



Transcript Ep. 66: Book Review Roundtable: How Cities Can Transform Democracy

[00:00:00] **Intro:** This is the Urban Political. The podcast on urban theory, research, and activism.

[00:00:09] **Nitin Bathla:** Dear listeners, welcome to another episode of Urban Political Podcast. And today we are here to discuss the very timely and interesting book by Ross Beveridge and Philippe Koch, *How Cities Can Transform Democracy*, published by Polity Press. And we are joined by the authors of the book, and, additionally, we have two great interlocutors, Roger Keil and Julie-Anne Boudreau.

Perhaps, could you introduce yourself?

[00:00:36] **Roger Keil:** Hi Nitin, thanks for the invitation and the introduction. My name is indeed Roger Keil, and I'm a professor at the Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change at York University, which is a suburban university in Toronto, the country's third largest university. And it has, and not only this Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change, but also, a long tradition in urban studies and maybe one of the most radical political science departments in the country of Canada, maybe North America.

And to some degree, I will speak also from that position, which is why I'm mentioning that which is an important place to call my home, my intellectual home.

[00:01:12] **Julie-Anne Boudreau:** My name is Julie-Anne Boudreau, and I'm a professor at the Institute of Geography at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM.

So, I'm speaking from Mexico City right now. I've been living in that city for close to 12 years now. As Roger was saying, I will be speaking from that point of view as well. Although, my previous experience, both personal and professional has been based as well in Canada, in Montreal and Toronto.

But I'm just coming back from a very interesting trip to Naples. So, I was very happy as well to read some parts about Naples in the book. So, thank you for the invitation.

[00:01:54] **Ross Beveridge:** Hi everyone. First of all, thanks to Nitin and to Roger and Julie-Anne for agreeing to do this. My name is Ross Beveridge.

I'm a senior lecturer in urban studies at the University of Glasgow. As we're talking about institutions and institutes, it must be one of the few departments of urban studies, certainly one of the largest in the UK. Alongside my academic work, I'm also an editor on the urban political.

[00:02:23] **Philippe Koch:** Yeah, hello. Thanks, Nitin, for organizing this podcast. My name is Philippe Koch and I'm a professor in urban politics at the Department of Architecture at the ZHAW, Zurich University of Applied Sciences in Winterthur. And I'm happy to join the conversation. Thank you.



[00:02:38] **Nitin Bathla:** Thanks all. Thanks for the introductions.

Perhaps, Roger, would you like to come in first and say a few words about the book?

[00:02:46] **Roger Keil:** Thank you for giving me the opportunity. I read this book a while ago for the first time and now again for the second time in preparation for this and it did not turn stale on me at all. I am even more enthusiastic about this book and its intervention.

What it's trying to do and how it will lead to, I hope today we will show that, lead to interesting conversations in urban politics. And that is true, both, for academic debates on urban politics, there is no lack of those, but also of course, it's also about urban politics itself. And it can be read as an intervention into urban politics.

So let me start then with a note on style. I really loved reading the book. It was an easy page turner, as much as one can say that about a book this theoretical, it is very well written and refreshing in style. It's not terse at all.

It's not in any way academic in style, unlike much other academic prose. It's a very academic book in many ways, but it's not in its style. It's different from typical academic books because it's dialogical and conversational and it's persuasive and it's illustrative. It shows what it's trying to do through examples but also through a language that easily appeals to people who are more than just specialists of urban political theory.

The language used in the book is aimed at clarifying things, not obscuring things with jargon and pretension. Its message is clear and explicit. It's repeatedly explicit. One knows what the book is about. It's analytical, normative, and programmatic, but never orthodox or dogmatic. So, here's an example of the book's emphatic and winning styles.

Just one of many sentences that I wish I could [unintelligible]: "Urban political is a bubbling [unintelligible] set of assemblages, chafing, wriggling for space. Everyday encounters are crucial. Talking, connecting, making plans can develop common cause and forge collective action." This is a great sentence to have somewhere in the middle of the book that catches the reader's attention in so many ways because it speaks to the direct experience of People, whether you are in academia or whether you are out in urban politics, the book is a generative critique of the discipline of political science with its epistemic nationalism in political science.

And I'm a political scientist by training, and I don't often say that, and I don't often speak from the disciplinary view of political science. But here I do that because I think it's important to point out that I have been trained, as have been my interlocutors today in this podcast. We have been trained from the national state downward and upward.

This is what makes political science work. And this book is a critique of that, but it's also a critique of politics at the nation state level, the actual politics, the real politics at the nation state level, that operates as the measuring stick of all politics in practical political arenas. Where a line is drawn against both sub and supranational politics that situates such politics outside of the sovereign domain of the nation state. Which sets the rules and boundaries of political engagement of any kind. The book, its authors, disabuses the reader from this conventional view. Entertain to another and introduce to another view of politics. Instead,

then, the book constructs politics from the deep experience of the proximate diversity of the city.

