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# Contesting the Public Realm: Struggles over Public Space in Los Angeles

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**This article, in response to architectural “narratives of loss” lamenting the disappearance of public space, argues that urban residents are constantly remaking public space and redefining the public sphere through their lived experience. Following Nancy Fraser, this article questions the insistence on a unified public, the desire for fixed categories, and the rigid concepts of public and private space that characterize the bourgeois public sphere and proposes contestation, competing “counter-publics,” and the blurring of private and public as equally significant aspects of the public sphere. In Los Angeles, the struggles of two “counter-publics,” street vendors and the homeless, over use of the streets and public places reveal the emergence of another discourse of public space, suggesting new forms of “insurgent citizenship” and offering new political arenas.**

TODAY, MANY DISCUSSIONS OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND PUBLIC SPACE are dominated by a narrative of loss. From the political philosopher Jürgen Habermas’s description of a public sphere overwhelmed by consumerism, the media, and the intrusion of the state into private life, to Richard Sennett’s lament for “the fall of public man,” to urban critics Michael Sorkin’s and Mike Davis’s announcements of “the end of public space” and the “destruction of any truly democratic urban spaces,” claims that once vital sites of democracy have all but disappeared are widespread.<sup>1</sup> These narratives of loss contrast the current debasement of the public sphere with golden ages and golden sites: the Greek agora, the coffeehouses of early modern Paris and London, the New England town square, where, allegedly, cohesive public discourse once thrived. This narrative inevitably climaxes in what these critics see as our current crisis of collective life, which places the very identities and institutions of citizenship and democracy in peril.

I argue that this perceived loss is primarily perceptual, derived from extremely narrow and normative definitions of both public and space. In fact, the meaning of concepts such as public, space, democracy, and citizenship are continually being redefined in practice through lived experience. By eliminating the insistence on unity, the desire for fixed categories of time and space, and the rigid concepts of public and private that underlie these narratives of loss, we can begin to recognize a multiplicity of simultaneous public interactions that are restructuring urban space, producing new forms of insurgent citizenship, and revealing new political arenas for democratic action.

In her important article, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” Nancy Fraser identifies some significant theoretical and political limitations contained in the arguments about these disappearances

of the public sphere.<sup>2</sup> While acknowledging the importance of Habermas’s influential concept of the public sphere as an arena of discursive relations conceptually independent of both the state and the economy, she questions many of its underlying assumptions. Habermas’s account of “the liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere” links its emergence in early modern Europe with the development of nation-states in which democracy was realized through universal rights and electoral politics.

This version of the history of the public sphere emphasizes unity and equality as ideal conditions. The public sphere is depicted as a “space of democracy” that all citizens have the right to inhabit and where all public discourse takes place. Here, social and economic inequalities are temporarily put aside in the interest of determining a “common good.” Discussion about matters of common interests is achieved through rational, disinterested, and virtuous public debate. However, like the often-cited ideal of Athenian democracy and the agora, this model is structured around significant exclusions. In Athens, access was theoretically open to all citizens, but in practice this excluded the majority of the population—women and slaves—who were not “citizens.” Similarly, the modern bourgeois public sphere began by excluding women and workers. Women’s interests were presumed to be private and therefore part of the domestic sphere, and workers’ concerns were presumed to be economic and thus excluded as self-interested. Moreover, the requirements for rational deliberation and a rhetoric of disinterest privileged middle-class and masculine modes of public speech and behavior by defining them as universal norms.<sup>3</sup>

Recent revisionist history has contradicted this account, demonstrating that nonliberal, nonbourgeois publics also emerged, producing competing definitions and spheres of public activity in a multiplicity of public arenas. In nineteenth- and twentieth-century America, for example, middle-class women organized themselves into a variety of exclusively female voluntary organizations that undertook philanthropic and reform activities based on private ideals of domesticity and motherhood. Less privileged women found access to public life through work and public roles that addressed both domestic and economic issues. Working-class men also founded their own public organizations, often structured around workplace or ethnic identities, such as unions, lodges, and political organizations. If we broaden the definition of public from a singular entity to include these “counterpublics,” a very different picture of the public sphere is revealed, one based on contestation, rather than unity, and created through competing interests and violent demands as much as by reasoned debate. Demonstrations, strikes, and riots, as well as struggles over issues such as temperance or suf-

frage, propose alternative public spheres, arenas where multiple publics with inevitably competing concerns struggle and where conflict takes many forms.

