Part IV Public Cultures and Everyday Space

Chapter 31

City Publics

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The open, civilizing and democratic possibilities of cities have always fascinated urbanists. Here the dimensions of that literature are mapped out along three axes: the relationship between the notions of the public realm and city space, conceptions of "the public" and "the private," and the relationship between the "extraordinary" and the "everyday." Much of the existing literature on these issues assumes and is developed from, the experience of Western cities, a tendency we hope to avoid here. We explore these themes in terms of the relationships between conventional notions of the public realm – formal and institutional – alongside more informal, everyday practices through which the public is negotiated.

The social consequences of urbanization were a preoccupation of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western writing on cities. Simmel ([1903] 1995) saw a blasé attitude to others developing as a response to the overstimulation of the city and from the pressure of capitalist markets to reduce all social encounters to the equivalent of exchange value. The industrial capitalist city became a place of suspicion, competition, and retreat into self. Tonnies ([1887] 1957) argued that cities separated out the multiple social ties of community (*gemeinschaft*) and made social exchanges specialized and one-dimensional in forms of urban association (*gesellschaft*). Wirth (1938) saw the size, density, and heterogeneity of cities resulting in a form of alienation or anomie. For some, the city of alienation and indifference meant being ignored and abandoned. For others who had command of the money economy and who benefited from living in a patriarchal society, it meant ease of movement and stimulation. Thus Walter Benjamin's figure of the *flâneur* (Benjamin 1969) was able to move through different spaces of the city and watch its activity but was not necessarily committed to, or embedded in, any of them.

Richard Sennett has long argued (Sennett 1974) that this sense of indifference and uncertainty in the city in Western culture changed the character of the public realm and encouraged a retreat into the private realm of the family and close friends. This public realm acquired a geography in the coffee houses and cafes of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century city where the issues and the people discussing them were open to scrutiny. As cities grew and social relations were more influenced by

industrial capitalism this urban arena broke down as people sought retreat in the private sphere. The public realm became one of studied impersonality, impartiality and rationality in the engagement with others. Yet for Sennett public urban spaces and the social heterogeneity of cities still offer more radically open and unpredictable encounters in ways which are socially progressive and civilizing. Unpredictability, spontaneity and a certain disorder (Sennett 1970) were at the core of Sennett's vision of a city that was based on encounter and performance in the public realm. Sennett (chapter 32 of this volume) opposes his view of the importance of performativity and the city as *teatro mundi* to the ideas of the city as impersonal rationality and self-repression that so preoccupied Simmel and others. Yet at the same time he concludes that the privatization of urban space and the separation of different groups has continued apace in the car-oriented, decentralized city. The problem is not one of overstimulation but understimulation and the loss of the public realm, a further restriction of the performative possibilities from which his analysis seeks to revivify the city.

For other writers urban public space is not so inclusive and potentially progressive. The unpredictability of encounter in cities may also result in conflict or a pervasive feeling of threat. Attacks, rapes, and mugging in certain spaces that are public in the sense that they are accessible to all, but are not safe for all (underpasses, concealed alleyways, nonresidential streets) have been of particular concern for women for example (Valentine 1989). Yet the streets are a contradictory site of the public for women. Victorian morality kept women off the streets (the prostitute or streetwalker was constructed as another category of woman) but the streets were also the spaces of freedom for women, away from the suffocation of the gendered space of the home and the private realm (Walkowitz 1992; Wilson 1992). Women who roamed the streets (the figure of the *flâneuse*) were unsettling for male society. What these contributions reveal is the contradictory nature of urban public space for women.

This contradiction has been encoded in urban planning. Notions of the public as open but impersonal became embedded in the physical design and planning of Western cities, and colonial cities. The building of, and access to, public space (parks, baths, libraries) was one of the great achievements of the municipal revolution in many Western cities. Yet at the same time it instilled an idea that space had to be ordered and rational and that in some senses space itself was neutral, in the Kantian sense, a container of activity. In contrast Sennett (1970) looks to heterogeneous spaces to bring different groups into performative encounter and this would work against the rationalizing and separating influences of urban planning and its tendencies to separate social groups and land uses. The links between a realm of encounter and the space of the city might not rely on the careful planning of public spaces but might be created through the encounters (chance or otherwise) in the everyday spaces of the city (streets, yards, stores). This is something that Jane Jacobs (1961) recognized in her analysis of movement, interruption, and encounter produced by the mixed activities of a New York street. Everyday spaces of the city can constitute a public realm.

