Contesting urban development and the struggle for the ecological commons at Ghent's 'Landhuis'[1] [2]

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Abstract

Over the last decade, many papers have been written about the de-politicization of territorial governance, a phenomenon often referred to with Zizek's notion of 'post-politics' (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Baeten, 2009; MacLeod, 2013; Oosterlynck & Swyngedouw, 2010; Paddison, 2009). Several innovative and provocative contributions have been made, arguing that under the current global acceptance of neoliberal capitalism and the entrepreneurial or competitive state as the only legitimate organizational foundations of society, inequalities running through society are being papered over and antagonisms are suppressed (Swyngedouw, 2010; Žižek, 2000).

Most of these contributions borrow their terminology from the post-foundational approach to politics (Marchart, 2007), making a sharp distinction between the specific practices and institutions through which socio-spatial order is created in a given society ('politics'), and the antagonisms and disagreements that are constitutive to every society ('the political'). Many of the empirical research inspired by this perspective aims either at describing particular instances of spatial politics as suffering from the 'post-political condition' or by the search for instances of the properly political in all kind of resistance movements (e.g. Occupy, the Arab Spring, etc.) (Badiou & Elliott, 2012; Davidson & Iveson, 2014; MacLeod, 2013; Oosterlynck & Swyngedouw, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2014). In this paper, we would like to focus not on one of both sides, but on the interface between day to day politics and the institutions through which this is played out on the one hand, and its interruption from time to time by fundamental disagreements and antagonisms on the other hand. Putting the interface between politics and the political central to our analysis is of crucial importance if one wants to capture the full complexity and manifold ways the political difference can play out in actually existing social formations (Chambers, 2011; Van Puymbroeck & Oosterlynck, 2014). Otherwise, we risk getting stuck in a one-sided view on current politics, i.e. a view that focuses entirely on 'pure politics', which would be the reverse image of the one criticised by post-foundationalist political thinkers.

In this paper, we will explore this relational approach to politics and the political through a case-study of contested urban development, more specifically the struggle for *'t Landhuis* in Ghent. In this case a group of squatters challenged the city council of Ghent and its intention to erect a training complex for the local soccer team on site that they had kept occupied for some time. We will analyse the political dynamics in this case with particular attention to how both politics and the political manifest themselves in this case and how the interaction between the two unfolds. To make the rather abstract language in these debates on politics and the political more operational, we focus on the frames used by the different actors during the conflict. More specifically, in these frames we look for Rancière's notions of universalization and particularization, in which the first stands for claims grounded in universal categories such as equality or humanity, while the latter refers to demands reflecting specific interests or positions (Nash, 1996). We argue that the interaction between politics and the political can be analysed as the conflicting dynamics of universalisation and particularisation.

We first elaborate on the theoretical framework that subsequently will be used to analyse the case of '*t Landhuis* in Ghent. We examine attempts of the squatters to politicise the conflict by framing their contestation of Ghent city council's decision as a defence of 'ecological commons' and their squatting methods as attempts to get heard as 'equals' in the debate on the socio-ecological future of the city, but also look at how universalising claims on ecological commons are interwoven with daily concerns and interests linked to housing and urban farming and how the squatters cannot avoid, during the conflict, to take particularizing positions. Likewise, attempts of the city council to frame the contestation in terms of alternative universal categories such as equality for the law or depoliticise the conflict by framing arguments in terms of particular interests such as the maintenance of a share of the garden allotments in the plans for redeveloping the site, are analysed.

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