

Political Action in Urban Space: Public Spaces in the City as Frame and Stage for Political Action

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ABSTRACT

Ever since the times of the Greek agora, the imagination of cities has been closely linked to the idea of political self-determination, public deliberation and decision-making of responsible (male) citizens. In the course of centuries, the actual political use of urban spaces changed considerably. In France of the absolutist era, for example, public spaces were used for royal representation, and the people were mainly addressed as audience for royal spectacles and ceremonies. During the French revolution, people re-conquered public spaces and used concerted mass action for expressing their will. While Bourgeois politics were based on discussion and deliberation in place, the workers' movements grounded on common mass action in streets and city squares.

In Germany, the workers' tradition was finally taken up and abused by the Nazi regime in the 20th century. As various as the political use of public spaces in cities have been the approaches of urban planning to take into account (or not) the usability of public spaces for political action throughout the centuries and in different political systems (compare e.g. FRG and GDR during the cold war). Especially in the West German modern city of the post-war period, the meaning attributed to political action of citizens in public spaces for city planning decreased. It were consumer and not political functions which were able to assemble people in public spaces.

Today, we can observe that the global justice movement – represented by, e.g., attac and other associations and institutions from all over the world – reintroduces elements of the agora into its strategy to protest against current globalisation politics and to fight for justice and sustainability. Even though the political had never totally left public spaces (think of the peace movement and its Easter marches), and in a way played a considerable role in many countries to replace dictatorship by a democratic system (e.g. in South America), this new type of movement has contributed in many countries to the re-appropriation of public spaces in cities for political purposes in its original sense: not only as symbolic mass action for one clearly defined goal but as a deliberative, open process. One could even argue that the “modern” type of mass demonstrations is partly replaced, or at least complemented by new “post-modern” forms of political self-expression.

My paper, based on my PhD thesis “Political Action in Urban Public Spaces”, aims to capture different qualities of urban public spaces for citizen’s political action, namely as places for communication, representation and perception, competition of opinions, and tradition and continuity. These qualities are illustrated by the G8 counter summit of the global justice movement in Genoa in July 2001, where they were taken up in order to combine discursive and representative elements of political action. I argue that the rise of this type of action is closely linked to a general “rediscovery” and re-appreciation of public spaces since the 1980s, and that its contribution to the vitality of cities can be significant, if its potential is used.

Key Words: public space, political action, quality of place