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ON DOMAINS The Public, the Private and the Collective

PROLOGUE AGORA AND ASPHALT

In the late summer of 1996, it became obvious that the psychopath Marc Dutroux and his companions had been able to kidnap, abuse, and murder a number of young girls. The spontaneous indignation about these unspeakable facts culminated in a huge protest march through the central boulevards of the Belgian capital.

Many protest actions had preceded the march through Brussels, however: two of them happened to be announced side by side in the newspaper *De Standaard*.¹ The first article describes a kind of commemorative caravan with ‘thousands of motorcyclists, truck drivers, and car drivers’ along the homes of four of the murdered girls in the suburban sprawl between the cities of Hasselt and Liège – a drive of some 40 km across the Belgian language border. The article concludes, ‘At the point of departure in Mechelen-Bovelingen, a 20-acre parking lot will be available. The destination is the Biggs shopping mall, which has one of the largest parking lots in the whole of Limburg.’

The second article deals with an expression of sympathy for the family of the disappeared girl Loubna, who lived in central Brussels. In this case a ‘silent march’ on foot, through the city centre, departs from the Flagey Square in Brussels. ‘The destination of the march is, symbolically, the Brussels Palace of Justice.’

The contrast between two urban models in this anecdotal meeting of two newspaper articles is striking. It overflows with issues, doubts and questions that dominate the current debate about public life and public space, about city and community.

In the description of the march for the Brussels girl Loubna, we immediately recognise the traditional morphology of the European city: a compact urban fabric articulated through monumental squares and buildings. According to this paradigm, public space serves as an agora for the gathering of citizens, and public authorities are clearly represented in the cityscape. Urban space is a full and coherent whole that testifies to a glorious tradition of public life. The demonstrators are characterised as ‘family members and friends’. In this view people are still part of a circle; Brussels is still a community of citizens, the ideal of the reconstruction movements that strongly inspire urban development in Brussels these days.

At the end of the pedestrian march through Brussels, demonstrators come face to face with the institution to which their reproaches are addressed: Poelaert’s impressive Palais de Justice. In this sense, the journalist’s use of the adjective ‘symbolic’ to describe the already overdeterminedly symbolic Palace of Justice is redundant. By contrast, in the other article the addition of a phrase like ‘without symbolic meaning’ to characterise the Biggs megamall would have been very much to the point. It might have helped to raise the question whether the spontaneous civic protest might also have been a condemnation of consumer culture.

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‘Herdenkingsrit stevent af op overrompeling’ and ‘Stille mars voor Loubna’, *De Standaard*, 14 September 1996.

In the megamall article, the image of a new kind of dispersed city emerges, which has been spreading in Belgium for some time now, but which has yet to find its proper paradigm. The article presents the urbanisation pattern between Hasselt and Liège as a car-scale environment: the most important feature of the assembly points for the protest drive is their size. The demonstrators are also primarily designated in terms of their mobility: they are ‘motorcyclists, truck drivers and car drivers’. According to this model, the city is not a circle but a network. The final destination of the protest drive by car is the vast asphalt space of an unused parking lot on a Sunday afternoon. The building that dominates this site is a manifest sign of unbridled mass consumption, but it does not come under attack. The real target of this posturban manifestation, of course, is the waiting TV-camera, not the place. The place itself is triply empty: spatially, functionally, symbolically.² In this dispersed city, the familiar urban models of public space have lost their meaning, while no up-to-date alternatives seem to have been formed.

MANICHEISM

The radical opposition between two models of the city and urbanity does not just lie dormant in these newspaper articles but also characterises to a considerable degree the debate on architecture and urbanism. Current theories about urban public spaces are largely like a ‘literature of loss’:³ they often paint a black-and-white contrast between the authentic but lost ‘good city’ and the present condition of cities, between quasi-pure ideals of urban public space and the hybrid conditions of the real world. This kind of manicheism has been criticised before,⁴ but remains in vogue, for example in Michael Sorkin’s much-discussed book *Variations on a Theme Park. The New American City and the End of Public Space*.⁵

In his introduction to this volume of essays, Sorkin frames the discussion of contemporary urban space in a stark contrast between the new city and the traditional city. The new city, according to Sorkin, can be characterised in three ways: ‘the a-geographia, the surveillance and control, the simulations without end.’ These three characteristics and their parallels with other theories are a good example of the abundant literature of loss that is currently mapping the loss of urbanity and public space.

