Contested Spaces

Carl Fraser, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom

The European Conference on the Social Sciences 2017
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
One of the key roles of civil society is to provide a platform for like-minded individuals and groups to come together to put pressure on powerful decision makers in society; from site stake holders, decision makers to elected representatives. However, strategies to undermine the active civil sector (facilitated through the systematic implementation of a series of legislative acts which permeate social division); creates the current situation; where the responsive body of citizens is less active and effective than they have been in previous decades. The lack of political desire to challenge the cyclic fall-out imbedded within our current mode capitalism; means that citizens cannot rely on traditional political ideologies or parties to overt this modern phenomena and problematic global outcomes. Thus, the role of alternative practices, particularly that of protest actions which take place in the public realm; are a key arena in challenging the problems created by global capitalism.This paper aims to build on protest actions which took place in London between 2010 and 2012 in the aftermath of the Global Economic Crash of 2007/8. These actions often crystallise the imbedded social and political problems - and if allowed to gather momentum can become a forum that catalyse change. This paper will explore the way in which protest and other oppositional action can become a route to more sustained oppositional practices which can become institutionalised and inform the direction or the way in which we approach contemporary global challenges.

Keywords: Public space, protest, democracy, representation

Introduction

Public space and its role within contemporary neoliberal society is often perceived through a narrative where "public" and "private" spaces operate as oppositional constructs. Where public spaces are locations which are imbued with qualities such as openness, as places to gather, places of self-expression, places for "everybody".

By "public space" we mean the range of social locations offered by the street, the park, the media, the Internet, the shopping mall, the United Nations, national governments and local neighbourhoods. "Public space" envelops the palpable tension between place, experienced at all scales in daily life, and the seeming spacelessness of the internet, popular opinion and global institutions and economy.
(Smith 2006)

The aim here is to unpack this reading of public space and engage in a dialectic which explores the possibilities of public space as an ever-changing platform. A place where rules of access, exchange and surveillance can be manipulated by its users, thus changing the nature of those locations.

If analysed in this way, public space can be seen as an active urban construct, instead of emerging simply as conduit or locations of accessible leisure for its inhabitants. If interpreted as a patchwork of locations which embed conflict over their designation, use and role within society; these conflicts, can be more effectively understood through analysis of the different types of spatial engagement that these locations facilitate.

Specifically, this paper will investigate the role that protest actions; which take place in public space; have in transforming our understanding of these locations and thus their role within society. The focus will be on well attended direct actions which took place in London between 2010 and 2012 in the aftermath of the Global Economic Crash of 2007/8 and the unpopular measures put in place by a coalition government.
Through analysis of these actions, a different understanding of public space will emerge. In particular; how it facilitates spatial engagement across a wide range of socio-political needs (developing the idea that the act of protest operates as both a right and a tradition). This paper will consider the role of protest as a tool for change, a tool for knowledge transfer and a tool for non-commercial exchange (and the values therein). This will be used to construct a new understanding of the possibilities of urban space within contemporary urban society.

What is public space?

It is first necessary to identify what we mean by public space, before pursuing a more in-depth explanation of how the act of protest can inform such locations. This paper takes a multidisciplinary approach to answering this question; informed by the evaluative approaches of anthropology and human geography we start with this quote…

By "public space" we mean the range of social locations offered by the street, the park, the media, the Internet, the shopping mall, the United Nations, national governments and local neighbourhoods. "Public space" envelops the palpable

tension between place, experienced at all scales in daily life, and the seeming spacelessness of the internet, popular opinion and global institutions and economy.
(Smith 2006)

This definition merges what I will unpack as three distinct notions of place and combines them into this familiar but non-distinct singularity. By focusing on each subcategory, I will develop an understanding in regard to social human interaction and how these spaces are utilised by different individuals within society.

Accessible Physical Locations

The first definition embodies the notion of public space as a series of accessible physical locations. They are not consecutive or continuous, in fact to traverse a number of these spaces requires entering into others which will fall under different definitions (such as "private"). As such, these places form part of the matrix of the urban environment. One could equally define them as spaces which can be walked through or transgressed by pedestrians, and that under their standard daily operative state; **do not require any form of identification based checkpoint system as a prerequisite to enter or move through**. However, as with all environments, they are each subject to a code of conduct which if contradicted and this contradiction acted upon by the management or ownership body; inevitably triggers a different state of operation.

