representative arenas. In other words, the experience of organisational democracy in development projects can concretise the meanings of democratic citizenship.

Furthermore, participation in development projects also enables people to see the bits and pieces of the state and how they function in contradictory ways at different scales. For example, those projects who benefit from, for example dedicated poverty funds, learn that the social development objectives of a national department may be very different to the social development initiatives of local government. In the larger political game, strategic political positioning and action depends on a differentiated understanding of the state and the contingent opportunities for alliances when appropriate.[xxxvi] As long as organisations of the poor fail to capitalise on the, always contingent, contradictions between various arms of the state, they are unlikely to move their agendas forward, let alone recalibrate the priorities of the government.

Lastly, grassroots projects can be invaluable sites of experimentation with alternative ways of doing development. State bureaucracies tend to be rigid, hierarchical and conformist institutions. Little room is left for creativity, learning and innovation despite incessant change management efforts.[xxxvii] In part, this is attributable to the organisational logic of large rule-bound and driven institutions. In part, it is a function of the need for political control and oversight over the functioning of government. The literature on organisational change and learning in the public sector suggests that these tendencies can only be mitigated by powerful external pressures that either show up the failures of government or provide such compelling alternatives that allow new discourses to come into play.[xxxviii] On rare, but very important occasions, grassroots initiatives can demonstrate alternative approaches to development that can be absorbed by the state and in theory lead to more equitable outcomes. A case in point is the influence of the Homeless People's Federation on the Department of Housing in South Africa and the government's subsequent adoption of the 'people's housing process' policy.[xxxix]

These three instances make it clearer why grassroots development associations are such an important aspect of the larger political canvass in the city. However, it would be misleading to suggest that it is easy to achieve these impacts because of the dangers associated with this category of organisation. Many of these grassroots organisations operate in an apolitical fashion

and tend to reproduce welfarist models of social change. Such an approach deflects attention from the structural underpinning of maldistribution of public resources. These organisations are also prone to cooption because of financial dependency issues. This is less likely to be a problem in cases where development projects also incorporate membership fees/savings into the organisational methodology, but that is rare. An even more insideous problem is the potential of development projects to dissipate pent-up anger and militancy—the fuel of 'spontaneous' combustion that is so essential for direct action.

In terms of the overall conceptual model proposed here, it is important to review grassroots development practice in relation to neo-corporatist forums and the departmental programmes carried out by municipal government. Due to the inherently tame and consensual style of politics that one finds in this sphere, it can be anticipated that umbrella organisations of these grassroots types are likely to participate in multi-stakeholder deliberative forums, ostensibly to represent 'the community' voice. This makes such organisations of strategic importance to social movements who may prefer to stand outside the discursive ambit of deliberative forums. On many issues, informal alliances with these organisations will complement public actions with good effect. On other issues, social movements may wish to back their positions and agendas in these fora through the media and other forms of projection and agitation in the public domain. On every single issue of note in the city, symbolic politics will be key, and symbolism thrives on waves of compelling and widely shared messages. With this point it is appropriate to move onto a discussion of domain five of political practice: symbolic politics through discursive action.

Domain Five: Symbolic Politics

> …power is both embedded in and effectuated through a crucial combination of knowledge and language, or what is called discourse. Discourse in this sense is the complex mixture of ideas and expressions through which individuals both perceive and in turn try to explain social reality. Discourse therefore also defines the parameters and criteria people use to ascertain and calculate the *potential courses of action* and to choose particular courses of action in specific circumstances. It is thus the primary … medium of both understanding and action (Goverde *et al.* 2000: 14).

