Rejecting the Communicative Paradigm of Public Space

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Abstract

Contemporary capitalism is often described as a economical system based on knowledge, whats indicate a shift from material production to more intangible assets related to exchange, control and circulation. It is strictly connected with something what we can define as a 'language (or communicative) turn' in debate on contemporary city, and particularly on public space. Architects and many urban theorist define public space as a kind of materialisation of Habermas' public sphere idea. However, the basic problem still concerns the relationship between the physical structure of the city, its social structure (in the broad sense) and the intangible constituents of modern capitalism. This paper challenges 'the language turn' in defining public space, focusing rather on production than communication, on a tangible outcome of a communicative action than on the communication itself.

Keywords: public space, cognitive capitalism, language turn

1. Public space or what?

There are four basic approaches to what is (or what should be) defined as public space. Let's start with a 'ceremonial space'. This approach symbolises the triumph of the political space, the advantage of political power over private interests and over the market. Ceremonial space could be closely related (but only at a symbolic level, not a practical one) to the idea of a public space as an area of political action. The second approach focuses on the community that uses a given space. This approach is focused more on the scale of the district (the model of "urban village") than the city as a whole, and again is close to (but only to a limited spatial extent) the space of political action.

The third approach can be described as 'liberal'. This is a case of a typical public space of the contemporary city – it is or has to be a place where different people can meet and different activities can take place. This 'democratic' space, focused on communication between citizens, is a kind of spatial materialisation of Habermas's public sphere. And again, this could be considered as a political space, if dialogue is defined as a foundation of democracy.

The fourth approach could be called 'post-modern'. The belief in one ceremonial space having disappeared, no one can believe in the possibility of a space in which the community can gather. The idea of equal, universal citizens is not valid any more - today we speak of a 'multi public' or 'counter public', today the differences are important. The existence of different communities and different values that they profess is an essential feature of post-modern public space. No one even tries to overcome these differences, instead accepting and celebrating the tensions that exist between them. This approach seems to accept reality as it is, without any ambition for change, no dreams of any social engineering. The post-modern approach to public space confirms postmodernism's ultra conservative stance, focused on the reproduction of the existing social order and the channelling of real tension into abstract spheres, far from the possibility of any social or political change.

This post-modern approach to public space could be seen as a development of Huizinga's concept focusing on play as a root of human culture. The idea of a kind of special zone in the city, where rules are relaxed, is tempting. Such a public space could serve as a simulation of the 'real' world, a simulation in which people can try out the new rules, manipulate and negotiate them. Unfortunately, the rules of post-modern public spaces are established externally of the players.

The post-modern public space, having an indifferent attitude towards reality, is a clever trap that prevents the users really engaging with the city (supporters of this model often emphasize the eroticism and pleasure generated by the differences and diversity). However, we need to keep in mind the idea of relaxed/flexible and negotiable rules as a potential way of challenging a homogenous neo-liberal urban regime.These four perspectives of perception of what might be called public space do not invalidate the most basic feature, in which public space is a space without any preconditions that everyone can enter.

However, these four perspectives make us realize that the 'ideal' public space does not exist. Unable to extricate ourselves from the snares of Platonism, we are inclined to see the existing spaces as an imperfect reflection of the ideal public space, not questioning the idea as such. It's a mistake.

2. Public space or space of social interactions (SoSI)?

If the ideal public space does not exist, it may be useful, while thinking about the contemporary city, to look for a different language and different key-phrases.The idea of contemporary public space is deeply rooted in concepts presented in Giambattista Nolli's eighteenth-century plan of Rome, a drawing which makes a clear distinction between publicly accessible and private inaccessible spaces (replacing the earlier distinction between what is sacred and what is profane).

The contemporary notion (and praxis) of public space reproduces the essential capitalistic superstition about the "sanctity" and "naturalness" of private property. Nolli made the revolutionary (for his era) decision to equate all non-private spaces (all streets, squares and the interiors of public buildings, mainly churches). Nolli's plan shows two types of space, defined in terms of accessibility. Therefore, referring to his plan, we can talk about regulations of access and usage, yet not about the relationship between the users of that space. To talk about relationships between users we need to look for another philosophical foundation of contemporary public space: Jurgen Habermas's (1997) notion of public sphere. For Habermas, public sphere refers to the idea of free communication; it is located between the private sphere and the sphere associated with political power. The bourgeois public sphere was born (according to Habermas) in the eighteenth century out of opposition to the absolutist power. Therefore, the 'execution' of the public sphere can occur not only on the streets or in the parks, but also in cafés and pubs, or in the media and art.

