

Public Goods and Social Justice

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Why should the state provide public goods? I explore this question by focusing on the example of public parks. It examines the three most influential approaches to public goods (the market failures, the normative, and the democratic) and concludes that they fail to explain why parks should be public. I propose an alternative that I call solidarism, a social justice-based approach that provides a response to liberal arguments about the neutrality of the state. Solidarism emphasizes that modernity gives rise to growing levels of interdependence that generate benefits and burdens that are not shared fairly. Public goods as such are a way of compensating for the negative externalities of urbanization and industrialization. Left libertarians argue that such compensation should exclusively take the form of individual benefits. I challenge this view and provide three reasons for building public infrastructure that is shared among people who live together in a physical space: solidarity, decommmodification, and politics. Exploring the publicness of parks provides a window into the broader question about the limits of the market and the importance of public space for democracy.

The justification of public goods is a conceptual problem for liberal democracies. A democratic state can tax residents and use the money to pay for the goods and services that the majority want: bread or ballet, armies or air quality, humanities or health care. Classical liberalism, on the other hand, restricts the scope of public goods to necessities that cannot be adequately provided by the market (Smith 2012). The seminal works of John Rawls exhibit the tension between these two different approaches. In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls argues that support for non-essential public goods must be unanimous (Rawls 2009, 266-267). In *Justice as Fairness*, Rawls suggests that public resources should not be allocated to

advance “perfectionist values” by funding pursuits like the arts and sciences (2001, 151-152). He does concede, in a footnote, that public funds could be used to support public spaces such as museums and parks because such places foster political values, yet the text fails to explain the connection between public space, political values, and justice. This lacuna is emblematic of the broader conceptual confusion over the legitimacy of state support for discretionary goods in liberal, pluralistic societies.

To what extent should tax revenue subsidize collective consumption goods? The answer to this question is one of the key differences between left- and right-wing ideologies. The privatization of public goods is among the central policy objectives of the right, and neo-liberals have articulated a cogent defence of privatization that is rooted in the principles of freedom and efficiency (Buchanan and Musgrave 1999, Biebricher 2019, Brown 2015). I explain the connection between public goods and social justice. I provide a solidarity-based rationale for public space and use the example of public parks as a lens for addressing the broader question about public goods.

Today, public parks enjoy broad popular support. One study found that voters approved 72% of ballot measures related to conservation and parkland (Myers 1999). Yet there is also an ongoing struggle about the degree to which parks and other public spaces should be privatized.¹ For example, Liberty State Park, a 1200-acre waterfront park in New Jersey, was recently the site of struggle over public access and privatization. Under the administration of New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, the state sought commercial partners to increase revenue in the park. One proposal involved leasing part of the shoreline to a Texas-based company, which planned to create a 500-slip marina. The

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view of the Statue of Liberty, opponents contended, would literally be blocked by a massive wall of mega-yachts. After popular mobilization and a change in administration, the State Department of Environmental Protection ultimately rejected the plan, but similar struggles play out on smaller scales, when local governments introduce or increase user fees to finance the improvement and maintenance of parks. Even when these spaces are still publicly owned, they become less inclusive and more commodified (Honan 2015). Localities have also used public/private partnerships or “parks conservancy” organizations to raise private money and to limit public sector control (Katz 1998).

It is difficult to assess these changes because the underlying reasons for the *public* provision of parks are unclear. A clear theoretical rationale for the public provision of parks can help us evaluate the privatization of public space. I examine the three most influential approaches to public goods (market failures, basic needs, and democracy) and explain why they fail to justify the public provision of parks. I propose another approach that I call the solidarist approach and show how it can illuminate debates about the regulation and funding of parks. Exploring the publicness of parks provides a window into the broader question about the limits of the market and the importance of public things for democracy (Sandel 2013; Satz 2010; Honig 2017).

Non-Universal Public Goods

Political theorists have devoted a great deal of attention to economic inequality and the distribution of material resources (G.A. Cohen 2000, 1995; Van Parijs 2004, 1991; Rawls 2001; E.S. Anderson 1999). The distribution of public goods, however, has received considerably less attention (Miller 1979; Zuidervaart 2010; Murphy and Nagel 2001). Without a theory of public goods, it is difficult to evaluate the allocation of public resources and the privatization of government functions. “Public goods” is sometimes used to describe anything provided by the state, but I will focus on collective consumption goods that are broadly enjoyed. Some public goods such as clean water and national defence benefit everyone, but not all public goods are universal, in this sense. Non-universal public goods are collective consumption goods that the state provides even though they are not preferred or enjoyed by all people. When *non-universal* public goods are distributed, the need for a theoretical account becomes even more urgent (Ferdman 2017). In using the term distribution, I mean to draw attention to the way that government resources are allocated unequally when they subsidize some collective consumption preferences and not others. The classic example is government funding of elite cultural tastes such as opera and classical music (Dworkin 1985; Brighouse 1995). The provision of non-universal public goods is problematic from a liberal perspective (Franken 2016). It involves coercion, which is

legitimate when it is necessary to rectify injustice but problematic when used to advance some discretionary interests at the expense of others. According to liberal theory, the state is supposed to be neutral about different conceptions of the good. This makes it difficult to explain why the state should subsidize some non-universal goods and not others (Feinberg 1994). State support for sporting events or opera companies takes resources away from some people (taxpayers who do not have a preference for the activity) and redistributes it to others. The problem becomes especially apparent under conditions of cultural pluralism. Why should everyone pay for jazz festivals and not sitar or tabla performances?