The first characteristic, that the surrogate city is a-geographic, refers to the decay of local and specific traits that traditionally distinguish cities from each other. Rem Koolhaas makes the same observation in his text on the generic city.⁶ A city is no longer to be understood as a unique spatial context that varies geographically, but merely as a species, a genus, a standard infrastructure that can be deployed anywhere in the world.

Surveillance and control make up the second characteristic and refers to the obsession with security that is especially

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See for a discussion of the ‘void’ as a basis for public space: K. Borret, ‘The “Void” as a Productive Concept for Urban Public Space’, in: GUST (Ghent Urban Studies Team), *The Urban Condition. Space, Community and Self in the Contemporary Metropolis* (Rotterdam, 1999), 236-251.

3
M. Brill, ‘Transformation, Nostalgia, and Illusion in Public Life and Public Place’, in: I. Altman and E. Zube (eds.), *Public Places and Spaces* (New York, 1989).

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For instance: Ted Kilian, ‘Public and Private, Power and Space’, in: A. Light and J. Smith (eds.), *The Production of Public Space* (Lanham, 1998); B. Robbins, ‘The Public as Phantom’, in: B. Robbins (ed.), *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis, 1993); R. Deutsche, ‘Agoraphobia’, in: R. Deutsche, *Evictions. Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA, 1996).

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Michael Sorkin (ed.), *Variations on a Theme Park. The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York, 1992).

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Rem Koolhaas, ‘The Generic City’, in: Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL* (Rotterdam, 1995).

prevalent in North-American cities. On the one hand, this obsession leads to extreme surveillance and security measures, on the other to an increasing segregation of different social groups. Mike Davis has described these developments to great dramatic effect in his bestseller *City of Quartz*.⁷

The third element describes how the architecture of the surrogate city has lost all authenticity and thrives on simulations. Christine Boyer illustrates this phenomenon in her analysis of the tourist district South Street Seaport in Manhattan: maritime architecture is scenically displayed to create an absurd fictitious tableau, which satisfies the nostalgic longing of visitors and encourages consumption.⁸

Michael Sorkin's description of the new city involves a plea for a return to a more authentic city. However, several aspects make the model of the good city problematic. By viewing public space as a locus of political activity, Sorkin successfully challenges the mainstream discourse that would prefer to screen public space from politics to facilitate discussions of the city's shape in terms of pleasant entertainment and safe sociability. But by holding up the dazzling historical ideals of 'agora, castle, piazza, or downtown', he only succeeds in making every intimation of public space in the banal reality of the generic city pale in comparison. This merely serves to perpetuate the lament about the demise of public space.

More importantly, Sorkin's text is steeped in the conviction that the so-called urban public realm is something we all once shared but have now lost and that we should somehow regain it. This argument, however, bypasses all the different levels of exclusion on which the ideal models of urban public space relied for their functioning. Not all urban inhabitants had equal access to participation in the supposedly open debate in the agora. 'For whom was the city once more public than now? Was it ever open to the scrutiny and participation, let alone under the control, of the majority? Was there ever a time when intellectuals were really authorized to speak to the people as a whole about the interests of the people as a whole? If so, where were the workers, the women, the lesbians, the gay men, the African Americans?' asks Bruce Robbins.⁹ Commentators like Sorkin mourn 'a lost state of plenitude' and chase a phantom of public space that has never really had any right to claim that title.

The manicheistic contrast that determines, in *Variations on a Theme Park*, what is to be called urban public life and what is not, ties in with the binaries that constantly crop up in theories of public space. Although the public/private dichotomy is casually applied, this pair of concepts is less obvious or monolithic than it seems. We should constantly remind ourselves that public and private are relative terms that only gain meaning through contrast, that they can't simply be consolidated spatially, and that they cover a great variety of definitions and ideologies.

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Mike Davis, *City of Quartz. Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York, 1990).

8

M. Christine Boyer, 'Manhattan Montage', in: M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory. Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainment* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 421-476.

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Robbins, 'The Public As Phantom', op. cit. (note 4), viii.

THREE TRADITIONAL MODELS OF THE PUBLIC/PRIVATE DISTINCTION¹⁰

The casual use of public and private obviously has to do with the fact that the distinction between the two is 'one of the grand dichotomies of Western thought'. However, for some decades now this binary has been intensely questioned within a variety of disciplines (economics, social history, feminist theory), although the different discussions can not always be easily related to each other. The distinction between public and private is not unitary but protean. It takes on different guises in different contexts. These contexts or paradigms are different but not entirely unrelated: that is precisely what makes it so difficult to separate them. Social and political theorist Jeff Weintraub has nonetheless identified three models, each of which organises the distinction between the public and the private in a distinctive way. This classification might bring some clarity and remove some of the misunderstandings and mystifications that arise by allegedly taking for granted terms such as the public or private domain.