In the bourgeois public sphere, public citizenship is primarily defined in relation to the state, addressing issues and concerns dealt with through political debate and electoral politics framed within clear categories of discourse. This assumes a liberal notion of citizenship based on abstract universal liberties, with democracy guaranteed by the electoral and juridical institutions of the state. Fraser instead argues that democracy itself is a complex and contested idea that can assume a multiplicity of meanings and forms. These often violate the strict lines between public and private on which the liberal bourgeois concept of the public sphere insists. In contrast, counterpublics of women, immigrants, and workers have historically not only defended established civil rights, but also demanded new rights based on differentiated roles originating in the domestic or economic spheres.

These constantly changing demands continually redraw the boundaries between public and private. Two current efforts to redefine public and private behavior demonstrate both the intensity and the complexity of these struggles. On one side, feminists are attempting to transform domestic violence from a matter of strictly private or domestic concern, dealt with within the family or through specialized institutions of family law or social work, into a matter of public concern and legal control. On the other side, the religious right is attempting to transform abortion from a private decision about one's own body into a public act regulated by civil law. While pursuing conventional remediation through legal or legislative means and attempting, through public debate, to mobilize public opinion, both groups also adopt less conventional methods that further blur the line between public and private. Feminist activists have attempted to create an alternative domestic sphere to the family by creating shelters and other communal living arrangements for battered women. Antiabortion demonstrators have abandoned rational discourse in favor of direct action and civil disobedience.

### **Rethinking Public Space**

How can Fraser's ideas of multiple publics, contestation, and the redefinition of public and private be extended and applied to the physical realm of public space without losing their connection with larger issues of democracy and citizenship? First of all, they suggest that no single physical space can represent a completely inclusive "space of democracy." Like Habermas's idealized bourgeois public sphere, the physical spaces often idealized by architects—the agora,

the forum, the piazza, or the town square—were similarly constituted by exclusion. Thus, instead of a single "public" occupying an exemplary public space, the multiple and counterpublics that Fraser identifies necessarily produce multiple sites of public expression, creating and using spaces that are partial and selective, responsive to limited segments of the population and to a limited number of the multiple public roles individuals play in urban society. Rather than being fixed in time and space, these public spaces are constantly changing, as users reorganize and reinterpret physical space. Unlike normative public spaces, which simply reproduce the existing ideology, these spaces, often sites of struggle and contestation, help to overturn it. The public activities that occur here suggest that urban politics and urban space can be restructured from the bottom up as well as from the top down.

The narrative of lost public space presents Los Angeles as particularly compelling evidence for the disappearance of public life. Most critics agree that the city's low-density development and widespread dependence on the automobile have eliminated street life and public interaction. The city's traditional public spaces support the argument that public space and public life in the city are either commodified, bankrupt, or nonexistent. For example, over the last thirty years, Pershing Square, historically the central focus of the downtown business district, has lost any public meaning. Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta's recent redesign, featuring brightly colored walkways, plazas, and seating areas above underground parking and a subway station, has failed to reinstate its public function. Although still physically recognizable as a traditional public square, it is usually unoccupied, except for a few hours at lunch time, and its emptiness visibly demonstrates the city's impoverished public life.