Left libertarians such as Philippe van Parijs argue that a just distribution of primary goods would largely solve this problem (Parijs 1998). If everyone had sufficient resources at their disposal, then they could simply purchase goods on a market. Some people prefer parks and others prefer libraries or museums. If each individual were to pay an admission charge to gain access to his or her preferred amenity, then the production of such amenities should respond to the effective demand. From the left libertarian perspective, the problem is not the market mechanism, but rather the distortion that comes from the vastly unequal distribution of resources among potential consumers (Levy 2017). There may be equal latent demand for saxophone and sitar concerts, but if saxophone fans have large amounts of disposable income and sitar fans have none, then the market will not respond to both groups’ preferences.

In the second half of the paper, I will explain why the solidarist rationale for public goods is relevant in a society with a just distribution of private goods, but for now I start from the perspective of non-ideal theory. This helps us focus on the concrete choices about public goods within societies like our own where the degree of inequality is significant and rising (Mills 2005; Galston 2010; Sluga 2014). Solidarist arguments apply not only to parks but also to other public spaces such as libraries, transit, and schools. I focus on parks because the case for state provision is harder to justify on other grounds (such as economic benefit) and therefore requires more careful theoretical elaboration.

Three Accounts of Public Goods

The scholarly literature on public goods is relatively thin, but it does provide three major answers to the question why the state should provide public goods: market failures, basic needs, and democracy. Each of these theories explains the reason for the public provision of some types of goods, therefore my objective is not to refute these theories but to supplement them. The market failures approach is the most influential and best-known approach. According to the classic economic account, goods should be provided by the state

under two circumstances: when the provision of benefits is non-excludable and the enjoyment of the goods is non-rivalrous (Samuelson 1954). Non-rivalrous means that the enjoyment by one person does not diminish another person's ability to enjoy the same good. The term "non-excludable" highlights the fact that it is impossible to provide a benefit to one person without others gaining access to it. According to the market failures approach, markets are not able to produce such goods efficiently. The classic examples are national defence and clean air; economists concede that these are best provided by the state. If the state does not compel everyone to contribute, then there will be a problem of free-riding and, in spite of the fact that these goods are highly valued, they will be under-produced.

The range of public goods that broadly exhibit this structure increases when we expand the meaning of non-excludable to take into account transaction costs (Touffut 2006). There are very few things that are truly non-excludable. Even the paradigmatic example—sunlight—could in principle be transformed into an excludable good, if an enormous sunshade were constructed over a territory and people were charged for access to a sun-hole. Yet there are many goods that in practice are non-excludable because the cost of the gatekeeping function is higher than the value of the good itself. Roads often fall into this category. It is possible to collect tolls, but tollbooths have high transaction costs that decrease the efficiency of transit. Until recently, when technological innovations significantly reduced the cost of "gatekeeping," roads were classic public goods in this broader sense of valuable things that could not be efficiently produced by private actors.

Where do parks fit in this schema? It is tempting to include parks with roads in this broader category of market failures, but this would not be correct. A striking illustration of the relative ease of excluding non-contributors is Gramercy Park. This is a small, fenced park in an affluent neighborhood of Manhattan. Eligible residents pay an annual fee and receive a key. This model builds on a long history of large, gated private parks in Europe. The proliferation of private health clubs and amusement parks demonstrates that there is no classic market failure in the commercial provision of recreational space. New technology has already eliminated the job of toll-taker, and it is possible to imagine a world in which GPS and automated payments commodify public space.

The enjoyment of a private park may also be different from the experience of a public park. In both cases, the individual has access to green space, but the social experience of the two types of parks is not the same. In Gramercy Park users will likely encounter neighbors who occupy a similar class position. A public park provides the opportunity to encounter a broader cross-section of society, and a network of public parks affords a variety of different experiences. The source of the market failure

may not only be the inability to provide green space but also the inability to provide a collective, inclusive, and diverse place of encounter. Scott Roulier described such a park as "the visual articulation of civic equality" (Roulier 2010, 330). In such spaces, hierarchies are temporarily suspended (Zacka 2018, 151).

A proponent of private provision might respond that the state is not the only agent capable of funding parks that are open to the public. For example, in 2017 Wall Street financier Paul Johnson donated \$100 million to the Central Park Conservancy (Williams 2017). Philanthropy often exacerbates inequality because it is not subject to democratic control. Eric Beerbohm calls this the free-provider problem. It alters the distribution of our resources and even when it benefits some deserving people, it does so in a way that weakens the ability of the relevant agent—the body of citizens—to rectify the structures that produce injustice (Beerbohm 2016). The funding of parks provides a striking illustration of this point. There are 1,700 other parks in New York City, many of which are located in less affluent neighborhoods and in a poor state of repair. The "parks conservancy" system was introduced in 1980 to ensure that the underfunding that was destroying parks in other neighborhoods did not impact Central Park. Today, Central Park, which is largely maintained through philanthropy, has one gardener for every six acres. In the rest of the system, the ratio, is one gardener for 133 acres (Surico 2018). The private money that maintains Central Park also makes it possible for elites living in Manhattan to remain indifferent to the condition of the other parks.

The second approach to public goods is a normative theory that holds that state provision is justified when it is necessary to supply primary goods (Klosko 1987). This approach builds on Henry Shue's seminal work *Basic Rights* (Shue 1996). Shue argues that regardless of one's substantive conception of the good, it is necessary to secure certain material conditions such as adequate food, shelter, health and security. The theory of basic rights is consistent with what John Rawls famously called political liberalism; it remains neutral about different substantive understandings of the good life by focusing on the minimal things that are necessary for people in pluralistic societies to live together peacefully (Rawls 2001). The normative approach begins with the premise that everyone desires a decent life, which entails both agency and well-being (Fabre 2000). If individuals cannot secure their own basic needs, then the responsibility to do so devolves on those who can, which includes other people and the state. This is the reason why education and healthcare are treated as public goods (Weinstock 2011). Joe Heath agrees that a social safety net should be provided by the government, but he justifies such programs as "a special instance of state provision in the face of missing or inefficient private markets" (Heath 2011, 27). The market failure here,

however, is the fact that some people do not have enough resources to meet their basic needs, therefore the rationale is still the normative argument that there is a collective responsibility to provide the preconditions of a decent life. Goods such as single-payer health care may be *provided* through the market, but they are described as public goods when access to the good is guaranteed by the government (Heath 2011, 27).

