11:S951 Urban Citizens

Class Syllabus

Autumn 2019

Units
6 (3-0-3)

Teaching Team
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Course Description

Aristotle wrote that a city cannot be composed of people who are similar; it is a more complex environment. A city is composed of people who differ but who need one another. Our seminar explores what politics follow from urban complexity, and particularly about the roles modern technologies play in these politics. Because the Sensible Cities Lab is now working with the United Nations on a project about urban climate change, Sessions 5 and 6 will focus on the consequences for urban citizenship of this massive environmental change.

The seminar will consist of six discussions, framed and introduced by us. Students will complement the debate through guided group discussions in the classroom, based on curated readings. We will discuss and frame the dimensions of citizenship in our modern societies while exploring their evolution and roles in history. Our discussions then will project the coming challenges for democratic practices in future cities. Members of the seminar will be asked to write a paper by the end of term.

Given the complications of scheduling, we will meet in 3 pairs of sessions during the autumn. Individual meeting can be arranged with Richard Sennett, though these need to be built around the scheduling of the MIT – UN project.
Class structure

The class follows a three elements structure:
1. Assigned readings
2. Class presentation and discussion
3. Paper writing

Element I // Assigned readings
Assigned readings throughout the course are intended to familiarize students with core arguments about politics and technologies which affect cities. The readings will frame discussions throughout the semester, but are targeted to particular meetings.

Element II // Class presentation and discussion
Discussion is the most important element of this seminar, because we are looking at knotty problems, not cut-and-dried questions and answers.

Element III // Essay writing
Students will write a final essay based on their reflections and ideas stemming from the course materials and discussions. The final essay will be posted on Stellar on the final due date.

Members of the seminar should know that Citizen Magazine, published by the London School of Architecture, will consider for fairly rapid publication any papers produced by the seminar.

Grading

If you attend class and write an essay, all will be well.

Final grades will be posted as pass or fail for the term.
Class Calendar

Part 1: Classic Issues in Urban Citizenship

Session 1  The Urban Citizen
Class Dates: 10/09/2019
Class Hour: 4:00-6:00 pm
Room: 9-450A

Session 2  The Citizen's Body
Class Dates: 10/10/2019
Class Hour: 12:00-2:00 pm
Room: 9-450A

Session 3  Inequality and the Urban Polity
Class Dates: 11/26/2019
Class Hour: 4:00-6:00 pm
Room: 9-217

Session 4  Democracy in Built Form
Class Dates: 11/27/2019
Class Hour: 12:00-2:00 pm
Room: 9-217

Part 2: Urban Citizenship in the Face of Climate Change

Session 5  The Citizen and Climate Change
Class Dates: 12/05/2019
Class Hour: 4:00-6:00 pm
Room: 9-451

Session 6  The Future City: Mitigation vs. Adaptation
Class Dates: 12/06/2019
Class Hour: 12:00-2:00 pm
Room: 9-451
Sessions Description and Bibliography

Session 1: The Urban Citizen

This session will explore a theoretical debate about place-based citizenship, and a practical issue about the status of immigrants which follows the debate: Max Weber argues with Immanuel Kant; Henri Lefebvre argues with Max Weber.

Kant believes that certain rights and duties apply to people just as human beings, no matter where they live. Weber maintains rights and duties are based on participation in specific places; there is not such abstraction as “the citizen.” Lefebvre argues that people should have a “right to the city,” both in terms of engaging with the whole city socially and physically, but that the modern political economy discourages participation.

Practically, place-based citizenship entails grappling with the rights migrants in and out of cities should have. In another vein, if rights are based on duties and obligation, what obligations do tourists, visiting students, and other non-citizens have to the places they pass through temporarily?

What role does technology play, if any, in shaping belonging to a city, “rights to the city,” and the obligations of non-citizens?

Readings:


Session 2: The Citizen’s Body

This session is based on two urban histories, rather than on theory. In both histories, people’s physical characteristics were seen to determine their relation to the political order.

a. The Male Citizen
How does the gendering of space work? What are the consequences for politics? An illuminating set of answers comes from ancient Athens, which created male spaces for power and female spaces for ritual.

b. The Alien Body

Segregation often arises from a fear of mixing physically, tactilely with those who different. Jews in Renaissance Venice were subject to this fear of the alien body and were as a consequence confined to a ghetto. Protected only if they stayed “where they belonged,” their story illuminates the dark underside of Weber idea of place-based rights.

In today’s city does ghetto-ization turn in part on fear of exposure to alien bodies? Are the ancient rules for gendering space still operative? Do these physical ways of gendering and segregating the city pass into de-materialised, online space?