In Western cities the idea of the "public" city and the "private" suburbs has strongly influenced planning regulations. These have essentially privatized women, leaving them confined to the domestic sphere in the suburbs or with an increasingly

difficult mix of paid employment, child-care responsibilities, and domestic work in a city which separates all these features through planning and zoning regulations (McDowell 1983; Watson 1988). Feminist writers (e.g. Sandercock and Forsyth 1992; Hayden 1981) seek to influence design and planning to promote a nonsexist city. Other feminist negotiations seek to make the private public by publicizing activities that are normally confined to the private realm (such as childrearing and domestic tasks) or exposing private practices, such as domestic violence, to legal intervention.

City space is amibiguous for women not just because of the way certain parts of the city are occupied by men or the sexist nature of some social interaction in public but also because the "urban public realm" has been constituted as settled, predictable, rational, and monumental – and male. Other groups offer resistance to this dominant representation of public space. The significance of being identified with certain distinct parts of the city has been noted for some time in the case of the gay community (Chauncy 1995; Mort chapter 26 of this volume) and increasingly the lesbian community (Bell and Valentine 1995). It is also important to make an impression on public space both as an affirmation of identity and political statement – in bars and clubs and on the street, most famously in the form of the gay and lesbian Mardi Gras in Sydney (Murphy and Watson 1997).

The relationship between public space, access to that space and constructions of identity is a recurrent theme in writing on the city. Ambiguity, fluidity, and movement are metaphors that figure strongly in a number of the contributions in this section. As Jonathan Raban (1974) observed over a quarter of a century ago the "soft" areas of the city are the ones that are hard to define in any way and are often the most stimulating and challenging. The ambiguous nature of urban space for different groups is also problematic for the notion of a singular public realm. Fraser (1990) for instance suggests that these differences constitute distinct public realms rather than a singular public realm. She is concerned with the balance between a politics of representation and recognition. Exclusive public realms (what she calls "subaltern counter publics") might enable the disempowered to gain recognition.

We can see that "the public" is constituted in terms of recognition and interaction in city space. It is also constituted in the institutional realm, in forms of representative organizations and city governance. The attempt to fix the public realm in cities was often tied to certain spaces but also to a distinct form of "public" service provision. The period of rapid urbanization in Western cities led to all kinds of urban deprivation, poor housing, and health (graphically noted by Engels ([1844] 1993) in Manchester and the subject of philanthropic surveys of Booth and Rowntree in London). The great municipal reforms sought to counter this urban malaise. They resulted in the expansion of the public provision in municipal and city government policies to provide basic infrastructure such as drainage and street lighting but also the construction of public spaces in the form of parks, squares, libraries, and public baths. This reformist liberal conception of public provision had a profound influence on the built form and democratic realm and was most noticeable in large cities. It had the effect of interconnecting the notion of the public with the state and certain settled spaces in cities. Indeed Castells (1977) saw the provision of bundles of public goods as the primary role for cities in capitalism. Recent developments in the privatization, putting out, and marketization of public provision represent a rupture

of the link forged in that earlier period between "public" service provision, the local state, and public spaces in cities.

A more important role for local government is now a feature of many non-Western cities. There has been a pervasive trend of decentralization of responsibilities for city governance away from the national state down to the regional and local level (Habitat 1996). For some, such as Castells (1997) this is an effort to sidestep the legitimation crises faced by many national governments and push the blame for lack of services down to localities. For others (such as Habitat) there is a suggestion that it results from elements of necessity – structural adjustment programs imposed by the World Bank and IMF have limited central government finances for welfare provision. But they also suggest an empowering element to this with increased democratization and links between an enhanced local state and grass-roots organization over service provision in cities. So it could be argued that such shifts represent the potential for a rejuvenated public realm in many non-Western cities.

It is instructive to think of conceptions of power and through what practices, institutions, and discourses the public is constituted. In many non-Western cities the formal public realm was something remote from the mass of the population, often tied to colonial interests and latterly to export markets and tourism. Indeed in thinking about the relations between the public and the private it is important to remember that most of the space of the cities worldwide and the majority of their activities are in private hands: not open to public scrutiny and secluded from areas of encounter. Most commercial and residential properties, and therefore land areas of the city, are held by private individuals. Although there are still tracts of land and monumental buildings, owned by the public, in terms of infrastructure, government, and other public buildings the privatization of urban space seems to be increasing. In many non-Western rapidly developing cities, the private ownership of land combines with the inability of governments to get access to it (either via the market because it is too expensive for cash-starved governments or because of the absence of legal mechanisms such as compulsory purchase, or through a lack of political will, or a prevailing regime of corruption).