The normative theory is important but incomplete. It does an excellent job justifying a role for the state in ensuring that residents have access to goods that fulfill basic needs, but it does not explain the reasons for public provision of things that seem to be discretionary such as parks. The enjoyment of parks is not a basic need in Shue's sense. Many people choose to spend their leisure time in libraries or coffee shops or bars rather than parks. It is possible to live a minimally decent life without regular access to parks. According to Fabre, the entitlement to a minimally decent life includes shelter, food, medical care, education, and other basic necessities like clothing, but she is careful not to expand it to include all valued things (Fabre 2000). In a similar vein, Rutger Claassen distinguishes between necessary and discretionary public goods. Parks do foster individual and social benefits, which I will highlight later, but they are discretionary goods. "Non-necessary infrastructure" (Claassen 2013) may foster human flourishing, but it is possible to live without it.

The third rationale for public goods is the democratic one (Sekera 2016; Claassen 2013). Often the term "public good" is used to describe private goods that are provided by the government (Holcombe 1997; Epple and Romano 1996). According to this approach, public goods are goods provided by the "public" (e.g., the state) to the "public" (e.g., citizens or residents). In democratic states, the term public goods is often used to describe the things that the majority of the citizens, through their elected representatives, choose to provide. This descriptive approach, however, does not help us answer the crucial questions: why *should* parks be public and how public should they be? By that I mean that this view fails to provide convincing reasons for subsidizing some goods and not others. What we need in a theory of public goods is some guidance about how to decide which goods should be provided by the state and how they should be distributed. My critique of the democratic approach rests on a distinction between legitimacy and justification. Legitimacy is a procedural notion. A policy that was adopted through democratic procedures is legitimate, as long as it does not violate basic rights. There are legitimate policies that are not justified, because the normative rationales are not persuasive. For example, I think that the decision to build a football stadium with public money would be legitimate but not justified. The descriptive approach does not provide reasons for preferring some public goods over others, nor does it provide tools to criticize or justify privatization.

There is both a descriptive and a normative version of the democratic theory. The normative version of the democratic approach holds that discretionary goods such as parks *should* be public if the majority wants them to be. According to Rutger Claassen, majority decision is a legitimate way to reconcile competing claims. His argument rests on the premise that liberal states must be neutral about different conceptions of the good. What does this neutrality require? John Rawls thought that coercion was legitimate only when employed to secure justice. The state should not force taxpayers to subsidize discretionary goods that they do not value. Rawls argued that unanimous consent would be required to authorize the state to provide discretionary public goods, which seems like an impossible standard. Claassen, however, disagrees with Rawls and argues that majority rule is a legitimate way to resolve disputes about public goods (Claassen 2013). The underlying rationale is the following: citizens disagree about whether the state or the market is the most appropriate institution to allocate discretionary goods. If the state must be neutral about different conceptions of the good—in this case, state and market—then it should allow voters to decide between private and public goods.

Claassen's democratic approach is an improvement over both the descriptive democratic theory and Rawls' unanimity requirement, but it does not ensure a fair compromise between different conceptions of the good. Claassen concedes as much, noting that the majority could consistently vote for complete marketization or complete state control. In the absence of an underlying norm of fairness and reciprocity, majoritarian decision-making does not ensure that minorities will be able to allocate a share of resources according to their preferences. The real problem with Claassen's analysis, however, is that it rests on the assumption that there is no principled reason for preferring public to private allocation of some non-essential goods. It is this assumption that I wish to challenge.

I argue that a novel approach that I call the solidarist account provides a principled reason for public parks, one that should convince fellow citizens, even if they have a preference for private or club goods. In making a principled argument in favor of public provision, my position seems to be a variant of the "merit goods" approach (Schwartz 1995). The term "merit good" was introduced in the late 1950s by the economist Richard Musgrave (Zuidervaart 2010; Musgrave 1957). In his work on public finance, Musgrave identified a category of goods that are socially recognized as things that should not be distributed on the basis of the ability to pay. Merit goods are subsidized by the government because they are intrinsically valuable but under-consumed when allocated through a free market. Examples of merit goods include university education, public broadcasting, arts subsidies, and humanities research.²

Musgrave introduced the concept of merit goods as a way to challenge the market fundamentalism of public choice economics. Trained in the continental, neo-Hegelian tradition of *Finanzwissenschaft*, he objected to an approach that left no room for the state as an agent of collective aspirations. According to Maurits de Jongh, Musgrave favored an extensive role for government in the provision of goods and rejected the view that the state should be “the defendant who must prove his innocence.” (de Jongh 2019, 84)

In liberal theory, however, the case for merit goods (e.g., discretionary, non-universal public goods) is controversial when it rests on a theory of perfectionism. By perfectionism, I mean the philosophical theory that rejects liberal neutrality in favor of the view that there is an objective account of the individual good that supersedes individual preferences (Carr and Hurka 1995; Sher 1997; Ferdman 2017). It is impossible to avoid a certain amount of perfectionism when thinking about “goods.” Even the argument for health care or education rests on the view that health and knowledge are better than sickness and ignorance. In this paper, I disaggregate the category of discretionary, non-universal goods into two subsets. The first subset includes things that do not have a political or justice-based rationale. These are particular interests, often the cultural tastes of elites such as opera and art galleries, and they are justified on strong perfectionist grounds.³ The second category includes goods that are still discretionary insofar as access should not be conceived as a justiciable basic right that could be enforced by a constitutional court; nevertheless, there are strong socio-political or justice based arguments for state provision.⁴ These public goods can be justified as a way of compensating for negative externalities of state actions or socially produced injustices (Kingwell and Turmel 2009; Kallhoff 2014). They may also be justified instrumentally as a way of securing the civic solidarity necessary to sustain the political will to redress social injustice.

