

Public space

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“Public Space is for living, doing business, kissing and playing. Its value can’t be measured with economics or mathematics; it must be felt with the soul.” (Peñalosa, 2001).

1) Venezuela: Groups of bodies joyously dance in circles, a spiritual exaltation, moving from one public plaza to another. The dance is circular, but the plazas are square. Ponce-Ugueto (2017) illustrates these Afro-Indigenous religious processions which animate, transect, destabilize, and re-claim the rigid, colonial-era, Spanish-designed ‘plazas.’ 2) Singapore: A single artist stands in front of a police station, holding a cardboard sign which shows, only, a smiley face (Ratcliffe, 2020). Still, he is arrested, because in this place, such uses of public space are not permitted. 3) A global pandemic means that city parks are inaccessible, leading to residents interacting with the public via phones and screens.

These three tableaux of intersecting shapes and textures, and the embedded tensions between movement and fixity, liberation and subjugation, fear and triumph, encapsulate the complexities, heterogenous languages, dangers, and beautiful possibilities of public space. There is no single definition or shape of public space. It means different things to different people, and it is used for many, often contradictory, purposes: joy and love; labour and profit; activism and revolution; control and violence; performance and play. For these reasons, public space has never been easy to theorize, because its two component words – ‘public’ and ‘space’ are likewise, shifting and contested concepts that take no single form.

Public space is the field through which humans (and *more than humans*) encounter and relate to each other and the world, form groups, collective identities, cultures, politics and ideologies, demands and actions. Public space contains social relations, in a physical sense, but is also produced and shaped by social relations, relations which extend beyond living

things altogether (humans, animals, insects, bacterium and pathogens) and into/out of the web of materials (e.g., smart phones, satellite beams). The assemblage of human, more than human, material and digital thereby produce, (re)produce, extend and contract, public space simultaneously at intersecting scales (from body to planetary and interstellar), each scale representing myriad possibilities for social, cultural, and political formations. The fact that such human-world relations are possible now via globalized virtual infrastructures and digital platforms further complicates any set taxonomy of the shapes, forms, and textures of public space.

Several questions emerge. *Where does public space begin and end, and what (physical) forms can it take? Is there a distinct and fixed demarcation between what constitutes 'public' versus 'private'?* This is a blurred and fluid boundary, and understandings/interpretations of public versus private differ according to global context and local cultures and individualized ability/(in)ability to access specific spaces. *How to reconcile local 'place' (a physical site, like a street, square, park, beach) with the more amorphous notion of 'space' (relations and flows, virtual networks)?* Lives and public interactions still depend on physical sites, but many social, cultural and political encounters and interactions happen via virtual space. Finally, *how is public space an uneven and contradictory experience – a catalyst for gross injustice and also emancipatory possibilities?* Global justice movements gain visibility and power by and through public space, in its many forms. But public space is also the site of state violence, repression, and subjugation. *What does a decolonised public space look like, or a queered public space? Can such a space exist, where access is truly open, and those on the outside can be in?*

With these questions, contradictions and debates in mind, the following discussion outlines four key themes which summarize how Human Geographers frequently theorize public space. These are, a) the concept that public space is socially produced; b) that the line

between public and private is complex and hybridized; c) that public space takes many forms across diverse global contexts; and d) that public space is uneven, but also emancipatory – and counter-publics form toward a more just society.

Public Space as Socially Produced and Relationally Assembled

The first theme is that public space is a socially-produced, “sphere of possibility”, “constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny” (Massey, 2005:9). In other words, it is both a spatial container (a physical site, a place), and it is also constantly shaped by, and is constantly shaping, relations and flows that extend beyond the (physical) edges of a local place. These relations happen at different, overlapping scales, at different speeds, and are shaped by humans, nonhumans, objects and materials, senses, affects, symbols. All of these things, all of these elements, these embodiments, are assembled, component parts of the public space (the street); or, taken as a whole, an “assemblage” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980).

The extension of physical public space (specific sites, places) into, and across, a networked virtual field, was theorized by Castells (1996) in his framing of the “network society”, or a “space of flows”. In the “space of flows”, which has evolved into the many virtual platforms and social medias that are now used for work, play, love, or learning (e.g., Zoom, Facebook, dating apps, accelerated further by the Covid 19 pandemic). Castells suggests there is room for both emancipatory openings and the replication of borders, boundaries, inequalities and social exclusions, a dichotomy that mirrors (rather than departs from) public space in a physical sense. These socially-networked virtual publics also complicate clean binaries between ‘public’ and ‘private’, since most mainstream virtual platforms are privately-owned, operated, and for-profit.

