The Antinomies of the Postpolitical City: In Search of a Democratic Politics of Environmental Production

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Abstract

In recent years, urban research has become increasingly concerned with the social, political and economic implications of the techno-political and socio-scientific consensus that the present unsustainable and unjust environmental conditions require a transformation of the way urban life is organized. In the article, I shall argue that the present consensual vision of the urban environment presenting a clear and present danger annuls the properly political moment and contributes to what a number of authors have defined as the emergence and consolidation of a postpolitical and postdemocratic condition. This will be the key theme developed in this contribution. First, I shall attempt to theorize and re-centre the political as a pivotal moment in urban political-ecological processes. Second, I shall argue that the particular staging of the environmental problem and its modes of management signals and helps to consolidate a postpolitical condition, one that evacuates the properly political from the plane of immanence that underpins any political intervention. The consolidation of an urban postpolitical condition runs, so I argue, parallel to the formation of a postdemocratic arrangement that has replaced debate, disagreement and dissensus with a series of technologies of governing that fuse around consensus, agreement, accountancy metrics and technocratic environmental management. In the third part, I maintain that this postpolitical consensual police order revolves decidedly around embracing a populist gesture. However, the disappearance of the political in a postpolitical arrangement leaves all manner of traces that allow for the resurfacing of the properly political. This will be the theme of the final section. I shall conclude that re-centring the political is a necessary condition for tackling questions of urban environmental justice and for creating egalibertarian socio-ecological urban assemblages.

Well, my dear Adeimantus, what is the nature of tyranny? It’s obvious, I suppose, that it arises out of democracy (Plato, The Republic).

The Labour Party’s crowning achievement is the death of politics. There’s nothing left to vote for (Noel Gallagher, Oasis rock star, The Independent 11 November 2006: 37).

The end of the socialist alternative, then, did not signify any renewal of democratic debate. Instead, it signified the reduction of democratic life to the management of local consequences of global economic necessity. The latter, in fact, was posited as a common condition which

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imposed the same solutions on both left and right. Consensus around these solutions became the supreme democratic value (Rancière, 2004: 3–4).

There is a shift from the model of the polis founded on a centre, that is, a public centre or agora, to a new metropolitan spatialisation that is certainly invested in a process of de-politicisation, which results in a strange zone where it is impossible to decide what is private and what is public (Agamben, 2006, original emphasis).

Depoliticized environments

Live Earth concerts, waving the banner of climate change and urging the world’s leaders to take immediate and serious action, were beamed across the airwaves from 8 major cities on 8 July 2007, watched by an estimated record number of 3 billion people. Cheered on by Al Gore and riding on the popular success of his unsettling ‘An Inconvenient Truth’ documentary, the concerts — exquisite expressions of contemporary spectacularized city life — re-enforced the consensual view that nature, the climate and the environment are in clear and present danger, threatening the life and sustainability of all the world’s peoples, in particular the poorer ones, and whipping up a moral crusade for a more energy-selective and carbon-sparse code of socio-economic conduct. It is of course ironic that these concerts took the urban as their stage, while it is exactly the socio-metabolic functioning of cities that requires gigantic energy resources to sustain their socio-metabolic processes, while pumping an accelerating volume of CO2 into the atmosphere (Swyngedouw, 2006). Cities produce 80% of the world’s greenhouse gases, express often the most pervasive forms of socio-environmental injustices and are central to producing more sustainable environmental futures (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2005; Sze, 2006; Doucet, 2007). Indeed, the environmental question has become one that mobilizes and galvanizes political energies, and around which a political consensus has emerged, one that has literally ‘naturalized the political’ (see Debruyne, 2007: 2). Indeed, a scientific consensus, most vividly illustrated by the successive Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports, fused with a pervasive apocalyptic imaginary, and combined with asserting the intrinsic value of a nature that has to be retro-fitted to regain a ‘sustainable’ configuration, has taken hold (Swyngedouw, 2007a). Environmental politics is a politics legitimated by a scientific consensus which, in turn, translates into a political consensus. The world is in clear and present danger and urgent, sustained and consensual action is required. This is a politics that ‘legitimizes itself by means of a direct reference to the scientific status of its knowledge’ (Žižek, 2006c: 188) or, in other words, it is a politics reduced to the administration and management of processes whose parameters are defined by consensual socio-scientific knowledges. This reduction of the political to the policing of environmental change, so I shall argue, evacuates if not forecloses the properly political and becomes part and parcel of the consolidation of a postpolitical and postdemocratic polity. The depoliticized contradictions of such postpolitical environmentalism exploded with acute force in 2008, when energy prices, and in particular oil, spiralled upwards to quadruple in a few months’ time. Irrespective of the reasons behind this spectacular rise in oil prices (whether driven by extremely profitable financial speculation in the futures markets after the speculative land-bubble had imploded or by a combination of peak-oil conditions and rising demand of China and India, or a combination of both, remains disputed), the implications in terms of urban environmental justice became clear quickly. Hailed by some environmentalists as finally opening a window to bring oil consumption and greenhouse gas emissions down, poor people around the world suddenly saw food prices spiral out of reach, food crops replaced by bio-fuels, access to energy curtailed and the cost of moving around going up. While seemingly offering an opening towards a more sustainable postcarbon society, the contradictory effects rapidly came to the boil. Urban riots in Haiti, Mexico, Burkina Faso, Indonesia, China and elsewhere signalled that the environment is indeed a deeply
political matter, one cut through by all manner of social antagonisms, radical disputes and profound disagreements.

In recent years, urban research has become increasingly concerned with the social, political and economic implications of the techno-political and socio-scientific consensus that the present unsustainable and unjust environmental conditions require a transformation of the way urban life is organized. This special issue testifies to this concern and, in particular, to the socially highly uneven consequences of both the increasingly unsustainable environmental practices and the feeble attempts to ‘rectify’ the problem, to retrofit a nature that science suggests is out of synch with its own internal balancing act. A flurry of writing in recent years has begun to interrogate the close relationship between urban processes and environmental transformations (see Bickerstaff et al., 2009, this issue, for a review). Social environmental research has by now convincingly argued and demonstrated that physical-ecological processes are not independent from socio-economic and cultural processes. While such political and socio-ecological perspectives were originally primarily concerned with the degradation of ‘natural’ conditions (like soil erosion, deforestation, climate change or resource depletion), recent work has increasingly concentrated on the pivotal role of the urban in political ecological processes (see, e.g., Bell et al., 1998; Braun and Castree, 1998; Forsyth, 2002; Robbins, 2004; Castree, 2005; Heynen et al., 2005; 2007). Prompted by David Harvey’s counter-intuitive comment that there is nothing unnatural about New York City, urban political ecologists insisted that urban environments, like any other socio-physical assemblage, are produced through combined social and ecological processes that shape particular socio-geographical conditions and manufacture the architecture of the socio-metabolic circulations and transformations that shape everyday urban life (Harvey, 1996). Neil Smith’s (1984) ‘production of nature’ thesis has been expanded and reformulated in an attempt to let ecological processes re-enter our perspectives on nature and on the city (see, e.g., Gandy, 2003; Desfor and Keil, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2004; Kaika, 2005). In In the Nature of Cities, a range of urban political ecologists argued indeed that cities are produced socio-metabolic assemblages and their analyses insisted on the ‘produced’ character of urban environments, including the distribution of social roles and positions, the socio-ecological flows of materials and the metabolic re-working of socio-physical processes into the fabric of what is defined as a city (Heynen et al., 2005). In short, urban environmental conditions are seen as dynamic, socio-physical, power-laden and co-evolutionary constructions. Uneven consequences of socio-environmental change, the distribution of environmental ‘goods’ and ‘bads’, and the rhizomatic networks that relate local urban ecological transformations with distant socio-ecological processes are now commonly understood as combined social and physical entanglements.

