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URBAN LIVES AND PROTESTS IN NEOLIBERAL  
TIMES: ART, AESTHETICS AND SOLIDARITY  
AS POSSIBILITIES

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ABSTRACT

*The introduction to this special issue explores theoretically the emergence of the cultural turn in contemporary social movements. Its focus on “possibility” as a broad array of culturally and politically disparate practices and ideas makes possible to discuss in the frame of contingency: the appearance of different forms of urban living and re-acting by focusing on visions of urban life that are activated by social movements; How these visions are put in practice; The already culturally available or newly imagined ways of relating in the new forms of social mobilization; The tactics, strategies, poetics, and rhetorics that social movements employ as they re-act against more or less authoritarian practices in neoliberal times. The case studies concern the following cities around the world: Bogota (Colombia), Los Angeles (U.S.A.), Istanbul (Turkey), Thessaloniki (Greece).*

*Keywords: urban protest, neoliberalism, possibilities, contingency, aesthetics, poetics, rhetorics, strategies*

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## *Ελευθερία Δέλτσου και Φωτεινή Τσιμπιρίδου*

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### ΖΩΗ ΚΑΙ ΔΙΑΜΑΡΤΥΡΙΑ ΣΤΗΝ ΠΟΛΗ: ΤΕΧΝΗ, ΑΙΣΘΗΤΙΚΗ ΚΑΙ ΑΛΛΗΛΕΓΓΥΗ ΩΣ ΔΥΝΑΤΟΤΗΤΕΣ

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#### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

*Η εισαγωγή στο ειδικό τεύχος διερευνά θεωρητικά την ανάδυση της πολιτισμικής στροφής σε σύγχρονα κοινωνικά κινήματα. Η επικέντρωση στην έννοια της “δυνατότητας” ως ενός ευρέως φάσματος πολιτισμικά και πολιτικά ετερόκλητων πρακτικών και ιδεών καθιστά εφικτό να αναλυθούν με όρους ενδεχομενικότητας: η εμφάνιση διαφορετικών τρόπων αστικής ζωής και αντι-δράσης μέσα από την επικέντρωση σε οραματισμούς που κινητοποιούν κοινωνικά κινήματα· το πώς αυτοί οι οραματισμοί γίνονται δράση· οι ήδη πολιτισμικά διαθέσιμοι ή φαντασιακά νέοι τρόποι συσχετισμού στις νέες μορφές κοινωνικών κινητοποιήσεων· οι τακτικές, στρατηγικές και ρητορικές που τα κοινωνικά κινήματα θέτουν σε χρήση, καθώς αντι-δρούν ενάντια σε περισσότερο ή λιγότερο αυταρχικές πρακτικές στους σύγχρονους νεοφιλελεύθερους καιρούς. Τα άρθρα αυτού του τεύχους αφορούν στις ακόλουθες πόλεις του κόσμου: Μπογκοτά (Κολομβία), Λος Άντζελες (ΗΠΑ), Ιστανμπούλ (Τουρκία), Θεσσαλονίκη (Ελλάδα).*

*Λέξεις κλειδιά: αστική διαμαρτυρία, νεοφιλελευθερισμός, δυνατότητες, ενδεχομενικότητα, αισθητική, ποιητική, ρητορική, στρατηγικές*

This special issue<sup>1</sup> is a small contribution to the study of social movements as a productive angle for the analysis of the public sphere[s] within urban settings (Checker, 2009). Our intention is to enrich the discussion that, until the current millennium,<sup>2</sup> had been largely ignored in anthropology (Gibb, 2001; Escobar, 1992). Here, we focus on social actions of dissent and protest that emerge in the context of, and as a response to neoliberalism (Appadurai, 2000; Ferguson & Gupta, 2002; Ortner, 2011).