That's a word from Warren Magnusson, which is cited in the book. But when using the term city, the authors immediately warn the reader that the object of their discussion is quickly losing its common reference. So, while they're decomposing the nation state as the point of reference, they're also saying the city itself isn't so clear anymore as a point of reference.

And that loss of reference has two dimensions. One is that the city is an emergent condition, and they say the city is not pre-given or stable but emerging in social practices and collectives. And secondly, the city is decentred in spatial temporal terms as the dimensions of urbanization and urbanism are taken on all manner of extensive forms.

The emergent ontology of the city and the extensive epistemology of the urban are the characteristic cornerstones of the book to which the authors return time and again, throughout the text. This is expressed perhaps succinctly in this: "An emergent political order of the urban calls long established certainties of democracy into question, at the same time forces us to reimagine what democracy in the age of global urbanization means.". From that a reimagining of democracy and a reimagining of the city take shape in an intertwined process, which I think is very important.

These processes are intertwined. that is both conceptual and empirical, abstract and concrete, situated and globalized. The book is explicitly dedicated to an engaged pluralism, and while highly theoretical and conceptual in its structure, it is informed by the empirics and experiences of today's urban life.

They say: "Our arguments thus draw on contemporary political practices and collective acts which are distinctly urban in their attempts to expand democracy.". Programmatically, the experience of urban life itself nourishes democracy, and urban democracy or urban politics creates the conditions for the foundation of urban life.

And when I say foundation of urban life, I mean two Moments of that foundation. One is the creation of urban life, and the other one is, like the foundation of a house, the substrate of urban life. And they say: "The city provides a democratic horizon for struggles on the right to be a part of urban collective life, to participate in the co production of urban space, and to benefit from the commonwealth of urbanity.".

This also means that in contrast to much local political science research, urban politics cannot be reduced to formal politics or electoral politics. Municipal, administrative politics. I would like to say that the book is not naive but conscious of the limits of its argument.

Another quote: "If urban collective life can provide an array of resources for democratic politics, there are also limits and contingencies. Urban conditions change and vary, become more or less conducive to enacting publics.". And I'd like to, later in the discussion, perhaps come back to this point in particular, but the book ends on a hopeful note that is based not so much on hope as an expression of desire, but on actual politics in our cities today.

The authors say in their conclusion: "The city, we have argued, is not a democratic idea stuck in the past of a sovereign city state, but it's already being practiced by urbanites around the

world while making democratic claims to the spaces around them." end quote and the end of my initial comments. Thank you.

[00:10:12] **Julie-Anne Boudreau:** So perhaps I can follow up on Roger's summary and comments of the book.

I want to begin my intervention by recalling. It was very nice, I was invited to this very urban political podcast at the very, very beginning of the pandemic in April 2020. And I'm saying that to discuss a book of mine, which is very much discussed, that is to say Philippe and Ross are entering in conversation with this book of mine and how cities can transform democracy.

And in that moment in April 2020 when I was invited on this platform to discuss that work it made me think quite a lot because we were at the beginning of the pandemic and I was thinking, oh my God, what if all of what I wrote about global urban politics doesn't make sense anymore because the state is coming back with such a force.

We were at the beginning of the pandemic and national and international politics was very much dominant. That is to say we were all worried about what this would do to urban political life, right? So, it was a very nice opportunity at that moment to reflect on that relationship, which is very tensed between national, international state politics and urban politics.

And I'm saying this as a mean of introduction, because reading this book now in 2023, we're at another moment. And I realize the book gave me many, many answers to these questions we had in 2020 when the pandemic was just starting to hit us.

And as Roger was saying, to me, the conclusion, as they say, is not about hope, but it's about desire. Desire for recognizing the performativity, the constant emergence of urban publics in urban politics. But I will also repeat what Roger says, not in a very naive way. There is a very interesting and theoretically strong and also empirically interesting reflection on the relationship with state politics in the book, and this is what I want to insist on in my comments today.

So first of all, I like the fact that the book starts with being very clear that the city is not an abstraction, is not just a place on the map with clear boundaries. The city is a category of practice. The city is also an inspiring imaginary, something that inspires urban publics as kind of an imaginary of what democracy is and should be.

It's a political idea, as well as a political practice. And also, the book starts with a very strong philosophical and normative statement about what democracy is. So, democracy is an open-ended project situated in practices. And to this I relate very, very much because this is, I think, what most of us see every day in our cities around the world.

So, I will structure my comments on three main themes. One is the question of sovereignty, which is discussed quite extensively in the book. The second one is the question of norms and institutions. And the third one is this notion of interstitial distance to the state. And I will come back to that at the end.

