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# The Publicness of Public Space. On the Public Domain

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DIPARTIMENTO DI SOCIOLOGIA E RICERCA SOCIALE

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ON THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

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*Introduction. The public as an ecology*

In this essay, I consider four major areas of theorisation and research on the 'public' in the attempt to advance towards a unified conceptualisation of publicness as 'public domain'. In order to do so, the complex, all but linear yet crucial relationships between publicness and visibility should be noted. I choose to highlight the principal aspects that emerges from each of these areas, beginning from a contentious or emblematic case, or a literary epigraph, which functions as a thought-provoking illustration, and then move to a more detailed analytical discussion.

First of all, visibility is one of the key aspects *political philosophers* have traditionally associated with the public sphere. Suffice to say that Habermas' [1989(1962)] original term for public sphere is *Öffentlichkeit*, which directly refers to the features of openness and visibility of this type of social space. In the first part of the essay, the literature on the public sphere developed by political philosophers ranging from Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas and Norberto Bobbio, to contemporary authors such as Craig Calhoun, Jeff Weintraub, Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner, is examined through the lenses of a thick conception of visibility. By doing so, my aim is to reveal the structure of 'visibility as publicity' held by normative-proceduralist views of democracy. A second tradition I explore in this context is *interaction sociology*. Interaction sociologists, from Erving Goffman to Lynn Lofland, have devoted much attention to the notion of the public realm, understood as a regime of interaction and an arena for the intervisibility of actors. Their theorisation allows us to understand how reciprocal visibility creates the public realm by facilitating both social rituals and action coordination. *Media studies and cultural studies* have also focused on the visibilities associated with mediated public communication. Third, *urban studies* literature also offers important insight into urban environment and its public space as a visible space. In particular, the importance of the materiality and spatiality of the social emerges clearly in these investigations, as does the prolongation of given contingent materialities into meaningful immateriality. Research on these topics by scholars such as Kevin Lynch, Jane Jacobs, Richard



Sennett, Isaac Joseph and, more recently, Nicholas Blomley, Sophie Watson, Luc Lévesque, Mattias Kärholm and Iain Borden, is reviewed. Fourth, the notion of ‘public order’ is a pivotal one in the literature on *governance*, *policing* and social order. Public order is a complex and problematic notion, which illuminates issues of perception (what counts as ordered and what counts as disordered in the city?) and expectation (who should take care of it? What are its boundaries? Who threatens it?). In the attempt to bring together contributions from political philosophy, interactionist sociology, urban and governance studies, I introduce the notion of ‘public domain’ as an integral regime of social visibility, which can be explored on the basis of its subjects, sites, rhythms and effects.

My aim here is to flesh out a productive notion of ‘public domain’, one that does not subordinate the public – more precisely, the public-ness of public space – to the dichotomy public *vs* private. My main argument is in favour of an understanding of the public domain as an ecology of ecologies. I regard the public domain as composed of a combination of a *media ecology* (or, an *ecology of mediations*), an *urban ecology* and an *ecology of attentions*. Each of these ecologies is constituted by social territories together with their visibilities and the prolongations that fill the phenomenal *plenum* of the here-and-now. It is important to stress that these ecologies are non-dichotomic: they cut across the material and the immaterial, they span urban space and the public sphere. Thus, the public domain exists at the point of *convergence* and in the zone of indistinction between material and immaterial processes, whereby an immaterial meaning is created through acts of material inscription and projection. Several authors have described this phenomenon as the coming together of, on the one hand, the material, the spatial and the corporeal and, on the other, the semiotic, the symbolic and the informational. However, there are good reasons to strive to avoid dualisms. I suggest it could be more proficuous to study the visible, the affective, the territorial and the rhythmic as analytical categories of the social: in my view, the challenge is not to define these notions in terms of more conventional Cartesian-dualist, Weberian-individualist or Durkheimian-collectivist epistemologies, but quite the contrary: to imagine how such misleading dualisms could be overcome.

Neither individual nor collective, the public domain is in fact a 'singular' creation of circulation and resonance.

An enlarged notion of visibility [Brighenti 2010a] has the advantage of capturing the finest variations of degree between the immediate and the mediated in the social sphere. Once we have climbed over this Wittgenstein's ladder, though, we can push ourselves to demystify the opposition between the immediate and the mediated: on the one hand, the mediated inherently produces immediacy; on the other, the immediate is always hypermediated, that is, mediated through some invisible medium (the ether is not even the thinnest one...). Thus, the process of mediation essentially concerns acts of prolongations which do not have a single direction. In this sense, prolongation is not an evolutionary category, it has no *télos*. Quite the contrary, it constantly multiplies the directions of events, determining a constant back-and-forth, a *viavai* of affordances and seizings, of montages and configurations.

Each locale is porous because it prolongs towards an elsewhere which, although not present in the here-and-now of the locale, becomes part of a single *plenum* [Garfinkel 2002]. Objects, spaces, actors, subjects, events and practices not present in the here-and-now of the locale can be important and even crucial components of the *plenum*. Processes of import and export come about essentially through mediations [Debray 1991], which act as bridges, corridors or thresholds that traverse the *plenum* in multiple directions and connect the various here-and-nows. Portions of elsewhere and at-other-times are constantly imported and inscribed into the locale, just as portions of the here-and-now are constantly exported and projected towards somewhere-else and at-other-times. The media that accomplish this import/export task work essentially by prolonging the locale. They can be imagined as 'projectors' and 'inscribers' that enable the 'motilisation' – both as extension and compression – of here-and-now. Prolonging, extending and compressing are energetic, or associational [Latour 2005], processes. Finally, this also illuminates the question of power that is inherent in the public. Of course, as media critics *à la* Chomsky have argued, power deploys a set of technologies to reinforce itself; but more interestingly, following Foucault [1982], power *is* itself a technology. Power is a way of associating and dividing, distributing and partitioning, visibilising and

invisibilising, affecting and anaesthetising, synchronising and desynchronising – in sum, of territorialising and deterritorialising. From this point of view, Michael Taussig's [1999, 5-6] notion of 'public secrecy' is insightful because it highlights the mechanism whereby the naked foundations of a given social order lay bare before everybody's eyes and, absolutely arbitrary and unjustified as they are, become effective: a public secret is what is generally known but cannot be articulated<sup>1</sup>. But how precisely do the articulations and non-articulations of the public take place?

### 1. *The sphere of the public*

#### Case 1. People Power II in the Philippines

*From 16 to 20 January 2001, more than one million people assembled at one of Metro Manila's major highways, Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (commonly called EDSA), site of the original People Power revolt in 1986. A large cross section of Philippine society gathered there to demand the resignation of President Joseph "Erap" Estrada, after his impeachment trial was suddenly aborted by the eleven senators widely believed to be under his influence. The senators had refused to include key evidence that purportedly showed Estrada had amassed a fortune from illegal numbers games while in office. The impeachment proceedings were avidly followed on national TV and the radio. Most viewers and listeners were keenly aware of the evidence of corruption on the part of Estrada and his family; once the pro-Estrada senators put an abrupt end to the hearing, hundreds of thousands of viewers and listeners were moved to protest in the streets. Television and radio had kept them in their homes and offices to follow the court proceedings, but at a critical moment, these media also drew them away from their seats. Relinquishing their position as spectators, they now became part of a crowd that had formed around a common wish: the resignation of the president.' [Rafael 2003, 401].*

#### Case 2. Twits from Iran

*During the highly contested 2009 Iranian presidential campaign, president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad shut down internet connections in the country to prevent his political opponent Mir Hossein Mousavi, along with independent journalists and other commentators, from using Facebook, Twitter and mobile phone networks. All websites that expressed concern over irregularities during the vote and denounced political repression of protest were under attack from the government. The struggle to*

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<sup>1</sup> A similar analysis was undertaken by Michel Foucault [1971] on the 'interdictions of speech'.