Since the 1980s, the “cultural turn,” which instituted both a substantive shift in society and an analytical shift in academia, has been basis for the new modes of protest and dissent (Gibb, 2001). This postmodern condition of the cultural turn is being constituted in relation to globalized forms of knowledge and communication, and its project of expression (Jameson, 1998) is particularly related to several “after[s]”: the post-colonial condition, the post-socialist transition, and the late modern modality of governance of the neoliberal project (Harvey, 1989; Αθανασίου, Καραβάντα, Λαλιώτου, Παπαηλία, 2016). Depending on the degree of transformation of cities into metropolises and/or “global cities”, every such dynamic urban space dominated by neoliberal governmentality, moves within the modality of the 3 Ts: *Talent, Technology and Tolerance* (Sassen, 2001). As far as dissent and protest are concerned, within similar environments cultural, gender and human rights claims engage with emotions, solidarity, creativity, artistic aesthetics, and smart cities (see, Gibb, 2001; Sitrin, 2013; Miller & Nicholls, 2013; Leontidou, 2015).

While these new social movements converse with affective responses to global challenges and motivations of dissent (Jasper, 1997; 2011), they differ in the specific modes of expressive dissent and aesthetics: social and cultural poetics, artistic or revolutionary creativity, subversive counter-publics, or subaltern cosmopolitics are diverse reactions to the neoliberal project, all of which call for ethnographic observation in semiotic, inter-

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1. This special issue drew its inspiration from the panel “From civil society to new social movements and beyond: Urban lives and experiences at the time of neoliberal governmentality” that we organized at the 2014 *Annual Conference of the Commission on Urban Anthropology* (CUA-IUAES) on “Dreamed/Planned Cities and Experienced Cities” held at the Université Jean Monnet, St. Etienne, France (8-10 July 2014). We thank Italo Pardo, Jerome Krase, Michel Rautenberg, Giuliana Prato, as well as all the anonymous reviewers who contributed with their insights, comments and suggestions to the improvement of this article, but also of this issue as a whole. Responsibility for the views expressed are solely ours.

2. Regarding anthropological publications on social movements, see, amongst others, Nash, 2005; Pratt & Luetchford, 2013; Ufer, 2015; Juris & Razsa, 2012.

pretive, or governmentality terms (Hilgers, 2011; Farmer, 2013). Meanwhile, in addition to previous patterns of conditionality (i.e. post-colonial, post-socialist, after the empire, or crypto-colonial) and within different historical, cultural and local social settings, social actors are facing new modalities and technologies of power and hegemony: authoritarian ruling through police states and security technologies, flexibility and/or precarity at work and life, gentrification, consumerism and privatization, as well as a return to morally conservative and patriarchal restrictions and ethics in the public sphere (Appadurai, 2000; Sitrin, 2013). Up to now, the forms of dissent seem to be predominantly inspired by the “right to the city” modality (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008) and pertinent aspirations of “hope” that are addressed by autonomous, feminist and environmental movements (Harvey, 2000; Jasper, 2011; Sharp, 2007).

Within this framework, new urban social movements range from mild lifestyle subversive counterpublics (Warner, 2002; Morhayim, 2012; Farmer, 2013) to autonomous radical groups. Respectively, the forms of dissent converge with the modality of the “antis” (Rethmann, 2013) in several ways: against central or local economic and political elites; against racial and ethnic discriminations; against geographies of exclusion via urban planning projects that discriminate against migrants and ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities; against restrictions on the use of public space by noncitizens; and against nationalist master narratives of social memory, as the different case studies in the present volume will show.

Moreover, the new social movements that adhere to the cultural turn flow as resistance protest against flexibility at work, the continuously reduced state social services, and the increasing privatization plans. At the same time, more participatory forms of governance emerge, which engage citizens in the modalities of civil society such as NGOs, as well as independent international organizations of transparency, human rights, humanitarian aid, etc. However, these technologies of governance – mostly supplanted from above or imported from outside – and their “audit culture” are often inadequate to cover the local needs and priorities (Kipnis, 2008). Social actors, even if in contact with and trained by civil society organizations such as NGOs, which are a part of the neoliberal governmentality prerequisite, soon supplant their actions with more autonomous/independent forms of dissent and protest. While supplementing the antis with talent, technology and creativity, civil society organizations, as entities in a continuous state of flow, may simultaneously disrupt liberal political community, as well as reinforce it (Afouxenidis, 2015, p. 10). We thus notice

the advance of creative and subvertive counterpublics in the squares – i.e. Occupy movements, Arab revolts, the Greek Syntagma square, the Spanish Plaza Mayor, etc. (see, amongst others, Miller and Nicholls, 2013; Bartsidis and Tsibiridou, 2014; Tsibiridou and Bartsidis, 2016), in contrast to regressing toward previous modern forms of resistance (demonstration, syndicalism). At the same time, subaltern groups often align their dissent practices with mainstream intellectuals and artists. In this case, the local/global encounter, demands for equal rights, and access to the polyvalent global city environment seems to lead to the formation of new (subalternist) cosmopolitics (de la Cadena, 2010; Watson, 2014).

