Political Activity in Public Spaces: Awakening, Stagnation, or Fall?

Sandra HUNING

Abstract. This paper draws on concepts of modernity and postmodernity, and related spatial orderings in order to understand recent transformations of the political use of public spaces. It argues that political activities are more and more organized as deliberative, open processes in which new media play a crucial role. Participants share situations rather than an identity, and creative interventions such as culture jamming question the legitimacy of power as manifested in urban space. The paper concludes that in spite of the translocal and ahistorical references which both new architecture and an increasing number of city users tend to be showing in urban space, political activities are adapted to local conditions, contradicting scholars who have declared the end of place.

During the 1990s, an intense debate went on among urban planners and sociologists in Germany about "public space" (*öffentlicher Raum*) in cities; Selle (2002) provides a summary. Many researchers claimed that urban public spaces had lost important functions which are essential for a well functioning and integrative society, for example Feldtkeller (1995). There were basically two arguments. On the one hand, it was stated that increases in graffiti, vandalism, petty crime, and nonconforming behaviour – such as groups of people drinking alcohol or begging – had led to insecurity among passers-by in urban spaces (Witte 2002). On the other hand, scholars argued that the privatization and regulation of urban spaces, such as through CCTV systems or private security in places such as shopping malls, would – in combination with the observable trend toward the commercialization of public spaces – necessarily be accompanied by the exclusion from certain places of certain social groups suspected of nonconforming behaviour, and/or a lack purchasing power, for example groups of young male adults, or homeless people. Underlying both arguments was the fear that public spaces were becoming more and more dysfunctional.

However, at the same time that these debates were taking place, the forms of appropriation and use of public spaces seemed to be constantly diversifying, and some German planners today even complain about the overuse of public space. This paper focuses on the political use of public space and how it has been transformed in recent years. Due to a lack of empirical data, it is difficult to quantify changes – but several trends can be observed which seem to make a closer look worthwhile, rather than focusing solely on the perspective of loss and decline. In the following, after narrowing the understanding of public space to the scope addressed by this paper, the way that the planning of public spaces has changed in an era of what has been labelled as "postmodernity" is sketched. Then the paper outlines new trends in the political use and appropriation of public space in cities. The conclusions will discuss the relationship between both. This paper is not intended to deliver any final results. Rather it aims to take some initial steps toward a framework for a more comprehensive discussion, and toward naming issues which need to be considered.

In German urban studies, there are several definitions of public spaces, none of them uncontested. Discourses in political and social

theory about the public, the public realm, or the public space have been inspired by political philosophers and sociologists such as Hannah Arendt (1967) and Jürgen Habermas (1969). Urban sociology has been enriched by the works of, for example, Hans Paul Bahrdt (1983), and more recently Christine Weiske (2003), and Walter Siebel (2000). Planners, architects, and urban designers – such as Andreas Feldtkeller (2002), Rob Krier (2003), and Klaus Selle (2004) – also deal with public space with regard to its material form. All of these authors have also been influenced by international scholars, taking into account definitions in other national or regional contexts beyond the German debate, especially the works of Jane Jacobs (1993) and Richard Sennett (2000).

For the purpose of this paper, the focus is on urban places which are – at least in general – accessible to anyone at any time of day: streets, public parks, and squares, as well as some public transportation hubs; but excluding shopping malls, parliaments, and sports stadiums. Of course, this claimed "accessibility" is debatable: roads are typically off-limits to pedestrians at all times of the day, and squares may be closed to car traffic. However, in principle, no one can be excluded from the use of these places; they are potentially available for unlimited private and public use and appropriation. For this reason, they have the potential to be "loose spaces" (Franck and Stevens 2007).

