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## Public action / political space: an appreciative response to John Parkinson

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John Parkinson lays down a direct challenge to what he calls ‘urban scholarship’, and to what I will refer to as spatial disciplines - that is, social science fields such as human geography, urban and regional planning, urban studies, architecture and design. The challenge is to think more carefully about the democratic values ascribed to various forms of public space. It is the question of the relationship between public space and democracy that Parkinson foregrounds, and he makes it clear that the relationship is not as obvious or as straightforward as is often supposed. He suggests that lots of social science literature, in analysing and assessing transformations of public space, tends to focus on one specific aspect of public value – the value of openness and accessibility. This rings true to me, although it is worth saying that it is not only social scientists that do this. There is also a strand of political philosophy that also tends to emphasise the idea of the public as a field of cosmopolitan encounter too, for example, in the work of Warren Magnusson or Iris Marion Young. At some level, the notion that democracy is best modelled on the conversational being-together of citizens in physical space resonates across strands of republican political theory and also in recently revived anarchist traditions too.

In the case of spatial disciplines, this emphasis arises, no doubt, from the fields of practice with which these disciplines are closely connected: planners, or architects, or design professionals might well emphasise issues of openness and accessibility because, well, that is what those professional fields have some degree of influence over. Likewise, critical spatial theorists, in geography and urban studies, overwhelmingly focus on issues of exclusion and enclosure when they talk about public space, not least because this work is often closely allied to activist imaginaries that put a premium on thinking about politics in terms of protest and dissent.

I take Parkinson’s point to be not that these values are necessarily the wrong ones to focus on, but rather that they are not the *only* ones at stake in the public space-democracy relationship. These disciplines tend to focus only on one aspect of public value at a time. I think, again, this is fair enough as a criticism, although it is one that can also be raised against other fields concerned with public value, not only those concerned with public space. For example, a great deal of work in social policy tends to think of the value of publicness primarily in terms of a particular organisational structure of collective provision (hence the deep suspicion of the market as automatically inimical to public values in these fields). In media and communication studies, to take another example, the strong emphasis is on publicness being all about the collective enjoyment of a shared set of cultural rituals and practices.

In different disciplines, then, one finds particular organisational or institutional forms being held up as paradigmatically ‘public’, but when you look more closely and take in the whole range, you notice that there is more than one value that can be celebrated as key to securing the relationship between public life and democracy. So for example, Parkinson, in his recent book *Democracy and Public Space* (Parkinson 2011) identifies four distinct values of publicness: accessibility, use of common

resources, common impact, and public role performance. Parkinson makes clear that the significance of making these distinctions within the concept of public, which is after all a deeply normative as well as descriptive concept, is to call in to question the routine deployment of the public/private distinction as the framework for evaluating public life. The combination of the focus on only one dimension of publicness at a time with this public/private frame tends to produce an oscillation in critical judgement: either public space, or the public sphere, or the public sector, is always in decline, being privatised, being enclosed; or, as Parkinson suggests, overly optimistic interpretations of the health of public life are made by ignoring how seemingly positive transformations in one aspect of public life might concatenate negatively with others. The analytical and normative challenge is to find ways of thinking about the reconfiguration of plural values of publicity and privacy (see Mahony et al 2009).

The key to understanding the more complex sense of the democratic uses to which public spaces can be put follows from what Parkinson calls a 'performative theory of democracy'. Thinking of democracy in terms of claim-making might at first sight seem to support an understanding of public space that privileges accessibility to classically defined public spaces, in so far as we think of claims as being expressed in standard ways, through protest or demonstrations or other forms of more or less spectacular presence in physical space. Parkinson gives plenty of attention to this sort of use of public space – it is a core theme of his comparative analysis of political uses of public space in *Democracy and Public Space*. However, what he makes clear in his contribution here is that, in fact, the focus on claim-making actually requires us to think about the ways in which the spatialities of democratic politics might extend beyond the preference for models of assembly, to include occasions of privacy, seclusion, concealment, or secrecy. This insight follows from thinking through the idea of claim-making beyond the mere expression of a demand, on to the processes by which claims are responded to, processed, adjusted, acted on, and above, made authoritative and find legitimacy. Now, I happen to think that this insight actually requires one to move on from a focus on thinking of space, public or private, in terms of 'physicality' per se, without falling into the trap of counter-posing physical to 'virtual' space. Rather, the sort of spatial imagination one needs to fully cash-out Parkinson's concern with the performative dimensions of democratic politics is one which focuses upon circulations and articulations (Rodgers et al 2009), not spaces of presence so much as spaces of on-going *re-presentations* (Barnett 2009).

The challenge that Parkinson lays down is to find ways of thinking about the relationship between public space and democracy that recognises that the first of these terms refers to multiple values, and that the second term refers to a complex assemblage of practices of mobilisation, demands, deliberations, compromises, deals, decisions, and revisions. Public space, classically conceived, is likely to play different roles in democratic politics as a result; different sorts of spaces, furthermore, might be able to serve certain public functions, depending on what part of the overall process one is looking at. There is more to public life, in short, than the public spaces we are most comfortable thinking and arguing about; and there is much more to democracy than practices of assembly, dissent, encounter and protest.

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