Political struggles are central in shaping alternative or different trajectories of socio-metabolic change and the construction of new and emancipatory urban environmental geographies. All manner of critical social-theoretical analyses have been mobilized to account for these processes. Marxist and post-Marxist perspectives, environmental justice arguments, deconstructionist and poststructural musings, science/technology studies, complexity theory, postcolonial, feminist and Latourian views, among others, have attempted to produce what I would ultimately be tempted to call a ‘sociological’ analysis of urban political-ecological transformations. What they share, despite their different — and often radically opposed — ontological and epistemological claims, is the view that critical social theory will offer an entry into strategies, mechanisms, technologies of resistance, transformation and emancipatory political tactics. In other words, the implicit assumption of this sociological edifice is that ‘the political’ is instituted by the social, that political configurations, arrangements and tactics arise out of

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1 The notions of nature and ecology that are implied by the notion of co-evolution proposed here are closely related to those explored by the dialectical biological and ecological theories of Levins and Lewontin (1985) and Lewontin and Levins (2007).
the social condition or process or, in other words, that the social colonizes ‘the political’ (Arendt, 1968). The properly political moment is assumed to flow from this ‘sociological’ understanding or analysis of the process. Or in other words, the ‘political’ emerges, both theoretically and practically, from the social process, a process that only knowledge has access to. Put differently, most urban political ecological perspectives assume the political to arise from analysis, but neither theorizes nor operationalizes the properly political within a political ecological analysis. This opens a theoretical and practical gap as the properly political is evacuated from the theoretical considerations that have shaped (urban) political ecology thus far. This ‘retreat of the political’ (Lefort, 1988; Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 1997) requires urgent attention.

This retreat of the properly political as a theoretical and practical object stands in strange contrast to the insistence of urban political ecology that urban socio-environmental conditions and processes are profoundly political ones and that, consequently, the production of different socio-environmental urban trajectories is a decidedly political process. Considering the properly political is indeed all the more urgent as environmental politics increasingly express a postpolitical consensual naturalization of the political. As argued by Swyngedouw (2007a), Žižek (2002 [1992]) and Debruyne (2007), among others, the present consensual vision that the environmental condition presents a clear and present danger that requires urgent technomanagerial re-alignments and a change in the practices of governance and of regulation, also annuls the properly political moment and contributes to what these and other authors have defined as the emergence and consolidation of a postpolitical condition.

These will be the key themes I shall develop in this contribution. First, I shall explore what might be meant by the ‘properly’ political. In conversation with, and taking my cue from, political philosophers and theorists like Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Etienne Balibar, Claude Lefort, David Crouch, Mustafa Dikeç, Chantalle Mouffe and Peter Hallward, I attempt to theorize and re-centre the political as a key moment in political-ecological processes. What these perspectives share is not only the refusal to accept the social as the foundation of the political, but, more profoundly, the view that the absence of a foundation for the social (or, in other words, the ‘social’ being constitutively split, inherently incoherent, ruptured by all manner of tensions and conflicts) calls into being ‘the political’ as the instituting moment of the social (see, e.g., Marchart, 2007; Stavrakakis, 2007). Put differently, it is through the political that ‘society’ comes into being, achieves a certain coherence and ‘sustainability’. Prioritizing ‘the political’ as the foundational gesture that permits ‘the social’ maintains ‘absolutely the separation of science and politics, of analytic description and political prescription’ (Badiou, quoted in Hallward, 2003a: 394). This is not to say, of course, that politics and science are not enmeshed (on the contrary, they are and increasingly so), but rather that unravelling the science/politics imbroglios (as pursued by, among others, critical sociologies of science, science and technology studies, science-discourse analysis and the like) does not in itself permit opening up either the notion or the terrain of the political. The aim of this article, in contrast, is to recover the notion of the political and of the political polis from the debris of contemporary obsessions with governing, management, urban polic(y)ing and its associated technologies (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 1997). Second, I shall argue that the particular staging of the environmental problem and its modes of management signals and helps to consolidate a postpolitical condition, one that evacuates the properly political from the plane of immanence that underpins any political intervention. The consolidation of an urban postpolitical arrangement runs, so I argue, parallel to the rise of a neoliberal governmentality that has replaced debate, disagreement and dissensus with a series of technologies of governing that fuse around consensus, agreement, accountancy metrics and technocratic environmental management. In the third part, I maintain that this postpolitical consensual police order revolves decidedly around embracing a populist gesture, one that annuls democracy and must, of necessity, lead to an ultra-politics of violent disavowal, radical closure and, ultimately, to the tyrannies of violence and of foreclosure of any real spaces.
of engagement. However, the disappearance of the political in a postpolitical arrangement leaves all manner of traces that allow for the resurfacing of the properly political. Indeed, the incoherencies of the contemporary urban ordering, the excesses and the gaps that are left in the interstices of the postpolitical urban order permit thinking through if not materially widening and occupying genuine political urban spaces. This will be the theme of the final section. I shall conclude that re-centring the political is a necessary condition for tackling questions of urban environmental justice and for creating different, but egalibertarian, socio-ecological urban assemblages.

Rethinking the political: police, politics and the city

In Disagreement, Jacques Rancière revisits the Aristotelian foundations of political theory and considers whether the political can still be thought of in an environment in which a postpolitical consensual policy arrangement has increasingly reduced the ‘political’ to ‘policing’, to ‘policymaking’, to managerial consensual governing. This reduction of the political to the ‘mode of governing’ is particularly prevalent in environmental practices. From the environmental justice movement that urges the elites to rectify environmental ‘wrongs’ on the basis of a Rawlsian equal distribution of goods and bads (see also Beck, 1992), to ecological modernization perspectives that insist on the possibility of a technological-managerial conduct that can marry ecological sustainability with economic ‘progress’ (Harvey, 1996) and the scientific consensus that urges the adoption of a particular set of management and accounting rules to mitigate imminent catastrophic environmental disaster, general agreement exists, shared by a broad range of often unlikely allies, about the need to develop a more sustainable, and just, socio-ecological practice, one that operates fully within the contours of the existing social order (Swyngedouw, 2007a). Rancière’s political philosophical mission, in contrast, is to re-centre the ‘political’ as distinct from ‘policy’ (what he calls ‘the police’) and to ask whether the properly political can be thought of and, if so, what constitutes a proper political gesture.

