



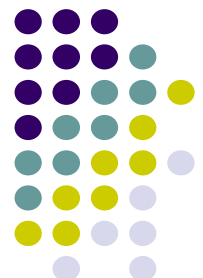
**At the Limits of Possibility:  
Working Notes on a Relational Model of  
Urban Politics**

**Edgar Pieterse**

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Edgar Pieterse, AbdouMaliq Simone, Mirjam van Donk

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# At the Limits of Possibility: Working Notes on a Relational Model of Urban Politics

Edgar Pieterse

## Abstract

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

It is argued that these complex and intractable conditions in our cities can only be addressed if social citizenship is animated by the ‘disciplining’ power of radical democracy and the fostering of a culture of agonistic engagement that is institutionally mobilised and embedded. Such a project requires a more lucid conceptual framework on urban politics than is typically found in current scholarship on the South African city. By drawing on diverse post-structural theoretical influences in the wake of the ‘cultural turn’ in urban studies, the paper postulates a conceptual model of politics that can incite further research and critical debate as part of a larger process of animating the public sphere about the potentialities of vibrant politics—a politics of transgression, pleasure, joy and social justice.

The conceptual model delineates five domains of political engagement between the state, the private sector and civil society at various scales, ranging from the national to the local: (1) representative political forums; (2) neo-corporatist political forums that are comprised of representative organisations, typically the government, the private sector, trade unions and community-based organisations; (3) direct action or mobilisation against state policies or to advance specific political demands; (4) the politics of development practice, especially at the grassroots; and, (5) symbolic political contestation as expressed through discursive contestation in the public sphere. The value of this model is that it allows one to rethink political practice from multiple angles. Moreover, it opens up new

ground for imagining more creative progressive political strategies to undermine and subvert the oppressive functioning of dominant interests in the city.

**About the author**

Edgar Pieterse is founding Director of Isandla Institute. His current research focuses on: the politics of urban integration; enculturating urban development; social movements and the direction of South Africa's development experiment. He is co-editor of *Voices of the Transition* (Heinemann, 2004) and *Democratising Local Government - The South African Experiment* (UCT Press, 2002). Edgar is also a Visiting Lecturer in Urban Studies at the University of Cape Town and Stellenbosch.

To contact the author via email: [edgar97@icon.co.za](mailto:edgar97@icon.co.za)

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# At the Limits of Possibility: Working Notes on a Relational Model of Urban Politics<sup>1</sup>

Edgar Pieterse

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

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

## INTRODUCTION

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

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper will appear as a chapter in: Simone, AbdouMaliq and Abouhani, Abdelghani. (eds.) *Urban Processes and Change in Africa*. Dakar: CODESRIA, forthcoming 2004.

Some scholars focus on institutional restructuring to give effect to the new local government dispensation ushered in by the *White Paper on Local Government* (March 1998) and associated legislation (Cameron 1999; Binns and Nel 2002). The institutional focus is often linked to analyses of new planning systems for local government: integrated development plans (IDPs), which are meant to inform the 'strategic direction' of institutional change (Harrison 2001a; Pieterse 2002a). Others focus on the new labour relations regimes that accompany some of these restructuring processes and on resistance from municipal trade unions and their alliances (McDonald and Pape 2003). Increasingly, there is also more research on urban social movements that organise against the privatisation and corporatisation of municipal services (McDonald 2002a). Studies of older social movements such as the South African National Civic Association are also in play (Heller and Ntlokonkulu 2001; Cherry et al. 2000), along with a focus on the mobilisation capacity of ratepayer associations in (mainly white) middle-class areas (Beall *et al.* 2002; Saff 2001). In contradistinction, other studies point to the almost invisible and painstaking efforts of groups in poor communities to formulate, institutionalise, maintain and grow development projects that make a world's difference in terms of accessing scarce resources to augment household livelihood strategies (Lyons *et al.* 2001; 2002). In betwixt such claim-making politics and collective survivalist strategies are the dangerous spaces of 'the everyday', where violent gangs seem to flourish as if on steroids and children negotiate the horrors of sexual predation (Segal *et al.* 2001; Soudien 2003). The twin spectres of violence and violation are also fuelling intense organisation in middle-class areas leading, inexorably, to the 'brazilianisation' of suburbs decked in the full regalia of gates, booms, surveillance cameras, privatised security and barbed wire (Bremner 1998; Jürgen and Gnad 2002). South African cities are being remade and re-imagined at a ferocious pace and with worrying consequences from radical democratic and redistributive perspectives (Mabin 2000).

Despite the speed and intensity of urban change it is clear that agency is flourishing and much remains to be done to recast political practice in the city towards a more comprehensive understanding of what is going on, where things may be leading to and, crucially, how democratic politics can be tilted towards social justice and equity concerns.<sup>2</sup> Many intractable problems beset the current urban political landscape in South

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<sup>2</sup> The dramatic levels of income inequality and seriously high levels of service deficiency are sufficient to underscore the importance of normative politics. A comprehensive overview analysis of urban

Africa. Ongoing reflection on these problems is a driving force for this paper. I will mention a few salient issues as a lead into the main focus of the paper. Firstly, it seems as if the democracy-enhancing aspects of the new local government dispensation are being under-realised under the weight of technocratic rationality within municipal government (Harrison 2001b; Harrison and Todes 2002). Secondly, many metropolitan authorities seem determined to follow, somewhat uncritically, mainstream policy ideas about the importance of being ‘world-class’, ‘competitive’ and globally integrated at any cost (Robinson 2002). This seems to produce a neo-corporatist tendency that crowds out other equally legitimate forms of political engagement through direct action and symbolic contestation in the public sphere. The valorisation of long-range strategic planning, such as *Joburg 2030* of the Johannesburg metropolitan authority, is but one example. Unicity councils in Cape Town, Durban, Pretoria, amongst others, are following similar paths (Pieterse 2003; Todes *et al.* 2000).

Thirdly, as intimated earlier, community-based militancy seems to be on the increase in the wake of toughening-up policies of municipal authorities. The resoluteness of municipalities is stoked by conditionalities of the national treasury, the ideological commitment of the ruling party to public-private service delivery ‘solutions’, and the non-collaborationist ideology that inform many of the organisations in this ‘movement’. As a result, we can see a new landscape of conflict and contestation that is seemingly becoming mired in an oppositional iron cage logic that undermines cooperative or consensual outcomes. (My understanding of cooperation and consensus will be made clearer below.) Fourthly, the interlocked conditions of pervasive inequality, impoverishment, institutionalised racism, poor health (caused in part by sweeping epidemics such as HIV/AIDS) and systemic violence are producing a growing class of people who are falling by the wayside of society as embodied reminders of our political impotence (Duiker 1999; Gotz, forthcoming; Mpe 2001; see Biehl 2002 on equivalent processes in Brazil).

Urban politics and policies are more likely to address the complex and intractable conditions in our cities if these become more effective in animating social citizenship, drawing on the disciplining power of radical democracy, and fostering a culture of

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poverty and its inter-relationship with inequality in South Africa can be consulted in: PDG and Isandla Institute (2002).



agonistic engagement that is institutionally mobilised and embedded. Such a project requires a more lucid conceptual framework on urban politics than is typically found in current scholarship on the city. By drawing on these diverse theoretical influences in the wake of the ‘cultural turn’, I am seeking to develop a conceptual model that can incite further research and critical debate as part of a larger process of animating the public sphere about the potentialities of vibrant politics—a politics of transgression, pleasure, joy and social justice (see Pieterse 2002b). In the next section, I summarise the conceptual scaffolding that underpins the relational model of urban politics, which comprises the bulk of the paper.