The praxis of public spaces in contemporary cities rooted in these two ideas is - in my opinion - intellectually flawed.
Why?
First of all, there are no areas in any city which guarantee equal and open access to all residents and there are no spaces which could support effectively free communication between members. There are also several more specific reasons that should lead to the rejection of the current paradigm of public space.

- Public space is too vague a term to effectively describe the phenomena of contemporary urban spaces such as shopping malls. These spaces can be described as quasi-public spaces (Diane Ghirardo, 1996), or heterotopic spaces (Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter, 2008), but we still lack a precise intellectual dimension in which to define and classify these spaces.
- The urban public space is described primarily in its physical, material dimension, while we should be aware that intangible codes and regulations have a dominant influence on how any space functions.
- Public space is a kind of 'empty NO-signifier' (in contrast to the 'empty signifier' defined by Ernesto Laclau, 1996), as pure space cannot really support neither social inclusion nor interaction with the socio-political structures. (Of course there are exceptions such as demonstrations or riots, but the same exceptions could be found in the factory, at the university or in the shopping mall.)

So, if public space does not really work, what could replace it to help us redefine our thinking of the contemporary and future city?

An interesting and surprising concept we can perhaps find in Karl Marx's later writing.

General Intellect, as originally mentioned briefly by Marx in *Grundrisse,* described the process of the growing importance of knowledge (mainly in the form of technical knowledge and skills) within the production process, and the 'fusion' of that knowledge to the machines, as a kind of capital. Each machine - whether the engine or laptop - includes a 'frozen' (both common and professional) knowledge. Today, in the works of thinkers connected to the Italian Autonomist movement such as Hardt and Negri (2000), Marazzi (2010) and Virno (2004), the meaning of this concept is greatly expanded - primarily by binding 'general intellect' to a human body (e.g. a programmer or a scientist).

However, it appears that the General Intellect could be used also as a tool in an attempt to formulate a new concept of public space (or – as I would like to call it – Space of Social Interactions, SoSI). The General Intellect could be considered as 'frozen' in not only machines and buildings, but also in the relations between them, in the very space itself. More surprisingly, such an assumption may in turn lead us towards the thoughts of Bruno Latour, and to consider public space as a convolution / coalition of the material and immaterial sphere, a coalition between buildings, roads, infrastructure and what exists in the area of language and culture. Before proceeding to more detailed considerations leading to the question of the shape of SoSI, it is worth asking a question of private space, as a complementary problem to public space.

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3. Private space does not exist

Exactly in the same way as we can question existence of public space, we should question the existence of private space. Limits of private space are blurring, we breathe air which is public, we use public mobile phone networks or wi-fi whilst sitting in our 'private' living rooms.Therefore, we can argue that not only is public space a useless construct, but also that private space seems to be a notion which does not explain anything.

So rather than looking for a binary typology (private-public, religious-profane), it could be more useful to consider space as a non-homogeneous continuum, it would be better to define what kind of interactions could appear in any of these spaces.Every space has a number of areas in which people can 'plug-in', using different types of interfaces to enter space and to put the space into a resonance. We could start to consider such space as not only a product of social forces, but rather as part of a socio-material weave.

This is a perspective which we would like to use to analyse the space: how socially active it could be. It will lead us to a question of interface between social and material bodies.

4. The space where the city is created

Edward Glaeser (2000) writes that the city developed economically thanks to non-market interactions. Maybe, probably unconsciously, he refers to Rosa Luxemburg's (1951) opinion that:

"*Capital cannot accumulate without the aid of non-capitalist organisations, nor, on the other hand, can it tolerate their continued existence side by side with itself. Only the continuous and progressive disintegration of non-capitalist organisations makes accumulation of capital possible*".

While discussing public space (or a 'Space of Social Interactions') we are in fact asking the question of how the non-market realm of contemporary city could be (re)built and strengthened.

However, what should be clear already, is that we are not trying to defend the illusionary concept of public space as such, which is defended by all representatives of mainstream politics, from right to left. Instead, we will try to define a non-capitalist (or non-market) realm that supports human life. This project is not intended (at least for the time being) to destroy capitalism, but rather to break the ideological hegemony: hegemony of profit as the ultimate goal of human activities.

