The force of density:

political crowding and the city

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Figure 1: Politicised densities.

Protest in June 2019 in Hong Kong against the Extradition Bill (author's photograph)

The movement, the mass, the rabble, the crowd, the mob, it has been called many things. Temporary political gatherings in the city are often a vital means through which to call into question urban inequalities or demand political change and transformation. As Andy Merrifield has argued, over the past decade or so the massing of people in streets and squares has been vital for urban politicization, from the 'Arab Spring' to the Occupy and Indignados movements, to forms of urban presencing, protest and occupation in Hong Kong, often connecting through a politics of online and offline encounter (Corsín Jimenez, 2014; Dikeç, 2018) (Figure 1).

"A crowd", writes Deyan Sudjic (2017: 207), is as "unstable, unpredictable and as volatile as the city itself". While the political Right has historically portrayed the crowd in the city as a form of unruly danger, destructive and thoughtless (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2015), crowds, we know, can perform important progressive political purposes. They can bear witness, demands rights, or – as we saw for example in 2011 through Cairo's Tahrir Square – help to

bring down governments (Sudic, 2017). For Merrifield, (2013: 915), the action of a crowd in place – or, as is often the case, both in place and connected translocally beyond place, especially through social media - provides a powerful example of how urban form is produced. Merrifield recalls Henri Lefebvre's (2003 [1970]: 118-9) descriptions of the urban through "encounter, assembly, simultaneity", to argue that urban form becomes defined contingently when it "is filled by a certain notion of proximity, by people and activity, by events coming together in this proximity".

Consider, for example, how the 2019-20 protests in Hong Kong used crowds to make political statements, or to shift their presence in the city in real time as circumstances changed, or to move sites in response to wider political developments. Protestors were keen to avoid being hemmed in, as they were during the 2014 Umbrella movement in the city, to one particular place. Partly to evade the police, partly to keep momentum and action, they shifted the geographies of the crowd. At times, they would rush into certain sites, particularly around government buildings. At other times, they would flow more slowly into other places, informed for example through digital updates via Telegram or other sources, attempting to evade police or to move around resources that supported the protests, or just to conserve energy through socio-metabolic rhythms of rest and action.

Not surprising, then, that a well-travelled quote from that most global of Hongkongers, Bruce Lee, speaking in 1971, was at times invoked by some of the protestors: "Be formless, shapeless — like water…you put water in a cup, it becomes the cup; you put water into a bottle it becomes the bottle; you put it in a teapot it becomes the teapot. Now, water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend". This idea – of flowing or crashing, of becoming

differently depending on context – resonates with the politics of the crowd. The crowd here is modulated as part of a political strategy, as protestors sought to remain , depending on the changing situations of the movement, variously visible and elusive over time and space.

At the same time, while Lee's quote indicates a kind of sovereign control – as if activists were always able to read the urban situation and respond accordingly - there is an unpredictability that comes with political crowds. As situations unfold all kinds of surprises occur, whether they emerge from the actions of activists, the state, or all kinds of other actors in the city, from private corporations to traffic flows and the weather. The protestors then need to decide how to respond, sometimes in ways that do not disclose a sovereign 'decision' by a leadership group or individual, but which are emergent in the experimentation with different kinds of responses going on simultaneously, some of which catch momentum, others of which do not. For example, graduate student Chit Wai John Mok (2019) has wrote of the Hong Kong protests (and see Figure 2):

'Sometimes a new action can be very random. When the police violently arrested a student for buying laser pointers, and accused him of possessing 'offensive weapons', people were outraged. Some angry protesters surrounded the police station and were later dispersed by tear gas. On another night, protesters held a 'stargazing assembly' outside the Space Museum. All the participants brought laser pointers along. It turned into 'a symphony of lights' and, eventually, a dance party'.

Figure 2: Hong Kong's 'stargazing assembly' (Flickr/Studio Incendo)[1]

As Henri Lefebvre (2003 [1970]: 130) argued, urban centrality has no necessary pre-given geography, and while it can be shaped by all kinds of powerful historical processes, it can also be a spontaneous force: "A crowd can gather, objects can pile up, a festival unfold, an event – terrifying or pleasant – can occur. This is why urban space is so fascinating: centrality is always possible". As cities continue to grow and inequality deepens, it is likely that the politics of the crowd will become a more common form of urban centrality, and that in turn states and police authorities will continue to combine brutal force in response – as we've seen recently in places as different as Hong Kong and Chile – alongside ever-more sophisticated technology and algorithms to anticipate, track and target activists (Amoore, 2013).