Paradoxically, the symbolic or discursive domain is the most under-studied and under-theorised compared to the previous four domains of practice. Paradoxically, because Michel Foucault suggests that we are surrounded and enrolled by discursive power all the time. It is the ground we move on, the air we breathe, because we cannot step outside of it if we are to make a (conscious or unconscious) decision about our next move. Discourses provide a lens on the world, our everyday spaces and ourselves. They constitute the everyday and specialist knowledge we draw on to make sense of larger systems of power that shape thought and behaviour through regulation of bodily practices. Put differently, we internalise discourses about what is appropriate to think about, what to think about (or believe of) the issues we should think about, and how to act in consistent ways with what we believe, and of course rationalise if we do not manage. All of this comes to us as unquestionable truths and that is the core of the power of discourse. It renders certain historically and politically constructed assumptions as self-evident and obvious, beyond the remit of questioning or reversal. For discursive power to work its magic, it must insinuate itself culturally; that is, be embedded in our daily sensibilities and practices which are culturally specific and contingent. Here I am applying a notion of culture as 'the historical transmission of a learned repertoire of embodied human practices expressed in symbolic codes through which individuals and social groups develop and perpetuate a way of life. It is a set of signifying activities shaped by and infused with relations of power. Culture implies not only language, values, beliefs, and mores, but material objects and processes

organized in time-space locations. Culture is therefore a complex social ecology of object, subject, and intersubjective relations.'[xl]

For my purposes in this paper, I want to draw attention to the political potency of discourses about the *identity of the city* and the policy imperatives that flow from it. In a recent article, Jenny Robinson highlights the problematic obsession of many local government managers in the global South with becoming 'world-class' and 'globally competitive.'[xli] The discourse on the imperative of becoming world class or globally competitive inexorably leads to policy commitments to maintain levels of infrastructure that are deemed world class and favourable to attracting foreign investors. If such high-cost and high maintanance infrastructures are not sufficiently *in place*, literally, then of course investment strategies need to be devised to ensure that sufficient resources are mobilised to make such 'essential' investments possible.[xlii] If this means that less resources are available for investing in infrastructure-poor areas, especially in times of economic slowdown, then this is a rational sacrifice for the longer-term good of the city. In this context, neo-corporatist forums then become important sites of reproducing and legitimating such discourses to the point of expunging oppositional ones, or at least casting such perspectives as 'out of touch with reality'. Crucially, municipal discourses such as these are reinforced by national discourses as expressed through the macro-economic commitments of the government and the industrial strategy that prioritises investment in high-tech sectors that will enable emerging developing economies to 'compete' globally, irrespective of whether the educational base exists for the realisation of such a economic trajectory. If one reflects on the underlying economic rationale of the CDS policy discourses, it is apparent how they can be manipulated to highlight and legitmate economic precoccupation in cities to do what it takes to become competitive and world class even if it involves decisions that will lead to the poor having to suffer even more in the short-term. In the rationality of such policy discourses, short-term sufferring is a necessary evil in order first to grow the economy, which will generate the resources to eventually attend more effectively to the needs of the poor.

If cities in the global South are to become spaces of greater possibility for radical democracy and distributive justice, this domain of political practice will have to be taken much more seriously. Symbolic contestation through the deconstruction and reconstruction of dominant discourses are prerequisites for achieving impact in terms of political strategies in all four of the other domains discussed before. Symbolic politics functions through cultural resignification and therefore implies more creative practices which target the media, especially radio and popular newspapers; public spaces in the city, especially streetscapes and squares invested with symbolic meaning; and, spaces of collective consumption, such as schools, clinics, libraries. Symbolic contestation clears the ground to ask fundamental questions about given governmental discourses such as: What are the underlying rationalities of this discourse? What conditions make it possible for this discourse to pass as given and valid? What are the goals of the discourse? How can the elements of the discourse be challenged and re-arranged to turn the discourse on itself and make new meanings and imaginings possible which can be pursued through direct action or development practice or municipal policy? More presciently, to return to my earlier concern about the identity of the city, a discursive sensitivity makes it possible to recast questions such as these: Who is the city for? Whose identities and cultures are embodied by representations of the city? How can the futures of the city be re-imagined to reflect a radical openess as opposed to the conventional approach whereby there is only one alternative?[xliii]

Interfaces
The drawback of any conceptual model is that it superimposes a false sense of structure on complex and fluid social realities. The conceptual model of urban politics developed here is no

exception. A lot of dynamics leak from the model to smudge the artificial boundaries between urban spaces and associated political practices. As Arjun Appadurai reminds us, cultural identities and practices are constitutively porous, relational and marked by dissensus within some aspiration for consensus. For these reasons, it is important to foreground the numerous spaces of interface between different types of political practice. I will return to one striking example which is theorised in the evocative work of Asef Bayat on what he categorizes as 'the encroachment of the ordinary.'

