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Problems, publicity and public space: A resurgent debate

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Urban public space is once again high on the agenda of social science researchers across disciplines. The reasons for this renewed interest include a range of dramatic events that are redefining its importance as a centre for social encounter and interaction, forum for discussion and dissent, interface of virtual and material connections and stage for the reinstatement of democratic practice and resistance in the face of state repression. Beginning with occupations of squares, parks and streets in a global wave of revolutions and demonstrations from the Middle East to Europe, North-America, Africa and the Asia-Pacific, public space has been reinstated as the symbolic core of urban life. Equally significant are transformations associated with new mobile media and computing technologies that enable large and diverse groups of people to communicate with each other in order to plan social activities from political uprisings to do-it-yourself housing interventions and other forms of informal urbanism. Public spaces increasingly host violent conflagrations and vigilante policing associated with resurgent nationalisms. At the same time, persistent privatization and securitization in response to perceived threats of financial and national security and the desire for 'clean' and 'safe' redevelopment to attract elite and middle class users are creating sanitized public spaces that increase real-estate values rather than enhance civic life.

In this set of papers, we want to establish some parameters for this resurgent debate. While persisting as one of the key terms of urban geographical and sociological studies across several decades, 'public space' remains a notoriously difficult concept to define and put to work. The papers in this collection seek to demonstrate both its on-going utility and importance, and to chart a course for scholarly investigation that can better understand its variable, fragile and contested emergence through social struggle, expanding publicity and collective action. Most importantly, this theme issue emphasizes the making of public space

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and the production of publicity as a process with historical, economic and political dimensions that extend our understanding of public space from a physical or social location to a set of ever widening relationships focused on 'trouble' or 'problems', incorporating innovative and creative solutions and solidarities, while retaining the political and material power to transform social and political trajectories.

Our interventions need to be understood as part of a very specific and nuanced conversation on the topic. In the 1990s and early 2000s, several major works on this topic struck a pessimistic chord (Caldeira, 2000; Davis, 2006; Graham and Marvin, 2001; Low, 2003; Mitchell, 2003; Sorkin, 1992; Zukin, 1995). As the twin forces of privatization and securitization chipped away at the integrity of those places that most scholars had come to associate with an active public sphere, we were asked to ponder the veritable 'end' of public space as we knew it (Mitchell, 1995). Urban governments across the globe were transforming the classic sites of social congregation and contestation – from the street corner (Blomley, 2010; Blumenberg and Ehrenfeucht, 2008; Brown, 2006; Çelik et al., 1994; Duneier and Carter, 1999; Fyfe, 1998; Khan et al., 2011; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009; Spinney, 2010), parks (Cranz, 1982; Gagen, 2000; Low et al., 2005) to the public square (Chesluk, 2008; Estrada, 2008; Low, 2000) – into inaccessible, unwelcoming and/or privatized zones that were now largely devoid of social dynamism and/or political demonstration (see also: Connell, 1999; Nemeth, 2010). In such a context, it became difficult to imagine where and how new democratic publics would be made. Efforts to produce new 'public spatial imaginaries' (Iveson, 2007) led some to interrogate taken-for-granted relationships between public space and everyday life (Watson, 2006), public space and public address (Iveson, 2007), public space and property regimes (Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008) and public space and media (McQuire, 2008), to name a few.

In more recent years, the struggle for public space has been joined in both spectacular and subtle ways. The social movements gathering under the banners of 'Occupy' and the 'Arab Spring' have given new life to the notion of political theatre (Mason, 2013). While the calling card of these movements has been their use of seemingly placeless social media technology, their participants have been bent on the far more 'real world' act of claiming and organizing iconic public spaces (Castells, 2013; Juris, 2012). These large and spectacular occupations are joined by (and frequently related to) a growing range of smaller scale and temporary appropriations of public space in the name of 'do-it-yourself' urban imaginaries (Hou, 2010; Iveson, 2013) Of course, in their efforts to claim public space for these various purposes, participants in these movements frequently confront urban authorities (both state and corporate) whose modes of policing public space likewise mobilize new technologies in the service of increasingly militarized forms of surveillance and control (Graham, 2010).