### **CONCEPTUAL SCAFFOLDING**

The conceptual model that is sketched in this paper draws on a variety of recent theorisations in urban studies, political science, policy studies, urban planning and development studies. The common denominator is a concern with culture as constitutive of the social, alongside the economic and political. With the cultural turn comes an awareness that language, discourse and symbolic meanings are central to incessant processes of identity construction and the realm of agency in the spaces of the everyday (Eade and Mele 2002). The conceptual challenge is to adopt an approach that recognises the structuring effect of the economy, bureaucracy and discursive diagrams of power without relinquishing an understanding of the saliency of agency. In urban studies the actor-network approach of Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift (2002) stands out along with the post-Marxist formulation of Kian Tajbakhsh (2001). In development studies, Norman Long (2001) has gone a long way in formulating a sophisticated framework to capture the dynamic interplay between structure and agency and the space for political action beyond the restrictions of economic-deterministic epistemologies. These are consistent with deployments in postcolonial cultural studies (Ahluwalia 2001; Ashcroft 2001). I locate the following conceptual reference points squarely within this tradition of theorisation. In the process I hope to alert the reader to the theoretical currents that flow through the conceptual model presented in the next section. The abbreviated discussion here will have to do since I do not have the space to develop my arguments in their theoretical fullness. This discussion is best treated as a form of prelude to summarise the theoretical anchors that bed down my conceptual model of urban politics.

1. Urban politics must be imagined, practiced and institutionalised on an ethical basis. Ideally, this is a human rights-based framework that legally guarantees access to opportunities to flourish as a creative individual ensconced in multiple communities of affinity, which may or may not be in close proximity (Amin and Thrift 2002, Ch 6). In South Africa, a strong basis for such an approach exists due to the constitutional entrenchment of all human rights: political, civil and socio-economic. It is vital to maximise this political potential in all spheres of citizenship and political practice.
2. Democracy is a necessary precondition for a vibrant political space that allows for regulated contestation of perspectives that are invariably imbued with particular interests. Formal liberal democratic norms and institutional procedures that rest on representative democratic institutions and the rule of law are wholly inadequate to address the structurally embedded relations and systems of inequality that characterise capitalist modernity (de Sousa Santos 1995; Unger 1998). More is needed. In this regard, the ideas of scholars who espouse the benefits of radical democracy are most convincing and promising (Gabardi 2001; Mouffe 2000; Squires 2002). More on the institutional expressions of radical democracy will be explored below.
3. The institutional design and functioning dimensions of urban politics are crucial for the effectiveness and democratic content of political practices. Institutions are not merely containers of political intent, but rather mediate in a fundamental sense how interactions between diverse political actors (and agendas) are structured and channelled (Flood 1999). This awareness brings into view the importance of organisational dynamics and cultures of both state and non-state political actors, but also the importance of translating new political agreements into “the routine practices of frontline officials [in government] if they are to make real differences to people’s life chances and to give real respect to people’s individual life circumstances” (Healey 2000: 918). In many ways, the conceptual model put forward in the paper adds up to an attempt to illuminate the institutional inter-dependencies between various political domains in the city.

4. The conceptual distinctions between ‘government’, ‘governmentality’ and ‘governance’ are useful to understand and recast the potential and limitations of the local state, especially in an era of neoliberal dominance. In my usage here, government refers in practical terms to the structures, institutions and organisations of the state that regulate social practices.<sup>3</sup> Governmentality is a Foucauldian concept, which refers “to the complex array of techniques—programs, procedures, strategies and tactics—employed by both non-state administrative agencies and state institutions to shape conduct of individuals and populations” (Gabardi 2001: 82). Governance denotes the relationality of power as it flows through networks between the state and institutional actors in the market and civil society. However, “governance is not a homogenous agent, but a morass of complex networks and arenas within which power dynamics are expressed and deployed” (Healey 2000: 919). The purpose of my conceptual model is to bring these multiple networks and arenas of urban governance into view so that more fine-grained critical research can be conducted. I also hope to provoke investigations into practicable visions about radical politics that can produce more socially just and environmentally conscious outcomes, i.e. political discourses that emerge from practical struggles to test and transcend the discursive limits of governmentality efforts of the state.
  
5. The full measure of the urban political terrain can only be apprehended via an appreciation of spatiality. Cities can be understood spatially in terms of densities, proximities, intensities and their effects. Furthermore, the particular form of the spatial configuration that arises in a city shapes the horizons of possibility (Massey 1999). If the horizon is extremely limited, spatial configuration continues to produce segregation, fragmentation and exclusion. Alternatively, if the horizons are more open, we are more inclined to use the rich multiplicity of spatial practices to unleash new ways of interaction and engagement. However, if the multiple spatialities of the city are repressed or erased (in official texts and regulations), it is virtually impossible to construct a radical democratic ‘cosmopolis’ (Sandercock 1998). In

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<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is related to, but more narrow than the Foucauldian conception, whereby: “Government is any more or less calculated and rational activity, undertaken by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and forms of knowledge, that seeks to shape conduct by working through our desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs, for definite but shifting ends and with a diverse set of relatively unpredictable consequences, effects and outcomes” (Dean 1999: 11).

other words, recognition of the inherently heterogeneous time-spaces of the city feeds into political questions about how the city is imagined and represented. At its core, all urban struggles are in one sense or another about the politics of recognition and determination of identity.

6. This ‘multiplex’ perspective of the city rests firmly on a non-essentialist conception of identity and community. Kian Tajbakhsh explains that “identities are not expressive of a deep ‘essentialist’ core, but are best seen as contingent and articulated through interdependent and overdetermined practices structured by both conscious intention and unconscious desire.” In other words, “complexity is the *a priori* feature of social identity” (Tajbakhsh 2001: 6). Invariably the same applies to the notion of “community”, where urban theory meets critical perspectives from development studies. In development studies, Frances Cleaver (amongst many others) has successfully demonstrated how “ ‘community’ in participatory approaches to development is often seen as a ‘natural’ social entity characterised by solidaristic relations” (2001: 44). She then goes on to systematically critique this approach, by pointing out the absence of “coterminosity between natural (resource), social and administrative boundaries” (Ibid.). Furthermore, she points out how processes of conflict, negotiation, inclusion and exclusion have been poorly analysed in the development literature with a tendency to romanticise community relations. This critical turn is vital for recasting development practice and re-connecting development strategy with questions of political power and especially distributional justice at all spheres of society: household, the street, neighbourhood, collections of neighbourhoods that coalesce as municipal areas and, of course, the city as a whole.
7. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that political contestation unfolds around specific, discursively constructed, points of crisis and imperatives to reproduce the political economic system. What is regarded as a *crisis* and finds its way into the public domain via the media is an important area of contestation. Representative democracy, collective and insurgent practices of subaltern classes, and quotidian practices to realise development projects rely on the (public) recognition of certain issues as valid political problems. Usually this is reflected in the discourses that circulate in (popular) media via newspapers, radio and television (and cyberspace?). Increasingly, successful political mobilisation of interests relies on capacity to set the

agenda and frame the issues of the day. This point brings me back to my first assertion about the importance of an ethical horizon in political engagement. It seems clear that the potentiality of a rights-based discourse can only be realised through practical struggles that translate everyday violations into claims, demands, remedies and solutions that find recognition and expression in the public domain. In other words, politics is as much about content as it is about performance. The question is: how does one re-imagine political agency at a subjective and collective level in ways that can transcend governmentality through performative practices in *all* domains of political action? Hopefully, the conceptual model elaborated in the next section will serve as a suitable starting point to answer this question.