Rancière distinguishes between ‘the police’ (le police), ‘the political’ (le politique) and ‘politics’ (la politique). For him, the political ‘turns on equality as its principle’ and is about enunciating dissent and rupture, literally voicing speech that claims a place in the order of things, demanding ‘the part for those who have no-part’ (Rancière, 2001: 6); politics disrupts the police order, ‘a refusal to observe the “place” allocated to people and things (or at least, to particular people and things)’ (Robson, 2005: 5). Indeed, as Dikeç maintains, the central premise of Rancière’s politics is ‘the contingency of any established order of governance with its distributions of functions, people, and places’ (Dikeç, 2007: Chapter 2: 3). Politics, then, is the arena where the principle of equality is tested in the face of a wrong experienced by ‘those who have no part’. Equality is thereby axiomatically given and presupposed rather than an idealized-normative condition to move towards (Badiou, 1992; 2005a; Lévy et al., 2007): ‘Everyone can occupy the space of politics, if they decide to so’ (Badiou, cited in Hallward, 2003a: 225). In democracy, the place of power is indeed structurally empty (Lefort, 1994) and equality is presupposed. In other words, equality is the very premise upon which a democratic politics is constituted; it opens up the space of the political through the testing of a wrong that subverts equality. Equality is, therefore, not a sociologically verifiable concept or procedure that permits opening a policy arena which will remedy the observed inequalities, but the ontologically given condition of democracy. Justice, from this perspective, disappears from the terrain of the moral and enters the space of the political under the name of equality. For Etienne Balibar (Balibar, 1993), for example, the unconditional premise for justice and emancipation resides in the fusion of equality and liberty (what he names as ‘égaliberté’), the former defined as the absence of discrimination and the latter as absence of repression (Dikeç, 2001). Egaliberté stands,
thus, for the universal and collective process of emancipation on which the very promise of political democracy is founded. What is central to Balibar’s and Rancière’s vision is that neither freedom nor equality are offered, granted or distributed, they can only be conquered. The political, therefore, is not about expressing demands to the elites to rectify injustices, inequalities or unfreedoms, but about the enunciation of the right to \textit{égaliberté}; the political is thus premised on the unconditionality of equality in a police arrangement that has always already ‘wronged’ the very condition of equality and liberty. Put simply, politics (or a properly political sequence) arises when, in the name of equality, those who are not equally included in the existing socio-political order, demand their ‘right to equality’, a demand that both calls the political into being, renders visible and exposes the ‘wrongs’ of the police order: this is the place and time of politics when the staging and articulation of an egalitarian demand exposes the lack, the superfluous, inscribed in the order of the given situation (Arsenjuk, 2005).

This existing order of things or the police order is, in Rancière’s words, ‘a partition of the sensible’ (Rancière, 2001: 8). The police refers to ‘all the activities which create order by distributing places, names, functions’ (Rancière, 1994: 173). It suggests ‘an established order of governance with everyone in their “proper” place in the seemingly natural order of things’ (Dikeç, 2005: 174). The partition of the sensible, the police order, ‘renders visible who can be part of the common in function of what he does, of the times and the space in which this activity is exercised . . . This defines the fact of being visible or not in a common space . . . It is a partitioning of times and spaces, of the visible and the invisible, of voice and noise that defines both the place (location) and the arena of the political as a form of experience’ (Rancière, 2000a: 13–14). The police is ‘not a social function but a symbolic constitution of the social’ (Rancière, 2001: 8) and refers to both the activities of the state as well as to the ordering of social relations:

The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise (Rancière, 1998: 29).

It is important to recognize that ‘the police’ includes a multitude of activities and processes, is full of conflict and tension, never totally closed and embraces not only the traditional notion of the state and state functions and activities, but also the ‘assumed spontaneity of social relations’ (Dikeç, 2007: 18). In sum:

The police, therefore, is both a principle of distribution and an apparatus of administration, which relies on a symbolically constituted organization of social space, an organization that becomes the basis of and for governance. Thus, the essence of policing is not repression but distribution — distribution of places, peoples, names, functions, authorities, activities and so on — and the normalization of this distribution (ibid.: 19).

It is a rule governing the appearance of bodies, ‘a configuration of occupations and the properties of the spaces where these occupations are distributed’ (Rancière, 1998: 29). As such, the ‘police’ is rather close to Foucault’s notion of governmentality, the conduct of conduct, the mode of assigning location, relations and distributions, or what Alain Badiou refers to as ‘the state of the situation’ (Badiou, 2005a). The police order is predicated upon saturation, upon suturing social space: ‘The essence of the police is the principle of saturation; it is a mode of the partition of the sensible that recognizes neither lack nor supplement. As conceived by “the police”, society is a totality compromised of groups performing specific functions and occupying determined spaces’ (Rancière, 2000b: 124). Of course, saturation is never realized; a sutured society is impossible as there will always be a constituted lack or surplus (Dikeç, 2005). It is exactly this lack or excess that constitutes the possibility of and that calls the political into being.
If the supervision of places and functions is defined as the ‘police’, ‘a proper political sequence begins, then, when this supervision is interrupted so as to allow a properly anarchic disruption of function and place, a sweeping de-classification of speech. The democratic voice is the voice of those who reject the prevailing social distribution of roles, who refuse the way a society shares out power and authority’ (Hallward, 2003b: 192). The proper political act, Rancière maintains, is the voice of ‘floating subjects that deregulate all representations of places and portions’ (Rancière, 1998: 99–100):

In the end everything in politics turns on the distribution of spaces. What are these places? How do they function? Why are they there? Who can occupy them? For me, political action always acts upon the social as the litigious distribution of places and roles. It is always a matter of knowing who is qualified to say what a particular place is and what is done to it (Rancière, 2003a: 201).

Politics proper arises then when the police order is dislocated, transgressed, ‘when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part’ (Rancière, 1998: 11). ‘Politics in general... is about the visibilities of places and abilities of the body in these places, about the partition of public and private spaces, about the very configuration of the visible and the relation of the visible to what can be said about it. All this is what I call the partition of the sensible’ (Rancière, 2003b: 3).

