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

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3 Jeffrey Hou and Sabine Knierbein, *City Unsilenced: Urban Resistance and Public Space in the*
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5 *Age of Shrinking Democracy*, New York and London: Routledge, 2017; 250 pp.: 978 1 1381 2581
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8 0, £43.99 (pbk)
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13 **Reviewed by:** Naomi Adiv, Portland State University, USA
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18 In response to austerity politics and market-based governance of urban land, large-scale social
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20 protest has erupted in the public spaces of cities across the globe. In *City Unsilenced: Urban*
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22 *Resistance and Public Space in the Age of Shrinking Democracy* (Routledge, 2017), editors
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24 Jeffrey Hou of UW-Seattle and Sabine Knierbein of [SKuOR](#), Vienna – both scholars of the
25
26 dynamics of public space – have compiled the stories, strategies and theories derived from
27
28 social movements in urban spaces since 2011. In this volume, the collected authors
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30 demonstrate how public spaces in cities operate as both the subject and object of civic unrest.
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37 Most chapters of *City Unsilenced* depict a period of time – usually a few heightened weeks or
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39 months – in a particular city in which neoliberal policies around issues such as housing,
40
41 transportation, or labor have led to a mass mobilization in the shared space of the city. While
42
43 the authors and editors are not the first to document social protest as a spatial phenomenon in
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45 cities, this volume ties together demonstrations in a range of cities across the globe with a
46
47 large-scale objection to the demands of neoliberalism on the spaces in which people live their
48
49 everyday lives. Authors depict scenes of parks and plazas, squares and sidewalks, and even
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51 buses and housing, where protesters redefine what it means for space to belong to the public.
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3 The book focuses heavily on the US and Europe, but also represents Latin America, East and
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5 Southeast Asia, and Turkey. The editors do note “that some locations and contests are glaringly
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7 missing, such as Africa and the Middle East” (12), to which I would add South Asia as well. In
8
9 spite of this, the book documents a moment of resistance that has spread around the world –
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11 moving, as the editors assert, “from the Global South to the Global North” (234) – and that has
12
13 attracted castes of people who are not the usual suspects out into the streets.
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20 *City Unsilenced* is organized into four sections based in different interpretations of the aims and
21
22 objects of protest. In the first section, *Mobilizing*, the authors demonstrate how the street
23
24 tactics of social protest function as a metonym for larger conflicts of privatization of urban
25
26 spaces. One particularly illustrative example is the Google Bus Blockades in San Francisco
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28 (Maharawal, Ch. 3), in which protesters deployed tactics from holding banners out in the
29
30 streets to issuing “mock citations to the bus for its use of the public... bus stop” (33), in order to
31
32 demonstrate against wealthy tech companies commandeering mass transit infrastructure for
33
34 private use. Section two, *Reclaiming*, focuses upon occupations meant to protect a particular
35
36 public space, such as Queens Pier in Hong Kong (Chen and Szeto, Ch. 6) or Gezi Park in Istanbul
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38 (Turan, Ch. 7), in which the place itself is threatened with privatization, or paving over for a
39
40 profit-seeking development. In these cases, the wholesale disappearance of public space is
41
42 emblematic of the foreclosure of the public sphere as a site of civic discourse, and often the
43
44 space in the urban center is at the core of national unrest. The third section, *Negotiating*, deals
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46 with “competing interests, identities, and agendas among movement organizations and
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48 activists” (11). In turn, many of the accounts in this section demonstrate how the *character* of a
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3 space understood as public is tested through protest, such as the Sunflower Movement of
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5 Taiwan (Ch. 11), or the Syntagma Square protests in Greece (Ch. 10), in which masses of people
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7 demonstrate their right to exist in the space, and also negotiate the meaning of that right with
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9 one another. In the final section, *Contesting*, the authors offer the possibility of new forms of
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11 politics arising out of public spaces, reworking the legal and social rights to the city (De la Llata,
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13 Ch. 14). In the case of the Nike 'takeover' of Miyashita Park in Tokyo (Ch. 16), Dimmer shows
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15 how the contests around place-making, rather than standing alone, "emerge at the intersection
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17 of national, metropolitan, and local urban scales" (200), forcing us to examine the agendas of
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19 local actors even in a scene dominated by powerful corporations. Each section's theme asks the
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21 reader to consider the complexity of protest in each place even as we follow the arc of the
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23 book.