Though somewhat less spectacular, processes of demographic diversification (Vertovec, 2007) have been reconstituting publics in a range of other notable ways. While the migration studies literature had led us to believe that the rapid ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversification of contemporary cities would encourage processes of political fragmentation (Putnam, 2000, 2007), other work has asked us to ponder an alternate outcome: when very different groups make common use of a variety of seemingly banal urban settings – markets, subway stations, gymnasia, etc. – they often generate and adopt a wide array of techniques for forming 'cosmopublic' spaces (Amin and Parkinson, 2002; Andersson et al., 2011; Dines et al., 2006; Hewstone, 2009; Landau and Freemantle, 2010; Lofland, 1998; Valentine et al., 2010; Watson et al., 2006; Wilson, 2011). Of course, such outcomes are by no means guaranteed – especially with the presence of insurgent and frequently violent ethno-nationalisms on the streets of many cities, not to mention the

ways in which the urbanization of the 'war on terror' has made ethnic and religious minorities the targets of both 'soft' and 'hard' police interventions in many contexts (e.g., Morgan and Poynting, 2012; Noble, 2009).

In many cities, these spectacular and everyday processes of public formation and spatialization are accompanied by significant developments in the resourcing and provision of the infrastructures often associated with the idea of public space. The privatization agendas that were so stridently critiqued by the 1990s literature on public space show no signs of abating, and forms of urban governance such as Business Improvement Districts have been highly mobile (Ward, 2011). Perhaps more novel is the increasing if uneven automation of the production of public space, through the insinuation of computer code and algorithms into everyday urban life via the growth of networked urban infrastructures (Greenfield, 2013; Kitchin and Dodge, 2011).

From 'interactional' to 'grounded' approaches to public space

The four papers collected in this theme issue represent a collective effort to clarify and advance scholarly frameworks for the analysis of the remaking of public space. In discussion across three research colloquia – a Max Planck funded workshop in Berlin in 2012, a panel at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Los Angeles in 2013, and finally at a writing workshop again funded by the Max Planck Institute in Amsterdam in 2014 – we first identified a set of disagreements between two strands of research in the literature on public space, which we believe can be usefully separated into works that adopt 'interactional' and 'grounded' approaches. For those adopting an 'interactional' approach, the term 'public space' refers to any easily accessible location where members of the population encounter one another. This approach explores – primarily through the use of observational techniques – how publics, communities and polities are continually reproduced when strangers interact outdoors (Amin, 2012; Goffman, 1971a, 1971b; Lofland, 1998; Morrill et al., 2005; Valentine, 2008).

By way of contrast, a grounded approach regards 'public space' as a more elusive political ideal, and one that is only realized by enduring struggles for power, resources and recognition. Those subscribing to this approach are broadly critical of the notion that lasting public spaces can be created through mere interpersonal encounters, or meaningfully understood through observation alone. Instead, this position emphasizes the importance of exploring the history of the struggle for public space through archival, spatial and policy analysis. Put in its most simple terms, a grounded approach insists that we develop an account of new public spaces by beginning with a discussion of the political origins and physical manifestations of place.

This second grounded approach is the one advanced by the papers in this collection. Across the four papers, there is an effort to: (a) specify the core commitments and claims of a grounded approach; (b) formulate a definition of 'public space' that could countenance both continuities *and* change and (c) develop and apply a set of heuristics to inform the grounded study of public space across a globally diverse set of cases. The title of the collection – Making Space Public – indicates our core claim that public spaces do not pre-exist the diverse and contested practices of public-making through the urban. Rather, to understand public space is to understand the diverse and contested ways in which a variety of actors seek to shape places and their possibilities, and how such struggles 'make spaces public' in a dual sense, by making them both the site of particular forms of being together as well as making them the target of public action and politics.

Core themes: Defining, developing and applying a grounded approach

Don Mitchell sounds the clarion call. He conducts a historiographical exegesis of the public space research agenda, formulating both the intellectual and political rationale for studying the material history of space. Briefly, he argues that only through grounded and historical research can we understand how the seemingly serendipitous and haphazard emergence of public space is tied into broader social, political and legal agendas. Mitchell then provides us with a first taste of what this brand of research might achieve by exploring three recent instances in the United States where self-organizing publics have sought to lay claim to and use urban spaces.

