

Επιθεώρηση Κοινωνικών Ερευνών

Τομ. 144, 2015



Public space as a field of urban struggle: Everyday life practices as the outcome of power relations

Pettas Dimitris

<https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.9133>

Copyright © 2016 Dimitris Pettas



To cite this article:

Pettas, D. (2016). Public space as a field of urban struggle: Everyday life practices as the outcome of power relations. *Επιθεώρηση Κοινωνικών Ερευνών*, 144, 135-140. doi:<https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.9133>

PUBLIC SPACE AS A FIELD OF URBAN STRUGGLE:
EVERYDAY LIFE PRACTICES
AS THE OUTCOME OF POWER RELATIONS

*Dimitris Pettas**

The PhD was completed in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, School of Architecture, National Technical University of Athens, under the supervision of Associate Professor Nikos Belavilas. The three - member committee also included Professor Kostas Moraitis and Emeritus Professor Dimitris Georgoulis. The thesis is written in Greek and was defended in July 2015.

Introduction

Urban public space constitutes a social creation and, as such, is a product of dialectic power relations and conflicts and embodies meanings and imaginary constructions. Moreover, it constitutes a field of action for several mechanisms¹ and collective entities, whose differentiated views and practices concerning the management and use of public space can lead to conflicts and struggles. Through the exploration of three public spaces in central Athens, namely Exarcheia, Syntagma and Agios Panteleimonas Squares, that operate as fields of urban struggle, my thesis explores the ways power relations among key mechanisms and collective entities are structured and developed and the ways those relations influence everyday life and use practices of both individual and collective nature. The analysis of power and power relations is heavily based upon the work of Michel

*PhD, National Technical University of Athens. Urban Planner.

1. The term «mechanism» is preferred to the commonly used term of «stakeholder» in order to underline the relationship of selected bodies and entities of the economy, the state and the local authorities to differentiated functions of public space within current modes of social and economic reproduction. Those mechanisms constitute the carriers of establishment for these differentiated and often antagonistic functions.

Foucault (1975, 1980, 1994, 2009, 2010), resulting in emphasis given not exclusively to actions of direct confrontation but also to attempts on the part of key urban actors to create circumstances that both re-enforce their practices and limit the possible actions of opponent actors. Within this framework, the public space users' level and ways of involvement in ongoing confrontations is of crucial importance.

Research Questions, Methodology and Structure

The thesis was driven by three major research questions:

- How is urban public space encompassed in contemporary modes of social and economic reproduction?
- How are everyday life and use practices in central and symbolic public spaces that operate as fields of urban struggle constructed and how can they be evaluated?
- How are power relations among urban actors, mechanisms and collective entities that operate both within and outside institutional channels constructed, and in which ways do they influence practices of everyday use and modes of governance and management in public spaces?

My PhD thesis consists of two parts. First part developed in order to address the first question and also operates as an introduction for the reader to contemporary functions of urban public space. Thus, I analyzed the role of urban public space within current modes of social and economic reproduction by approaching five major dimensions: public space as a field of the development of power relations, a field of the development of social movements, a field of social segregation, its role within current economic restructuring and finally its role concerning perceptions of time, history and expressions of collective memory. Secondly, I applied the aforementioned research questions to three case studies, which consisted of public spaces in central Athens that have operated as fields of urban struggle and confrontation. By adopting an inductive approach, I built a research methodology towards the identification of key urban actors for each case study, the analysis of everyday life and use practices, the characteristics and results of power relations among urban actors and their implications concerning the governance and management of public space. The identification of key urban actors for each case study was achieved through triangulation, based on three methodological tools: archival analysis, direct observation and short interviews with nearby residents and business owners. The analysis and evaluation of everyday life and use practices is divided into four fields: diversity, quantitative and qualitative

characteristics of users' presence, perceived safety and familiarity, and users' evaluations. The determination of the fields of analysis is based on previous research projects and theoretical works (Carr et al., 1992; Carmona et al., 2008; Holland, 2007; Loukaitou and Sideris, 1999; Marusic, 2010; Montgomery, 1998; Project for Public Spaces, 2000; Shaftoe, 2008; Whyte, 1980). Even though these works focus more on issues of design, certain attributes of social content are useful towards the analysis and evaluations of everyday social life. Methodological tools included direct observation and a 280 questionnaires survey in the field, extracting data of demographic, quantitative and qualitative nature. Finally, towards the analysis of power relations and their influence, I conducted 29 in depth interviews with participants and members of a variety of key urban actors (state and local authorities and bodies, police departments and bodies, local businesses, political parties, social movements and residents' organizations with ideological origins varying from anarchist to extreme right wing groups), along with participatory observation of meetings and events. My research unveiled the crucial role of symbolic and imaginary dimensions of space, contradicted approaches of both Marxist and mainstream background that consider economic relations as the primary field of urban space's formation by pointing out the role of relations and forces of non - economic nature and gave prominence to the importance of the ways non - institutional actors participate in current urban politics.

Brief Presentation of Case Studies and Key Findings

In each case study, the characteristics of both everyday life and power relations are significantly differentiated. In Exarcheia Square, a coalition of local movements, residents and large proportion of business owners has been developed in order to confront cannabis dealing and use in the square and in the neighborhood's public spaces. This struggle takes place on two differentiated but also interacting levels: the symbolic/imaginary and the everyday life level. Despite the existence of a highly homogenous social capital (Bourdieu, 1994) in the square which is established through the participation of both collective entities and individuals in the same symbolic system, comprised of common notions, linguistic forms and discourses, the views of the aforementioned coalition concerning public space's management have not fully translated into relevant everyday life practices. Research concerning Exarcheia Square is focused on the obstacles the dominance in power relations on the symbolic level is facing regarding the creation of relevant conditions on the level of everyday life.

