

Innis One: Blogging the Just City

INI 101: Blogging the Just City introduces first year students participating in the Innis One program to broad concepts related to cities and urban social justice. Weekly blog activities speak to the development of new knowledge gained through reading and class discussion, ways of seeing and thinking regarding urban social justice and the spaces around us. The following are a sample of excerpts from student blogs:

AALIYA ALIBHAI, JANUARY 15, 2013

Hello, WordPress and INI 101. I come to you a girl untried – not just in terms of blogging, but in terms of the subject matter with which this particular blog has been set to deal. I am the first to admit that I know nothing about anything that the socio-politically-inclined among us calls important. I learned about Hobbes, Rousseau, and Marx in a Grade 12 History class the contents of which I barely remember. I also know very little about cities. I grew up a sheltered child in a 'burb in the city of Burnaby, which is pretty much Vancouver, BC without the lights and loud noises. Vancouver itself is pretty low-key compared to Toronto, where I've been living for a grand total of 7-ish months. And the only neighbourhood I'm familiar with is the University campus. And I don't even know THAT very well. I'm looking forward to diving into this subject (though I don't know how much we can learn about a city without exploring it ourselves), and in the meantime I shall do my best not to sound like I'm talking out of my posterior.

As I read this week's readings, I asked myself – what exactly do I think of when I think "city"? The German in me wants to say "a constructed configuration of buildings wherein people work and live" and be done with it. But, of course, it is much more than that. For me, a city is defined by the people that reside within it. By virtue of stepping out our doors every morning we play a part in the shaping of the city-scape, whether we're working on the construction of a new housing project or simply contributing to the armpit-stink on the bus. But true change – the sort of life-altering, for-the-better change that many of us pray we get to see in our lifetime – requires a little more elbow-grease.

David Harvey (2003) claims that "[t]he right to the city is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart's desire" (p 429). This is an intriguing idea, and one that I fully endorse... but I'm hesitant to believe it's entirely practical. The changes that Harvey suggests, specifically that "[d]erivative rights (like the right to be treated with dignity) should become fundamental" (p 431), are an excellent example of "common ground" change. By "common ground" change I mean a change that most people should be (at least theoretically) on board with. However, common ground change can only go so far. I think we can all agree that utopias are snowflakes – no two individuals' ideals are exactly the same, and so no two individuals' ideal worlds are exactly the same. And that's just two people who know and like each other – try reconciling everyone in a city and come back to me when your broken bones have set. Sharon Zukin (1995) states that "[t]he look and feel of cities reflect decisions about what – and who – should be visible and what should not" (p 351)... but on whose ideals are these decisions based? Whose heart's desire gets to be realized, and whose falls along the wayside? We could divide the city up, perhaps – everyone gets a street and designs it as they wish, implements their own laws, system of government, etc. ... but what happens when we run out of streets? Someone's for-the-better is always going to be someone else's for-the-worse. There will always be an unhappy party holding picket signs and writing angry letters to their MPs. And if you try to stop them, you're a dictator silencing oppression. It's a no-win situation.

If cities are defined and shaped by the people who live in them, then cities (at least ones that don't operate under an absolute power) will always be at least somewhat divided. Conflict and people whose opinions you can't stand will always run rampant. And if we manage to shape a city after our heart's desires... someone will always stand up and say the same thing to the group that didn't get their say.

Sources:

Harvey, D. 2013. The Right to the City in *The Urban Sociology Reader*, Lin, J. and Mele C. (eds), New York: Routledge, 429-432.

Zukin, S. 2013. Whose culture? Whose city? in *The Urban Sociology Reader*, Lin, J. and Mele C. (eds), New York: Routledge, 349-357.

OLGA TARATUTA, JANUARY 15, 2013

We stare frustratedly in the mirror asking: "which is the most just theory of justice of all?" In practice, we suspect Thrasymachus was right: justice is simply whatever the ruling class wants it to be.

Harvey, D. 2013. The Right to the City in *The Urban Sociology Reader*, Lin, J. and Mele.C. (eds), New York: Routledge, 430. Course Reader

This quote sparked an interest in me because I am studying philosophy and have read Thrasymachus' theory on justice and the state in Plato's *Republic*. Although the city is supposed to be a place where there is opportunity for everyone to achieve the "American Dream", in reality, just a few rich and powerful men make money off of the labourers, employees, and all others who contribute to the state. Those with power decide how to rule the citizens, and, consequently, how to rule the citizens' beliefs. Thrasymachus' theory of justice is rash and critical, but it is, in my opinion, the most correct definition of the city.

JEREMY CHAI, JANUARY 23, 2013

It's a bit hard to sum up what social justice in the city is about.

I could go on about equality, women's rights, aesthetics, blah blah, the same of the sort, but to really encompass what is a truly just city? To wrap everything into a few words? It's hard to think about, especially when the topic flirts subjective territory.

