

# PUBLIC SPACE, CIVIC DIGNITY AND URBAN RESISTANCE IN THE AGE OF SHRINKING DEMOCRACY

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## Abstract

Neoliberal urban restructuring constitutes an underlying challenge facing cities and communities around the world. Public space, as a medium of political engagement and social interactions, may represent a vehicle for resistance against patterns of shrinking democracy. In its capacity as a place for active democracy, public spaces – the lived spaces of contemporary societies – deserve greater care, attention, and critical reflection. As movements evolve to confront new challenges, explore new opportunities, negotiate with new actors and circumstances, and utilise new technologies and platforms, our understanding of the agency of democracy – supported through an understanding of civic dignity – must also advance. This paper aims at examining the role of public space in reclaiming and reinstating democracy. By drawing on empirical findings from cities worldwide, explored through the lens of multiple disciplines, it argues that the study of urban protest might show directions for a new, dignified politics of public space. It asks how this study may enable planners and designers to contribute to the spatial emergence of human and civic dignity.

### *Keywords*

*Post-political condition, global restructuring, urban resistance, civic dignity, democratic agency*

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## 1. Spaces of Resistance

Around the world, the shrinking capacity of democratic processes has left citizens and communities with no other resort than to take to the streets. The erosion of democracy, accompanied by economic restructuring, austerity policies, and the weakening of the public sphere fundamentally challenges cities and communities around the world. Current developments of de-democratisation, rising dissatisfaction, and decreasing identification with representative-democratic institutions have given rise to new movements and resistance to the shrinking capacity of (formal) democratic processes. Public space has served as a vehicle for such resistance and expressions of civic dignity. Following Ober (2014), civic dignity is defined as 'a set of historic practices that were regularized as custom and law at certain times and places in history' (p.55). It

is predicated on a shared status of political equality among a body of citizens – a defined set of people who are jointly committed to the preservation of a public domain (Greek: *politeia*; Latin: *res publica*), but who are not social peers and who may have no personal ties with one another (ibid.).

In this sense, civic dignity promotes the mobilisation of civic agency in public spaces through a focus on the potential for urban publics to self-organise and debate the roles for common goods in contemporary democracies. Public space provides channels for realising and performing active democracy, and thus deserves greater attention. This paper argues that current urban movements, including their practices, claims and utilisation of new technologies, encourages us to reflect and re-think the role and agency of public space. Therefore, acknowledging public space as a vehicle through which democracy can be reclaimed also means public space ought to be viewed as lived and political space. Stressing the role of public space in contexts of planning, development, and urban design in these unsettled times clearly touches upon Margalit's (1996) question – if planning for dignity is indeed about avoiding humiliation and establishing a more decent society. In this vein, this paper analyses and challenges the relations and interconnections between civic dignity, urban resistance, and public space in the context of current developments of de-democratisation.

## 2. Exploring Urban Resistance Tactics in Relation to Civic Dignity

### 2.1. Shrinking Democracy and the Post-Political Condition

In many parts of the world, democracy has been institutionalized, and 'is now firmly and consensually established as the uncontested and rarely examined ideal of institutionalized political life' (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2015, p.2). At the same time, however, democracy 'has never been more conceptually footloose or substantively hollow' (Brown, 2011, p.44). Democracy has rather become an empty signifier, that, as Brown states, has been reduced by capitalism 'to a "brand," a late modern twist on commodity fetishism that wholly serves a product's salable image from its content' (ibid.).

The idea of democracy as 'governing by the people for the people' has vanished due to the growing influence of technocratic governance regimes, as well as multi- and transnational companies. Governing is now conducted by 'a proliferating maze of opaque networks, fuzzy institutional arrangements, with ill-defined responsibilities and ambiguous political objectives and priorities' (Swyngedouw, 2010, p.5). This 'post-democratic state', which Rancière (1999) describes as 'democracy after the demos' (ibid., p.102), is characterised by 'the disappearance of the mechanisms of appearance, of the dispute opened up by the name "people" and the vacuum of their freedom' (ibid.). Hence, as he continues, it is 'the disappearance of politics' (ibid.).

