

Resisting the transcendent

Chris Baker

Abstract

This essay tracks the oft-hidden acknowledgement by critical human geography of the significance of the transcendent as an ontological and imaginary concept that shapes the way that material and urban space is created. Despite a normative prescription against acknowledging the role of the transcendent—usually as a form of Marxist prohibition against recognizing the salience or religion and belief for modernity—I seek to show how an operant ‘transcendent’ tradition subverts and complexifies this normative position. The postsecular this becomes another way of describing this ambivalent and complex relationship that will become more entangled as the 21st century progresses, not less.

Introduction

The idea of the postsecular, and subsequent developments of the concept of postsecularity, have struggled to gain critical purchase and acceptance in critical urban and human geography. This places it at odds with other disciplines where there is a wider acceptance of the term – for example religious studies, political philosophy, anthropology, cultural studies and international studies (Baker and Dinham 2017). However, critical urban and human geography, or critical urban theory for short (henceforth CUT)¹, has historically shared a greater scepticism of the term along with sociology and sociology of religion, with whom it seems to share a number of misgivings.

First, there appears to be an ongoing suspicion, derived from Marxist and sociological materialist analysis, that religion and belief are largely irrelevant social and political actors in the public sphere, and that even if they are not, there is little particularly good that can from the impacts that they create (Lancione 2014, Helm, 2015). Second, even those who recognise the increased salience of religion and belief in the current modernity, appear suspicious that the ‘postsecular project’ is an attempt to generate a narrative of 21st century whereby religion somehow replaces the secular in a linear or teleological fashion (Beckford 2012, Martin,

2016). Third, there is a line of thought that interest in religion and belief are driven by policy panics over cohesion and integration, on the one hand, and radical and violent extremism on the other. The degree of interest in the supposed power of religion and belief is therefore not empirically matched by the policy hype surrounding it (Dinham and Francis, 2015, Bruce 2011). Notwithstanding these and other critiques, part of the potential challenge of the postsecular concept is that it unambiguously challenges many disciplines to unlearn their presuppositions and working assumptions. There is natural resistance to this challenge on the grounds of both time and intellectual credibility. I will nuance some of these stances by means of my thesis that proposes that undergirding, or perhaps running parallel to this *normative* ontology of scientific and empiricist certitude within CUT, there is an *operant* ontology of the sacred, the mystical and the enchanted buried deep within the traditions of this discipline.

In this scenario, I am indebted to the work of public theologian Helen Cameron who comes up with four categories of inter-related knowledge; the operant, the formal, the normative and the espoused (2010). This framework traces the complex and nuanced ways in which practical knowledge and applied wisdom are held in a creative tension with the authoritative and normative prescriptions of a particular discipline, ideology or theoretical construct. Within Cameron's exemplar, theology, the boundaries of acceptable or recognised knowledge and behaviour are laid out in the formal and normative theology categories. Formal theology refers to 'the theology of the academic theologians and the dialogue with other disciplines', while normative theology describes 'the theology the group names as authoritative and will allow to challenge its operant and espoused theologies' (2012: 13). The operant and espoused categories refer to the practical and nuanced ways in which these formal and normative sets of propositional beliefs get 'cashed out' in the day to day public sphere. Operant refers to 'the theology embedded in the actual practices of a group (what we do)', whilst espoused is 'the theology embedded in a group's articulation of its beliefs (what we say we do)'. Espoused theology, based on reflection of actual praxis, can be fairly congruent with normative and academic assumptions of the discipline, but it can, of course, be deeply subversive and/or incongruent with them.

I now delineate this relationship between formal/normative and operant/espoused forms of knowledge with a four-fold, largely chronological, schemata outlining the engagement by CUT with ideas and practices of religion and belief (as proxy terms for deep ontologies of transcendence) as indicative of what we might broadly call a ‘turn’ towards postsecularity.

In the beginning was absolute space – Lefebvre’s ontological category of space production.

