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**CITY PUBLICS**  
**THE (DIS)ENCHANTMENTS OF URBAN ENCOUNTERS**

**SOPHIE WATSON**

# City Publics

As cities have grown into mega-cities or have seen their centres decline with the flight to the suburbs, questions of the public realm and public space within cities warrant even greater attention.

*City Publics* investigates the ordinary spaces in the city where differences are negotiated. It is concerned with the borders, and boundaries, the constraints and limits on living with, accepting, acknowledging and sometimes celebrating, difference in public. Through ethnographic studies of a number of unusual, surprising and marginal sites, which are not usually the focus of debate, as well as studies of different subjects in public spaces, the book aims to interrogate how difference is negotiated and performed. When and how differences are lived agonistically, and how power is exercised often subtly, not through dominance or manipulation, represents a further focus. Also challenged are the conventional notions of the public and public space.

This valuable and timely book explores the conditions under which violent and negative emotions can erupt to the detriment of others, and elucidates through fine-grained exploration what underlies racist, homophobic, sexist or any other phobic/ist exclusionary practices, so that it becomes possible in some way to expose and confront them. At the same time this book uncovers and reveals some of the many and serendipitous sites of enchantment and pleasure to be found in the city.

With numerous photographs and drawings *City Publics* not only throws new light on encounters with others in public space, but also destabilises dominant, sometimes simplistic, universalised accounts and helps us reimagine urban public space as a site of potentiality, difference and enchanted encounters.

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# **City Publics**

The (dis)enchantments of  
urban encounters

**Sophie Watson**

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# 1 Introduction

## THE (DIS)ENCHANTMENTS OF URBAN ENCOUNTERS

I glance around at my fellow citizens as I deposit the books in my sack, and I feel a surge of love for the arbitrariness of our arrangements, that we should be assembled here together in this particular compartment of time, sharing public space, at one with each other in our need for retreat and the printed word. There's Mrs Greenaway, with her impossibly narrow nose bridge, smiling perpetually, an intelligent woman with no place to stow her brand of originality. Mr Atkinson, retired teacher, his tie sunk into the fat of his neck, the *Britannica* opened on the table before him, to a map of some sort. There's a bearded man whose name I don't know but who seems to be scribbling a novel or a memoir into a series of spiral notebooks. There's Hal (Swiftfoot) Scott, who pumps gas and plays hockey, or at least he did before he got caught in a drug bust last year. He's reading *Macleans*, probably the sports section. This is a familiar yet unique scene. The precise patterns will occur only once – us, here, this moment engraved in a layer of memory – a thought that stirs me to wonderment.

(Shields 2002: 45)

For most contemporary city dwellers, or indeed visitors to the city, the experience of walking along a city street, and musing on the diversity of faces they see and languages they hear, on the shops with arrays of different products and smells, restaurants displaying foods and recipes from across the world, is a sensory delight. This is the contemporary phantasmagoric 'multicultural' city, where people of different races, ethnicities, class locations, ages and sexualities live side by side, produced by a complex set of socio-economic, global/local, political and socio-demographic shifts which mean that living with difference, though always a feature of urban life, is probably now quintessentially what city life is about. But running alongside this celebratory urban narrative, constituted by the very same processes, is the city as a space of segregation, division, exclusion, threat and boundaries, where the story of city life as mixing and mingling is replaced by a story of antagonism, fear and exclusion.

These experiences and also myths of the city, in some sense, are not new. Pro- and anti-urban discourses and mythologies have been present since cities first existed. What has changed is the content of the narratives, on the one hand,

## 2 Introduction

and the political and social responses on the other. Thus, in the late nineteenth century, the public spaces of the city were proclaimed unhealthy places populated by the unruly and disorganised working classes, prompting interventions through planning, social reform and other urban strategies. Difference, except as mobilised in discourses of class, was not central to urban narratives, despite the already multicultural composition of many of the world's large cities, as a result of the impact of colonialism and international and inter-regional migration. Even by the time that Simmel was writing, cities were seen not so much as places which concentrated difference but rather as places where sensory overload from excessive stimulation produced a withdrawal and anomie amongst urban dwellers. Meanwhile other writers, such as Tonnies, variously mourned the passing of (imagined) rural cohesive communities (*Gemeinschaft*) for places of loose association (*Gesellschaft*).

