

Book Review: Democracy and Public Space: The Physical Sites of Democratic Performance

by Blog Admin

December 7, 2012

*In our extensive online world, democracy is increasingly made up of wikis and blogs, pokes and tweets. The traditional sites of democracy – assemblies, public galleries, and plazas - are becoming less relevant with every new technology. But democratic citizens are embodied, take up space, and perform democracy on physical stages at least as much as they engage with ideas in virtual space. Combining conceptual analysis with interviews and observation in capital cities on every continent, **John Parkinson** argues that democracy requires physical public space. **Marco Scalvini** especially admires the insights Parkinson offers for scholars in media and communications.*



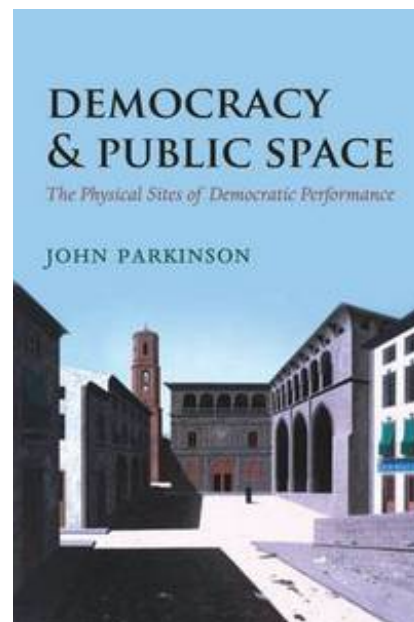
Democracy and Public Space: The Physical Sites of Democratic Performance. John R. Parkinson. Oxford University Press. January 2012.

John Parkinson states at the start of this book that democracy depends on the availability of physical public space, even in an apparently increasingly digital world. While a growing proportion of mass communication is mediated by new technologies, for Parkinson public debate still involves real people who “can take up, occupy, share and contest physical space” (p.1).

From this supposition, Parkinson moves to the compelling questions of what space is needed in a democracy and how this space is “used, how it is constructed, and how it is controlled” (p.9). However, according to the author, issues of physical space are almost entirely absent from the literature of scholars of political sciences. In fact, he claims, the idea that democracy depends on physical space in various ways runs counter to the “current orthodoxy” in political sciences and specifically in democratic theory (p.6).

The primary aim of this book is to alert political scholars to the importance of the physical, drawing on resources from the urban theory literature; while the secondary aim is to highlight some important differences in the way key political concepts are handled in urban theory, especially the concept of democracy and the distinction between public/private spheres (p.8). Therefore this book addresses two audiences: scholars of democracy, communication and planning, and more general readers within political scientists and urban theorists.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I, The Theory Democratic Public Space, does the conceptual groundwork, setting out a theory of democracy’s requirements for public space by drawing on the concepts of democracy, deliberation, and public space. Part II, Public Space and Democratic Performance, offers a more grounded analysis of the case studies focusing on the formal and informal public spheres, and showing how the conceptual requirements are reached. Part III, Evaluating Democratic Space, summarizes the main points but does so in the context of a set of applications for improving some measures of democracy to take spatial requirements into account, and offers a comparative evaluation of selected cities based on the observational and interview work.



Readers will find very helpful Parkinson's semiotic and sociological distinction between 'space' and 'place', in which the former denotes physical entities and settings, while the latter denotes those spaces filled with meanings, symbols, social practices, narratives, power relations, and so on (p.11). Undoubtedly, from the perspective of social theory, public space has an important role to play in the shaping of social and political imagination. A statue, a building, a new square might make an extremely good physical anchor point to mark and call to mind a real change in the national imagination. Specifically, architecture has a privileged role in reconstituting space through new cultural and political narratives.

Parkinson writes that Cape Town, South Africa has [many memorials and symbolic reminders](#) connected to slavery of the past to maintain awareness (p.192). Santiago, Chile, on the other hand, prefers not dealing with the past so openly, and many markers of dictatorship have been removed or hidden. For example, the National Stadium, which was the scene of numerous atrocities under Pinochet (p.193), does not have any memorial or commemorative plaque. The only visible exception is La Moneda, the bullet holes still marking surrounding buildings and the statue of Allende.

Another interesting example is provided by Berlin, where erasure has been a strategy adopted to eliminate any memory of the Nazi or Communist past (p.191). At the same time, Berlin has been very successful at embodying some memories to "ensuring that history is not allowed to repeat itself" by focusing on the Holocaust Memorial, the Jewish Museum or the Topography of Terror exhibition.

In the case of London, Parkinson references the statue depicting disabled British artist [Allison Lapper](#) (p.186), which was aimed at giving a positive representation of disability in the history of art. However, in London there is a little trace of those cultural diversities, which could disrupt the national symbolic language, in this way it is difficult to find in the British capital any memorial celebrating the Scottish, Welsh or Irish nations (p.190).

However, renaming streets or placing statues might be an important step but it is not normally sufficient to give people a feeling that they are being recognized rather than merely depicted. Public space cannot create inclusion through architecture, as symbols are powerful communicators only when they line up with collective performance. This type of performance is more likely to be formed at the level of the city than media sites because cities are based on lived space associated with mass culture.

Indeed, the author argues the availability of public space for collective performance is one of the most important conditions for democracy (p.38). In this manner, the author originally supplements deliberative theory with a 'performative' account of democracy (p.34). Specifically, performance and drama are not considered as metaphors to help explain democracy but as the way that democracy really works (p.10). By drawing on the dramatic theory of Kenneth Burke, the political communication theory of Murray Edelman and a long-standing tradition of narrative analysis, the author claims that a performative account reveals the staging of democracy through the need for and utility of public space for democratic functions. This performative account of democracy goes beyond the 'structure/agency' debate that still persists in political sciences and reframes democracy as a "creative, iterative, dynamic thing" rather than "a fixed set of abstract relations among institutions, or between elites and masses" (p.10).

Unfortunately, the book does not focus on the emergence of globalized economic conditions and their effects on the national public space; in this way the empirical analysis does not offer a specific analysis of how spatial and communicative reorganization has affected collective performances in a post-national paradigm. Nowadays, narratives of nation-states seem increasingly abstract and detached from public space and these tensions often find expression in the increasing isolation of elites from public opinion's concerns.

Indeed the increasingly contested nature of elites' narratives has meant that social narratives are now more likely to be formulated and performed at the level of the urban space rather than inside institutional spaces. This is one reason why the city is becoming such an important post-national actor ([Delanty and Jones 2002](#)). The city offers a contemporary medium in which performance can be developed at global stage.

Perhaps another reason is that the city offers a potential site for increased levels of identity formation and citizenship participation.

In conclusion, the book attempts to blend political theory with the way that democracy is actually performed rather than be driven entirely by ideal models (p.9). For this reason the author has developed an innovative democratic theory of public space based on collective performance. However, why is it important to analyse the relationship between democracy, public space and performance? Because this relationship “might alert us to problems with certain voices not being included, certain experiences not being narrated, and certain identities not being symbolized” (p.194). This is important from a normative democratic theory point of view, because people can gain a sense of efficacy from seeing their symbols made present in public space (p.194). In this way, the author offers also a very important insight also for scholars in media and communications; that physical space matters to democracy because of its importance in generating images and symbols for the media and not the opposite.

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