The Production of Space was a landmark volume that came towards the end of Lefebvre’s long career as a Marxist philosopher and sociologist. Among other things he had been a taxi driver and fought for the French resistance in the Second World War. According to David Harvey, at the heart of his intellectual project was an attempt to infuse material Marxist philosophy with art, literature and poetry as well as a deep appreciation for the sociological encounters of every-day life encountered in both rural and urban situations. Harvey defines this plea for recognising the emancipatory value of the body and human creativity a subversion of ‘the mechanistic view... the Cartesian/Newtonian conception of [how] spacetime [is] produced’. (2000: 100) This lived and vibrant quality of space, was for Lefebvre, the key to developing a new critical theory (updating Engels’ Cottonopolis theory of the industrial city, for example) of how space was produced, and was an important endeavour in showing how hegemonic, bourgeois ideologies associated with capitalism constrain the political and economic agency of the proletariat.

Lefebvre’s new critical urban theory was constructed around the fluid interplay of three different ways of looking at how urban space is produced: perceived space (*l’espace percu*), conceived space (*l’espace concu*) and lived space (*l’espace vecu*). Broadly conceived, lived space reflects the tactics for everyday living deployed by the working class whereby social and working relations are reproduced. Conceived space refers to prescriptive vision of the city laid out by planners and capitalists that are designed to disrupt and thwart the ability of the working class to own and reproduce the city. Perceived space is by all accounts a tricky category, but one which according to Merrifield, ‘mediates’ between lived and conceived space because it represents the values and meaning that is attached to patterns of movement around the city, monuments, landmarks and so on that interconnect people with places and create new patterns of interaction (2006: 111). Despite, or perhaps because of, its creative

imprecision, this typology of space production has had a huge impact on several eminent Marxist and post-Marxist geographers and cultural commentators, including David Harvey, Soja, Jameson, Lebas, Shields, Swyngedouw and Brenner.

An *a priori* category of space that Lefebvre uses to critically inform his deployment of these other three categories, however, is his notion of *absolute space* (or *l'espace absolu*). These are spaces of ontological and sacred depth that derive their power from natural energy, but then get overlaid by architectural, cultural and political readings. For a time, their pre-eminence as foundational spaces of meaning and power lies precisely in the fact that they combine all these elements, and are thus spaces of 'symbolic mediation' between human and divine power. Lefebvre's exposition is worth quoting in full because of its centrality to not only his argument, but the argument I am outlining in this chapter.

Absolute space, religious and political in character, was the product of the binds of consanguinity, soil and language, but out of it evolved a space which was relativized and historical. Not that absolute space disappeared in the process; rather it survived as the bedrock of historical space and the basis of representational spaces (religious, magical and political symbolisms) ...[and] embodied an antagonism between full and empty. (48)

Within Lefebvre's typology, the power of absolute space becomes irrevocably corrupted and subsumed by material capitalism, or what he calls 'abstract' space. Abstract space emerges fully in the medieval period when towns and cities became more systematically constructed according to the logic of accumulation which he defines as, 'the accumulation of ... knowledge, technology, money, precious object, works of art, symbols' (49). This accumulation, Lefebvre suggests, means that space loses its ability to reproduce itself socially. It becomes disconnected from social relationships and thus turns into an 'abstracted' commodity – as indeed does time, nature, human sexuality and sensuality, as well as meaningful public spaces. Capitalism with its capacity to distort labour and social relations assumes a subjectivity that 'dissolves and incorporates' other subjects. Yet this subjectivity is occluded; 'it appears as an impersonal pseudo-subject, the abstract 'one' of modern social space, and – hidden within it, concealed by its illusory transparency – the real subject, namely state (political) power.' (51)

Lefebvre highlights how each century from Roman and Greek Empires to the 20th century, moves human society inexorably from ‘absolute’ space to ‘abstract’ space. Under this narrative, religion or at least Christianity, is characterised as a religion obsessed with death and darkness, with pilgrimages to crypts of dead saints a key characteristic. This ‘cryptic’ faith is ‘decrypted’ by the emergence of modernity in the form of the medieval town with its bustling energy conducted in the light and transparency of secular activity. It is the 12th century, in the epic intellectual battle of two theologians Bernard de Clairvaux and Peter Abelard that the decisive *intellectual* battle for modernity is won by the latter. Yet Lefebvre is clear in his high regard for both thinkers, and sometimes appears to argue against his own historical and teleological logic with regard to abstract space, by asserting that pre-existing, or absolute space in fact ‘underpins’ ‘representational’ spaces. Modern knowledge forgets this arrangement at its peril as it ‘falls into a trap when it makes representation of space (i.e. the conceptualised space of scientists, planners and urbanists) the basis for the study of life for in doing so it reduces lived experience.’ (90)

Elaborating Lefebvre’s thinking on ‘absolute’ space reminds us that he took the historical interplay between the religious and the secular, the theological and the philosophical, with a concerted intellectual approach, and on occasions seems to suggest that that tension is still ongoing and properly unresolved. The historically contingent (yet still ongoing) relationship between ‘absolute’ space and ‘abstract space’ is a central oppositional pull that drives the argument of the book.