*feed out information from Iran and provide eyewitness accounts of repression received wide media coverage in Western countries. [Source: Compiled from The Guardian, 14 June 2009; The Daily Telegraph, 14 June 2009].*

### Case 3. Monitoring elections in Afghanistan

*'Any attempt to rig or interfere with Afghanistan's election could be caught out by a system that allows anyone to record incidents via text message. The Alive in Afghanistan project plots the SMS reports on an online map. Citizens can report disturbances, defamation and vote tampering, or incidents where everything "went well". Their reports feature alongside those of full-time Afghan journalists to ensure the election and reporting of it is as "free and fair" as possible. "We hope to enable people to report on what is going on in the country," explained Brian Conley, who helped set up the project. "In the rural areas there are not going to be monitors, and it is questionable how much international media coverage there will be in these areas."' [Source: BBC News, 19 August 2009].*

Cases 1, 2 and 3 provide highly visible examples of how new media are transforming the ways in which public discussion and deliberation take place, and how the visibility of democratic and antidemocratic events is distributed, reshaped and contested. But what is public communication in the first place? Any public discussion requires a space and time where it unfolds, but these are distinctively different from the here-and-now of a social locale. Mediated communication extends and prolongs but it also bounds and contains public discussion. Both dimensions – extension and containment – form essential thresholds, and this double movement defines a rhythm, which brings together chains or series of spaces and times of communication. I suggest to introduce a distinction between the mainstream, where a large-scale synchronisation of attentions occurs, and the minoritarian, where synchronisation is small-scale. On the one hand, we find a dominant attentional and affectional rhythm and, on the other, a multiplicity of variegated subdominant and subordinated (e.g., communitarian, group-based, sectarian etc.) rhythms. Of course, the public is not simply the mainstream. So, how do mainstream and minoritarian different rhythms coexist? How are the public, the communitarian, the subcultural and the oppositional created at the intersection of different rhythms of attention and centripetal social energy? It is possible to address this question from the point of view of the visibility of the public. The public sphere, as

hinted above, is constitutively a sphere of communication through visibility and accessibility or ‘collectivity’ [Weintraub and Kumar eds. 1997]. Here, the work of social and political philosophers such as Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas and Norberto Bobbio, as well as contemporary authors such as Craig Calhoun, Jeff Weintraub, Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner, proves extremely relevant. Archetypically, the public is by definition what is open and visible to everyone, as opposed to the private, which is restricted, concealed and protected. Hannah Arendt [1958, §2] insisted on the existence of a ‘world in common’ among human beings as the pivotal condition for politics. In Greek and Roman culture, Arendt argued, it is the experience of the *common* that defines the public sphere as the place where things and people can be seen and acquire the status of ‘public’. The public sphere is defined by its commonality, in contrast to the private sphere, which is characterised by deprivation and by the dominance of economic reason. It is only because the world-in-common is subject to more than merely economic rules and the ‘scholastics’ of private life that a political life in common can emerge. Notably, then, the common is not an undistinguished, totalitarian entity; on the contrary, the world-in-common is created by a plurality of perspectives which are and remain separated. The existence of the public sphere as a world-in-common which joins and separates is, for Arendt, threatened by mass society, which undermines the capacity of the public to articulate meaningful relationships and separations among people. Such ‘meaningful separation’ speaks in fact to the Hegelian theme of recognition, which has been taken up by Charles Taylor [Taylor 1989]. In particular, Taylor has argued that the sources of the subject as social Self in western political thought should be conceived by taking into account not merely large-scale social projects (as with the theories of justice for example), but especially the personal desire for recognition as constitutive of life in common.

While in disagreement with Arendt’s thesis that modernity is a time of decline of the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas [1989(1962)] similarly defined the public sphere as a realm of social life that provides a forum for the articulation of general issues. The public sphere emerged in the modern age, from the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century, as a third

domain, distinct from both private households and the public power. The public sphere is the space of civil society, as distinct from private association on the one hand, and institutionalised political society on the other. Its specificity consists in providing the infrastructure for the elaboration of public opinion through public debate – that is, debate on matters of general interest and issues of common concern. Such debates are joined by all those citizens potentially affected by the outcomes of political decisions on the issues at stake and are carried out according to rational rules. Participation and deliberation are the crucial aspects of this sphere of social action. Linked to institutions such as coffee houses, public libraries and, above all, modern mass media such as the press, the history of the public sphere is the history of the consolidation of the bourgeois society. Indeed, Habermas depicted discussion as revolving substantively about the rules that guide economic exchange and economic relationships. The defining features of the public sphere are its essential accessibility to all citizens, who can debate issues critically, and the principle of the public availability of proceedings (*Publizitätsvorschriften*) – an issue that becomes particularly evident in cases such as 2 and 3. Habermas also diagnosed a crisis of the public sphere during the course of the twentieth century, in the form of a ‘refeudalisation’. On the one hand, new powerful private actors, such as large corporations, started undertaking direct political action through control and manipulation of communication and the media, thus promoting their private interests in a way that is at odds with the original logic of the public sphere. On the other hand, the Keynesian configuration of the western welfare state corresponded to a more active engagement of the state in the private sphere and everyday life, leading to an erosion of the distinction between political and civil society which was itself the object of criticism [see e.g. Young 1990]. Following the Frankfurt School line of analysis, Habermas described the decline of the public sphere as a process of transformation of citizens into consumers, which eventually leads to a decline of interest in the common good and direct participation – although he later acknowledged that the idea of such a linear trajectory was too simplistic [Habermas 1993]. Normatively speaking, the deliberative structure of the public sphere and its orientation to

the principles of all-affected decision and universalisation should facilitate the emergence and the formation of opinions functional to the taking of binding decisions, although in a strict sense for Habermas the public sphere does not include the binding decisions that have been taken. Indeed, the latter already belong to the sphere of government and are expressed in political-legal language. The public sphere is, in a sense, the atmosphere of democracy.

Reflecting on the nature of politics, Norberto Bobbio [1999] similarly identified democracy as a type of power that poses a specific challenge to the older elitist tradition of secret power (the *arcana imperii*). The elitist tradition is grounded in a negative anthropology maintaining that there is no cure for the evil of power. In this view, history is reduced to a contingent series of facts that do not alter the basic cupidity for power that inherently characterises the human being. Power is believed to have been, and to be unavoidably always bound to be, in the hands of a minority, an élite which is not legitimated from below but rather synarchically self-legitimises and rules. Understandably, this bitter reality of power is often kept hidden to avoid contention and political turmoil. This is the classic theme of the Pascalian ‘mystical foundations of authority’. Bobbio defines democracy as the opposite of the *arcana*: democracy is ‘power in public’, power whose inner mechanisms are made visible to all and therefore (at least, ideally) controllable. Modern democracy was born in opposition to the Middle Age and early modern treaties on the art of government, such as the Machiavellian-styled ‘advice to the Prince.’ Whereas the precepts-to-the-Prince literature looked at power *ex parte principis*, from the point of view of the prince, modern democracy forms when one starts to look at power *ex parte populi*, from the point of view of the people. The gaze from below amounts to a vigorous call for the openness and visibility of power. Whereas all autocratic regimes are founded upon the conservation of secrecy in proceedings, the crucial democratic challenge is to achieve a deployment of power that is ultimately without secrets. The device of political representation is necessarily public, as recognised even by opponents of this view, such as Carl Schmitt. For his own part, Max Weber [1978(1922): I, §III, 3-5] saw quite clearly that modern bureaucracy is an

ambivalent institution. On the one hand, bureaucracy is necessary to achieve the legal-rational form of power, based on the specialisation of competences and the standardisation of procedures: bureaucratic apparatuses are capable of attaining the highest degrees of efficiency and represent the most rational way to control people because they guarantee a high degree of calculability of outcomes. On the other hand, however, not only does bureaucracy produce conformity and uniform technical competence, it also tends to breed plutocracy and dominance of formalistic impersonality, and, above all, it is constantly tempted to resort to restrictions to open access to government records, through the production of classified documents (*Amtsgeheimnisse*) and other inaccessible technicalities. These perils of technocracy have also been remarked more recently by other democratic theorists, such as Robert Dahl [1989].