The political arises when the given order of things is questioned; when those whose voice is only recognized as noise by the police order claim the right to speak, acquire speech. As such, it disrupts the order of being, exposes the constituent antagonisms and voids that constitute the police order and tests the principle of equality. The proper democratic political sequence, therefore, is not one that seeks justice and equality through governmental procedures on the basis of sociologically defined injustice, but rather starts from the paradigmatic condition of equality or égaliberté, one that is ‘wronged’ by the police order. Such procedure brings into being a new symbolic ordering, one that transgresses the limitations of police symbolization. Therefore, a proper environmental politics is one that asserts the principle of equality and justice as its original principle, not as a normative goal; it demands equality in the right to produce proper and properly democratic socio-physical environments. Democratic politics is, therefore, always disruptive and transformative:

Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise (Rancière, 1998: 30).

Politics acts on the police (ibid.: 33)... revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time (Rancière, 2006: 13).

The space of the political is to ‘disturb this arrangement [the police] by supplementing it with a part of the no-part identified with the community as a whole’ (Rancière, 2001). And, of course, politics is about the production of spaces, the making of environments and the recognition of the principle of dissensus as the proper base for politics. As Rancière attests: The principle function of politics is the configuration of its proper space. It is to disclose the world of its subjects and its operations. The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus, as the presence of two worlds in one’ (ibid.: Thesis 8). It occurs when there is a place and a way for the meeting of the police process with the process of equality (Rancière, 1998: 30).

Politics has, therefore, no specific place: ‘Politics “takes place” in the space of the police, by rephrasing and restaging social issues, police problems and so on’ (Rancière, 2003c: 7); it is the disruption of the police order. It can arise anywhere and everywhere.
Space becomes political in that it... becomes an integral element of the interruption of the ‘natural’ (or, better yet, naturalized) order of domination through the constitution of a place of encounter by those that have no part in that order. The political, in this account, is signaled by this encounter as a moment of interruption, and not by the mere presence of power relations and competing interests (Dikeç, 2005: 172).

The political as understood in the above terms rejects a naturalization of the political, signals that a political ‘passage à l’acte’ does not rely on expert knowledge and administration (the partition of the sensible), but on a disruption of the field of vision and of the distribution of functions and spaces on the basis of the principle of equality (May, 2008).

With Alain Badiou, Rancière shares the view that the political event is rare and unusual; they are far from believing that ‘everything is political’, the clarion call of 1970s-style progressive movements. While the political might arise anywhere and everywhere, the political sequence is unusual, eventual, not predictable and, above all, disruptive. Or in other words, the emergence of a properly political sequence cannot be foretold on the basis of the social or ecological analysis of the conditions of the situation; it can only retroactively be identified as an eventual political moment. This view of the political as a space of dissensus, for enunciating difference and for negotiating conflict stands in sharp contrast to the consolidating consensual ‘politics’ of contemporary neoliberal socio-environmental governance, an assemblage that a growing body of literature identifies as ‘postpolitical’. And this is what we shall turn to next.

The postpolitical condition and the environment

Consensus in effect became the suppression of the litigiousness constitutive of the political, and identitarianism became the flip side of this suppression: that is, it became the malady of consensus politics (Rancière, 2000b: 119).

There is indeed a widespread consensus that the (urban) environmental condition needs to be taken seriously and that appropriate managerial-technological apparatuses can and should be negotiated to avoid the urban maelstrom sinking into catastrophe, socio-environmental degradation and possibly disintegration. At the same time, of course, there is hegemonic consensus that no alternative to liberal-global hegemony is possible.

This postpolitical constitution, which we have elsewhere defined as embodying new forms of autocratic governance-beyond-the-state (Swyngedouw, 2005), reconfigures the act of governing to a stakeholder-based arrangement of governance in which the traditional state forms (national, regional or local government) partake together with experts, non-governmental organizations and other ‘responsible’ partners (see Crouch, 2004) in the pursuit of environmentally sustainable socio-ecological practices. Not only is the political arena evacuated of radical dissent, critique and fundamental conflict, but the parameters of democratic governing itself are being shifted, announcing new forms of governmentality, in which traditional disciplinary society is transfigured into a society of control through disembedded networks of governance. These new forms of ‘governance’, operative at a range of articulated spatial scales, are expressive of the postpolitical configuration (Mouffe, 2005: 103; Swyngedouw, 2007b; 2008):

Governance entails an explicit reference to ‘mechanisms’ or ‘organized’ and coordinated activities appropriate to the solution of some specific problems. Unlike government, governance refers to ‘policies’ rather than ‘politics’ because it is not a binding decision-making structure. Its recipients are not ‘the people’ as collective political subject, but ‘the population’ that can be affected by global issues such as the environment, migration, or the use of natural resources (Urbinati, 2003: 80).
In this sense, environmental and other politics are reduced to the sphere of the police, to the domain of governing and polic(y)ing through allegedly participatory deliberative procedures, with a given distribution of places and functions. Consensual policymaking, in which the stakeholders (i.e. those with recognized speech) are known in advance and where disruption or dissent is reduced to debates over the institutional modalities of governing, the accountancy calculus of risk and the technologies of expert administration or management, announces the end of politics, annuls dissent from the consultative spaces of policymaking and evacuates the proper political from the public sphere.

Slavoj Žižek and Chantal Mouffe, among others, define the postpolitical as a political formation that actually forecloses the political, that prevents the politicization of particulars (Žižek, 1999a: 35; Mouffe, 2005; Žižek, 2006b): 'post-politics mobilizes the vast apparatus of experts, social workers, and so on, to reduce the overall demand (complaint) of a particular group to just this demand, with its particular content — no wonder that this suffocating closure gives birth to “irrational” outbursts of violence as the only way to give expression to the dimension beyond particularity’ (Žižek, 1999b: 204). In Europe and the US, in particular, such postpolitical arrangements are largely in place. Postpolitics rejects ideological divisions and the explicit universalization of particular political demands. It disavows the constitutive lack or excess that splits the social and prevents saturation, as it insists on the ‘democratic’ inclusion of all, thereby suturing the totality of the social and precluding the rise of the political moment. Such configuration succumbs to the “totalitarian” temptation of democratic institutions (Lefort, 1994). Particular demands are exactly seen as such — as particular/identitarian — thereby precluding the possibility of their universalization, that is, of the particular demands becoming the stand-in for a universalizing egalitarian politics. Instead, the postpolitical condition is one in which a consensus has been built around the inevitability of neoliberal capitalism as an economic system, parliamentary democracy as the political ideal, humanitarianism and inclusive cosmopolitanism as a moral foundation. As Žižek puts it:

In post-politics, the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties which compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinion specialists . . .) and liberal multiculturalists; via the process of negotiation of interests, a compromise is reached in the guise of a more or less universal consensus. Post-politics thus emphasizes the need to leave old ideological visions behind and confront new issues, armed with the necessary expert knowledge and free deliberation that takes people’s concrete needs and demands into account (Žižek, 1999b: 198).