Drawing on Rancière's concept of 'post-democracy', Mouffe (2000) argues that the current 'post-political' condition encompasses substantial repression of antagonistic struggles. However, since 'the political' cannot be easily extinguished, political disagreement is increasingly expressed through identity politics and violent fundamentalism (ibid.). In this current political climate, authoritarian regimes, ultra-right parties and neo-fascist tendencies are contributing to the growing erosion of human rights standards around the world, sustained ironically by a climate of technocratic de-politicisation. As the common denominator for a respectful, decent and peaceful politics is at stake, scholars focusing on the study of dignity have pointed to the need to delve

beyond human rights alone and focus on dignity (Brownsword, 2014). From this general debate, lessons considering the role of urban resistance in (re)establishing civic dignity via place-based approaches to planning need to be drawn.

## 2.2. Armament of Public Space

Developments in de-politicisation have a direct influence on public life and significantly shape urban spaces. Mayer (2013), for example, introduces four dimensions to neoliberal urban restructuring: (1) processes of 'investor-driven upgrading' of cities; (2) 'gentrification-led restructuring' of inner-city areas; (3) urban marketisation through privatisation and festivalisation; and (4) outsourcing of manufacturing to the Global South (*ibid.*, p.9).

In the context of increasing competition between cities, (political) regulations are scaled back with the intent of attracting investment and capital. Cities pay subsidies to global corporations, investors, and developers in order to attract their investment. Instead of responsibly representing citizens' concerns, politicians are 'buttressed by self-interested officials and lobby groups, distanced from people's everyday lives' (Healey, 2010, p.11). On a conceptual level, the growing alienation of people from their everyday life through processes of totalisation has been criticised, as totalisation

imposes doubt, collapse, and disintegration. Every trial must be carried out, every hypothesis must be hazarded, every attempt at totalization must be put to the test before the irreducible residual deposit – the everyday – can claim its demands, its status and its dignity (Lefebvre, 2014, p.931).

We conceive everyday places as sites where acts of urban resistance may eventually take place – both to reclaim dignified living conditions in the ideal sense of egalitarian politics, and as a study field where antagonistic action and intersecting forms of discrimination are taken to undermine human rights (and thus threaten dignity). In this sense, and following intersectional approaches, this also means considering and reflecting on several inter-related and overlapping forms of discrimination in order to adequately understand different forms of exclusion, oppression, domination, and vulnerability. Scholarly inquiry needs to consider key findings from feminist approaches that have identified public spaces as places where (human, political) vulnerability is shown, as it is here where the '(dis)enchantments of public encounter' (Watson, 2006) evolve, and the expression of political will is still bound to face-to-face interaction. On this face-to-face level, human vulnerability can be linked directly to considerations of dignity. With the rise of new authoritarianisms, the civil right to use public spaces and express one's opinion has come under pressure, particularly for vulnerable groups and subjects in their common struggles over representation.

Especially since the events of 9/11, hyper-security measures have shaped cityscapes around the world. As a result, the daily life of urban dwellers is increasingly affected by the politics of surveillance and techniques of control in both physical urban spaces and cyberspaces (Low and Smith, 2006). Under the cover of allegedly omnipresent terrorist threats and following the rationale of zero-tolerance politics, police forces increasingly deploy means of violence and harassment; more frequently against political dissidents in order to prevent or disperse forms of protest and occupation in the first place. Such security measures and so-called 'prevent strategies' are often highly racialised and discriminatory in character, and have thus been widely criticised for their ethno-racist bias (cf. Smith, 2003; Cahill et al., 2017).

For many ordinary citizens, their bodies have become the only available resource to disrupt the flows of neoliberal governance. Protestors around the globe have loudly and passionately occupied squares, streets, and plazas in the name of reinstating democracy. In this respect, Moore (2013) has offered reflections about embodied space, protest, and dissent as essential features in reinstating the political. Such a conception of embodied space can be related to different conceptions of dignity: Ober (2014) has introduced a three part distinction between meritocratic dignity, civic dignity, and human dignity. Civic dignity 'is held in common by an extensive yet bounded body of citizens' (*ibid.*, p.54) that 'stands between the personality and exclusivity of meritocratic dignity and the impersonality and universality of human dignity' (*ibid.*, p.55). Once established, civic dignity 'may provide a bridge from meritocratic to human dignity, by facilitating the recognition that