### 1.1. *Publics, counter-publics and non-public publics*

#### Case 4. Stripteases at funerals

*On 16 August 2009, in the county of Donghai in China (a mainly rural region, but also known for crystal and silicon production), five people were arrested for running striptease acts at a farmer's funeral. Striptease used to be a not uncommon practice at funerals in Donghai's rural areas. The aim of this type of show was to attract a wider public to the funeral: according to the local villagers, larger audiences were the sign of greater dead person's honour. [Source: Compiled from BBC World News, 23 August 2006].*

#### Case 5. City wall tagging

*'I paint the wall but the house is still workin', right? I haven't... The use of the house is you can still live in it, maybe it's just slightly different, aesthetically speaking. I understand you get angry about that, but after all I don't give a damn. Fuck off, I too want my slice of fun in all this shit. I found it like this, too bad for you.'* [Source: Personal conversation with graffiti writer, discussed in Brighenti 2010c].

#### Case 6. Women-only beach

*In December 1992, a male resident near the Sydney beach of Coogee formally complained to the New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Board for his exclusion from McIvers Baths, an ocean pool at Coogee which is open to women and children only, alleging 'discrimination on the grounds of sex'. After various legal and media*



*debates, on 18 January 1993 Randwick Council (1995a, p. 2) unanimously passed a motion establishing that 'McIvers Ladies Pool at Coogee be retained for the exclusive use of women and children under twelve years and that Council take all necessary steps to support the present use of the pool, including proceedings before the Equal Opportunity Tribunal.'* [Source: Compiled from Iveson 2003].

#### Case 7. Unwanted exposures

*'On 5 September 2006, Facebook – a social network site primarily used by college students at the time – launched a feature called "News Feeds". Upon logging in, users faced a start page that listed every act undertaken by their Friends within the system – who beFriended whom, who commented on whose Wall, who altered their relationship status to "single", who joined what group and so on. None of the information displayed through this feature was previously private per se, but by aggregating this information and displaying it in reverse chronological order, News Feeds made the material far more accessible and visible [...] At launch, this aggregated display outraged Facebook users. Users formed groups like "Students Against Facebook News Feeds" to protest against the feature; over 700,000 people joined the aforementioned group to express their frustration and confusion. Less than 24 hours after the launch, Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg responded with a blog entry entitled "Calm down. Breathe. We Hear You". This did not allay participants' concerns and on 8 September, Zuckerberg returned to the blog with an apology and a peace offering in the form of new privacy options.'* [boyd 2008, 13].

In spite of the differences between their views, most social theorists share a concern for the transformations of the public sphere during the twentieth century. Those who see a shrinkage or deterioration of the public sphere – Habermas' 'refeudalisation' or Blumler and Gurevitch's [1995] 'crisis of public communication' – find it threatening to democracy. This is particularly true for what Jeff Weintraub [Weintraub and Kumar eds. 1997] has called the 'republican-virtue' model, in which the public sphere is understood as the polity. In this respect, Graig Calhoun [2005] has observed that democracy constitutively requires both inclusion and connection among citizens; in other words, citizens should be able to access relevant information and communicate with each other in a common world which extends beyond primary, private associations. This is also why the public sphere has historically appeared in the city and was later spread by the media over a wider territory (a process analysed by Foucault as an 'urbanisation of territory'). Like Habermas, Calhoun also finds that transparent and symmetric communication is constitutive of the public sphere

[see also Calhoun ed. 1993]. The public sphere, Calhoun claims, cannot be conceived as the mere 'sum' of a set of separate private opinions, for such a conception deletes the fundamental process of the formation of public opinion itself, which takes place through discussion and deliberation. Similarly, Luc Boltanski [1999] has finely problematised the idea of the public sphere as producing an 'aperspectival objectivity' – the latter idea descending from Rousseau's notion of general will, a will that would not correspond either to the mere will of the majority or to the mean of empirical wills. Contrarily to aperspectivalism, the public sphere is filled with engagements and stances toward action.

In her critique of bourgeois, masculinist and, more generally, status-neutral conceptions of the public sphere, Nancy Fraser [1993] wrote about the existence of a plurality of 'subaltern counterpublics', including, for example, the feminist counterpublic. As revealed by cases 6 and 7, these counterpublics also critically raise the issue of the efficacy of public discussion and deliberation. Both normative legitimacy and political efficacy of public discussion become all the more urgent in a postnational or global context, where issues of inclusiveness and capacitation need to be addressed on an unprecedented scale [Fraser 2007]. According to Pellizzoni [2003], today the public sphere seems to be plagued by the incommensurability of languages and the intractability of controversies. These characteristics, Calhoun [2005] has argued, lead to a multiplication of social arenas that serve as public spheres. For instance, extensive discussions have been carried out on whether or not the internet could be counted as public sphere [Poster 1997]. Clearly, in its generality this question cannot be answered, and a sensitive enquiry should begin by differentiating and analysing the different territorialities and territorial formations of the internet, for while it is certainly true that, whenever to get a rough idea about a social phenomenon of general interest you 'try a web search', this suggests something about the communicative commonality of the web, on the other hand all sorts of walls, fences are part of the internet as far as private, corporate, military and lobby interests are concerned. Commenting on the trend toward the pluralisation of communicative arenas, Michael Warner [2005] has defined as

‘counter-publics’ those subordinate and historically stigmatised publics that are defined by their tension with or opposition to a larger public, for instance GLTBQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) cultures, but also graffiti writers crews (case 5), could be included in this category. A counterpublic is not a strict or bounded community, it is always territorially spread and its communications are mediated. It comes into being through an ‘address to indefinite strangers’ [Warner 2005, 120]. At the same time, though, a counter-public is clearly distinct from the general public because people who are part of it are socially marked by their participation in it. It is so to the point that sometimes external protections may be called forth, as in case 6.

While the attempt to pluralise the notion of public is potentially interesting because it allows the recognition of the diversity of arenas of communication and discussion made possible by the mass media and the new media, three major limits can be found in both classic and contemporary public sphere theories. First of all, there is a tendency to think in dichotomic terms, as if the public and the private were simply two opposed and symmetric entities – or, in Bobbio’s words, one of the ‘grand dichotomies’ of Western political thought. This is a limitation because it leads us to simply associate the public with the visible and the private with the invisible, hampering our capacity to conceptualise the public in its complex and articulated forms of visibility.

Second, the public sphere is supposed to be a social space for interaction, but in essence Habermas’ theorisation remains spatially and materially blind – as does, for that matter, that of his adversary Luhmann. While Habermas focuses on rational and critical communicative processes, one needs no more than a slight ethnographic sensibility to remember that deliberations and communications always entail uncomfortable chairs, noisy rooms, typos, defective antennas, rhetorical tricks, verbal aggressions and all sorts of cultural waste, muck and filth. As Alan McKee [2005] has reminded us in his excellent introduction to the topic, far from being an ideal space, the public sphere is (also) a place of trivialisation, commercialisation, spectacle, fragmentation and apathy (an uncanny case 4 reminds us of the strange effects of the quest for visibility) – which, let us be clear about this point, does

not at all detract from its importance. In other words, as observed by many critics, there is too much ideality in the Habermasian description of how communication occurs, which is in part linked to his explicitly normative commitment. Public communication does not simply occur, it takes place. Therefore, the material constitution of the 'sphere' is hardly irrelevant, as observed by Paolo Carpiagnano [1999]. Because the public sphere is inherently mediated, Carpiagnano has argued, it is necessary to closely scrutinise how this media space is materially, technologically and socially shaped.

Third, and even more problematically, is the idea of a plurality of public spheres. If the public sphere is defined with Arendt and Habermas as grounded in the existence of a life in common, what kind of encompassing commonality can a plurality of distinct and separated spheres of communication produce? Once we introduce the idea of a plurality of communicative arenas – whose existence, we should remember, is a fact – can we still refer to each of them as 'public'? Or are we, on the contrary, before a different configuration? If we can speak of 'public life', how many 'public lives' can exist? Public lives can only be the lives of (private) people in public, but once again that only shifts the question: what is 'public'? Are counter-publics really publics, or are they in fact non-public publics? I believe the latter is the case. The existence of non-public publics should not be understood as something negative. Quite the contrary, these other communicative formations are extremely important for society: they correspond to communitarian, subcultural or oppositional minorities who importantly intervene in the mainstream, fostering change within, and sometimes even dissolving into it. In fact, the 'counter-' or 'subaltern-' prefixes refer to a specific relationship these minoritarian arenas of communication entertain with the mainstream. The point is that, just like the public does not belong to the state or any formal institution, it does not belong to any specific social group, either.

