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### **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-government, public deliberation and decision-making of responsible (male) citizens. But 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 was mainly addressed as audience for royal spectacles and ceremonies. During the French revolution, the people reconquered 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. 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, and in a way

played a considerable role in many countries to replace dictatorship by democratic systems, 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. The “modern” type of mass demonstrations is partly replaced, or at least complemented by new “post-modern” forms of political self-expression.

This paper 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 contribution to the vitality of cities can be significant, if its potential is used.

## **Introduction**

The recent discussion on the resurgence of cities is fuelled by the observation that cities seem to have gained a renewed attractiveness for economy and population. One explanation is that the introduction of new information and communication technologies has changed the importance of spatial, but also of temporal distances, and that old dense cities provide good conditions for the knowledge-based economy where success seems to be determined to a great extent by connectivity and connections. Cities as the “absence of physical space between people and firms” (Glaeser/Gottlieb 2006: 1281) where “information is not just created but sorted” (Storper/Manville 2006: 1250) provide some comparative advantage to suburban and rural environments (while, however, the strategic question why some cities are preferred to others still remains unsolved).

Some authors argue that the resurgence of cities cannot predominantly be explained by cities being places of production, but more and more also by their functioning as places of leisure and consumption. Although this may not be true in every regard, it can be observed that urban entertainment functions in their broadest sense have recently increased considerably. It seems like decades of creating spatial distances between people – e.g. through suburban detached housing and individual transportation means – are now followed by an era of rising interest in spatial proximity at different levels. Urban public spaces are more and more becoming stages for cultural, commercial and sportive performance, and on many occasions are used for public assemblies and festivals of all kinds.

In this paper, I argue that along with these developments, also the political use of urban public spaces achieves a new quality. In contrast to earlier forms of political action,

organizers of demonstrations and manifestations today take into account the symbolic dimension of the appropriation of public space, as well as their participants' demand for common action, communication, creativity, and meaning, and I suggest this goes hand in hand with a change in the self-conception of citizens and of social movements, and a new claim for a more active participation in politics. In the following, I will first briefly look back into history to show various forms of interrelation of political action and urban public spaces respectively the planning of urban core areas to this purpose. I will then describe the political dimension of public space, as it has been elaborated by Hannah Arendt and by Charles Goodsell. Thirdly, I will outline the activities in the context of the G8 counter summit in Genoa, Italy, in July 2001, before drawing conclusions for the question of urban governance.

### **Political action in public spaces – a review**

A central square of the agora type was first built in the first millennium b.C. in the Mediterranean region as "ideal typical centre of a community" (Schröder 1992: 103; translation SH). Before, there had been squares used for the performance of cults or as market places, but the central square as agora – used for political assemblies – emerged from the democratic society as corresponding form of political organisation. Until today, the Greek agora as ideal type (in the sense of Max Weber) defines imaginations of central urban squares as places of deliberation and consultation of political decisions by legally equal (male) citizens. But the agora fulfilled social as well as political functions. Similar to the Roman forum, it offered room to the market and to political assemblies at the same time. It was the centre of local public life and of its "collective memory" (Assmann 2004).

The squares which were built in medieval age showed similarities to the ones in provincial towns in the Roman Empire: They were framed by the market, the town hall, the treasury, the court, the temple or church, monuments and wells. Political and economic centres were here situated in close spatial proximity to each other (Roeck 1995). When feudal times came to an end, the courts of absolutist kings and clerical leaders became the centres of social and political life in Western Europe. City builders designed public space as interrelated spatial systems in the inner city, and in spatial proximity to the courts, so that the whole people could be reached by and integrated into festivities of royal representation. The people was addressed as audience for royal spectacles and festivities, but played no active political role of its own.