So, on sovereignty, it's very interesting. I mentioned in the introductory comments that I was just coming back from a trip to Naples where we're starting a new project on humanity's urban futures. And over there in Naples, we had this very interesting discussion on sovereignty. And at that moment when we were in Naples, I had not read the book yet.

So, when I read this book in the past few days, then I saw all of what you had to say about sovereignty. I was very happy because it came back to me, and some of the arguments that we could have used in that discussion in Naples. In the book the argument that Philippe and Russ are making is that we should dissociate democracy from Institutions and from this idea of sovereignty, that is to say, democracy is always performative, is always emergent.

It cannot be fixed in this idea of sovereignty, which is very much related to state formality, right? So how do we enact democracy? We enact democracy through Relations that developed in the cities and not through the control of a territorial space, which is the idea of sovereignty. But and this is what I very much like about the discussion of sovereignty in the book is that this does not mean if we dissociate sovereignty from democracy and from territorial space. It doesn't mean that democracy is aspatial because one of the main arguments of the book is that democracy relies on materiality. We need a place for democracy to be performed and emerge. And they develop this argument using among many other authors, the work of Judith Butler on assembling political publics.

And the fact that we need this material place and bodies where democracy actually emerges. So, I like that because it's a way of thinking about democracy beyond this idea of controlling a piece of territory, but it's not aspatial. This brings me to the second point on norms and institution in the sense that what they're calling for is dissociating this idea of state formality of what democracy should be, rights and obligation, and all those mechanisms to ensure the sovereignty of a democratic state.

And instead, they speak of democratic instantiations, they speak of the development of democratic knowledge, they use a lot of examples of the appearance in cities of urban public such as for instance the chapter where they discuss the critical mass cyclist movement around the world, right?

So, democracy emerges, pops up in cities. So, it doesn't rely on a set of norms and institution. However, when I was reading this, thinking about what's going on in Mexico City right now, I'm thinking if democracy is always performed and always emerging, how then can we make sure that it stabilizes for some time?

Because from a classical political scientist's point of view, this will be certainly always a question, right? So, it's nice to have democracy emerging through urban publics in different instantiations over time and in different places, but in a place where you have a very long history of state intermittency, the state can be there, or sometimes it's not there.

For instance, Mexico or many, many cities of the global south. This very instability may be something we're thriving for in Europe, in North America, where you have centuries of democratic institutional formation, but in other places where this is not the case, this very instability is part of the problem. It's not something we should thrive for in a certain way.

So, if democracy is always fugitive, is always performed, well then how do you make sure that you don't have abuse of power? Because in a place like Mexico City, democracy relies on charismatic leaders, which is by definition always performed and always emerging and always discontinuous.

And so, there is, I think, a tension. It's a tension that I wasn't able to resolve myself in many ways because what I see in Mexico is that the urban leftist political elite are thriving for institutionalizing democracy because it's not institutionalized, but by doing so, they empty it of its democratic content because it becomes very formal, very static, very bureaucratic.

And in the book, they have this figure, which I thought, wow, this is an answer to this conundrum that I was stuck in. They have this figure of the democratic craftsman. And I thought this is very, very clever because who are the democratic craftsman? They're not the charismatic leaders like this president we have right now in Mexico City, this AMLO, the populist president, which is a very charismatic leader, which is very authoritarian and anti-democratic in many ways, but they have these craftsman which are these people in the city that actually weave democracy or weave democratic publics, or the emergence of self-govern initiatives with the state at certain kind of distance, and this will come back to my third point in a moment.

So, I think this is very interesting, this kind of intermediary point in real people, these craftsmen that kind of disseminate and promote democratic knowledge. Because by definition in a city like Mexico City where the state is always intermittent, it's there and it's not there. When it's there, it can be very, very paternalistic or it can be very, very abusive, in terms of abuse of power. And when it's not there, it's negligence of many places in the city. So how do people react to that, by definition by self-government. This is how you make the city work. So, by definition, Mexico City, according to the definition of the book, is very democratic in the sense that there's a lot of democratic knowledge of self-government, autogestivo in Spanish places, right?

So, people just make it happen. And there are huge amounts of these urban publics because the state is just either abusive or not there, or very paternalistic. So, these craftsmen are there all over the city. But institutionally the city lacks democracy, right? I found in that book interesting responses to this paradox in the context of Mexico City.

And just not to take up too much time with these initial comments, another concept of the book that I really like is this, use this development that you make of this idea of interstitial distance to the state. So, you're saying, we cannot avoid the state and democratic norms and institutions, the state will always be there. So, we need to think of how much distance do these urban publics, urban democratic publics, need with the state. So instead of speaking of being inside or outside the state or formal or informal, you speak of what does the state do to democracy and what are the points of contacts or the modes of engagement between the state and these urban democratic publics.