The Concept of Postmodernity in Urban Planning

The idea of postmodernity has been frequently subject to debate. Precisely speaking, already the concept of modernity is questionable. Its definitions are manifold. They agree, more or less, that an instrumental rationale is characteristic of modern society (even though they might be contradictory in their details, and fully acknowledge that functional differentiation already started in the medieval period). Spatial orderings, which are strongly linked to social formations and activity patterns, have been produced to create modernity – or the feeling of it – in the form of certain places and urban settings, as a common framework for individual and social experience. In this context, planning has tended to be functionalist and technical. Only slowly has the political dimension of urban planning become more fully understood, as it became a common sense

notion that designing space is not only, and not even foremost, a functional problem, but also one of social and economic relations in a city, of cultural and symbolic values, and of aesthetic sensation. Obviously, the process of "reflexive modernization" (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1996) has gone far beyond a transformation in the planning profession. The so-called condition of postmodernity – as far as this concept can be usefully employed as specific historical-geographical condition (Harvey 1990) – has captured all sectors of Western societies.

> "Among the shared key-themes of many accounts of the postmodern condition are included a new radical scepticism about the role of scientific knowledge; a new concern with aesthetics rather than morality; enhanced reflexivity on the part of individuals about their identity and the grounds for their conduct; a magnified importance for mass media in the framing of everyday life; an intensification of consumerism, the demise of socialist politics and its replacement by the local and personal politics of new social movements" (Savage and Warde 1993, 138).

Postmodernism in architecture has been discussed primarily as an aesthetic project (Hajer 1995). Architecture now claims "to celebrate multivalence (many meanings) over univalence (one meaning), and to promote a fresh aesthetic borrowing from different architectural styles from various historical periods" (Savage and Warde 1993, 139). The urban fabric is seen as "necessarily fragmented" (Harvey 1990, 66). Interchangeable new urban spaces, such as out-of-town hypermarkets and shopping malls, have emerged, and during the 1990s were discussed as "nonplaces" (Augé 1994). Such "nonplaces" – in contrast to places – are accused by their critics of an indifference toward local context, and characterized by the fact that they more or less playfully combine motives from different historical and cultural backgrounds. Planning nonplaces has been called "imagineering" (Hassenpflug 1998), to point out that this kind of planning does not overcome the (modern) instrumental rationale, but that it adds another facet to it: aesthetization is not an end in itself, but is seen as a means to symbolize a city's status, and to create a setting for social or individual experience which evokes feelings of comfort and emotionality; this is true for public as well as for private producers of space, who compete for innovative and ever-new kinds of temporary and extraordinary urban sceneries.

"Whereas the modernists see space as something to be shaped for social purposes and therefore always subservient to the construction of a social project, the postmodernists see space as something independent and autonomous, to be shaped according to aesthetic aims and principles which have nothing necessarily to do with any overarching social objective, save, perhaps, the achievement of timeless and 'disinterested' beauty as an objective in itself" (Harvey 1990, 66).

As a consequence, urban entertainment destinations have been very successful in the 1990s (Roost 2000, 2003; Tessin 2003) both as elements of urban development strategies in inner cities and as magnets for attracting visitors. Moreover, the inner city has been seen as a city's business card, symbolically displaying the economic power of the companies within the city (and thereby of the city as an economic headquarters), or showing off its built and cultural heritage (Kuklinski 2003). In a global perspective, a homogenization of planning and design strategies can be observed in the sense that similar ideas – such as the construction of spectacular architecture ("starchitecture"), or city marketing innovations such as city "branding" – are applied in many large cities, although they certainly lead to quite different outcomes at the local level. Critics argue that the addressees of these planning measures are not local residents as citizens, but rather large businesses and tourists, with the notion of international competition as ideological backbone to these approaches. The criticism is that these places invite citizens to act as tourists and to merely consume the city, but not to act as responsible individuals. Liveable places (it is claimed) need citizens, not spectators. However, recent changes in the appropriation of public spaces show that these have by no means been reduced to a consumerist function, but are increasingly also strategically used for certain kinds of political communication, information, and protest by new social movements, arts projects, and local initiatives.