In my view, the only way to overcome these paradoxes is to recognise that the public cannot be either an institution or a specific group of people. There may be some publicness to these subjects, but neither collectives nor individuals can be the public. As James Donald [2003, 52] put it, the public refers not to the *fact*

of community but to the *question* of community. One cannot be *the public*, one can only be *in public*: the public, in other words, is 'bridging' rather than 'bonding'. Gabriel Tarde's [1901] social theory is particularly useful here. Indeed Tarde conceptualised the public through the two elements of synchronicity of attention *coupled with* territorial dispersal. From this perspective, the public is defined by a rhythm of visibility and a scale of association. It is an undulatory, anadyomenic phenomenon, a pulsation, a non-collective non-individual singularity. My suggestion is that we should distinguish the dimension of the public – or better, publicity – from any specific social group with which it is associated, which reclaims it or in which some publicity manifests itself. Such a perspective may be accused of being unsympathetic or uncaring towards minorities, counterpublics and their claims, but arguably it is not at all so. If the public cannot be equated with any minority group, least of all can it be equated with the majority. Rather, the point is to image the public as a register of interaction and a regime of visibility. The dimension in which it exists is eminently a ecological dimension of 'inter-', and from this point of view the existence of a plurality of groups, formations, with their various voices and appropriations, is absolutely central to the dynamic of publicness. Indeed, the regime of publicness runs through the various social territories which have been defined by theorists considered above as counter-publics. The public runs through them as a single element (the element of visibility) – hence, precisely, its commonality.

## 2. *Public interaction and communication*

...a generic face, somehow, a face that would become invisible in any crowd...

Paul Auster, *Invisible*.

When he first arrived in London he used to stare boldly into the faces of these passers-by, searching out the unique essence of each. Look, I am looking at you! He was saying. But bold stares got him nowhere in a city where, he soon discovered, neither men nor women met his gaze but, on the contrary, coolly evaded it.

Each refusal of his gaze felt like a tiny knife-prick. Again and again he was being noted, found wanting, turned down. Soon he began to lose his nerve, to flinch even before the refusal came. With women he found it easier to look covertly, steal looks. That, it would seem, was how looking was done in London. But in stolen looks there was – he could not rid himself of feeling – something shifty, unclean. Preferable not to look at all. Preferable to be incurious about one’s neighbours, indifferent.

John M. Coetzee, *Youth*.

We studied the familiar strangers. We spoke to them in station after station, and this is what they told us. As the years go by, familiar strangers become harder to talk to. The barrier hardens. And we know — if we were to meet one of these strangers far from the station, say, when we were abroad, we would stop, shake hands, and acknowledge for the first time that we know each other. But not here. And we know — if there was a great calamity, a flood, a fire, a storm, the barriers would crumble. We would talk to each other. But the problem for those of us who live in the city is this: How can we come closer — without the fire, without the flood, without the storm.

Stanley Milgram, *The City and the Self* (film).

#### Case 8. Managing social kissing

*New classes are being launched to teach UK business people about Indian etiquette after a series of “mini-disasters” involving hapless executives. The UK India Business Council will run the first of a series of classes tomorrow offering tips on how to bow graciously, smile politely and refrain from kissing women. The lessons follow reports of business deals collapsing due to overly tactile sales people, patronising chief executives and British delegates offending their Indian counterparts by standing with their hands on their hips and calling Indian managers by their first names.’ [Source: The Guardian, 28 July 2008].*

#### Case 9. Increasing restrictions on public behaviour

*During the course of 2009, in Italy a huge number of municipal directives restricting permitted behaviour in public spaces have been passed. In each case fines up to 500 euros are established. Some examples: In Genova it is forbidden to carry open bottles of alcoholic drinks in the street. In Milano, teenagers are prohibited to buy alcohol. In Rome and Venice it is forbidden to stop and eat in public squares. In Bologna and Modena it is forbidden to consume alcohol everywhere in the street. In Verona, Bolzano and Naples it is forbidden to smoke in outdoors public places such as parks. In Capoliveri (Elba island) teenagers are banned from smoking and even carrying tobacco with them. In Savona it is forbidden to lay down on public green. In Voghera it is forbidden to sit on public benches after 11pm, while in Viareggio it is forbidden to step feet on public benches. In Novara it is forbidden to stay in public*

*parcs in groups of more than three. In Lucca it is forbidden to feed the pigeons, as in many other tourist cities. In Eboli it is forbidden to kiss in the car. In Lucca and Capriate (Bergamo) it is prohibited to sell kebab in the city centre. In Varallo Sesia (Vercelli) women wearing traditional Arab costumes are denied to bath, while in Azzano Decimo (Pordenone) it is forbidden to wear the hijab. In Thiene (Vicenza) it is forbidden to sit on ladders, to eat in the street and to climb on buildings and gates. In Lerici (La Spezia) it is forbidden to wear bikini on the beach. In Capri and Positano it is forbidden to walk with sabots and have pic-nics on the beach. In Marina di Camerota, Milano Marittima e Cervia (Ravenna) it is forbidden to play music after midnight. In Sorrento buskers are banned from playing for more than 15 minutes in the same place. In Eraclea (Venezia) it is forbidden to dig holes in the beach. Nationwide, it is forbidden to do massages on the beach. In Maiori, near Amalfi, it is forbidden to take baths by night. In Trapani it is forbidden to drink and eat in the street; in Sanremo it is forbidden to walk with bare torso in the city centre and wash in fountains. In Porto Azzurro it is forbidden to hang the wash and to throw cigarette filters on the ground. [Source: Compiled from rainews24, 19 August 2009 and other official sources].*

In order to better understand how visibility regimes are constitutive of the domain of the public, and how private individual and collective bodies and objects access this domain, we need to take into account a second tradition of studies. Sociologists have developed the notion of public realm precisely as a regime of interaction and an arena of visibility and intervisibility of actors. While political philosophers have insisted on the procedural and deliberative dimension associated with communicative action, sociologists also study the specificities and practicalities of public space through the only apparently mundane details of interaction in public. Richard Sennett [1978], for instance, focused on western urban space in order to physically situate the public sphere. He argued that it was the very transformation of modern city life that fostered the crisis of the public dimension of society.

During the nineteenth century, Sennett explained, the construction of the public sphere had meant the construction of an impersonal, role-based model of interaction, which enabled people to deal with complex and disordered situations of city life. The fall of this model is due to the rise of a new emotivism and a thirst for authenticity, community, emotional expression of feelings and desires. Indifference, concerns for personal safety,

fear of victimisation, and a whole ideology of the ‘coldness’ of public space caused a general retreat into the private, in search for the ‘warm’ human relations supposed to be found in the family and the community. Emotivism and communitarianism thus induced a crisis in the dynamism of the public sphere as well as a decrease in ‘civility,’ understood as the capacity to relate positively to strangers. In other words, the fall of the public man corresponded to an increasing fear of strangers’ intervisibility. In the new situation, visibility immediately came to be perceived as intrusive because of a deterioration in the ability to feel protected while dealing with unknown others. Such an incapacity to live with strangers, Sennett observed, is deeply problematic, because intimate relations cannot be successfully projected as a basis for social relations at large. Recent trends such as the one reported in case 9 reveals that Sennett’s reflection is far from superseded.