Of interest within this study are Trafalgar, Parliament and Paternoster Square. When looking at how the act of protest challenges this code of conduct; we see a plethora of different strategies used to counteract the effectiveness of their presence. As such, the The Student Tuition Fee Protests and Occupy LSX transform these spaces into the threshold at which a battle over the designation of space occurs.

Non-physical Platforms

This second definition embraces the notion of a series of non-physical construct which operate primarily as information based resources which stimulate or provide a platform for communication between individuals who are separated by geography. These are constructs which are made available to the populous through conduits which may vary wildly but which do not necessitate a particular spatial singularity to facilitate them. In both the examples given by Low and Smith, "the media and the internet" these are industries whose services or products are owned and distributed by large private corporations (Google, Reddit, Amazon, Microsoft, Facebook and Twitter to name a few). Whether this distribution is through interpersonal communication or news/ information distribution cycles; they are simply a mechanism by which this subjective information reaches its intended target or market audience. However, what they facilitate, is an often-free platform for social communication and discourse which; broadly speaking is publicly accessible (although social barriers persist when considering realities such as poverty, gender and language).

These spaces are often used to facilitate acts of protest in physical public space. This facilitation is not a one-way relationship, as the attempts to mobilise are easily monitored and allowing the development of counteractive strategies by law enforcement officials. We see a prime example of this when those promoting acts of

criminal violence on social media outlets during the August Riots are later prosecuted. Similarly, the development of platforms such as Sukey[i]; allowing protesters to share real time information on the activities of law enforcement officials changes the balance of power of events developing in "accessible physical locations".

Representative Spaces

The third designation outlines a set of locations which house operations which are identified as representative to the citizens within a predefined terrain (district, borough, city or nation). This includes bodies such as The United Nations and national governments and can be extended to both democratic and nondemocratic/ elective institutions. Thus, both The Houses of Parliament and The London Stock Exchange are both spaces which are within this categorisation. What binds these locations as a definable group is their **remit of operation**. These operations invariably take place on privately owned or managed land; and in stark contrast to the first definition of public space - do require (often elaborate) forms of identification and checkpoint systems for individuals to gain access. Here, the decisions made in these terrains have wide reaching ramifications for the general public (regardless of the processes utilised to reach them). Their effective remit is **the public**. This brings together a raft of operations include the deliberation over and the creation of policy, and a plethora of other life defining mechanisms.

Protesters often target these spaces as those operating within their corridors make decisions which they disagree with. As such, Paternoster Square (the location of the London Stock Exchange) is a target for Occupy LSX. Similarly, Parliament Square is the fulcrum for much of the activity instigated by The Student Tuition Fee Protesters, highlighting the importance of these spaces.

Evaluation

Each of these categories (1) accessible physical locations, (2) Non-physical platforms and (3) Representative spaces; is critical in understanding the nature of representative activities in contemporary society space. Each is activated by popular protest during the Austerity protest bubble, however, it is the role of the first designation; the accessible physical locations which showcases the potential of public space to operate as platform to test and change the urban environment.

By defining public space as public(ly accessible) space, it starts to move our understanding away from those based in ownership and instead towards action. Instead of considering whether a location is owned by a private or publicly funder organisation, we can instead look at more specific indictors that contextualise the site; which are to do with how it operates.

---

i "Sukey" provided live protest maps. Utilising the familiar Google maps format – providing additional detailed information as an integrated layer. Information includes the size, time and location of police Kettles. A similar level of information on mounted officers, police vans, dogs and helicopters. The idea was to share information between protesters and those using public(ly accessible) space – to counteract the monopoly on knowledge that the police have at the same time and in the same territory. Thereby reducing the advantage that law enforcement would have over those partaking in direct actions.