Political Action in Public Spaces

Although there is hardly any comprehensive data available, there is no doubt that creative new forms of political mobilization can be observed. For a long time, the main political uses of public space were demonstrations and manifestations. During the French Revolution,

people reconquered urban public spaces for their own unplanned and independent political action, and a political "street public" (*Straßen-öffentlichkeit*; Kaschuba 1991) demonstrated against the representative public and festival culture of royal anniversaries. While earlier bourgeois emancipation figures had been strongly related to deliberative settings in certain places (the agora, or later, city squares and town halls) and to a specific kind of civic attitude, the politics of the streets became the tradition of non-bourgeois population groups as physical movements in space which were accompanied by new means of communication and representation. In response to the fact that the workers' protest move-ments had only very restricted formal political influence, communication was less logical-deliberative, than emotional-affective. Demonstrations were ritualized, and collective representations in language (slogans, speeches), appearance, and ritual symbols supported the activities as symbolic actions (Korff 1991). A political message would be transported through a number of participants, walking formations, clothing, posters, buttons, flags, acoustics, gestures, interaction with the audience and the police, as well as the treatment of spaces and objects. The German Third Reich made instrumental use of the labour movement tradition, and initiated pseudopolitical mass events in public space, aiming to unite the people with strict choreographies for the affirmation of Nazi politics (Ehls 1997). After the Second World War, the tradition of demon-strations and political protest in the street was continued in West Germany, for example by student protests in the late 1960s, and new social movements in the 1970s and 1980s; and in the GDR by govern-ment-led affirmative demonstrations in urban space, which was specifi-cally designed for this purpose – see, for example, the Leipzig demon-stration plan (Topfstedt 1994). Demonstrations here and there were in their different ways affirmative and oriented toward creating collective identities.

The global justice movement has extended this pattern by combining elements of both the democratic agora and the revolutionary "street public" in its strategy to protest against current globalization politics. In many countries the movement has contributed to the reappropriation of public spaces in cities for political purposes, not only as symbolic mass action toward one goal, clearly defined by a central agency such as a party or a trade union. Rather, political activities are more and more

organized as a deliberative, open process. This new type of social movement is characterized by the way that it "break[s] with "we-ness" and collective identity," and its members share a situation or an experience, rather than an identity (McDonald 2004, 583, 589). It is organized as a network, and cooperates on the basis of common goals which are agreed upon by its members, but it does not represent its members in the traditional sense.

Not only the self-perception of the global justice movement differs from that of its predecessors: its strategy in using public spaces also shows new concepts. The 2001 G8 countersummit in Genoa, for example, was organized by members of different initiatives and groups who were part of the international global justice movement and came together only for the purpose of preparing the countersummit (Huning 2006). Thousands of people travelled from all over the world to assemble in the spot where political leaders were meeting. The countersummit consisted of a three-day Public Forum for discussion and communication, two large demonstrations, and one day of "thematic squares" (*piazze tematiche*) including a symbolic attack on the red zone (*zona rossa* – the area surrounding the G8 venue, which was closed to the public). The organizers stressed the importance of the Public Forum because they considered a demonstration without constructive debate as inefficient. The demonstrations were accompanied by players, clowns, orchestras, and bands, but also by violent protests and destructive actions, from the so-called black bloc. The thematic squares spread around the red zone. Each square was occupied by associations who pursued similar goals and agreed on similar forms of protest. This spatial dispersal of the movement was supposed to symbolize and represent the different streams within the movement; plurality was not suppressed, but supported. Starting from the thematic squares, a "virtual and political" siege of the red zone was started in the afternoon by using balloons, paper aeroplanes, music, speeches, and other devices, with the intention of overcoming the barriers (Klein 2001). The countersummit involved both assemblies for deliberation, and protest movements in the streets, to aim at the recovery of civil rights and political influence.

