



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 21 | Winter 2015

Title	Public Works
Author	Professor Bruce Robbins
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	21
Issue Date	Winter 2015
Publication Date	09/12/2015
Editors	Sarah Bernstein and Emma Sullivan

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Public Works

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The ambiguities of the word public show with unusual clarity when the subject is public works, when it is unclear what, if any, citizen engagement or influence has been brought to bear. This article asks whether the discourse of the common good can be salvaged for large scale mobilisations, whether they be infrastructure projects or responses to ecological crisis.

In his most famous newspaper article on imperialism, “The British Rule in India,” Karl Marx wrote: “There have been in Asia, generally, from immemorial times, but three departments of Government: that of Finance, or the plunder of the interior; that of War, or the plunder of the exterior; and, finally, the department of Public Works.” The striking thing about this sentence is that the department of Public Works, unlike the other two departments, is not associated with plunder. Nor does it get associated with plunder as the article proceeds.

The British have taken over the two departments of government that are associated with plunder, Marx goes on to argue, but they have neglected public works. Perhaps, though he does not say so, public works have been neglected precisely because they did not involve plunder – because taking responsibility for irrigation, say, would involve spending money rather than stealing it. In any event, Marx sees that neglect as a disaster for India. Alongside the assault on native Indian industry, it is the refusal to take over and maintain public works, Marx argues, that has made the British conquest, compared with previous conquests, uniquely harmful to Indian society – “the only social revolution ever heard of in Asia.”

This analysis concludes with Marx’s notorious turn to the reassurances of the dialectic, which balances the “sickening” spectacle by which Britain has ripped apart India’s “inoffensive social organizations,” on the one hand, against the historical necessity of this revolutionary destruction (given India’s enslavement to tradition, its “undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative life,” its “distinctions of caste,” and so on) and the more just society that will one day emerge from its ruins. This line of argument has been controversial, and understandably so. But something has been lost in all the controversy. The mode in which India was governed before the British conquest looks like it must be on the list of customs and institutions that, for Marx, would eventually have to be swept away. And that is how it has generally been seen. In his account of the lines I quote above, Zachary Lockman for example suggests that in Marx’s view responsibility for public works like centralized irrigation encouraged Oriental despotism and encouraged those qualities that Marx found so distasteful in Indian culture.¹ But this is not quite what Marx says. The maintenance of public works appears here as

¹ The passage goes on: “Climate and territorial conditions ... constituted artificial irrigation by canals and waterworks the basis of Oriental agriculture.... This prime necessity of an economical and common use of water, which, in the Occident, drove private enterprise to voluntary association, as in Flanders and Italy, necessitated, in the Orient where civilisation was too low and the territorial extent too vast to call into life voluntary associations, the interference of the centralizing power of

a proper and necessary function of government.² Unburdened by the heavy irony elsewhere in the passage, and indeed setting off that irony, the adjective public refers straightforwardly to the genuine interest or welfare of the social whole.

The fact that the domain of the public overlaps here with the domain of the government is of course a sign of danger. Max Haiven writes in *Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power: Capitalism, Creativity and the Commons*: “most public institutions have been and are far from democratic, except in the most abstract sense. From the media to health care to public transit to universities, from public utilities like water to the police to the management of public spaces, public institutions tend to be run by appointed executives and boards. Citizen oversight and influence is minimal, if it exists at all” (96). To hear these things called public is to be invited to forget how little public they really are.

No one who has paid any sustained attention to the term will have missed its dangerous ambiguities. These ambiguities show with unusual clarity when the subject is public works, especially in the former colonies and/or the global south. If public means, for example, that which is *visible to* a given community, then public works are indeed public. Dams, for example, are exemplary theatrical spectacles where all are invited to contemplate the state’s accomplishments and modernity. On the other hand, if public means that which is *accountable to* and therefore *scrutinised by* that community, let alone *owned* or *controlled by* it, then public works may not be public after all. Was the planning and decision-making transparent? Was any real public input allowed? A dam would certainly be public in the sense of being (another sense) *of significance to* the community; it might not be public in the sense of being *authorised by* the community. Perhaps the knottiest problem would be whether it is public in the sense of being constructed *in the service* or *on behalf of* the community. How does one decide that? And who does the deciding? Most often, the record tells us, the taxpayers are asked to pay for services that capital needs but would prefer not to pay for itself. In the process, local populations are displaced, become victims of environmental damage (an externality that doesn’t show up on anyone’s budget), and become liable as well, in the form of austerity programs, for the eventual repayment of loans taken out by the state. The Three Gorges Dam, like China’s Great Wall itself, has become emblematic of infrastructure as pure centralized madness, “giant public works projects” (11), as Bruce Cumings puts it with reference to North Korea, with the despot “running armies of

Government. Hence an economical function devolved upon all Asiatic Governments, the function of providing public works.” Note that Marx oscillates here between an Orientalist explanation (“low” civilisation) and a geographical explanation (“territorial extent”).