And yet it is hard, if not impossible, to find reference to, or critical development of, Lefebvre’s use of *absolute* space in any of the followers of the Lefebvrian tradition. Their analysis remains by and large fixated with the *abstract* and accumulative production of space. This is why, within the globalised flux of the 21st century, which has brought the practices of religion and belief back again into sharp relief, their analysis struggles to find the purchase it once did in explaining the modern urban city in which we now live. Gregor McLennan puts his finger on this issue in an outstanding chapter for the *Postsecular Cities* collection. He reflects on David Harvey’s 2008 book *The Right to the City*, a substantive reworking of an earlier volume entitled *Social Justice in the City*, written in 1973. Despite its interest in

emerging new civic solidarities as expressions of new forms of social justice, Harvey makes no reference at all to the role of religion and religious social movements in either volume. As a critical Marxist, McLennan suggests that his natural response should be one of relief that Harvey's 'daring and unflinching' case for a traditional Marxist analysis of global inequality, represents a moment when 'the tables have been decisively turned once again, with normal (critical-materialist) service resumed' (2011: 29). But McLennan is too honest to slip uncritically back into a comfortably reassuring mindset. For him, Harvey's inability or unwillingness to include religious activism and phenomena in his analysis into the 'multiple signs of rebellion...against the burgeoning processes of creative destruction that have dispossessed the masses to any right of the city whatsoever' (2008:37) (2011, 29) is 'puzzling' and inaccurate. For McLennan it's hard to see how any serious debate about what 'kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire', can avoid 'explicit political and philosophical discussion concerning the place of religion in public life and identity'. (2011; 29)

'The echoes return slow'² – the emergence of geographies of re-enchantment

A counternarrative to this normative materialist Marxist and post Marxist critique on religion and belief begins to emerge in the late 1990s. It is now gathering pace and ontological intensity and appears willing to expand the terms under which religion and belief can be said to 'co-produce' the urban with the secular. This turn to what I am calling 're-enchanted geographies', emerges under the impetus of three strands within CUT which include: the psychoanalytic revolt and the liberation of political desire and jouissance; the feminist turn towards religion and belief; and the emergence of a fully-fledged ontology of secular enchantment based on the idea of 'cosmopolitics', inspired by the work of Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers.

The post-oedipal turn in CUT

There are a series of Marxist and post-Marxist theorists who are seeking to replenish the wellsprings of political socialism, particularly after the failure of the Paris uprising of 1968, with a 'immanentist' appeal to what in effect is a sublimated language of quasi-spiritual ecstasy. In this camp, I am thinking particularly of the work of Andy Merrifield and Mark

Purcell. They do not go down the path of some of their fellow post-Marxist theorists (for example Zizek (2003) Badiou (2003) and Hardt and Negri (2000) for whom the political replenishment of the leftist cause as global movement lies in a creative engagement with religious and theological ideas, and the ideational role of the early Christian church as the bringer down of 'empire' and the establishment of a new universal 'brotherhood'.

Merrifield and Purcell's 'immanentist/ psycho-analytical' rather than the 'theological' genealogy of post-Marxist theory derives inspiration from the radical reinterpretation of the Freudian psycho-analytical tradition that was so clearly linked to Marxist materialist critiques of religion and bourgeoisie morality. This re-interpretation starts with Lacan and then is driven forward in spectacular fashion by Deleuze and Guattari in their book *Anti-Oedipus* (1972). Post-analytical critical geographers are drawn to Lacan's new emphasis on the importance of desire (or *jouissance*) and a union with an external Real or Other (or at least external to the unconscious of the individual). Lacan's formulation was that 'desire is the desire of the Other', which he came to symbolise, in his complex analytical algebra, as the '*petit object a*'. The 'a' in this formulation is the first letter of *autre*, or 'other', and it represents the *cause* of the desire, rather than the end point of desire, which is the Autre, or Other with a capital A. Referring to Lacan's tripartite system of psycho-analytical enlightenment including the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, Caldwell suggests that 'as a force beyond both the Symbolic and the Imaginary the "*objet petit a*" is the residual part of the Real that resists completion'. (2009: 23)