everyone has an interest in living with dignity' (ibid.). It is not by coincidence that civic dignity and the public domain are strongly linked, as the former is available to and protected by citizens who all ideally have an equal chance to participate in the public domain. Human dignity 'generalizes to all humanity the high standing formerly reserved for a privileged few' (Waldron, 2012). On a more practical level, '[r]especting human dignity entails treating humans as persons capable of planning and plotting their future. Thus, respecting people's dignity includes respecting their autonomy, their right to control their future' (Raz, 1979, p.221, cited in Brownsword, 2014, p.3). For the planning discourse, strong parallels to the debate on the Right to the City – in which inhabitants are granted the right to design and thus control their own urban future (Purcell, 2013) – can be identified. Civic dignity, however, is a political praxis and an ethical principle upon which every democratic action needs to reflect, as democracy is not only about securing one's own rights and demands but also about granting these rights and demands to others so that they can live decent lives: 'individuals are secure in their dignity only when others are willing and able to defend it' (Ober, 2014, p.53). This is a key ethical principle to the democratic foundation of (planning for) public space.

### 2.3. Urban Resistance and Public Space

Urban inhabitants have been facing severe structural changes affecting their everyday lives, among them: rising living costs, job losses, community displacement, citizens' harassments, pension cuts, and police violence. At the same time, a lack of regard for democratic instruments to ameliorate or prevent these shortcomings has been identified (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2015). As a consequence, it is not surprising that protests occur at increasing frequency and intensity in many cities worldwide. Ordinary citizens are taking to the streets, raising their voices, claiming for their rights, and demanding specific local policy changes. Often, their calls for dignity are not complex. Such demands include adequate access to water resources, decent housing conditions, freedom of speech, and fair wages. Passionate protests show that urban spaces have again become a catalyst in struggles for a democratic society based on civic dignity. Mass assemblies in Brazilian cities, the occupation of Queen's Pier in Hong Kong and the state capitol buildings in Madison, Wisconsin, and protests in cities including Vienna, Paris, and Budapest illustrate how in urban spaces abstract political claims and ideals become materially manifested.

The crucial role and relevance of public space in urban resistance could be explored further, as analyses in this area are often confined to disciplinary boundaries. For example, in political theory, social movement research sees space primarily as a backdrop when analysing movement strategies and tactics, and for contextualising protest phenomena in structuralist accounts with a socio-political focus (cf. Ajanovic et al., 2015, Vienna). For planning and design professionals, although they are essentially involved in and responsible for the making of the material arrangements of public space, issues of protest, social movements, and forms of urban resistance are rarely emphasised (as an example, see Janson and Bürklin, 2002, Venice). This underestimation of public space with respect to democratic agency underlines the crucial need for (analytical) work in this area. Planning and design scholars dealing with public space issues are asked to unpack the role of public space and to develop planning for dignity by supporting and generating active democracy (Knierbein and Viderman, 2018). This means, for instance, focusing on the relationships between urban protest, civic dignity, and planning in order to better understand the connections between forms of resistance and public space.

Frank and Fuentes (1990) state that even though 'social movements are more defensive than offensive and tend to be temporary, they are perhaps the most important agents of social transformation' (ibid., p.142). Following their insight, this paper focuses on activists' capacity for social transformation. It is argued that the exploration of urban protest might show directions for a new, dignified politics of public space, and might offer ideas of how planners and designers could contribute to the emergence of better spatial human and civic dignity. This paper is based on a research collaboration (Hou and Knierbein, 2017), that involved a diverse group of scholars and activists from different disciplinary backgrounds – encompassing a broad range of cases of urban resistance and public space agency in Asia, Europe, North and South America. This collaborative work was guided by the following research questions: What do recent forms of urban protest have in common? What are the roles, functions, and meanings of public space in these urban resistance movements? What are the implications of urban protest for the (re-)making of public space in the context of current developments of de-democratisation?

Methods used originate in various disciplines including ethnography, human geography, urban sociology, planning theory, and political science. Single or comparative case study approaches have been presented as part of the research and many drew on empirical observations, participatory action research, structured and semi-structured interviews, and qualitative content analysis of parliamentary documents and daily and weekly media. Moreover, an emphasis has been placed on empirical research that includes activist research strategies and approaches inspired by feminist ethics and resistance-by-research. The paper draws on empirical findings from sixteen cities, analysed through the prisms of diverse disciplines. As part of a second round of analysis of the cases and the results, we now focus on interpreting earlier findings regarding urban resistance movements by introducing dignity as an additional interpretative concept.