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32 In many chapters, the authors foreground the historicity of public spaces, and the ways in
33
34 which spaces accrue symbolic meaning over time. One outstanding example of this is when
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36 protests in Argentina (Rosa and Vidosa, Ch.5), having to do with high levels of unemployment,
37
38 moved to the Plaza de Mayo. For Argentinians, this place is heavy with the memory of the long-
39
40 running protests of the 'Madres de la Plaza de Mayo,' a group of women who returned each
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42 week over many years during and after the 'dirty war' to demand that the state tell them what
43
44 happened to their disappeared children and grandchildren. The contemporary protests, in
45
46 which "citizens spontaneously mobilized themselves in public space" (60) also drew from the
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48 protests resulting from the crisis of 2001, in which "strategies of using public space left an
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50 important legacy that continue to inform present forms of organization..." (64). Thus the
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3 strategies for protest in the collective memory of the demonstrators, as well as the physical
4 sites of discontent serve as a place of remembrance from which to draw strength and mobilize.
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10 In some cases, the street protests have been but a small piece of much larger organizing efforts.
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12 In Chapter 8, *The Right to the Sidewalk*, the collective Researchers for Fair Policing gather data
13 experiences of marginalized communities of color in New York City in order to resist “the
14 carceral geographies of young people’s everyday lives” (96). While they note that “thousands of
15 New Yorkers have joined together taking over streets in citywide protests” of police killings of
16 Black men (102), their work is to change the longer-term structural issues that are the context
17 for police violence. In a different vein, major sporting events in Rio in 2013 (Andrade and
18 Huguenin, Ch. 2) precipitated street demonstrations based in a much larger campaign regarding
19 fare increases in mass transit, affecting mobility for the urban poor.
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35 One dispiriting aspect of many of the stories recounted here is the number of times and ways
36 the activists miss the mark, do not achieve their goals, or are dispersed by police violence
37 followed by further privatization. In Istanbul, the author recounts
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45 the commercial development project that will destroy Gezi Park is still
46 continuing, and as witnessed in the aftermath of many other movements... there
47 has been no immediate transformative influence ... on the current political
48 system or the institutional city-making process in Turkey. On the contrary, there
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3 has been an increasing erosion of freedom, rights, and participation in decision
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5 making (92).
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10 In Hong Kong, "Occupy Queens Pier eventually failed to preserve the pier..." (74). Accounts of
11 squatting buildings and other lands in Oakland (Owens and Antiporda, Ch. 13) are beset by
12 challenges of representation of diverse groups. Two years after the Indignados' protests in
13 Madrid, "the city's metro station at Puerta del Sol has been renamed 'Vodafone Sol' in a €3
14 million deal with the British mobile giant" (Kränzle, Ch. 15, p. 186). This is not to say that the
15 events leading up to these points of stoppage or disintegration are not meaningful or powerful,
16 but does raise questions of how much hope to place in street protest as a vehicle for social
17 change in an atmosphere of shrinking democracy.
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32 The editors' conclusion to this volume offers a framework for understanding urban spaces as
33 sites of resistance for various groups of marginalized urban actors, who they name (238). In
34 teaching about public space in the university setting, I might begin with this chapter, asking
35 students to consider how our public spaces and institutions treat these groups: the
36 unemployed, the un(der)represented, the nonconsumers, among others. We would turn, then,
37 to compare the stories in each chapter from this framework; through comparison, the events in
38 this book gain even more power. In so many places and cultural contexts, as the pace of social,
39 economic and political disenfranchisement increases, and more people find themselves on the
40 outside of taken-for-granted social systems, the accounts in *City Unsilenced* shout out loud:
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54 *these things really happened.*
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