Deleuze and Guattari are concerned to break through what they see as the hermetically-sealed world of the Freudian framework, where desire is introvertedly and neurotically located within the universe of the individual analysand and often predicated on a manifestation of a 'lack' (for example the lack of a penis). This repressed and internally-driven energy instead needs releasing externally for the sake of political revolution. Deleuze and Guattari's tactic is to free the '*objet petit a*' from its subordination to a lack (i.e. a lower case manifestation of an upper case Real or Other) into a primordial energy that 'transforms and is transformed through the ways in which it is organised' (Caldwell 2009:23). In collapsing the ontology between the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real, Lacanian-influenced geographers redirect the energy of the desire for a transcendent Real to within an immanent frame and horizon. This

tactic, they believe, releases a flow of energy that creates machinic or ‘real’ expressions of that desire that is then enabled by other machines ad infinitum (ref). In this way the subject never becomes a unified object, but is always in the process of fluid expression. Thus the idea of desire and joy (or what Lacan defines as *jouissance*) as a form of transformational, externalised and enchanted life drive (rather than internalised death-drives) begins to populate post Marxist critical geography.

One example of this genre would be Merrifield’s book *Magical Marxism* (2011). In an editorial based on its contents, he argues that Marxist studies move away from tired and dry categories of materialist and class-war analysis which are cognitive, self-referencing and out of touch with the aspirations of ordinary people. As he pithily suggests, ‘Over the years we have let the spirit of Descartes crush that of Rabelais.’ (2009:385) Rather, he pleads, Marxism must move into a more affective register, where the essence of the search for social justice and economic empowerment engages with everyday life and new forms of utopian imagination, including those inspired by poetry. This passage is typical of what one might call a re-enchanted Marxist materialism.

The emphasis on poetry is a crucial one, not least because Magical Marxism's best adherents are perhaps lyric poets, people who don't necessarily write poetry but who somehow lead poetic lives, who literally become-poets, as Deleuze might have said, who internalize powerful feelings and poetic values, spontaneous values with no holds barred. The key point here is that Marxists make life a poem, adopt a creative attitude towards living. Poetry, accordingly, becomes something ontological for Magical Marxists, a state of Being-in-the-world, the invention of life and the shrugging off of tyrannical forces that wield over that life (2009; 382)

Other post-Marxist commentators like Castells and Purcell see the tumultuous events of the Arab spring and the emergence of Occupy in 2011 as epoch-defining events that liberate the potential of this magical and enchanted materialism. In his book, *The Deep-down Delight of Democracy*, Purcell channelling the likes of Spinoza, Ranciere, Mouffe as well as Deleuze and Guattari, talks about new forms of economic and spatial production, based on desiring. These forms of ‘desiring-production’ are likened to flows that escape the capitalist-state

machine's attempts to control them; they are 'accelerated flows...that seek out other flows and enter into connections with them. In the best case... they will produce large aggregates of free connected desire, and those aggregates, as they grow, will begin to trace out something they [Deleuze and Guatarri] call "a new land".' (47). Purcell is clear however, that this new land is an affective state of mind – a new political consciousness that has been liberated by the Occupy phenomenon – that he hopes will survive despite retrenchments by the state and the market to restore 'business as usual'. The new land is a metaphor not a physical space (87). What will keep the flame alive is not dead ideology or musty tomes. Rather it is the affect of joy, of jouissance. As well as the power of ideas, Purcell says, 'we need to really *feel* what it is we desire' (original emphasis) (119)

