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RECLAIMING THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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INTRODUCTION

If a public sphere is where members of a democratic society determine the shape and values of that society for themselves, a conventional identification of that sphere with urban public spaces is problematic. The concept of a public sphere relies on historically specific precedents linked to geographical sites yet those cited, such as classical Athens, do not support the concept. Perhaps a public sphere has never fully existed. And, while understanding the necessary defence of public spaces in face of encroachment by private-sector developers, I do not see it in the new public spaces of urban redevelopment schemes. These are more like a residue of nineteenth-century monumental space, a site in which the values a society's subjects are required to hold are presented in the form of statuary and devices to control the flow of people through the city (or today in the blander forms of public art). To find a public sphere means looking to a critical social imagination, as in the consensus decision making of alternative settlements, and remains to be realised in the wider society.

CONTEXT

Discussion of the public sphere in architecture and urban design privileges the provision of new public spaces, as if this constitutes a public realm to replace one that is disappearing. Urban redevelopment schemes tend to include piazza-like spaces alongside internationally accented cafés, designer bars, boutiques, and art spaces. The schemes are often culturally led in that culture industries constitute key users of the spaces provided when redundant industrial buildings are remodelled or hitherto devalued sites are refashioned as urban villages for young professionals. Perhaps the designers of such spaces see themselves as reintroducing the public aspect of a site such as the Campo in Siena, if on a smaller scale. The gesture parallels the efforts of property speculators to disguise themselves as Renaissance patrons by commissioning or collecting public sculptures. But the efforts of the designers should not be dismissed, echoing those of the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) for a new society to be achieved, after the defeat of fascism and return of humanism after a devastating war, by design and social engineering (Curtis, 2000). If their failure was predicted by some members of CIAM, and followed a privileging of functionalism over participation by users - a denial of the poor's ability to determine their own spatial practices (Robbins, 1996) - this does not detract from the intention. Rather it returns attention to the mismatch of the means used to the utopian ends desired, ends which in this idealistic respect characterised international modernism.

The failure of inter- and post-war urban planning to produce a better world also draws attention to the inappropriateness of some of the histories said to have supported a public sphere, from the *agora* of Athens to the medieval city square - campo or piazza - and the modern public space. In effect, this is a history of a

lack of such spaces: the agora was a market; the medieval city square was a space for the display of power, and until the nineteenth century of public executions; civic squares of the Enlightenment era reflect the creation of a bourgeois city. The latter is, of course, progressive in rejecting feudal ties to land and introducing structures of power appropriate to a secular merchant class; but the broad avenues and paved squares were again sites for display, if now of wealth rather than inherited authority. In the nineteenth century they become the sites of promenading, along with the glass-vaulted arcade, and of a decidedly masculine gaze. I return to these histories below, and here add only that the public sphere as it is generally envisaged is absent, too, for the most part, in the literature of ideal societies. The plan of More's *Utopia*, like Campanella's *City of the Sun*, suggests a centralised authority in the regulation of its spaces, not a society in which users continuously adapt and modify space in accordance with their needs and values.

The literatures of urbanism tend to emphasise the city as dystopia, in fiction and academic writing. Thomas Hardy represents the ideal city - Christminster (Oxford) - as site of catastrophic rejection for the non-privileged Jude (the obscure), while representing a rural world already encapsulated in history when he wrote about it. Neil Smith (1996) sees 1990s New York as site of a new frontier, a new class of young professionals its pioneers. And Mike Davis (1990; 1999) observes armed response signs on suburban lawns and likens the future script of Los Angeles to that of the disaster movie. Putting Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958) beside these sources - men's war stories of the city - draws out the quaintness of her appeal to the democracy of classical Athens as precedent for a quality of publicity; but also the abiding concern for a society of empathy. For Arendt, publicity means the condition in which identity formation is enabled amid the perceptions of others, and only amid such perception. Denial of publicity is deeply painful, and for Jews in 1930s Germany a precondition, as oblivion, for annihilation. Separating the unreality of Arendt's appeal to Athens as a proto-democratic site in which the idea of publicity can be intellectually established - which jars with the fact that Athens depended on a slave economy - from the idea itself allows a reconsideration of publicity which, I suggest, remains a viable point of departure for a re-conception of the public sphere. Turning to accounts of the sites of an alternative society in intentional communities and eco-villages today (Bang, 2005; Barton, 2000), in which the perceptions of others are freely and regularly communicated, a further difficulty arises: the cases cited are in most cases localised and micro-scale, separated from the dominant society by pursuit of rural self-sufficiency or claims to spirituality. If, however, experiments in social formation from squatting to eco-village living revolve around the 'work' of social life, then they act as a practical counterpart to Arendt's philosophical image of a self-determining world in which subject-citizens interpret that world and their views of others for themselves. It seems a long way from the bright new piazza-style spaces of urban redevelopment, and the ersatz civic values of new urbanism in north America.