Such land supply bottlenecks lead to massive shortfalls in housing provision resulting in homelessness or very poor accommodation for the mass of the cities' population who find their own solutions via squatting on unused land and self-provision of shelter. These "informal" organizations are significant not just for the provision of basic services but as a way of constructing a new public realm, a form of grass-roots representation. Although such social movements are generally targeted at specific issues it is clear that a number of them have had significant impacts on urban governance. Especially important are women's movements – such as those for political participation in Guadalajara, Mexico; neighborhood handicraft associations in Santiago, Chile; and struggles for health care in São Paulo, Brazil (Habitat 1996: 168). The growing importance of feminist movements in all their diversity in the cities of the world has been noted by Castells (1997, chapter 4). Despite the pervasive force of gender divisions, these movements represent a reconstitution of the public realm in relation to issues of work, health, and home; production and reproduction; and the toleration of difference.

The importance of women's movements points to a realm between the public and the private – that of civil society. For Gramsci civil society had a significant impact

on the historic blocks of allegiance between groups in society. Castells (1997) sees civil society as an arena to perpetuate the state but also deeply rooted in the everyday lives of people. This implies that the arenas of the state might be seized without direct violent conflict. But civil blocks in society need not be active and progressive. Recently Maffesoli (1996) has argued that there has been a growth in tribal-like groupings based on niche markets for products, identity politics, and other loose associations, independent of government and political representation: neither private nor public. The significance of social networks and social capital in economic activity has been argued by Putnam (1995) and this civil arena has also received attention in Western nations as a resource in welfare economics – the so-called "third way". Here informal cultural and social networks are seen as economic and personal resources to assist in caring, job search, and skill enhancement. It is argued that this realm can provide welfare in ways not possible via the private market (capitalism) or public provision (socialism) thus throwing responsibility back on to groups who may be ill-equipped to respond.

Similar arguments about the significance of community are also being emphasized by communitarians against assumed universalizations of individualistic capitalism or remote state socialism (Etzioni 1993). However Young (1990ab) provides a useful warning that communities can be every bit as oppressive as individualism is alienating. They may also be imagined rather than constituted in material practices, or posited as homogeneous and cosy as opposed to fractured and constituted by power. And as Short reminds us (chapter 2 of this volume) they can be fascistic, prejudiced, and exclusionary.

Whatever the merits of the community as a sphere between the public and the private such connections are being made with great results under conditions of necessity rather than choice in many non-Western cities. The provision of credit, employment, housing, and some social services is made via grass-roots activity in informal social networks in the barrios and bustees. It is perhaps in non-Western examples that we find the realization of Castells' ideals in *The City and the Grassroots* (1983).

Against the efforts of urban social movements to open up the public realm, urban space is being increasingly privatized or savagely withdrawn, particularly in the downtown areas, to serve the interests of the growing middle classes and to sanitize the streets for the tourist gaze. Street traders, hawkers, and the homeless are purged from the streets to make way for a certain sort of public life that serves the interests of the wealthy and the "formal" economy. This goes for Western cities as well. At the extremes the privatization of public space becomes fortress-like and militaristic as private interests exert literal or symbolic violence on those urban dwellers whose presence unsettles economic interests. There are roll-top benches to prevent rough sleeping in Los Angeles (Davis 1990) for example, and militaristic sweeps of city streets in Yogyakarta to clean up the street children. Harriot Beazley (chapter 40) describes the violence and depredations that infuse the lives of the street boys of Yogyakarta whose grip on the city, and indeed life itself, is often very tenuous. Yet she goes on to show how the in-between spaces of the city also become a resource – for meeting and mutual aid, for work, for sleep, for escape from the city. Here we have the construction of a public and private life all within the public and liminal spaces of the city where public space is a place of temporary security with the constant threat of brutality.

There has been a significant literature in urban studies on "the end of public space" (Sorkin 1992; Mitchell 1995). This focuses on how the hitherto open and uncontrolled public spaces of the city, sites of unpredictable encounter, have been either made subject to controls and surveillance or have been made into semiprivatized spaces. The enclosed atrium replaces the courtyard, the shopping center replaces the street. The power of private capital to thematize and commodify these spaces as sites of consumption further degrades the opportunity for idling, casual mutual performance and display, and chance engagement. Urban spaces have been Disneyfied.

