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# Is Public Space Suited to Co-operative Inquiry?

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SOR-HOON TAN

**ABSTRACT** *This article questions the nature of the philosophical commitment to the problem of ‘the public’ in modernity. To what extent does the natural form of the public determine the use and value of the instruments of pragmatism in the public–private divide. In this interpretation, John Dewey’s ideas about ‘the public’ are presented in terms of how to solve a specific problem through what he sees as ‘co-operative inquiry’. The article also examines the role of public space in the process of democratization through the potential of co-operative inquiry. More often than not, it appears that the politics of public space may be both detrimental and/or beneficial to its end-users in China, Europe, the Americas, Africa, and the rest of Asia.*

In his paper prepared for the ‘Modernity & Politics’ panel at the Modernist Studies Association’s Annual Conference in 2001, Antonio L. Rappa argued that:

Public spaces are physical and temporal sites where the colonial imprint of modernity appears to have made the most significant impression. The imprint of modernity on the nature of public space is symbolized in tangible architectural forms and gentrified civic locations that register the confluence of colonial and postcolonial periods.<sup>1</sup>

In 1989, the world was transfixed by the drama that unfolded in Tiananmen Square. To some, the Goddess of Democracy statue that the student demonstrators erected was an incongruous icon of Western imperialist influence clashing with the hallowed traditions of that most symbolic of all public spaces in that country, and perhaps for the Chinese Diaspora all over the world as well. To others it was a beacon of hope which tragically toppled in another failed struggle towards democracy.

Before any Westerner had heard of Tiananmen, the Square had been privy to, and was the public site of, political tension and attention. There had been ‘people’s’ demonstrations and mass movements in that Square before 1989. But these are overshadowed by the ‘demonstrations’ orchestrated by the authorities to display power. The latter displays hark back to China’s imperial past, when the Gate of Heavenly Peace separated the ruler from the ruled, concealed the ruler and preserved the mystic of his power; ruler and ruled communicated only through rituals. In the twentieth century, Tiananmen Square remains ‘a locus of coalescence for political expression, collective memory, identity, and history ... a prime visual means of political rhetoric in modern China to address the public and actually to constitute the public itself’ (Wu Hung, 1991, pp. 84–85).

For many, the 1989 democracy movement recalls, among other events, the May Fourth movement and the student protests of 1919. John Dewey was a witness to that

earlier struggle for democracy, arriving in China on 30 April 1919 for a visit that lasted more than two years. Dewey was influential among several leaders of the New Culture movement—Hu Shih and Jiang Menglin were his students—and his lectures were so popular that he could justifiably be said to have become a ‘fad’ in China during his visit (Keenan, 1977, p. 34). What might Dewey have to say about the events that took place in Tiananmen seven decades later? On a more modest scale, what does his philosophy have to say about the role of public space in the pursuit and functioning of democracy? The emergence and organization of publics play a key role in Dewey’s philosophy of democracy. Central to that role is the process of a public’s co-operative inquiry (Campbell, 1995, pp. 193–213).<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I shall explore the democratic efficacy of public space as an arena of cooperative inquiry.

### **Democratic public space and public sphere**

The words ‘public space’ conjure up an image of a place one can point to and be in—a town square, a piazza, a park, the Athenian *agora*, or the Roman forum. It is a place open to the public, to the people, to anybody and everybody. It is a place where people gather, interact, or act, together or separately. Public space could be used for ‘private’ purposes, where people are present as separate individuals, ignoring or merely tolerating the presence of others, each enjoying or using the place privately. Even when there is interaction, the purposes could remain private. Tourists and hawkers are common examples of those using public space for private purposes. Only when the interaction arises from or gives rise to interests or goals shared by all as *a people*, as *a public*, is the public space also used for a public purpose.

How does public space become democratic? Unlike an authoritarian public space where authorities impose the public ‘purpose’, a democratic public space is used for a public purpose determined by the people acting freely and equally, bound together by spontaneous ties that are both sentimental and practical. Its physical dimension gives a powerful visibility to political struggles and action. The association of public spaces with democracy is embodied in images of popular protests and demonstrations. The public space fires modern imagination as the battleground where ordinary people without institutionalized power mobilize and organize to change the status quo, to seize power from those who refuse to share it or exercise it justly for the benefit of all. In a democracy, it is a place where the people can be seen and heard, can exercise their civil rights and participate in the public life beyond their periodic trips to the ballot box.