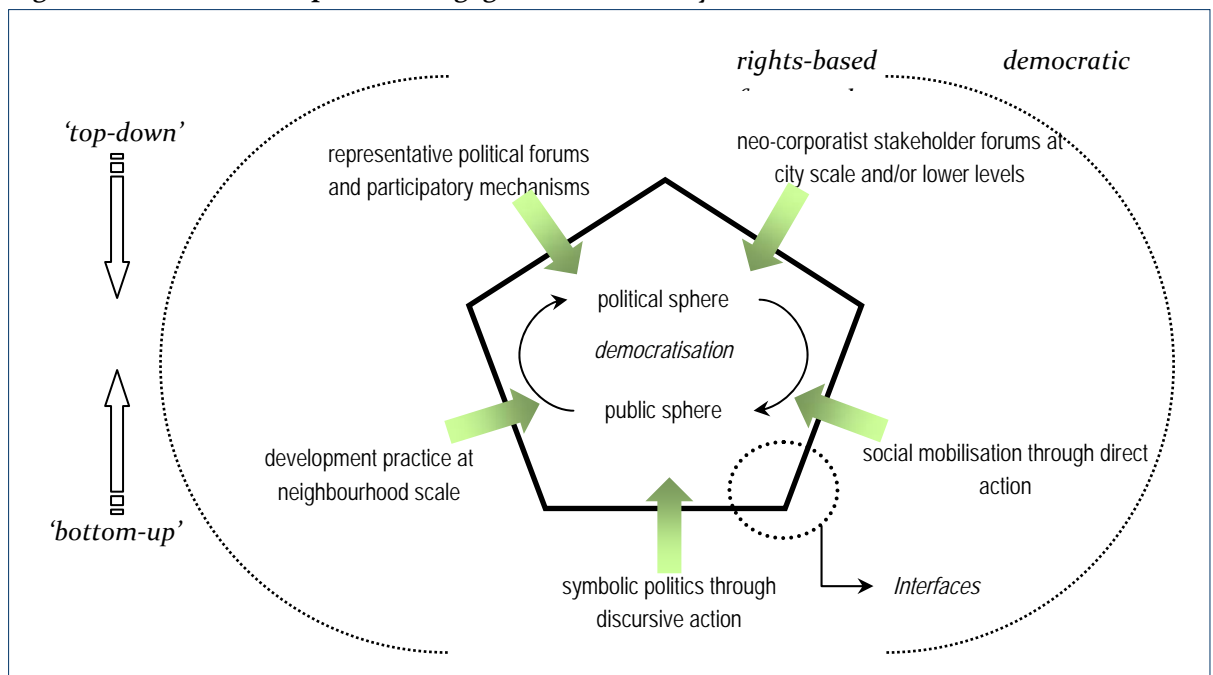
#### **SKETCHES OF A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF URBAN POLITICS**

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

The value of this exercise is that it allows one to rethink political practice from multiple angles. Moreover, it opens up new ground for imagining more creative progressive political strategies to undermine and subvert the oppressive functioning of dominant interests in the city. The model rests heavily on Foucault's understanding of power and therefore locates discursive and symbolic dimensions of political practice as central to re-reading political institutions and agency (Flyvbjerg 2001: Ch 8; Gabardi 2001: Ch 4). I will briefly elaborate each domain in terms of key defining features, types of political practices, inter-connections with other domains and possible pitfalls. To animate the

discussion, I will occasionally draw on examples mainly from Cape Town, where my own research is ongoing, to illustrate certain points. Given the conceptual biases that I base this model on, the organising thread that runs through this paper is a concern with progressive political practices and identities that will address urban inequality in a substantive manner.

**Figure 1: Dimensions of political engagement in the city**



**Domain One: Representative Politics**

Political representation refers to the formal political system that characterises national, provincial and municipal government. The parameters of formal politics are established in the South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996), which makes provision for a proportional political system based on multi-party political contestation for electoral support. At all levels, the main avenue of political participation in this process is political parties that are elected on the basis of a proportional system, except at municipal level where a combination of proportional and ward-based systems are in effect. The democratic effectiveness of the system depends in large measure on the democratic nature

of the respective political parties along with their rootedness in their constituencies (Goetz and Lister 2001; Heller 2001). It also depends on the quality and maturity of the institutional rules and systems that structure the functioning of political chambers, council and committee meetings and associated mechanisms for transparency, responsiveness and accountability (Blair 2000).

The *White Paper on Local Government* laid a firm foundation for the establishment of developmental local government which is a normative approach to ensure that municipal government prioritises the needs of the poor in fulfilling its governing functions. The framework further acknowledged that a developmental thrust is dependent on vigorous citizen participation to construct a participatory form of local governance (Pieterse 2002a). This policy framework, later encoded in various pieces of legislation, provides a solid foundation for participatory local governance where the full diversity and conflictual interests of the city can be expressed. Naturally this depends on 'political commitment' to formulate more practical policies to create various participatory governance mechanisms such as citizen juries, participatory budget councils, integrated development planning forum, area-based political committees, citizen opinion surveys, participatory action research studies to test policy preferences and options, transparency guidelines and support systems, and so forth (Borja and Castells 1997: 193-200; Hill 1994; Pieterse 2000).<sup>4</sup> Beyond political commitment, it also depends on the tangible accountability of the elected politicians.

The literatures on urban regimes, growth coalitions and elite pacts demonstrate the subtle and blatant ways in which (organised) business interests that rely on public investment frameworks and spending (for transport, land-use zoning and preparation, environmental guidelines, etc), exert their influence over the decision-making and functioning of local government (Barkin 1997; Hiller 2000; Mossberger and Stoker 2001). If one approaches participatory instruments with a naivety about these relations it easily becomes a form of camouflage for what is really going on in the city. The point about participatory local governance is to increase the democratic oversight of active citizens, especially those whose human rights are systematically denied due to inadequate services and lack of

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<sup>4</sup> In an earlier study I provide a full discussion on the gamut of participatory governance policies and tools with due regard for contextual specificity and dangers associated with this relatively recent trend (Pieterse 2000).

opportunities. However, this is unlikely to take root unless citizens are well organised and supported by municipal government to actively organise themselves into independent and articulate voices. A 12 year programme on ‘community management’ in poor/informal areas in Developing Countries undertaken by Habitat, underscores the importance of self-organisation and appropriate state support (Lüdekring and Williams 1999). These qualifiers point to the importance of the political values and practices of the political parties that hold majority power in the council. Even though it is a neglected subject in the literature, it is clear that the democratic culture – open or closed – within political parties is a vital aspect in embedding meaningful participatory local governance.