Postpolitics is thus about the administration (policing) of environmental, social, economic or other domains and they remain, of course, fully within the realm of the possible, of existing social relations; they are ‘the partition of the sensible’. ‘The ultimate sign of postpolitics in all Western countries,’ Žižek (2002: 303) argues, ‘is the growth of a managerial approach to government: government is reconceived as a managerial function, deprived of its proper political dimension’. Postpolitics refuses politicization in the classical Greek sense; that is, politics as the metaphorical universalization of particular demands, which aims at ‘more’ than the negotiation of interests. The consensual times we are currently living in have thus eliminated a genuine political space of disagreement. However, consensus does not equal peace or absence of contestation (Rancière, 2005: 8). Under a postpolitical condition: ‘Everything is politicized, can be discussed, but only in a non-committal way and as a non-conflict. Absolute and irreversible choices are kept away; politics becomes something one can do without making decisions that divide and separate. When pluralism becomes an end in itself, real politics is pushed to other arenas’ (Diken and Laustsen, 2004: 7). Difficulties and problems, such as re-ordering the urban or re-shaping the environment that are generally staged and accepted as problematic need to be dealt with through compromise, managerial and technical arrangement and the production of consensus:
Consensus refers to that which is censored... Consensus means that whatever your personal commitments, interests and values may be, you perceive the same things, you give them the same name. But there is no contest on what appears, on what is given in a situation and as a situation. Consensus means that the only point of contest lies on what has to be done as a response to a given situation. Correspondingly, dissensus and disagreement don’t only mean conflict of interests, ideas and so on. They mean that there is a debate on the sensible givens of a situation, a debate on that which you see and feel, on how it can be told and discussed, who is able to name it and argue about it... It is about the visibilities of the places and abilities of the body in those places, about the partition of private and public spaces, about the very configuration of the visible and the relation of the visible to what can be said about it... Consensus is the dismissal of politics as a polemical configuration of the common world (Rancière, 2003b: 4–6).

The key feature of consensus is ‘the annulment of dissensus... the “end of politics” ’ (Rancière, 2001: 32). Of course, this postpolitical world eludes choice and freedom (other than those tolerated by the consensus) and, in the absence of real politicization of particulars, the only position of real dissent is that of either the traditionalist (those stuck in the past and who refuse to accept the inevitability of the new global neoliberal order) or the fundamentalist. The only way to deal with them is by sheer violence, by suspending their ‘humanitarian’ and ‘democratic’ rights. The postpolitical relies on either including all in a consensual pluralist order and on excluding radically those who posit themselves outside the consensus. For them, as Agamben (2005) argues, the law is suspended; they are literally put outside the law and treated as extremists and terrorists.

Late capitalist urban environmental governance and debates over the arrangement of the city are not only perfect expressions of such a postpolitical order, but, in fact, the debate over the policing of sustainable urban environments, or, more generally, the environmental debate, is one of the key arenas through which this postpolitical consensus becomes constructed, when ‘politics proper is progressively replaced by expert social administration’ (Žižek, 2005a: 117). The postpolitical environmental consensus, therefore, is one that is radically reactionary, one that forestalls the articulation of divergent, conflicting and alternative trajectories of future (urban) environmental possibilities and assemblages. There is no contestation over the givens of the situation, over the partition of the sensible; there is only debate over the technologies of management, the arrangements of policing and the configuration of those who already have a stake, whose voice is already recognized as legitimate.

There is, of course, a close relationship between the postpolitical condition and the functioning of the political system. In particular, the postpolitical threatens the very foundation upon which a democratic polity rests. Indeed, Jacques Rancière insists that this kind of consensual postpolitics is paralleled by the rise of a postdemocratic institutional configuration (see also Crouch, 2000; 2004; Rorty, 2004), one that erodes the very foundation of equalitarian democratic politics:

Postdemocracy is the government practice and conceptual legitimation of a democracy after the demos, a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests... It is the practice and theory of what is appropriate with no gap left between the forms of the State and the state of social relations (Rancière, 1995: 142–3; also in Mouffe, 2005: 29).

In this postdemocratic postpolitical era, adversarial politics (of the left/right variety or of radically divergent struggles over imagining and naming different socio-environmental futures, for example) are considered hopelessly out of date. Although disagreement and debate are, of course, still possible, they operate within an overall model of elite consensus and agreement (Crouch, 2004), subordinated to a managerial-technocratic regime (see also Jörke, 2005; Blühdorn, 2006). Through the technocratic management of environmental concerns — in the form of the search for local sustainability, the quest for
a more equitable distribution of ecological goods or bads, or the management of the climate — the properly political as defined above becomes evacuated from the disembedded police/policy configurations through which these concerns become articulated. The barrage of apocalyptic warnings of the pending catastrophes wreaked by climate change and environmental degradation and the need to take urgent remedial action to engineer a retro-fitted ‘balanced’ climate and ‘sustainable’ environment are perfect examples of the tactics and configurations associated with the present postpolitical and postdemocratic condition.

Indeed, a politics of sustainability, predicated upon a radically conservative and reactionary view of a singular — and ontologically stable and harmonious — nature is necessarily one that eradicates or evacuates the ‘political’ from debates over what to do with natures. The key political question is one that centres on the question of what kind of natures we wish to inhabit, what kinds of natures we wish to preserve, to make or, if need be, to wipe off the surface of the planet (like the HIV virus, for example) and on how to get there. The fantasy of ‘sustainability’ imagines the possibility of an originally fundamentally harmonious nature, one that is now out of synch but which, if ‘properly’ managed, we can and have to return to by means of a series of technological, managerial and organizational fixes. As suggested above, many, from different social, cultural and philosophical positionalities, agree with this dictum. Disagreement is allowed, but only with respect to the choice of technologies, the mix of organizational fixes, the detail of the managerial adjustments and the urgency of their timing and implementation. Nature’s apocalyptic future, if unheeded, symbolizes and nurtures the solidification of the postpolitical condition. As Žižek argues, ecology and the ecological imperative are becoming a new opium for the masses (Žižek, 2008a). The excavation and critical assessment of this postpolitical condition sustained and embodied by most of current Western socio-environmental politics is what we shall turn to next.

Constructing the postdemocratic: populist environmentalism and the evacuation of the political

This postpolitical condition articulates, with a populist political tactic, the conduit to instigate ‘desirable’ change. Populism, contra Laclau’s defence (Laclau, 2005), becomes the symptomatic expression of a postpolitical condition. For Žižek (2008b: 268), ‘populism is emerging as the inherent shadowy double of institutionalized post-politics’. Urban polic(y)ing is a prime expression of the populist ploy of the postpolitical postdemocratic condition. In this part, we shall chart the characteristics of populism (see, among others, Canovan, 1999; Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2005; Žižek, 2005b; 2006a) and how this is reflected in mainstream urban environmental concerns.