Though the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, public space is only part of the public sphere of modern political thought.<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant focused our attention on the public use of reason as the basis of the ethical commonwealth. The public sphere is the ‘organizational principle’ of the liberal constitutional state, wherein ‘laws empirically had their origin in the “public agreement” of the public engaged in critical debate’. The public sphere, as the ‘market place of ideas’, is central to a liberal democracy. As the arena from which the unified ‘voice of the people’ (i.e. public opinion) emerges, it is crucial for self-government. In the public sphere of Western modernity, citizens assemble and unite freely, and express and publicize their opinions freely concerning objects connected with the practice of the state (Habermas, 1989, p. 231). Free public discussion, which defines a public sphere, does not require a *physical place*; it could occur in newspapers, radio, television, or the Internet.

However, Dewey argued that the emergence of democratic publics, articulate and

organized, 'is accomplished in face to face relationships by means of direct give and take' (Dewey, 1954). If we understand this to mean that face-to-face interaction is required in the free and open communication that sustains a democracy, then the public space must be the most crucial form of the public sphere as a condition of democracy. I shall proceed first on this limited premise, but I shall look beyond it and indicate some direction for further inquiry in the concluding section.

### **The nature of co-operative inquiry**

For Dewey, the definitive activity of a democratic public is not the Enlightenment 'use of public reason'. Human beings are not essentially rational beings. Our thinking abilities are not fixed and innate; they are developed over time in our interactions with our natural and social environments (Dewey, 1983). Dewey referred to these abilities as effective or embodied intelligence (Dewey, 1984, p. 366). Effective intelligence is the result of inquiry that is social rather than individual; it is *co-operative* in the sense of involving shared efforts to advance the common good. Co-operative inquiry is more than an open exchange of individually formed opinions; its outcome is different from that of the free competition of ideas in a liberal public sphere.

Embodied intelligence is not an individual possession; it is cumulated in social processes over time, so that 'a mechanic can discourse of ohms and amperes as Sir Isaac Newton could not in his day. Many a man who has tinkered with radios can judge of things which Faraday did not dream of' (Dewey, 1984, p. 366). Intelligence results not only from our shared historical cultural legacies, but also from the ongoing process of interaction with others wherein there is free and open communication. What one single individual lacks in intelligence or imagination can be compensated by others in a co-operative inquiry, wherein sharing of views, constructive criticism, edifying discourse, could lead to a more intelligent outcome than solitary thinking.

Dewey defines inquiry as 'the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole' (Dewey, 1986, p. 108). The situation that calls a public into existence, transactions having indirect consequences serious enough to warrant systematic regulation, is a problematic one. It is indeterminate, obscure, doubtful, disturbing, perplexing, full of conflicting tendencies—things do not hang together, and those involved become aware that 'This won't do.' When the trouble is recognized, and they get together to solve the problem, co-operative inquiry begins. Publicity of inquiry allows those indirectly affected to recognize their shared problem and interest. Those who might not be aware that they were affected before would also be given an opportunity to know of their involvement. Membership in any public must remain open at all times as more or fewer people might become affected as an inquiry goes through the different stages of formulating the problem, proposing and testing solutions.

Inquiry begins with examining the situation to formulate the problem. This involves not only careful observation of what is going on, but also interpreting and selecting factual materials on the basis of their assessed relevance to *resolving* the problem (Dewey, 1986, p. 112). Very frequently, conceptual reconstruction—especially of ends, values, social doctrines, which guide social action—is required, for the 'solution comes only by getting away from the meaning of terms that is already fixed upon and coming to see the conditions from another point of view, and hence in a fresh light' (Dewey, 1976, p. 273). Only when concepts and values used in inquiry interact freely with the observable 'facts of the case', mutually modifying one another and thereby moving

towards greater coherence, will the problem then be formulated so that it suggests possible solutions.

Solutions are 'working hypotheses' to be tested intellectually before actual experimenting. A solution that solves one problem sometimes creates other problems; a solution must be evaluated in terms of its total effects (as much as could be anticipated). The inquirers select the best alternative and test it in the actual situation. If it works, the problem is solved, if not, the process of inquiry resumes with new information from the experiment. Even if a solution worked, there could nevertheless be unanticipated effects that could be problematic, and further inquiry would be required, perhaps involving a more extensive or a new public (Dewey, 1976, p. 63).