In contrast, the sidewalks of Citywalk are always jammed with people. Operated by MCA and Universal studios, this complex of movie theaters, shops, and restaurants was designed as a simulation of a public street, a collage of Los Angeles's most attractive urban elements supervised by mall designer Jon Jerde. Citywalk's popular appeal, however, owes as much to its crime-free image as to its architectural spectacle. The management of this privately owned space has the right to exclude anyone they deem undesirable, in addition to those groups of the public already discouraged by its suburban location, six dollar parking fee, and heavily policed spaces. To many architectural and urban critics, Citywalk's success demonstrates the total absorption of public life by private enterprise.<sup>4</sup>

However, Fraser's redefined public sphere allows us to identify other sites of public expression that propose an alternative conception of public space. The civil unrest of April 1992, for example, can

be interpreted as a spontaneous and undefined moment of public expression, an explosion of multiple and competing demands (some highly specific, others barely articulated) on the streets and sidewalks of Los Angeles. These events unleashed a complex outpouring of public concerns, involving a number of different ethnic and social groups. African-Americans, many of whom called the uprising the “justice riots,” attacked the inadequacy of urban politics to redress the juridical inequality demonstrated by the Rodney King and Latasha Harlins verdicts. To many, this constituted a denial of fundamental rights of citizenship. Liberal concepts of universally defined civil rights failed to address the visible racism of the police department and the court system, allowing them to avoid public responsibility to more specifically defined ethnic and social groups.

The riots also dramatized economic issues: poverty and the lack of jobs, exacerbated by the recession and the long-term effects of deindustrialization. This was expressed through highly selective patterns of looting and burning that largely spared residences while attacking commercial property; 74 percent of damaged buildings were retail stores and restaurants.<sup>5</sup> Despite public perception, the riots were multicultural. Thirty-four percent of those arrested were black, 51 percent were Hispanic, mostly recent immigrants. Also economically marginalized and exploited, they protested their economic exclusion and political and social disenfranchisement. The riot also pitted immigrants against one another. Korean-owned stores were the focus of much of the burning and looting, serving as targets for pent-up frustration about the lack of economic self-determination in low-income neighborhoods. Briefly, streets, sidewalks, parking lots, swap meets, and mini-malls became sites of protest and rage: new zones of public expression.

The violent dissatisfaction revealed by the unrest makes it imperative to look more closely at the lived experience of different groups in the riot areas and to acknowledge their use of everyday space as a site of public discourse. Looking around the city, we can discover innumerable places where new social and economic practices reappropriate and restructure urban space. Arenas for struggle over the meaning of social participation, these new public spaces are continually in flux, producing constantly changing meanings. Streets, sidewalks, vacant lots, parks, and other places of the city, reclaimed by immigrant groups, the poor, and the homeless, have become sites where public debates about the meaning of democracy, the nature of economic participation, and the public assertion of identity are acted out on a daily basis. Without claiming that they represent a totality of public space, in their manifold forms these public activities collectively construct and reveal an alternative logic of public life.



1. Pershing Square in downtown Los Angeles, redesigned by Ricardo Legorreta.

### Street Vendors

No longer deserted, Los Angeles’s streets, sidewalks, and vacant lots are increasingly populated by street vendors. Existing on the margins of the formal economy, their informal commerce supplements income, rather than constituting an occupation, or else supports only the most marginal of existences. Although all types of street vendors openly occupy space all over the city, street vending remains illegal. Current discussions about centralizing vendors in designated locations acknowledge the existing reality of widespread vending but attempt to restrict one of the main advantages of vending: its flexibility to respond to changes in activity and demand. Street vending constitutes a complex and diverse economy of microcommerce, recycling, and household production. The innumerable variety of vendors publicly articulates the multiple social and economic narratives of urban life in Los Angeles. In the process of pursuing their trade, vendors blur established understandings of public and private in complex and paradoxical ways.