There remains surprisingly little systematic research on the African National Congress (ANC), especially in terms of local dynamics within branches and spill-over effects into municipal councils. Nevertheless, most commentators seem to be in agreement that the ANC is struggling to redefine its ideological commitment to internal democracy as a political value and cultural practice (Marais 2001; Peet 2002). The nature of the list formulation process, which is an integral component of the proportional electoral system, seems to reinforce a hierarchical culture in the organisation along with an upward-looking sense of accountability as opposed to the reverse. This is compounded by the determination of the organisation’s leadership to keep crucial national debates about the economy, political reform, developmental issues and foreign policy outside of the public domain to avoid the impression that there are divisions within the party. Unsurprisingly, it has the opposite effect (see Saul 2001; cf. Cronin 2002). The ANC is losing credibility amongst the intelligentsia (black and white) as the torch-bearer for robust democratic contestation. With this said, it is important to underscore that my own research in Cape Town suggests that there are many grassroots members of the party that are equally worried about this tendency and use their branches and other forums to challenge it. This contradictory drift towards less openness and a suspicion of direct opposition undermines the emergence of strong democratic leaders that can transcend the party machinery to become influential in the public sphere and with the citizenry.

Democratic and visionary leadership amongst the elected representatives in (municipal) government is a vital ingredient of this conceptual model. Such leaders need to set the tone in establishing governance networks that are robust, based on healthy agonistic contestation and broad-based so that societal programmes can be undertaken to shape the



future of the city (Landry 2000). What all this means will become clearer as I proceed to other political domains. But first a few more comments on the inter-relationship between the representative domain of politics and others identified in the model. I started off with a discussion of the representative domain of political practice, because it is in this domain that an enabling climate can be constructed for the flourishing of political agency in other domains of social action. In particular, municipal government (and visionary leaders) is an important precursor for the establishment of 'neo-corporatist' forums to undertake strategic planning regarding the future trajectory of the city. In fact, close synergy between the IDP of the municipality and the broader city development strategy (CDS) that emerges from multi-stakeholder governance forums is essential (Pieterse 2003). However, given the built-in bias towards more organised, well resourced and articulate voices in multi-stakeholder forums, the elected politicians have a vital role to play in ensuring that marginal and poorly organised interests in the city, who should be the primary beneficiaries of the developmental local government mandate, can also find their issues infused in the deliberations. There are few guarantees that this is likely to happen, but this does not negate the conceptual assertion. When I elaborate on autonomous agency by subaltern classes and groups below it will become clearer that I locate this conceptual assertion within a larger theoretical diagram of agonistic, conflict-ridden contestation between various political agendas in the city. Seen from that position, it is legitimate to invoke the democratic expectation about the ideal role of elected politicians.

There are many other dangers when it comes to the functioning of representative politics. Ongoing research by scholars on the impact of the expansive policy edifice on the capacity of municipal politicians to exercise their roles is indicative of the danger of malfunctioning due to overload. Some of the evaluative studies of IDPs point in this direction (Harrison 2001a; Harrison and Todes 2001; Binns and Nel 2002). Other studies point to the debilitating effect of declining regional economies on the developmental aspirations of local government (Todes 2000). Some research also points out the persistent disjuncture between policy rhetoric and continuing business as usual at the expense of the urban poor (McDonald 2002b; Williams 2000). These research findings all underscore the danger of vesting all hope for radical democracy in the emergence of effective representative democratic institutions. Much more is required as the remainder of the paper will demonstrate.

## **Domain Two: Neo-corporatist Stakeholder Forums**

Stakeholder-based forums refer to formal deliberative institutions that provide a regulated and predictable space for negotiation and contestation between state, civil society and private sector representative organisations on urban issues of (mutual) concern, even if for different reasons. Commonly they are referred to as multi-stakeholder forums. In their book, *Local and Global*, Jorge Borja and Manuel Castells (1997) set out the case for the necessity of these kinds of deliberative spaces to co-create strategic plans for the city. They frame their argument against the backdrop of the impact of globalisation processes on cities. Such impacts make it more important than ever that public infrastructure investments (especially transport and communication) are carefully made and in terms of a larger strategic vision of where the urban economy is headed. By definition, such a vision cannot be the fabrication of municipal planners but must arise from properly structured processes of participation and deliberation, because it must not only be viable but also politically embedded amongst the diverse stakeholders in the city. Without legitimacy, strategic plans are bound to run ashore on the banks of political conflict and corruption. The perspective of Borja and Castells clearly operates on shifts away from master planning to strategic planning to accommodate the complexity of urban life. It also builds on the strong participatory thrust that propels discourses on greater decentralisation and deliberative democracy (Fung and Wright 2001; Minogue 2002).

Ideas about participatory local democracy are now thoroughly mainstream, even if poorly implemented (Nederveen Pieterse 2001). The World Bank and other multilateral development institutions are feverishly promoting CDS's across the globe. The CDS methodology is a more sophisticated re-run of the city consultation concept that Habitat and the United Nations Environment Programme have been pioneering since the late 1980s (Pieterse 2000). This bouquet of policy thinking seeks to lock municipal government into multi-stakeholder processes of planning and monitoring to compensate for the limited resources and capacity of most Third World local authorities. It also aims for increased legitimacy which has been eroded by decades of authoritarian and patronage-based political decision-making. Recent moves in most South African cities to initiate strategic planning processes or build ownership around visions such as *Joburg 2030* demonstrate the impact of this category of political action (City of Johannesburg 2002).

Despite the rapid spread of multi-stakeholder strategic planning and deliberation, a number of criticisms have been levelled against the theory and practice. In summary, four criticisms of stakeholder forums can be gleaned from the literature: (1) It legitimises decisions that are taken by proxies of elite interests and consequently fulfils a function of cooptation through 'corporatist localism' (Ruppert 2000); (2) It potentially subverts the emergence of oppositional political discourses and practices by framing such actions as illegitimate and undemocratic, because these emanate from outside of the negotiation framework (Fainstein 2000); (3) It reinforces divisions within poor and marginalised communities because these forums tend to draw in relatively better-off community associations that crowd-out less organised and articulate associations (Cooke and Kothari 2001); (4) It undermines informal and non-rational livelihood strategies of the poor through an insistence on working with formal planning frameworks and rationalities (Cleaver 2001). These are insightful points and my own research on urban political processes in metropolitan Cape Town confirms these dangers (Pieterse 2002c; Pieterse, forthcoming).

Nonetheless, it is instructive to bear in mind that the stakeholder forum mechanism is now firmly entrenched in South African political life. At the dawn of the transition process (late 1980s), a number of negotiation forums started to emerge at a local level as white municipalities entered into negotiations to end or circumvent rates and service charge boycotts (Shubane 1995). These institutional forms became somewhat paradigmatic throughout the transition because they provided a model to allow oppositional political organisations to retain their relative autonomy whilst renegotiating the terms of their relationship as the process of democratisation shifted power to the black majority and their representative organisations (former political liberation movements such as the ANC, PAC and the like). In other words, the forums provided a guarantee against unilateral decisions that would radically alter economic and political relations in society. It is for this reason that many regard them as reformist corporatist institutions that simply serve to entrench vested elite interests by diffusing militant social action by subjugated classes (Bond 2000).