First, populism invokes ‘THE’ city and ‘THE’ people, if not humanity as a whole in a material and philosophical manner. All people are affected by environmental problems and the whole of humanity (as well as large parts of the non-human) is under threat from environmental catastrophes. At the same time, the environment is running wild, veering off the path of (sustainable) control. As such, populism cuts across the idiosyncrasies of different human and non-human ‘natures’ and their specific ‘acting outs’ of the indeterminacies or contingencies of socio-environmental or socio-ecological relations. It silences ideological and other constitutive social differences and papers over conflicts of interests by distilling a common threat or challenge to both nature and humanity. This is sustained by a certain short-circuiting between science and politics, whereby the ‘matters of fact’ of science are directly translated, without proper political mediation, into ‘matters of concern’ and subjected to a de-politicized techno-managerial, policy and socio-cultural deliberation (Latour, 2004; 2005).

2 For a further discussion of the political trouble with nature, see Swyngedouw (2007a; 2009).
Second, populism is based on a politics of ‘the people know best’ (although the latter category remains often empty, unnamed), supported by an assumedly neutral scientific technocracy, and advocates a direct relationship between people and political participation. It is assumed that this will lead to a good, if not optimal, solution. Actually existing democratic politics is hereby reduced to ‘good environmental governance’. The architecture of populist governing takes the form of stakeholder participation or forms of participatory governance operating beyond the state in a multi-scalar arrangement and invites, if not assumes, forms of self-management, self-organization and controlled self-disciplining (Dean, 1999; Lemke, 1999; Swyngedouw, 2005; 2008), under the aegis of a non-disputed liberal-capitalist order.

Third, populism customarily invokes the spectre of annihilating, apocalyptic futures if no direct and immediate action is taken. The classic racist invocation of Enoch Powell’s notorious 1968 ‘Streams of Blood’ speech to warn of the imminent dangers of unchecked immigration into the UK has, of course, become the emblematic populist statement, as are many of the catastrophic environmental predictions that galvanize large segments of the population to take ecological conditions seriously and expect urban and other elites to act in ways that produce a more sustainable form of urban life.

Fourth, populist tactics do not identify a privileged subject of change (like the proletariat for Marx, women for feminists or the ‘creative class’ for competitive capitalism), but instead invoke a common condition or predicament, the need for common humanity-wide action, mutual collaboration and cooperation. There are no internal social tensions or internal generative conflicts. Instead, the enemy is always externalized and objectified. Populism’s fundamental fantasy is that of an intruder or, more usually, a group of intruders, who have corrupted the system. Pollution, ‘environmental degradation’ or ‘CO₂’ stand here as the classic examples of a fetishized and externalized foe that require dealing with if sustainable urban futures are to be attained. Problems, therefore, are not the result of the ‘system’, of unevenly distributed power relations, of the networks of control and influence, of rampant injustices and inequalities, of the police order and its non-egalitarian distribution of functions and places or of a fatal flow inscribed in the system, but are blamed on an outsider. It is something that does not play its proper part within the structure (Žižek, 2008b: 279). That is why the solution can be found in dealing with the ‘pathological’ phenomenon, the resolution for which resides in the system itself. The Kyoto Protocol, for example, is a classic example of such a tactic, whereby the commodification of air and the marketing of CO₂, that is the making of a perfect neoliberal object, suggest exactly a procedure by which the very mechanisms on which ‘the system’ rests is believed to be able to cure itself from its pathological excess. The police can deal with its own excesses by exercising the pathogen, suturing the socio-physical landscape and maintaining cohesion. It is not the system that is the problem but its pathological syndrome. The ‘enemy’ is, therefore, always vague, ambiguous, socially empty or vacuous and homogenized (like ‘CO₂’); the ‘enemy’ is a mere thing, not socially embodied, named and counted.

Fifth, populist demands are always addressed to the elites. Populism as a project always addresses demands to the ruling elites. It is not about changing the elites but calling on the elites to undertake action to redress particular injustices. A non-populist politics is exactly about obliterating the elite, about transmuting noise into voice so that the empty place of power in democracy can be claimed by those who have no part. Environmental égaliberté is not given but conquered.

Sixth, no proper names are assigned to a postpolitical populist politics (Badiou, 2005b). Postpolitical populism is associated with a politics of not naming in the sense of giving a definite or proper name to its domain or field of action. Only vague concepts like the creative city, the sustainable city, the green city, the eco-city, the competitive city and the inclusive city replace the proper names of politics. Assigning proper names is, according to Rancière (1995; see also Badiou, 2005b), what constitutes a genuine
democracy, that is a space where the unnamed, the uncounted and, consequently, unsymbolized become named and counted.

Seventh, populism becomes expressed in particular demands (remove immigrants, increase ‘participation’, reduce carbon emissions, improve ecological amenities) that remain particular and foreclose universalization as a positive urban project. It eschews the question of who has the right to the city as a metabolic vehicle. In other words, the environmental problem does not posit a positive and named socio-environmental situation, an embodied vision, a desire that awaits realization, a fiction to be realized, a fantasy awaiting symbolization. In that sense, populist tactics do not solve problems, they are moved around.

In sum, postpolitical postdemocracy rests, in its environmental guise, on the following foundations. First, the social and ecological problems caused by modernity/capitalism are external side-effects; they are not an inherent and integral part of the relations of global neoliberal capitalism. Second, a strictly populist politics emerges here, one that elevates the interest of an imaginary ‘the people’, ‘nature’ or ‘the environment’ to the level of the universal rather than opening spaces that permit the universalizing of the claims of particular socio-natures, environments or social groups or classes. Third, these side-effects are constituted as global, universal and threatening — they are a total threat. Fourth, the ‘enemy’ or the target of concern is thereby, of course, continuously externalized and disembodied. The ‘enemy’ is always vague, ambiguous, unnamed and uncounted and, ultimately, empty. Fifth, the target of concern can be managed through a consensual dialogical politics and, consequently, demands become depoliticized and politics naturalized.

What is at stake, then, is the practice of genuine democracy, of a return to the polis, the public space for the encounter and negotiation of disagreement, where those who have no place and are not counted or named, can acquire or, better still, appropriate voice and become part of the police. This is the theme of the final section.

Democracy’s location: the return of the polis

A true politics for Jacques Rancière (but also for others like Badiou, Žižek or Mouffe) is a democratic political community, conceived as:

A community of interruptions, fractures, irregular and local, through which egalitarian logic comes and divides the police community from itself. It is a community of worlds in community that are intervals of subjectification: intervals constructed between identities, between spaces and places. Political being-together is a being-between: between identities, between worlds... Between several names, several identities, several statuses (Rancière, 1998: 137–8).