² When Zachary Lockman sums up Marx’s analysis in his book *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), he paraphrases it as follows: “arid climatic conditions made artificial irrigation necessary ... and this meant that a strong central government was needed to build and maintain the irrigation systems on which agriculture depended. This was, Marx suggested, the economic basis for the despotism so characteristic of Asian societies, where rapacious and all-powerful governments owned the land and collected taxes from the great bulk of the population living since time immemorial in their largely self-sufficient communities” (84). There is no question that Marx saw Asian governments as despotic. But the text does not link public works directly to despotism or government rapacity. Marx does not say, for example, that government responsibility for irrigation made it despotic in the sense that it resulted in inequality of access to resources.

bureaucrats and soldiers, regulating the paths of great rivers.”³ We are back to Oriental despotism again.

Trying to take us away from Oriental despotism in its modern forms, Arundhati Roy gives her extraordinary little book condemning Indian dam-building the title *The Greater Common Good*. In this way she reminds her readers how much the phrase “the common good” has been abused by those making a case for enormous investments in infrastructure that will leave local populations to pay the price. But some question remains, and not just in developed countries with dangerously decaying infrastructure, whether the discourse of the common good can be salvaged. This seems a time when we sorely need more of it. And this cause is not always furthered by speaking in the name of the local. In making its passionate and articulate case about the consequences of dam building projects in India for the largely tribal or indigenous people who have been displaced by them, *The Greater Common Good* identifies its enemy as bigness: “We have to support our small heroes. (Of these we have many. Many.) We have to fight specific wars in specific ways. Who knows, perhaps that’s what the twenty-first century has in store for us. The dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. Perhaps it will be the century of the Small” (5). This seems to me an ethical impulse or common sense that the topic of infrastructure, responsibly considered, cannot leave undisturbed. In part because the local has often been camouflage for racism, as it was during the civil rights movement in the US. In part because there is no obvious benefit in reducing the scale of, say, the public university or access to Wi-Fi. And in part because the greatest challenge today is to think and build the public at a larger, transnational scale.

Those who want to save what is valuable in the public without surrendering anything to *raison d’état*, that is, to the representational indirectness and bureaucracy-consolidation associated with government, tend to speak in the name not of the public, but of the commons. The commons seeks an alternative, or what some might call a counter-public. The most important example in the last half-decade is the do-it-yourself, autonomist ethos of the Occupy movements. The Occupy movements have shown, among many other things, that the threads that need to be analytically disentangled from the ambiguous term public can also be knitted together again. So, for example, the “mere” visibility of spectacle in public space can transform neoliberalism’s competitive individuals and the worries they are told are private into a group that experiences its social bonds and defines social issues – into a public in the strong sense, a community that shares a common fate. And yet arguably we need the agency of the government, to take back under public control those institutions and services that neoliberal ideology has helped the champions of the free market wrest away. And we also need an agency that works *beyond* the scale of the government. “Even if we do build a thriving commons,” Haiven concludes, “how will we deal with massive issues like global warming and ecological toxicity?” (91). Or, to put it another way, “How do you build a common MRI machine? Or a common airline?” (91).