### **Finding the phantom public**

Dewey considered co-operative inquiry to be an effective antidote to the prejudice, bias, misrepresentation and propaganda which all too often reduce 'public opinion' to what Walter Lippmann called 'the compounding of individual ignorance in masses of people'. For Lippmann, 'a public which directs the course of events' in democratic politics is 'a mere phantom'. People are simply not rational or intelligent enough to govern themselves, with or without the liberal public sphere. Not only is government by the people acting as a public impossible in the current state of affairs, it will never be possible—no education, or information media, or public debate, would make it possible. This 'false ideal of democracy can lead only to disillusionment and to meddling tyranny'. Better if we recognize that government is safest and best in the hands of an elite so that 'each of us may live free of the trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd'.

Dewey agreed with Lippmann that the public is in eclipse; but he disagreed with Lippmann's elitist conclusion. While Lippmann simply adopted the usual vague usage of 'the public', Dewey offered a more specific understanding of the concept. The vagueness of the term is what allows it to be manipulated for undemocratic purposes. Dewey reconstructed the concept to recognize a multiplicity of distinct and overlapping publics. According to Dewey, 'when the consequences of an action are confined, or are thought to be confined, mainly to the persons directly engaged in it, the transaction is a private one'; when the consequences 'affect others beyond those immediately concerned' the transaction becomes a public concern. A public is constituted by 'all those who are indirectly affected by a transaction to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for'. As there are infinite transactions that could give rise to their own respective sets of 'indirect consequences', so there could be an infinite number of publics.

Even though Dewey kept the usage of 'the public', it is more accurate to talk about 'publics' in his philosophy of democracy. According to Dewey, a public is organized into a state by establishing special agencies to care for and regulate the indirect consequences of transactions that require systematic regulation and therefore become public concerns. 'A public articulated and operating through representative officers is the state; there is no state without a government, but also there is none without the public' (Dewey, 1984, p. 277). There could be some confusion over the way Dewey switched between 'a public' and 'the public'. We might object that a single-concern public obviously cannot be organized into a state as we understand the term. Though he appeared at times to be proposing a new political theory of the state, Dewey explained that he used the terms 'state', 'government' and 'officials' in a functional sense rather than to refer to the political structures and entities that are so familiar to us that they leap to the eye when these words are used (Dewey, 1984, p. 276n).

We could link Dewey's functional usage to the more common usage, and clear up some of the confusion caused by Dewey himself, if we think of the public that is organized into the political state as constituted by multiple publics overlapping and forming a nested network which, when it is large enough, would be organized into the kinds of relatively permanent structures we are familiar with at the various levels of government. These public agencies and their officers deal with numerous issues because they are shared by a changing variety of publics with different concerns, but all of which use these agencies to regulate the indirect consequences of transactions that affect members of the various publics. New publics could create new regulatory structures at local or national level, even international level. New publics could also use existing structures to deal with new consequences that need systematic regulation.

Dewey's concept of 'a public' identifies both what should be public concerns and who should have a say in them. This is different from Habermas's concept, for example, wherein 'citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest' (Habermas, 1989, p. 231)—the relation between any individual citizen and a particular 'general interest' remains vague, and how an interest is judged to be 'general' is left to be resolved elsewhere. By considering states as organized publics, Dewey also offers us a functional understanding of the democratic basis of political states. A state is democratic when it effectively regulates the indirect consequences that are the concerns of its constituent public(s). Since ends and means are inseparable in Dewey's pragmatism, effective regulation also requires a process that must itself be democratic. This is a process involving the relevant public; it is a process of co-operative inquiry into indirect consequences and how best to regulate them.