For example, Dylan Reid's (2010) take on aesthetics on the city of Toronto is that the hustle and bustle, the mash up of the old and the new, the 'messy urbanization' of the community is a good thing when compared to the previous idea of a beautiful city – clean and pristine, poster and graffiti free, an efficient, shining city. If you were to ask me what kind of city I would prefer, I would have to go for the 'messy' city. My bedroom would be answer enough. But that's not really the point. The fact is that you can argue for both sides; 'messy' Toronto has personality, it speaks character, and 'clean' Toronto – that is, Toronto with no garbage, no debris, no grit, smell- is more efficient, more productive. Both points are debatable, of course.

Now, don't you people start with a bunch of 'What are you talking about messy urbanization is better, blah blah blah' because I don't care. That's not the point I'm making. I'm saying that social justice in the city is sort of a two sided idea. Social justice is indeed about aesthetics – beauty (amongst a multitude of other things – see above), but what kind of beauty? The mix up of race and culture, past and future Reid speaks of, or the gleaming, sleek city he denounces? Remember, the previous belief of the beautiful city was the latter. I'm sure if we lived in that time, some decades ago, we would all agree a 'messy city' as the one Reid describes would be less than satisfactory. And why? Because there was a different state of mind back then. As there is now. After all, the city is, as David Harvey says, not merely a right to what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart's desire (Harvey, 2003, p. 429). And in the past a clean Toronto was our heart's desire. Only recently is there

this new interest in messy, urban, downtown Toronto (complete with its fair share of hipsters).

It brings me to the conclusion that justice in the city is openness, a readiness to change. To have, as Mark Kingwell puts it, not just an appreciation of the other as a fellow-traveller, or worse a competitor for scarce goods and prizes; but a sense of the other as capable of prompting a displacement of self, a loosening of the stable ropes of identity (Kingwell, 2008, p. 5). It is what I see as a willingness to change what is just, and in turn, change what we think is right or wrong. To open ourselves to outside ideas. I'm sure there is plenty of argument for this stand, but I reassure myself when I think that if there was no openness to change, and hence an alteration to public identity, then there would still be black people enslaved and women considered less than men. You must remember that social justice changes as we move on in time. And so I must believe that the one true constant of justice must be the willingness to change what our perception of justice is. After all, social justice is justice according to society.

It's important to expand this thought to the city itself, because the city is a reflection of the people. It is a constantly changing, constantly flexible embodiment of human expression. And of course when expressions and values change there is going to be debates for and against them. Hence the debate between messy urbanization and clean urbanization. With the new belief that the ideal city is not clean and beautiful, but rather messy and all mixed up (Reid, 2010, p. 18), one must decide what is more socially just. A city with personality or a city with efficiency.

Sources

Reid, D. 2010. Bless this mess. *Spacing* (Summer), 18-23.

Harvey, D. 2013. The Right to the City in *The Urban Sociology Reader*, Lin, J. and Mele C. (eds), New York: Routledge, 429-432.

MARTA SWITZER, JANUARY 29, 2013

"Barber (2001: 2003) notes that the privatization and commercialization of space have turned our 'complex, multiuse, public space into a one-dimensional venue for consumption' " (Hou, 2010, pp. 7).



Above is a photo of Times Square that I took during a trip to New York City in March 2012. The advertising in this public space is so overt. Times square attracts tourist consumers and the overwhelming advertising is geared towards this specific audience. Times Square is occupied by consumerism as opposed to the public.

FEDERICO BERNARDINELLI, FEBRUARY 6, 2013

Blogs are what you make of them; in my opinion blogs can be anything. You can blog about what's happening in your city or about music or just write your thoughts and impressions like it was a personal diary. Blogging about social justice however, is a horse of a different colour; blogging for social justice requires commitment, caution and also a dose of courage. In countries where free speech is not appreciated as a representation of democracy bloggers and activists are hindered, threatened, and sometimes arrested too (2009, 93). Blogging is indeed a powerful "tool" for social justice just as Fahmi (89) tells us in his article about the recent protests of the so-called "Arabic Spring" in Egypt: [speaking of bloggers and social activists] This is particularly evident in the way these activists have (re)claimed Cairo's contested public spaces in downtown Unions Street and Midan al Tahrir (Liberation Square) and transformed them into zones for public protest, employing urban installations and street graffiti and constructing significant sites of urban resistance and spatial contestation". This is a very fitting example of the power of blogging in matters of social justice. Especially in a context like the one cited in the article, blogs (and internet in general) allow a safe "space" that promotes the free sharing of ideas and information. Internet provides bloggers with uncountable opportunities to pass on information that would be otherwise censored in a tightly secured and authoritarian country like Egypt; and that is exactly why they are so feared. What really made a difference in this particular case however, is a total dedication to the cause (freedom) by both the activists and the "common" people. What I am trying to argue is that blogging by itself does not really do anything tangible (see it as "material change"). Blogging is just the first step; it then requires activism in the streets and squares, it requires protests and boycott against the "rulers". Blogging is the spark that starts the fire but then the people must instigate that fire.

Sources: Fahmi, W. S. (2009). Bloggers' street movement and the right to the city. (Re)claiming Cairo's real and virtual "spaces of freedom". *International Institute for Environment and Development, Vol. 21(1), 89-107.*
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