Furthermore, access to virtual space often relies on paying into network providers (whether that be a mobile phone contract or home-work media products). They are, in other words, hybridized public spaces. However, there are some aspects of virtual platforms that do offer more traditionally - 'public' possibilities, such as community web-networks, free wi-fi zones (provided in public space in some cities), and moderated 'Wiki's, which allow for free access to information, media/images, and public input/contribution (such as "Wikipedia", a free and crowd-sourced repository of information).

Nonetheless, these virtual public spaces are not physical sites, even with increasingly-advanced technologies like augmented reality and gaming simulations that mimic the physical world, and can make differentiating one from the other difficult. Virtual public space is not accessible to all. As Mitchell (1995:123) argues, referring to Hillis (1994): "a fully electronic public space renders marginalized such as the homeless even more invisible to the working of politics".

To summarize, public space is socially produced and relationally-networked across physical sites and virtual flows. Physical public spaces are shaped by the "network society" while, likewise, the "network society" still relies on physical sites, infrastructures, and users who do not actually live in cyberspace. Yet limitations on access, divides and inequalities, levels of control, surveillance and censorship, profit incentives, and incursions of private into public, are inherent to both physical and virtual public space. Thus, the question emerges, where does the line between 'public' and 'private' space actually exist, if at all?

Public Space versus Private Space? A *Euro-Centric Dichotomy*

What makes a space truly public? This is not an easy question, but answers normally consider aspects such as ownership, access, and rights (Luger and Lees, 2020). These facets,

however, depend greatly on local context and differ significantly accordingly to global settings. Individual property rights and common-law, for example, largely determine how space is enclosed, privatized and / or made / remains public in the Anglo-American sphere and much of the Global North and West. One key differentiator between public and private space is the idea of ‘rights’ – either ‘right’ to public access and use, or ‘rights’ to private enclosure and control. For Lefebvre (1968), access to public space was a vital “right to the city”, regardless of what spatial form that space takes. Lefebvre considered public space crucial for political formation, representation, and daily joy, offering a scale and visibility that private space cannot.

Historically, in the pre-modern age, land ownership in Britain and much of Europe (and other contexts, e.g., historic monarchies like Japan or Thailand) was entirely concentrated in the hands of the aristocracy or religious institutions, and most people worked or farmed on land that was not their own (e.g., the feudal system, where a tax would have been paid to the land-owner, whether that be a noble, a monarch, or the church). A ‘commons’ was typically a parcel of land that was set aside for use (often grazing of animals) for those tenants on the land; thereby, the ‘commons’ came with unique rights and shared responsibilities and is often framed as a ‘public’ space, even if it is not truly publicly owned/operated. Some cities still have ‘commons’ (open fields, parks, gardens, or urban squares) which have their origins in these earlier forms (e.g., ‘Boston Common’). The spirit of these historical commons can also be seen in contemporary co-operatives or collectives, where public spaces or facilities are co-owned, for example, some small-community parks or gardens.

As European empires explored, conquered and colonized, these Euro-centric configurations of land ownership and organization were transferred (in different, but related ways) to Portuguese, Spanish, French and English colonies in North and South America,

Africa, South and Southeast Asia, all places which had extant indigenous cultures with unique conceptions of public space, following multiple path-dependencies. Colonialism thereby resulted in hybrid spatial formations, which intermixed Euro-centric approaches with context-specific, indigenous interpretations.

In many indigenous cultures, the idea of private ownership of land simply did not exist, and spaces of living, working, socializing and politics were communal. In other words, privatization of land, and the constructed binary of public versus private, was imposed and deliberately replicated, governed, and maintained by, and for, a (small) elite of property owners, the legacy of which remains today across a vast portion of the world that was, or is still, subject to colonial expansion and settlement. These historical patterns are inextricably woven into contemporary racial/ethnic class and gender disparities of land and property ownership, which also relates to how public space is allocated, controlled, and accessed.

The line between public and private is sometimes clean and legally-bounded (e.g., ‘no trespassing’ or ‘private, keep out!’). But other times, it is much more dynamic and blurry. This zone of hybridity has long existed, but has been heightened by the neoliberal shift across many global contexts in the past half-century or-so (Luger and Lees, 2020). Under neoliberalism, privately-operated public spaces (sometimes abbreviated as “POPOS”) and public-private partnerships (between public entities like city or state governments and property sector or financial organizations) have proliferated, producing built environments where public access is only partially available, if at all. Consumption-scapes like shopping centres, for example, have long functioned as semi-public spaces in terms of their ability to foster social interaction, but mostly operate as privately-operated entities. More recently, private-sector development and ownership of spaces like parks, squares and even streets and waterfronts have become endemic features of neoliberal urbanism. The same blurred boundaries occur through the privatization or semi-privatization of ‘public’ entities like

schools and universities, libraries or other community facilities, transport networks or utility infrastructures. The Covid 19 pandemic brought these blurred lines into stark relief, as restrictions on gathering in public space relegated many around the world to ‘home’ during a period of enforced lockdown. Public interactions continued, via virtual platforms; thus, the hybrid space of the “network society” again appears.