Looking at the Student Tuition Fee Protests, Off Duty Police Officer's March and Occupy LSX. Each takes place in a public(ly accessible) space which is in proximity to a "representative space"; The Houses of Parliament and The London Stock Exchange (respectively). The spatial relationships of the urban environment - means that these spaces were pivotal in providing a platform for spatial engagement to be used as a tool to raise awareness of their particular issues. Without this platform, the agenda that these participants wanted to raise would not have a mechanism to prompt politicians into a response. In each case; the mass of people protesting in public spaces showed the relevance in their agenda and thus a level of general public interest which incumbent politicians felt obliged to respond to. We see this in the statements that coalition politicians released questioning the validity and necessity for these actions.

However, protesters must use the tools that they have at their disposal. Institutional forms of opposition are more time consuming and dependent of activity cycles which participants cannot affect (such as voting, petitioning and union action – i.e.: the withdrawal of labour). Thus, there is a necessity for contestation to take place in a forum which is more immediate, in response to emerging socio-political concerns.

Contested Space

Urban life inevitably embeds and creates moments of contestation. The representative nature of public space guarantees that different agents within the urban complex will want to shape the city according to their own ideals. This is an intrinsic part of the matrix of contemporary life and affects political, social and economic mechanisms of potential change.

I propose a distinction between two forms of antagonism, antagonism proper – which takes place between enemies but between 'adversaries', adversaries being defined in a paradoxical way as 'friendly enemies', that is, persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way."

(Mouffe 2003, 13)

The act of protest is an intensification of the conflicts which persist at every level within society. Those participating in the act are highlighting agenda which is not considered or deliberated upon. Thus, the spatial platform is created to allow an agenda to gain **recognition** in the role of "friendly enemy". In this reading, "friendly enemy" is a rarefied position, where the act of protest is a concerted way to oppose an adversarial body. This is so that it can operate on a platform which can perhaps affect policy makers and others who operate as determinants of a location. This platform nonetheless normalises the idea that opposition is permitted but only once validated on one of these increasingly notional platforms. What the act of protest allows both activists and observers to do alike; is to challenge overarching urban constructs through the filter of direct action which undermines these predefined affiliations.

Social engagement

When looking at the role that protest plays in contemporary neoliberal society; it is necessary to make a distinction between two approaches to protest. They can broadly

be categorised as reactionary and ideological. The first is aligned with the idea of antagonism ("persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way." - Mouffe) and the second; with the idea of right to the city ("it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city" - Harvey). There are three key protests which take place during the Austerity Protest bubble which exemplify the value and role of these two forms of protest. Although instigated by the reactionary, they also engage in the ideological.

Ideological

Each year, regardless of the prevailing socio-political or economic conditions – there are a series of protests which will take place in public space. These are structured activities with the aim of raising the profile of a particular agenda. In the UK, many of these protests have a direct lineage which can be traced back to the "liberal" movements of the 1970s. Then, their aim was to oppose the political shift characterised by policies such as energy production and the approach to the natural environment (i.e.: missile construction and development), free market economics (i.e.: tax breaks for private building initiatives), expansion of travel networks (i.e.: the London Ring roads project) and the privatisation of industry (i.e.: characterised by the change in rules that define unions).

With the time period that we are looking at, the ideological protesters came together when government and other powerful institutions based in the capital (such as The Bank of England or The London Stock Exchange) implemented new initiatives which were unpopular. The significant example of this is Occupy LSX. Although the protest gathered much momentum for the multiplicity of their approach to protest; their initial stance was against free market and the ruthless pursuit of capitalist ideals.

As such, participants embody the idea that protest is a political requirement, and as such, the idea that antagonism is a required and permanent construct in the negotiation for political ideals, and a legitimate forum for this antagonism is public space.

Reactionary

If ideological protests develop as part of a tradition; reactionary protests develop as the realisation of a right. Whether this is an understanding which develops instantly or over a period of time; it is a response to a specific issue. The "right to the city" attracts a different participant base as a result. Here, the Student Tuition Fee protests and the Off-Duty Police Officer's March, particularly as their actions are timed to influence decisions being made my powerful officials (the vote on the raising of tuition fees by incumbent politicians, and the implementation of cuts to police spending). The significance of the different categories is that they provide arena for a diverse group of people to engage with public space.