It was not until the French Revolution that the people re-conquered urban public spaces for their own, unplanned and independent political action. A political "street public" (Kaschuba 1991) emerged which demonstrated its protest against the representative public and festival

culture related to royal anniversaries. In contrast to earlier "bourgeois" emancipation figures which had been strongly related to deliberative settings in certain places (the agora or later city squares, 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. They reached their peak with the labour movement in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This new kind of political self-expression resulted in new corresponding communication means and also new types of representation. As the workers' protest movements had only limited access to formal means of political opinion expression, highly ritualised communication types – less logical-deliberative than the bourgeois tradition, but more emotional-affective – came up. The mass action became a goal of political action in itself to support the claims of the respective protest movement. For its success, collective representations by language, appearance, and ritual symbols supported the activities in suggestive-affective ways (Korff 1991). For example, the comprehensive political mobilisation after World War I was accompanied by a multitude of symbols, emblems and metaphors. Demonstrations – defined as protesting or appellative, generally peaceful course through the streets of a city (Warneken 1991) – were symbolic actions; their effects were supported by paroles and speeches. A political message was transported through the number of participants, the walking formations, the 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 pseudo-political mass events in public space, aiming to unite the people with strict choreographies for the affirmation of Nazi politics (Ehls 1997). After World War II, the tradition of demonstrations and political protest in the street was continued in the Western world e. g. by the student protests in the 1960s, and by new social movements in the 1970s and 1980s. On the contrary, many socialist countries kept up the tradition of government-led affirmative demonstrations in urban space, and paid special attention to the usability of urban space for this purpose when rebuilding the destroyed cities after the war. In the GDR, demonstration plans made exact provisions for the regulation of the streams of people into the city centres at specific occasions, for example 1 May (Labour Day) or 7 October (GDR anniversary). Here, political protest manifested itself in someone's absence from prescribed mass demonstrations, instead of the appropriation of public spaces which was not tolerated by local governments (which became obvious already in 1953, when the GDR-government suppressed the workers' demonstrations in Berlin with the help of Soviet military).

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, due to the post-war regime's wish to distance itself from Nazi building politics, and to the Allies' distrust of the masses after the experiences of the Third Reich. As a consequence, it were foremost consumer and not political functions which assembled people in public spaces. Demonstrations were more or less affirmative rituals aiming to communicate a common political claim and to represent a collective identity, but they were no agora-type spheres of deliberation and common action.

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 both the agora and the "street public" into its strategy to protest against current globalisation politics and to fight for justice and sustainability. The movement has contributed in many countries to the re-appropriation of public spaces in cities for political purposes not only as symbolic mass action for one clearly defined goal, but as a deliberative, open process. The "modern" type of mass demonstrations is partly replaced, or at least complemented by new "post-modern" forms of political self-expression. This new type of social movement is characterised by 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. The deliberative element seems to regain importance, without the representative side of the medal being neglected.

### **Political dimensions of urban public spaces**

Which qualities exactly – apart from obvious factors like size and accessibility for assembly (which are, however, not self-evident today) – are responsible for the relevance of public spaces for political action today?

Hannah Arendt described public realm – which eventually may manifest itself in physical space – as "fabric of human affairs", in which every human can knit a new thread (Arendt 1999: 237). Whether a thread is taken up and prolonged or cut loose cannot be influenced by the initiator. From Arendt's perspective, public spaces emerge as intermediate spaces between individuals with different standpoints by their (political) action, first of all as a kind of realm and eventually manifest in physical space. The place where this happens can be basically anywhere, but physical public spaces offer an optimal environment, where citizens unknown to each other meet as equals, without having to give up their different standpoints,

their equality being an “artificial” political construction by a community as part of its political constitution. Public spaces are common spaces of presence and perception, in which phenomena from different – spatial and thematic – points of view can be perceived and valued. They are not only interfaces of representation (**co-presence**), but also interfaces of perception (**co-perception**). They at the same time separate and assemble people (**spaces of association**), and emerge where people meet, get in touch with each other, and communicate. Here, citizens have the opportunity to act, to start something new, and to break the chain of mere behaviour; they may set new beginnings spontaneously and by common action participate in the development of the community. In order to come to a decision, opinions have to compete with each other. In this sense, public spaces are demanding, and it takes courage and engagement to step out into public space where one is seen by everyone.

Political spaces grant moreover historical continuity, so that, on the one hand, the memory of excellent people and their deeds is preserved, and on the other hand, people are invited to participate in common affairs (Breier 2001). By continuous experience, these spaces link presence to future and update it. This continuity offers an incentive for people to present themselves in their individuality, to step out of the masses, and accomplish great achievements (**agonistic spaces**). It is obvious that Arendt’s model refers to a republican ideal which stresses the deliberative and communicative side of political action, but she does also take the representative and symbolic aspect seriously.