Sennett’s description of the public realm shares similarities with ideas emerging from interactionist sociology. Erving Goffman [1963; 1967; 1971] approached public space from the perspective of the specific type of interaction that goes on in public. This is a sociality made of fleeting encounters among strangers in specific urban locales, which calls for a ‘ceremonial idiom’ of deference and demeanour, in a social and ecological context of ‘throwntogetherness’ [Massey 2005; Amin 2008] – which is of course culturally influenced, as reminded by case 8. Civil inattention entails a precise politics of visibility whereby the stranger is noticed and appreciated but also respected: s/he will not become the target of an intrusive attention or curiosity, his/her territory will not be invaded. For instance, if we consider the case of harassment [Nielsen 2004], we have an encounter with a predatory stranger in a public context, but the act of predation itself is private, it is an act that denies and even disrupts the public realm. As also noted by Cooper [2007], for the persecuted and the oppressed, the point is not to preserve their privacy but rather to strengthen the public as a site open to interconnections, contestations and, in Hirschman’s words, ‘voice’. Isaac Joseph [1984] described interactionist sociology as the study of the ‘depth the surface’ of interaction, as a ‘skin of the social’ where the oscillations between the public and the private determine interconnections and separations. Working within a Goffmanian



framework, and also influenced by classic works by Jane Jacobs [1961], Lyn Lofland [1998] has insisted on the elements of stranger interaction and urban environment as constitutive of the public realm at large. The public realm, according to Lofland, can be conceived primarily as a type of register of human interaction which differs from other registers, specifically from the private one. Lofland highlights in particular that the realms of the private (or the intimate), the parochial (or communitarian) and the public are social-psychological rather than spatial. The type of realm, in other words, is not defined by the physical space in which it is located but by its predominant relational form. The public realm, in particular, is where forms of ‘categorical recognition’ – i.e., recognition based on social typification – are most common.

Whereas in the private realm the dominant relational form is intimate, and in the parochial realm it is communitarian, in the public realm the dominant form is essentially categorical. A categorical form of relation, which corresponds to the capacity to deal with biographic strangers, stems mainly from the experience of urban life and is based on the only apparently thin capacity to coexist in a civil manner, accepting the existence of social diversity. Thus, Lofland’s analysis advances an apology of the public realm on the basis of its social value as an environment for active learning, a site for relief from sometimes oppressive strong ties, a place where both social cooperation and social conflict can be acted out, and, ultimately, the only true place for social communication and the practice of politics.

While for political theorists the private/public distinction is mainly based on communicative rationality (more precisely, a normative model of that rationality), for interaction sociologists it entails a properly ritual element. Simply to be observed in public entails assuming postures, ways of behaving, expectations, if not ascribed roles [Joseph 1998]. Certainly, from this point of view, being in public entails a degree of disciplinatio in Foucault’s sense. Media studies scholars have extended the issue of public visibility to mediated communications, analysing the complex and subtle ways in which the personal, the private and the political interweave, and how the ritual dimension of publicity is achieved, reproduced and contested [Couldry 2003]. As argued for instance by Peter Dahgren [1995], media organisations in general and, in

particular, public broadcasts have represented themselves as the heralds of the public sphere. While the media, and the press in particular, were also at the centre of Habermas model, the research into electronic mass media visibilities and new digital media visibilities has produced a much more nuanced picture of how an audience comes to be shaped, together with the type of practices, rhythms, framing and affections that are inherent in mediated communication.

### 3. *Public space*

Public space is not space in the city but the city itself. Not nodes but circulation routes; not buildings and plazas, but roads and bridges. Public space is leaving home, and giving up all the comforts of the cluster-places that substitute for the home.

Vito Acconci, *Public Space in a Private Time*.

#### Case 10. Give peace a mall

*On 3 March 2003 a lawyer named Stephen Downs was arrested and charged with trespassing at Crossgates Mall, a public mall in the state in Guilderland, New York, near Albany. He had refused to take off a T-shirt advocating peace that he had just purchased at the mall. According to the criminal complaint, Mr Downs was wearing a T-shirt bearing the words "Give Peace A Chance" that he had just purchased from a vendor inside the mall. "I was in the food court with my son when I was confronted by two security guards and ordered to either take off the T-shirt or leave the mall," Mr Downs told Reuters in a telephone interview. When Downs refused the security officers' orders, police from the town of Guilderland were called and he was arrested and taken away in handcuffs, charged with trespassing "in that he knowingly enter(ed) or remain(ed) unlawfully upon premises," the complaint read. [Source: Compiled from CNN/US, 4 March 2003].*

#### Case 11. Fencing in/out

*The most recent census data suggests that over 18 million Americans live in Gated communities. These communities represent a very clear attempt on the part of millions of affluent Americans to literally fence themselves off from the wider community of urban centres. Schools, churches, cinemas and golf courses are provided on site by the company that owns and manages the project, and residents pay a 'management fee' in return for such communal services as refuse collection and 24-hour armed security patrols.' [Steel and Symes 2005, 323].*

Architecture is a powerful way of managing intervisibilities. Basic architectural artefacts such as walls can radically reshape publicness as defined by both social theorists and interaction sociologists, creating specialised, enclosed spaces endowed with affordances that foster a specific grammar and practice of interaction [Brighenti ed. 2009]. Just as houses protect individual privacy, offices protect commercial secrets and government buildings classified information. In most cases, walls become naturalised and work invisibly in the lifeworld's horizon. Both political philosophers and interaction sociologists tend to somewhat downplay the importance and scope of the materiality of the public. On the contrary, the interweaving and constant prolongations of materialities and immaterialities into each other have been explored by geographers and urbanists. For instance, Nicholas Blomley [2007] has recently shown the ways in which the very notion of private property was born not simply as a legal relationship but rather enacted through a variety of material processes of enclosure. Cases 10 and 11 also speak of the complexities of social spatial arrangements. While political philosophical reflection on the public sphere is almost exclusively focused on the dimension of political participation and deliberative procedures, interactionist studies of the public realm are mainly concerned with the cognitive frameworks and registers of interpersonal interaction. By doing so, however, both approaches miss the properly spatial and material constraints and capacitations that constitute the public. By contrast, urban studies essentially illuminate how possibilities for publicness and constraints upon the public dimension are embodied. Obviously, the public cannot be explained in merely spatial terms, for it includes a regime of interaction and communication. The public is a social territory, yet precisely as such it is materially grounded. This materiality of the public is not trivial, it is deeply imbued with an energetic and directional element: as the artist Vito Acconci expressed, public space is linked to a vector of exit, of relative deterritorialisation ('leaving home'). But how is this state produced in practice within given locales, how does this vector operate upon previously constituted social territorialities?

An important tradition of reflection on public space has been initiated by the classic works of Kevin Lynch [1960] on the mental

image of the city and Jane Jacobs [1961] on sidewalks and boroughs in large cities. Jacobs in particular insisted that the built-in equipment of urban open spaces is essential to sustain and enhance their very publicness. Contrary to dystopian views, urban public space is made of more than abandoned concrete islands and other terminal landscapes. The subtleties of the physical uses of public space were also highlighted by nuanced observational studies such as William Whyte's [2001(1980)] on the 'life' of streets and plazas in New York city. More recently, Low, Taplin and Scheld [2006] have argued that social tolerance and peaceful public coexistence depend on the availability of inclusive and culturally diverse urban public spaces (case 10 serves here as a counterexample of what happens when a genuine public space lacks). For all of these authors, social identities engage in mutual relationships, interact and define themselves in public space. Certainly, as we have now repeated perhaps a sufficient number of times, public space is a space of intervisibility of subjects; yet at the same time, as crucially remarked by Isaac Joseph [1998], public interaction is not seamless but always fragmentary. To take another illustration, Michael Bull [2007] has analysed urban retreatism that is associated with the use of iPods. Public space, Bull contends, is impoverished as urban social space and comes to be shaped as independent bubbles. Similar views, on the other hand, trace back to an old anti-urban or urbanophobic tradition represented by a number of notable authors, including Jean Jacques Rousseau. Anticipating a large part of twentieth-century critiques of alienation in the metropolis, Rousseau sternly criticised urban public life on the ground that it only produced passive individuals voyeuristically assembled around a spectacle [Kohn 2008].

Do practices such as 'iPodding the city' really amount to a denial of the public, or are they on the contrary a way of actually *performing* public space? Is 'fragmentation' really the opposite of 'togetherness'? In this respect, Luc Lévesque [2008] has interestingly theorised public space as an 'interstitial constellation', made of discontinuous and even often left-over spaces in the city. Lévesque suggests to explore the type of movements that are inherent in these spaces through a set of actions that characterise a few important twentieth-century artists: 'shaking' (Man Ray),

‘perforating’ (Lucio Fontana) and ‘impregnating’ (Yves Klein). If we start looking at public spaces as encounters, acts and configurations, no physical determinism is tenable. Neither urban planning, nor urban design nor architecture can dictate a single use of a given space; they can only provide a set of affordances; and, as architects and planners increasingly recognise, public space is constantly appropriated in a number of unforeseen ways. Thus, urban scholars have increasingly turned to studying the practices that occur in public space – a topic which was traditionally the domain of interaction sociologists.