Readings:

- Duneier, Mitchell. *Ghetto: The invention of a place, the history of an idea*. Macmillan, 2016. Chapters 1 and 6

Session 3: Inequality and the Urban Polity

News to no one, economic inequality is increasing. Monopoly capitalism has played a major role, globally, in increasing inequality. Are global, anti-trust solutions necessary to combat modern monopoly capitalism, and so reduce one source of inequality – or could localised, and urbanised actions effectively countervail? The urban against the global?

a. We will focus one aspect of this huge issue. John Rawls’ proposals for dealing with inequality envisaged Kantian solutions, providing such things as universal income or universal medical insurance. These proposals are not place-based. Against Rawls, Michael Sandel believes that civic institutions should be the basis for compensatory economic actions and entitlements, even if the city cannot defeat the global market.

b. This contrast between Rawls and Sandel is one way to think critically about tech companies who are today’s major new monopolies. Should they be broken up globally? Would breaking them up have any effect on inequality? Or should they be made to engage civically and locally, as Sandel believes? That would entail providing compensations on the ground for their tendency to increase inequality: for instance, they would be obliged to provide cheap mortgages in Boston and San
Francisco to non-employees – cities where their presence has increased housing inequality.

Readings:


Session 4: Democracy in Built Form

At this point, the seminar turns to issues more specific to a school for architecture and planning. How can democratic politics be built in the city? In this seminar, we will focus on one spatial quality: porosity.

a. borders and boundaries: there are contrasting edge conditions within the city: porous borders and sealed boundaries in the city’s ecology. The border edge is, we will argue more democratic, but that its porosity can come with a price: it can weaken the strength of ties within the community.

b. the intense street: Proposals first made by Jane Jacobs and now by Jan Gehl, Suzanne Hall, and Richard Burdett, argue for creating street life which concentrate and intermingle different kinds of activities and people, by making more porous the relation of the building and the street. The more porous, supposedly, the more intense. Does intense street life in turn encourage, as Jane Jacobs argued, political activity, in the form of exchange and debate? or do high-intensity streets cause people to withdraw into themselves, as Georg Simmel maintained?

c. public spaces inside buildings: Walter Gropius was the first and David Adjaye is the latest architect to argue that tall buildings serviced by elevators posed a social challenge: the elevator is a trivial public space. Adjaye calls this the problem of “stacking” within a structure. Do stacked buildings with minimal public spaces then, as Gropius argued, pose a political challenge, making the buildings less “democratic.” The architects, like the urbanists, assumed that democracy and porosity define each other.

As in our other seminars we will try to relate questions about physical porosity to the situation online. Are there parallel issues online about the edge, intensity, and stacking?

Readings:
Session 5: The Citizen and Climate Change

Climate change poses three challenges to urban citizenship:

- Can climate change issues be dealt with democratically, bottom up, or does the climate emergency require top-down imposition of power?
- What do “rights to the city” consist of in the face of an expected 200 million climate refugees by 2050, mostly of whom will be migrating to cities.
- What role can technology play in dealing with the tensions between adaption and mitigation of urban climate change?

Readings:

- De Tocqueville, A. *Democracy in America* (Vol. 1, Part II). Chapter 7

Session 6: The Future City: Mitigation vs. Adaptation

All these issues became crucial in the work of Habitat III, the United Nations’ recent convocation on the future development of cities, especially emerging cities in the Global South. [One of us is the author of Habitat III’s over-all policy document, the
work of other is used by its technology committee.] The issue for the UN is how sustainability relates to the politics of the city.

“Sustainability” in the usage of UN Habitat, the Global Climate Initiative, and the World Bank, basically means resilience in the long term; for cities, the capacity of a place to survive economic upheaval or the challenges of climate; to distribute resources more equitably and efficiently; to achieve standards of “lived justice” [which means greater inclusion and less discrimination, as in the gendering of space]. These goals are bench-marked over a twenty-year period until Habitat IV convenes in 2036. Investment and programme decisions are now bench-marked to that time-frame.

In this context, what role, if any, does citizen action play in sustainability? In particular, will democratic practices and built forms make the city more sustainable? Can a smart city avoid the “Tocqueville trap”? How is big data to be used to promote long-term development, not just momentary homeostasis?

We’ve had to think about these big political issues in drafting the benchmarks for investment and the organisation of projects. We’ve arrived at no certainties. Discussions in the seminar and the essays written for it will, we hope, take these issues further.

Readings:

- Resolution A/60/1, adopted by the General Assembly on 15 September 2005