Asef Bayat, in the tradition of James Scott, seeks to capture political agency in a zone in between what I would label direct action and development practice (Bayat 1997; 2000; Scott 1997). Bayat studies the everyday practices of survival and circumvention, undertaken at the expense of the elite, that the ultra poor engage in to carve out spaces to dwell, move around and earn an income in the city where their very presence is deemed illegitimate and illegal. It is a nuanced and layered argument which is best summarised by the author:

> The notion of "quiet encroachment" describes the silent, protracted and pervasive advancement of ordinary people on those who are propertied and powerful in a quest for survival and improvement of their lives. It is characterized by quiet, largely atomized and prolonged mobilization with episodic collective action—open and fleeting struggles without clear leadership, ideology or structured organization. While quiet encroachment is basically a "non-movement", it is distinct from survival strategies or "everyday resistance". First, the struggles and gains of people at the grassroots are not made at the expense of fellow poor or themselves, but of the state, the rich and the general public. For example, in order to light their shelters, the urban poor tap electricity not from their neighbours, but from the municipality power poles; to raise their living standard they do not prevent their children from attending school and send them to work, but rather they squeeze the hours of their own formal job in order to work a second job in the informal sector. In addition, these struggles should not be seen as necessarily defensive, merely in the realm of "resistance", but as cumulatively encroaching, meaning that the actors tend to expand their space by winning new positions to move on to. This kind of quiet activism challenges fundamental aspects of state prerogatives, including the meaning of "order" and control of public space. But the most immediate consequence is the redistribution of social goods via the (unlawful and direct) acquisition of: collective consumption (land, shelter, piped water, electricity); public space (streets, intersections, parking areas); and opportunities (favourable business conditions, locations and labels).[xliv]

This provocative conception clearly has resonance and relevance across the global South if one considers the slum growth trends outlined in the evocative overviews by Mike Davis (*Planet of Slums*) and Robert Neuwirth (*A Billion Squatters*). Yet, it would be incorrect to locate it as either direct action or politics of development practice. It occupies a zone in between but is also highly amenable for deployment in creative politics of discursive contestation about who the city is for, even if not by the protagonists of quiet encroachment themselves. This example will have to suffice to stress the point that the model can only be seen as a heuristic to explore discrete domains of political practice and their hybrid interfaces. Now, for some comments on the final elements of the model depicted in figure 1: political and public spheres.

Public sphere + Political sphere = Vibrant Democracy?

In terms of the conceptual model, elected politicians carry out their function primarily in two domains of political practice: the representative sphere and neo-corporatist forums. And together, these two constitute the formal 'political sphere' in the city, anchored in the deliberations of the municipal council chamber. In the political sphere the governmental priorities of the city are defined, contested and reviewed through highly structured, procedural

mechanisms of deliberation. Both the content and systems of deliberation have a structuring effect on what is defined as legitimately part of the political sphere and what is not. As I have already argued, discursive power and its underlying knowledges are the grids that define the horizon of political imagination and intervention. This political horizon is mediated via the media and legitimating knowledge institutions such as universities, technical colleges, think-tanks and opinion-poll survey companies that reflect back to society curves of opinion and attitudes with a gloss of scientificity. In the absence of dissent and conflict, the political sphere can easily dominate and structure the broader public sphere where state and civil society engagements are mediated. In other words, top-down political practices can eclipse bottom-up processes that emanate from civil society, effectively asphyxiating democratic citizenship.