Austerity Protest Bubble

The Student Tuition Fee Protests (STFPs) at the beginning of the protest bubble, Occupy London Stock Exchange (LSX) which spanned a third of the two-year period, and the Off-Duty Police Officers March (O-DPOM) which materialises towards the

end. The STFPs takes the “tradition” of the linear march; and through successive actions (four marches) develop a series of techniques to target their desired territory. The Houses of Parliament, where an imminent decision on the whether to raise tuition fees was to be voted on. In this way; the STFPs utilised the tradition to attract a record number of participants (50,000+) a “representative” tool to show the level of discontent with the proposed bill.

Occupy LSX uses the “traditional” mechanism of the occupation to gather 100s of participants at Paternoster Square. Home to the London Stock exchange; who’s practices were seen as an active contributor to the culture which lead to the Global Economic Crash. When law enforcement officials undermined the validity of that tool (through the use of Kettling). The protesters responded tactically, shifting their target within public space and relocating their camp on and beside land owned by St Paul’s Cathedral. Here, they could test their “right” to occupy through continual negation with the Church of England and the Corporation of London. This lead to a nine-month occupation which in turn allowed a series of alternative practices to emerge and be tested within this terrain.

During the Austerity Protest Bubble; many unionised workforces explored a number of different mechanisms to show their distain with the strategies employed by government. In this light, the O-DPOM represents a break from these protest actions. Restricted from forming unions since 1919, for Officers to come together as a body, their protest had to take place when “off-duty”. Despite this restriction; the greatest number of officers attended the march (30,000). So, although they engaged in the “traditional” construct of the march to enter the platform of the public, this march takes place in the officer’s personal time; the “right” that is afforded other public-sector workers; is not open to them. So that right has to be gained through self-expression and social engagement, notably marked by the way that on-duty officer’s policing the route engaged with off-duty officers. Thus, the protest itself is an embodiment of the ability of protest within public space to operate as both a tradition and a right.

Relevance

Protest actions are often wrongly judged on their success or failure to overturn the policies which they challenge. My contention is instead to analyse what protest creates whilst in existence, and how we can learn from these practices as a method to inform our possible futures – both within public space but also other spaces of contention.

All, the actions analysed, achieved three distinct outcomes. 1. Challenge existing mechanisms of political decision making. 2. Develop new forms of opposition. 3. Create spaces held in common

Recognising that contention is an intrinsic element within urban life; we can begin to extract the ways in which the three different protest actions highlighted start to transcend their temporal existence.

Redefining the terrain

The STFPs are a clear example of the practice of protest developing through the implementation, repetition and expansion of a typology of direct action (the dérivé). Each of the four direct actions that define the mico-movement allow us to see the emergence and subsequent development of a particular approach to protest which takes place in public(ly accessible) space. This series of four direct actions are characterised by decisions made by activist's whose actions are instantaneously disruptive to the structures of the existing spatial status quo which are prevalent in the areas in which they choose to operate.

These protests highlight the imbalance of power and knowledge that occurs around the nexus of protest action. During the STFPs, a virtual strategy of counter mapping[ii] developed to aid the landed protests. This went some way to reduce this discrepancy of power and knowledge that exists between the two adversaries. The most prominent example is "Sukey", which gave protesters greater agency to move more freely during a direct action. Its use allowed protesters to have comparable information to that of the law enforcement officials operating in the same environs. Most importantly this reappraisal facilitated a more tactical response which among other things allow protesters to resist the pattern of activity which allows police to establish Kettles and other lines of containment. This early foray into the evasion of police tactics became something more fluid and rapid in later Student Tuition Fee Protests (which begin to utilise "cat and mouse" tactics).

This case study looks at two types of perimeter space. The first is not visible, it is a notional cartographic line of operation – it is the 1km zone protecting Parliament Square. However, the rules of operation either side of the line are different, this difference is utilised by the 1st protest. In the 2nd, 3rd and 4th, the perimeter space ***becomes the field of action*** as law enforcement officials systematically employ the tactic of implementing a continuous line of bodies which forms the boundary of a closed area or space. Here, activists operate on the perimeter of a boundary as a mechanism to undermine its integrity. By diverting focus away from the homogeneity of the boundary, access is gained to key spaces within the enclosed area – notably, Trafalgar Square itself. So, this action not only temporary redefines the nature of public space, but also the tools used to activate it.