Ethnographic observation of public practices should be integrated within larger reflections in order to make sense of what is the proper social layer of publicness that the ethnographer can observe. In an important piece of research on public territorialities in two Swedish cities, Mattias Kärholm [2005; 2007] has distinguished phenomena of territorial production and territorial stabilisation. In turn, both production and stabilisation can be either strategic – i.e., planned and delegated – or tactical – i.e. practical and implicit. Public places thus appear as complex territorially stratified entities, in which the various territorialities correspond to series of acts of appropriation and territorialisation, while the distinction between strategic and tactical ways of action is essentially relative to the degree of visibility of a certain productive or stabilising/associative – as well as, to introduce another relevant notion, destabilising/dissociative – act. Kärholm also reflects on how the process of commercialisation of public space necessarily entails an issue of rhythm, concerning the synchronisation of visibilities and attentions.

Intervening into public space is thus an affective endeavour. The case of skaters [Borden 2001] is noteworthy. Like other urban sports, skateboarding provides a performative critique and a situational appropriation of open areas. Skaters bodily engage in an unconventional way of crossing urban environments, materially questioning urban design and architecture. In a similar vein, Sophie Watson [2006] has studied a series of invisible practices that define forms of appropriation of public space in the city, like the Jewish eruv, street markets, pond swimming, public bathing facilities, allotments and so on. For his part, Stéphane Tonnelat [2008] has shown how publicity, visibility and interstitiality

interweave even in what planners regard as residual spaces. They are commonly described as no-man's land and social vacuums, although they are populated by a finely modulated scenery of visibility, ranging from people who find shelter there to people who are 'just passing'. Similarly, Blomley [2004] has described the clashes between different conceptions of private property and dwelling. Appropriations are almost always met with reactions, which include competition, complaints, quarrels, discussions, in short, communication – and this is what the public realm is about. Whilst several of these small-scale processes may pass unnoticed by planners and administrators, in fact they represent what makes public space on the ground. The public is constantly crossed by acts of territorialisation, and the territorialising process is a way of visibly – publicly – carving the environment through certain acts of boundary-drawing, which concurrently help to stabilise the set of relationships that take place in the environment.

Thus, acts, affections, attitudes and institutions are all crucial components. Isaac Joseph [1998] observed that public space originates in two types of requirements: on the one hand, a series of institutional devices including official definitions and legal regulations, on the other, a series of attitudes that subjects hold about how they should behave and orient themselves in public. For Joseph, the public has a critical potential insofar as it reveals the fragmentation and balkanisation of communities by constantly submitting them to a public judgement. Public space is dispersed and circulatory yet by these very characteristics – not in spite of them – it constantly produces co-presence and encounters.

The public cannot be sociologically defined on the basis of either its ideal normative diagram or its official legal framework. It has often been observed that some publicly owned places are in fact difficult to access, while conversely privately owned spaces can function as public places. Between the formal property of a space and its actual use there is often a cleavage. Accessibility is therefore an essential component. Basically, public space has low entry thresholds, which does not mean that they are completely absent but that they are relatively lower or practically less enforced. Many authors have insisted on the quality of 'meetingness' that is supposed to be inherent in public space. However, to place social interaction at the centre of the definition

of the public should not lead to our overlooking the specific material and territorial qualities of places. Analysis should focus on the affordances that are actualised in various circumstances in order to understand the visibilising processes associated to such actualisations of the public. The zone of convergence between the material qualities of places and the immaterial relationships that are inscribed in them constitutes what I propose to call the ‘public domain’. Before turning to elaborate this notion more detailedly, another challenging material-cum-immaterial construct should be considered, namely public order.

#### 4. Public orderliness

##### Case 12. Learning to cross the road

*‘After a 1936 inter-departmental committee on road safety among school children recommended road safety training in every school, there began an eagerly anticipated ritual in the life of every child: the police visit. According to Major C. V. Godfrey, the chief constable of Salford in the 1930s, children looked forward to these visits with eager anticipation: ‘It is no uncommon thing for these children of working-class parents to ask if they may wear their best clothes on the day when a police lecture is to take place.’ On these visits, the inspector would give a brief lecture about road safety, and then go over to the piano and conduct the communal singing of the ‘safety first’ song:*

*When you cross the road by day or night,  
Beware of the dangers that loom in sight.  
Look to the left, and look to the right,  
Then you’ll never, never get run over.’*

[Moran 2006, 482].

##### Case 13. Urban snapshot from ‘aftermath’ United States of America

*‘[F]ace-recognition cameras on lamp-poles; police or security officers on every corner; dogs and their handlers roaming the squares and parks; reinforced, more bunker-like buildings; traffic restrictions sensitive to changing conditions (through the use of automatic barriers that can rise up through the pavement and close off streets nearly instantly); the elimination of “all above- and all below- ground parking” near key public spaces and important buildings; continual broadcasts of public-service announcements throughout public squares [...] and the installation of numerous planters, bollards, and blast-resistant trash cans.’ [Mitchell 2003, 2-3].*

While public space is usually regarded as an index of democracy, public order is more commonly associated with

government. However, as remarked above, the notion of public order has many different and partially contradictory meanings. In the literature on governance and policing, ‘securing public order’ is often undertaken as one of the main aims. But what does this mean in practice? To which set of practices does public order correspond? Which sort of policies and which ‘police’ do implement or sustain it?

From a genealogical perspective, Michel Foucault [2004(1977-78)] first described the birth of an activity known as the ‘police of territory’ or ‘police of the city’ (*Stadtpolizei*), which is the control over public space. In its original meaning, policing is the administrative activity that helps organising a society so as to optimise the balancing between its means and ends. The aim of this governmental rationality is to obtain a well-balanced and flourishing, prosperous society (hence *Wohlfahrts Polizei*, or ‘police of the welfare’). In this earlier modern use, the term ‘police’ clearly covers a much broader range of meanings than it does today. For instance, in seventeenth and eighteenth century absolutist France, the birth of the police apparatus was conceived as a tool for the total government of society, as clearly expressed in Nicolas Delamare’s 1705 classic dissertation, according to which the task of policing is no less than to produce ‘the happiness of the people’ [Rawlings 2002; Napoli 2003; Campesi 2009].

The imperative to control urban space is part of a process carried out by the administrative apparatus which Foucault described as the ‘urbanisation of territory’. It comprises a number of control tasks, ranging from mundane issues of traffic circulation (including the mere act of crossing the road, as highlighted by case 12), through uncivil behaviour in the streets and airport security measures, to large-scale riots, civil unrest and upheaval (‘public disorders’). Foucault’s analysis underlines that all apparatuses of administration and governance are *strategic* (they are functional to the manipulation of relations of forces) and *heterogeneous* (they comprise different types of activities). From this point of view, the police apparatus represents the original blueprint of what Foucault called ‘biopolitical governmentality’: indeed, the police is simultaneously a discourse of legal-political self-legitimation and one of administrative governmental efficiency. The general aim of policing is to make society and,



more precisely, a given population 'legible' [Scott 1998]. Not only does the state attempt to make its own population legible through the collection of aggregated, standardised, documentary facts, it also tries to concretely shape it according to those same imperatives. Accordingly, public order is an active practice of ordering public space, setting flows and boundaries, calculating possible events which are going to occur with a certain probability. More precisely, public order is not order per se, but rather entails managing the thresholds within which disorder is acceptable. Public order amounts to distributing various disorders in a given urban space, operating upon the set-up of a territory and the visibilities of the subjects who circulate in it. The birth of a professional metropolitan police in eighteenth-century Europe is intimately linked to such a notion of public order and yet it is by no means its only element, as other mundane ordering tools of traffic regulation remind us.