The solidarist approach is a historical approach to public goods (Desai 2003). The premise is the claim that modernity gives rise to growing levels of interdependence that generate benefits that are not shared fairly. Public goods are a way of correcting or compensating for the negative externalities of urbanization and industrialization. The next section of the paper provides a brief introduction to solidarism. The final sections show how this approach provides a deeper understanding of conflicts over public space and how it illuminates broader debates about public goods.

Solidarism

The roots of the solidarist approach to public space date back at least as far as Aristotle, who thought that to be a political community you must have some shared things

and “a common place” (1941, 1146). Solidarism also builds on the strand of republicanism that aimed at limiting vast fortunes in order to secure civic equality and independence (Harrington 1992; Pettit 2013). In *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, Rousseau challenged the assumption that private property advanced the good of all and argued that the law often legitimized privatization and inequality (Rousseau 1984). In *On the Government of Poland*, Rousseau argued that in order to cultivate citizens willing to prioritize the common good, a polity had to provide shared public things. Rousseau suggested that the proper enjoyment of public space could form civic citizens (Rousseau 1972).

The solidarists built on Rousseau’s ideas. The solidarists were a group of radical republicans writing in late nineteenth-century France. Influenced by Rousseau and Durkheim, they tried to articulate an alternative to both classical liberalism and socialism (Kohn 2016). Solidarism has three related features: a descriptive social theory, a normative theory and a political theory (Bouglé 2010; Hayward 1961). The social theory is an account of interdependence that serves as the foundation for a normative argument in favor of fair allocation of the social product secured by democratic institutions in both state and civil society. The social theory builds on Durkheim’s notion of organic solidarity. Durkheim argued that modern societies differ from pre-modern societies in two ways. They have higher levels of interdependence due to the division of labor and lower levels of mutual identification and shared values, because of the differentiation of roles (Durkheim 1960). The solidarists aimed to foster shared values by increasing recognition of interdependence and its attendant obligations. They emphasized the empirical claim that the division of labor, urbanization, and industrial production generate a social product. The value of a piece of urban land is a particularly striking illustration of this claim because it is widely recognized that the value of land reflects a range of social factors: proximity to markets, infrastructure, transit, schools, and population growth. The land may be owned privately but the value is produced socially.

Solidarism was a critique of possessive individualism and the economic inequalities that classic liberalism had legitimized. The philosopher Alfred Fouillée developed his theory of social property through a critique of John Locke’s justification of private property. Fouillée argued that it is a fallacy to assume that mixing individual labor with commonly owned material generates a privately owned product (Fouillée, 1908). Logically, the product is a hybrid composed of social and individual value. Once the social or hybrid character of property is acknowledged, it becomes necessary to reconsider the unquestioned status of the right to private property in liberal thought. The solidarists argued that this logic applied well beyond the private appropriation of common land in the state of

nature. They insisted that the social, cultural, political, and technological infrastructure was also a kind of inherited common property, and therefore the products of modern society were also composed of both social and individual shares.

The goal of solidarism was to develop an approach that could help diagnose and cure social ills. The central idea was to demonstrate the connection between the benefits and harms of social cooperation. The modern metropolis provided a vivid illustration of this point. Urbanization and industrialization generate all sorts of benefits, which economists call positive externalities of agglomeration. These include economic growth and cultural vitality, but much of this benefit, especially the economic benefit, becomes concentrated in the hands of a small group of people. Urbanization and industrialization have literally changed the world in ways that are both good and bad, but some people get more of the benefit and others bear more of the burden.

The solidarists challenged the assumption that the market is the natural default method of allocating goods and the attendant view that any deviation from the market must meet an extremely high threshold of justification. Drawing on Ricardo's theory of rent, the solidarists emphasized the significance of the concept of unearned increment, a term that describes the difference between the value created by the individual's contribution and the benefit received. The most striking examples of rent occur in cities, places where the division of labor, infrastructure, and social networks inflate the value of land and labor. In urban property markets, unearned increment is created socially and does not naturally belong to the property owner (Kohn 2016). According to the solidarists, this should be reallocated to benefit society. Reallocation can take the form of universal insurance that secures the individual against misfortune or collective benefits such as hospitals and infrastructure.

While urbanization generates an enormous amount of common wealth, it also makes some things that were once free such as access to nature or relatively inexpensive like shelter—into commodities and commodification generates exclusion. To put it more forcefully, attached to the aggregate prosperity of modernity are public bads such as pollution, traffic, unsanitary housing, and alienation from nature. Solidarism is a theory of compensatory justice and, while it might at first seem like an odd way to think about it, public parks are a way of compensating for the loss of nature.

Why Are Parks a Good?

In order to answer the question “why should parks remain *public*” we must first consider why parks are seen as goods, as valuable things. I leave aside the contentious issue of the intrinsic value of protecting the natural environment (O'Neill 1992) and focus on the way that parks are

valuable because they fulfill human interests. While they are not basic needs in Henry Shue's sense, they are among the important things that promote human flourishing. I describe some typical uses of park space and then identify the broader underlying individual social interests that motivate such use. My own enjoyment of parks began when I learned how to ride my bike in a large urban park. The underlying interest is recreation and exercise under conditions of safety. In the United States, public parks were introduced in the period when the number of traffic fatalities was exploding. To take just one example, the number of “street and steam railway” casualties in Philadelphia increased from 19 in 1856 to 236 in 1894 (Lane 1979). Parks provided a space shielded from the dangers of vehicular traffic.