Dewey's concept of 'a public' allows that each of us cannot 'have opinions on all public affairs'; nor need we do so. Not everyone has a right to a say in everything of 'general interest'. Each needs to have opinions, and should only have a *decisive* say on those issues that affect him or her personally. Those not affected may offer views for consideration in the inquiry—including the views of experts who might play an important part in such inquiry—but they should not participate in the collective decision on which solution to implement. Each of us is a member of numerous publics, and therefore should participate in numerous co-operative inquiries. In a less than ideal world where the different kinds of indirect consequences of transactions affecting one may exceed what one could deal with, one prioritizes and participates most actively in those of greatest concern to oneself. As different individuals would almost certainly have different sets of priorities, there would be a 'division of labour' so that hopefully one would be adequately represented by others who share one's interest in inquiries in which one is not actively participating. Since one is not a member of all the possible publics in a democracy, one need not, as Lippmann argued, 'know everything' or 'do everything' (Lippmann, 1927, p. 148).

### **Is public space suited to co-operative inquiry?**

Co-operative inquiry requires freedom of thought and therefore of speech. To Dewey, 'every new idea, every conception of things differing from that authorized by current belief, must have its origin in an individual'. Since there is no knowing beforehand who would have the new idea or new conception needed to solve a problem, to limit anyone's freedom to speak, to express their ideas, would also limit the chances of success of co-operative inquiry. However, the freedom of thought and speech required for a public's co-operative inquiry is not the negative freedom familiar to the liberal.

In Dewey's philosophy, 'freedom from restriction, the negative side, is to be prized

only as a means to a freedom which is power: power to frame purposes, to judge wisely, to evaluate desires by consequences which will result from acting upon them; power to select and order means to carry chosen ends into operation'. Having space is not enough. 'No man and no mind was ever emancipated merely by being left alone. Removal of formal limitations is', according to Dewey, 'but a negative condition; positive freedom is not a state but an act which involves methods and instrumentalities for control of conditions.'

We should not dismiss the importance of space, even when negatively and formalistically conceived. If co-operative inquiry is to be carried out by a public meeting face to face, an appropriate place is necessary to accommodate it. The open and public nature of the place, as well as the freedoms one exercises within it, must be protected. A private place would not suffice because publicity enables those with a common interest in regulating the indirect consequences affecting them to recognize one another and come together for an inquiry. Continued publicity throughout the inquiry ensures that those who come to be affected by any indirect consequences from recommended and adopted actions arising from the inquiry would also be given a say. In ensuring publicity, public space is a contributor, rather than merely neutral, to the democratic process. However, given the complex and extensive interdependence of today's world, the publicity might not be adequate if we rely only on face-to-face interactions.

Public space is necessary but not sufficient for democracy. Opportunity goes hand in hand with risk. Large numbers of people gathered in a public space threaten public order. Emotions can spread through a crowd very quickly, and the emotions of crowds are prone to violence. A crowd can turn into a mob. The sense of sharing in a mighty and irresistible power renders a mob reckless of consequences and encourages licence of the worst sort. Too often we find that peaceful protests turn into riots. Even when people share a common interest in some indirect consequences of transactions that require systematic regulation, what is to ensure that such a Deweyan public would proceed as an inquiring public rather than deteriorate into a mob? The characteristics enabling the face-to-face communication of a public in inquiry will also provide opportunity for mob behaviour.

Dewey did not subscribe to the dualism opposing emotion to reason, which has come under some strong criticism; but he recognized that 'nothing is so easy to fool as impulse and no one is deceived so readily as a person under strong emotion' (Dewey, 1983, p. 175). Dewey's philosophical psychology is built on three basic notions of impulse, habit, and intelligence. Our impulses begin by being indeterminate and infinitely plastic; they only gradually gain stable expression through the formation of habits. Emotion is the outpouring of impulse as 'a perturbation from clash or failure of habit' (Dewey, 1983, p. 54). It renders one vulnerable to manipulation (Dewey, 1983, p. 55). Reflection, 'the painful effort of disturbed habits to readjust themselves' (Dewey, 1983, p. 54), steers us away from that danger. Successful reflection is intelligence. The most important habit to acquire is the habit of thinking before acting, a predisposition to inquire into a troubling situation rather than reacting as dictated by haphazard circumstances. There is no foolproof method to ensure that people would reflect rather than simply react or be manipulated when in a group. The closest we could come to a safeguard lies in cultivating the right habits, a topic that Dewey dealt with in 'Democracy and education' (Dewey, 1980).