### 3. Spatial Grounds of Re-Democratisation

The worldwide rise in urban resistance in 2011 served as a starting point for academic and public debates about shrinking democracy and urban contestation against modes of neoliberal restructuring. However, as various empirical examples show, protests against neoliberal policies were happening long before then. In Athens, for instance, processes of neoliberal urban upgrading, commercialisation and privatisation ahead of the Olympic Games in 2004 led to acts of resistance during the 1990s. In Bolivia's third-largest city Cochabamba, people successfully protested against the privatisation of water between December 1999 and April 2000 (Santos, 2007). In Argentina, the economic crisis in 2001 provoked mass demonstrations against a neoliberal regime installed under the military junta decades before (Rosa and Vidosa, 2017). A further example is the Western-Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign in South Africa. Initiated in 2001, it served

as an umbrella body for a number of community organisations, crisis committees, and resident groups that emerge in Cape Town's poor townships to resist [...] evictions and service cut-offs and demand their rights to shelter and basic services (Miraftab, 2009, p.36).

These examples illustrate that 2011 represents a peak in resistance when sparks of protest against neoliberal urbanisation and inequality in cities of the Global South spilled over into those in the North. It was exacerbated by the global economic crisis of 2008 which had further precipitated a significant rise in unemployment, the dismantling of welfare state systems, and had seriously challenged speculative housing investments. Yet, the shaping and effects of neoliberal governmentality cannot be understood only in terms of economic or material parameters. They also need to be assessed in respect of their political, social, and cultural dimensions. To adequately grasp and comprehend the impact, means, and rationale of contemporary neoliberalisation, economic processes need to be conceived of in relation to their influence on democratic political systems. Neoliberalism has actively provoked a political crisis. This can be seen in the reduced impact of voting in altering political approaches, as well as the acceptance and internalisation of neoliberal ideology across the political spectrum, leading to the disappearance of viable alternatives (cf. Monbiot, 2016). This has further reinforced voter disenfranchisement and political apathy (ibid.).

As a consequence of these political, economic, and social changes, urban life has become fundamentally unsettled. In the context of these recent struggles, public space has come into focus, as it is one essential place where the restructuring of multiple relations between the state, markets, and civil society can gain momentum. Due to the undergoing crisis of modern nation-states, cities and their role within these processes of restructuring are receiving increased attention (Appadurai, 1996). Considering current developments of de-democratisation, the ideal of Western liberal democracy has been exposed to more criticism. Mouffe's (2000) concept of the 'democratic paradox' provides an analytical framework to understand crisis shaken democratic states. As Mouffe (2000) argues, the idea of liberal democracy has always been based on a contradiction. This democratic paradox points to the intrinsic tension of two traditions of political thought, the liberal and the democratic strand:

On one side we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defense of human rights, and the respect of individual liberty; on the other, the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, the identity between governing and governed, and popular sovereignty. There is no necessary relation between those two distinct traditions but only a contingent historical articulation (ibid., p.2-3).

Yet with the rise of neoliberalism, the imbalance between liberty and equality has become stronger, and this has led to the superiority of the liberal tradition (Mouffe, 2000). This means that the democratic principles of equality, popular sovereignty, and identity between the governing and the governed have been increasingly neglected. In this context, it might prove interesting to connect Mouffe's (ibid.) argument to Ober's (2014) distinction between debates about human rights and debates about human dignity. Whereas the human rights debate clearly links to the first field of individual liberty, civic dignity would allow us to more strongly focus on the democratic tradition insofar as civic dignity 'is predicated on a shared status of political equality among a body of citizens' (ibid., p.55). Civic dignity emphasises the idea of democracy as government by the people, for the people, which in turn presupposes an equal right and capacity to do so. Therefore, civic dignity enforces the democratic tradition of liberal democracies without neglecting the liberal principle of individual liberty: 'civic dignity is available to and protected by free citizens who have an equal opportunity to participate in a public domain of decision and action' (ibid.). For the field of planning and designing, this suggests that a concept of civic dignity – based upon a balance of dissent and consent, out of which a shared vision that starts with decent living conditions for all and includes wider conceptions of dignity, and is continuously reinvigorated by active public engagement – is required.