Ontology is the first research hurdle standing in the way of those who would respond to Mitchell's call. The very term 'public space' suggests something that is fixed or known – a completed project rather than an elusive ideal. The next paper attends to this problem by offering an alternative way of defining our object of analysis. **Cédric Terzi** and **Stéphane Tonnelat** chart a different path towards a similar end. They suggest that the definition of public space has – to its detriment – been too focussed on 'necessary' rather than 'sufficient' criteria. Put simply, while 'access' to space is necessary for publics to emerge, a range of other factors are involved in making such spaces grow and prosper. Drawing upon the pragmatist thought of John Dewey, they suggest we need to focus our attention on processes of *publicization* – a specific concatenation of space, people and problems – that determine which accessible spaces become truly public – and which do not.

Of course, occupation has emerged in recent years as an important tool of publicization. Written in the shadow of the remarkable wave of global occupations of public space (Castells, 2013), three contributions to the collection demonstrate how a grounded historical approach can enhance our efforts to understand the various movements that have appeared under the banner of 'Occupy'. Whereas the sites targeted by members of the current 'Occupy' movement have often been analysed as if they were largely replaceable or interchangeable, each of these papers demonstrates the inherent value of work that begins from an account of the history of struggle to lay claim to a particular patch of ground. Extending the framework for understanding the spatial dimensions of public-making that he developed in *Publics and the City* (2007), **Kurt Iveson** provides us with the resources to critically interrogate the practice of spatial occupation as a means for counter-public formation. Using the rather extreme example of the 42-year long Aboriginal Tent Embassy in the Australian Capital, he walks us through the complex matrix of legal, rhetorical and political dynamics that have ensured that successive generations of indigenous Australians have found meaning and value in the preservation of this 'counter-public' site. In telling this story, he compels us to ask whether and how participants in today's occupations will be able to generate a similar legacy. The importance of on-going and iterative struggle is given further impetus by **Don Mitchell's** paper, which argues that the occupy movement must be understood as a struggle against a ceaseless tendency within global capitalism. Mitchell demonstrates how the occupiers' efforts to publicize space were historically conditioned and confined by such structures and how the activists nonetheless managed to establish public spatial claims for brief demonstrative moments. In doing so, Mitchell provides us with a framework with which to gauge to what extent the broader 'Occupy' movement represents a counter-systemic trend.

As proponents of a grounded approach, we are also attentive to its internal contradictions. Principal amongst these is the tension between its theoretical focus on big and general explanatory structures (class conflict, demographic change, democratization, etc.) and its methodological appeal for attention to geographic specificity and context.

This tension has been particularly well exploited by scholars working Asia, Africa and Latin America. The grounded study of informal, poorly planned and weakly regulated cities in the Global South has often led to an appeal for a theoretical *tabula rasa*, rather than the attempt to rework explanatory and interpretative frameworks that were first developed in Europe and/or North America. **Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch** and **Emma Thébault's** case study of Rondebosch Commons in Cape Town seeks to address this problem. They suggest that while occupy movements have all appealed to a global lexicon, they may often be more reflective of local planning traditions; in this case: that of apartheid and the post-apartheid era. From their position in the 'Global South', the case for grounded historical work becomes an appeal for attention to local context and specificity and scepticism of large structures and processes. However, far from providing a logic for disengaging with 'Northern' theoretical traditions, **Houssay-Holzshuch and Thébault** argue that the work of Détienne and Mitchell and Staeheli can help us to cope with the complex and continually shifting forms of public space emerging in the Global South.

In summary, readers of this collection will encounter a group of papers on the politics of urban space advancing a novel position on a highly topical theme. By developing our contributions across a series of three meetings, this group has not only developed a common language for talking about how public spaces are made and spaces are made public but has synthetically deployed these concepts and heuristics to make sense of a diverse set of cases and research problems. Taken together, the papers in this collection seek to make sense of spatial publicization in all its diversity, while drilling down into compelling life histories, revelatory fieldwork vignettes and the ironic twists of archival history. The grounded approach we develop and deploy seeks to develop a more compelling frame for the investigation of current trends in the making of public space, across a broad diversity of urban contexts. And the papers illustrate the implications of this frame, which insists that insights into the process of making space public demand extensive and rigorous fieldwork, in dialogue with theoretical formulations and literary engagements.

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