Should these criticisms lead us to reject the role multi-stakeholder forums in advancing radical democratic urban politics? I think not. It is crucial to remain aware of the depoliticising dangers of such forums along with the built-in tendency to cater for well

organised, resourced and articulate political groups. Yet, given the complexity of urban development challenges it is imperative to build broad-based agreement, even if provisional and continuously renewed, about the future direction of the city and how to get there. The constitutional obligations to use developmental local government to progressively realise everyone's socio-economic rights must be the touchstone for the institutional rules and agenda of such forums. In other words, in terms of institutional design and functioning, provision must be made for ensuring adequate representation of potentially marginalized groups and ensuring that the search for consensus does not rule out the necessity of agonistic engagement. The work of Michael Gunder and Jean Hillier, amongst others, points to a series of useful principles that can be used to ensure fair and critical deliberation (Edmunds and Wollenburg 2001; Gunder, in press; Healey 2002; Hillier 2002).

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

citizens in the city. As stressed earlier, it is crucial to appreciate the *relational* interdependency between various domains of political practice.

### **Domain Three: Direct Action**

Direct action involves various forms of collective action by (disadvantaged) groups aimed at stretching the liberal democratic constitutional framework to its limit.<sup>5</sup> This assertion implies that social movements and looser, issue-specific, social groups must claim their rights and entitlements through non-violent social action focussed on concrete issues that shape the quality of life of their constituencies. In South Africa's recent history, there are a number of examples where such action resulted in favourable constitutional judgements on the rights to shelter for children, protection from forced evictions (see Liebenberg 2001) and access to essential drugs and medicines (*The Sunday Independent*, 7 April 2002).

In recent years, there has been a noteworthy increase in social mobilisation *against* state policies, premised on an anti-neoliberal and anti-globalisation platform. At a national scale, examples would include public protests against debt, the arms deal and privatisation. (These tend to be based in urban areas and are becoming a feature of political cultures in the cities.) At a local level, there has been a noticeable increase in community level protests against the privatisation and/or commercialisation of some municipal services and the related disconnection of services and/or eviction of defaulters (Desai 2000; McDonald and Pape 2003). The common thread in these protests is a radical political economy analysis that ascribes the root cause of increasing poverty and inequality to the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macro-economic policy of the government. In terms of this perspective, GEAR is a natural reflection of an elite pact (comprised of the new political and (black) economic elite) that is determined to slot into the unequal system of globalisation, even if it is at the expense of the working classes and the unemployed (Bond, 2000). As a result, a new brand of highly politicised social formations has taken root at the grassroots and sections of the NGO community. This group seeks to deconstruct and replace the mainstream development programme of

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<sup>5</sup> There are obviously many instances where (relatively) privileged and conservative groups also embark on direct action to get their political grievances across. By focusing on disadvantaged groups I am merely signaling an analytical preference to highlight the actions of this category of social actors but not to create an impression that other groups do not engage in this political arena.

the state. This is highly significant, because it signals the emergence of a series of much more pronounced political fault lines that cut through the ruling tripartite alliance, the NGO sector and organised grassroots organisations.

In a sense, the primary function of progressive direct action is to maintain political momentum for redistribution and realisation of human rights, especially socio-economic rights. Of all the political practices in the city, this type pushes most blatantly at the boundaries of the possible (in discursive, political and juridical terms). Direct action seeks to disturb the tranquillity of ‘business as usual’, whereby local governance unfolds at an arms length from the citizenry and politicians nestle snugly in the bosom of elites. It potentially shakes up the middle-class disinterest in life beyond the suburb; that is, livelihood challenges in the township, shanty town and other spaces of marginalisation. Street conflicts, clashes and destabilisations that spark off direct action are prerequisites for political agreements to address urban inequalities. Such agreements will invariably involve attitudinal and behavioural change amongst the middle-classes, because they will have to fund more aggressive redistribution and more effective government. (Not that their financial contributions are proportionately more significant than what the poor are already contributing to simply survive despite inadequate support from the state.)

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

Such a conception of course rejects social mobilisation for the sake of it; that is, militancy without a purpose, without a potentially winnable demand. It remains unclear whether the recent social mobilisation in many South African cities is merely reactive or premised on a clear strategy to articulate the diverse domains of political practice in the city. Hard, ideologically-pure rhetoric tends to militate against reflexive and adaptive political strategy. Such rhetoric is impervious to strategic, contingent political praxis. Much of the rhetoric that seems to travel along with new formations such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum seems to fall into this category.<sup>6</sup> It is unlikely to produce radical incremental political solutions that can be institutionalised to achieve lasting redistributive effects. It runs the risk of creating a lot of symbolic attention without translation into practicable reforms that may not fulfil the entire demand but represents a step in the right direction. (Of course I recognise that in some strands of Marxist social theory the point of social mobilisation is merely to demonstrate the impossibility of solutions in a capitalist framework. Therefore, militant political action for the sake of inducing conflict is the *raison d'être*.) The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and Homeless People's Federation seem to be more adept at understanding the use-value of direct action to shape agendas and make room for provisional solutions that will in future become the focus of further mobilisation, renegotiation and even incorporation by the state (Pieterse and van Donk, forthcoming).

There is one more dimension of direct action that is relevant for my purposes here before I move on to discuss development practice as a domain of politics. Collective action through embodied public displays of protest, celebration, defiance or whatever, is not inherently progressive or conservative. In my view, progressive direct action is marked by the political philosophy and agenda of the movement and more importantly, the values of the actors who constitute the movement. Participation by the poor and marginalised citizens in social movements or processes can have a profoundly empowering psychic effect as we know from the works and examples of Paulo Freire, Mahatma Gandhi, Commandante Marcos and Franz Fanon. However, this is contingent on the democratic culture of such organisations and the space for self-realisation through experimentation and performative play. Ostensibly progressive agendas do not automatically translate into

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<sup>6</sup> There is as yet limited published material on the Anti-Privatisation Forum. I base my observations on statements taken from their website and contributions to the "Debate: SA discussion list" list serve (debate@lists.kabissa.org).

progressive inter-personal relations between activists, nor does it translate into an emphasis on self-realisation as part and parcel of the larger social change desired by the movement. What I have in mind here is a form of politics sensitive to issues of interiority as well as exteriority (Alvarez *et al.* 1998; Orbach 1996; Pieterse 2002b). This culturally-attuned understanding of political agency is a vital part of re-defining progressive political agency in our times. Surely our research of these movements needs to be as attuned to the political strategies and ideas as well as the politics of self-realisation. This is particularly important in the next domain of political practice.

#### **Domain Four: Grassroots Development Practice**

So long as we confine our conception of the political to activity that is openly declared we are driven to conclude that subordinate groups essentially lack a political life, or that what political life they do have is restricted to those exceptional moments of popular explosion. To do so is to miss the immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt, and that, for better or worse, is the political environment of the subject classes. It is to focus on the visible coastline of politics and miss the continent that lies beyond (Scott 1997: 323).