Dramas of immigration are played out daily on the streets of Los Angeles, increasingly exposing to the consciousness of the city stories both heroic and horrifying. For example, the ubiquitous orange vendors, working on street dividers all over the city, are almost always undocumented immigrants. Working for the “coyotes” who brought them across the border, they sell the fruit the coyotes sup-

ply to pay off the cost of their illegal crossing. Along streets in the Zona Centroamericana, other immigrants use vending as a means of economic mobility. For many self-employed vendors, their vending carts provide an alternative to sweatshop labor and may eventually lead to a stall at a swap meet or even a small store. Lined up along sidewalks, wearing aprons, female vendors extend the domestic economy into urban space, selling tropical fruits, tamales, or nuts that they have prepared or packaged in their own kitchens. Defending the right to sell on the street has become a political issue to many immigrant vendors, many of whom are undocumented, therefore doubly illegal. The organization of *Vendadores Ambulantes* represents the interests of more than eight hundred vendors to the city government. Other vendors recently demonstrated against police harassment, chanting, “Somos vendedores, no criminales” (We are vendors, not criminals).<sup>6</sup> Defending their livelihood, vendors are becoming a political as well as an economic presence in the city.

In other parts of the city, vending takes different forms. In Baldwin Hills, a middle-class African-American neighborhood, a parking lot between a gas station and a supermarket has become a scene of intense, if fluctuating, social and commercial activity. On most days, a van parks in the lot, offering car detailing services. The operators, two local men who are now retired, set out chairs, providing a social magnet for neighborhood men who pass by. On weekends, a portable barbecue is set up nearby, selling “home-cooked” ribs and links. On holidays and weekends, a group of middle-aged women joins them, setting up tables to sell homemade crafts and gifts. Mostly grandmothers who work at home, their products represent both hobbies and an income supplement. Replicating the domestic order of the surrounding neighborhoods and expanding the private roles of grandparents into the public realm, their local activities provide a focus for the community that is also accessible to anyone driving by. Simultaneously local and public, the activities in this parking lot strengthen the neighborhood while they visibly represent its culture to outsiders.

### The Homeless

No group challenges the limits of the concept of public more than the homeless. Even the designated social category of homelessness can be seen as a method of removing a group of people from the larger collectivity of the public by collapsing various life situations, such as joblessness, disability, or extreme poverty, into a generic category. For many homeless people, minimal boundaries exist between public space and the spheres of domestic and economic life.



2. The *Los Angeles Times*'s coverage of struggles over public parks in Santa Monica.



3. Street vendor selling papaya on Sixth Street in Los Angeles.



4. Vendors along La Brea Avenue in Baldwin Hills.

Occupying parks, streets, sidewalks, and the lawns of public buildings, they claim the space necessary for their own personal and economic survival. This forces them to live at least part of their private lives on the street and in other public places. It is often impossible for them to secure domestic privileges that are taken for granted, such as bedrooms, closets, and private bathrooms. Their private use of public space tests democracy's promise of universal access in a very literal fashion.

For the homeless, streets and sidewalks also function as important economic spaces. Although most homeless people work, they do not earn enough money to afford shelter. Instead, public spaces become their primary venue for seeking work and acquiring money. Waiting for day-labor jobs, posting bills, recycling cans and bottles, or collecting and reselling refuse or castoffs, homeless men and women claim their rights to be economic actors.<sup>7</sup> Using cardboard signs to explain their circumstances, they assert their identities as unique individuals in need of a job or money. Even panhandling can be understood as an economic transaction, encouraging individuals to evaluate requests for a certain amount of money or a specific need on the basis of their own judgment or financial situation.

Yet even these minimal social and economic rights are under attack. If Pershing Square, with its hard surfaces and intense security, was explicitly designed to repel the homeless, far more intense struggles over public space are taking place in Santa Monica. Intent on criminalizing the daily activities of the homeless, the city coun-

cil is incrementally redefining the nature of public space while gradually expelling the homeless from the city. After a ban on sleeping in public parks proved unenforceable, the city closed all parks from midnight to 6 A.M. Even in daytime, the presence of homeless people in city parks has become a point of tension, with some parents demanding that homeless people be evicted from parks with playgrounds and sports facilities. Other antihomeless measures include eliminating food programs in city parks and preventing the expansion of social service agencies. Local merchants are also attempting to eradicate panhandling; they have initiated a campaign to urge pedestrians not to give money directly to panhandlers but instead to put donations into a bronze dolphin, to be distributed to approved social service agencies.<sup>8</sup> For these people, the definition of a "public" place has become a space without homeless people. Homelessness is perhaps the ultimate determination of citizenship. Defined as undesirables, the homeless are not just evicted from public parks, they are stripped of "the right to have rights."<sup>9</sup> In Santa Monica, the right to public space has become conditional, based on official residence, appearance, or adherence to a set of values that defines "proper" use.