Based on these considerations, in the following section we examine four aspects in which public spaces serve as nodes of critical actions and reflections: (3.1) public spaces as sites for mobilisation and negotiation, (3.2) public spaces as zones of contestation and learning, (3.3) public spaces as space for rescaling and re-politicising, and (3.4) public space as grounds for alter-politics.

### 3.1. Public Spaces as Sites for Mobilisation and Negotiation

Studies on acts of urban resistance show that recent protests have produced a new generation of protestors. Furthermore, spatial analyses of political protest emphasise the importance of physical urban places for various social groups to participate in political protest, (verbally) articulate their demands, and also to (bodily) stand in for a different social order. Many people who have never been politically active before have been protesting in streets, on plazas and other public spaces. Also, different groups have engaged with each other, among them groups who might possess opposing political and/or moral views. For instance, in the Occupy Gezi Park movement in Istanbul, LGBT activists protested together with conservative Muslims (Yiğit Turan, 2017). In the course of the protests at Syntagma Square in Athens, right- and left-wing activists came together and formed political coalitions (Kaika and Karaliotas, 2017). These political communities work to defend their own political interests, but they increasingly work to protect decent living conditions for others. This can be directly related to a remaining or revived sense of civic dignity.

In the Latin American movements of 2001, horizontality as a mode of mobilisation became an important and powerful strategy for self-organisation and for developing new and different forms of resistance (Lorey, 2014). Following Lorey, horizontality is 'an instrument for actualizing the equality of all those present' (ibid., p.45) that involves new forms of organising, new modes of subjectivation, and reflexive social regulations (ibid., p.53). However, horizontality is not a programme that immediately removes hierarchies but rather needs to be conceived as a possible 'instrument for creating a social space in which everyone feels empowered to speak and take part in common challenges as a different and similar singularity' (ibid., p.54). Ideally, this space offers opportunities to consciously deal with forms of inequalities and privileges, and to reflect on different manners of speaking and expressing opinions (ibid.). This directly relates to civic dignity as it relates to who is respected and who is being heard (Ober, 2014). However, these forms of horizontal mobilisation might still be entangled in (post)structural discrepancies. Hence, it is important to acknowledge that not all urban movements are progressive by nature or interested in radical democratisation. Cases illustrate that anti-democratic acts of protest can instrumentalise forms of urban resistance by deploying strategies of mimicry (Knierbein and Gabauer, 2017), or by pursuing a politics of fear in order to reinforce boundaries between groups of different ethnicities, religions, cultures, classes, or genders (Chen and Szeto, 2017; Owens and Antiporda, 2017).

### 3.2. Public Spaces as Zones of Learning and Contestation

Crises are 'the heartbeat of neoliberal governance' (Knierbein and Hou, 2017, p.235), which are constantly produced through processes of austerity and mechanisms of de- and re-institutionalisation. Neoliberalism

permanently (re)produces political, social, economic, and cultural divides and, consequently, recurrently provokes outbursts of resistance against these ruptures. At the same time, through this politically engineered state of perpetual crisis, neoliberal measures and austerity policies become legitimised. Hence, neoliberalism renders itself a self-fulfilling prophecy. Cities in particular are sites where the effects of neoliberal governance gain momentum, and, conversely, where the cracks and fractions of the neoliberal project become visible.

Different case studies illustrate the relevance of public space research in carefully analysing processes of urban transformation. The focus on public space enables research to examine changing patterns of urban life at a local level within the scope of neoliberal governmentality. Investigations of this kind also demonstrate the (inter)relations between informal action and formal policies. For instance, in Tokyo, homeless citizens, youth activists, artists, public intellectuals, and trade unionists demonstrated against the privatisation of Miyashita Park, an elevated park in the city's iconic Shibuya shopping district (Dimmer, 2017, p.199). The protestors not only occupied the physical space of the park but also promoted debate on social media among planning professionals and scholars of social movements about public spaces in Japan's cities (*ibid.*). The case of Tokyo, and also Berlin (Lebuhn, 2017), Warsaw, and Poznań (Domaradzka, 2017) illustrate how activists use formal means of participation and/or formal rights and legal resources to address political claims. In these cases, protestors have called for city-wide or neighbourhood referenda, or have sought information about legal procedures. Their mobilisation strategies have enabled them to connect with a wider audience. This has helped them receive additional support for their demands. Furthermore, establishing referendum campaigns has encouraged them to sharpen their discursive claims and messages.