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

Elsewhere I have elaborated the content and institutional dimensions of community-based development processes, with particular reference to anti-poverty programmes that are most urgent for the urban poor (Pieterse 2001). In a similar sense, one could categorise



shopfloor struggles to improve the quality of work and establish workplace democracy in this category (Mackay and Mathoto 2001). Both types of social practice involve the establishment of practical rules and norms that can regularise interactions between powerful interests (e.g. government departments with bundles of resources for specific programmes) and the subaltern in terms of effective ways of meeting the minimum standards of 'human dignity' as espoused in the Constitution. In addition to clarifying norms and standards, grassroots development practice also involves the active construction of systematic projects to address a variety of consumption, productive, information and political needs. Here I have in mind savings clubs (stokvels), community gardens, neighbourhood watches, public art clubs, soup kitchens, shelters for the abused, community creches, drama societies, religious clubs, sports organisations, primary health care circles, and so on (Andersson 1999; Swilling and Russell 2002).

The recently released study, *The Size and Scope of the Non-profit Sector in South Africa*, confirms that community life is teeming with associational practices aimed at developmental processes to create and augment livelihood strategies (Swilling and Russell 2002). There are many ways of categorising and analysing these practices. With my eye on urban politics, I want to foreground territorial considerations without underestimating the importance of sectoral logics for organisation (i.e. thematic clubs that can cut across neighbourhoods). Territorially defined development organisations have received particular attention in the post-apartheid era as government legislation often promoted the establishment of community forums – essentially clusters of development organisations at the grassroots – to serve as interfaces with government programmes. The health committees, water committees and policing forums immediately spring to mind. Furthermore, the reorganisation of development finance institutional routes have also been done with a view to providing more funding to such organisations. These initiatives build on a long legacy in South Africa of community-based mobilisations around welfare, self-defence and educational initiatives (Patel 1992). However, what do all these observations mean for radical democracy and the horizon of distributive justice in the city in times marked by neoliberal ideology?

In the first instance, it is vital to appreciate the *experiential* importance of participation in community-based associations aimed at improving the quality of life of oneself and fellow residents. The recent work of Arjun Appadurai on slum dweller associations in

Mumbai argues for the importance of taking serious “the capacity to aspire” in thinking about this issue. Appadurai (forthcoming) develops a layered argument that development, and especially its imagining, is deeply embedded in local cultures that people draw on to function in a day-to-day sense. Some of these cultural resources will be consistent with dominant societal values and norms that reproduce the acceptability of perverse inequalities. Other cultural resources may hold the germ of critique, of thinking about alternative social configurations that can lead to an improvement in quality of life and sense of self. The challenge is to use the future-shaping essence of development practice to expand “the cultural map of aspirations” and in the process expand social citizenship and especially voice (Appadurai, forthcoming: 5). It is inconceivable that such political faculties can be cultivated outside an associational contexts. The argument can be extended. Social learning that arises from development projects can socialise uninformed and unrecognised citizens into democratic values such as accountability, transparency, (agonistic) deliberation, inclusivity, review and majority decision-making. In this sense, it prefigures the democratic rules of the larger political game that unfold in representative arenas. In other words, the experience of organisational democracy in development projects can concretise the meanings of democratic citizenship.

In the second instance, participation in development projects often also enables people to see the bits and pieces of the state and how they function in contradictory ways at different scales. For example, those projects who benefit from the government’s Poverty Alleviation Fund administered by the Independent Development Trust for the Department of Social Development, learn that the social development objectives of a national department may be very different to the social development initiatives of municipal government. In the larger political game, strategic political positioning and action depends on a differentiated understanding of the state and the contingent opportunities for alliances when appropriate (Evans 2002). As long as organisations of the poor fail to capitalise on the, always contingent, contradictions between various arms of the state, they are unlikely to move their agendas forward, let alone recalibrate the priorities of the government.

In the third instance, grassroots projects can be invaluable sites of experimentation with alternative ways of doing development. State bureaucracies tend to be rigid, hierarchical and conformist institutions. Little room is left for creativity, learning and innovation

despite incessant change management efforts.<sup>7</sup> In part, this is attributable to the organisational logic of large rules-bound and driven institutions. In part, it is a function of the need for political control and oversight over the functioning of government. The literature on organisational change and learning in the public sector suggests that these tendencies can only be mitigated by powerful external pressures that either show up the failures of government or provide such compelling alternatives that allow new discourses to come into play (Barnard and Armstrong 1998). On rare, but very important occasions, grassroots initiatives can demonstrate alternative approaches to development that can be absorbed by the state and in theory lead to more equitable outcomes. A case in point is the influence of the Homeless People's Federation on the Department of Housing and their adoptions of the "people's housing process" policy (see Bauman and Mitlin 2002).

These three instances make it clearer why grassroots development associations are such an important aspect of the larger political canvass in the city. However, it would be misleading to suggest that it is easy to achieve these impacts because of the dangers associated with this category of organisation. Many of these grassroots organisations operate in an apolitical fashion and tend to reproduce welfarist models of social change. Such an approach deflects attention away from the structural underpinning of maldistribution of public resources. These organisations are also prone to cooption because of financial dependency issues. This is less likely to be a problem in cases where development projects also incorporate membership fees/savings into the organisational methodology, but that is rare. An even more insidious problem is the potential of development projects to dissipate pent-up anger and militancy—the fuel of 'spontaneous' combustion that is so essential for direct action. The highly regulated and routinised political frameworks in South Africa, which construct sharp insider/outsider boundaries, undermines the rise of social movements willing to occupy political arenas of public direct action. For reasons argued earlier, this is a problem for advancing radical democracy and distributive justice.

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to denigrate the important and complex work of effective institutional change in large public sector organisations. Studies on 'synergy' between the state and civil society organisations demonstrate just how crucial it is to pursue organisational transformation to enhance the developmental capability of government departments, especially where they act in concert with civil society organisations (see Evans 1996; Tandler 1997; Abers 2000). Nevertheless, drawing on participant observations I am also certain that much of what passes as change management quickly becomes ritualised practices of adaptation with little interest in fulfilling the developmental mandate of the government.

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

#### **Domain Five: Symbolic Politics**

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

Paradoxically, the symbolic or discursive domain is the most under-studied and under-theorised compared to the previous four domains of practice. Paradoxically, because Foucault suggests that we are surrounded and enrolled by discursive power all the time. It is the ground we move on, the air we breathe, because we cannot step outside of it if we are to make a (conscious or unconscious) decision about our next move. Discourses provide a lens on the world, our everyday spaces and ourselves. They constitute the everyday and specialist knowledge we draw on to make sense of larger systems of power

that shape thought and behaviour through regulation of bodily practices. Put differently, we internalise discourses about what is appropriate to think about, what to think about (or believe) the issues we should think about, and how to act in consistent ways with what we believe. All of this comes to us as unquestionable truths and that is the core of the power of discourse. It renders certain historically and politically constructed assumptions as self-evident and obvious, beyond the remit of questioning or reversal. For discursive power to work its magic, it must insinuate itself culturally; that is, be embedded in our daily sensibilities and practices which are culturally specific and contingent. Here I am applying a notion of culture as “the historical transmission of a learned repertory of embodied human practices expressed in symbolic codes through which individuals and social groups develop and perpetuate a way of life. It is a set of signifying activities shaped by and infused with relations of power. Culture implies not only language, values, beliefs, and mores, but material objects and processes organized in time-space locations. Culture is therefore a complex social ecology of object, subject, and intersubjective relations” (Gabardi 2001: 89).