A scheme for evaluating the democratic qualities of public spaces as settings for political action has been developed by Charles Goodsell who tried to combine urban studies, architectural and political theory discourses, and defined public space as a “space-time continuum for connected and interactive political discourse” (Goodsell 2003: 370) which can be

- place-bound if it consists of face-to-face interaction in a single physical location;
- electronic if it is achieved at dispersed geographic locations through information technology; or
- extended if it is broadcasted by television, radio, internet, or other means.

The democratic qualities of physical public spaces can then be understood by the degree to which they encourage public access, to which the status of authority is muted, barriers between the governing and the governed are minimized, the staging is organised by the people as well as by officials, and conditions conducive to deliberation are fostered (Goodsell 2003: 370).

In the following, I will illustrate the above mentioned elements of the political dimension of public space using the example of the G8 counter summit in Genoa, Italy, in July 2001.

### **The G8 counter summit in Genoa, Italy, July 2001**

In July 2001, more than 200.000 people came together in Genoa in order to demonstrate against the G8 summit which took place at the same time in the Palazzo Ducale. The counter summit was organized by members of different initiatives and groups who are part of the international global justice movement (Andretta et al. 2002, Gubitosa 2003) and formed the network "Genoa Social Forum" (GSF). Founded in October 2000, the GSF had held a first public international meeting in May 2001, when an assembly of about 300 people from different countries discussed the themes for the counter summit and decided to organise the counter summit along the following events: a Public Forum for discussion and communication from Monday to Wednesday (16-18 July); a "demonstration of migrants" on Thursday (19 July); "thematic squares" and a symbolic attack on the red zone on Friday (20 July); and an international demonstration on Saturday (21 July). The GSF agreed on the following rules of civil disobedience: The city was not to be damaged; no people (civilians or in uniform) were to be attacked, and no dangerous objects were allowed.

At the same time when the preparatory meeting took place, the *prefetto* of Genoa – as the politically responsible official – declared a so-called *zona rossa* (red zone) and a *zona gialla* (yellow zone) in Genoa's inner city. The red zone was to be totally closed to the public during the G8 summit, marked by high grates and containers, and framed the areas in direct vicinity to the Palazzo Ducale, the historic city centre and the neighbouring shopping areas. It had 13 official entrances along a border of 8 km. The yellow zone surrounded the red zone and was originally supposed to be a neutral zone in which no demonstrations were allowed, but in the end the demonstrators were permitted to enter. Most of the shops in the yellow zone were closed. The everyday life in the red and yellow zone was practically brought to a standstill for the time of the G8 summit.

The places designated to the use of the GSF were assigned by the *questura* of Genoa, which was supported by the Italian head of police. The municipal institutions were more or less overruled by national institutions and interests. As a consequence, not only the demonstrators came from elsewhere, but also security and police staff. The GSF managed the different locations from the so-called convergence point, which lay in walking distance from the *stazione Brignole*, the only train station open during the summit. In two schools, a few hundred metres away from the convergence point, the necessary infrastructure for a press and media centre was at everyone's disposition. Accommodation was organised in

schools, parks, and the *Carlini stade* where tents were erected. Sanitation was provided in two gymnasiums. Since most of the shops in the city were closed, the GSF had to install food service points. In order to provide the incoming masses with information, mobile observers and bike guides spread information.

The Public Forum took place at the so-called *cittadella*, the central point of assemblies which stretched from the *punta vagno* to the *piazzale Kennedy*. This public conference with several hundred participants dealt with various political issues, such as debt policies, fight against poverty, civil and human rights, etc. There was also time and space for spontaneous and independent discussion on further topics. The organisers stressed the importance of the public forum because they considered a demonstration of protest without constructive debate as inefficient. The location had been agreed upon by the *prefettura* of Genoa. On Thursday, 19 July, the international migrants' demonstration attracted more than 50.000 people. The demonstration took place without any incidents; there were players, clowns, orchestras and bands. On Friday, 20 July, the activities took place on so-called *piazze tematiche* (thematic squares). Each square was occupied by associations who pursued similar goals and agreed on similar forms of protest. This division was supposed to symbolise and represent the different streams within the movement without having to confront each other. The thematic squares were spread around the red zone and surrounded it from all sides. From here, a "virtual and political" siege of the red zone was started in the afternoon by using balloons, paper air planes, music, speeches etc. (Klein 2001). When demonstrations started approaching the red zone, the so-called black bloc started to provoke violent conflicts with the police, which then resulted in the death of a demonstrator, and to destroy city furniture. On Saturday, 21 July, another demonstration took place with more than 200.000 people, again shadowed by violent riots.