Of great importance for this (international) cooperation – which has undergone a kind of homogenization since its beginning in the mid-to-late 1990s – are new media, such as the Internet and mobile telephones. These have also been a crucial factor in the emergence of

another phenomenon of political mobilization, the so-called smart mob. "A smart mob is a group that, contrary to the usual connotations of a mob, behaves intelligently or efficiently because of its exponentially increasing network links. This network enables people to connect to information and others, allowing a form of social coordination." (Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smart_mob, 5 November, 2007). One early example was the organization of spontaneous raves in illegal or secret places, but smart mobs can obviously be also key to political action. A specific type is called a "flash mob," in which people appear suddenly in a public space, undertake a common action for a short period of time, and then disperse again. They do not necessarily have to assemble: the important characteristic is that they show up in one defined space, at a certain time. For example, the NGO *attac* has called on its members to participate in flash mobs at the central station of Berlin and other cities: to show up at a certain hour – say, three minutes past twelve – hold up a sign with a random number (e.g. 147) for exactly three minutes, and then disappear again. This was meant to raise people's awareness of and draw their attention to the plans for the privatization of Deutsche Bahn.

Within the *reclaim the streets* movement, carnival elements are applied during "anti-capitalist action days" (Brünzels 2000), and these creative interventions intend to question the legitimacy of power as manifested in urban space. Parties, concerts and playful staging of criticism – sometimes even as a parody – confront the normality of a central business district or a pedestrian zone. Synchronic activities take place in several cities, which make single temporary events part of a global agenda. This concept is more frequently applied in combined political-cultural events, such as Earth Day and Live Aid, but is also found in Social Forums and other kinds of international and national protest activities. The Internet and other means of communication make this parallel action possible, and mass media enable others, who cannot participate in person, to share the experience in front of the TV or the radio.

Many characteristics of political activities in public space are shared by other new cultural forms of appropriation: carnival elements, the switch from spectator to activist, and the temporality of activities. One form has been called "culture jamming" (Carducci 2006). Here well

known symbols and brands are altered and used to send a critical message, generally contesting the idea of consumer society and advocating change. Facilitated by software and the Internet, commercial messages are imitated and satirized in order to raise consumers' awareness of illegal or ecologically alarming practices. For example, a logo of a company is slightly altered and printed on bags containing material about the social, ecological, or other failures of the company, which are then distributed in the street to passers-by, who – supposing that it contains promotion material – only realize upon taking a closer look that this bag is meant to challenge their attention. This approach is supposed to be part of a "postmodern consumer culture" which emerged in the 1960s when consumers started to realize that consumption could be a means of autonomous identity formation. Brands which claimed "authenticity" of their products were favoured. "Culture jamming" has been interpreted as a form of conflict between consumers and brands (Carducci 2006, 122), as brand veneers have started to crumble and the "backstage" of a brand has been questioned. Culture jamming takes place in public space, but also in the media and in commercial settings. One example is the case of an Austrian artists' project, which in 2003 published the news that the Karlsplatz in Vienna was to be renamed "Nike Square," and had been sold to Nike. They erected a Nike monument and an information centre called the "Nike Info Box." The media coverage of this activity induced strong opposition to the supposed acquisition. The fact that many people took this message seriously and reacted to it, highlights people's increased awareness of the commercialization of public space. Many citizens and initiatives were mobilized to protest against the apparent sell-out of the Karlsplatz (Löw, Steets, and Stoetzer 2007, 133f). Only days later, Nike disclaimed the news.

To sum up: Political demonstrations and manifestations today are not primarily built upon collective identities, but also focus on individual creativity and engagement. The results are open, and they aim at regaining democratic space for citizens, rather than strengthening one representative organization. Playful elements are integrated into the activities, and anyone can participate or make the change from spectator to actor; and anyone who passes by is addressed. Places in the city that can be appropriated to this purpose are the same places that were used

for more traditional demonstrations (which of course still take place also): central streets, squares, and pedestrian zones. Their accessibility is comparably high, which produces a high number of passers-by; it is easy to generate visibility. Membership is not a precondition for participation, nor is agreement on a certain political goal; rather, the willingness to reflect upon current political and economic issues is essential.

Discussion: A "Postmodern" Use of Public Space?