The City of Spirit – the feminist turn back to religion and the sacred

Much feminist critical geography has centred on ideas of cities of difference or ordinary cities (Robinson, 2002; Fincher and Jacobs, 1998), which normalise and diversify the ways in which urban spaces are planned, conceived and experienced, not least by women, ethnic minorities, young people, LGBTQ and disabled constituencies. Clara Greed (2011) however, outlines how the portrayal of religious women in urban contexts within both feminist and CUT studies has largely been ignored (2011). There were clear overlaps between religious identities and first wave feminism during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in which women of faith were at the forefront of suffragette and social reform movements. Some of the early second wave feminist theorists in the late 60s and early 70s were also theologians and philosophers, or were religiously educated (2011: 107). But since that period, a secular, Marxist and Enlightenment tradition within western feminism has predominated which has foregrounded a critique of religion as patriarchal and anti-modern, and therefore deeply inimical to women's agency and empowerment. Over time, however, this model has also become perceived as too normative and privileged in favour of white, Western women, ignoring, for example, how 'third-world women' are multiply oppressed on the grounds of race, gender and class. Crenshaw (1989) coined the concept of intersectionality to describe these multi-layered experiences of oppression, domination, or discrimination, to which have now been added the categories of sexuality and disability. According to Sarah Salem (2013), religious identities have now also become part of the intersectionality debate as part of the post-colonial challenge to normative, white western feminism.

There is now an emerging discourse, particularly from Muslim women scholars challenging the traditional assumption that religious identities stifle both feminine agency and autonomy. They present the complex and often problematic ways Muslim women must negotiate contemporary urban pluralism within non-theocratic states. Banu Gokarikel and Anna Secor (2014), for example, reflect on how devout Sunni Muslim women inhabit the postsecular geographies of Istanbul. ‘Women navigate a gendered moral order made taut with the tension of political and cultural contestation, and in the intimate micro-geographies of offered prayer mats, rejected pastries, a visit to the house of an Alevi aunt or a refusal to visit a friend’s place of worship.’ (p.28)

Clara Greed is sceptical that the notion of postsecular city eases the complexity of religious women’s lives and the prejudice they encounter, even though the idea of the postsecular is, at one level, pointing towards a positive re-evaluation of religion and belief in the public sphere. Greed focuses on the growing cohort of Black Pentecostal women ministers and church leaders who work in diverse, global cities like London. ‘They are more likely to apply their belief in the miraculous to the political situation, and to intercede for the nations and the rulers, in the “public” realm as an extension of their beliefs in physical healing, casting out demons and the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the ‘personal’ realm...’ (2011; 112) Their willingness and ability to span traditional public and private zonings of space means these women become ‘political’ and ‘feminist’ actors, not necessarily through conscious choice, but because they ‘inevitably’ get ‘drawn into community politics and equality battles in dealing with local problems’ (p.112). Greed suggests that despite this important political and community work on the ground, the contribution of these women remains ‘politically invisible’ to central government, despite an apparent ‘concern for “faith communities” within the “diversity and equality agenda”. (112)

The new inclusion of religion and belief in the intersectionality debate highlights a further shift towards the religion and belief agenda within feminist critical urban theory. Hopkins (2009) suggests a new interface between religion, belief and feminist geographies has been generated by the ‘emotional turn’ in human geography (see Bondi et al., 2005). Such an alliance suggests Hopkins, promotes shared understandings based on ‘intimate, personal and

embodied accounts of the salience of religion to people's everyday experiences, the emotions and feelings associated with particular religious places, events and times may also be better understood'. (2009; 9)

Meanwhile, a less private and individualised feminist critical geography, is drawing attention to the ways in which particular configurations of physical and human elements combine to create certain religious and spiritual spatial affects, and indeed, effects. Leonie Sandercock proposes a counter-hegemonic practice to the paternalistic and modernist norms to which she was exposed as a trainee planner. These norms were 'designed to triumph over both politics and nature with its rational decision making and problem-solving techniques, grounded in rigorous social analysis.... which would liberate societies from ideologies superstitions, prejudices.' (31). As a reaction against the sterile and unsafe public spaces that this form of planning created (see for example the work of Jane Jacobs), Sandercock suggests that the hitherto marginalised voice of women and particularly minority women, came to the fore in the 80s and 90s, creating a series of alternative imaginations of the city which Sandercock characterises as the city of memory, the city of desire and the city of spirit (33).

The 'city of spirit' category refers to the sense of individual and communal alienation that Sandercock perceives has been produced by the 'dead' landscapes of urban overcrowding, pervasive consumerism and mass industrialisation. As an Australian citizen, living in British Columbia, she observes that several of her compatriots 'now go in search of comfort to aboriginal songlines or Native American sacred places' (225). She is painfully aware of the Orientalist paternalism inherent in such practices (226), but seeks to expand her understanding of 'spirit' in a way that fits a renewed sense of 'western' and immanentist re-enchantment. This is her vision of a re-enchanted urban space.

