

Michigan Social Theory Conference Abstract

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Panel: Space (and place)

Title: What Makes Space ‘Public’? Conceptualizing the Legitimation of Space

This paper develops the concept of “public legitimation”, defined as a process by which a particular space gains recognition as representing public interest and/or collective identity. I argue that focusing on this process allows us to gain a better empirical understanding of the difference between public and private space, avoiding some of the ambiguities associated with conventional political-economic approaches. Furthermore, I present ways in which public legitimation can be studied as either an explanandum (i.e. how do certain spaces gain public legitimacy), and as an explananda (i.e. how does legitimacy affect the way people act toward and within a particular space).

The distinction between public and private spaces is frequently made both explicitly and implicitly in academic and political work. Conventionally, public spaces are conceived as being publicly (or government) owned and providing some kind of social service, and private spaces are seen as being owned by individuals or private organizations and serving private economic purposes (either for personal consumption or for the generation of profits). I call this distinction the “political-economic” approach, since it focuses primarily on ownership, economic function, and legal status to distinguish between public and private space.

There are two problems facing the political economic approach to public space. First is the problem that Zukin (1991) refers to as “liminality”. With the rise of shopping malls, gated-communities, and public-private partnerships, spaces are increasingly falling somewhere in between traditional notions of public and private (Sandercock and Dovey 2002). This makes public space harder to distinguish based on political-economic criteria. The second problem is that political-economic distinctions between public and private space often get pushed beyond their explanatory range. This is particularly true when scholars attempt to make claims about the symbolic characteristics of a space (e.g. how people feel about it, or whether it embodies certain meanings) based on its material characteristics (e.g. who owns it, or what economic function it serves). While there may be a relationship between the symbolic and material characteristics of particular spaces, we cannot derive the former directly from the latter.

In response to these limitations, I propose that rather than trying to label space as public or private according to some established political-economic criteria, we examine how these distinctions are made by the inhabitants of cities. In particular, we examine how particular spaces gains *legitimacy* as public rather than private among the local population. Legitimacy typically refers to a status of acceptability, or a process by which something becomes acceptable (Baumann 2007a; Zelditch 2001). Legitimacy has most

commonly been tied to the formation of a collective *interest* within a group, such as the interest in following a particular leader (Weber 1968). And more recently legitimacy has been used to describe the achievement of special cultural status, such as when art gets legitimated as ‘high’ rather than ‘low’ (DiMaggio 1982; Peterson 2003; Bauman 2007b). Incorporating both dimensions of legitimacy, I define the public legitimation as a process in which space gains recognition as representing public interest and/or collective identity. Libraries, monuments, parks, and sidewalks are all typically seen as legitimately serving the public interest, representing local identity, or both.

The main benefit of public legitimation is that it allows us to take public space as the object of empirical study – either as an explanandum (dependent variable), or explananda (independent variable). As an explanandum, we can ask how certain spaces come to gain legitimacy. This approach allows us to incorporate both the symbolic and material characteristics of space, rather than privileging one over the other. Legitimation is a symbolic process, but it takes place within political-economic conditions. The owner or a particular space and the economic activity that occurs within it will affect (but not fully determine) whether the space is seen as representing public interest and/or collective identity. As a related sub-question, we must also examine the level of consensus that has been achieved over legitimacy. Different groups within the city will regard different spaces as public, based on divergent socio-economic positions and cultural sensibilities. Often legitimation processes will involve a clash between different groups that see the same space as either a benefit to the public interest, or a threat.

I further argue that the public legitimation of spaces contributes to the structure of social life within cities, since people act differently toward and within spaces they recognize as public. Thus, legitimation can also be taken as an explananda. For instance, once a space gains legitimacy among enough people (or just the ‘right’ people) it often becomes subject to state-enforced regulations, such as the laws governing heritage architecture. Other spaces that have not gained official state recognition may nonetheless become the focus of social movements that form to protect or revitalize these spaces. The paper expands on these empirical approaches to public legitimation by drawing on original research of two iconic architectural developments in Toronto, and examples from existing literature.

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