Unlike in these cases, activists behind the protests at Syntagma Square in Athens (Kaika and Karaliotas, 2017), the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (Chen and Szeto, 2017), and activists behind the Occupy Gezi Park movement (Yiğit Turan, 2017) and the Sunflower Movement in Taipei (Chen, 2017) have prevented parties and formal authorities from (entirely) hijacking their mobilisations. The study of the self-organisation of different groups within the Sunflower Movement illustrates how such arrangements enable new forms of collective learning in areas relating to solidarity, tolerance, and transparency within decision-making processes. The cases of Taipei (Chen, 2017), Hong Kong (Chen and Szeto, 2017) and Madrid (Kränzle, 2017) demonstrate how protestors can become part of the political system. Their electoral traction has enabled them to challenge established political identities and renew governing bodies. These findings facilitate reflections on dignity as the right to autonomously define one's own (political) positions and to (collectively) reorganise common goods and public affairs.

### **3.3. Public Space as Space for Rescaling and Re-Politicising**

The success of protest strategies 'is related to the ways in which geographical scale is actively considered and mobilised in struggles for social, political, or economic resistance or change' (Swyngedouw, 2004, p.26-27). That is why protest movements organise their tactics, aims, and demands in order to connect the fragmented geographies of crisis. This means, for instance, that they need to combine struggles for local needs, urban equity, regional justice, national political contestations, criticism against supranational governance, and struggles against the local impact of market forces, thus overcoming the 'jumping of scales' of capital (Swyngedouw, 2004, referring to Smith, 1984). Therefore, as Swyngedouw (2004) points out, the resistance to 'the totalising and globalising forces of money and capital accumulation demands forging "scalar" alliances that are sensitive to geographical difference and uniqueness' (*ibid.*, p.43).

Urban public spaces are sites where spatial crises collide, where social densities and political identities meet, and where fragmented scales of protest can be (re)united. This entails forms of solidarity that extend from a small-scale with local peers, to issues of civic dignity in a city's wider political community, towards a much more global solidarity for egalitarian democracy. Social movements have emphasised that certain spaces in cities are politically symbolic, and are locations where claims for political reform or revolutions have been repeatedly articulated. This is no less the case in contemporary protests against neoliberal restructuring, and here, protestors have articulated more fundamental political demands instead of issuing local, interest-based inquiries or narrow claims. Hence, these spaces are the material manifestations of the earlier contexts behind struggles for civic dignity, as they are about the inherent links between contingent city publics, public life, and the formation of public opinion in the public sphere. Nevertheless, feminist and postcolonial planning

scholars have pointed to the limits of such Euro-centric notions (Miraftab, 2009; Bayat, 2010). We would thus need to revisit civic dignity to respond to these more recent criticisms and to carve out an analytical tool in urban studies and planning theory relevant to research on urban societies characterised by increasing levels of social, cultural and political difference.

A politics of dignity in difference would also be needed for those case studies that focus on the vulnerability of younger generations. Young people have been affected by evictions and displacement either through the commodification of public spaces (Maharawal, 2017) or as a result of racialised broken-windows policing (Cahill et al., 2017; Owens and Antiporda, 2017). These empirical findings on urban resistance speak directly to the intersection between debates on human rights and human dignity. This is because the operational neglect of principles of human rights in real politics has been contested in forms of resistance in which an ethical consideration of dignity is expressed. Public space mobilisation and resistance are thus ideal fields to empirically track down disjuncture between human rights and human dignity, and help to include individual, collective, public, and political forms of social (self)organisation that all address dignity in different ways.

### 3.4. Public Space as Grounds for Alter-Politics

Historically, cities have been perceived as places where different publics within urban society have used public space as an urban commons. However, within neoliberal governmentality, the city has changed from being conceived as possessing a collective urban history to being defined by a narrative of competition. Competition has become a key concept in urban democratic societies, which in turn means that those who are not able or do not want to become part of this competitive rationale are excluded (Tyler, 2015). This is an affront to civic dignity as an ethical-political approach. Embarking from a deeper understanding of democracy would promote the equal treatment of all parts of a political community (and those beyond it).