Social Experimentation

Occupy LSX transforms the pre-existing condition achieving a transformative impact over a conglomerate of territories previously defined through ownership as either "private" or "public". The protesters projected a third category of designation, that of being public by changing the daily operation and thus designation of these territories, allowing them to act as a singular space (even though they were acting across several different territories of ownership). **They had transformed these disparate territories into one where the public is defined by the activities and citizen access to them.** Gifted through the luxury of time, Occupy LSX is singularly different from

ii counter-mapping is a practice which looks specifically at mapping as a method to contradict established, hegemonic traits within accepted or established maps. Here, this technique has been used to challenge the designation of site, where it lies in direct opposition to the strategies of the law enforcement officials.

other forms of Occupy (occurring around the world at the time), it gave the activists the opportunity to adapt and develop tactical approaches to the manipulation of space.

The camp goes through a series of phases 1. The initial hiatus where a hedonism spreads across the camp with ideas forming about what is possible running high. 2. The development of a series of daily practices; those of negotiation and of daily living patterns. 3. Then the integration of a diverse population (noticeable a large homeless population), 4. and finally the resistance around the eviction; once those actions became inevitable.

As a result, the camp is in essence - a platform for discussion and debate which creates different forms of civic action and social integration on which no pre-determined identification or qualification are required to gain access or involvement with the processes within. This is achieved both 1. spatially; through the creation of places of (a) democracy (such as the general assembly), spaces of (b) knowledge exchange (such as The University tent) and (c) community and communal living (such as the kitchen tent). It is also achieved in relation to the practices which quickly become inherent, those of (d) equality of voice; (e) shared territories of action and (f) informal non-commercial exchanges. All of which contribute to the presence of a 2. practice of protest, which are dependent on mutualism and multiplicity. Such multiplicity which causes the development of the 27[iii] working groups; which create focused forum to discuss and debate specific issues (such as welfare, legality, outreach, faith liaison or sanitation) and their consensus proposals are aired in the arena of the general assembly. The church working group is of particular interest, as a mechanism of negotiating mutual dependence (as the camp is partially located on their land).

The co-dependence of Occupy LSX and St Paul's Cathedral, is not an expected one. On the face of it, there is little of interests which connects them. However, the implicit questions raised by the camp around morality and abuses of power; chime with the core interests of the Church of England. Although thrust upon them in an unceremonious way, the core values of the church meant that their response would always be different to that of The City of London (despite its categorisation as a public body).

What occupy allows us to readily engage in, is the antithesis to this argument, where large numbers of people informed themselves and acted in unison in condemnation of established yet deeply floored practices, and in doing so created a base for them to test the efficacy of alternatives. The actions would of course never hold all the solutions to the eroding reciprocal relationship between citizens and our representatives in the neo-liberal age, but they give an avenue into the notion of what is possible if dissent engages with notion of politicising public(ly accessible)spaces and that this is a lesson which can be brought forward and applied elsewhere.

[iii] First Aid, Health & Safety, Sanitation, Environment, Kitchen, Waste & Recycling, Youth, Faith Liaison, Non-violence, Outreach, Welfare, Economics, Technical, Tranquillity, mediation Commission, Land Ownership, London Corporation, Politics, Legal, Direct Action, Media & press, Cinema, Web, University & Library, Information, Surplus and Active non-violence.

Alternative practices

The O-DPOM is towards the end of the Austerity Protest Bubble, both in chronology and as a representation of the change in momentum and pessimism that develops over during the bubble. Most noticeably, this protest embodies the shift in the ideology of participants, their expectations, and their approach to claiming space. The protest itself raises many philosophical questions around the nature of policing and the rights that key service providers can or should expect in contemporary society. However, of particular importance to this paper is the way in which these participants are limited in the tools available to them in claiming space during their act of dissent due to their uniformity and standing in society.