And I find this very useful. And again, it's something that speaks very much to the situation I can observe in a city like Mexico City. So, I will just end these initial comments with that.

[00:21:41] **Nitin Bathla:** Thanks for all of your time Julie-Anne. That was really rich, your commentary, and I can only glean upon your comments. I would like to say that, by the time that this podcast would be out, the listeners would have had the chance to also listen to the podcast around the book of Adam Auerbach, machine politics and migration to cities, and for me this book was somehow very interesting to cross read with Adam's book, which insists on how migrants sort of redefine the state and redefine political machinery.

He uses this metaphor of machine politics, which was developed in the U. S. to look at politics of racialized people in American cities. And he tries to read Indian cities through that, and specifically how informal or squatter settlements rather in Indian cities, how do they redefine the state and how perhaps sometimes the sort of authoritarian state through the authoritarian lens obscures the redefinition of the state and redefinition of urban politics itself.

So, when I got this book in my post-box, at the first glance, I was just praying that it should not be about urban triumphalism. And it wasn't. So, I'm so happy because somehow, the cover had a hand, which was carrying this sort of spectacular looking building.

So, I was just praying to God and praying to myself that, I hope it's not urban triumphalism. And then when I opened, I just enjoyed reading the book on so many different levels. Firstly, sorry I'm an architect here, just the format of the book is so readable, and you can carry it around and the page size is somehow just beautiful and the thickness of the page and everything.

So, the materiality of the book itself is really nice. But just to come to the content of the book itself, I think there's not much to say after what you, Roger and Julie-Anne, have said already, but perhaps I would just like to add, I love this sort of decentering of the state, and then looking at rather centring our attention to, as Julie-Anne said, this sort of interstitial distance and how the different types of urban politics are framed.

And you take us to these different typologies or different places where you describe how these various groups are defining their politics in relation to the state and what kind of distance they're using for that definition. But also, I loved how you centre our attention on the everyday. The everyday is often forgotten and you somehow bring the attention back, while not losing the attention to also state space, but how the everyday politics has the potential of redefining states space, as you call it, not state space, but states space. And to ground us again from seeing the state and instead of seeing the state, you take us back into these different places.

Philippe, I'm assuming you wrote that part, but perhaps in conversation with Ross, but to the squatter movement in Zurich and then the whole progressive corporate movement. But also highlighting the contradictions of these movements. How it's somehow the immobiliar or the real estate company that gives the land to this cooperative is actually implicit in Nazi politics in the past.

And it's problematic in itself. So, I love that you highlight these contradictions as well throughout the book. But what a lovely and emphatic ending to the book where you bring us to Glasgow, Ross, and then you highlight the case of [unintelligible] to long-term migrants

and residents of Glasgow and how the city police and the collectives in Glasgow sort of offer resistance to their deportation and are able to make them stay, even under COVID 19, which was a time of emergency.

And I found that ending quite emphatic and bringing our imaginary back to very pressing forms of politics. I love how you, chapter by chapter, give us a more complicated view on understanding the urban political and urban publics and decentring our ideas of citizenship and democracy and everything.

So that was really lovely to read. Thanks a lot. Perhaps, I would like to ask two questions. One relates to my work, and I'm really interested in understanding and looking at politics of inhabitation beyond the city. Inhabiting the extensions, so to speak. And I try to look for these sorts of interstitial movements and try to understand how people are fighting against evictions and how also the middle class organizes in these extensions. But in my view, what has happened is there's an emergence of ordinary politics, right? Where everyone behaves as if they're the ordinary citizen of these city extensions.

And the politics is quite fragmented, just like the fragmentation of the city extensions as well. And I sometimes feel that the politics that is being produced in these sorts of urban extensions is somehow irreconcilable with each other. It just leads me always to a dead end where it's post political, it's somehow framed as post ideological, but is very ordinary and, is this different forces acting against each other, but without being explicit about it. So, I would love your view about it, how to, perhaps, use your book to rethink that notion of ordinary politics?

And the 2nd question is perhaps mundane, which is, Philippe and Ross, I mean, it's quite rare for me, for monographs to be published by 2 authors, more and more.

I see people writing alone, and that's something that is conditioned by academia as well. In order to progress on your academic track, you need to publish single authored monographs. So, I would love to hear what made you decide to write together and how is the process? Because you're also coming from very different situations, I mean Philippe you are such a zurichite and you, perhaps, think in German as well and you are embedded within different kind of realities and Ross, you're such an anglophone or rather a Scottish guy. How do you bring these different ways of thinking and different ways of writing together?