For this reason, it is vital to stimulate and animate a vibrant public sphere. In the traditional Habermasian sense, the public sphere 'is a space which mediates between society and the state where the public organizes itself and in which 'public opinion' is formed.'[xlv] In this sphere, citizens engage discursively and rationally in public reasoning to arrive at the greatest public interest on a given issue. My theoretical starting points at the beginning of the chapter leads me away from the rational deliberative model of Habermas in order to promote a conception of the public sphere more favourable to the possibility and hegemony of radical democracy. This refers to 'a radical pluralistic public sphere of contestive identities, moralities, and discourses. It endorses a politics of diverse social, cultural and political movements organized around the values of cultural recognition, direct democracy, and performative resistance.'[xlvi] This conception is premised on the insight of Chantal Mouffe that we can never fully reconcile the tensions between equality (maximisation of egalitarian spaces of differences) and liberty (maximisation of democratic rights), but instead deploy the tension to animate agonistic contestation within the ambit of universal human rights.[xlvii] The tension produces agonistic pluralism in the polity. In summary, the argument here is simply for a recognition that at the nexus of the present (everyday transgressions in combination with an agonistic public-political sphere), the past (memory) and the future (open-ended), we are perched on the edge of a politics of potentiality; i.e. a transgressive politics of radical democracy and distributive justice.

Conclusion

By crossing the limits of possibility one encounters transgression. The perverse persistence of brutal inequality in cities of the South requires a politics of transgression that valorises agonistic engagement in a radical democratic public sphere. An ethic of transgression is a prerequisite for political action that will shift the 'frontier of the possible', following the injunction of Ben Okri. In this paper, I have attempted to clarify a conceptual model of urban politics that can serve two functions. On the one hand, it can stimulate a stronger *relational* perspective of urban political practices across a plurality of action spaces: formal and informal, symbolic and concrete, collaborative and contestationary, with a sensibility of agonistic pluralism. Too much of the current scholarship on urban development is fragmented and partial, undermining our ability to get a handle on what is going on and how the status quo is maintained and bolted in place. This aspect of the model is about incitement for more comprehensive analytical accounts of political practices in the city; that is the fullness of political identities in variegated time-spaces of the city.

On the other hand, I have also sought to demonstrate that a radical democratic practice in the city is multi-dimensional and constitutively open-ended. If one considers the multiplicity of domains of political practice alongside the subjective imperative of identity politics, it is clear that progressive politics cannot be imagined *a priori* nor in simple good/bad terms. A progressive agenda is by definition a complex latticework of numerous transgressive practices that span from psychic interiors to the monumental spaces that symbolically 'embody' the city for its citizens

and the world at large. In-between there are an infinite series of strategic and tactical maneouvres that can be deployed to remake political identities, boundaries and horizons. It is only at the coalface of practice and resistance that the tactical coordinates can be defined and used as a resource to construct focussed political communities in difference and solidarity. Such an appreciation allows for the natural coming together of an unflinching critique of the workings of dominating power, especially during our neoliberal times, and reverence for the complexity and indeterminacy of political practice. For me, echoing James Holston, this constitutes the challenge, pleasure, and joy of insurgent citizenship for the city yet to come.[xlviii]

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[i] The dramatic levels of income inequality and seriously high levels of service deficiency are sufficient to underscore the importance of normative politics. A comprehensive overview analysis of urban poverty and its inter-relationship with inequality in South Africa can be consulted in: PDG and Isandla Institute (2002).

ii See: Harrison 2001b; Harrison and Todes 2002.

iii Robinson 2002.

iv Pieterse 2003; Todes *et al.* 2000.

v Duiker 1999; Gotz 2004; Mpe 2001; see Biehl 2002 on equivalent processes in Brazil.

vi Pieterse 2006.

vii In urban studies the actor-network approach of Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift (2002) stands out along with the post-Marxist formulation of Kian Tajbakhsh (2001). In development studies, Norman Long (2001) has gone a long way in formulating a sophisticated framework to capture the dynamic interplay between structure and agency and the space for political action beyond the restrictions of economic-deterministic epistemologies. These are consistent with scholarship in postcolonial cultural studies (Ahluwalia 2001; Ashcroft 2001).

viii See: Amin and Thrift 2002, Ch 6.

ix Two scholars who are particularly insightful on this point are: de Sousa Santos (1995); Unger (1998).

x For example, see: Gabardi 2001; Mouffe 2000; Squires 2002.

xi See: Flood (1999).

xii Healey (2000b: 918).