Given that it is unclear whether these collectivities are actually fighting the same enemy and for the same idea of “alterpolitics” (Ciavolella and Boni, 2015, p. 6), we concur with Rethmann’s approach: social movements should be reconsidered within the modality of multiple “possibilities” that are open to tropes of assemblage, invention, and hope, by studying individual and collective desires, the unpredictability of people’s lives and their unexpected futures (Rethmann, 2013, p. 231). Such a perspective also accords with an approach of “public sociality” as collective action in the public space. By focusing on agency and the meanings people give to their actions, “public sociality” problematizes analytical categories such as “civil society” and the “public sphere”, and promotes a broad perception of the political, whereby collectivities may be transformed into “schools of citizenship” (Αβδελά, 2015). It thus becomes possible to employ a critical understanding of the intersections, the motivations and the experiences of people who act from below in the field of “possibilities” (Graeber, 2007 in Rethmann, op.cit., p. 227), which involve ways of envisioning cultural and political practices and ideas that might assist an imagined “us” in challenging harmful forms of governance and injustice. This anthropology of possibilities pursues a “politics of the antis” beyond antagonism and opposition (Ferguson, 2009 in Rethmann, op.cit., p. 228) and perceives “possibility” to include a broad array of culturally and politically disparate practices and ideas (op.cit., p. 228).

Furthermore, “possibilities” as a theoretical approach allows for comparison, while ethnographically acknowledging the particularities of the different conditions and circumstances, turning ethnography itself into a figure of becoming (op.cit., p. 232). Departing from anthropology’s earlier approach of possibilities in terms of opposition and confrontational challenge to institutionalized forms of power and domination, Rethmann (op.cit., p. 230) puts emphasis on three registers: direct action, tempo-

rality, and becoming. Foregrounding a language of potentiality and becoming, she calls attention to how people imagine and struggle for temporalities and conditions that will give them the opportunity to exist in ways different from the present in diverse cultural and political contexts. Drawing upon, but diverging from what Graeber (2007, cited in *op.cit.*, p. 228) called “possibilities”, Rethmann (*op.cit.*, p. 228) defines the term as “open enough to include a host of culturally and politically disparate practice and ideas, and evocative enough to inspire new routes of analyses”, in which she includes cultural and political epistemologies, social movements, art, creative projects. Such anthropology of possibilities readdresses the political by incorporating dimensions of ethics, affect, sentiments, aesthetics, poetics, and representation that more practice-oriented theories of agency and resistance hardly dealt with. It thus aims at understanding individual and collective struggles in the realm of the unpredictable, imperfect, and incomplete, and at making space for tropes of assemblage, invention, and hope (*op.cit.*, p. 231), delineating Chambers’ (cited in *op.cit.*, p. 229) “room for maneuver”, by which he meant a politics that opens up possibilities for alternative ways of imagining and being in a given order of things.

In relation to these topics, the different case studies of this issue set for discussion and answer the following ascertainment or open question that is based on previous sociological assumptions and political projects of modernity (Prato & Pardo, 2013, pp. 81-83): How (do) urban anthropology and ethnographic practices contribute to an understanding of the productive contradictions formal/informal, urban/rural, past/present. Having moved beyond the previous exoticism over neighborhoods and minorities, in the direction of the continuous interaction between the material and the non-material, of long-term goals and immediate returns in the domains of action, and of the link between micro-and macro-level analysis (Pardo, 1996, p. 11-12; Prato and Pardo, *op.cit.*, p. 95; see also Pardo and Prato, 2016), these case studies also bring indirectly to the fore the concerns about grouping together cities that may in many respects differ significantly from each other. Questioning whether analytic perspectives such as the “spatialization of culture”, “class struggle”, and gender solidarity happen everywhere (Prato and Pardo, *op.cit.*, p. 97), it is for urban ethnography to reveal the different experiences of negotiating everyday contradictions, even when they appear to be the same way, to have the same meaning, or to follow the same pattern. Despite the imposition of global and transnational processes, comparative analysis may be really insightful in the direction of

acknowledging and addressing differences that derive from diverse political systems and inevitably affect a wide range of urban policies.

