

Bodies in public space: security and politics

**Frédéric Dufaux | Philippe Gervais-Lambony | Claire Hancock | Sonia Lehman-Frisch |
Sophie Moreau**

Our previous editorial in issue 3 emphasized the strong link between public space and spatial justice. This link has been further confirmed and we hope to explore it in a different light with the present issue on "urban security", which raises the question: security for whom and for what?

What is going on when forms of control of public space become ever more sophisticated and claims are heard for the right to occupy it and protest against dominant ideologies? As CCTV cameras proliferate, both their meaning and their location, in cities, raise questions. They may prove efficient to detect the crimes of the poor, that necessarily take place in the open, in streets and public space; they allow for the identification of the young people who ransacked chain stores in the poorest neighbourhoods of London during the summer 2011. What they do not capture is organized theft carried out in stock markets, behind the walls of merchant banks and in the lavish palaces of our "irreproachable" governments. Middle- and upper-class crime seems immune to the current securitarian ideology, safely ensconced as it is in spaces that escape scrutiny. British PM David Cameron himself drew the parallel between the London riots and the guilty irresponsibility and culture of impunity from above, and acknowledged that greed and consumerism had become socially acceptable, if not valued. A study conducted jointly by the Guardian and the London School of Economics showed that the rioters' claims were rooted in a deep sense of injustice, both economic and social (The Guardian, 5 /12/2011).

Social or spatial injustice? There is undeniably an issue around space, as can be seen at this end of 2011, despite the cold, with movements of a rather different order, in many parts of the world, still thriving and claiming public space. From the Arab Spring to the Spanish Indignados and the US "Occupy" movements, these have been instrumental in toppling several dictatorships and challenging the mechanisms that brought about the current major economic crisis, as well as those responsible for it. Time magazine has just made "the Protester" the person of the year (Time, 14/12/2011). While these movements are diverse and make very different claims, they do seem to have at least two things in common. First, they all call for a serious engagement with what "democracy" means. As philosopher Jacques Rancière commented: "if the word democracy has meaning, it must designate the constitution of an autonomous space, of a force of the people distinct from its official representation and able to intervene on everything, with its own agenda that forbids it to dissolve into support to any of the existing political parties" (interview in Médiapart, 29/11/11). Second, from Tunisia to the US, in Egypt, Greece, Spain, Chile, Britain, South Korea, Malaysia... all these movements call attention to the significance and definition of our "public spaces" since they all "occupy" them. Here we can turn to David Harvey (whom we interviewed during his recent stay in Paris in November 2011, see in the Public Space section of this issue): "Spreading from city to city, the tactics of Occupy Wall Street are to take a central public space, a park or a square, close to where many of the levers of power are centered, and by putting human bodies in that place convert public space into a political commons, a place for open discussion and debate over what that power is doing and how best to oppose its reach. This tactic, most conspicuously re-animated in the noble and on-going struggles centered on Tahrir Square in Cairo, has spread across the world (Plaza del Sol

in Madrid, Syntagma Square in Athens, now the steps of Saint Paul in London as well as Wall Street itself). It shows us that the collective power of bodies in public space is still the most effective instrument of opposition when all other means of access are blocked. What Tahrir Square showed to the world was an obvious truth: that it is bodies on the street and in the squares not the babble of sentiments on twitter or facebook that really matter" (David Harvey, "Rebels on the Street: The Party of Wall Street Meets its Nemesis", Verso Books Blog, October 28, 2011).

In the US movements, in several hundreds of cities, the protesters refused spokespeople and leaders, arguing everyone should be able to speak up. They even refused to speak into microphones, to challenge established hierarchies and inequalities in discussion. Are the US movements just one particular style of a worldwide movement? Such massive and protracted occupations of public space had not taken place in the US since the late 1960s. The financial and economic crisis and the growing inequalities in the distribution of wealth may have triggered these movements, but they were not born out of nowhere: very diverse grassroots organizations (of the jobless, the homeless, students or ethnic minorities...) claiming more justice have been part of them from the start. The occupation of public space, the call for free speech and platforms of expression that accompanied it, has fostered novel collective alliances. The claim for justice is one thing they have in common, and one of their strengths is how they resonate with large sections of the public in each country (in that sense, attempts to occupy the Bastille in Paris, and then the business district of La Défense, did not elicit much response, maybe because of the strong police crackdown from their very beginning). Using the right to occupy public space and making it a free platform is quite clearly a claim for spatial justice.

To what extent are these rights connected with the fact that urban space is the focus of ever increasing securitarian concern? It may well be that the ruling elites fear social movements on this new scale and try to prevent them with "securitizing" tactics. This issue of JSSJ edited by Marie Morelle and Jérôme Tadié contributes to this debate. It addresses epistemological issues, and discusses concepts of public space and the public sphere, and the relations between the two that authors such as Isaac Joseph have problematized. There is no space per se, nor is any space "public" per se. Public space is something to fight for and conquer: making space public is a process, as Don Mitchell would put it. It is a political and conflict-ridden process, and raises crucial contemporary issues.

About the authors: Frédéric DUFAUX, Equipe Mosaïques, UMR 7218 LAVUE, Université Paris Ouest-Nanterre-La Défense,

Philippe GERVAIS-LAMBONY, Laboratoire Gecko, Université Paris Ouest-Nanterre-La Défense

Claire HANCOCK, Lab'Urba, Université Paris Est-Créteil

Sonia LEHMAN-FRISCH, MRTE, Université de Cergy-Pontoise

Sophie MOREAU, Gecko et Laboratoire Etude Comparée des Pouvoirs, Université Paris Est-Marne-la-Vallée

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