Capitalism appeared as a historical force that put the original governmental rationality of 'total policing' in crisis: capitalism makes it impossible to isolate any given territory from external flows of money, goods and labour. However, in the spatial management of colonial and urban territories, i.e. both in the colonies and the homeland, capitalism and the police soon found themselves allied. In this respect, Karl Marx first analysed the bills that criminalised 'vagrants' and their subsistence activities in early modern Europe as legislation that was functional to capitalism. Simultaneously, such a control of movements – encompassing rural-urban migration and various types of urban travel and transport – was a quintessential domain of policing. Foucault [2004(1977-78)] named these forms of control *dispositifs de sécurité* (apparatuses or devices of security) and reconstructed the way in which, thanks to the logic of security, the discourse of liberalism did not fall in contradiction but could rather ally itself with governmental practices: far from being anti-governmental, as sometimes wrongly held, liberalism represented since its inception a specific type of governmental rationality.

The aim of both discipline and security can be interpreted as a means to disaggregate multiplicities such as urban crowds, insofar as the crowd represents an 'excessive subject' [Brighenti 2010b] that must be governed. Yet their respective strategies are different

and, to a large extent, complementary: while discipline breaks down multiplicities into individual bodies to subject to specific training, security breaks down multiplicities into 'dividuals' [Deleuze 1990], sums of traits and analytical dimensions which can be empirically filled by various individuals (aggregated trends and profiles). During the shift from its original 'totalitarian' meaning of encompassing government of the polity to its circumscribed, specified and narrowed-down contemporary understanding, policing retained its ambiguity in dealing with both dividuals (population) and individuals (people). The police is not simply an unseen seeing eye, it also exercises an exemplary visibility precisely through its own visibility (interestingly, the same term 'police' applies to both the whole organisation and its single representatives who are, in essence, common people wearing a uniform). Embodying an idea of security and discipline, the police simultaneously represents the visible face of the government over a population. Most importantly, the police is not so much 'street level bureaucracy' as it is 'street level governmentality'; it is not simply a professional group but above all a regime of interaction in public.

This is evident even in mundane practices such as traffic regulation, which concerns the various uses and misuses of public spaces of transit. The modern city is a site of flows at least as it is one of dwelling. Circulation is functionally and economically vital for the city. It is no coincidence that modernist urbanists were among the most vociferous preachers of acceleration: as Le Corbusier famously put it, 'il faut tuer la rue corridor!'. Yet while modernism was calling for the liberation of speed in the city, precisely such a generalised attempt paradoxically ended up stuck in huge traffic jams, commuter hubs congestion and systematic overload. Besides its merely functional aspect, mobility constitutes both a crucial precondition for personal freedom and an essential dimension of urban citizenship. The development of a vast arrays of technologies and professional expertise mobilised to build mobility and transport infrastructures not simply in the city but in a progressively extended 'urbanised territory' – airports and stations serve as the perfect illustration, but other infrastructures including traffic lights, roundabouts, elevated, highways, freeways, overpasses, tunnels, lanes and parking lots should also be

considered – was meant to balance the imperative to produce speed, the imperative to enable citizens to move and the imperative to produce orderly circulation. The imperative of orderly circulation called for an activity of policing of flows and fluxes aimed at sorting and hierarchising different types of movement. An urbanised territory is not yet a city: indeed, these places have been famously criticised as ‘non-places’, stressing that one cannot really dwell in them, only cross them. As Sheller and Urry [2000] have observed, the system of automobility has created a form of ‘capsuled’ dwelling. While the car has enhanced personal mobility it has also created the contradiction of ‘forced flexibility’. Besides the natural environment, the car has also transformed the urban spatial and visual ecology. The notions of public space, interaction in public and public order have been profoundly affected by the material transformation of urban mobility, including not only the system of automobility (that significantly put public space under siege) but also the ratio between public and private transport and the virtual or actual fencing of different social groups through various forms of urban enclavism.

Public order is essentially interwoven with a politics of definition of acceptable, as opposed to unacceptable, disorder. Since the late 1980s, the spread of neoliberal ‘law and order’ policies has been dominated by a concern for unacceptable disorder, which turned into an obsession for safety (mainly, personal physical safety and safety of property). As Bauman [2000, 25] argued, the leitmotiv of safety has been projected as a proxy for a vanishing security (social security, security of welfare and occupational security) producing increasing ‘separation, amputation, excision, expurgation, exclusion’. Its output on the ground is well captured by case 13. Wider anxieties have been collapsed onto most immediate and tangible phenomena of disorder, fostering revanchist attitudes, moral panics and the rise of a neopunitive urban order, often propped by new criminologies such as the controversial broken-window theory [Garland 2001; Harcourt 2001]. Order itself has increasingly turned into a scarce resource and a commodity reserved to upper social strata. In response to this trend, critical questions to be addressed include: Order for whom? At which cost? And, perhaps most importantly,

what counts as order and disorder? Indeed, not only public order but the the very definition of public order has been almost taken away from debate and expropriated from direct experience. While Sennett [1970] famously celebrated the positive vitality of perceived disorder in public space as a resource to sustain publicness (through mixture and encounter with diversity), more recently Robert Sampson [2009] has found that perceptions of disorder are shared among different social groups, despite the fact that, due to that very disorder, these groups find themselves located – sometimes, forcibly so – in differently sorted and ultimately unequal places and neighbourhoods.

##### 5. *The public domain*

What made me feel best was when you sometimes undressed first and I was able to stay behind in the hut alone and put off the disgrace of showing myself in public...

Franz Kafka, *Letter to his Father*.

###### Case 14. Stolen Christmas tree in Naples

*During the night between 9 and 10 December 2009, the official public Christmas tree in Naples' Galleria Umberto was stolen. In the afternoon of the same day, it was retrieved not far from where it was stolen, in the Quartieri Spagnoli, the inner city district which is regarded as territorially controlled by the Camorra. Since 1999, the official Christmas tree has been repeatedly attacked or sabotaged (including, burnt). Various commentators have observed that this is the umpteenth attempt by the organised crime to prove that they are stronger than the official institutions. However, it has also been provocatively noted that these acts could be framed within some sort of popular justice narrative, whereby a deprived neighbourhood reaffirms its own right to Christmas decorations. [Source: Compiled from various Italian newspaper and web sources].*

The public is not only what is open to sight, but also what is touched by many. Its visibility is often excessive because it is also haptic. The public is an inhabited vision, an ecology whose parts belong to all and nobody in particular: it can be and in fact often is easily appropriated and easily discarded because it tends to be unprotected (as case 14 testifies). The public is what is constantly appropriated, yet constantly resists appropriation. From this point

of view, it can be argued that the public domain is not power, but is rather more akin to *resistance to power* (not simply *resistance against*). Contrary to what monotone celebratory views of the public sphere or public space have held (voice, empowerment etc...), the public is not necessarily harmonious and, above all, it is not necessarily a comfortable place to be in. Franz Kafka's literary work powerfully stages the violent and unpleasant nature of the public. In Kafka, the public is always a deep experience, never a relaxing one: 'the disgrace of showing myself in public'. Kafka visibilises the public as a field of gazes, haptic forces which abolish distance. It is, in a sense, a tough view and, to my mind, a tough lesson to learn. The point here is not to detract or diminish the importance of the public, rather to understand its nature, as not just a mere space of ideas, communication and representations, but as a territory of forces that shape bodies by acting upon them.

The richness of insights that can be found in the approaches outlined above, such as those of political philosophers, interaction and communication sociologists and urban studies scholars is extremely proficuous. At the same time, as indicated for instance by comparative works [Goodsell 2003; Staeheli and Mitchell 2006], an attempt to overcome the partial limitations inherent in separate disciplinary conceptualisations could also prove useful. To this end, I suggest that we adopt the label 'public domain' as an encompassing and general term to address issues traditionally associated in various ways with the public sphere, the public realm, public space and public order. In the public domain, both visibility and territoriality emerge as key analytical points, first of all because, as we have seen, the public domain is open and visible. But not simply this: accessing the public domain also means accepting that one becomes a *subject* of visibility, someone who is, in his or her turn, visible to others. Of course, such an acceptance is never unconditional and a number of problems with the public concerns precisely the management of visibility thresholds. As remarked by Joseph [1984], the public is inherently a phenomenon of thresholds. Another crucial process that is currently reshaping the boundaries of the public domain in significant ways is the emergence of visibility asymmetries fostered by contemporary surveillance practices. Not only is access to

many spaces being more and more restricted through the use of checkpoints and passwords, but the very type of categories produced by professional surveillance knowledge is intersecting with and even colonising lay knowledge in the public domain.