Rancière’s notion of the political is characterized in terms of division, conflict and polemic (Valentine, 2005). Therefore, ‘democracy always works against the pacification of social disruption, against the management of consensus and “stability”... The concern of democracy is not with the formulation of agreement or the preservation of order but with the invention of new and hitherto unauthorised modes of disaggregation, disagreement and disorder’ (Hallward, 2005: 34–5). The politics of urban sustainability and the environment, therefore, in their populist postpolitical guise, are the antithesis of democracy and contribute to a further hollowing out of what, for Rancière and others, constitutes the very horizon of democracy as a radically heterogeneous and conflicting one.

The political act (le passage à l’acte) disappears from a consensual naturalization of the political. This political act is what Badiou (2006) views as the declaration of fidelity to an event, an event that arises from the state of the situation but is not exhaust or totally explained by it. A political truth procedure, for him, is initiated when, in the name
of equality, fidelity to an event is declared, a fidelity that, although always particular, aspires to become public, to universalize. He defines ‘le passage à l’acte’ as an intervention in the state of the situation that transforms and transgresses the symbolic orders of the existing condition and marks a shift from the old to a new situation, one that can no longer be thought of in terms of the old symbolic framings. In the same vein, Žižek (1999b) insists that a political act does not start ‘from the art of the possible, but from the art of the impossible’. Proper politics is about enunciating demands that lie beyond the symbolic order of the police; demands that cannot be symbolized within the frame of reference of the police and, therefore, would necessitate a transformation in and of the police to permit symbolization to occur. This is the actual political process through which those that have no part claim their place within the symbolic edifice of the police and become part of the state of the situation.

Therefore, as Badiou (2005b) argues, a new radical politics must revolve around the construction of great new fictions that create real possibilities for constructing different socio-environmental futures. To the extent that the current postpolitical condition, which combines apocalyptic environmental visions with a hegemonic neoliberal view of social ordering, constitutes one particular fiction (one that, in fact, forecloses dissent, conflict and the possibility of a different future), there is an urgent need for different stories and fictions that can be mobilized for realization. This requires foregrounding and naming different socio-environmental futures, making the new and impossible enter the realm of politics and of democracy, and recognizing conflict, difference and struggle over the naming and trajectories of these futures. Socio-environmental conflict, therefore, should not be subsumed under the homogenizing mantle of a populist environmental-sustainability discourse, but should be legitimized as constitutive of a democratic order. Of course, as Dikeç (2005: 181–2) argues, ‘the police and politics are enmeshed. In other words, the spaces of politics are enmeshed with the space of the police. If politics puts the police ordering of space to an egalitarian test, then politics is possible not despite the police, but because of it’. ‘Politics acts on the police’, Rancière (1998: 33) maintains, ‘[i]t acts in the places and with the words that are common to both, even if it means reshaping those places and changing the status of those words’. Politics consists in a ‘series of actions that reconfigure the space where parties, parts, or lack of any parts have been defined’ (Rancière, 1998: 30; cited in Dikeç, 2005: 181–2). Proper egalitarian democracy is ‘the symbolic institution of the political in the form of the power of those who are not entitled to exercise power — a rupture in the order of legitimacy and domination. Democracy is the paradoxical power of those who do not count: the count of the “unaccounted for” ’ (Rancière, 2000b: 124). Therefore, ‘[p]olitics exists wherever the count of parts and parties of society is disturbed by the inscription of a part of those who have no part’ (Rancière, 1998: 123) and dissensus is the proper name of egalitarian politics:

The notion of dissensus thus means the following: politics is comprised of a surplus of subjects that introduce, within the saturated order of the police, a surplus of objects. These subjects do not have the consistency of coherent social groups united by a common property or a common birth, etc. They exist entirely within the act, and their actions are manifestations of a dissensus; that is, the making contentious of the givens of a particular situation. The subjects of politics make visible that which is not perceivable, that which, under the optics of a given perceptive field, did not possess a raison d’être, that which did not have a name . . . This . . . constitutes the ground for political action: certain subjects that do not count create a common polemical scene where they put into contention the objective status of what is ‘given’ and impose an examination and discussion of those things that were not ‘visible’, that were not accounted for previously (Rancière, 2000b: 124–5).

And this, of course, stands in contrast to the consensual neoliberal environmental policies that define, organize and suture the present debate and practice:

Consensus is thus not another manner of exercising democracy . . . [It] is the negation of democratic basis for politics: it desires to have well-identifiable groups with specific interests,
aspirations, values and ‘culture’... Consensualist centrism flourishes with the multiplication of differences and identities. It nourishes itself with the complexification of the elements that need to be accounted for in a community, with the permanent process of autorepresentation, with all the elements and all their differences: the larger the number of groups and identities that need to be taken into account in society, the greater the need for arbitration. The ‘one’ of consensus nourishes itself with the multiple (Rancière, 2000b: 125).

Therefore, the political act (intervention) proper is ‘not simply something that works well within the framework of existing relations, but something that changes the very framework that determines how things work... [A]uthentic politics... is the art of the impossible — it changes the very parameters of what is considered “possible” in the existing constellation’ (original emphasis) (Žižek, 1999b: 199).

This is a call for a de-sublimation and a decolonization of the political from the social or, in other words, to re-invent the proper political gesture from the plainly depoliticizing effects of postpolitical and postdemocratic policing. (Urban) environmental justice movements, for example, indicate exactly such procedure of the colonization of the political by the social — and thereby displacing or rendering inoperative the proper political field). Their ‘politicalization’ is structured by the blatantly race or class bias of the socio-technical-managerial distribution of environmental goods or bads. Their mobilization is about seeking redress, thereby fully acknowledging the race and/or class relations that subvert the democratic promise of equality, yet drawing on this promise (as enshrined in the law) to fight for greater equality. The ‘scandal of democracy’, i.e. the necessary totalitarian moment inherent in the institutionalization of democracy, is hereby disavowed and the proper political moment of radical antagonism predicated upon dissensus is displaced onto the terrain of the socio-technical-legal (onto society). Something similar is at work in the micropolitics of local environmental struggles, dispersed resistances and alternative practices. These are the spheres where an environmental activism dwells as some form of ‘placebo’-politicalness (Marchart, 2007: 47). This anti-political impulse works through colonization of the political by the social through sublimation. It elevates ruptures, disagreements, contestations and fractures that inevitably erupt out of the incomplete saturation of the social world by the police order. For example, the variegated, dispersed and often highly effective — on their own terms — forms of (urban) environmental activism that emerge within concrete socio-spatial interventions, such as, among others, land-use protests, local pollution problems, road proposals, airport noise or expansions, the felling of trees or forests, the construction of incinerators, industrial works, etc. elevates localized communities, particular groups and/or organizations (like NGOs), etc. to the level of the political. They become imbued with political significance. The space of the political is thereby ‘reduced to the seeming politicization of these groups or entities... Here the political is not truly political because of the restricted nature of the constituency’ (Marchart, 2007: 47). In sum, particular socio-environmental conflict is elevated to the status of the political. Rather than politicizing, such social colonization of the political, in fact, erodes and outflanks the proper political dimension of egalibertarian universalization. The latter cannot be substituted by a proliferation of identitarian, multiple and ultimately fragmented communities. Moreover, such expressions of protest, which are framed fully within the existing practices and police order (in fact, these protests — as well as their mode of expression — are exactly called into being through the practices of the existing order) are, in the current postpolitical arrangement, already fully acknowledged and accounted for. They become either instituted through public–private stakeholder participatory forms of governance, succumbing to the ‘tyranny of participation’ (Cooke and Kothari, 2001) or are radically marginalized and framed as ‘radicals’ or ‘fundamentalist’ and, thereby, relegated to a domain outside the consensual postdemocratic arrangement. The more