What concerns me here is not to find a truth about the living of difference in the public spaces of cities, one overarching narrative or straightforward story. Compelling as such stories may be, evidenced most strikingly in Mike Davis' (1992) depressing description of Los Angeles as the fortress city, articulating the notion that public space has become militarised, or in his more recent depiction of cities as spaces of disaster (Davis 1998) or Mitchell's (2003) portrayal of zones where undesirable behaviour is regulated by what he calls bubble laws, they offer only one account. Similarly, the idea of the end of public space through its privatisation in theme parks (Sorkin 1992), or commercialisation in shopping malls (Crawford 1992), rests on the gaze at some kinds of public space, not others. Rather this book is about public sites out of sight, not the city centres now being designed and planned to reintroduce diversity; it is concerned with the borders and boundaries, the constraints and limits on living with, accepting, acknowledging and sometimes celebrating, difference in public. To argue that public spaces are only spaces of transit where little contact between strangers takes place (Amin and Thrift 2002) is to focus one's gaze on only more visible, and often overplanned, or neglected spaces. There are many other kinds of public space too.

When asked by friends about the book I was writing, I found myself answering that it was about how people rub along, or don't, in the public spaces of the city. This is neither a simple issue nor one to which a universal solution can be found. Moments of tranquillity or harmony can easily erupt into moments of antagonism and violence. Love and hate, empathy and antipathy co-exist in ambiguous and ambivalent tension. Requiring attention, then, are the conditions under which violent and negative emotions can erupt to the detriment of others. Each part of a city is distinct from each other part, and is different at different times of the day and night, as well as across the different months and years, depending on the wider socio-political context. It is also different depending on who you are, both in a material sense and in the realm of the imaginary – every subjectivity in the city is walking through the city streets with a different set of images and imaginations, constituted in personal conscious and unconscious histories. Each city is different from another, though common strands and grounds can be found, and there is a danger in urban studies, all too prevalent, that analyses of American (first), British

(next) and other European cities are deployed to describe cities in other parts of the globe, notably Africa, Asia and Latin America, in ways that are utterly inappropriate and even pernicious. It is only when we can elucidate through fine-grained exploration what underlies racist, homophobic, sexist or any other phobic/ist exclusionary practices that we can go some way to exposing and confronting them. Agonistic encounters are an inevitable and productive outcome of differences in the city where these are engaged in with openness and lack of closure, where imbalances of power are acknowledged and addressed, and where outcomes are not pre-determined.

This is also a book which challenges conventional notions of the public and public space – a book which has arisen out of a weariness with the circulation of theories of difference and the public and with well-worn quotations which litter the literature, an irritation with the articulation of assumptions and generalisations about the public space and people within it which are rarely grounded in complex and textured understandings of the people and places concerned. Through ethnographic studies of a number of sites in the city, sites which are not usually the focus of public space debate, as well as studies of different subjects in public spaces, the book aims to interrogate in a fine-grained way how difference is negotiated and lived, when and how differences are lived agonistically, and how power is exercised often subtly, not through dominance or manipulation (Allen 2003), in order to investigate what the limits to difference in different sites at different times might be. Central to my argument is that the specificity and contingency of difference as lived in particular socio-spatial configurations has to be central to urban analysis, even if this specificity illuminates and elucidates wider concerns.

The origin of this book came many years back when I fell in love with public space, that space of delight which encapsulates serendipitous encounters and meanderings: sitting, watching, being, chatting in spaces that may be planned, designed and monumental, but more often may be barely visible to the inattentive eye, on the margins of planned space, or even imagined. It was in Venice that this love affair, which had been bubbling subterraneously for many years, finally erupted. It was not the grand Piazza San Marco which charmed me, as it has charmed many urban designers and planners before, despite its awesome beauty. Campo Santa Margherita stole my heart.

This is a public space which is irregular, haphazard and ordinary. Its ten entrances/exits invite random paths to be taken, its benches, scattered across the square, lure the old and young to pause for a while, its lack of cars entices kids to play and chase the pigeons, its market stalls bring locals to shop, its calm and bustle, light and shade, mark it as a place to gaze, chat and rub along with others with ease.

The notion of random, specific, contingent, symbolic, imagined and lived, visible and invisible, spatio-temporally differentiated public space informs the selection of sites and subjects deployed and examined here. These are not Richard Rogers' grand piazzas or endlessly rehearsed shopping malls. A vignette from the month before this book went to press illustrates the point. On a hot day in the early



*Plates 1.1 and 1.2 Saturday morning, Campo Santa Margherita, Venice.*  
 Photographs: Jeri Johnson.