The nourishing of the spirit or soul needs daily space and has everyday expressions: a group of students in a coffee shop discussing plans for a protest; and elderly Chinese man practising his tai-chi on the beach or in a park; amateur musicians performing in front of cafes and museums; an old woman tending her flowers in a community garden; kids skateboarding among the asphalt landscaping of sterile bank plazas; lantern parades through city streets on the winter solstice. (227)

This expression of an materially inclusive if somewhat ontologically nebulous urban enchantment contrasts with the more edgy and contested response to overtly religious symbols of dress worn by women of faith (e.g. niqabs, hijabs, crucifixes). But both responses are clear examples of post-secular engagement with notions of religion, belief and spirit from within the tradition of critical feminist thinking.

Cosmopolitics – object centred politics and the shift towards full spectrum secular enchantment

Sandercock's 'spiritual' vision of urban space becomes more fully-blown in the work of what we might call 'second generation' assemblage theorists. In this line of enquiry initiated by Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour, every human and non-human element that constitutes the fabric of urban life is a fully-blown 'actant' that possesses an ontologically real energy and personality that profoundly shapes the material structures around us. In a 2011 article for *City* journal on the theme of 'Assemblage and Critical Urbanism', Colin McFarlane develops Deleuzian assemblage theory as a critical tool for thinking about 'a more just and ecologically sound' theory of urban transformation. The Marxist materialist analysis that simply sees cities as outcomes of excess and unjust capitalist accumulation has occluded the role of many other actors and processes that also shape the urban. Instead, McFarlane sees the city as a decentred object which is 'relentlessly being assembled at concrete sites of urban practice ... as a multiplicity of processes of becoming, affixing societal networks, hybrid collectivities and alternative topologies' (2011; 205). He researches into the informal settlements in Mumbai as a case study of this set of intertwined practices. But he is also keen to attach a greater 'potentiality' to this assemblage theory. By potentiality, McFarlane means 'both the intensity and excessiveness of the moment – the capacity of events to disrupt patterns, generate new encounters with people and objects and create new connections in ways of inhabiting everyday urban life'. (2011; 209)

Blok and Farias take McFarlane's assemblage theory further up the ontological dial with reference to what they refer to as an 'object – centred politics' (OCP) which becomes the operating framework for their enhanced model. This OCP, also designated as 'ontological

politics' (2016:5), has, I detect, four -interrelated dimensions associated with it: the *notion of radical co-presence* that highlights a ontologically significant relationship between all the actants that combine to create new common urban assemblages; the new knowledge and experience of this radical co-presence often generates an *excess or surplus of meaning*; this surplus of meaning in turn generates *new political-ethical subjectivities* based on a common understanding of the singularity of moral intent and ontological depth that lies within the urban; this understanding in turn leads to the creation of *new political imaginations and practices of urban and civic engagement*.

This ontological and radical co-presence of multiple objects highlights the innate (or virtual) set of possibilities that are generated by these new and ever-fluxing assemblages. A surplus of knowledge and affect is generated by these ontological co-presences that impels us to make these potential realities more visible (p.5). Blok and Farias are clear that this is not only a critical research task (p.5), but also a politico-ethical one. The search for an underlying unity (or commons) to the impact created by both human and non-human actants requires a visualisation of hitherto new possibilities for creating the co-existence of these human and non-human actants.

This is the implicit moral task lying at the heart of *Cosmopolitics*. Following Latour's extrapolation of a *Dingpolitics* (or politics of things) (7) Blok and Farias suggest that the objects that co-construct our urban assemblages are not 'objects' in the standard sense of the word; rather they are relationally intended, and in shaping our 'shared, common public matters' they therefore come 'loaded with moral and political capacities' (p7). The key question that emerges from this ontological worldview is, 'not first and foremost for *whom* these [enactments] function, but rather *how* shared urban realities are made and remade' (p.7).