Although is the least active, of the protests; the fact that it took place at all speaks of the importance of alternative practices, and their permanent ability to create a level of reciprocity for any in society who; perhaps un-expectantly, find that suddenly becomes their only outlet for collective representative action. Understanding protest as existing within the range of alternative practice allows us to understand how it has a permanent place within our complex urban environments.

Conclusions

Protests which occur in public(ly accessible) space can be used as a signpost for better urban possibilities. Returning to the theories of Lefebvre looking at our relation to the spaces where protest occurs, and our ability to access these spaces and the potential for transformation which is embodied within these acts. For Lefebvre, ‘the right to the city’ is an approach to daily life which transgresses different fields of action (work, leisure and love) as experienced through the city. This is in tune with the idea of ideological social engagement.

One of the key perspectives which support this theory, is the idea that citizens have rights to spaces and mechanisms to change society without engaging in the role fulfilled by elected representatives exploring the potential to bypass existing social hierarchies. For both Harvey and Lefebvre; ‘right’, is about access and space to act in a non-prescriptive manner. In ‘the right to the city’ Lefebvre outlines a historical timeline of spatial production and later Harvey explores the mechanism by which citizens can access these systems. Lefebvre speaks of a transition from the early dwelling to the fully industrialized city of his time (1970/80s) taking us up to the initiation of global neo-liberal capitalism. For Lefebvre, the key phases that define the ‘mode’ of production and by implementation the pace and scale, are classified as Agricultural, Industrial, Urban and Global. By focusing on the difference between the modes, Lefebvre questions the assumption that the urbanised environment is part of a natural progression or inevitability. Instead seeing this trajectory as the product of certain mechanisms, which can be altered, or; we as a society can choose to engage with different modes of production.

Lefebvre identifies the lineage throughout history that links different forms of ‘control’ that are prevalent behind the various modes of production, which strongly suggests a hierarchical system of rule which is maintained through different institutionalised bodies. He asks serious questions on the ‘finality’ (or indeed the embedded ideology) of industrialised systems of production. For Lefebvre, it is the

notion of access; moving freely through different urban environs and locating oneself based on “desire” as opposed to following existing hierarchical constructs. This paves the way for citizens’ access to resources and to create systems of commoning and communality. For Harvey ‘rights to the city’ are more in line with identifying opportunities. Where citizens can gain control over the mechanisms of economic change. and that democracy can be created through the expanded use, bringing them under citizen control.

To maximize the potential of aligning theory with practice and to utilise these positions in a contemporary context; citizens need to take the opportunity to operate both as individuals, in small groups and to recognise their potential to operate as a global body, larger than that of the any of the systems or companies which limit them to a singular locality.

The act of protest shows us a method of developing a targeted response to a finite issue with temporal immediacy. If you accept that direct action is a key element of protests' validity - then this rapid mobilisation of existing resources would prove invaluable to small groups who can maximise their responsive flexibility. It is not the actions themselves which should be adopted but the galvanisation of available resources at short notice. This should serve as an adjunct to the regular scheduling of meetings to discuss a series of pre-set issues creating a principled approach - so that at short notice a meeting which includes the more loosely affiliated members can be called upon to meet and mobilise over a particular issue.

Protest can also inform the practice of larger alternative practice organisations; who could benefit from seeing themselves as (overtly or passively) political entities. This is because their aims require a level of socio-political engagement which means that they will be negotiating with others that are (by their very nature) politicised constructs with related but intrinsically different priorities and focuses. Essentially it is about a level of appropriate organisational structure and galvanisation at times which are not scheduled or regular but specific to your organisations' aims. On occasion, it will be necessary for a few key individuals to meet for a shorter and unscheduled period of time to catalyse a response to a key issue. This fluid responsiveness is key to any alternative practice to remain relevant and is applicable to a range of practices which can be considered alternative.

References

Harvey, D. (2006). *The Politics of Public Space* (1 ed.). New York: Taylor & Francis Group, Routledge.

Mouffe, C. (2003). *The democratic paradox.* London, New York: Verso books.

Smith, S. L. (2006). *The Politics of Pulbic Space.* New York: Taylor & Francis Group, Routledge.

Lefebvre, Henri. 1974. *The Production of Space.* English Translation first published in 1991. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Devon: T.J International Ltd, Padstow Cornwall.