Ever since the 1990s, very big events and smaller temporary settings seem to have become more important in the use of public spaces. They transform spaces such as central squares and streets, parking lots, and train stations into extraordinary urban scenes, which are constituted by a specifically designed physical framework – whether meaningful in itself, or adapted to or rearranged for the situation – and the participants who, intentionally or involuntarily, become part of the setting. Some events take place on a regular basis, some only once; some activities would be considered as private, and some as public; some are local events, while others parallel worldwide happenings.

Something else that these events have in common is that they introduce new forms of participation. Quite frequently, people – be they group members or passers-by – are not only addressed as consumers, but are invited to take an active part in the event. They are free to exchange the role of the spectator for the role of an active player, or the other way around. The self-orientation of the kind which has been claimed to be a central characteristic of postmodern societies (Schulze 2003), has got rid of context – in the sense that it allows immediate points of contact without paying attention to conventions, knowledge, or tradition. The codes used are easily understood, and rapid decoding lowers barriers to access and participation. These rather "situationist" approaches reflect postmodernists' rejection of meta-narratives (Harvey 1990, 9), and do not attempt to transcend the "ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic" (Harvey 1990, 44). Just as "imagery is created and can be manipulated" and "local authorities try to present their own area as appealing," (Savage and Warde 1993, 146), so new social movements and cultural projects also employ public spaces as stage and scenery for their claims.

Although there are certainly no causal relations between the design of public spaces and the activities that take place here, correlations between the meanings attributed to public space by planners and city users can be observed. This paper described changes in the planning and appropriation of public space which tend to point toward more playful approaches, and to the emergence of translocal references on both sides. In a globalized era, local urban space tends to gain importance as a setting for political deliberation and cultural representation, which both challenge actual conditions, power relations, and national and international policies. In spite of the translocal and ahistorical references which both new architecture and an increasing number of city users tend to be showing, these are adapted to local conditions and contradict scholars who declare the end of place.

Conclusion

An evaluation of recent developments in public space depends very much on one's own normative contention, but also on the context in which the development takes place. The question whether the transformations described above can be seen as an "awakening," as a "stagnation," or as a "fall" of public space cannot be positively answered here. One reason for this is the lack of data. Another one is the complexity of the question. This paper provided a first explorative framework for analysis, suggesting that it would be better to speak of a transformation of the use and appropriation of public spaces – which implies both risks and chances for future developments – than of awakening, stagnation, or fall. The trends described above give only a general overview and do not take into account specific historical, economic, cultural, social, political, or even ecological circumstances that might relate to cities; The combination of these factor is likely to significantly influence the local outcome of recent trends. But only an empirical in-depth study will be able to generate a more nuanced understanding of the meaning of public spaces today for political action.

References

Arendt, H. 1967. *Vita activa oder Vom tätigen Leben*. Zürich: Piper.

Augé, M. 1994. *Orte und Nicht-Orte: Vorüberlegungen zu einer Ethnologie der Einsamkeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.

Bahrdt, H. P. 1983. *Die Moderne Großstadt*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich.

Beck, U., A. Giddens, and S. Lash. 1996. *Reflexive Modernisierung: Eine Kontroverse*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Brünzels, S. 2000. Reclaim the streets: Karneval und Konfrontation. *com.une.farce* 3. http://www.copyriot.com/unefarce/

Carducci, V. 2006. Culture jamming: A sociological perspective. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6.

Ehls, M.-L. 1997. *Protest und Propaganda: Demonstrationen in Berlin zur Zeit der Weimarer Republik*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Feldtkeller, A. 1995. *Die zweckentfremdete Stadt: Wider die Zerstörung des öffentlichen Raums*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus.

------. 2002. Konstruktionslehre für den öffentlichen Raum. In *Was ist los mit den öffentlichen Räumen? Analysen, Positionen, Konzepte*. Ed. K. Selle. Dortmund: Dortmunder Vertrieb für Bau- und Planungsliteratur.

Franck, K. A., and Q. Stevens. 2007. Tying down loose space. In *Loose space: Possibility and diversity in urban life*. Ed. K. A. Franck and Q. Stevens. London: Routledge.