In other words, OCP involves a radical *decentring* of our assumptions about how material reality is produced. It requires the formation of an inductive, but politically astute, sensibility; one might even say, spirituality. An OCP radically decentres the human subject. 'It is important to stress', say Blok and Farias, that 'this ontological multiplicity does not just point

to the different furniture of human worlds, but to different ways of “being human”, of assembling and enacting humanity.’ (p.7) Blok and Farias never directly allude to the spiritual quality of their work, but their call for a new political-ethical subjectivity derived from an ontological politics could potentially ‘cross-over’ into religious, spiritual and no-religious sites of engagement: ‘a politics of exploring and provisionally settling what does and does not belong to our common (urbanised) worlds’ (p.7)

Blok and Farias commission multiple case studies to flesh out their idea of OCP, ranging from austerity-economy tactics for sharing train tickets between strangers which are derived from excesses of ‘social energy’ (2016; 33) and disrupt traditional transactions of neo-liberal economics, through to the truly apocalyptic disruption of urban systems by actants derived from Water and Air in the form of hurricanes and tsunamis. Put succinctly, the common thread linking these examples of OCP lies in the way they all reflect the fundamental politico-ethical question ‘of how we can live together in ways that remain sensitive to the active inclusion and the making visible of all the heterogenous constituents of common worlds’ (11)

In conclusion, Cosmopolitics and OCP have their roots in Actor Network Theory which begins as a ‘techno-scientific’ enquiry into objects, before widening the debate to explore the spaces in which these objects circulate. These tactics lead to exploring how these objects exert influence on one another and how they become entangled with one another. Blok and Farias then use the language of ‘entanglements’ (12) to shift the analysis from one located within techno-scientific frameworks, to one with more obvious moral-ethical and political dimensions. The journey towards secular enchantment, energised by ‘cosmopolitics’ thus makes the hermeneutical shift from the scientific to the ethical to the political, including the emergence of new politico-ethical subjectivities of what it is to be human and a citizen (Baker 2017)

Conclusion

In this essay, I have sought to highlight how, as part of the postsecular turn, those disciplines who hitherto had not paid much attention to religion, belief and ontologies of transcendence and the sacred, are now starting to address them. The purpose of constructing this typology has been three-fold. First, I have set out to show that ontologically real readings of the transcendent become more pronounced as we move deeper into this postsecular century. OCP, for example, represents a full-spectrum secular ontology reflecting an externally transcendent reality that actively shapes the material structures that surround us.

Second, the shift within CUT a towards deeper ontological view of reality suggests an unconscious unravelling of Lefebvre's foundational thinking about the significance of 'absolute space'. Although largely ignored by CUT in the 80s and 90s, a more symbiotic, if still edgy, relationship with notions of the transcendent (and by implication, religion and belief) seems to have developed. In other words, the work of Blok and Farias symbolise a return to the lost or sublimated category of the transcendent established by Lefebvre.

Finally, this typology attempts to understand the emerging relationship between CUT and notions of the transcendent, as part of the new space for critical debate and research opened by the 'postsecular turn'. My title for this essay suggests that the relationship has historically been characterised by a resistance on the part of a normative intellectual secularism to acknowledging the full impact and complexity of religion and belief on the spatial, and vice versa. However, my use of a question mark in my title is deliberate. In deploying Cameron's theory of knowledge development, I have suggested that the category of the transcendent has consistently emerged as an operant category, alongside and within the normative sanctions self-imposed by CUT on referring to it.

But perhaps active resistance or avoidance within CUT is giving way to a recognition of the validity of religion and belief as a shaper of modernity. This recognition is still grudging and sceptical in some quarters, but increasingly intrigued and enchanted in others. Either way, a new relationship between the religious and the secular is being forged at both an empirical and theoretical level that requires us to rise to the challenge of new thinking and praxis if the

multiple challenges facing our modern, urban world are to be progressively overcome for the benefit and flourishing of all.

Notes

1. I use the term Critical Urban Theory as a shorthand concept for both critical theory that looks at the urban, as well as the tradition of critical human geography. In this sense I am deploying the term as argued by Neil Brenner in an influential *City* article where he defines CUT as ‘involving the critique of ideology (including social–scientific ideologies) and the critique of power, inequality, injustice and exploitation, at once within and among cities.’ (2009:198)

2. This phrase come from the title of a volume of the poetry of the 20th century Welsh poet R.S.Thomas (1988) *The Echoes Return Slow*. MacMillan, London.

Further reading

Becker J, Klingan K, Lanz S and Wildner K (eds) (2013) *Global Prayers: Contemporary Manifestations of the Religious in the City*, Lars Muller Publishers, Zurich.

A fantastically visceral and materialistic reading how embodied religion shapes the smallest to the largest of urban spaces, and across multiple cities not usually theorised upon. Interdisciplinary and full of visual resources.