This special issue sets at the center of its analytic perspective the use of traditional ethnography for the study of the relationships between local and national processes and policies of global restructuring that influence local lives, along with the methodological and theoretical debates that movements of resistance instigate (op.cit., pp. 95, 98). In this direction, we consider central the forms of social interaction and urban conflict in multi-ethnic states and “multicultural” Western cities, the ways people in different places and under different political regimes come to terms with global policies, as well as the bearings of anthropological urban research on the broader society (op.cit., 2013, p. 97).

The discussion of social movements in this issue touches upon the possibilities of ethnographic practice in the urban context as a question of ethnographic practice *of* the city, *in* the city, or *via* the city’s dynamic contradictions (Forum on “Urban Anthropology”, 2013, p. 81; 2014, p. 86). As Monge remarked (2014, pp. 96-97), an ethnographically grounded approach, whereby the anthropologist —arriving on foot<sup>3</sup>—approaches the city on a very specific level of observation, should be mindful of the peculiarities of the influences on the ethnographic practice and of the hype about the originality of the city in an all the more globalized world. Monge’s affirmation for a critical approach stresses that cities are human artefacts, constituted by individuals, by human action, and that for anthropology theorization arises from fieldwork, in dialogue with other disciplines that study the city. In like manner, but earlier on, Herzfeld also set critical emphasis on ethnographic fieldwork in his urban researches in Greece (1991), Italy (2009), and Thailand (2016). In his work, he related the social and political impact of historic conservation and urban gentrification to nationalism and bureaucracy, and, by juxtaposing historic conservation and gentrification with a critique of the public management of knowledge, he showed that the commoditization of history serves the goals of neoliberal modernity (Herzfeld, 2010; see also Herzfeld, 2015).

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3. Monge cites Garcia Canclini’s remark about the city being approached by a specific level of observation, whereby “the anthropologist arrives in the city by foot, the sociologist by car and via the main highway, the communication specialist by plane”. For him, each of the three disciplines constructs a distinct and partial vision. The fourth perspective/discipline he considers is that of the historian, who, leaving the city, moves from its old center toward the contemporary margins, the current center being no longer in the past (Garcia Canclini cited in Monge, op.cit.: 96).

The articles in this issue explore different forms of urban living and re-acting in different parts of the world, bringing to the fore new practices of possibility and becoming by different agencies in the U.S.A., Colombia, Turkey, and Greece. In these case studies in the Americas and Europe, the causes for action comprise racial issues, precarity at work, economic crises, authoritarian rule, de-regulation of the public sector, gentrification projects, economic greed, mass consumption, and political dissent. The analytic perspectives of the contributing authors demonstrate how practices of solidarity and alternative economic networks<sup>4</sup>, aesthetics, social poetics, and art instigate new cultures of protest.

Joseph's analysis of Los Angeles stresses the significance of visibility to the subversive practices of *Angelenos* since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As these mobilizations produce everyday Los Angeles, they consider the fictionalized/fictionalizing of L.A., whilst Street Art constitutes a visible practice that reconceptualizes social values and socializing practices.

Garzón Ramírez analyzes dissent practices and acts of citizenship in Bogotá by Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), who claim their return to dignified life, confronting gentrification and urban neoliberal re-planning and representation. Her ethnography shows that public plans reproduce racial, ethnic, and class spatial segregation and transform IDPs' subjectivities. It also shows the importance of the city center as a locus of political struggle, and that IDPs have some power to subvert spatial modalities of exclusion, and also to organize for perceived benefits.