DEFENDING PUBLIC SPACES

The vogue for public spaces follows its demise in the marketised city. Sharon Zukin (1995) critiques Business Improvement Districts in New York City, and the complicity of cultural institutions. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) argues that the task of critical theory today is to defend a vanishing public realm on which private space encroaches. I find his qualification more helpful, when he says, "... or rather [the task is] to refurbish and repopulate the public space ... [after] exit of the 'interested citizen', and the escape of real power into the territory which ... can only be described as 'outer space'." (Bauman, 2000: 39). I think outer space

means the de-centred geography of trans-national companies whose key functions are out-sourced.

Bauman's case is coloured by the growth of neo-liberalism, the architectural form of which is new urbanism. Samir Amin reads neo-liberalism as reinforcing a danger of "anti-democratic regression" (Amin, 2000: 102-103, in Harootunian, 2006: 32), and Harry Harootunian argues that it contradicts the rhetoric of democracy in its management of crisis (Harootunian, 2006: 32) – which I take as the production of permanent crisis. But then liberalism always was a form of social control, a mix of good intentions with an apparatus of reform designed to lessen the possibilities for revolt. This does not decrease the beneficial impacts of reform, as in installing sewers in metropolitan cities and providing clean drinking water to citizens - a process only recently turned over to the private sector as a new area for exploitation.

This ambivalence informs Adorno and Horkheimer ([1949] 1997) in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. While they argue that there is a continuity of the mythical within Enlightenment, they also argue that this should not lead us to junk the project of Enlightenment but to seek revision within the rationality which is Enlightenment's primary claim. It sounds like permanent cultural revolution and implies a non-teleological dimension. This refusal of end=domination is found also in utopian theory, described by Simon Tormey as, "contingent, open, negotiated, unpredictable, beyond capture" (Tormey, 2005: 402). I cite this because I think the question of public space and the associated but distinct question of a public sphere require a similar critical approach, in which the good is recognized and the failure of delivery - which stems from the unkept promise and undelivered dreams of Enlightenment - is interrogated.

To sum up this part of the argument, to defend public spaces is to refuse the encroachment on them of a seemingly total privatization. It is viable to see in this an allegiance to a public sphere; but also to imagine other ways in which that sphere, as yet metaphorical, may eventually be given form than in design or material provision. Yet this is not, either, to relegate it to aesthetics or literary fiction. If utopia is no-where, in the earliest texts a distant island the description of which is narrated not by the author but a mysterious voyager, a public sphere is a concept in the social imagination durable enough that it can be thought of as at some stage transmuting to a viable social form. That form will not be absolute or fixed but a negotiated position (Laclau, 1996: 19); and will be always open to renegotiation, and already compromised in its inevitable derivation from the conditions of non-publicity in which it was conceived. The contingency of the public sphere can be likened, perhaps to this description by Paul Carter: "Public space incubates a desire that cannot be satisfied, the same desire that keeps the space 'public', open to the prospect of better times ... [and] not a place at all in any static sense, but the setting of a mass mobility made sociable ... " in which the art of inscription "can contemplate its own disappearance." (Carter, 2006: 260-261).

PUBLIC SPHERES?

I want to look further, now, at Arendt's idea of a public sphere in *The Human Condition* (1958), and to juxtapose Arendt's idea to Nancy Fraser's (1993) critique of Habermas' concept of communicative action. Arendt appeals to the Athenian polis as site of a proto-public sphere where "everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity" (Arendt, 1958: 50). In public, a growth to a mature self is possible through the self's perceptions of others and others' perceptions of the self, and the continuous

interaction, like parallel mirrors, this invokes. Such mature selves, produced explicitly in the condition of publicity, can build a political life. Without publicity there is darkness and ossification. Kimberley Curtis sums up Arendt's argument, Denied that movement in relation to others in a public sphere, denied the dense and pressing presence of speaking and acting beings, our own urge to appear remains unprovoked. Our potential to call forth something that had never been before, to 'change every constellation' is crippled. And if this were not sufficient cause for despair, the denial of this political freedom over time may well undermine our capacity for inner freedom as well (Curtis, 1999: 73).

To understand Arendt's position it helps to remember that her work is haunted by the rise of fascism in industrialised Germany, after the failure of revolution in 1919, and by the anti-semitism which caused her to flee Europe to north America - which she re-encountered as an observer at the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem. When she writes that "The privation of privacy lies in the absence of others" (Arendt, 1958: 58), she hints at another privation in Germany, as precondition for oblivion.

Denial of publicity is thus not only painful in a personal sense but in an urgent social sense as well. But while a public realm "gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other" (Arendt, 1958: 51, 52) this is at the cost of intimacy, which is bundled together with the private realm of domesticity as secondary to the public realm. I would question this, and counter the relegation of the realm of intimacy through Herbert Marcuse's argument, in an essay on French literature under the German occupation, that the art of intimacy - in love stories and poems - is a last resort of liberation in times of total oppression such as those of the occupation (Marcuse, 1998: 199-214). For Arendt, the dimension of privacy is an uncertain and obscure area exemplified by the experience of pain, "truly a borderline experience between life as 'being among men' ... and death ... so subjective and removed from the world ... that it cannot assume appearance at all" (Arendt, 1958: 51). It suits Arendt to refer to the remote past of classical antiquity, from which the public life of *agora*, *pnux* and acropolis is recoverable in archaeological evidence while the private, everyday lives of diverse dwellers are more difficult to ascertain.