Berking H, Steets S, and Schwenk J (eds) (2018) *Religious Pluralism and the City: Inquiries into Postsecular urbanism*. Bloomsbury Press, London

The latest critical enquiry into the nature of the postsecular from a predominantly secular/urban sociology perspective. Whilst critically regarding postsecular labelling, this volume does equally challenge the discipline of urban sociology to engage far more openly than it has done to date with the lived and complex realities of urban religion and belief.

Cloke P and Williams A (2018) Geographical Landscapes of Religion. In Baker C, Crisp B and Dinham A (eds) *Re-imagining Religion and Belief for 21st Century Policy and Practice*. Policy Press, Bristol.

A critical and comprehensive up-to-date literature review of the multiple and innovative ways religion and belief are being theorised and researched in human geography.

References

- Badiou A (2003) *St Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* Stanford University Press, Stanford
- Baker C (2017) Aiming for re-connection: responsible citizenship. In Cohen S, Fuhr C and Bock J (eds) *Austerity, Community Action and the Future of Citizenship in Europe*, Policy Press, Bristol
- Baker C and Dinham (2017) New Interdisciplinary Spaces of Religions and Beliefs in Contemporary Thought and Practice: An Analysis. *Religions*, 8 (2)
<http://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/8/2/16/html> (accessed 18.4.18)
- Beckford J (2012) SSSR Presidential Address Public Religions and the Postsecular: Critical Reflections. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 51 (1), 1-19
- Blok A and Farias I (2016) *Urban Cosmopolitics*, Routledge, London and New York
- Bondi E (2005) Making connections and thinking through emotions: between geography and psychotherapy <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2005.00183.x> (Accessed 18.4.18)
- Brenner N (2009) What is Critical Urban Theory? *City*, 13, 198-207
- Bruce S (2011) *Secularisation: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Caldwell L (2009) Schizophrenizing Lacan: Deleuze, [Guattari], and Anti-Oedipus. *Intersections* 10, 19-27
- Cameron H, Bhatti D, Duce C, Sweeney J, and Watkins C (2010) *Talking about God in Practice*. SCM Press, London

- Crenshaw K (1989) Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 139–67
- Dinham A and Francis M (2015) (eds) *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*. Policy Press, Bristol
- Fincher R and Jacobs J (eds) (1998) *Cities of Difference*. Guilford Press, London and New York
- Gokariksel B and Secor A (2014) The Veil, Desire, and the Gaze: Turning the Inside Out. *Journal Of Women in Culture and Society*, 40, 177-200
- Greed C (2011) ‘A Feminist Critique of the Postsecular City: God and Gender’. In Beaumont J and Baker C (eds) *Postsecular Cities: Space, Theory and Practice*. Continuum, London
- Hardt M and Negri A (2000) *Empire*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA
- Harvey D (2000) *Spaces of Hope* Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh
- Hjelm T (2015) (ed) *Is God Back? Reconsidering the New Visibility of Religion*. Bloomsbury, London
- Hopkins P (2009) Women, Men, Positionalities and Emotion: Doing Feminist Geographies of Religion, *ACME*, 8, 1-17
- Lancione M (2014) Entanglements of Faith: Discourses, Practices of Care and Homeless People in an Italian City of Saints. University of Cambridge Repository
<https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1810/253370/Lancione%202014%20Urban%20Studies.pdf?sequence=1> (accessed 18.4.18)
- McFarlane C (2011) Assemblage and Critical Urbanism. *City*, 15, 204-224
- McLennan G (2011) ‘Postsecular Cities and Radical Critique: A Philosophical Sea-change?’ In Beaumont J and Baker C (eds) *Postsecular Cities: Space, Theory and Practice*. Continuum, London

- Merrifield A (2009) Magical Marxism *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27, 381-386
- Martin D (2016) *The Future of Christianity*. Routledge, London and New York
- Merrifield M (2006) *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, London and New York
- Purcell M (2009) *The Deep-down Delight of Democracy* Wiley-Blackwell, Malden MA
- Robinson J (2002) *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development*. Routledge, London and New York
- Salem S (2016) Intersectionality and its discontents: Intersectionality as traveling theory. *European Journal of Women's Studies* <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506816643999> (accessed 18.4.18)
- Sandercock L (2003) *Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities of the 21st Century* Continuum, London
- Zizek S (2003) *The Puppet and the Dwarf* MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.