Yet such nostalgic formulations of a lost public space themselves construct an idealized perspective. If the new shopping centers and atria represent the end of democracy, public space must once have been open to participation, engagement, and control of the majority. Or to put this another way, who were the public of these lost public spaces, who was included and who was excluded, and for whom were these public spaces formerly more public (Deutsche 1996: 285)? In her discussions of public art Rosalyn Deutsche takes this further in asking how "images of public space create the public identities they seem merely to depict?" (1996: 286). What is important she suggests is how these images construct a public, what imagined identities are evoked for those that occupy the prescribed site, and whose identities are being reinforced.

The possibility of affirming identities in the public spaces of the city are inscribed in power relations and are thus conflictual. Rather than adopt Habermas's notion of the public sphere as a potential space for consensus, rationality, and implicit homogeneity, it may be more useful to imagine public space as constituted by difference and inherently unstable and fluid. Following Pringle and Watson's argument (1992) that interests do not exist as already fixed outside the state, but instead are formed within, and themselves form, the very arenas of the state, so identities are constituted by and constitute the public spaces of the city. Such a process can never be complete and as Mouffe (1992: 234–5) suggests, a democratic public sphere is predicated on difference, divisions, exclusions, and open contestation rather than on the imposition of unity, homogeneity, or consensus. Perhaps as Deutsche proposes, psychic anxiety lies beneath this mourning for a lost public sphere, when these responses may instead be read as "panicked reactions to the openness and indeterminacy of the democratic public as a phantom – a kind of agoraphobic behaviour adopted in the face of a public space that has a loss at its beginning" (1996: 325). In other words there never was a public sphere that included everyone, and maybe these new privatized/ public spaces of the city simply include a different public.

Disputes over the assumptions behind constructions of the public and the private are not confined to Western scholarship on Western cities. They also mark the boundaries of assumptions from a Western experience and the contrasts (as well as similarities) in non-Western urban realms. Non-Western cities disrupt many assumptions about the relationship between the public and the private even further. What in the West is treated as the domestic realm is lived out in public in many cities. In Hanoi for example men are shaved on the street – see Figure 31.1. The domestic realm is also often the site of production for the public economy. Homes are sites of economic production and often exchange of goods. At the same time some urban homeless create spaces of privacy through marking territory when all they have is public space – now more clearly a feature of Western cities also.

Figure 31.1 Street barber in Hanoi (© Sophie Watson)

Studies of public life in Western cities are secular. Whereas the public in Western cities is infused with impartiality and rationality, in many non-Western cities it is experienced through the partiality of the figure of the monarch or through religious observance. As Annette Hamilton (chapter 39) describes, in Bangkok much of the public life of the city is expressed through the personage of the King. At most times separate and secluded from the public the King's person becomes important at certain ceremonies (such as the annual Ploughing Ceremony to celebrate the beginning of the agricultural season) or in certain spaces, such as Sanam Luang, a public open space and royal cremation ground. The vertical city represents the cosmology of merit. These sacred/personified meanings of the public demand a reexamination of the public and the city.

This interweaving of the public and the private indicates the degree to which much of the prior discussion of the public realm and everyday life has been based on Western cities. It also shows how those prior assumptions are being questioned and discussion raised about the ambiguity of the public and the private, the monumental and the everyday in critical readings of Western cities as well.

This transgression of the public and the private, the intimate and the abstract, is felt in other ways. The separation of public and private so long pursued in Western cities has also been a highly visual act (Benjamin 1969; Sennett 1990) which has led to the representation of conceived space in the planning imaginaries as a visual act, an act of putting at a distance and separating out. As Urry (chapter 33) argues other senses might enhance the sense of leakage between these realms as the city is experienced in everyday life. Smell cannot be so easily controlled as the gaze and can lead to a blurring of the public and the private as intimate smells leak into the public arena and public smells invade private spaces. The politics and technology of the control of smells says a great deal about the more subconscious governmentality of the city and the separation of public and private.