The political crowd of urban protest is not quite the same thing as high density. High density is a proximity of people in a site, but a political crowd is a particular expression of high density. The political crowd is a collective act that people enter into with particular aims in mind, and with a sense of the temporality of the crowd (for an excellent discussion of the history of 'crowding studies', and the relations between 'density' and 'crowds', see Roskamm, 2017). A crowd is conscious of itself as a political entity (Sudjic, 2017). If 'density' has been historically linked to the realm of modernist urban governance, management and regulation, the 'crowd' is a less controlled historical urban phenomena, more likely to carry with it qualities of improvisation, elasticity and excess (and here Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power*, six decades old, remains a key statement). In this sense, the difference between 'density' and 'crowd' maps on to the distinction between 'the people' as a sociological or demographic category, and 'the people' as a political category (Swyngedouw, 2016).

The relationship between high density urbanisms and the political crowd, however, are multiple and open. Consider for example, in Mumbai, the Right to Pee movement. The movement works with communities and activists across the city to improve sanitation provisions, particularly access to public and private toilets. It works closely to support high density neighbourhoods lacking the most basic facilities. For example, activists help inspect and monitor toilet blocks in low-income neighbourhoods, and work to raise resources to address material problems with toilet blocks or to intervene when social or political disputes occur. This is a politics that, following Elizabeth Grosz (2005: 2), is not so much "mapped out in advance" as it is linked to negotiation and experimentation around ways of doing, a kind of immersion in the trajectories and actors that compose dense sites.

At the same time, Right to Pee is locked into negotiations with the municipality. These are negotiations around policy, budgets, and process, using data that Right to Pee itself generates from conditions on the ground. This element of Right to Pee's work turns on a politics of density as number: counting people, counting toilet provisions, documenting conditions, and holding the state accountable by speaking in the grammars of urban liberal governance. This work has involved teams of volunteers retrieving data on the conditions of sanitation across the city, from railway stations and city centre public toilets to neighbourhood provisions such as community and public toilet blocks, and comparing that to the data the municipality holds, the claims it makes, and the resource allocation it sets aside for sanitation access and maintenance. There are, then, two means through which Right to Pee performs a politics of density: one, a politics of density linked to monitoring sanitation conditions, and second, a politics of density that speaks to a liberal modernist tradition of number, data, policy, infrastructural and budgetary distributions, rights, and so on.

But there is a third politics that I want to draw attention to here, which is linked to these two forms and which points to the generative connections between high density urbanism and the politics of the crowd. In 2015, one of the community groups inspecting toilet blocks became frustrated by the pace of change and the unfulfilled promises of the municipality. As a protest, a group of women announced that they planned to go to the state government building in south Mumbai and, in the area around the outside of the building, stage a 'pee protest'. This was a political provocation that could only work through the form of the crowd, a massing of people in space performing a particular and controversial political act, in which people would shield, protect, and motivate one another. The idea circulated online and off-line, as one activist put it, "like wildfire". "People thought it was exciting", recalled Supriya. It was picked up on social media, and by the *The Asian Age* newspaper. The paper reported that on the 25th of the month, the women would go to the building and stage the protest. The next day the state government requested to meet with the protestors.

And so, the protest didn't happen. Nonetheless, the point here is that high densities, as an agential set of combinatory relations, can become expressed as different kinds of crowd politics. Indeed, precisely the form of political action that Right to Pee were planning and then abandoned has, at times, served as a political strategy historically in India and beyond. There is a history here, beyond the confines of this commentary, of people using their bodies as political weapons through crowding, connecting a politics of proximate and concentrated presencing to the metabolic and the municipal. Around the same time, for instance, a group of women in the low-income neighborhood of Rafiq Nagar, near to where Right to Pee does much of its work, embarked on a similar politicization (Desai *et al*, 2014). There is a history

here of what Sudipta Kaviraj (1997) has called 'small rebelliousness', a quite particular politics of density that emerges from the links between density, fragmented provisions, and urban inequalities, and which itself translates density as a force of shock and surprise by instantiating it through the politics of the crowd (there are resonances too in cases from Cape Town, McFarlane and Silver, 2017; and see too Appadurai, 2002; Gandolfo, 2018).

The relations between high density urbanisms and the political crowd constitute an important lens onto the urban political. It is the potential for high densities to be connected to all kinds of different political instantiations that marks out density as a resource of radical possibility in the city. There is a quality of surprise and possibility at work here. This is why the politics of density cannot only be a liberal politics contained within, for example, the slow negotiation with the state over provisions, rights and distributions. As Right to Pee well know, it also has to be, at one in the same time, a politics *in the wild*, open to the imaginaries, ideas and practices that emerge from the combinatory possibilities and different potential instantiations of political crowding. For all that density has, historically, been a focal point of managed city technocracy, it has also been a figure of untamed urban democracy, exceeding the confines of liberal urban governance and expressing itself through forms of crowding that push and trouble at the very forms and taken-for-grantedness of politics.