Another reason to walk in the park is to have access to nature. For people who live in the heart of densely populated and noisy neighborhoods, the park provides quiet, fresh air, sunlight, and greenery. This was an important theme in the writings of early park promoters such as Frederick Law Olmsted. He emphasized the need for healthy air, sunlight, and a break from the sensory overload of urban life. Like other Mugwumps, he was also worried about the disorder caused by rapid urbanization; reform projects like parks and public recreation were both a way to meet the needs of the urban poor and also a mechanism of social integration and control (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992; Rybczynski 2000; Wilson 1994). In the late nineteenth century, the discourse on parks still reflected the romantic ideal of the elevating effect produced by contemplating nature. Today there is a burgeoning empirical scholarly literature on the psychological and health benefits that come from access to nature (Sullivan, Kuo, and Depooter 2004; Hartig et al. 2014; Shanahan et al. 2015; Bratman et al. 2015; Berman, Jonides, and Kaplan 2008; Maller et al. 2006).

In addition to the health, safety, and recreational interests of users, parks also have an important social role to play. For parents of young children, the park is the site of informal and limited yet important social interactions, a relief from the monotony and isolation of staying home to care for pre-verbal children. For teens, the park is a different kind of social space: an accessible, decommodified place relatively free from the surveillance and authority of adults.

Solidarity and Parks

The value of parks, in my account, is quite expansive and a critic could respond that this is part of the problem. If parks are all things to all people, then how do we adjudicate between conflicting uses? How can we even criticize forms of partial privatization such as user-fees or commercial concessions when we employ such a broad definition of value? Olmsted, with his romantic understanding of parks as natural oases from urban life,

had a principled reason for excluding almost all commerce and even most recreational facilities from his parks. If parks are natural, civic, and social, then how do we resolve conflicts over their design and use?

The solidarist approach does not have a formula for resolving these disputes, but it does provide some principles that can inform contextual judgement in meaningful ways. The neo-solidarist normative theory is a theory of compensatory justice based on the solidarist concept of debt. According to the solidarist Leon Bourgeois, the distribution of the social product is unfair and largely reflects the power of capital and elites. He argued that the wealthy owed a “quasi-contractual” debt to the disinherited (Bourgeois 2013; Blais 2007). Like the obligation that binds heirs to repay debts of the deceased from the estate, so do the wealthy have an obligation to repay social debts to those who have not gained access to an adequate share of the social product.

This debt could be repaid in a variety of different ways, including means-tested welfare benefits or some type of universal basic income, but there are reasons why many solidarists included collective consumption among their proposals, rather than focusing exclusively on individual benefits. I will briefly explain three reasons in favor of providing spaces such as parks that are shared among people who live together in a physical space: solidarity, decommodification, and politics. These benefits can be enjoyed by all residents but an ethos of solidarity is particularly important for citizens because they are the ones who exercise power through democratic institutions.

The first argument is that the collective consumption of goods such as education and natural/recreational space enables the lived experience of solidarity. In a democratic state, as opposed to the world of ideal theory, citizens must be conscious of their interdependence (Kallhoff 2011, 2014). Empirical research confirms that support for redistribution correlates with a feeling of solidarity and interconnectedness (Baldwin 1990; Gelissen 2000; Hall 2017; Banting and Kymlicka 2017; Bauböck and Scholten 2016; Johnston et al. 2017). The solidarists emphasized the links between political and moral theory. Like Durkheim, Fouillée criticized Kant for his lack of attention to the problem of moral motivation (Durkheim 1960; Fouillée 1908). Durkheim emphasized that people must recognize and affirm their interdependence if it is to have political efficacy. Durkheim’s argument about civic solidarity is similar to Karl Marx’s better-known argument about class consciousness. For Marx, social class was an objective economic fact, but class consciousness, the recognition of social class and its significance, had to be produced politically and historically. This is the significance of the famous distinction between class in and for itself. Similarly, for the solidarists, the fact of interdependence created through the division of labor and urbanization had to be recognized and affirmed through social and

political practices that fostered affective identification with society.

In his path-breaking work *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis demonstrated that spaces that are welcoming to some users are unwelcoming to others (Davis 2006). Starting in the 1980s, the managers of public parks began to control unwanted users and activities through landscape design and architectural cues. Uneven surfaces made it difficult to sit or lie down on benches or ledges; shrubbery was removed to facilitate surveillance and small guardhouses were added to discourage less privileged users from entering public space. In fact, these disciplinary strategies have a long history, but they have taken different forms. Olmsted designed Central Park with the goal of educating—or disciplining—the immigrant urban masses by facilitating appropriate leisure activities. Many popular activities such as carnival games, sports, and the consumption of alcohol were prohibited and enthusiasts, usually the working class, were effectively excluded (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992).

The park can be a site of negotiation and even struggle between different activities that some users see as incompatible (Mitchell 2003). Parks are often lightning rods for conflict over issues like homelessness because they are sites where social problems are made visible to people who are otherwise sheltered from exposure to them. Iris Marion Young argued that this exposure is one of the democratic effects of public spaces. Even when the reaction to homelessness is aversion, there is an epistemic gain in recognizing that there are people without access to safe housing (Young 1999).

Sometimes the tensions around public space can be diffused through regulation or informal norms such as taking turns or allocating space for specific activities, but often the pluralism is constitutive. By this I mean that one characteristic of the public park is its openness to different meanings, uses, and experiences. One reason for going to the park may be that users do not have to relate to one another directly but yet can still experience an indirect connection through the conductivity of public space (Alexander 2006). Public space facilitates a lived experience of solidarity that does not require something as demanding as mutual respect for fellow citizens. It is a somatic version of what Benedict Anderson described as imagined community (Anderson 1991). The physical experience of co-presence in a particular space can be a way of imagining a connection with the broader public. This is an interpretive claim, but there is some empirical evidence that supports it. A number of studies have shown that participation in local park stewardship initiatives are linked to increased levels of civic participation (Yagatchi, Galli Robertson, and Fisher 2018), and a broader comparative study of urban regime types showed a correlation between trust and a built environment with a robust infrastructure of public spaces (Emerson and Smiley 2018).

