SIX PARADOXES OF PUBLIC SPACE

ADRIAN BLACKWELL

Since the financial crisis of 2008, we have watched a resurgence of political demonstrations and occupations in the Middle East, North Africa, China, Greece, Spain, the United Kingdom, and North America that have reanimated the concept of public space. In each case, citizens gathered in squares and streets, in opposition to today's political economy of austerity and inequality. For over thirty years neoliberalism has effected a two-pronged assault on public space: on the one hand it has been transformed almost entirely into a space of capital flow, and on the other it has become more heavily surveilled. These two forms of encroachment—one by the market, the other by the state—appear as opposites, but they function as complementary dimensions of neoliberalism, which pursues a relentless opening of markets while intensifying society's social and economic disparities.

To better understand this contemporary situation, it is worth returning to Jurgen Habermas's concept of the "public sphere" in order to sketch a provisional definition of "public space." Habermas saw the public sphere as a mediating or communicative zone between public authority and the private sphere, emerging in an essentially sympathetic relationship to new forms of bourgeois governance in Europe. It was in this instance that the bourgeois public sphere might have thrived as a place of rational discussion between the two realms and their conception of "publicness" in both its senses (public authority and the public sphere) tied to the invention of bourgeois private property.

The emergence of the modern private property regime was a profound event, because it secured the obligations that existed within earlier land-use regimes to create a form of land that is on the one hand open to all and alienable at any time, and on the other, owned absolutely and entirely monopsonistically. The construction of this historically specific form of private space was coincident with the production of a repertoire of new spaces of public authority, such as urban avenues, parks, government buildings, libraries, prisons, and hospitals, which were all produced to solidify social control. Capitalism is thus founded on the re-production of two realities, the entirely unequal system of private property, and spaces of public authority whose function is to surveil and normalize capitalist subjects.

If we apply the emergent concepts of private property and public authority to space, we can think of public space as analogous to the public sphere, as a physical space in which private people come together in order to question both the state and the economy. In this conception, we end up with three spaces: private economic space, spaces of public authority, and "public spaces." Given that all spaces in democratic capitalist society are legally controlled through the rights of sovereign or private property, public space must always be constructed on top of a sphere governed either by the private economy or public authority. Public space is always an appropriation, a layering of a political space over legal space. This is clear when we take a quick glance at the physical spaces in which publics have asserted their power and produced new democratic knowledge, from public squares to universities, coffee houses, and public homes. These spaces built either by public authorities or private economic agents (or some combination of the two) public spaces only appear within them when they are actively constructed.

So what exactly is produced when a public space is made? Insofar as it is a thoroughly capitalist institution, a locus of criticism and public debate, and a space for the construction of a community, a political space within a physical space. It is not that public space today is an oxymoron, rather that spaces of public authority and private economy are themselves contradictory, and public space is the construction of spatial and material argument that brings their contradictions to light.

CONVERSATIONS

On November 12-23, 2014, the Blackwood Gallery will host a two-day hybrid event open to the general public. The Furnishing Positions event will be structured as a set of six conversations, each on a different public space, between the artist, writer and two members of a public audience. The event on Furnishing Positions will be used by University of Toronto Mississauga faculty and students as well as the wider community to engage with the question of how digital information means that every individual statement has less value than it once did. The most recent social movements emerged through and occupied complex hybridities of immanent and material public spaces.

For Habermas, the public sphere that emerged in the late eighteenth century was a space that was both physical—on the streets, coffee houses, and social clubs—and virtual—embedded in media such as newspapers and journals. Today's media are even less material, as the Internet allows anyone with access to a computer to produce and disseminate her or his ideas on the web. However, this process remains not only contested but also facilitated by digital technology and information means that every individual statement has less value than it once did. The most recent social movements emerged through and occupied complex hybridities of immanent and material public spaces.

The most fundamental paradox of public space is that place assembles because they have something in common, but at the same time they are only compelled to do so because they disagree with others about something that affects their lives. Contempora
y political theorists have argued that disagreement lies at the heart of any political assembly, while others have emphasized the importance of the affinities that draw people together. Both of these claims are true, then public space has to accommodate the complexities of both consensus and dissensus.

The public sphere is always tightly tied to dominant ideologies, in which turn delimit what is possible and what is not, what is real and what is pure fantasy. As a result, many people and positions are excluded from public space. Political theorists such as Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner have argued that under these conditions we need multiple publics, or what they call counter-publics: conversations within which smaller groups of people can build arguments, gestures, and practices in opposition to the dominant culture and at a distance from it. It is only through the preservation of certain forms of privacy that we can have meaningful forms of public space.