xiii In other words, it is related to, but more narrow than the Foucauldian conception, whereby: "Government is any more or less calculated and rational activity, undertaken by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and forms of knowledge, that seeks to shape conduct by working through our desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs, for definite but shifting ends and with a diverse set of relatively unpredictable consequences, effects and outcomes" (Dean 1999: 11).

xiv Gabardi (2001: 82).

xv Healey (2000: 919).

xvi The rich and insightful work of Doreen Massey (1999) is particularly illuminating on this point.

xvii Tajbakhsh, K. (2001: 6).

xviii Cleaver, F. (2001: 44).

xix Ibid.

xx Flyvbjerg (2001: Ch 8); Gabardi (2001: Ch 4).

xxi Goetz and Lister (2001); Heller (2001).

xxii The Global Campaign on Urban Governance (GCUG) is the second part to a twin track strategy to advance the Habitat Agenda adopted in 1996. The GCUG is striking for its bold discourse, which comes on the back of a very significant restructuring and repositioning process that UN-Habitat went through in the late 1990s. The outcome of this repositioning exercise was that UN-Habitat resolved to take on a more advocacy role, presumably because the normal methods of diplomatic policy building proved unsatisfactory or the fact that the urban agenda was simply not achieving traction as a high profile development issue. The other aspect of the newfound boldness was the explicit poverty reduction focus underpinned by the principles of equity, urban justice and urban citizenship.

xxiii In an earlier study I provide a full discussion on the gamut of participatory governance policies and tools with due regard for contextual specificity and dangers associated with this relatively recent trend (Pieterse 2000). Also see: Borja and Castells (1997: 193-200); Goetz and Gaventa (2001); Manor (2004).

xxiv See: Barkin (1997); Mossberger and Stoker (2001).

xxv See UN-Habitat's own experience and research in this regard: Lüdekring and Williams (1999).

xxvi Borja, J. and Castells, M. (1997) *Local and Global. The Management of Cities in the Information Age*. London: Earthscan.

xxvii I cover these criticisms in Chapter 4 of *City Futures* (Pieterse 2008).

xxviii See: Shubane (1995).

xxix For example, see: Bond (2000).

xxx There is a rich literature on this which provides useful guidelines for thinking through this complex relational politics, especially: Edmunds and Wollenburg (2001); and Hillier (2002).

xxxi There are obviously many instances where (relatively) privileged and conservative groups also embark on direct action to get their political grievances across. By focusing on disadvantaged groups I am merely signaling an analytical preference to highlight the actions of this category of social actors but not to create an impression that other groups do not engage in this political arena.

xxxii Alvarez *et al.* (1998); Orbach (1996); Pieterse (2004).

xxxiii Scott, J. (1997: 323).

xxxiv This is surveyed in: Pieterse (2001).

xxxv Appadurai, A. (2004) 'The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition' in Rao, V. and Walton, M. (eds) *Culture and Public Action* Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 69.

xxxvi Evans, P. (2002).

xxxvii This is not to denigrate the important and complex work of effective institutional change in large public sector organisations. Studies on 'synergy' between the state and civil society organisations demonstrate just how crucial it is to pursue organisational transformation to enhance the developmental capability of government departments, especially where they act in concert with civil society organisations (see Evans 1996; Tendler 1997; Abers 2000). Nevertheless, drawing on participant observations I am also certain that much of what passes as change management quickly becomes ritualised practices of adaptation with little interest in fulfilling the developmental mandate of the government.

xxxviii Barnard and Armstrong (1998).

xxxix See: Bauman and Mitlin (2002).

xl Gabardi (2001: 89).

xli Robinson, (2002).

xlii See: Graham and Marvin (2001).

xliii The theoretical basis of such an approach is elaborated in: Eade and Mele (2002), Massey (1999), Robinson (2002) and Tajbakhsh (2001). Strategic actions that flow from such an approach are deftly argued in: Amin (2002), Amin and Thrift (2002), Graham and Marvin (2001, Postscript) and Sorkin (2001).

xliv Bayat (2000: 24-25).

xlv Barker (2000: 151).

xlvi Gabardi (2001: 109).

xlvii Amin and Thrift (2002, Ch 6); Mouffe (2000).

xlviii Holston, J. (1998).