In Agios Panteleimonas Square, power relations are developed around immigrants' rights of presence in public space and not specific uses and functions of space, which is the case for the other case studies. Immigrants' presence in public space is confronted by the local residents' committee, along with the neo-Nazi party of Golden Dawn and some local business owners, not because they bring unwanted uses to the space but solely because of their national identities and the fact that public space constitutes the field in which demographic changes in the broader neighborhood become apparent. The analysis of power relations is built upon those collective entities' discourse and the struggles of a supportive to the immigrants' movement to establish its presence in the square. Moreover, the role of media and the negative effects of residents' actions against immigrants' rights in public space on the value of their own properties are also examined.

Syntagma Square falls into Iveson's (1998) description of «ceremonial public space», whose characteristic is the host of multiple and contradictory functions. The position of the square within the commercial and touristic centre of Athens has led to a dominance of a coalition among state, local authorities and economic forces. Moreover, in terms of everyday life practices it constitutes an indifferent space that hosts passive and individualistic activities. Thus, its function as the central place for collective political actions of protest has a minor influence on the level of everyday life practices, while the inability of social movements to influence everyday life is also based on internal characteristics of those movements. Moreover, specific focus is given to the period of the Aganaktismenoi movement and its role in the introduction of new spatial practices from social practices and the relation of such practices to issues of ideology and structure.

From the comparative analysis of the case studies, several structural characteristics of power relations that define and differentiate their results on everyday life and use practices were extracted and analyzed. Those characteristics consist of:

- The content of the issues that struggles and power relations are built upon.
- The connections between the content of the struggle and the processes that concern everyday life or periodical functions.
- Ways and level of public space users' involvement in ongoing struggles.
- Level of dominance on the part of urban actors or coalitions of actors.
- Structural and ideological characteristics of key collective social entities and mechanisms.

Additionally, research challenged several established anticipations concerning the behavior of selected mechanisms in terms of development, formations of alliances and practices. The commonly anticipated coalition of state and local authorities' mechanisms and economic forces is not developed in all case studies, with the exception of Syntagma Square. Moreover, mechanisms that are not developed on an ideological basis, such as police bodies and economic mechanisms develop and implement ideological narratives. Finally, broader social movements tend to adopt characteristics of urban social movement when engaged in struggles concerning their presence in public spaces that constitute fields of confrontations, even when the issues those confrontations are built upon are not related to spatial functions and uses.

KEY LITERATURE

- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Bourdieu, P. (1994). *Practical reason: On the theory of action*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Brenner, N. and Theodore, N. (2002). Cities and the geographies of actually existing neoliberalism. *Antipode*, 34 (3), 349- 379.
- Carmona, M. et al. (2008). *Public space: The management dimension*. New York: Routledge.
- Carr, S. et al. (1992). *Public space*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Castoriades, C. (1975). *The imaginary institution of society (2000)*. Athens: Ypsilon.
- Coppola, A. and Vanolo, A. (2015). Normalising autonomous spaces: Ongoing transformations in Christiania, Copenhagen. *Urban Studies*, 52 (6), pp. 1-17.
- Foucault, M. (1975). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison (1977)*. New York: Pantheon.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*. Athens: Ypsilon.
- Foucault, M. (1984). *Of other spaces, Heterotopias (1994)*. Athens: Plethron.
- Foucault, M. (2009). *Security, territory, population: Lectures at the College of France, 1977, 1978*. New York: Picador.
- Foucault, M. (2010). *The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the College of France, 1978-1979 (2012)*. New York: Picador.
- Harvey, D. (2012). *Rebel cities: From the right to the city to the urban revolution*. New York: Verso.
- Holland, C. et al. (2007). *Social interactions in urban public spaces*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Iveson, K. (1998). Putting the public back into public space, *Urban Policy and Research*, 16 (1), 21-33.
- Loukaitou-Sideris, A. and Banerjee, T. (1998). *Urban design downtown: Poetics and politics of form*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Malone, K. (2002). Street life: Youth, culture and competing uses of public space. *Environment and Urbanization*, 14, 157- 168.

- Marusic, B. (2010). Analysis of pattern of spatial occupancy in urban open space using behavior maps and GIS. *Urban Design International*, 16 (1), 36-50.
- Minton, A. (2006). *The Privatisation of public space*. Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors.
- Montgomery, J. (1998). Making a city: Urbanity, vitality and urban design. *Journal of Urban Design*, 3 (1), 93-116.
- Moulaert, F. et al., (2002). Neoliberal urbanization in Europe: Large-scale urban development projects and the new urban policy. *Antipode*, 34 (3), 542-577.
- Project for Public Space (2000). *How to turn a place around: A handbook for creating successful public spaces*. New York: PPS.
- Robins, K. (1989). Reimagined communities? European image spaces beyond fordism. *Cultural Studies*, 3 (2), 147- 166.
- Shaftoe, H. (2008). *Convivial urban spaces: Creating public urban places*. London: Earthscan.
- Sibley, D. (1995). *Geographies of exclusion*. London: Routledge.
- Webster, C. (2007). Property rights, public space and urban design. *Town Planning Review*, 78 (1), 81-102
- Whyte, W.H. (1980). *The social life of small urban spaces*. Washington DC: Conservation Foundation.