Parks are sites of civic solidarity in the minimalist sense that they are accessible to all and not rationed on the basis of the ability to pay. This is the inverse of what Michael Sandel has called the “sky-boxification” of public life (Sandel 2013). Sandel laments the fact that we are losing the few places where rich and poor encounter each other in everyday life. According to Sandel, increasing segregation makes it more difficult for citizens to think of themselves as engaged in a common project. Some critics have rightly pointed out that the stronger arguments about the relationship between citizenship and public space are not persuasive; mere exposure to difference does not lead to mutual recognition or understanding (Putnam 2007). Even proponents of the “contact hypothesis” never suggested that sporadic and limited encounters with diverse others could dismantle prejudice, aversion, or indifference. Indeed, in the research project that generated the concept “contact hypothesis,” Allport showed that a number of demanding criteria have to be met in order for social interaction to decrease prejudice: interactions must be sustained, organized non-hierarchically, oriented toward shared goals, and supported by institutional culture (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 2005). Specific programming such as community gardens or sports leagues could meet these criteria but the more sporadic uses of parks do not. Yet these more minimal uses could still help secure attachment to a shared world. The very fact of living together requires a certain minimal collective responsibility for maintaining a shared world. Public space aggregates resources in order to create something beneficial that most individuals, in isolation, could not enjoy.

Any claim to create a shared world or to realize common values must also be cognizant of its own exclusions. Parks are no exception. In settler-colonial societies, parks are almost always constructed on land taken from Indigenous peoples. In the early twentieth century, the creation of national parks was a tool used to exclude native peoples from their traditional lands (Spence 1999). In Stanley Park in Vancouver, a métis community was dispossessed for the express purpose of creating an urban public park (Mawani 2005). This history reminds us that the concept of the public good can function to marginalize other claims and interests that become constructed as particular. The solidarist approach de-naturalizes private property but it doesn’t provide a framework for addressing the injustices of colonialism and should not be seen as a complete theory of justice.

Decommodification

The second reason for subsidizing public parks, rather than providing vouchers for the purchase of recreational services, is the value of the lived experience of decommodification. What is wrong with commodification? The expansion of market logic has been the focus of critique by political theorists (Brown 2015). In his influential

book *Spheres of Justice*, Michael Walzer argued that goods such as friendship or Nobel prizes cannot be bought and sold because such allocation would contradict the social meaning attached to the goods (Walzer 1984). Debra Satz points out that notwithstanding some easy cases, the social meaning of goods is usually contested and political philosophy should provide grounds for favoring one meaning over another. In *Why Some Things Should Not Be for Sale*, Satz introduces specific criteria to help decide whether desired things such as babies and healthy organs should be allocated on the market. She does not write about public space and much of her analysis focuses on extreme situations: “extreme vulnerability of contracting parties” and “extremely harmful outcomes.” Two of her arguments, however, are relevant for this discussion of the commodification of everyday life.

Satz argues that markets are problematic when they structure social relations in harmful ways and when they are characterized by “very weak or highly asymmetric knowledge and agency” on the part of participants (Satz 2010, 96). It is useful to think about land use decisions with these criteria in mind. Land use decisions dramatically affect future generations and yet future residents have no say over them (“weak agency”). While most decisions affect future people, the preservation or destruction of nature and open space is particularly hard to reverse.⁵ One characteristic of the built environment is its stability and fixity (Hayward and Swanstrom 2011). Constraints are literally set in stone. After land has been developed for high-density, high-value private uses such as commerce and housing, it is extremely difficult, both physically and economically, to make it available for other uses. This means that future generations do not have the choice about how to balance urbanity and nature, private and common uses. One meaning of public authority is fiduciary responsibility for the interests of future generations and this entails preservation. The social meaning of public ownership is different from corporate ownership. It is not collective ownership for individual benefit but rather a public trust for all citizens, including those of the future. Public parks and land trusts are a way to set some limits on the destruction of natural environments and ensuring common space for future generations.

The second concern raised by Satz is the way that markets structure social relations in harmful ways. For Olmsted, parks were intended not only as a place free from the noise and pollution of the city, but also as a respite from commodified and competitive social relations (Olmsted 1997; J. Cohen 2017; Zacka 2018). In industrial and post-industrial urban, capitalist societies, many valuable things are allocated through competitive processes. In his article “Why Should We Care about Competition?” Waheed Hussain explains why this is harmful. Competitive processes “pit people against each other”: they put people in circumstances where the only

way for one person to secure an important good is by preventing another from acquiring it (Hussain 2018). According to Hussein, social connectedness is valuable, both as an intrinsic dimension of a good human life and as an instrument that is necessary to achieve other goods such as political democracy and collective responses to injustice. If this is true, then competitive institutions are harmful and should be curtailed. Current practices, however, are moving in the opposite direction. As Jurgen Habermas pointed out already in the 1980s, we are witnessing the expansion of competitive market dynamics into areas of life that were previously coordinated by other mechanisms. He described this as the colonization of lifeworld by system (Habermas 1985). Solidarity provides arguments against the colonization of public space by market rationality.

The lifeworld approach to public space follows a distinctive logic. Truly public parks, places that do not charge admission, provide a brief reprieve from the world of calculation. A parent does not have to worry whether taking her daughter to play a game of catch means that she will not be able to pay for a new pair of shoes. Transforming public goods into club or toll goods (Kallhoff 2014) also changes the structure of social interactions. Consider the following hypothetical example that illustrates what happens when a park introduces a “pay-to-play” system to generate revenues for park maintenance. In “Gentrification City Park” three friends from the Mixed-Income High basketball team play pick-up basketball in the post-season. They want to improve their performance after a losing season, but “Gentrification City Park” implements a new reservation system with a user fee, and the two less affluent friends cannot afford the fee. The pick-up games stop. Two of the players lose the chance to take part in a favored past-time and the team performs poorly during their next season. This is unfortunate, but not an “extremely harmful outcome,” the kind of outcome that concerns Satz (2010, 9). So what is troubling about it?