Finally, where public and private space begin and end in terms of the natural environment – waters (lakes, oceans, rivers), beaches, mountains, forests – is an ongoing contestation. Attempts to enclose and privatize these ‘green’ and ‘blue’ spaces are often met with public resistance or legal challenges.

In summary, the line between public and private is a shifting one, with some origins in pre-modern feudal systems (in Europe) which have been exported (and adapted, modernized) in various context through differing path dependencies, culminating in neoliberalism’s privatization of the built environment in the late 20th century. But we must move beyond the North and West, and such a Euro-centric framing of public and private, to invite a broader and decolonised language of public space.

From South and East: *Public Space’s Many Global Languages*

Beyond the West and North, other global contexts have different relationships between public versus private, and different conceptions of how public space is designed, governed, and used. China’s unique state-capitalism, notably, presents an alternative model characterized by strong state control of public space, and less emphasis on private property. East Asia has other varieties of hybrid state-capitalist models and degrees of authoritarian governance, which give rise to different morphologies of public space. For example, Singapore is a nation where most land and buildings are owned by the City-State

government, including squares, plazas, and parks. The State allows public assembly and use of these sites, but with restrictive rules that limit the number of people that can gather and the type of gathering that can occur. Protests and activism must be approved, and cannot contain certain themes. Hong Kong exemplifies similar tensions, as seen in recent waves of pro-democracy protests occurring in public spaces like streets and squares which have been increasingly restricted by authorities.

Other examples offer more extreme examples of how public space is governed. There are totalitarian states (North Korea) or different hybrids of communism, such as Cuba, where private ownership is generally non-existent (with some exceptions, e.g., foreign resorts which now operate on the island).

Religious institutions still own and operate vast swathes of global space, operating in many ways like private companies, but sometimes accessible (and welcoming, or not) to the public for community use, albeit, with themes around faith and prayer (e.g., Jerusalem's Old City, Rome's Vatican, or Mecca's complicated webs of public, religious, and private space).

In South, East and Southeast Asia, many urban residents live in multi-storey buildings that feature 'void decks' on the ground, which are open spaces that function as public, community sites for a variety of uses. Returning to Singapore, for example, the 'void deck' on the ground floor of most high-rise residential towers is a vital site for public meetings, exercise, performances and socialising. Latin cultures from the Mediterranean across to Mexico and South America, integrate interior courtyards as fundamental social spaces, as does much of the Islamic world, partially as a cooling and shaded response to hot, sunny climates (for example in North Africa and the Middle East).

To summarize, the Eurocentric, capitalist and postcolonial frameworks of public versus private space are instructive, but do not stand for the whole world, and varying social,

cultural and political systems approach property (and public space) very differently. Moving beyond the Global North and West, or we should say, looking from the Global South and East, there are variegated and highly locally-specific formations and conceptions of what constitutes public space, versus private, and how such spaces might be used.

Public Space as Uneven and Emancipatory: *Making Counter-publics*

For the political theorist Chantal Mouffe, the political was predicated upon “the always-to-be-achieved construction of a bounded yet heterogenous, unstable and necessarily antagonistic “we”” (quoted in Donald, 1999:10). This ‘we’ of various political demands – whether those demands be for access to housing; access to infrastructure or clean drinking water; access to democracy and political representation; safety from police violence and racism; recognition of basic humanity and civil rights in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation; or fairer opportunities in an unequal economy – is formed in and through public space. Public space has tremendous kinetic energy and possibility for political transformations and re-makings.

The inherent contradiction is that public space is also where much repression, violence and inequality takes shape and erupts. A street can be the site of police violence one moment, and the site of protest the next. Public space is uneven, at the same time that it is emancipatory. It is frequently inaccessible: the public square may be guarded by state police; it may be inhospitable to the socially marginalized or physically disabled; it may be enclosed by walls. These limitations stimulate great public creativity and the formation of counter-publics, such as the single-man protest in Singapore, prevented from protesting, but still standing there, holding his cardboard smiley face. Or, the circular, Afro-Indigenous religious

dances in Venezuela, transforming the rigid, square plaza into animated festivals of rapture and joy.

To close: Human Geography engages with the ongoing process of allowing for such re-makings and counterhegemonic narratives to emerge. The effort must continue to decolonise public space as a concept and theory, by elevating new languages, readings, and understanding to illuminate not only what public space might look like and how it might function, but also, how knowledge is constructed about it. This means leaving any attempts to define public space radically open, maintaining an eye for difference, and allowing for a multiplicity of heterogenous narratives, “always under construction ...a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (Massey, 2005:9).

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