Urban space matters here. As the cases from Hong Kong and Mumbai suggest, density, space and politics co-constitute in different ways. The politics of density emerge in part from the conditions of urban space, including the sociospatial production of fragmented and unequal urbanism in the case of Mumbai. Density is a bundle of relations found *in* space which can form new political combinations and potentials, and which can, then, become generative *of*

space across the city and beyond. We see this, for instance, in the changing urban political forms through the histories of the recent Hong Kong protests (see Hung-Ying Chen writing in this collection for a discussion of these). Density can enter into the making of geographies, even if only temporarily. It co-constitutes, as Merrifield (2013) indicates, urban form, and the ways in which it is politicised and brought into measures of action and organization makes use of space, can reform space, and can produce new spaces altogether.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that there are deterministic relationships between space and politics that we can typologise here, as if certain kinds of politics belong to particular kinds of spatial density. As Ananya Roy (2011: 235) has rightly argued, for example, it is important not to fall into the trap that would "assign unique political agency to the mass of urban subalterns". I am not arguing that certain kinds of spaces on the margins produce particular types of politics. Quite the opposite: my position is that density is radically open because of its combinatory possibilities, ie the multiple and changing relations between people and things that it carries with it, and which change not just over space but over time, and which can become instantiated in often quite different ways. At the same time, it is important too not to over-state the scope of the possible in those combinatory possibilities, given that we know that some forms of social and political action can become sedimented and habitual, and shaped by cultural norms and historical obduracies. The politics of density tacks its course between multiplicity and learnt strategy, between the experimental and inherited routine, and in the process enters into the composition of urban space as idea, form and practice.

Density can be made into all kinds of things – a political crowd, a target to be met, an arena to be transformed, and so on - and is a resource of potential. What might that 'something

else' be? This is much more to say on this. Partha Chatterjee's (2004) effort to document what he so influentially called 'political society' attempts to name another set of politics connecting density, inequality, and community groups. Asef Bayat's (2011) attentiveness to the 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary', of a politics that moves below-the-radar of state visibility, but which at the same time depends on proximate concentrations of people - such as street vendors - both in place and with the capacity to disperse and reconvene elsewhere, is another. Oren Yiftachel's (2009) rendering of a 'grey space' between the legal and illegal, through which the very forms of being present on the land can become a dramatic politics of rights, is another still. In work I've been involved with in Berlin on refugees for example, the act of occupying space tells a different story about the potential force of density, one that sometimes resonates with but at other times is quite distinct from the examples of political crowding highlighted here.

Seeing the urban political through density is not, then, a version of the argument around seeing like a city which has become influential in recent years. To see like a city, Warren Magnusson (2011: 120) writes, is "to accept a certain disorderliness, unpredictability, and multiplicity as inevitable, and to pose the problem of politics in relation to that complexity, rather than in relation to the simplicity sovereignty seeks" (and see Amin and Thrift, 2017). Seeing through density – seeing like density? – is more open still. The politics of density might well be orderly, predictable, and singular; there is no inevitability that the politics of density is disorderly and unpredictable. The force of density is one of potential. It is a force that can be controlled, policed, structured, and led, but which always already contains within its relations the possibility of being something radically other. The political crowd is one

historical expression of that, and it itself takes on all kinds of forms and meaning at different times in the history of the urban world.

The force of density is a reminder that the urban political can be more open than we often think it to be. It is a force, as Merrifield reminds us, that is both fundamentally urban in the form it takes, but only ever in contingent and divergent ways. As a resource of potential through its relational interactions, density does not just exist *in* space but is productive *of* spaces, both short and longer term. For David Kishik (2015), paying attention to density is one of the ways we might appreciate what he calls, after Walter Benjamin (2003), the 'sheer life' of the city. This a social and political realm that is often not written down, which night be planned, coordinated and habitual but which is also emergent from the improvisations, happenstance, tensions and lines of flight nascent in people and things together. Kishik's argument is that listening to and attending to the sheer life of the city might teach us something about the urban political, where the political sprouts not just from blueprints but from an immersive engagement in different kinds of densities. "For far too long", Kishik (2015: 95) neatly summarises, "we have busied ourselves with thinking about ways to change the city. It is about time that we let the city change the way we think".

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