For my purposes in this paper, I want to draw attention to the political potency of discourses about the *identity of the city* and the policy imperatives that flow from it. In a recent article, Jenny Robinson highlights the problematic obsession of many local government managers with becoming ‘world-class’ and ‘globally competitive’ (2002). The work of Jo Beall and colleagues on Johannesburg, Alison Todes on Durban and my own research on Cape Town, confirm the observation of Robinson (Beall *et al.* 2002; Pieterse 2003; Todes 2000). The discourse on the imperative of becoming world class or globally competitive inexorably leads to policy commitments to maintain levels of infrastructure that are deemed world class and favourable to attracting foreign investors. If such high-cost and high maintenance infrastructures are not sufficiently *in place*, literally, then of course investment strategies need to be devised to ensure that sufficient resources are mobilised to make such ‘essential’ investments possible (see Graham and Marvin 2001). If this means that less resources are available for investing in infrastructure-poor areas, especially in times of economic slowdown, then this is a rational sacrifice for the longer-term good of the city. In this context, neo-corporatist forums then become important sites of reproducing and legitimating such discourses to the point of expunging oppositional ones, or at least casting such perspectives as ‘out of touch with reality’. Crucially, municipal discourses such as these are reinforced by

national discourses as expressed through the macro-economic commitments of the government and the industrial strategy that prioritises investment in high-tech sectors that will enable South Africa to ‘compete’ globally, irrespective of whether the educational base exists for the realisation of such a economic trajectory.

To understand the discursive parameters of urban politics, it is important to pay attention to the following kinds of municipal discourses about:

- ≈ the size and sources of the municipal finance envelope;
- ≈ the options for service delivery and the differential consequences for various categories of citizens;
- ≈ the degree and quality of citizen participation – are residents in the city defined as customers, clients, citizens, or defaulters?;
- ≈ the identity of the city and especially its future as defined in planning frameworks, IDPs and city visions that emanate from stakeholder forums and are popularised in the public sphere through print media and the airwaves.

Since most of the functioning of discursive power is abstract and fluid, I will draw on one example from Cape Town during the recent period (post 1996) when the African National Congress (ANC) came into power to govern the City of Cape Town municipality. At the outset of their tenure, ANC Councillors quickly set themselves up to institute policies that will unravel and remake the apartheid city – tackle head-on racialised segregation and unequal access to urban resources. For the politicians this meant addressing institutionalised racism that structured the allocation of the budget between white and black areas and providing housing for black communities alongside traditionally white areas to ensure access to economic opportunities and other urban resources. They achieved reasonable results on the first aspect but hardly any progress on the second. Discursively this was legitimated through a shift in policy objective from ‘equitable outcomes’ to ‘equitable opportunities’. At the start of their tenure, the criterion for success was whether the city was becoming more socially just by ensuring that all citizens experienced a relatively equal standard of living through a rigorous application of distributive justice. At the end of their tenure, senior officials defined as their primary criteria of success whether they were able to ensure that everyone had equal access to opportunities in the city, with no comment on their responsibility with regard to the overall quality of life and social justice in the city. For the current argument, the point is

that the politicians and officials got away with this discursive redefinition with very little opposition or protest from the affected communities or collective associations representing the urban poor. In one sense, it points to the serious weakness of progressive civil society organisations in the city. In another sense, it illustrates the subtle play of power that underpins discursive strategy. Furthermore, it is certain that wider circuits of power came into play.

If South African cities are to become spaces of greater possibility for radical democracy and distributive justice, this domain of political practice will have to be taken much more seriously. Symbolic contestation through the deconstruction and reconstruction of dominant discourses are prerequisites for achieving impact in terms of political strategies in all four of the other domains discussed before. Symbolic politics functions through cultural resignification and therefore implies more creative practices which target the media, especially radio and popular newspapers; public spaces in the city, especially streetscapes and squares invested with symbolic meaning; and, spaces of collective consumption, such as schools, clinics, libraries. Symbolic contestation clears the ground to ask fundamental questions about given discourses such as: What are the underlying rationalities of this discourse? What conditions make it possible for this discourse to pass as given and valid? What are the goals of the discourse? How can the elements of the discourse be challenged and re-arranged to turn the discourse on itself and make new meanings and imaginings possible which can be pursued through direct action or development practice or municipal policy? More presciently, to return to my earlier concern about the identity of the city, a discursive sensitivity makes it possible to recast questions such as these: Who is the city for? Whose identities and cultures are embodied by representations of the city? How can the futures of the city be re-imagined to reflect a radical openness as opposed to the conventional approach whereby there is only one alternative?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The theoretical basis of such an approach is elaborated in: Eade and Mele (2002), Massey (1999), Robinson (2002) and Tajbakhsh (2001). Strategic actions that flow from such an approach are deftly argued in: Amin (2002), Amin and Thrift (2002), Graham and Marvin (2001, Postscript) and Sorkin (2001).

## **Interfaces**

The drawback of any conceptual model is that it superimposes a false sense of structure on complex, fluid social realities. The conceptual model of urban politics developed here is no exception. There is much that leaks from the model to smudge the artificial boundaries between urban spaces and associated political practices. Cultural identities and practices are constitutively porous, relational and marked by dissensus within some aspiration for consensus (Appadurai, forthcoming). For these reasons, I want to foreground the numerous spaces of interface between different types of political practice. Because of space constraints, I will refer to one striking example which is theorised in the evocative work of Asef Bayat on what he categorizes as “the encroachment of the ordinary.”

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

The notion of “quiet encroachment” describes the silent, protracted and pervasive advancement of ordinary people on those who are propertied and powerful in a quest for survival and improvement of their lives. It is characterized by quiet, largely atomized and prolonged mobilization with episodic collective action—open and fleeting struggles without clear leadership, ideology or structured organization. While quiet encroachment is basically a “non-movement”, it is distinct from survival strategies or “everyday resistance”. First, the struggles and gains of people at the grassroots are not made at the expense of fellow poor or themselves, but of the state, the rich and the general public. For example, in order to light their shelters, the urban poor tap electricity not from their neighbours, but from the municipality power poles; to raise their living standard they do not prevent their children from attending school and send them to work, but rather they squeeze the hours of their own formal job in order to work a second job in the informal sector. In addition, these struggles should not be seen as necessarily defensive, merely in



the realm of “resistance”, but as cumulatively encroaching, meaning that the actors tend to expand their space by winning new positions to move on to. This kind of quiet activism challenges fundamental aspects of state prerogatives, including the meaning of “order” and control of public space. But the most immediate consequence is the redistribution of social goods via the (unlawful and direct) acquisition of: collective consumption (land, shelter, piped water, electricity); public space (streets, intersections, parking areas); and opportunities (favourable business conditions, locations and labels) (Bayat 2000: 24-25).

This provocative conception clearly has resonance and relevance in the South African context. Yet, it would be incorrect to locate it as either direct action or politics of development practice. It occupies a zone in-between but is also highly amenable for deployment in creative politics of discursive contestation about who the city is for, even if not by the protagonists of quiet encroachment themselves. This example should suffice to stress the point that the model can be seen as a heuristic to explore discrete domains of political practice and their hybrid interfaces. Now, for some comments on the final elements of the model: political and public spheres.