The dimensions of the relationship between the public realm and urban space have brought into question the notion of the everyday and everyday life. There has been a rapidly burgeoning literature adapting notions of the "everyday" to city life. For Lefebvre (1991) the everyday was the arena where capitalist alienation was greatest (or constant) and yet was also an escape route via the extraordinariness of the mundane (a Sunday in the country as a form of resistance and celebration). The everyday is set up against the systemic oppressions of capitalism or bureaucracy or commodification. For Habermas (1984; 1987) the everyday lifeworld has been separated out and made provincial by "the system" – but it still retains the possibilities for communicative action and the reconstitution of the degraded public realm via communicative rationality and discourse ethics. For de Certeau (1984) it is the repository of an array of tactics of resistance. Many of these themes are explicitly spatial breaking down the quotidian violence of rational planning – in a form of "pedestrian rhetoric," a different way of inscribing the city through walking. By following the critical signposts, Gibson and Rossiter (chapter 37) reflect, on walking through the city one can draw in different experiences of the city. Gibson and Rossiter discuss how a supremely commodified space (a department store window) is transformed through perfomativity into a domestic space, and the renewed sense of encounter between the performers living in the space and the audience on the street and the expressions of care this encourages. The ordinary becomes extraordinary and the street perfomativities can become a new space for politics and a public realm. More traditional forms of protest can also be made significant almost by their ordinariness and occupation of public space – witness John Paul Jones's inspiring description of the street politics of Jackie Smith (chapter 38).

As we have seen, much of the discussion of the public has been constituted in terms of the oppressive practices of the state (in the form of rational bureaucratic planning for example), or the economy resulting in the decline of the public realm. Alternatively, it might be constituted as a hyperpublic realm of surveillance and control in this totally administered and panoptic world (Foucault 1991). Equally the conceived spaces of planners and the preoccupations of urban scholars have rested with noticeable public space, of monumental public space. Recent writing on the city asks us to look elsewhere for the public. Thrift (chapter 34) begins by quoting Musil that there is nothing so inconspicuous as a monument; we must have other sensitivities to the city, in the mundane practices of everyday life. Sennett has argued that productive urban encounter will not be the impartiality of rationality but the performance of the *teatro mundi*, while Thrift takes hold of the performative turn

in social theory to look at the positive elements of contemporary city life. This is not about the center and the public, nor the private and periphery, but the liberating aspects of the gesture and the hitherto unnoticed. Gibson and Rossiter see public performance from within the commodified space of the department store window. Democracy might be relational and dialogic rather than representational and institutional. The street politics of Jackie Smith is a deadly serious performance to reactivate and animate (rather than simply make public) the memory of Martin Luther King. But as John Paul Jones acknowledges, perhaps King lives through the activities of both the King museum and the street protest of Jackie Smith, and the street that separates these two activities is the key zone of engagement – the public realm.

These developments represent a decentralizing of public space. They build on the ambiguity about public spaces in the city first advanced by feminist scholars, and open up possibilities in the interstices of everyday life. But everyday life need not mean copresence. There are new public spaces that have nothing to do with physical copresence. The openness of cyberspace is one possibility for unpredictable encounter (taking full account of the social selectiveness of global unevenness of access to this medium). There is a transformation of the intimate. Cyberspace also presents us with the possibilities of a spaceless public realm. Paradoxically it also has the potential to open up new spaces for "the public" in particular cities. Graham and Aurigi contrast global cybercities and virtual cities. The local participatory possibilities of virtual cities open up the possibilities for non-copresent participatory democracy.

Mediated interactions and the nature of a tolerant public realm also preoccupied Iris Young. She sees the city as a type of relationship and one that might lead to a new conception of the public. It is a coming together of strangers but one which posits tolerance and a civilized engagement – "the acknowledgement of unassimilated otherness." Here the public is a climate of mutual civility that is respectful of others in all their aspects. This seems to be a long way from where we started with the rough and tumble of encounter and discomfort that Sennett advocated. And this is one of the key elements on which contemporary discussions of the public realm and everyday space turn. Is the public a realm of encounter and activity (through traditional notions of politics and collective action and social movements) or is it one of inaction, mutual regard and understanding, a "letting be" as Heidegger calls it. Is the public realm discursively constituted as Habermas would have it or socially constituted and constitutive of the physical spaces of the city?

What are generally assumed to be more distant mediations of memory are now more present phenomena in our understanding of the meaning of public cultures and everyday spaces of cities. Christine Boyer's work has pointed to the importance of collective memory in the constitution of the city (Boyer 1994) but as Steve Pile has pointed out (chapter 8) our relation to cities is partly about phantoms and traces of the past and the subconscious. The repression and manifestation of desire in the city (see Walkowitz 1992) have been opposed to the rational and the phenomenal and the public. Now even these borderlands are open for inspection. All these questions are now very much on the agenda in thinking about cities. How they are resolved will have a profound effect not just on thinking about cities themselves but also on how we think about future urban democracy.

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