The liberal-economistic model

PUBLIC	PRIVATE
- government	- market
- administrative regulation backed by coercive force	- voluntary contractual relations between individuals
- 'public sector'	- 'private sector'

The difference between public and private in the liberal-economistic model roughly comes down to the distinction between state administration and market economy. Often-used concepts such as the 'public sector' and the 'private sector' belong to this tradition. This model, dominated by economic arguments, places individuals and the organisations based on voluntary and contractual relationships between individuals over and against governmental interference and control. The boundary between these definitions of public and private is expected to be as clear as possible: what falls under public jurisdiction and what does not? When does the public interest demand government intervention and when does it not?

The citizenship model

In the citizenship model, the public side is the realm of political community based on citizenship; it corresponds neither with the free market nor with the government in the liberal-economistic model. The true distinction according to the citizenship model can therefore never be made visible in the liberal-economistic framework. Consequently, the meaning

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For the discussion of the models of the public/private division, I made extensive use of Jeff Weintraub, 'The Theory and Politics of the Public/Private Distinction' in: Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar (eds.), *Public and Private in Thought and Practice. Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy* (Chicago, 1997), 1-42.

of 'public' in each model appears to be different:

<i>liberal-economistic model</i>	<i>citizenship model</i>
PUBLIC	PUBLIC
'public sector' = administrative state	'res publica' = world of debate, collective decision making, and action in concert
≠ market	≠ market and ≠ government

The basis here is the Aristotelian division between *oikos* (household) and the public life of political activity. The notion of public follows the tradition of republicanism (the tradition was readopted by Hannah Arendt in the twentieth century). In this context citizenship therefore means more than being part of a community, as in the communitarian definition, it implies active participation: 'Citizenship entails participation in a particular kind of community . . . one marked by, among other things, fundamental equality and the consideration and resolution of public issues through conscious collective decision making.'¹¹

The 'public realm' (Arendt), the 'public sphere' (Habermas), the 'political society' (De Tocqueville) are typical concepts that belong to this model. More recently, Peter Rowe proposed his rather vague notion of 'civic realism', which fits into this framework.¹²

The sociability model

PUBLIC	PRIVATE
<i>ancien régime</i> polymorphous sociability	(isolated individual)
<i>modernity</i> Gesellschaft	(personal life)

The criterion used to distinguish the public from the private in the sociability model is the nature of social relationships. Sociability refers to spontaneous encounters and associations between heterogeneous and mutually unfamiliar individuals and groups, in a way that makes their diversity bearable and coexistence sustainable (Sennett's civility). The ideal model is the polymorphous and theatricalised public life of the *ancien régime*, when 'life was lived in public', a cosmopolitan or even

'Mediterranean' idea of street life that is more casual and promiscuous but also quite apolitical. The issues surrounding the distinction between public and private in the work of Philippe Ariès, Jane Jacobs, Richard Sennett and William H. Whyte belong to this paradigm.

This model assumes that the gap between the public and the private has widened since the onset of modernity and that sociability has been in decline ever since. Modernity causes the collapse of the original concept of sociability, with its increasing polarisation between a public domain increasingly experienced as impersonal, instrumental, individualistic (*Gesellschaft*, market, modern state, bureaucratic organisation, and so forth) and the private domain of domesticity, which is increasingly shaped by intimate and emotional relationships (modern notions of non-instrumental friendship based entirely on sympathy and affection, the ideal of romantic marriage, the position of the child in the nuclear family, and so on). The sharp distinction between, on the one hand, a private sphere of intimate relationships through the emergence of the modern family (and other relationships geared to the creation of islands of intense intimacy and privacy) and, on the other hand, a radically opposite public sphere caused the old form of sociability to fade away.

Richard Sennett has identified an additional evolution, namely that the norms for social relationships within the private sphere became so dominant that they started to manifest themselves in the public sphere as well. Sennett sees the city as the locus of tolerated heterogeneity: public space is the scene of civilised contact with the strange and the other.