#### **PUBLIC SPHERE + POLITICAL SPHERE = VIBRANT DEMOCRACY?**

In terms of the conceptual model, elected politicians carry out their function primarily in two domains of political practice: the representative sphere and neo-corporatist forums. And together, these two constitute the formal ‘political sphere’ in the city, anchored in the deliberations of the municipal council chamber. In the political sphere the governmental priorities of the city are defined, contested and reviewed through highly structured, procedural mechanisms of deliberation. Both the content and systems of deliberation have a structuring effect on what is defined as legitimately part of the political sphere and what is not. As I have already argued before, discursive power and its underlying knowledges are the grids that define the horizon of political imagination and intervention. This political horizon is mediated via the media and legitimating knowledge institutions such as universities, technikons, think-tanks and opinion-poll survey companies that reflect back to society curves of opinion and attitudes with a gloss of scientificity. In the absence of dissent and conflict, the political sphere can easily dominate and structure the broader public sphere where state and civil society engagements are mediated. In other words,

top-down political practices can eclipse bottom-up processes that emanate from civil society, effectively asphyxiating democratic citizenship.

For this reason, it is vital to stimulate and animate a vibrant public sphere. In the traditional Habermasian sense, the public sphere “is a space which mediates between society and the state where the public organizes itself and in which ‘public opinion’ is formed” (Barker 2000: 151). In this sphere, citizens engage discursively and rationally in public reasoning to arrive at the greatest public interest on a given issue. My theoretical starting points lead me away from the rational deliberative model of Habermas in order to promote a conception of the public sphere more favourable to the possibility and hegemony of radical democracy. This refers to “a radical pluralistic public sphere of contestive identities, moralities, and discourses. It endorses a politics of diverse social, cultural and political movements organized around the values of cultural recognition, direct democracy, and performative resistance” (Gabardi 2001: 109). This conception is premised on the insight of Chantal Mouffe that we can never fully reconcile the tensions between equality (maximisation of egalitarian spaces of differences) and liberty (maximisation of democratic rights), but instead deploy the tension to animate agonistic contestation within the ambit of universal human rights (Amin and Thrift 2002). The tension produces agonistic pluralism in the polity.

Ongoing research and obsessing about the political economy of urban development in Cape Town in the post-apartheid era leaves me surprised at how much is not surfaced and voiced in the city (see Abbot 2000; Pieterse 2002b; Turok 2002; Watson 2002; Wilkinson 2000). So much of the latent conflicts between groups and representations continue to be repressed or dissipated by discourses that seek to construct the city as a place of harmonious cooperation towards a shared future. Political contestations are mostly ritualised around banal conflicts pertaining to intra- and inter-party personality clashes as opposed to substantive ideological differences articulated around everyday concerns for viable employment, shelter, community services, and so on. Occasionally, questions about structural racism and its impact on the ability of certain groups to access basic services are foregrounded through momentary interventions such as a three day cultural festival on “one city, many cultures”. Yet, even then the representations are mainly organised in terms of a depoliticised model of multiculturalism that celebrates diversity without paying attention to how inequality is tied to structural difference. Opportunities

to use such public moments to saturate the media, educational institutions, public spaces, community facilities with unsettling questions about the persistence of prejudice, racism and discrimination are simply not taken up. But the real political tragedy unfolds in the quotidian spaces of everyday consumption of public services and spaces in the city. What we do not have is a political interest to foster a grounded politics of difference that challenges the ascribed and assumed identities of people and communities. Without such destabilisation it is impossible to stimulate the experiential framework amenable to a larger project of radical democracy across the city, including its pasts and futures. In a moment I shall say more about pasts and futures, but first more on the need for acts of transgression and social learning in spaces of the everyday.

On the everyday, much can be learnt from the recent work of Ash Amin (2002) on the crises of racism and inequality in British cities. In the wake of ethnic riots in 2001, Amin explores the conventional approaches to deal with difference and inequality in the city. He observes that much faith has been stored in the promotion of public spaces for greater mixing, the development of mixed housing estates and the increasing mixture in public schools. However, despite these conscious attempts to promote multicultural mixing, they often make little difference in terms of shifting racist and discriminatory attitudes and behaviour. Amin argues that “[h]abitual contact in itself, is no guarantor of cultural exchange. It can entrench group animosities and identities, through repetitions of gender, class, race, and ethnic codes, and paradoxically, through interventions working the grain of everyday interaction. Cultural change in these circumstances is likely to be encouraged if people can step out of their daily environments into other spaces acting as sites of ‘banal transgression’ ” (2002: 13). Amin continues to detail what such sites of banal transgression may look like and how they can be maintained. Suffice to say for my purposes here that this conception of everyday spaces provides an immensely fertile ground to re-conceptualise the technologies and rationalities of service delivery as it unfolds at street level, in public libraries, public squares, transport inter-changes, public parks, sports fields, and so on. Surely notions such as partnership can be radically recast through this lens whereby citizens from different bases of subjectivity are socialised to undertake joint problem solving and maintenance of public resources. However, the politics of banal transgression must be simultaneously anchored in the past and the future, which also need to saturate the public sphere.

Reconstructing the past through symbolic political gestures of memorialisation is indispensable to demonstrate the interdependencies of groups and the historically constructed nature of boundaries and identities in the city. Heroic narratives of key moments and key leaders get replaced with modest narratives about everyday resistance against totalisation projects in particular sites and spaces in the city. With the colonial apartheid history we are endowed with, there is an infinite well of memories and stories to draw on to reconstitute the historical premise of the city. Similarly, the future provides a rich resource for imagining a plurality of trajectories of the city, infused by the diverse spatialities of the city. In such a public sphere it becomes very difficult for exclusivist discourses to find a foothold and exert dominance over deliberations about the use and allocation of public resources.

In summary, the argument here is simply for a recognition that at the nexus of the present (everyday transgressions in combination with an agonistic public-political sphere), the past (memory) and the future (open-ended), we are perched on the edge of a politics of potentiality; i.e. a transgressive politics of radical democracy and distributive justice.

## **CONCLUSION**

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

On the other hand, I have also sought to demonstrate that a radical democratic practice in the city is multi-dimensional and constitutively open-ended. If one considers the multiplicity of domains of political practice alongside the subjective imperative of identity politics, it is clear that progressive politics cannot be imagined *a priori* nor in simple good/bad terms. A progressive agenda is by definition a complex latticework of numerous transgressive practices that span from psychic interiors to the monumental spaces that symbolically ‘embody’ the city for its citizens and the world at large. In-between there are an infinite series of strategic and tactical manoeuvres that can be deployed to remake political identities, boundaries and horizons. It is only at the coalface of practice and resistance that the tactical coordinates can be defined and used as a resource to construct focussed political communities in difference and solidarity. Such an appreciation allows for the natural coming together of an unflinching critique of the workings of dominating power, especially during our neoliberal times, and reverence for the complexity and indeterminacy of political practice. For me, echoing James Holston (1998), this constitutes the challenge, pleasure, and joy of insurgent citizenship for the city yet to come.

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