The conducted research on various protest movements shows that public space serves as an important site where resistance groups with different motivations articulate their demands and criticisms and radically reinvent the democratic project. In this vein, the study on which this paper is based draws upon earlier work which understands the collective production of space as a democratic act. Through it, those who previously had no part become central agents for re-establishing democracy (Rancière, 2010). The broad range of studied cases from different cities around the globe offers results that enable us to both further differentiate between disenfranchised groups and to elaborate on how those differently disempowered and disenfranchised groups relate to public space – as well as how they use public space to connect to other urban realms. For instance, groups of unemployed have re-appropriated offices, vacant factories, or container terminals, and thus have linked public space with labour markets and workplaces (e.g. in Buenos Aires). The unsheltered have connected public space with housing and homes. Protestors in Barcelona, for example, have occupied empty buildings, de-privatised, rehoused, and de-commodified private property. These indigents have reclaimed bank assets into collective property. The un(der)represented have connected their struggles in public space with sites where democracy ideally should be made (e.g. in Athens' Syntagma Square). In Taipei, protestors have blocked symbolically important public squares and streets, and even the parliamentary building. The unattended have brought public space together with transport infrastructure by occupying and using train stations in Vienna and Budapest to stand together in global solidarity and to organise humanitarian support, e.g. for refugees. The colonised have occupied sites emblematic of colonial history, of oppression, inferiority, terror, and imprisonment (as cases of Oakland and San Francisco indicate). They have linked public space with such places in order to symbolically free themselves from a history of colonisation. In Ghent and Berlin, the non-consumers have protested in and for non- and de-commodified spaces, thus connecting public space with places of non-consumption and commoning. They have shared common resources through using both private and public properties.

Public spaces are not only essential sites for claiming rights and stating dissent, they also offer possibilities to expand political identifications to others. This is how protestors use lived space as a vehicle to incite wider political resistance and the creation of an alternative democratic society. Hence, public space, in the sense of lived and political space, is precisely where the multiple fragmentations and failures of neoliberal hegemony become visible, and where those potential spaces that escape neoliberalism's spatial conquista can be analysed. In this vein, public space is the arena where different types of (counter-)publics meet, where they

try to achieve decent living conditions, and where they intermingle, collaborate, and build solidarity across different(ly) affected groups. This means that public space needs to be conceived as both an opportunity and a threat. On the one hand, public space offers the possibility for citizens to make their claims visible, not least to receive support for their struggles. On the other hand, as shown in the case of Mexico City, it also risks people becoming further marginalised, stigmatised, dispossessed, threatened, or criminalised (de la Lata Gonzales, 2017). Hence, public space cannot only become a site of one's empowerment but also where one's vulnerability is exposed, which includes the risk of losing one's dignity and of losing one's life.

Finally, empirical research on urban publics can help to identify a shift from anti-politics towards alter-politics (Hage, 2012). 'Anti-politics' refers to forms of protest against certain issues whereas 'alter-politics' denominates the desire for a politics of radical change. Thus, alter-politics aims at practicing and establishing an alternative democratic project, one that is opposed to the post-democratic model and that offers a different idea of a democratic society.

#### 4. Conclusion: Silent and Unsilenced Forms of Resistance and Solidarity

As outlined in the previous sections, our research on diverse empirical cases in various cities and continents illustrates the crucial role of public space in reclaiming and reinstating democracy. Differently motivated resistance groups have used a broad range of strategies and tactics to connect public space protests with direct action in private, public, or hybrid territories of capital accumulation. Their acts of resistance have linked the public and private realms in order to address and confront the pervasive and overlapping means, strategies, and impacts of current neoliberal governmentality.

Reflecting on these empirical findings might enable us to directly address issues of dignity and link them with the role of public space. If dignity can be defined as non-humiliation, we suffer indignity, as Ober (2014) states,

when our public presence goes unacknowledged, when we cringe before the powerful, when we are unduly subject to the paternalistic will of others and when we are denied the opportunity to employ our reason and voice in making choices that affect us [...] Dignity is [...] a matter of the respect we accord to one another. It is because we live in communities, structured by rules, that the ethical question about lives going well became a question for political theory. From this perspective, the best political regime is the one that provides the best conditions for lives to go well (ibid., p.53f).