Theatricality and coded expression were the rules of the game of public life during the *ancien régime*. They went into decline in the nineteenth century, according to Sennett, when notions like personality, authenticity and spontaneity made their appearance in the domain of public life. Ever since then relationships are not considered authentic unless they are sincere and spontaneously manifest the 'deeper' personalities of the parties involved. The mask should be a face. Intimacy becomes the standard for all social behaviour in the public sphere. Thus, the politician is not simply judged by his actions but also by his ability to convincingly show character and emotion in public. Sennett's well-known argument is that the ideology of 'warm' intimacy has become a tyranny that pervades society as a whole and seriously erodes the balance between the public and the private realm in the city.¹³

In discussions about urbanism we use these different models of the public/private dichotomy without really distinguishing between them: we often use them at the same time and mix them together. One example is the shifting content of critiques of the public space in the context of urban renewal.

The content of urban renewal projects in the 1970s, for example, predominantly belonged to the third model. The problem was defined in terms of sociability: the cold and deathly

¹¹ Ibid., 13.

¹² Peter Rowe, *Civic Realism* (Cambridge, MA, 1997).

¹³ Especially elaborated in: Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man. On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* (New York, 1978). These themes also return in Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye. The Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York, 1990), and in Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone. The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York, 1994).

design of public space in accordance with the functionalist theories of late-modernist urbanism did not stimulate spontaneous, human relationships, according to this critique. Critics deplored the fact that the streets and squares of the city no longer provided obvious occasions for social contact.

One might argue that the revitalisation of the city since then has all in all been a success but has also led to the risk of the overtaking of the city centre by private businesses, as part of the boom in urban entertainment. This evolution in turn has given rise to a new kind of critique, which is formulated less in terms of sociability and more in political terms and has set its sights on urban renewal itself. It is feared that the inner city will become no more than an entertainment centre. The festivalisation of the city centre often creates commercial excesses that clash with the urban public space. Current discussions of public space precisely revolve around the concern to safeguard the fundamental statute of public space. Thus, the liberal-economistic model is foregrounded in recent critiques of the commercialisation of public space: in the eyes of critics the market is crossing its boundaries by usurping ever-larger chunks of urban life and poses a threat to the public interest.

The following scheme synthesises the three models presented so far:

	PUBLIC	PRIVATE	
<i>liberal-economistic</i>	government	market	<i>capitalism</i>
<i>citizenship</i>	political community	(oikos)	<i>polis</i>
<i>sociability</i>	sociability	(domesticity)	<i>ancient régime</i>

A FEMINIST MODEL

However, this scheme needs to be supplemented with a fourth model, developed through feminist criticism.

Surely the liberal-economistic model and the citizenship model – and in part the sociability model as well – have in common that they all start by filling out the public half of the dichotomy. As a result, the private half usually serves as a residual category. The feminist model reverses that order and starts by defining the private sphere as the family. In this way it makes sure that the domestic sphere is not mystified within the binary model. In the liberal-economistic model, for example, the division into public and private only relates to the part of social life that has traditionally been dominated by men, namely government and the market economy. The domestic

sphere does not play a part in these environments and consequently cannot be theorised within this model.

public (market + government) >< *private* family

The distinction between public and private within the feminist critique is designed to reveal the asymmetry of this dichotomy in terms of gender, but does so at the cost of neglecting a very large public domain. The public sphere includes all economic and political activities outside the family and is therefore a residual category in this model. In the feminist model, the family or the domestic sphere is thematised, but market and government are relegated to the same side of the dichotomy without any distinction.

The market and the civil society¹⁴ grafted on it, turn out to switch sides, depending on the model in which they are placed. One can offer a sociohistorical explanation for the ambivalent position of the market economy or civil society. In the Aristotelian distinction, which laid the foundations for the dichotomy of public and private, the sphere of the *oikos* or household included both family and economic life: the household was the most important institution for the organisation of production and distribution. Modernity, or the rise of the market economy, pulled these activities out of the household. Because of the increasing importance of the market economy and the development of an entire world of social relationships based on the market, the market economy could hardly be put on the same side of the binary with the family anymore. The market economy or civil society is private or public in a peculiar way, different from the way the family is private and different from the way the government is public.

This confusion between private and public alone, aside from any other entanglements with other divisions according to other models, shows how binary thinking about the public and the private probably poses an epistemological problem, and most definitely a terminological one as well. The binary division of public and private is not unitary and airtight. Every public/private dichotomy contains a non-reducible complexity.