Perhaps implicitly I could read that, but I would be really interested in listening how you wrote this book together.

[00:29:26] **Ross Beveridge:** Maybe I'll go first, just to make sure Philippe can't say anything negative about me. To deal with the second question first. In terms of writing, I think, we write a lot together on articles and books tend to be something that we see as individual projects.

But I suppose Philippe and I have been working on articles, hovering around topics of Politics and democracy in everyday life in the city, and I think at some point we just had an idea that we had to get out of our system and had to do it together. And it seemed obvious that we would write this book together.

We've known each other for quite a long time, that helps, of course. But I think we both have some background in political science, political theory, and then also a kind of distrust of that, or some kind of distance to that, as Roger was saying. Dissatisfaction, with where that leads you when we think about the politics of the city. [unintelligible] worked. It wasn't always peace and harmony, but it was generally pretty cooperative, and we got on pretty well doing it, and it was good fun. So, we might even write another one. In terms of your question, Nitin, about urbanization and everyday politics, having this risk or reality that it becomes so fragmented and almost non-ideological and too bound up in its own kind of rhythms and routines or narrow interests, to transcend that to become a broader project.

I suppose that's what the book's really about in some ways. I think it's this reassertion of the idea that democracy comes from people coming together. This original idea of the demos coming together in space. And we make this really strong argument that democracy needs to be spatialized, needs to have a location.

Democracy isn't something that we can assume will solve everything. Indeed, I think, we're quite contingent in our arguments. But ultimately, we say that the city and urbanization provide these resources and we should use these resources more. This potential there that we can use to transcend differences between us.

I think that isn't necessarily a solution to non-ideological politics, but I think we position this idea of democracy in relation to this frame of urbanization. So, this idea of something bigger that's shaping us and that affects us in very different ways in even ways, but that it can provide us some kind of sense of a political horizon. There's an urban horizon, or there's a horizon shaped by urbanization, and that we need some kind of engagement with that. And how do we develop collective solutions to that? What do we call that project? And we call that project Democracy.

And Philippe and I were just talking quite recently that it's interesting in urban studies, there are lots of books written about, justice, urban justice, justice in the city, and that's absolutely an important thing to write about, but there are very few books written about democracy, and I think that's one of the things we wanted to do here, was to take this idea of democracy and take it away from formal politics, and say, look, people are already doing democracy, and they show us this different way of doing politics.

And I think that doesn't provide a single solution to this movement from fragmented self-interested politics to collected politics but provides some kind of horizon and coordinates. Philippe, you want to add anything to that?

[00:33:16] **Philippe Koch:** Maybe just a few comments. First of all, many thanks for these generous comments on our book.

It's just fantastic, especially because your work was so important in the whole project. And you're always thinking if we can resonate with that work and if it comes together. And so, I'm really happy to hear that. And I think in this spirit, also the second question on our collaboration, first of all, I think we are friends.

So, the book was also a means to stay friends, given our academic lifestyle. So, Ross lives in Berlin, in Glasgow, I'm living in Zurich. And so, the book was the bracket that kept us together to a certain extent. But of course, we had content and an idea that we want to put on these pages. I would recommend that if you can imagine writing with someone that you get along with, and that you have shared ideas, it's certainly a good way to develop new ideas and also be quite self-reflective and also maybe sometimes insecure, and being together insecure is easier than alone, I would say.

And the other part, I think what was interesting, maybe also to come back to your first question, is this idea of the democratic craftsman, which comes quite late in the book and also in the whole process of writing the book. And I think that's something we should develop at some point or someone else could develop that.

It goes back to Sheldon Wolin, to whom we refer a lot. And I think that's something that might be also interesting to consider when looking at ordinary politics. So, these Persons who are maybe capable of bringing different projects and experiments together, without providing a coherent framework or a coherent kind of idea or project.

And I think that sometimes people refuse those small projects because they are not bold enough or they may be going different directions, but I think we would suggest to see the positive side of these projects and also to have in mind that they will provide some memory in the future.

So, people will memorize that there was this project, that there was this quote, and we can refer to that. There's a history of democratic politics. And I think that's something we should not undervalue because otherwise we will just start all over again every time. And maybe that's also something that we want to highlight in the book, that there are some kind of hidden traditions that we might want to show or reveal in different cities and that there is, as I said, this idea of a craftsmanship that we might want to collectively define and also adjust depending on the specific situation.

