

A Stroll through Public Space

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Urban philosopher Thierry Paquot’s synthetic work maps out the historical development of the notion of public space. It highlights the diverse representations and uses of the public which structure citizens’ lives, with a fair share of hesitations and conflicts.

Reviewed : Thierry Paquot, *L’Espace public*, Paris, La Découverte, coll. Repères, 2009.

This essay by Thierry Paquot builds on a double definition of public space which connects its five parts: public space as a place and a practice, on the one hand, and as the plurality of spaces open to different publics, on the other hand. Though philosophy and communication science analyze public space whereas city planners, architects and engineers tend to consider the different natures of space, the author posits that the idea of communication, of sharing, of exchanges and circulating signs are central to both approaches. Reading this solid and insightful work proves a delightful experience of sharing in the author’s great scholarliness. His curiosity for rare details and unusual characters, as well as his readiness to challenge clichés, were surely sparked by his multidisciplinary background. Like Richard Sennett, Paquot argues that public space is a space of coincidence and encounters which makes the very richness of a city. The subject arises from these public spaces; indeed, strangers’ otherness is perceived as a guarantee of one’s own singularity.

Manufacturing Opinions

In 1961, Jurgen Habermas¹ defined public space as an intermediary space between private life and the State. His analysis explored the genesis of the bourgeois public sphere (as David Harvey does brilliantly regarding the Second Empire period²), its transformations and those of the State, then the rise and fall of the opinion. Yet this does not imply giving up the concept of public opinion (however fictional it may be), since it is a paradigm which counterbalances the State's exclusive voice (p. 17). Indeed, the practice of power and political domination must be made accountable by the *publicity* conferred on the opinion in a collective discussion. There have been variations on these ideas, and alternative subjectivities, such as proletarian ones, must be taken into account. Habermas himself admitted to having been overoptimistic on the unity of democratic universalism. Thus, taking particularities into consideration led him to declare the end of public culture. Undoubtedly, this is what opposes him to Richard Sennett, who establishes a difference between opinions on social life and behaviors and defends civility in the name of urban civilization: “The mask is the very

¹ Jurgen Habermas, *L’Espace public. Archéologie de la publicité comme dimension constitutive de la sphère bourgeoise*, Paris, Payot, 1978.

² David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, New York, Routledge, 2003.

essence of civility”³. It shields others from everyone’s subjectivity, and from “the tyranny of intimacy”!

The art of conversation, which is also called etiquette, is at its height in 18th-century Europe. At the time, over one thousand newspapers are published in French. The concept of cafés is imported from Arab-Muslim societies but spreads in Paris (there are over one thousand cafés in 1804). These cafés are the stage for the expression of the spirit of the city, influential ideas and political proclamations. Paquot is at his best when matching vignettes to topics and authors, sketching collective scenes or recounting forgotten statements to underscore his arguments with scholarly references.

Different Relations between Public and Private

The migration of exchanges from public to private space leads Thierry Paquot to question the relations between these terms in different cultures. In Greece, “private” (aidos) also means modesty, intimacy and respect (p. 47). A public cult is dedicated to Hestia, the goddess of the home who keeps vigil over the City’s destiny; by contrast, Hermes is a symbol of mobility and communication while both of them together, inasmuch as they are consubstantial to each other, perform the unity of opposites⁴. During a debate on the Grand Paris urban planning project, Christian de Porzamparc also contrasted Hestia (symbolized by a lamp) with Hermes, representing movement, trade and the agora. He regretted the former’s disappearance: streets are vital for the city to exist again, to become open to time and its impact, to sensorial experiences, to the joy of being transformable.

Whereas in Rome public and private are constantly intertwined, the central role played by the state during the Middle Ages stresses their opposition. *Publicus* designates the sovereign’s officer, *publicare* means to confiscate, to remove something from individual use. But, as pointed out by Georges Duby, feudalism is so pervasive that everything becomes public⁵. Analyzing the loss of this overlapping inevitably brings to mind Norbert Elias’s theory, which has been criticized for its ethnocentric bias (Duerr, Bruguière). What if the modern rationality of behaviors lies in individuals’ ability to withdraw, in their concern for dissimulating as much as for putting on an appearance? We have tried to set forth a collective answer to this question⁶, by giving private life the meaning of a secret life. Therefore, the Americans’ fenceless yards do not mean that they do not have a secret life, rather that their codes are different than those of the French.

