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Politics of Urbanism: Seeing Like a City

Warren Magnusson

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It often seems as though our political theories and the politics of our neighbourhoods reflect different worlds. As a political theorist in the academy and an urbanist in my community, I was hoping that *Politics of Urbanism* might address both of these ordinarily separate areas of my life. I had not expected that Warren Magnusson would speak so clearly and incisively to the split between the actual politics of globalised cities and much of the work done by political theorists.

Magnusson believes politics is characterised by disorder, and this is distressing to political theorists. We respond by justifying the legitimacy of the sovereign and outlining the ideal ways in which the sovereign should act to effectively eliminate this disorder. We “*see like a state*” (3), a long tradition embedded in political theory’s development as a discipline. Our ontology is statist, and rests on the notion that there is a sovereign actor that will determine what occurs in its territory.

The problem, for Magnusson, is that sovereign authority cannot actually be effective. Politics is necessarily “a chaotic field, in which order is always partial, relative, and temporary” (112). Seeing like a state obscures local sites of action, and our idealism means we are complicit

with “sovereign authority” because we must ask the sovereign to “implement our dreams” (116). Even radical responses to the authority of the state are trapped by this ontology, as they define themselves in opposition to the state, and therefore rely on it for their coherence (56).

Magnusson’s response to the limitations of seeing like a state is “seeing like a city” (116). He works to develop “a different ontology of the political” that would situate “politics in the practices of government and self-government that enable urban life” (89). Global cities are characterised by a self-generated order containing multiple, diverse, and unstable authorities; the effectiveness of states depends upon their ability to work within these conditions, rather than simply on their ability to dominate the other authorities.

Seeing like a city suggests that we should not view certain sites, such as states or certain geographic locations, as “privileged point[s] of access” for the study of politics (10). Magnusson encourages us to start our work as theorists from different questions, and different places. Demonstrating these possibilities, he concludes with an example of the politics to be found when he tries to see like his city of Victoria: the university’s efforts to eradicate bunnies on its campus connect with issues of urban agriculture, multinational corporations, and democratic theory, and as such highlight complex political networks. He aims to turn our attention to different questions than the ones we ask if we assume politics is about how a sovereign authority should fix the disorder of politics. We get different answers as a result.

This original treatment will be of interest to diverse political theorists. Magnusson weaves together a wide range of ideas, using Max Weber’s conceptions of authority, Louis Wirth’s insights on urbanism, Freidrich Hayek’s contribution on “unplanned order” (14), Jane Jacobs and Richard Sennett’s examinations of “street level practices of self-government” (88), and Michel Foucault’s work on governmentality. Yet Magnusson also speaks to the practice of

political science far beyond the questions of political theory, arguing that the fields of international relations, political economy, and political theory are ultimately interdependent, and rely on statist ontology and “the problem of government” that Foucault identifies (107). It is a book for political scientists across the discipline.

Magnusson makes a substantive critique of much of the work we do. In making this challenge, it is possible that he oversimplifies the breadth of these fields as they stand today. He glosses over potential affinities between his work and the work of those trying to push the disciplinary boundaries that constitute these fields. Yet while he could perhaps do more to acknowledge these ongoing skirmishes, his characterisations of these fields are apt. Even, and perhaps especially, scholars doing less traditional work in these areas will recognise the primacy of the conventional ontology that Magnusson outlines. The contours of our cannons are built on statist foundations, and our identities as scholars are bound up in the varied ways that we relate to them.

His challenge is therefore profound. In another form, such a challenge might be hard to hear. Fortunately, Magnusson manages to build to his conclusions gently, guiding us through his thoughts without condescension, yet without holding back.

I have acutely felt the split between political theory and the way I see politics operating in my communities since the early days of my undergraduate studies. It has always left me with a deep and nagging feeling of discomfort. *Politics of Urbanism* gives me hope that my discomfort may be eased: this split is but does not have to be a feature of our academic field, and we might start to think differently about our ontology to reconnect that which has been pulled apart. I only hope we take up Magnusson’s challenge.

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