Eyal Weizman writes that for Arendt, "the political realm of the Greek city was guaranteed, quite literally, by two kinds of walls (or wall-like laws): the wall around the city, defining the zones of the political, and the walls between the public areas and the private house, guaranteeing the autonomy of private space." (Weizman, 2006: 19). The walls were gendered, or divisions of two discretely gendered realms - men's discourse in the open air, and women's domestic lives and cthonic rites in dark spaces indoors or in the Earth. This is conjecture, given my previous comment on what archaeology preserves. I wonder if Richard Sennett is captured by his material when he describes Greek society's polarisation of a masculine world of light, heat, and men's symposia, and a cool, dark feminine realm (Sennett, 1995: 52-81). The effect for Sennett as for Arendt is to relegate the private to a restrictive condition of the household or an interior world we might, after Freud, read as a part of mental life characterised as an unconscious. Arendt writes that a feeling for reality rests on a public realm where "things can appear out of the darkness of sheltered existence ... [so that] the twilight which illuminates our private and intimate lives is ultimately derived from the much harsher light of the public realm." (Arendt, 1958: 51).

For Sennett (1995) the harsher light is the sunlit sky against which the speaker in the *pnux* (assembly) was silhouetted in front of an audience grouped according to the part of the city in which they lived, who remained seated. I note the centrality of the performative in Sennett's account, but also the selectivity of Arendt's view

of the *polis* as a model for a democratic society. For Sennett a public realm is evoked less by the *prytaneion* than the *agora* (market). He draws attention particularly to the *stoa*, built around 460 BCE on the north side of the *agora* of Athens as a space "not built ... for the use of a single group of officials." (Sennett, 1995: 54). This echoes Habermas' (1989) idea of a public sphere as being separated from civic institutions. Sennett writes of citizens strolling from one informal discussion to another - a nice image. But decisions on state policy were not made in the market, but the preserve of an elite, and not a vehicle for grass-roots articulation of social ideas; and, as Sennett says, only 5 to 10 per cent of the adult, native-born population of Athens could take part in the *prytaneion* (Sennett, 1995: 52) - all men. In her critique of French Republicanism in the 1790s, Nancy Fraser reads an etymological connection between the words 'public' and 'pubic', "a graphic trace of the fact that in the ancient world possession of a penis was a requirement for speaking in public." (Fraser, 1993: 5-6). In Athens a further requirement was possession of a talent (6,000 drachmae, or 6,000 days' pay for a skilled worker). The public realm of Athens is, then, a model for the bourgeois public sphere more than for a democratic society, replicated according to Geoff Eley (1992) in bourgeois society's philanthropic institutions and professional associations. Fraser admits that in time exclusions of gender, property, and race diminished in Western democratic structures (Fraser, 1993: 10); but argues that interrogation of the concept of a public sphere shows that difference is no more than set aside "to the advantage of dominant groups and to the disadvantage of subordinates." (Fraser, 1993: 11). Gary Bridge raises another problem: Habermas' idea of communicative action is restricted to language, and to a procedural approach based on claims to validity,

The contents of the validity claims relate to people's ideas of the objective world, their social norms and their subjective worlds. In order to defend these worldviews in debate people must examine the basis of their validity - in terms of objective truth, social legitimacy and subjective sincerity (Bridge, 2005: 6).

Bridge identifies a broader idea of communicative action in "bodies and gestures, as well as speech and thought" so that "performativity, slips and excess in communication can be as much a resource for social transformation as the more controlled communication towards consensus, on which Habermas focused" (Bridge, 2005: 6).

CONCLUSION

If the public sphere, like music, comes into reality when it is performed, it is diminished by alignment to urban public spaces - sites not of formation but of selective representation, and of regulation through narratives of national or civic identity in public monuments, rituals, displays of power, and public art. I began by saying that the public sphere was a metaphorical site. This enables me to avoid the reification of publicity in forms such as the piazza. Yet I do need a sense of how such a sphere takes place, that it is not only metaphorical. A case which lends a material sociability to the concept is a domestic, or on closer inquiry transitional, space - the kitchen of Soviet communal housing.

Angela Harutyunyan (2004) sees Habermas' public sphere as constructed in the discourses of citizens free from state interference, arguing that it functions only in conditions of free association. She asks what happens outside such conditions. In a leaflet publicising the project public media space which she curated at the Armenian Centre for Contemporary Experimental Art in Yerevan in 2004, Harutyunyan writes,

In Soviet times the kitchen became a place where underground discussions

were going on and where alternative thought was formed. So, the kitchen became a public space (if we follow the definition of Habermas) (Harutyunyan, 2004, n.p.).

Where does that lead me? Firstly, to understand a potential public sphere as produced in social dialogue, not given in design. Social dialogue enables the shaping of a social imagination, hence glimpses of how else a society might be organised. This resembles Lefebvre's idea of lived time - constituted by moments of liberation within the routines of everyday life. And it leads me to ask to what extent cultural work, as in contemporary dissident art within the affluent society, might contribute to articulation of such a public sphere.

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