[00:36:26] **Roger Keil:** Can I intervene here because I ended on such an emphatic note when I described the book and its contents. And while I was rereading the book, I was worried about a few things that I also made known to the authors early when I first read the book, which has been an experience much of the kind, similar to what Julie-Anne said in the beginning about the experience of three years of COVID and post COVID. And also, the politics of populism and right-wing populism, and I'm curious about the craftsmanship, the urban craftsmanship. We must not forget that cities were founded, and you quote Engin Isin, our old friend, very deliberately in many parts of the book. And Engin, of course, did his original work, his dissertation, I believe, on the Canadian city and the colonial city, and how these were corporations in the first instance, and cities are corporations. And in the 19th and early 20th century, when urban politics, in the way that we learn it at university and political science programs, take shape.

There are these top hat politicians sitting around these council tables making decisions as urban craftspeople. And in the progressive movement, it was the urban crafts, and they were all craftsmen, most of them. Who then became Depoliticized in a way, and they ruled

the city because they knew stuff about water and electricity and about economics and finance and all that.

I think that we need to think about that also as a tradition of urban politics. So, when we want to dig into that joined experience of the urban as a political space in a democratic space, we must not forget, that the modern city has been ruled by these specialists of the urban that often did terrible things.

Sometimes they build the waterworks and public transit and particularly under regimes of municipal socialism and all that. But often they did terrible things. They built prisons and they built a welfare state that had a bad side to it. And all kinds of things like that have to be taken into account when it comes to that legacy.

But today, in this present moment, which you said you are very interested in because you're talking about the current urban politics, we have to deal with this, an urban political, which is potentially built on a craftsmanship that is extremely counter revolutionary and counter progressive. I'm thinking, when Julie-Anne and I left Naples from our meeting last week, when I landed in Munich, I looked at my phone and I noticed that Berlusconi had died.

And I had nothing to do with it, even though I came from Italy, but I must mention that it made me think [unintelligible] Berlusconi, of course, his first wealth as an urban developer. So did Donald Trump. These are people who worked in and through urban politics to become who they became in the end.

They became these globally ambitious populist politicians. Through the craft that they learned in the back rooms of City Hall and all of this. So, we need to keep that in mind. And just to close the cycle, which I started with COVID politics, I read the book in short distance to a book that the German speakers here will know about, by Nachtwey and Amlinger, "Gekränkte Freiheit", about the rise of a particular kind of libertarian authoritarianism.

And to keep that in mind when we talk about the politics of the city today is that during the pandemic, when we stayed at home to be good progressive citizens, and we believed in keeping our fellow citizens healthy, the crazy right wing was out there in the streets demonstrating and creating urban publics of a certain type.

That of course was mostly brought home to us in Canada through the occupation of our capital city Ottawa, for an entire month by a group of, sociologically spoken, very non-urban people who came in driving in big trucks to the city and occupying the city space, occupying in that case also the capital city space, and making that the arena for a certainly non-progressive and non-urban politics.

So how would you react to that? I know that you have thought about this, and you write about it in the book, but I would like us to briefly touch on that because we can't not mention it at this point.

[00:41:30] **Philippe Koch:** I think, first of all, I think we decided not to talk about this dark side of urbanization.

I think we mentioned that somewhere in the book that there is a dark side to it, and we want to follow the more hopeful signs. And that might be a wrong choice or a biased choice, that can be the case, but it has been a choice and it has been a deliberate choice, but we started off also this project, I think when the *Gilets jaunes* were occupying a lot of streets in France and that was one sign that there is something to a specific form of urbanization, as in France, where you have a different form of articulation and a more kind of, well, *Gilets jaunes* is a bit more complicated. It's not just riot during populism, but there is this relationality to urbanization where you support centrality and then you produce marginal spaces at the periphery and that this periphery will somehow come back to the centre and try to occupy the centre and get into these resources. And I think that's something that we want to address more in terms of what kind of organization and collective action has to be in place so that these grievances can be formulated in a more democratic way.

There must be some form of solidarity or commonality or sociability, also outside those spaces that we usually connect to those forms of solidarity. And so, our approach should also maybe serve as an inspiration outside of these centres and at more peripheral spaces to think about the openings that urbanization might provide.

And of course, this sounds kind of naive when you look at the protests in Germany. My idea of that, as a Swiss, is we have now our late largest party, political parties, the right wing since 30 years. And what I can say is that there is a lack of organizing and community activity on the ground, which leads people to move to right wing parties.

So there needs to be a more situated engagement with political grievances. And that's something that we want to describe in the book.

[00:43:56] **Ross Beveridge:** To follow up on that last point, and maybe make another one more related to the state, thinking a little bit more, maybe not in terms of political science, but in terms of formal politics. You could make the argument, and lots of political scientists, political sociologists do, that with the decline of political parties, we're thinking in this global north context now, the absence of that kind of Political infrastructure, in the absence of some kind of civic infrastructure, the decline of civic infrastructures, you are more likely, or it is harder to counter these kinds of movements.