Even when a public is not distracted by unruly emotions, co-operative inquiry could encounter other obstacles. Public space is not empty. It is usually filled with cultural and historical meaning. The symbolic legacy of a particular public space could affect what takes place there on any one occasion. Echoes of the past were prominent in the Beijing



student protests in 1989. The very language of their petitions to the authorities was reminiscent not only of previous protests against the communist government, but also of an even earlier tradition of remonstrance by educated elites against the injustice of imperial rulers. Cultural-historical semiotic context must be given a place in a public's co-operative inquiry; it plays a part both in the diagnosis of the problem and the hypothesizing of solutions. While it could provide a common basis that shapes the inquiry coherently, it could also complicate or even undermine the process when there are multiple strands of historical-cultural meaning, some of which might be contradictory, all of which are fighting for dominance in the process.

The multiplicity of publics and their overlapping membership could also pose problems for co-operative inquiry. It is difficult, and in some cases perhaps even impossible, to keep the different concerns separate. The co-operative inquiries of different publics would overlap and affect one another in extremely complex ways. This means that practically no co-operative inquiry will be quite as simple as our schematic description. Every stage will be fraught with difficulties. All kinds of cross-currents could sweep a public off course in its attempted exercise of effective intelligence. In the end, co-operative inquiry in any public space might turn out to be as elusive as the public use of reason in a liberal public sphere.

We cannot assume that the availability of public space will automatically lead to publics engaging in co-operative inquiry. In some aspects, the nature of public space could even obstruct such inquiry. However, this is not to declare it useless or unimportant in the pursuit of democracy. Rather, understanding the problems of co-operative inquiry in any public space should help us find ways of making better use of public space.

## **Public space, ICTs and democracy**

To talk solely in terms of face-to-face communication seems hopelessly inadequate in this day of the World Wide Web and Internet. The printed media, telecommunications, and the latest information and communication technologies (ICTs) overcome the limits of physical distance. Thanks to such technology, the public sphere is more than public space, and popular participation in politics is not limited to those who can actually gather together in one place for face-to-face interaction. Technology has also transformed the possibilities of political participation in other ways. Radio and television, for example, being less limited by a literacy requirement than printed media, could provide more and quicker access to information, as well as arenas for more vivid representation and advocacy.

Craig Calhoun is not alone in thinking that the 1989 student protests in China reflected 'an emerging public sphere linked to popular culture in film, television and other media' (Des Forges and Wu, 1993; Calhoun, 1994, p. 2). Edward Gunn considers the impact of 1988 television mini-series *River Elegy (He Shang)* one of the many contributors to the events of 1989 (Gunn, 1993; Calhoun, 1994, p. 29). During the protests, both local and foreign media brought the messages of the pro-democracy movement to millions in China and the rest of the world. They sparked off similar demonstrations in other Chinese cities and garnered sympathy and support for the demonstrators even from people who have never set foot in China. A decade later, the *Falungong* movement has also been staging protests in Tiananmen Square. It has received less international media attention; but it has made extensive use of the Internet in promoting its cause and publicizing the Chinese government's actions against its members.

Technology, in extending the public sphere beyond public space, not only magnifies but also changes both the pros and cons of public space vis-à-vis democracy. Does this make Dewey's emphasis on 'local community' quaintly nostalgic, even obsolete? Not necessarily. His thinking could at least be extended to take account of these technologies. Dewey himself did not ignore mediated communications even as he emphasized face-to-face interactions in *The Public and its Problems*. More important, his emphasis highlights the need to inquire more deeply into the complex effects of technology on the nature of communications and on the very nature of our experience. That ICTs, any more than mass media and telecommunications, are not simple extensions of public space and unequivocal blessings to democracy means that we need better understanding of what is achievable when co-operative inquiry is conducted face to face, which might be lost in mediated communications, and what such mediation makes possible which might enhance the democratic efficacy of co-operative inquiry. But that is a task for another day.

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## Notes

1. See A. L. Rappa, international conference paper prepared for the Modernist Studies Association (MSA III) organized by Douglas Mao (Harvard University) and Michael Coyle (Colgate University), Houston, Texas, 12–15 October 2001; see also Rappa (2001, 2002).
2. Dewey used the term ‘social inquiry’; but I think James Campbell’s ‘cooperative inquiry’ brings out Dewey’s thinking better.
3. Habermas’s *öffentlichkeit*, translated as ‘public sphere’ in English, is translated as ‘public space’ in France; see Robbins (1993, p. xvi).