summer, having failed to find the promised fun fair, my daughter, her friend, my friend and I set off to another borough through the bank holiday traffic to a planned children's play area in a local park. The visit was disastrous. The place was crowded, my child was wearing the wrong clothes to play in, the two competed for the equipment and showed off to each other, parents were grumpy, the place was littered and ugly. We beat a hasty retreat with the children in tears in the back of the car. Attempting to retrieve the situation, we bundled them off to the local city farm, a space cut out of the railway sidings and abandoned land, captured from the railway authorities by a local community group, where in a higgledy-piggledy 3 acres, horses, cows, goats, sheep, a pig and chickens share the space with tumbledown buildings, an education centre, stables, a couple of fields, allotments for old age pensioners and, crucially on this particular day, a pond. There, by the side of this small pond, were children of all ages, ethnicities and class backgrounds, lying on the ground fishing for tadpoles in plastic cups, while parents sat and lay on the banks chatting. It was two hours before any of the kids could be extracted from this buzzing, intermingling, cheerful site to return home. In this scruffy, unplanned and marginal public space, on this particular afternoon, urban encounters across age, race, sex and class enchanted and surprised those who happened upon it. This is London, a global city, but in every city in every corner of the globe there are sites of magical urban encounters, hidden in the interstices of the planned and monumental, divided and segregated, or privatised and thematised, spaces that more usually capture public attention.

A number of themes and arguments run through this book, foregrounded differently across the sites and subjects here. The first is that there are different



*Plate 1.3* Children search for tadpoles at Kentish Town City Farm, London.



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conceptions of the public for different subjects: the ‘public’ and public space are deployed and understood in multifaceted and particular ways, constructing subjects heterogeneously. The second is that *contra* Habermas and others, the public is not just about ‘talk’, it concerns bodies and their micro-movements. To put this another way, bodies and public space are mutually constitutive. The third argument is that exploring marginal, unportentious, hidden and symbolic spaces, and the different imaginaries of often forgotten subjects, gives us a way into thinking of public space differently. At the same time, connecting to a third argument, these very same sites can quickly shift from liminal space to centre stage as they rub up against institutional and regulatory arenas at particular historical moments. So even marginality is a temporary and shifting state: the invisible becomes visible and vice versa in unpredictable ways. Thus, the role of the state and regulation in constructing public space is another theme in the book. The fourth theme is the mutually constructed and complex relation between public and private spaces, and the culturally embedded nature of embodied and social practices associated with these. Fifth, this is a book about engaged, agonistic and antagonistic encounters in the city – an exploration of how and when difference matters. Central to all these themes is the question of how different subjectivities, bodies and knowledges are constructed in, and themselves construct, public space.

For me, this is an important political project. The city, and the public spaces which constitute it, in the twenty-first century is the site of multiple connections and inter-connections of people who differ from one another in their cultural practices, in their imaginaries, in their embodiment, in their desires, in their capacities, in their social, economic and cultural capital, in their religious beliefs, and in countless other ways that cannot be enumerated here. If these differences cannot be negotiated with civility, urbanity and understanding, if we cling to the rightness of our own beliefs and practices, and do not tolerate those of another in the public spaces of the city, at best Mike Davis will have been proved right, at worst there will be no such thing as city life, as we know it, to write about or celebrate. This is not to argue for a world where differences are ironed out, equalised or placated. As Mouffe (2000) persistently contends, differences are inherently agonistic and, following Foucault, implicated in the exercise of power in complex and productive ways. Rather, we have to confront the realities of differences in the city head on, experience the pleasures as well as the pains they inevitably produce, and think about ways of not entrenching difference in the politics of fundamentalism (religious and secular) which is threatening the possibility of everyday democratic multicultural space. So, finally, to borrow Bennett’s (2001) notion, this also is a story of enchantment in the public spaces of the city, a story of places and sites where people do rub along, not just in the exoticised, celebrated and commodified spaces representing a visible multicultural settlement, so loved by city planners and investors, but in the ordinary spaces of everyday life.

In the rest of this chapter I introduce some of the theoretical propositions that have informed my thinking. I then consider different conceptions of public space and the public realm. The first part of this discussion explores conceptions which

foreground the potentialities for the co-mixing and mingling of strangers in public space or which see public space as the realm of debate, citizenship and democracy. The second part considers different explanations for the limits to living with difference in the city, which help elucidate some of the stories which follow.

## **CITY PUBLICS: THE (DIS)ENCHANTMENTS OF URBAN ENCOUNTERS**

This book, then, is about encounters in public urban space. It is also about difference and the multicultures that inhabit the everyday spaces of the city, and the ebbs and flows of openings and closures, the possibilities and constraints, the inclusions and exclusions, the joys and pains, that these produce. Public space is always, in some sense, in a state of emergence, never complete and always contested, constituted in agonistic relations, in that it is implicated in the production of identities as relational and produced through difference. As Connolly (1998: 93) puts it:

Public space is the space in which such collaborations and contestations occur. Today, a profound source of social fragmentation flows from the demand by a series of intense contenders to occupy the authoritative center. That center must itself be pluralised.