### New Forms of Insurgent Citizenship

These struggles define what anthropologist James Holston has called "spaces of insurgent citizenship."<sup>10</sup> These emergent sites of citizenship accompany the processes of change that are transforming societies locally and worldwide. In cities such as Los Angeles, migration, industrial restructuring, and other economic changes increase social reterritorialization. When they appear in the city, residents with new histories, cultures, and demands inevitably disrupt the normative categories of social life and urban space. In the course of expressing the specific needs of everyday life, they dramatize the large-scale public issues of economic change and migration. Their urban experiences, the focus of their struggle to redefine the conditions of belonging to society, reshape cities like Los Angeles. As new and more complex kinds of ethnic diversity come to dominate the city, these multiple experiences increasingly define a new basis for understanding citizenship.

The homeless and the street vendors, demanding access to public space, are just two of many social groups articulating new demands. The demands of the urban poor for "rights to the city" and of women and ethnic and racial minorities to "rights to difference" constitute new kinds of rights, based on the needs of lived experience outside of the normative and institutional definitions of

the state and its legal codes. These rights emerge from the social dramas acted out in the new collective and personal spaces of the city; they concern people largely excluded from the resources of the state; and they are based on social demands that are not constitutionally defined but that people increasingly perceive as entitlements of citizenship. Expanding the definition of urban political activity to include these new social bases can produce new forms of self-rule, which in turn can lead to new social movements that challenge existing formulations of democracy.

Holston warns that, while the city is an arena for the self-creation of these new citizens, it is also a war zone. The dominant classes have met the advances of these new citizens with new strategies of segregation, privatization, and fortification. The war zone includes gang-devastated neighborhoods, corporate fortresses, and suburban enclaves. Just as the local and the urban appear as crucial sites for articulating new social identities, they also engender exclusion and violent reaction. The public sites where such struggles occur serve as evidence of an emerging order, not yet fully comprehensible. Here differences between the domestic and the economic, the private and the public are blurring. Change, multiplicity, and contestation—rather than constituting the failure of public space—may in fact define its very nature. The emergence of these new public spaces and activities in Los Angeles, shaped by lived experience more than built space, raises complex political questions about the meaning of economic participation and citizenship in our cities. By recognizing these struggles as the germ of an alternative development of democracy, we can begin to frame a new discourse of public space—one no longer preoccupied with loss, but filled with possibilities.

## Notes

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2. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in Bruce Robbins, ed., *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 4–6.
4. David Wharton, "A Walk on the Mild Side," *Los Angeles Times*, Valley Edition, May 27, 1994: 10; Norman Klein, "A Glittery Bit of Urban Make-believe," *Los Angeles Times* July 18, 1993: B17; Leon Whiteson, "Dream Street," *Los Angeles Times* Oct. 31, 1993: K1; and Charles Jencks, *Heteropolis* (London: Academy Editions, 1993) pp. 46–51.
5. Frank Clifford, "Rich-Poor Gulf Widens in State," *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1992: A1; "The Path to Fury," *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1992: T1–10; and Mike Davis, "In L.A., Burning All Illusions," *The Nation*, June 1, 1992: 743.
6. Robert Lopez, "Vendors Protest against LAPD," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 2, 1994: B3.
7. For an excellent overview of homelessness in Los Angeles, see Jennifer Wolch and Michael Dear, *Malign Neglect: Homelessness in an American City* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).
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9. Rosalyn Deutsche, "Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy," *Social Text* 33 (Fall 1992): 37–39.
10. James Holston, "Spaces of Insurgent Citizenship," *Planning Theory* 13 (Summer 1995): 30–50.