Voulvouli's analysis sets the anti-gentrification movements in Istanbul within the contexts of neoliberal governmentality, neighborhood modality, and the legacy of past social protest. The author argues that the Gezi uprising emerged from earlier smaller, localized, less visible, but long-lasting campaigns against neoliberal policies and their convoluted broader meanings, values and claims.

Tsibiridou's ethnography from the center of Istanbul demonstrates the conditions for the transformation of counterpublics into subaltern cosmopolitics. Artists, students, academics, architects, feminists, as well as bohemians object to the neoliberal spatial transformation of Istanbul into a touristic commodity. Their reflective nostalgia and creative dissent engage

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4. Possibilities can extend to the formation of alternative economic and political spaces in the realm of social economy, where solidarity is a fundamental value and an everyday technology of exchange. On the issue of alternative economic and political spaces see Καβουλάκος και Γκιτζάς, 2015.



humor, irony, love, social poetics, and cultural intimacy ethics to confront the new-Islamist public moralizing, thereby shaping new subjectivities. These new cosmopolitics aim at subverting the synergy of the Turkish government with its global neoliberal trends by opposing its mechanisms of empowerment, such as police state control, gentrification plans, and intolerance towards minorities.

Tragaki's ethnography of a Greek popular musician-poet-singer explores how music performances may reconsider mainstream modalities of the "political" and lead to the emergence of affective counterpublics that contest national sentimentalism and neoliberal subjectification. The analytic emphasis on dissensus describes the dispute of the "distribution of the sensible" and the emergence of counter-hegemonic counterpublics through the lyrics, the performativities, and the aesthetics of the songs.

Rakopoulos analyzes a solidarity movement against market middlemen in the two largest urban centers in Greece that developed as a response to austerity and recession measures. The members of this food activism movement established alternative routes of economic organization, breaking away from an exchanging system that assumes the consumptive city divided from the producing village. On the contrary, these alternative economic routes disclose the existence of an urban /village continuum.

Deltsou focuses on an urban group in Thessaloniki, Greece, whose rhetorics of creativity, entrepreneurialism and art claim coeval participation in hegemonic Europeanness. The ethnographic analysis of the group's performative materializations of the crisis features aesthetics and design as dominant modalities of imagining, practicing and relating to the city. Accordingly, it raises the issue whether the construction of such a cosmopolitan locality should be seen as a form of crypto-colonialism or an "otherwise" form of resistance in the context of the Greek "crisis".

All these articles see in the contemporaneity of the ethnographic present how the conjuncture of the city and new social movements acting in its milieu transform-ed oppositions into contingencies for change, subversion, discontinuity, resistance, etc. The courses of agency that these social movements take emanate from the interaction between the particular place and the protagonists' dispositions on the basis of the parameters of *locality, historical conjuncture, liminality, intersection, and negotiation of the public sphere*. In methodological terms, comprehension of the agents' meanings arises from the ample data that have been produced by studying the individual cases from the below via inside detailed observation, but also through the productive comparisons amongst the agencies of social

movements in the urban milieus of Los Angeles, Bogotá, Istanbul, and Thessaloniki.

*Locality* in this case concerns how the sort of city, or the particular parts of the city, and its/their heritage cut across everyday life and inspire the action of current residents. Each one of these four cities has its particular history and many more different, internal, and informal histories at their centers, at the outskirts, in relation to the nation-state and/or globalization. The *historical conjunctures* of neoliberalism and globalization, of the “crisis” and austerity, of individualism and social networking may have created analogous or even similar, but never “the same” course for every single city as a spatial category and as a lived micro-history/ies. Both the place(s) and the way(s) where micro-histories are narrated differ: In Los Angeles, people make graffiti that are visible to the city residents, as they spend half of their days in their cars; In Bogotá, the displaced from the city center request their visibility, condemn gentrification, and reclaim access to new public spaces undermining the neoliberal project of institutional power; In Istanbul, people get out at Gezi and through expressive art escalate their claims to freedom of expression and tolerance, supporting in the end the Kurdish minority “party of the people”; In Thessaloniki, a group that claims the right to the city, highlights the actuality of a local, cosmopolitan/European aesthetics as an encouraging image of the urban-cum-national landscape in the conjuncture of the “crisis”; Also in Thessaloniki, but throughout Greece as well, a musician inspires resistance and propagates the emergence of counterpublics through his anti-establishment critique; At the same time, people in Thessaloniki, but elsewhere in Greece as well, also support the “Without Intermediaries” movement. The actions of all these movements overcame the distinction between formal and informal practices, as they concerned both individuals and collectivities, formal institutions and informal groupings, all those who in their own ways reacted to the neoliberal technologies of gentrification, austerity, and authoritarian governance/rule. All these initiatives are negotiating the public sphere, on the one hand, and the right to a dignified life, on the other.