Evolutions and Interpretations of Public Spaces

In Greek cities, blocks defined streets and territories were divided between public and private spaces. At this point, Paquot indulges in playful descriptions. Aristotle is portrayed defining the role for the police of behaviors: keeping an eye on women flutists, lyrists and zitherists; ensuring that waste is disposed of beyond the fortifications; removing any bodies found in the street, etc. (p. 69-70). Our current representation of public space, as we imagine it today, is based on the idea of the agora as a space of gathering, in a physical and political

³ Richard Sennett, *Les Tyrannies de l’intimité*, Paris, Seuil, 1979, p. 202.

⁴ Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*, Paris, Maspéro, reedition by La Découverte, 2005.

⁵ Philippe Ariès, Georges Duby (dir.), *Histoire de la vie privée*, V. 2, *De l’Europe féodale à la Renaissance*, Paris, Seuil, 1985.

⁶ Philippe Ariès, Georges Duby (dir.), *Histoire de la vie privée*, V. 5, *De la Première Guerre mondiale à nos jours*, Paris, Seuil, 1987.

sense. Nonetheless, there are numerous and diverse *agorai*, and there may be barriers to their access for the little people or for foreigners. The Etruscan viewed the foundation of a city as a religious and political event and performed it according to a precise ritual which inspired the Romans, masters in building public streets. According to Richard Sennett⁷, the meanings given to the body appear gradually with the creation of urban space. There is a close relationship between the way individuals experience their own bodies and the space they inhabit. The Romans' belief in a geometry of the body is manifest, for instance, in their urban planning and Imperial life.

To outline the evolution of city spaces, Francoise Choay⁸ suggests that the Middle Ages were characterized by a space of contact, the classical era by a space of performance, the industrial era by a space of circulation, and that our age has set forth a space of connections (p. 74). Rather than succeeding each other, these categories coexist and are combined, at times in unprecedented ways. During the Middle Ages, there were often conflicts regarding the use of streets and responsibility for surroundings was uncertain. The embellishment of cities was carried out during the 17th and 18th centuries by means of the creation of squares, parks and walkways. Displaying street names only started in 1728 and nameplates were standardized in 1847. The city was construed as a performance (as was the night) and nuisances such as cemeteries and sewers were hidden from the public's sight. Jane Jacobs points out that when thinking of a city "if the city's streets are interesting, the city seems interesting. If they are boring, the city seems boring"⁹. She adds that public space symbolizes a space which makes each and every one of us part of a greater political entity, thanks to an "architecture of empathy"¹⁰. Thierry Paquot also observes that the street can be pleasant, vain, lively, deserted or sad. The Catalan Ildefons Cerda (who coined the neologism "urbanization") highlighted the ambiguity of these aspects in the 19th century, as did poets who were also urban planners, such as Robert de Souza. In 1913, the latter regretted the fading colors of frontages in Nice, no longer maintained by highly-skilled craftsmen. "The streets, squares, tree plants, "open spaces" (this term was used at the time, it stands for the "in between", the interstices", the "vacant plots"...), the lighting, the signs, the shop fronts, the street art ("street art [...] is the expression of the very movement of the peoples who live outdoors"), all that is characteristic of a city should be addressed with the utmost care [...] » (p. 84).

Multiple Uses

The phrase "public spaces" appeared at the end of the 1970s and only became widely used twenty years later. As the last part of the essay shows, it is still a fuzzy notion. Of course, there are now many different laws regulating the use of public spaces. Nonetheless, inhabitants are reclaiming the streets' vitality, the harmony of parks and unsuspected interstices by giving them unforeseen uses. However, when the precautionary principle implies filtering, monitoring and excluding in the name of public interest; when fringe groups take control of public spaces and intimidate users into abandoning them; when the privatization of former public spaces entails closing them off, controlling their use and banishing people, then there is cause for alarm. As a living organism, the city is constantly reinventing itself, but sheer nostalgia for the long-gone days of strolling through the city is not enough to spur its rebirth. So are we to take shelter in virtual cities, in a quest for delayed

⁷ Richard Sennett, *La Chair et la Pierre*, Paris, Éditions de la Passion, 2001, p. 17-18. 3

⁸ Francoise Choay, *Espacements*, Milan, Skira, 2003.

⁹ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York, Random House, 1961. ¹⁰ See Sophie Body-Gendrot, *La Peur détruira-t-elle la ville ?*, Paris, Bourin, 2008, p. 134.

dreams? Are we fated to become mere spectators of urban spaces, chained to our screens, our keypads and our earphones? What is at stake is not the “end of the public” but the endorsement of a consensus which strengthens individualism instead of the sense of well-being, of being together, conveyed by shared spaces.

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