During the counter summit, the political relevance of urban public spaces was unravelled by the employed strategies of both the governing – in terms of regulation and efforts to shut demonstrators out from their negotiations and from the media, as journalists who signed up for the summit were inside the grates, and could not observe what was going on outside – and the global justice movement. Thousands of people travelled from all over the world to assemble in the same spot where political leaders met and took decisions, partly because of the public attention that a G8 summit provokes. Through spatial proximity, the protests and government action were directly linked. Symbolically, the movement aimed to force government politicians to confront its alternative ideas, but did not succeed. The city of Genoa was in a state of emergency. It was no longer the city of its inhabitants and commuters, but it was used by strangers – like a stage for a performance. The importance of public spaces was threefold:



- as communication medium for the movement, extended by mobile phones and the internet,
- as stage and scenery, where the movement could represent itself and demonstrate its protest, and
- as symbolically contested space for governments, the globalisation-critical movement, and the black bloc.

Genoa's urban space did not have a meaning in itself for most of the participating groups, but was the symbolically charged setting for a fight for the right to use and appropriate it. The exclusion of the demonstrators through grates and barriers symbolized the exclusion from the political process; and this resulted in the movement's intention to end this exclusion and reclaim these spaces for themselves (even if it was only symbolical). At the same time, the squares used as thematic squares showed the heterogeneity of the movement, its variety and differences. Plurality within the movement was not suppressed, but supported.

So at the counter summit in Genoa one could find both assemblies for deliberation and protest movements in the streets, aiming at the recovery of civil rights and political influence. The co-presence of several groups with different backgrounds constituted a public realm in which appearances could be perceived from various perspectives. The participants could communicate on political problems and values, and not only could see plural perspectives, but also were seen themselves from different angles. The right to see and be seen, to hear and be heard was more important than the simple self-assertion against each other. So they had to and could represent themselves individually and their groups in the midst of plural actors.

Even though the counter summit took place under certain extraordinary conditions with an external trigger, it was part of a continuous movement. The participants "picked up a thread" with regard to the content of the event as well as the manner of action, which can now be left, cut off, or picked up by other groups and people to carry on.

With regard to the definition of public spaces by Charles Goodsell, as introduced above, we find elements of place-bound, electronic and extended public space at the event, although public access was hindered, authorities were quasi omnipresent, barriers between the governing and the governed were maximized instead of minimized, and conditions conducive to deliberation were definitely not fostered. However, the staging outside the grates was set by both the people and officials, which shows how public spaces offer a framework for political action even if the governing try to deny the citizens any recognition.

To put my conclusions in a nutshell: Demonstrations take place in public space so that as many people as possible can assemble and reach a broad public. This would be a common sense notion which would need no more research. But what I have tried to show is that demonstrations can be more than acclamation of groups' collective identities, and that public spaces offer potential for public deliberation and the communicative side of citizens' political action. Here citizens can be given the chance to experience themselves as political beings, as parts of a political community, and to knit a thread into the "fabric of human affairs" (Arendt). As social movements today no longer foremost strive to reach a collective identity, but stress the deliberative aspect of their activities, public spaces are ideal to also address passers-by, who can change from spectator to actor if they wish.

The case study shows furthermore that the fact that political decisions are taken more and more at a supranational level has certainly not diminished the significance of urban public spaces for political action. On the contrary, one could argue that an international movement which only virtually appears in the internet would be more or less invisible and could not reach any collective attention (Rauterberg 2002). The use of urban public spaces therefore has a special quality for the functioning of this movement: it is not necessarily linked to local problems and decisions, but helps to raise attention to international politics. Public spaces' democratic qualities are decisive for citizen's and social movement's political action both with regard to deliberation and representation.

