

## *Policy & Politics*

Political public space: what is it, why it is special, and why standard spatial nostrums mislead

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In the wake of the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement, questions of political use of public space are back on the policy agenda in many countries. But as Western governments celebrated the occupation of Tahrir Square and Pearl Roundabout, they did so from sites that are themselves increasingly barricaded against their own publics.

So far, so familiar: numerous scholars of public space have made similar points, as have colleagues looking at social movements and democracy more broadly. My contention is less familiar: that a great deal of urban scholarship unwittingly plays into the hands of the barricade builders. It does so by starting with a very specific definition of public space, developed in particular contexts for particular purposes, and applying it more generally to contexts in which its descriptive power is limited and its normative force questionable.

To make this admittedly confronting assertion, I need to make two broad points. The first is about the contrast between an essential sociological understanding of public space, and a more political philosophical one. Questions of public space have been the more-or-less-exclusive preserve of urban scholars like Lofland (1998), Madanipour (2003), Low and Smith (2006) and Stevens (2007) who, reflecting a long-standing concern with the 'socialness' of the city experience from Simmel (1950) onwards, start with a definition of public space based on openness and accessibility and reflect on the variety of ways in which access to space is restricted and by whom, or by what forces and in whose interests restrictions are established, maintained, challenged and loosened. There are exceptions to this, notably Barnett (2003) and Iveson (2007), but they are rare.

This work gets a particular spin when it comes to spatial planning and design. In the work of organisations like the UK's Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment; in the work of Sennett (2002) and others above; in the literature on place-making and planning (eg., Gallent and Wong 2009), value is placed on design practices that, for example, break up large, empty plazas and fill them with 'breaks' – furniture, plantings, palyful elements, and so on – that encourage 'unscripted encounters with strangers' rather than a heads-down, hurried transit. There are other imperatives too, but for my purposes this is the key one.

When put like that, there seems nothing wrong. And yet, from the perspective of a political theorist, such definitions and prescriptions for public space are surprisingly limited. For one, the foundational public/private distinction has long been recognised as problematic, to put it mildly. There is a long history to this featuring feminist and post-colonial critics of liberalism, among others, but even within liberalism there are critics like Raymond Geuss (2001) who show that the public/private distinction on its own does almost no conceptual work, but masks finer-grained, contextual distinctions to do with ownership and access, use of common resources, common impacts (including so-called 'public goods'), and 'the public' as a noun. This means that spaces and places can have all, some, or just one of the features that we generally label public and yet therefore still be considered 'public space'. To put it another way, a lack of openness or accessibility of a space does not automatically render it 'private' because it might be public in other ways, for example by being paid for out of collective resources; nor does its 'publicness' in other ways automatically mean that it should

be open and accessible. These are separate criteria which we habitually lump together out of linguistic convenience, nothing more.

Secondly such definitions overlook the fact that certain kinds of public spaces are essential stages for the performance of key roles in democracies, and that those roles impose certain spatial requirements that can be at odds with the ‘open and accessible’ or ‘unscripted encounters’ injunctions. I do not have space to go into this in detail here – for a fuller account see (Parkinson 2012, Parkinson 2013, Parkinson forthcoming) – but there are three key points relevant here. First, a core role in democracies is ‘claim-making’ – that is, translating experiences into claims on the state or the collective, and the attempt to imbue those demands with authority (Hajer 2009) – and for this the staging requirements are driven by visibility to audiences in politically significant spaces, often proximate to the sites and symbols of national dignity and power. Online visibility is useful but not sufficient – physical demonstration of the scale and significance of public feeling in symbolically laden sites is needed too. And that is one reason why the Cairo demonstrations were in Tahrir Square – flat, featureless, large, accessible, symbolically resonant – and not somewhere else in that vast city. The demonstration of the scale of public displeasure is so much more impressive in such a space than in Parliament Square in London, say: derided as a roundabout and, since a succession of occupations over the last 10 years, being designed so that it is more useful for tourists and accidental encounters, less useful for purposive publics with an axe to grind.

The second sub-point is that while such sites gain symbolic meaning and normative value in large part through the use that is made of them (Rapaport 1982), it is not just the work of public claim making that is relevant. In democratic politics, there are other roles too, particularly the work of representation, deliberation, persuasion, bargaining and binding collective decision-making made by representatives, and the scrutiny that comes with that. Again, I do not have space here for the detail, but some of these roles require public access while others require, on the contrary, the privacy necessary not just for good deliberation (Chambers 2004) but to get a day’s work done.

Indeed, there is a trade-off between public access and private work in many democratic public spaces, notably parliaments. In my public space work I have noted what I call the mendacity of the National Assembly for Wales and the Australian Parliament in Canberra, sites and buildings full of gestures to public access but which grant that access to people performing certain roles and not others: limited (and misleading) access to tourists and school children, quarantine in safe zones away from the risk of any actual contact with an actual representative for citizens with more pointedly political purposes. In the case of Washington DC, Wilson (2000) has argued that decision to move representatives’ and senators’ offices out of the Capitol was a major factor in what he calls the ‘historicization’ of the Capitol, such that the work of democracy becomes increasingly invisible.

The Canadian model shows another way. The Canadian authorities talk of Parliament as ‘the people’s building’ and appear to mean it. It is used by constituents for meetings with members; it hosts all sorts of rituals like weddings (public? private?); it allows public claim making (ok, ‘protest’) inside the perimeter, right up the steps of the Central Block; it is a site for public celebration; and yet it functions too as office space, deliberation space and so on because, while space is certainly at a premium, it is a working building as much as anything else.

Of course, many urban scholars worry about the hidden controls in seemingly public space. My concern is that, by starting with a particular take on Simmel et al., their very definition of public space supports spatial practices that undermine political performance, particularly democratic performance. My concern is that such definitions play into the hands of those who are turning over Parliament Square to tourists and office-dwellers having a sandwich, and provide no normative grounds on which to resist such moves. As a democrat, that strikes me as dangerous.

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