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Book Review of, City Unsilenced: Urban Resistance and Public Space in the Age of Shrinking Democracy

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Jeffrey Hou and Sabine Knierbein, City Unsilenced: Urban Resistance and Public Space in the Age of Shrinking Democracy, New York and London: Routledge, 2017; 250 pp.: 978 1 1381 2581 0, £43.99 (pbk)

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In response to austerity politics and market-based governance of urban land, large-scale social protest has erupted in the public spaces of cities across the globe. In City Unsilenced: Urban Resistance and Public Space in the Age of Shrinking Democracy (Routledge, 2017), editors Jeffrey Hou of UW-Seattle and Sabine Knierbein of SkuOR, Vienna – both scholars of the dynamics of public space – have compiled the stories, strategies and theories derived from social movements in urban spaces since 2011. In this volume, the collected authors demonstrate how public spaces in cities operate as both the subject and object of civic unrest.

Most chapters of City Unsilenced depict a period of time – usually a few heightened weeks or months – in a particular city in which neoliberal policies around issues such as housing, transportation, or labor have led to a mass mobilization in the shared space of the city. While the authors and editors are not the first to document social protest as a spatial phenomenon in cities, this volume ties together demonstrations in a range of cities across the globe with a large-scale objection to the demands of neoliberalism on the spaces in which people live their everyday lives. Authors depict scenes of parks and plazas, squares and sidewalks, and even buses and housing, where protesters redefine what it means for space to belong to the public.
The book focuses heavily on the US and Europe, but also represents Latin America, East and Southeast Asia, and Turkey. The editors do note “that some locations and contests are glaringly missing, such as Africa and the Middle East” (12), to which I would add South Asia as well. In spite of this, the book documents a moment of resistance that has spread around the world – moving, as the editors assert, “from the Global South to the Global North” (234) – and that has attracted castes of people who are not the usual suspects out into the streets.

City Unsilenced is organized into four sections based in different interpretations of the aims and objects of protest. In the first section, Mobilizing, the authors demonstrate how the street tactics of social protest function as a metonym for larger conflicts of privatization of urban spaces. One particularly illustrative example is the Google Bus Blockades in San Francisco (Maharawal, Ch. 3), in which protesters deployed tactics from holding banners out in the streets to issuing “mock citations to the bus for its use of the public... bus stop” (33), in order to demonstrate against wealthy tech companies commandeering mass transit infrastructure for private use. Section two, Reclaiming, focuses upon occupations meant to protect a particular public space, such as Queens Pier in Hong Kong (Chen and Szeto, Ch. 6) or Gezi Park in Istanbul (Turan, Ch. 7), in which the place itself is threatened with privatization, or paving over for a profit-seeking development. In these cases, the wholesale disappearance of public space is emblematic of the foreclosure of the public sphere as a site of civic discourse, and often the space in the urban center is at the core of national unrest. The third section, Negotiating, deals with “competing interests, identities, and agendas among movement organizations and activists” (11). In turn, many of the accounts in this section demonstrate how the character of a
space understood as public is tested through protest, such as the Sunflower Movement of Taiwan (Ch. 11), or the Syntagma Square protests in Greece (Ch. 10), in which masses of people demonstrate their right to exist in the space, and also negotiate the meaning of that right with one another. In the final section, *Contesting*, the authors offer the possibility of new forms of politics arising out of public spaces, reworking the legal and social rights to the city (De la Llata, Ch. 14). In the case of the Nike ‘takeover’ of Miyashita Park in Tokyo (Ch. 16), Dimmer shows how the contests around place-making, rather than standing alone, “emerge at the intersection of national, metropolitan, and local urban scales” (200), forcing us to examine the agendas of local actors even in a scene dominated by powerful corporations. Each section’s theme asks the reader to consider the complexity of protest in each place even as we follow the arc of the book.

In many chapters, the authors foreground the historicity of public spaces, and the ways in which spaces accrue symbolic meaning over time. One outstanding example of this is when protests in Argentina (Rosa and Vidosa, Ch.5), having to do with high levels of unemployment, moved to the Plaza de Mayo. For Argentinians, this place is heavy with the memory of the long-running protests of the ‘Madres de la Plaza de Mayo,’ a group of women who returned each week over many years during and after the ‘dirty war’ to demand that the state tell them what happened to their disappeared children and grandchildren. The contemporary protests, in which “citizens spontaneously mobilized themselves in public space” (60) also drew from the protests resulting from the crisis of 2001, in which “strategies of using public space left an important legacy that continue to inform present forms of organization...” (64). Thus the
strategies for protest in the collective memory of the demonstrators, as well as the physical
sites of discontent serve as a place of remembrance from which to draw strength and mobilize.

In some cases, the street protests have been but a small piece of much larger organizing efforts.
In Chapter 8, *The Right to the Sidewalk*, the collective Researchers for Fair Policing gather data
experiences of marginalized communities of color in New York City in order to resist “the
carceral geographies of young people’s everyday lives” (96). While they note that “thousands of
New Yorkers have joined together taking over streets in citywide protests” of police killings of
Black men (102), their work is to change the longer-term structural issues that are the context
for police violence. In a different vein, major sporting events in Rio in 2013 (Andrade and
Huguenin, Ch. 2) precipitated street demonstrations based in a much larger campaign regarding
fare increases in mass transit, affecting mobility for the urban poor.

One dispiriting aspect of many of the stories recounted here is the number of times and ways
the activists miss the mark, do not achieve their goals, or are dispersed by police violence
followed by further privatization. In Istanbul, the author recounts

the commercial development project that will destroy Gezi Park is still
continuing, and as witnessed in the aftermath of many other movements... there
has been no immediate transformative influence ... on the current political
system or the institutional city-making process in Turkey. On the contrary, there
has been an increasing erosion of freedom, rights, and participation in decision making (92).

In Hong Kong, “Occupy Queens Pier eventually failed to preserve the pier...” (74). Accounts of squatting buildings and other lands in Oakland (Owens and Antiporda, Ch. 13) are beset by challenges of representation of diverse groups. Two years after the Indignados’ protests in Madrid, “the city’s metro station at Puerta del Sol has been renamed ‘Vodafone Sol’ in a £3 million deal with the British mobile giant” (Kränzle, Ch. 15, p. 186). This is not to say that the events leading up to these points of stoppage or disintegration are not meaningful or powerful, but does raise questions of how much hope to place in street protest as a vehicle for social change in an atmosphere of shrinking democracy.

The editors’ conclusion to this volume offers a framework for understanding urban spaces as sites of resistance for various groups of marginalized urban actors, who they name (238). In teaching about public space in the university setting, I might begin with this chapter, asking students to consider how our public spaces and institutions treat these groups: the unemployed, the un(der)represented, the nonconsumers, among others. We would turn, then, to compare the stories in each chapter from this framework; through comparison, the events in this book gain even more power. In so many places and cultural contexts, as the pace of social, economic and political disenfranchisement increases, and more people find themselves on the outside of taken-for-granted social systems, the accounts in City Unsilenced shout out loud: these things really happened.