The condition of *liminality* that many residents of these cities have been experiencing seems to carry a dynamic of overturning in their own lives. The conditions of pauperization, vulnerability, and marginalization provide liminality with dynamics to overcome binarisms such as private vs. public, personal interest vs. solidarity, job vs. life, informal vs. formal, rural vs. urban, past vs. present. These dynamic contradictions are adjoined in productive possibilities and combinations that neither just draw devel-

opmental plans on paper, nor expect anything from the state, or from the rescuer investor. It is not at all accidental that initiatives are often taken by people who currently or in the past have gotten in a condition of liminality, living on the margins as excluded, misfits, minorities, artists, or intellectuals who reflect over culture and public sociality. Like artists, each one testifies his/her creativity departing from the condition of experienced liminality to reach the point of creating that third field of action beyond the house and work, getting involved in the publics, in action, in reaction, drawing graffiti, organizing alternative perspectives of the city, alternative museums, musical and creative counterpublics, alternative neighborhoods, cooperative enterprises, etc.

This experienced liminality and the deposition of creativity meet *intersectionality* in social action. The new social movements in these four cities do not have a uniform and one-dimensional character. They unite participants in urban movements, who call for different possibilities to come into existence: the abolition of discrimination, the right to work, the visibility of ethnic, racial, sexual and other minorities, but also for the right to re-write the history of and for themselves that the official historical narratives have ignored. Who are the protagonists of this new social activism? In this issue, they are marginal artists, self-employed, minorities, but also innovative and creative personalities, i.e. writers, architects, feminists, cultural entrepreneurs, who act as agents at times literally and at times metaphorically, at times formally and at times informally. They provoke reactions that feed the agency of movements, reshaping the forms and the aesthetics of resistance against the local and global authoritarian policies of power and the particular malaise those produce. In this way, new social movements seem to distance themselves from early modernity's institutionalized formulations of the publics as politics and resistance, like traditional parties, trade unions, and international unionism. In all the above cases, intersectional action extends to different *negotiations of the public sphere*; against discriminations that relate not only to the right to work and the protection of human rights in general, but also to the kinds of lives people live and their right to co-shape the public goods in specific urban and suburban environments. Through the lens of urban ethnography, these articles demonstrate that the agency of each one of these movements addresses the possibility to change the agenda of modernity, as well as the ethics that sociologists and political scientists had imposed thus far as specialists for the study of the urban life.

At the same time, the changes in the agendas of social movements and the way these are being studied also mark two other major changes: one

of a moral-political kind that calls for change in the social bond and the formation/stance of the subjects; another of a methodological kind that highlights the importance of ethnographic practice to study from the *inside* and the *below*, and its interlocution *with* other scientific methodologies, e.g. from sociology, political philosophy, cultural critique, cultural studies.

Last but not least, it is important to stress once again the dynamics of significant *comparison* not merely in the study of cities, but also in the study of the plural possibilities fostered by social movements in specific cities at specific moments in time. Comparison amongst cities and practices of activism that focus on one issue create another framework of constructive possibilities in the era of globalization, that of a critical understanding on a global context, beyond national borders and local boundaries, as well as beyond the bounds of past epistemological assumptions and political projects of modernity. We consider that the case studies of this special issue enhance the endeavor of redefining the field of urban anthropology through ethnographic analyses. Our focus on social movements and the possibilities of change that city people bring to the fore, indicates the potency of not only interdisciplinary, but transdisciplinary critical understandings of urban movements that bridge ethnography, literary criticism, art, sociology, etc., and challenge the public sphere through claims for new socialities, new publics, creative counterpublics, and subaltern cosmopolitics.

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