The question, then, would be whether public space agency 'enables a ready response to dignitary threats' (ibid., p.56). This question cannot be fully answered, yet a critical reflection on the evidence is that 'the concern for defense of dignity among a body of citizens need not dull the concern felt by citizens for the dignity of those outside the citizen body' (ibid., p.58). This concern is of key relevance here, as it helps to rethink the roles of those included and excluded in the political publics. Such an inclusive and open conception of civic dignity helps to reconnect to Rancière's focus on those who had no part and who are considered as having the prime agency in the renewal of the democratic project. In his considerations about the Community of Equals, Rancière (1991) argues that

We can thus dream of a society of the emancipated [...] Such a society would repudiate the division between those who know and those who don't, between those who possess or don't possess [...] It would only know minds in action: people who do, who speak about what they are doing, and who thus transform all their works into ways of demonstrating the humanity that is in them as in everyone. Such people would know that no one is born with more intelligence than [...] [their] neighbour [...] They would know that [hu]man's dignity is independent of [...] [their] position, that "[...] [humans are] not born to a particular position, but [...] [are] meant to be happy in [...] [themselves], independently of what fate brings" (ibid., p.71, quoting Jacotot, 1836, p.243, insertions by paper authors).

Following Bayat (2010), in Western democracies public space is part of the institutions of the modern nation-

state. However, as he indicates, many of the subaltern in cities of the Global South have no access to public spaces. Hence, he argues that

Because modernity is a costly existence, not everyone can afford to be modern. It requires the capacity to conform to the types of behaviour and mode of life [...] that most vulnerable people simply cannot afford (ibid., p.59).

Urban public space, as a highly-institutionalised realm, is one of these components of the modern world. Many subaltern groups try to avoid public expression wherever possible in order to escape modern legal structures. They do so because these legal structures mostly restrict their daily life instead of offering them opportunities or resources (ibid.). However, to adequately understand urban resistance, it is of great importance to also consider the type of silent, individual protest to which Bayat refers. As we take a worlded, critical perspective in examining different forms of resistance, we suggest that such 'social non-movements' (Bayat, 2010) are an essential aspect that can contribute to an understanding of the city as self-organised political project.

This research, however, has been concerned with acts through which such silences have been overcome. Hence, urban public space has been analysed as a site of loud and passionate resistance, as a catalyst for radical democratic change, and where people disrupt political silence in order to renew the democratic project – in which 'the spaces of democracy (spaces for the practice of democracy) and the democracy of space (democratic relations in the production of space)' (García-Lamarca, 2017, p.52, referring to Hoskyns, 2014, p.4) are inherently interwoven. Following Ober (2008), the original meaning of democracy refers to power as the capacity to do things

*Demokratia* is not just 'the power of the demos' in the sense 'the superior or monopolistic power of the demos relative to other potential power-holders in the state.' Rather it means [...] 'the empowered demos' – it is the regime in which the demos gains a collective capacity to effect change in the public realm. And so it is not just a matter of control of a public realm but the collective strength and ability to act within that realm and, indeed, to reconstitute the public realm through action (ibid., p.7).

As Ober (2014) has identified elsewhere, 'the practice of civic dignity developed [...] in close association with democracy' (ibid., p.58). Research and action considering the qualities, pitfalls, and potential of public space agency might help to establish and/or maintain legal constraints and a political culture that values both human and civic dignity, the latter as the 'responsibility of a group of civic peers to maintain the dignity of each and all' (ibid., p.57).

In order to better understand recent urban resistance, this paper aimed to shift attention onto public space, understood as lived space, in regard to its role, meaning, and relevance, to the practice of civic dignity and lived democracy. Our research aspires to demonstrate that in light of diminishing democratic institutions, spaces of resistance play a crucial role not only in holding the state and governmental institutions to account, but also in renewing and reclaiming democracy and pursue civic dignity. We have argued that the continued presence, contestation, and discourse of lived public space is essential in a radical democratic project. This means a worlded understanding of democracy is fundamental to protecting and enhancing the dignity of citizens, non-citizens, and communities against the encroachment of neoliberal interests, new authoritarianisms, and all other sources of increasing spatial patterns of social inequality.

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