Habermas, J. 1969. *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Hajer, M. 1995. People's Places. *Arch+* 127.

Harvey, D. 1990. *The Condition of postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell

Hassenpflug, D. 1998. Atopien: Die Herausforderung des ''Citytainment.'' *Wolkenkuckucksheim* 3, no. 1. Cottbus: BTU Cottbus.

Huning, S. 2006. *Politisches Handeln in öffentlichen Räumen*. Berlin: Leue Verlag

Jacobs, J. 1993. *The death and life of great American cities*. New York: Modern Library.

Kaschuba, W. 1991. Von der ''Rotte'' zum ''Block'': Zur kulturellen Ikonographie der Demonstration im 19. Jahrhundert. In *Massenmedium Straße. Zur Kulturgeschichte der Demonstration*. Ed. B. J. Warneken. Frankfurt am Main: Campus.

Klein, A. *Eine heiße Woche in Genua*. http://www.ila-bonn.de/genua/genuaheiss.htm.

Korff, G. 1991. Symbolgeschichte als Sozialgeschichte? Zehn vorläufige Notizen zu den Bild- und Zeichensystemen sozialer Bewegungen in Deutschland. In *Massenmedium Straße. Zur Kulturgeschichte der Demonstration*. Ed. B. J. Warneken. Frankfurt am Main: Campus.

Krier, R. 2003. Typological and morphological elements of the concept of urban space. In *Designing cities: critical readings in urban design*. Ed. A. R. Cuthbert. Malden: Blackwell.

Kuklinski, O. 2003. Öffentlicher Raum: Ausgangslagen und Tendenzen in der kommunalen Praxis. *Informationen zur Raumentwicklung* no. 1/2.

Löw, M., S. Steets, and S. Stoetzer. 2007. *Einführung in die Stadt- und Raumsoziologie*. Opladen: UTB.

McDonald, K. 2004. Oneself as another: From social movement to experience movement. *Current Sociology* 52, no. 4.

Roost, Frank. 2000. *Die Disneyfizierung der Städte: Großprojekte der Entertainmentindustrie am Beispiel des New Yorker Times Square und der Siedlung Celebration in Florida*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich.

------. 2003. Metropolen als Standorte imageorientierter Großprojekte: Das Beispiel Tokyo. *Planungsrundschau* 08.

Savage, M., and A. Warde. 1993. *Urban sociology, capitalism and modernity*. London: Macmillan.

Schulze, G. 1993. *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft. Kulturgesellschaft der Gegenwart*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus.

Selle, K., ed. 2002. *Was ist los mit den öffentlichen Räumen? Analysen, Positionen, Konzepte*. Dortmund: Dortmunder Vertrieb für Bau- und Planungsliteratur.

------. 2004. Öffentliche Räume in der europäischen Stadt: Verfall und Ende oder Wandel und Belebung? Reden und Gegenreden. In *Die europäische Stadt*. Ed. W. Siebe. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Sennett, R. 2000. *Verfall und Ende des öffentlichen Lebens. Die Tyrannei der Intimität*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.

Siebel, W. 2000. Wesen und Zukunft der europäischen Stadt. *DISP* 141.

Tessin, W. 2003. Kraft durch Freude? Wolfburgs Weg aus der Arbeits- in die Erlebnisgesellschaft. *Planungsrundschau* 08.

Topfstedt, T. 1994. Aufbauplan und Demonstrationsplan: Das Leipziger Stadtzentrum in den fünfziger Jahren. In *Zum Wandel städtischer Festkultur in Leipzig*. Ed. K. Keller. Leipzig: Edition Leipzig.

Weiske, C. 2003. Städtische Öffentlichkeiten: Ihre Akteure und ihre Räume. *Informationen zur Raumentwicklung* 1/2.

Witte, G. 2002. Lebensqualität durch Sicherheit und Sauberkeit in der Stadt. *Der Städtetag*, 11/2002.