Doesn't say that the presence of these kind of infrastructures will, I mean these movements, these populist right-wing movements, emerge, but it certainly means that countering them could be more difficult. I think that's an important point that Philippe makes in relation to the book. We're talking about a different form of understanding democracy.

And I think to take that to a more strategic level. The argument that we make about democracy as a kind of theoretic strategic point, that it doesn't really have anything to do, in its essence, with the state is then brought into this constant tension with the state as being an unavoidable force.

And that's where we come up with this idea of the interstitial distances, which we take from Simon Critchley, who takes the basic idea, I think goes back to Marx, this idea that you need to have a space away from the state to generate not just confrontational politics and a

movement, a mass movement, but to generate political education citizenship, that there needs to be that kind of distance.

But what Critchley argues, and this is when Critchley is more of a political theorist rather than a philosopher, general philosopher that he is today, was that essentially these democratic projects, it's true democracy as I think Marx called it, just has to engage in some ways with the state because it's always internal to the state's scope, the power of the state.

And I think one thing that we argue in the book, and then we have this chapter where we engage with these different new municipalities' projects, you mentioned Naples, Julie-Anne, we talked about Barcelona, Preston, Jackson in the U. S. And we try to illustrate the tensions which occur from taking, adopting these different positions to the state.

But what all of these positions are about, of course, is political power. And one thing that we don't address is the question of power. We try to deal with it in this illustrative notion of interstitial distances.

But what's underlying that, of course, is the possibilities which emerge from engaging with the political power of the state and the compromises which then occur through being coopted or being far away from institutional power and institutions. And so, in a kind of roundabout way, I think, what we're saying there is that at some level, some kind of fundamental level, all forms of urban democracy will have to engage with those sources of power. And I know that ultimately the source of democracy can't be the state. There has to be some push towards the state, to avoid perhaps this fragmentation and some form of institutionalization. Julie-Anne mentioned this notion of fugitive democracy, which also comes from Wolin, this is the idea that democracy is always fleeting and can never be fixed and established because once it does, then it loses its essence of self-governance and everything like that.

But the point we make in the book going on, that is that one reading of Rowland's work is that he thought that about democracy, but it wasn't necessarily something that he cherished about democracy. So, he was always looking for ways to advance some form of democratic consciousness, you could use the word culture, but that's also problematic and opens up lots of questions in itself.

I suppose there's something about this rolling out of some kind of democratic consciousness through urban space and then this strategic engagement with the state as an idea and as a source of power. I think I have to stop there.

[00:48:31] **Julie-Anne Boudreau:** If I may come in on the question of power. I think this is absolutely crucial, in the sense that many of the urban publics, democratic publics that you're talking about in the book are not striving for power. This is not what they want really. The question is, and I think this is important because this is also what I see very much in my own work, working with similar urban publics in Mexico City right now is, power is not of interest to them.

That's not what they want. And this comes to the question of what's their desire, what's their goal. Because you mentioned transformation at some point also, many points in the

book. I think what do these people want to do is to change their immediate life environments.

At different scales, some of them very, very micro, some of them more at a societal scale or ecological, et cetera. But the question of power, I think is interesting. You don't address it directly in the book, but it's interesting to dissociate also from the state. There is for sure this need, and you do it very well. You just synthesized it with this question of how do these publics strategically decide to engage with the power of the state, but it's many of them are not, this is not their interest really. What I'm trying to say is I'm wondering if what we're talking about is not necessarily just power, but to be more specific would be violence in the sense that what these right wing populist movements, that Roger mentioned, want or what the self-governed groups I'm working with on the periphery of Mexico City want is to avoid abuse of power and to avoid violence by the state or by other actors in certain ways.

I know this is a question of power, power and violence are related to one another. But it's in a certain sense, democracy is not really about power. Democracy is about a way of living and transforming this urban materiality you're talking about in the book, and one of the things we need to make sure about is how do you avoid violence in the process of practicing democracy in certain ways, and this changes a little bit the discussion we have normally about in political science.

About power and democracy in the state, etc. But I think following your lead of dissociating institutions from democracy, perhaps we should also dissociate power from institutions, right? And in reality, the effect of power is violence in many ways. And so maybe this is what we should talk about.

[00:51:25] **Roger Keil:** I find this last bit of your conversation particularly fascinating, and I don't want to get involved in that and not drive that further. But I want to perhaps move us to another plane, and a plane of horizontalism, away from the vertical relationships to the state, and how to create institutions, as I said, I found this discussion extremely helpful, and the question of violence and power is absolutely central to that.

But I'm interested in two other terms. One is horizontality, and the other one is autonomy. In this global world that you're taking as your starting point, and it's also, of course, the basis of Julie-Anne's book. And I need to point out that all four of us here are authors for the same publisher, and I've done two books for Polity in the last few years, and Julie-Anne is in the same series, and you are too. So, there is a bit of a debate going on already, which I actually, I wanted to point that out and make it explicit, it's actually a great format through which to have these kinds of debates.

