

ROUNDTABLE

The Production and Politics of Public Space

Radical Democratic Politics and Public Space

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doi:10.1017/S0020743813001335

These are critical times for democratic politics from Morocco to Iran, as heterogeneous popular movements for greater representation and social justice increasingly challenge established authorities. It is not surprising that these struggles have laid claim to symbolic urban places in the process of claiming their collective political demands. Politics is not purely discursive or institutional; it always has material and spatial dimensions, which for democratic politics is manifested through public space. For all the recent enthusiasm about the emancipating possibilities of the digital media, the fact remains that Tahrir Square (Cairo), Gezi Park (Istanbul), Revolution Street (Tehran), and Pearl Roundabout (Manama) are not virtual locations on the Internet.

Postcolonial nation-states are now predominantly urban. The residents of their cities—home to a bewildering array of socioeconomic and cultural differences—hypothetically belong to the same imagined community (the nation), but do not necessarily feel equally welcomed or accepted. The rapidly urbanizing societies of the Middle East are beset on the one hand by rising inequality and unaccountable elites, and on the other hand by ideological and undemocratic counter movements. Initiating collective challenges for meaningful political reforms requires participants to accept social differences that are often used to divide them. These differences are experienced corporeally in politicized public space, where they can be negotiated in the process of building coalitions of young and old, poor and middle class, women with hijab and without, migrants, refugees, adherents of different religions and sects, people from slums as well as posh areas: the heterogeneity that aims to become the “public” in the “republic.”

The potential of heterogeneous crowds becoming a coherent public is why the ruling political and economic establishments, as well as antidemocratic ideological currents, consider politicized public spaces an existential threat and work hard to subvert or even obliterate them through violence, curtailing open access, or commercialization: Gezi Park turned into a shopping mall, Pearl Roundabout bulldozed into a highway, protesting women violated in Tahrir in plain daylight, Basij militia shooting Neda Aghasoltan in the chest when she is peacefully walking in protest. These are disturbing examples of the contemporary enclosures of the political commons. They also point out why public space is at the heart of democratic struggles, and not a marginal afterthought.¹ Here I offer a couple of observations in the hope of raising further discussion.

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There is nothing inherently “public” about any of the places that have come to symbolize the rising aspirations for participatory politics in the region. Places *become* the public spaces of political aspirations not because urban planners or municipal bureaucrats designed them as such, but through the collective actions and practices of “the public.” Urban places in the region that have recently gained symbolic significance were not as politically meaningful before public action made them so. Some were thoroughfares choked with traffic and relentless commerce; others were vast and impersonal concrete surfaces hostile to social lingering. It was the collective and simultaneous actions of diverse crowds that made these places significant as geographic embodiments of the demand for participatory politics.

It is important not to reduce public space to an abstract ideal type. Social theories define public space as a democratic place where social differences are experienced, and ultimately accepted as integral to the collective polity.² In the classic case of the Greek Agora, the notion that (male) citizens could visibly observe the workings of the law and of government adjacent to routine daily activities such as commerce, and that their voiced opinions would help shape decisions, is supposed to have made public space integral to Athenian democracy.³ Critical social theorists and geographers have rightly objected to such idealized definitions.⁴ Ancient Greece was hierarchic and highly stratified, so the open performance of politics and justice in front of a public could not have made it truly participatory for women, slaves, or other noncitizens. In the modern era, the critique goes, public spaces have become sites of surveillance and consumerism. Behavior in, and access to, public spaces are now policed by states and enclosed by gentrification and privatization. Common urban spaces are increasingly regulated by imposed moral codes of behavior, and the tyranny of globalized consumption habits. Sometimes they are merely abandoned and become plagued by crime and petty violence, as the more affluent retreat into their gated communities.