Globalisation in its various forms (for example, financialisation) is often given as a reason for the loss of publicness. Publicness of a genuine and desirable kind is hard enough to imagine at the

³ Bruce Cumings, “We Look At It and See Ourselves,” review of two books about Korea, *LRB*, 15 December 2005, 11-14. Cumings cites Karl Wittfogel’s infamous theory of “Oriental despotism” based on hydraulics, which has been taken to extend Marx’s comments on irrigation in India.

scale of the nation-state; beyond that scale, it can well seem aerily, and even irresponsibly, utopian. This is part of the powerful story that Wendy Brown tells in *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. On the other hand, there are both formal and substantive grounds for not resting content with this narrative. Formally, it is a narrative, even what we used to call a meta-narrative: publicness *always* seems to be in the process of declining or being lost. When you realize how many such stories there are that fit this paradigm and how many different agents are fingered in them as the guilty party, it becomes less plausible to believe in the actionable responsibility of any one perpetrator. (This point is made very eloquently in Stefan Collini's *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*.) It seems more accurate, then, to say that publicness always seems to be in decline to the extent that it is treated, consciously or not, as a normative ideal. If the public is assumed to be an ideal, descriptions of it on the ground, as something actually existing, will always appear to fall short, and the public itself will then appear to be disappearing. The appropriate response, then, will be mourning. We can all think of reasons why this is at best a partial view. Movements concerned with gender and sexuality have expanded the public domain, adding to it issues that had been blocked from debate and reform because they were consigned to privacy. It's true that the consumerist impulse to display intimate matters in public has often expressed itself in socially-mediated narcissism and a contagious sense of victimhood, both aggrieved and entitled. But there is also the impulse to make once-private choices into a matter of public scrutiny, for example in the domain of food and, now, attention to the labour conditions of those who cultivate that food. As such examples illustrate, publicness has not gone away even as an actuality, let alone as a regulative ideal.

That was Marx's point in talking about public works in India. The thingness or material persistence of public things brings us together even when (as Bonnie Honig argues) it brings us together in conflict. The point still stands. In a Heideggerian take on British public works in India, the historian Gyan Prakash predictably shows no enthusiasm for the technological "enframing" of the world that makes it "available as a resource" (159). "Forging India into a productive, interlocking network of irrigation works, railways, telegraphs, mines, and manufacturing," the colonial state was not only providing itself with new instruments, but changing its own "substance." "Increasingly, state power meant the growing technological configuration of the territory; it became inseparable from the modern India it engineered into existence" (160). He quotes the Indian historian and civil servant R.C. Dutt as detailing the ruin of the Indian handicraft industry, its de-industrialization, and the drain of economic wealth to Britain. But when the topic of irrigation comes up in Prakash's account of Dutt, it's only to point out that over-investment in railways "diverted investment from irrigation" (183). Which is to say that for Dutt the irrigation itself continues to stand for a worthwhile site of investment. Here, as in other cases, the problem is not some putative inhumanity of technological enframing, as if the mode of life underwritten by such projects could not after all serve our needs. The crops need the water. We need the crops. The question is who pays for the irrigation and who benefits.

Any number of headlines attest to it: a certain sexiness or at least excitement has recently been recognized in the long unglamorous area of infrastructure. It would be worth our collective while to figure out in what this sexiness inheres and what its political potential might be. How much is owing to the simple newsworthiness of many infrastructural failures? How much is it the "dirty jobs" style discovery of hidden dependence, hidden necessity—perhaps even an eagerness to fall back on

necessities in implicit or explicit contrast with a lifestyle based on frivolous consumer luxury? How much does this new attention to infrastructure bring with it a new tolerance or even enthusiasm for inspection and regulation as activities necessary to the public good? For that matter, how much does it correspond to an increased appreciation for the public good as such? And if there is a real gain here, can it be transferred to, say, our financial infrastructure, where initiatives for greater surveillance and regulation (though these are no longer the dirty words they were) do not seem to be doing too well? Here too public works and the public good lead us back to the scale beyond the nation-state.

“What could it mean,” Nancy Fraser asks at the end of her book *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*, “to posit the *legitimacy* of transnational public opinion, when the interlocutors are not fellow citizens with equal participation rights and a common status as political equals? And what could it mean to speak of the *efficacy* of transnational public opinion, when it is not addressed to a sovereign state that is capable in principle of implementing the interlocutors’ will and solving their problems?” (156, emphasis in original) We saw how unanswered these questions remain, Fraser goes on, after “the world-wide anti-war demonstrations of February 15, 2003, which mobilized an enormous body of transnational public opinion against the impending US invasion of Iraq” (156) – an expression of public opinion that went unheeded. Among the things necessary, Fraser remarks, is to build, or rather to build on, “a shared context and practice of political communication that generates a communicatively based solidarity reminiscent of constitutional patriotism, but not focused on a bounded polity” (153). In short – it’s her word, and yours – to build or build on a “forum.”

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