### **Implications for urban governance**

It may seem a far way from an international political event which provoked massive protest and high mobilisation by the global justice movement, to drawing conclusions for everyday urban governance. I chose this case for the examination of the political dimension of urban public space for two reasons: 1) because I think an extreme case is likely to show more clearly which features of public spaces are crucial, and to make the relation between place and action visible; 2) because if the normative goal is a further democratisation of the planning process, which for me is a task which is getting ever more essential, then it seems to make sense to consider the ways that citizens do get active on their own account and their employed strategies, to see in return what one may be able to learn for participation in planning. In this regard, the case of Genoa in the light of the theoretical context introduced above raises two topics:

First, the planning of urban public spaces. Obviously urban planning cannot plan for political action in public space in a technical sense, and it should certainly not try to do so anyway. However, it may provide space – or rather: place – for these kinds of activities. Today, many

experts fear that privately financed projects of inner-city refurbishment and renewal tend to exclude certain groups of city users and certain urban functions. Naturally, the aims of public and private city builders differ quite a bit, and privately funded projects are generally dominated by economic interests. Surveillance technology and private security services play an important role in order to supposedly enhance the quality of consumer spaces. The addressees are consumers who buy, not citizens who communicate on common political issues. Many local governments see the necessity that municipal public spaces be competitive with these privately produced entertainment and consumption spaces, and tend to employ the same strategies as private investors in order to keep municipal public spaces clean and safe as they observe that consumer-oriented spaces withdraw audience from other kinds of public spaces (Witte 2002). In US literature, some authors claim that democratic, freely accessible public spaces no longer exist in US cities (Giroux 2001: vi, Gottdiener 2003). In European cities, where central urban spaces still are used frequently as places of assembly for all kinds of events, recent developments will have to be observed closely in the future. It remains to be seen which influence for example new surveillance technologies such as closed circuit television (cctv) will have on the activities of social and political movements, as they cannot only be used to detect criminals, but also to observe suspect citizens.

Secondly, an analysis of social movements in public space can inspire the discussion on participation, as it shows that not only the provision of spaces for participation per se is a precondition, but also the establishment of a continuous political discourse. Although today it seems to be especially commercial – also sportive and cultural – uses which manage to assemble and interest people, it may also be possible to build or strengthen the political dimension of public spaces by addressing citizens to engage in settings for deliberation and exchange. This does of course not mean to simply employ staging mechanisms for political means, as this might have the contrary effect, and extinguish any spontaneous political action (not to speak of the many cases where participation is “allowed” without any serious competencies for the participants to influence any really important decisions). The case study suggests that in order to address citizens and get them interested in political participation, form and content of political action should remain relatively flexible, and participants should be given the opportunity to experience plurality, express diverging opinions and debate. This would be also be a contribution to creating the city as a collective resource (Healey 2002).

For these forms of participation, urban planning is an ideal medium as its topics are relatively close to the everyday life, and because of the increasing acknowledgment of its political rather than technical character, which is not adequately met by the “classic” presentation of concepts and plans in planning departments at certain opening hours, or even on the

internet. If planning goes to public spaces where a large audience is present anyway, e.g. in proximity to commercial functions, it can also address a clientele which usually avoids formal discussion events. Information in an open space context where people can come and go, listen to presentations, or participate in workshops, may inspire communication which would otherwise not come into being. A change of roles from actor to spectator must be possible at any moment. In Germany, this principle has already been partly applied when determining temporary uses e.g. by open space or formal discussions. Efforts like this could help to establish new traditions of political action in certain places. The places themselves become media of collective memory, which in return strengthens the binding character of the negotiations. The internet can play a supportive role in the preparation and information phase; however, it can not replace direct exchange of participants, spontaneous integration of people who happen to pass by, as well as the visibility and attention of such an event.

The proposed orientation of participation strategies towards situativ actions and events may not seem sincere at first sight. Urban planning and development are still seen by many planners as solutions to technical questions, where residents can not make valuable contributions, as they are no experts. But I would argue that the increased understanding of the political dimension of urban planning – i.e. its finding solutions which are based on negotiations – has to be consequently followed by its further democratisation, which can for example be pursued by providing open public spaces for democratic experience. The more immediate the experience is which is potentially generated here, the greater is the probability that new ideas are born and political innovations induced, especially in times when society is attributed a great need for reforms, for civic responsibility and civil society. The acceptance of urban planning measures is likely to increase if their democratic legitimacy is strengthened.

At the moment, the political usability of urban public spaces does not play a role in urban planning, at least in Germany, but I argue that planners should be more sensitive as the more public space is privatised and regulated according to the principles of consumption, tidiness and safety, the less it can be considered as free space for free citizens to articulate their political protest without having to fear legal consequences.

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### **Key words**

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