The commodification of social space decreases opportunities for social connectedness and restructures social interaction along class-stratified lines. The team’s win-loss record may have no intrinsic value, but the quality of teamness is important. For whom is it important? When the pick-up players see each other every day, they develop the connections that enable them to collaborate on schoolwork, to notice and help one another during difficulties, and to aggregate their efforts in service of other objectives. Teachers want their students to get to know each other so that they can ask one another about missed work and get help. So social connectedness benefits the group members, but also the teacher, whose job of ensuring students do not fall behind becomes more manageable. Relationships are sources of information and know-how that teach people to access the broader resources of our common world.

In an influential essay, Charles Taylor introduced the concept of “irreducibly social goods.” (Taylor 2002) He had in mind things like culture and language: the background conditions that enable particular assessments of value. I want to suggest that public spaces like libraries, schools and parks fit into an expanded understanding of this category. They are sites of social connectedness and also little windows into the world of inherited knowledge, beauty, and diverse possibilities. When social connectedness is achieved through egalitarian rather than hierarchical ties, it becomes a public good. The decommodification of public space is a constitutive feature. If every experience comes with a price-tag attached, then we will carefully choose the experiences that are consistent with our tastes. By subsidizing certain collective practices, we are encouraging people to take part in them rather than others and this helps to facilitate social coordination. Parks are a paradigmatic public space, but this logic of the argument extends to other communal spaces such as plazas, squares, and community centers. Instead of the tragedy of the commons, this often creates positive externalities as intensive use creates more conviviality.

The third reason for collective consumption is a political one: the state disguises the compensatory logic by providing goods to everyone. Universal benefits tend to have higher levels of political support compared to means-tested programs. The high levels of electoral support for parks mentioned at the beginning of this article is one illustration of the fact that voters tend to fund things that they think they may use. Especially in the United States, many voters object to taxing some people’s incomes in order to provide benefits to others. This means that there is an instrumental reason for providing public goods as opposed to means-tested programs. Some universal programs end up having a regressive effect. For example, tax incentives for college savings accounts end up primarily benefitting wealthy households. Collective consumption provides a way around this dilemma. Investment in public infrastructure can be a form of de facto compensation that is universal yet not regressive. Less affluent residents have less access to private goods and therefore they have greater need for public goods. Public goods are accessible to everyone but, used more intensely by people with greater needs.

To summarize, solidarity provides two arguments that are relevant to our discussion of public parks and these apply to a wider range of public infrastructure such as schools and transit. It links a structural theory of compensatory justice to a politics of civic solidarity. This politics of civic solidarity emphasizes the importance of public things. Collective enjoyment of shared things is a way to redistribute social property that has been unjustly appropriated, but it does so while also building social ties among citizens and fostering identification with the idea of the common good, even if the common good

is subject to dispute. The social theory of solidarism highlights the fact of interdependence, emphasizing that it generates mutual benefit in the form of economic productivity, technological innovation and cultural vitality; the solidarists used this premise to criticize the way that the associated burdens are allocated unfairly and to justify the taxation necessary to provide public goods. Cities are increasingly using this logic of compensation to address the negative externalities of development. Zoning changes and public infrastructure increase the value of urban land, and “value capture” and “community benefits agreements” are ways of ensuring that the costs and the remedies (new public spaces) are targeted. The beneficiaries of what the solidarists called “rent or “unearned increment” fund the public goods that create a more just city (Kohn 2016).

Cities are increasingly using this logic of compensation to address the negative externalities of development. Value capture is a way of compelling the beneficiaries of urban development to pay for the attendant costs. For example, rezoning for high-rise development places strain on the surrounding neighborhood. If the public and private sectors share the value added, then the public portion can be used to provide compensatory natural and civic spaces. Tax policy can ensure that the beneficiaries of what the solidarists called “rent” or “unearned increment” fund the public goods that create a more just city

A critic might object that solidarism seems less distinctive when we consider the range of other theories that also recognize the importance of solidarity. For example, Cass Sunstein and Edna Ullmann-Margalit argue that the value of collective consumption goods is composed of the enjoyment of the good and the feeling of solidarity that comes from enjoying them together (Sunstein and Ullmann-Margalit 2001). While Sunstein and Ullmann-Margalit use the term solidarity good, I think that the term “connectivity goods” would be more accurate because it better captures the non-normative sense of the concept. For the solidarists, however, connectivity is only a part of solidarity and not the most important one. Indeed, the market can provide connectivity goods, but it does so in a way that reinforces class and identity-based divisions. Public goods, on the other hand, reinforce and enable a more inclusive mode of connectivity, one based on social membership. Public goods connect residents to one another (Kallhoff 2014, 2011). If society is composed of separate individuals who are free to pursue their own interests and tastes, it is unclear why citizens should support redistribution that undermines their own interests.

How then does solidarism differ from accounts such as David Miller’s, which also connect solidarity and citizenship (Miller 1979, 31)? The distinctiveness of the solidarist approach is the link between the normative theory of social property/debt and the political argument in favor of an

ethos of solidarity. Some scholars acknowledge the social character of property (Van Parijs) and others link national solidarity with redistribution (Miller) but only the solidarists weave these into a coherent framework. The solidarist approach is more than just recognition of the need to compensate for negative externalities. It also incorporates the more radical position that the positive achievements are produced collectively and a critique of modes of allocation that reflect power and luck rather than justice.