3 I am grateful to one of the referees for signalling this lacuna in the original version of the article and for offering a series of apt examples.
radical forms of environmental activism become ‘an unending process which can destabilize, displace, and so on, the power structure, without ever being able to undermine it effectively’ (Žižek, 2002: 101) and are, as such, doomed to failure. The problem with such tactics is not only that they leave the symbolic order intact and, at best, ‘tickle’ the police order (see Critchley, 2007), but also, as Žižek (1999b: 264) puts it, ‘these practices of performative reconfiguration/displacement ultimately support what they intend to subvert, since the very field of such “transgressions” are already taken into account, even engendered by the hegemonic form’.

A genuine politics, in contrast, emerges in ‘the moment in which a particular demand is not simply part of the negotiation of interests but aims at something more, and starts to function as the metaphoric condensation of the global restructuring of the entire social space’ (Žižek, 1999b: 208). It is about the recognition of conflict as constitutive of the social condition, and the naming of the socio-ecological spaces that can become without this process being grounded in the universalizing notions of the social (in the sense of community, unity or cohesion) and of a singular notion of nature/ecology. The political becomes, for Žižek and Rancière, the space of litigation (Žižek, 1998), the space for those who are not ‘All’, who are uncounted and unnamed, not part of the ‘police’ (symbolic or state) order. A true political space is always a space of contestation for those who have no name or no place. As Diken and Laustsen (2004: 9) put it: ‘Politics in this sense is the ability to debate, question and renew the fundiment on which political struggle unfolds, the ability to radically criticize a given order and to fight for a new and better one. In a nutshell, then, politics necessitates accepting conflict’. A radical-progressive position ‘should insist on the unconditional primacy of the inherent antagonism as constitutive of the political’ (Žižek, 1999a: 29).

The beginning of politics proper emerged with the demos as an active agent in the Greek polis, with, as Žižek (2006b: 69–70) puts it:

the emergence of a group which, although it [is] without a fixed place in the social edifice (or, at best, occupying a subordinate place), demanded to be included in the public sphere, to be heard on an equal footing with ruling oligarchy or aristocracy, i.e. recognized as a partner in political dialogue and the exercise of power . . . Political struggle proper is therefore not a rational debate between multiple interests, but, simultaneously, the struggle for one’s voice to be recognized as the voice of a legitimate partner . . . Furthermore, in protesting the wrong (le tort) they suffered, they also presented themselves as the immediate embodiment of society as such, as the stand-in for the Whole of Society in its universality . . . Politics proper thus always involves a kind of short-circuit between the Universal and the Particular: the paradox of a singular which appears as a stand-in for the Universal, destabilizing the ‘natural’ functional order of relations in the social body.

The elementary gesture of proper politicization is ‘[t]his identification of the non-part with the Whole, of the part of society with no properly defined place within it (or resisting the allocated place within it) with the Universal, . . . discernible in all great democratic events’ (Žižek, 2006b: 70). Such new symbolizations through which, what is considered to be noise by the police, is turned into speech, is where a proper politicization of the urban should start from, where the re-politicization of public civic space in the polis resides. Reclaiming proper democracy and proper democratic public spaces (as spaces for the enunciation of agonistic dispute) become a foundation for and condition of possibility for sustainability, one that is predicated upon the symbolization of a positively embodied egalibertarian socio-ecological future that is immediately realizable. These symbolizations should start from the premise that equality is being ‘wronged’ by the given socio-environmental police order and are about claiming a metaphorical and material space for those who are unaccounted for, unnamed and whose fictions are only registered as noise. It is exactly in this sense that the notion of utopia has been given a new lease of life by Žižek (2005c):

We should re-invent utopia. But in what sense? There are two false meanings of utopia. One is this old notion of imagining an idea of society which we know will never be realised. The other
is the capitalist utopia in the sense of new and new perverse desires that you are not only allowed but even solicited to realise. The true utopia is when the situation is so without issue, without a way to resolve it within the coordinates of the possible that out of the pure urge of survival you have to invent a new space. Utopia is not kind of a free imagination; utopia is a matter of innermost urgency. You are forced to imagine it as the only way out, and this is what [is needed] today.

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Résumé

Récemment, la recherche urbaine a montré un intérêt croissant pour les implications sociales, politiques et économiques du consensus techno-politique et socio-scientifique selon lequel les conditions environnementales actuelles, non viables et injustes, exigent que soit transformé le mode d’organisation de la vie urbaine. Or, cette perspective consensuelle de l’environnement urbain soumis à un danger manifeste et réel annihile le moment véritablement politique et contribue à ce que de nombreux auteurs ont défini comme l’apparition et la consolidation d’une situation post-politique et post-démocratique. Traitant ce thème essentiel, l’article tente d’abord de conceptualiser et de recentrer le politique en tant que moment critique dans les processus politico-écologiques urbains. Ensuite, il montrera que la mise en scène particulière du problème environnemental et de ses modes de gestion indique, et aide à consolider, un état post-politique, dans lequel le véritablement politique est évacué du plan de l’immanence sous-jacent à toute intervention politique. La consolidation d’une situation post-politique urbaine se fait en parallèle à la formation d’un dispositif post-démocratique qui a remplacé débat, désaccord et dissension par une panoplie de technologies gouvernementales gravitant autour de mesures de consensus, d’accord et de responsabilité, associées à une gestion technocratique de l’environnement. Une troisième partie soutient que cet ordre policé consensuel post-politique se rapproche nettement du geste populiste. Toutefois, la disparition du politique d’un dispositif post-politique laisse toutes sortes de traces permettant la réémergence du véritablement politique. Cet aspect est au cœur de la dernière partie. Pour conclure, le recentrage du politique est un préalable au traitement des questions de justice en matière d’environnement urbain et à la création d’assemblages urbains socio-écologiques d’égaliberté.