THE DEFINITION OF A THIRD TERM

The distinction between public and private obviously remains an inescapable key element of Western thought. Nevertheless, it makes sense to make the limitations of the dichotomy explicit and to confront them. The political philosopher Hannah Arendt tackles the problem head-on.¹⁵ She leaves the binary model behind and clearly defines a third domain, using a three-part model of society. She argues that the dichotomy of the public and the private is a historical model, which has been complicated since modernity through the rise of what

¹⁴ 'Civil society' is understood here as 'the social world of selfinterested individualism, competition, impersonality, and contractual relationships – centered on the market – which . . . seemed somehow able to run itself'. Weintraub, 'The Theory and Politics', op. cit. (note 10), 13.

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958).

she calls the social realm. Arendt connects the social realm with the rise of mass society in the wake of a modern capitalist economy and defines it as a kind of pre-political jumbo-household.

It is tempting to introduce Arendt's three-part model into current debates on public space. But her negative qualification of the social realm makes this problematic. Because of her emphatic definition of the social realm as an apolitical area and because she cherishes the public realm like a pure hothouse flower, Arendt's tripartite model remains blind to a number of indirect power structures and political developments in the social realm and runs the risk of confirming the nostalgic litany about the loss of citizenship and public-political life.

This third term can be conceptualised in another way by considering civil society as a wider field. Rather than only centred on the market economy, civil society can be understood as a realm of several different publics, each with its own clearly defined identity. This includes neighbourhood committees, cultural organisations, environmental movements and countless other interest groups based on ethnicity, language, race, etcetera. On the one hand, they show the characteristics of a community: they share the same standards and values; they sanction their members on the basis of those standards and values; and they try to exist as a group, despite individual preferences and interests. On the other hand, their authority does not extend across society as a whole. That is why they are, in a sense, not public: they protect their members against the intervention of the government, which is on the outside, and they pursue rather more limited, particular goals than universal ones. To think about the third term in this way is closely related to the idea of micro-politics and identity-politics. Other than in Arendt's model, the third domain appears to a certain extent to be a repetition of the public domain, but within very homogeneous, independent and distinctive little reservations.

The possibility of a third term in between public and private space is also an important issue in architecture and urbanism. The Barcelona urban designer Manuel de Solà-Morales introduces a term of his own: 'Collective space is much more and much less than public space, if we limit it to public property. The wealth of a city is that of its collective spaces, of all places where everyday life takes place, presents itself, and is present as memory. And maybe they are more and more often spaces that are not public or private but both at the same time: public spaces used for private activities or private spaces that allow collective use.'¹⁶

Manuel de Solà-Morales gives commercial activities on public property, on the one hand, and public use of commercial spaces, on the other, a concept of their own. In one sense it resembles Arendt's social realm, because it is also a domain grafted onto the increasing importance of the market

economy. But in De Solà-Morales's argument this domain has a positive potential as a contemporary location of public value. The pale focal points of life in the generic city, such as the supermarket, the sports centre, and the parking lot are in De Solà-Morales's eyes possible places of communal interest, as often undefined spaces where the public shape of the city is at stake. In the historic inner city of Brussels we find a classic example of both guises of collective space. The Galeries St. Hubert and the Rue des Bouchers cross each other halfway. According to a purist terminology of public space, neither would be considered as such. The Rue des Bouchers is public domain but has been completely colonised by the private activities of the restaurant business. The Galeries St. Hubert has always been open to public access, but is in fact private property. Wouldn't we put ourselves in a theoretical cul-de-sac if we were to dismiss both these marvellous urban spaces as not-public?

CLOSING

This account shows that public and private are not monolithic terms but that they vary considerably in meaning, depending on the framework within which they are used and defined. Many misunderstandings and much confusion in the current debate on public space is actually the result of the neglect of these multiple definitions of the distinction between the public and the private. Discussions in the fields of architecture and urbanism badly need more terms, more adequate terms and more specific terms to articulate and define public life. If we want to talk with some sense about an anti-Dutroux demonstration on a blue Sunday afternoon, on the parking lot of a shopping mall somewhere in the banal urban sprawl between Hasselt and Liège, we need more words than public and private.

Translated by Gert Morreel

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Manuel de Solà-Morales, 'Openbare en collectieve ruimte: de verstedelijking van het privé-domein als nieuwe uitdaging', in: OASE no. 33 (1992), 3-8. De Solà-Morales applied these ideas convincingly in the design of the shopping mall in the building Illa in Barcelona (with R. Moneo, 1986-1994).