This skepticism about the inherently emancipatory nature of public space is well founded, but only if we imagine public space as a given and not as a geography that is *produced* through collective political action. Take the 1979 Iranian Revolution as an example. It was a drawn-out movement that took place primarily in the streets, but also in universities, mosques, and workplaces, rather than in closed rooms among conspirators hidden from the public eye. In the process, all sorts of official, semiprivate, sacred, and even private places became public spaces of political debate, organization, resistance, and participation.⁵

In Iran, the civil wars of 1980–82 leading to the consolidation of a new regime that defined itself as an exclusively “Islamic” republic were in part fought over the ultimate control of public space, and in particular over the imposition of Khomeinist standards of adequate public behavior. What is it that makes Iran’s regime “Islamic”? Over the past three decades, economic, geostrategic, doctrinal, and redistributive policies have ebbed and flowed and become increasingly conventional. What has remained constant is the unrelenting struggle over policing the boundaries of appropriate and permissible behavior in public space. Dress codes regulated the physical appearance of individual bodies in public, streets were renamed after martyrs while any visible commemoration of rivals was prohibited, murals and slogans covered city walls, loudspeakers broadcast the call to prayer and sermons at all hours, only public ceremonies of a religious nature were allowed. Above all, any form of collective dissent was repressed immediately and

violently. But this colonization of public space has always remained contested, and much of the attritional struggles of the past three decades have been over exclusive claims to public space.⁶

These ongoing wars of position have given a surreal tint to political life in Iran, as public places are constantly subverted out of their anticipated and designated functions. Thus Tehran University, the loci of secular intellectual autonomy and political activism, is still used for public Friday prayers, while the enormous government-built Mosalla, or Friday prayer compound, is mostly dedicated to commercial fairs, including fashion shows. Local mosques, in an attempt to undermine black market video rentals, were being used until a couple of years ago as video and DVD clubs! During Ahmadinejad's presidency, to general public dismay, the Basij militia began to exhume the bodies of dead soldiers from the Iran–Iraq war and rebury them in city squares and on university campuses, in order to claim these public spaces of potential dissent, as shrines to the martyrs of the Islamic Republic.

Meanwhile, the young are constantly challenging the boundaries of their officially accepted physical appearance. But to what extent can sexually provocative fashions and visible plastic surgeries substitute for the courageous exercise of democratic citizenship?⁷ It was the mass public demonstrations preceding and following the 2009 elections that repoliticized yet again urban public spaces and in the process made clear to the huge and silently marching crowds that, despite their quite visible social and cultural differences, they shared a common political project.

A final point to consider is that the obsession about the control of public space is by no means exclusive to political regimes like Iran's. In fact, the control of public life, common social space, and the individual's body in public has been a centerpiece of modernist projects, in various political configurations, whether of liberal capitalism, state socialism, or nationalist state building. In the case of postrevolution Iran, the imposition of specific Islamic codes of public behavior on both men and women, as well as the obsession to police and control public space, was not an attempt to return to an imagined Islamic past. Rather, it has been an explicit project to create the modern Islamist individual and public as committed and self-confident alternatives to their secular and westernized other. That is why radical democratic projects that acknowledge the existing heterogeneity of contemporary societies, and seek to redress economic and social inequalities, can only do so by reclaiming the public spaces of collective life. Decolonizing public space is at the center of radical democratic projects in the Middle East.

NOTES

¹ See the special issue "Gender Frontlines," *Middle East Report*, no. 268 (Fall 2013).

² For a classic statement see Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1992).

³ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).

⁴ See, for example, Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park* (New York: Noonday Press, 1992); special issue "Espace Public et Complexité Sociale," *Espaces et Sociétés* nos. 62–63 (1990); Margaret Kohn, *Brave New Neighborhoods: The Privatization of Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Setha Low and Neil Smith, eds., *The Politics of Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Susan Ruddick, "Construction Difference in Public Spaces: Race, Class, and Gender as Interlocking Systems," *Urban Geography* 17 (1996): 132–51.

⁵Asef Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

⁶See Kaveh Ehsani, "Municipal Matters: The Urbanization of Consciousness and Political Change in Tehran," *Middle East Report* no. 212 (1999): 22–27.

⁷Azam Khatam, "Struggles over Defining the Moral City," in *Being Young and Muslim*, ed. Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 207–21.