This represents a break with the idea of public space as a space where differences as fixed identities can be asserted. Rather, following Deutsche (1999: 176), it ‘interrogates exclusionary operations that simultaneously affirm and prevent the closure of identity’: opening it up instead as a space of heterogeneity where differences are acknowledged as constituted in power relations.

Weber places disenchantment at the centre of modernity in his description of the modern, rational, routinised, bureaucratised and secularised society (Jenkins 2000) where life is increasingly impersonal and mystery and magic have no place. These ideas have permeated political thought as well as commonsense understandings of everyday life. Notwithstanding the usefulness of Weber’s insights, like Bennett (2001) in a different context, I want to reintroduce an idea of enchantment into our sense of living together, with all the fractured, fluid, shifting and different subjectivities implied, in the spaces of the city. In part, then, this book is an attempt to reclaim public space from the darker narratives which have constructed it over recent decades. Stories of the city and its public spaces as dangerous, dead or dull, or as sites of exclusion, marginalisation and violence, I want to suggest, contribute to, and produce, the very conditions that they describe. Some accounts of this kind do appear here. But new stories of public space as life enhancing, exciting, safe and inclusive, or stories of sites that are on the margins and barely visible, can take us far in creating those spaces in just that way. When word goes out that a market or a new walkway by a river, which days before was empty, is fun to visit, crowds are drawn there, creating the very sense of co-mingling with others – the delights of encounter – in the city that those who go there seek. This in turn attracts

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street performers, food or second-hand book stalls, jewellery stalls, bric-à-brac, sights to surprise and charm, sounds and smells to arouse, and the random occurrences of everyday public space.

Representational space (Lefebvre 1991), or space as psychologically lived in, is implicated in the very production of space itself. How we imagine a place, space, city in large part creates the conditions of possibility for how we act, which itself creates the contours of that very space. The stories we tell ourselves as we walk down the street, the swirling of affect, the cacophony of noise, take us along one route or another, down this alleyway or highway, to this park, to this market and this street. Bombarded daily by images and stories of public space as dirty, polluted, dangerous, empty, homogenous, pointless – the list is endless – we retreat into the private realm of family and friends, or the privatised realm of cultural consumption that we can afford. To protect ourselves from meeting and confronting those who threaten or disturb us, who disrupt our sense of self, who put our fragile subjectivities under threat, we draw into ourselves in indifference at best or hostility at worst. But this presumes the possibility of such a withdrawal from others. Jean Luc Nancy would have us see it otherwise:

we happen – if happen is to take place, as other in time, as otherness. . . . We are not a ‘being’. . . . This happening as the ‘essential’ otherness is given to us as we, which is nothing but the otherness of existence. . . . The ‘we’ is not, but we happen, and the ‘we’ happens, and each individual happening happens only through this community of happening, which is our community. . . . Community is finite community, that is, the community of otherness, of happening . . . history is community, that is, the happening of a certain space of time – as a certain spacing of time, which is the spacing of a ‘we’.

(1993: 156)

For Nancy, then, a person exists, or has a singular history, only insofar as he or she is exposed to and within a community – the “‘we” happening as the togetherness of otherness’ (ibid: 158). This is a thoroughly situated, in space, time and place of otherness, sense of self and subjectivity, formed in the public spaces we inhabit with strangers – rubbing along, as I have chosen to call it, to underline its very ordinariness.

The challenge of our time is to conceive of society and political life as having difference at their heart, rejecting the notion of multiculturalism as deployed by a dominant group to spatially manage those that are other (Hage 1998). Multiculturalism which rests on a notion of cultures as definable and homogenous is inevitably a view from the outside used as a means to understand and control others from a space of power (Benhabib 2002: 8). Cultures are not fixed and given, but fluid, shifting and contested. So too are identities. As Benhabib puts it:

human identities can be formed only through webs of interlocation . . . the individual can be seen to have a ‘right’ – that is, a morally justifiable claim of some sort – to the recognition by others of structures of interlocation within

which he or she articulates an identity, only if it is also accepted that each individual is equally worthy of equal treatment and respect.

(*ibid*: 56)

There can be no normative assumptions as to which collective life forms, in particular which ways and strategies of inhabiting public space, should be privileged over others. Here I am also compelled by Wendy Brown's (2005) rejection of the notion of tolerance, which, she argues, works to mask the universalism at the heart of liberalism and disguises its normative powers. Central to liberalism is the autonomy of the individual subject, on the one hand, and, on the other, the autonomy of law and politics from culture, thus securing the individual from culture, which is depoliticised and relegated to some other place into or from (parts of) which the individual can voluntarily enter or leave. Thus tolerance configures the right of the liberal subject to tolerate others or not, and is 'generally conferred by those who do not require it upon those who do'. Only those who deviate from, rather than conform to, established norms are thus eligible for tolerance.