Because configuring intervisibilities amounts to the practice of introducing and managing qualitative thresholds between different types of events, the public domain is doubly-articulated, socio-technically and bio-politically. Hence, the public domain is eminently relational. To an important degree, it is not the subject who engages in or refrains from relationships, but the relationships that constitute the subject. Bringing into our discussion Dewey's [1927] notion of the public as a collective which will be affected by the undertaking of certain acts, while leaving aside his insistence of the public as a specific group or circle of people, we can say that the public is a *territory of affection*. As with every other territory, the public domain is bounded, but its boundaries are constantly worked upon. The public domain has both a material side, defined by bodily experience, density, circulation and urban dromology, and a social-relational, affective side, referring to the capacity of actors to affect each other, almost by contagion (as in fashion etc.): in short, the public domain is a specific modalisation of situated and materially constrained interaction. Territories are acts or events that unfold in time, creating determinations, trajectories and rhythms on the basis of threshold-making and boundary-drawing acts that introduce discontinuities in the field – the flesh – of visibility.

The issue of the effectiveness of the public sphere raised by Nancy Fraser cannot be adequately tackled unless we first consider the issue of its *affectiveness*, in other words the ways in which the public is affected as it resonates with certain themes and moods. The public is put into resonance by the circulation of words and gazes. It is a phenomenon of diffusion and even contagion which must be conceptualised precisely as a movement, or event. If Warner [2005] accredits the rather dubious and probably erroneous etymology of 'public' from 'pubic', it is still certainly true that the public and the sexual have an impersonal, de-individuated aspect in common – which, of course, they share with money. Visibility concurs crucially in the demarcation of the public domain as a relational field of attentions and affections. But

it is not a general type of visibility which defines the public domain, rather a regime of categorical recognition and a dynamic of subsequent acts of appropriation and resistance against appropriation. Otherwise we would not understand, for instance, the heated debates raised by civil rights activists against surveillance and in support of the right to anonymity in the public domain.

Visibility is not merely a free-floating aspect of social interaction. Rather, it is structured as the result of the activities and practices of all the different actors who aim to plan it or, on the contrary, to resist planning. Visibility asymmetries are arranged into structured complexes which consolidate into veritable *regimes*. Contemporary society is organised around regimes of visibility that concur in the definition and management of power, representations, public opinion, conflict and social control. Whereas potential ambivalences are inherent to all visibility effects, actual regimes contribute to the specification and activation of contextual determinations of the visible. Thus, what selects the actual effects of visibility is the whole territorial arrangement in which social relationships are embedded.

### *5.1. Public addresses*

The public domain is integrally a site of visibility and invisibility of subjects. Indeed, debates, controversies and contests over urban transformations are framed as debates, controversies and contests over the visible boundaries of public space. Such boundaries are often associated with some continuous physical space within the city where genuine urban encounters can take place. But, as Kurt Iveson [2009] has rightly stressed, the city should not be seen as the opposite of the media. The idea that the genuineness of urban encounters is uniquely tied to immediate face-to-face interaction is a mythical one. On the contrary, our urban spaces – even our spaces of intimacy – are saturated with mediations and prolongations. Elsewhere, Iveson [2007] has highlighted the limitations inherent in both ‘topographical’ and ‘procedural’ approaches to public space. Contrary to these

essentially static (either physicalist or structuralist) models of the public, Iveson has noted that the public always unfolds as a 'public address'. The public appears when a certain urban site is turned into a venue of 'public address', as an attempt to reach a dispersed public of personally unknown yet significant recipients. Every form of address to a public thus entails imagining a public to be addressed. Building on Iveson's point, we can add that such an imagination concretely proceeds through acts of projection and inscription into the visible of a diagram of association and/or sociality. The public domain is different from the communitarian domain: whereas the latter is thick and is often imagined as a 'warm' environment, the former is a thin layer of sociation, often criticised for becoming too thin and for being 'cold'. But thermometric metaphors are not satisfactory: the public domain is in-between, it is the inter-, the ecological.

The prolongations of the public possess rhythms and inhere to motilities. The contemporary situation is one in which, following Appadurai [1996], due to the combination of global media and mass migrations, both viewers and images simultaneously are on the move. Such motilities are qualitatively and quantitatively differential, in the double sense of differentiated and differentiating. Today, the control over motilities – made possible by sorting the visibilities of subjects, events and rhythms – leads to a new form of social stratification. In light of this, Jacques Rancière [1998] has opposed 'politics' to 'police' and has attributed the quality of 'circulation' to the latter: policing is the activity of controlling public space governing the appearing of subjects in it and their disappearing from it, through having them 'circulate'.

However, what Rancière overlooks in his description of politics as 'settled' and opposed to the circulation of policing is that public space in its full political significance is precisely a space of circulation. As indicated by Joseph [1998], it is at the same time a space of *circulation* and a space of *communication*. On the contrary, settledness is arguably a characteristic not only of politics but also of private property. The public consists of a coefficient of deterritorialisation and motilisation of local territories, through their constraints and affordances, in order to set in motion an address characterised by categorical recognition. A nice illustration



of this is an old tradition in Naples known as the 'paid coffee'. It is a peculiar form of charity and solidarity, whereby after having a coffee in a bar one can pay one more, which is left as a bonus for an unknown future customer who may be experiencing economic troubles, who will be roaming around asking bartenders if there is any 'paid coffee' s/he can take advantage of. In another important case, Blomley [2004] has focused on how different conceptions of property are enacted both practically and discursively in the city. Here, we find different conceptions of property and appropriation of the land. Arguably, while there is scope for invisible practices of resistance, the public domain emerges in those zones of discontinuity between different practices and different legal framings of those practices. Such discontinuities can be highlighted or concealed, as Cresswell [1996] has observed, by different expectations, aspirations and contestations about what (normatively) is in place and what out of place in a given locale. The public thus emerges in the space between invisible resistance and normative hegemony.

The public domain derives, as we have seen, from the intersection of three ecologies: a media ecology, an urban ecology and an ecology of attentions. The peculiar visibility regimes of these ecologies, and their changing configurations, are constitutive of the domain of the public and how bodies, subjects and events enter this domain according to certain rhythms and producing certain effects. The public domain thus offers a *productive* notion of *publicness*, in which the public is not understood merely through the 'grand dichotomy' – the opposition of the public to the private – rather it is observed as a self-consistent regime of social life. The public domain is a movement consisting of a series of always reversible situational appropriations; it is a territory of affection defined by visibility, accessibility and resistance.

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# The Publicness of Public Space. On the Public Domain

*Andrea Mubi Brighenti*

This essay attempts to elaborate a notion of 'public domain' in order to capture the elusive features of 'public-ness'. Its leading question can thus be put as follows: 'what is specifically public in public situations and public spaces? What is the specific dynamic that contradistinguishes the public?' A series of empirical cases taken from different contexts, which functions as thought-provoking illustration of the theoretical issues at stakes, is discussed. Theoretically, the essay draws from, and suggests a critical synthesis of, four major threads of research: political and social philosophy (notion of 'public sphere'), interaction sociology and cultural studies (notion of 'public realm'), urban studies (notion of 'public space') and the literature on governance and policing (notion of 'public order'). Accordingly, the public domain is conceptualised as an ecology of three ecologies; in other words, it is regarded as composed of a media ecology (or, an ecology of mediations), an urban ecology and an ecology of attentions. An evental perspective on the public domain is proposed, which takes into account the convergences and the tensions that exist within the social between material and immaterial dimensions. From this perspective, the public domain is inherently defined by the events of visibility, accessibility, circulation, appropriation and resistance.

Andrea Mubi Brighenti is post-doctoral research fellow at the Department of Sociology, University of Trento (2008-2010). His research focuses empirically and theoretically on space, power and society and, more specifically, on the transformations of urban environments through the technologies of control and the practices of resistance. He has recently published *Territori migranti. [Migrant Territories. Space and Control of Global Mobility]*, ombre corte, 2009 and edited *The Wall and the City*, professionaldreamers, 2009. Forthcoming: *Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. He is currently working on an edited book project on *The Aesthetics and Politics of Urban Interstices*.