But one of the things that I was thinking about is that some people have used this idea of global urbanization as another entry point of something that has been going on for quite some time, is this [unintelligible] idea of [unintelligible], but it is sort of this idea which has roots in anarchism. It has roots in municipal socialism, but also in social democracy and roots in Marx's understanding of dissolving the contradiction of the countryside is to horizontalize the way a governor goes through separate autonomous urban communities that live side by side in a way, but also somewhat autonomous.

If this is a largely positive version of a horizontalized urban democracy. There is also, again, the other side, and I just happened to listen to Jagoda Marinić's interview with Slavoj Žižek yesterday, and he made that point, and I don't necessarily take that as an endorsement, but he made a smart point about the refeudalization of capitalism. And that is capitalism moves away from these nation state-based forms of organization of politics to a relationship of you and me and Google in a very direct way.

And it's sort of a feudal relationship that we have with our little machines and the devices that we have and with Amazon that gives us little presence on our doorstep. So, we have a completely different form of capitalism to deal with, that organize other forms of power in also a horizontal way.

In a feudal type way, also hierarchically in terms of creating new dependencies in that largely horizontalized world in which you can have anything you want. If you have money on a credit card, you can just order everything you want and you can have all the information, if you have the internet, that you want. And you're participating in this horizontalized world, which at the same time is the world of these new hierarchies.

So how do these potentially autonomous, urban communal forms of politics fit into this new terrifying world of refeudalized global capitalism.

[00:54:56] **Philippe Koch:** That's obviously not an easy question to address. But I think we also discussed that, at some point writing this book, I think maybe it's also a response to that development that we observe now. When we see that the nation state might not provide the services and the legitimacy that it has been, or that it used to, and also maybe the nation state does not provide the democratic arenas or platforms. And that's also a result of this refeudalization or regionalization of capitalism so that the nations, they kind of lose track of all these different layers and scales of production and capital.

So maybe that's just the answer to that. So that's really a passive or reactive to a development that we already see. And so, it's not really progressive or transformative in the first place. But it's more, how can we stick to what we have maybe, or how can we translate what we have as an idea of democracy, a self-government, and also solidarity.

And, as Julie-Anne said, that we try to have an impact on our immediate urban space. So how can we do that when the nation state or formal politics is not really of big help in that. So, it's really reactive. That's one interpretation of what we're trying to develop in the book. But I think it's also on a more positive or more active note, it's also a call against this form of individualism. That these individual relations between corporations or Google kind of services and single customers, that there needs to be a collective idea, which goes beyond this imaginary of the nation and of the people. And I think that's the more positive or more normative active side of the book, that we develop the idea that there is a spatial, not identity, but connections that are located and situated, and that might turn into something more politically productive, also democratically productive.

But I think it's a huge question. And I think it's also a question that which comes down to earth quite differently, depending on where you look at.

[00:57:19] **Ross Beveridge:** So just very briefly, I would say the idea of the city is the way of trying to counter some of that. That's the way of locating projects which go beyond these kinds of relationships, trying to create these locations of demos coming together or publics coming together.

The hope that this imaginary of the city within processes of urbanization can somehow bring people together to counter these kinds of processes. And I know, of course, that's something which Julie-Anne's book also engaged with, these forms of agency and transnational agencies as well as agency in one place.

I think the whole book is a name for trying to counter that kind of thing. The city is the place where we should try to counter that.

[00:58:07] **Nitin Bathla:** I think we've taken up quite some time. Thanks a lot for this really generative exchange and for all your comments and kind feedback.

I hope, Ross and Philippe, perhaps you write a future book taking into account all these things. It's been such a pleasure to read this one, so I'm really looking forward to reading further work from you. And I hope you keep writing together. Thanks a lot.

[00:58:34] **Ross Beveridge:** Thank you.

[00:58:35] **Philippe Koch:** Thank you.

[00:58:36] **Ross Beveridge:** And thanks Roger and Julie-Anne for that fantastic engagement.

So much to think about, almost impossible questions to answer, lots of food for the thoughts.

[00:58:50] **Roger Keil:** It was a pleasure and I second Julie-Anne's thought. It helped me a great deal as I was leaving Naples to understand what we actually talked about as we talked about humanity's urban future because these are some of the ideas we need to grapple with. Thanks.

[00:59:04] **Julie-Anne Boudreau:** Thanks. It was great. It's great talking to you as well.

[00:59:11] **Outro:** Thanks to you for listening.

For more information visit our website urbanpolitical.podigee.io

Please subscribe and follow us on Twitter.