Strategies and discursive practices deployed by dominant groups to marginalise those less powerful in the representation, definition and use of public space rely on a self-perception which is produced and reproduced with such subtlety as to deny their normative effects. William Connolly (1995) makes the point that one of the difficulties with the growing pressure towards pluralisation is that the opening up of a cultural space for the redefinition of difference presupposes a redefinition of the terms of self-recognition on the part of those whose community is being pluralised. It is for this reason, he argues, that 'the pressures to pluralization and fundamentalization so readily track one another' (*ibid*: xvii). Castells (1997) makes a similar kind of point when he argues that the rise of Christian fundamentalism has taken place in the context of progressive movements for women's and gay liberation in the USA. Central to Connolly's argument is the idea of critical responsiveness, which means revising the terms of one's own self-definition and modifying the shape of one's own identity; also a respect for, and recognition of, new identities even as they are in the process of becoming, that is before they take shape around a stable definition that can be recognised. Identities in this framework are always relational and collective – an argument which runs through all of his work (including Connolly 2002). Connolly rails against the reduction of the notion of difference, which is relational, to diversity, which implies independent identities; in other words, 'there is no identity without difference' (1995: xx). Again, like Castells, Connolly emphasises that the more forceful the push towards integrated communities the 'more implacable the drive to convert difference into otherness' (*ibid*: xxi). What this implies in terms of public space, I think, is an openness and porosity, a blurring of the boundaries, a permeability where differences can collide and rub up against each other, even while the other is recognised as different. Though there are arguments for separate spaces for different groups, particularly where imbalances of power inhibit the expression of specific cultural/gendered/sexed/raced practices, where these are solidified into bounded identity communities, relationality and encounter are lost.

## 10 Introduction

The move whereby ‘identity converts difference into otherness to secure its own self-certainty’ (Connolly 2002: xiv) is thus a dangerous one, if self-certainty means recourse to the implacable and immovable subject position.

Connolly’s political and philosophical project, then, is to construct a new ethos of political engagement and connection between people which is founded in part on the notion of ‘agonistic respect’ which he describes as:

a civic virtue that allows people to honor different final sources, to cultivate reciprocal respect across difference, and to negotiate larger assemblages to get general policies. . . . Agonism is the dimension through which each party maintains a pathos of distance from others with whom it is engaged. Respect is the dimension through which self-limits are acknowledged and connections are established across lines of difference.

(ibid: xxvi)

Coming together across their multiple differences, he proposes a generous ethos of engagement where different identities and faiths are appreciated and articulated in debates and decisions about the fundamental issues of public life (Connolly 1998: 94).

My concern, like Connolly’s and also Deutsche’s, is how to conceive of democratic public space which is not predicated on the exclusion of those who are different from ourselves. Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas, Deutsche (1999: 176–185) cites the notion of ‘non-indifference to the other’ (Levinas 1994: 124, quoted in Deutsche 1999: 176), or to put this another way, taking ‘the other’ seriously. For her, indeterminacy – the abandonment of references to a transcendent ground of power – ‘exposes us to others, and with exposure, democracy is invented’ (Deutsche 1999: 184). For if the grounds of our commonality are uncertain, this opens up the space for continuing debate and negotiation around social questions and rights. To quote: ‘The removal of its [democratic society’s] ground pluralises society – not by fragmenting it into self-contained, conflicting groups, but by making it incompletely knowable and therefore “not mine”’ (ibid: 185). There is an idea here of lack of fixity opening up the grounds for debate and dismantling the prior claims of strong and homogenous groups to define the terms and to claim power. Public space in these terms becomes the space where these debates and negotiations can be enacted, allowing for the possibility that different claims will be made at different times by different emergent groups. Following Levinas’ idea that the reasonable human being can be defined by his or her non-indifference to the other, ‘democratic rights can then be understood not simply as the freedom of the self but a freedom *from* the self, “from its egotism”’ (Deutsche 1999: 185). This gives a breath of fresh air to the centrality of self and the individual, so fundamental to contemporary political, economic and social discourse.

In my own reading of Levinas, I am attracted again, as I am with Connolly, by his appeal to an ethics of conduct between strangers (not kin) who encounter one another: ‘All thought is subordinated to the ethical relation, to the infinitely other in the other person, and to the infinitely other for which I am nostalgic. Thinking