Implications

Solidarism can strengthen the case for public goods, but the provision of public goods alone cannot bring about a state of fairness. At most, it mitigates unfairness and create a political community in which unfairness can be addressed. Solidarism can also help resolve practical conflicts over the regulation of public space. To demonstrate this, I return to the hypothetical case introduced earlier and ask how we should view the user fee introduced by the Parks Department in Gentrification City? The user fee was introduced after a process of consultation and a major renovation, replacing the cracked concrete, improving drainage, and adding lighting to improve the playing field. The rationale was two-fold: it helped recover some of the cost of maintenance and it provided a way of allocating playing time. There were conflicting ideas about how to share public space. Permit holders wanted to play league games, but neighborhood residents, who had played for free in the past, objected. They insisted that their community norm, allocating access to the basketball courts through a rotation system, should be respected.

Can a theory of public goods help resolve this conflict? Claassen’s democratic approach would favor the permit holders. In this scenario, the Parks Department, a bureaucracy that is accountable to elected representatives, engaged in public consultation and adopted a reasonable policy that balanced the interests of different users. The economic rationale supports user fees and the basic needs approach would have to stretch the meaning of basic beyond recognition. The solidarist approach enables us to see this conflict in a different way and to ask different questions. If the purpose of public parks is to compensate for the way that the benefits and burdens of social cooperation are unfairly allocated by the market, then it is hard to see how commodifying park space will meet this objective. The open access system is more efficient; it allows for wide access without the costs of gatekeeping. Charging a fee for a publicly subsidized good is a regressive form of redistribution. All citizens pay through taxes yet only those who can afford the extra cost of the permit get a share. Solidarism places structural advantage or disadvantage at the core of the approach. A theory of compensatory justice forces us to ask who deserves compensation, which rests on an assessment of relative advantage.

The solidarist approach is not a comprehensive theory of public goods. It is a supplement to the normative (“basic needs”) and the market failures approaches, both of which provide compelling arguments to clarify why certain things should be provided for free by the state. The solidarist approach explains why some things that do not meet the normative or efficiency criteria should still be public. By this I mean that the solidarist approach provides reasons that should have significant weight in democratic deliberation. The democratic theory of public goods treats such goods as preferences or tastes. The solidarist approach advances principled arguments why citizens should support public goods even if they will not personally use them. It also has implications for how we allocate resources. Yet public deliberation and majoritarian decision-making must still play an important role in prioritizing different sites of solidarity and forms and levels of collective consumption. Compensating for the negative externalities of social cooperation is a potentially vast requirement. It could justify public parks but also public libraries, broadband and housing. There will be disagreements about the amount of social property that should be reallocated and the urgency of unmet needs and unrectified losses.

Conclusion

I have argued that public goods are a theoretical problem for liberal democratic theory. To have to justify public goods, however, seems to treat the private provision as natural or at least as preferable under most circumstances. The burden of proving superiority is placed on the public. This way of framing the issue is not only characteristic of liberalism; it was even incorporated into the slogan of the 1959 German Social-Democratic Party: “markets whenever possible, the state when necessary.” (cited in Heath 2011,13) We could start from a very different premise, such as that of Henri Lefebvre, whose “right to the city” rests on a more radical claim that social value is produced collectively and should be controlled by the people (Lefebvre et al. 2009). Solidarism was an alternative to late-nineteenth-century socialism, so it is not surprising that the solidarists had a response to these more radical arguments. In *Propriété Sociale et la Démocratie*, Alfred Fouillée argued that the natural world belonged to everyone in common but the value created by labor belonged to the individual. In contrast to Locke, Fouillée concluded that the world was composed of things that were composites of social and private value and were so intertwined that it was impossible to separate them. For the solidarists, neither private nor state control were natural and unproblematic, which meant that both needed justification. Writing in the context of a liberal society without a modern welfare state, their goal was to convince elites that addressing the new and urgent social problems created by industrialization was a collective responsibility.

A key feature of the solidarist approach was the claim that public goods could be seen as a way of correcting or compensating for the negative externalities of modern society while also fostering the sense of we-ness necessary for joint political action. Solidarism provides a rationale for state provision of goods that are not strictly necessary to fulfill basic rights. Yet solidarism was not simply a justification of state authority. The solidarists promoted mutual aid societies, cooperatives, and trade unions, and they shared the republican worry about excessive state power. From the solidarist perspective, the responsibility for promoting the common good does not rest solely on the state; it is the co-obligation of those involved in a shared practice. Instead of juxtaposing the commons and government-provided public goods, solidarism tries to find ways of promoting virtuous circles of interplay between the public (compulsory) and common (voluntary) provision of goods.

Notes

- 1 According to the Trust for Public Land, a conservation advocacy group, fourteen major cities were facing the loss of parkland and eighteen reported that they had lost a total of 688 acres over the past five years; Carlton 2016.
- 2 According to economists, there are two main reasons for the under-supply of merit goods; Ege and Igersheim 2010. The first concern is that consumers tend to maximize short-term utility and underinvest in long-term benefits. The second concern is that consumption of such goods generates positive externalities that are not taken into account by consumers, who only weigh individual rather than aggregate social benefit.
- 3 Joe Heath incorporates “minority public goods” in his public economics model. He argues that without state involvement these tastes would not be satisfied, “because of contracting problems among private parties”; 2011, 27. It is unclear why cultural events and art galleries could not be provided by private parties. The case for minority public goods seems to rest on what I call the democratic argument: minority groups want state provision and are willing to engage in a quid pro quo arrangement that yields state support for many but not all minority goods. While this seems like an accurate description, it begs the question of whether there are principled (as opposed to self-regarding and strategic) reasons to support public goods.
- 4 One implication of my argument, however, is that public goods that are both compensatory and solidaristic should have priority over merit goods such as elite culture that don’t have these features.
- 5 Nature reserves and urban parks have a different structure. Nature reserves maintain pre-existing natural environments. Urban parks are often artificially created and carefully manicured. Even in the later situation,

however, once land has been developed for high-value uses, it is very difficult to remove buildings and replace them with open space.

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