This project aims - still within capitalism – to put human survival and moral development as a priority. If we agree that the goal of SoSi is to support the existence of a city as a subject, then before attempting to define SoSi this fundamental question should be asked: what connects residents and users of the city? And that's where we come back to the idea of urban interfaces - if the city exists in the heads and hands of users, it means that the city is accessed via the interfaces that people plug into the city to actively change it. This change occurs on many levels - political, economic, cultural, and social. Only small numbers of these areas are managed democratically. Truly democratic management of the city is only possible when the city has interfaces supporting both residents and users, when the city reinforces the strength of individuals. The instability and threat to democracy in the modern city is also rooted within a blurred urban social structure – a rapidly growing number of users of the city (immigrants, tourists, students etc.) and the decreasing number of citizens.

Therefore, the crucial question is: what can integrate the citizens and users of the city? According to Pierre Manent (1994) the city was a fundamental political idea, together with ideas of empire, national state and the church. All of them are imagined communities, based on a shared cultural framework. The city could also be considered to be an imagined community, but the concept of a multitude, defined by Leibniz and more recently developed by Hardt and Negri and Paolo Virno (2004) seems to be more adequate. Virno defines a multitude around an idea of "being not at home" (this seems to be extremely relevant in a contemporary global city inhabited by 'users' rather than 'citizens') and the Marxian concept of 'general intellect'. Virno defines "general intellect" as a kind of *cultural plateau* on which people can come together in all kinds of interactions.

The idea that the city is the natural emanation of the multitude sounds very interesting. Unfortunately, however, there is not one multitude but rather many multitudes and they are extremely unstable. The feeling of "being not at home" is something that most people naturally try to avoid; instead of finding a refuge in the "general intellect", they try to find less universal shelters - ethnic, religious or ideological. They tend to form small, local communities (both geographically and mentally). General intellect then disintegrates into millions of local languages and cultural codes and yet, after all - in some sense - Virno is right. The city actually works, and some kind of connection between the residents exists. It seems, however, that this is not transcendent to the residents / users of the space / sphere, but on the contrary - the sphere of interaction is inherently constructed as a series of 'interfaces', as a Hegelian dialectical mode of existence in the world.

We could define three types of interfaces necessary for society to exist:

- Convention, namely the interface of face-to-face relationship, open to change;

- 'Internal interface': all kinds of organizations, which retain their specific set of rules, partly open to 'bottom up' changes, however tending to restrict their memberships;

- 'External interface': all kinds of institutions where the 'bottom up' changes are almost impossible, yet users are permitted to conditionally plug-in and plug-out.

These interfaces, however, are not in any way connected with Habermas's public sphere idea and, even more so, with urban public space. They are closer to the aforementioned 'general intellect' concept. These interfaces therefore are tools of coding and de-coding a 'general intellect' in/out of the world. If 'general intellect' is a key idea in understanding the current focus of capitalism on immaterial production, a precise definition of interfaces is essential to understand the relationships between different elements of the urban environment and how they could support a production of knowledge and innovation.

Let's put SoSI into the broader context of contemporary capitalism.

5. Between material and immaterial

Contemporary capitalism could be described by at least three adjectives; it could be defined as 'financial capitalism' (Marazzi, 2010) 'communicative capitalism' (Dyer-Witheford, 1999) or 'cognitive capitalism' (Berardi 2007). All these terms indicate a shift from material production to more intangible assets related to exchange, control and circulation. Obviously, production has not disappeared, but today it is not so important because *the spirit*, or even *soul,* as Franco "Bifo" Berardi (2007) dares to write, is the core of modern capitalism.

The basic problem concerns the relationship between the physical structure of the city, its social structure (in the broad sense) and the intangible constituents of modern capitalism. Among these constituent factors the most important are information and knowledge. How the information is transferred, transformed and used in order to produce knowledge is one of the key problems in a contemporary economy. The other is finance. The connection between information and finance in contemporary discourse is strong. However, it was Georg Simmel (1997) in his seminal essay 'Metropolis and the Mental Life' who wrote how the town based on interpersonal relationships between individuals is replaced by what is institutional and quantifiable. Simmel's approach – followed by many others – tends to describe the contemporary metropolis as an inhuman entity based on abstract values. It could be said that Simmel (1990) was the first to see the city as a world of numbers, even the first who predicted a digital shift in contemporary urban studies.

Money then could be seen as an abstract 'cold' medium, destroying 'warm' interpersonal relationships. However, money could also be seen as an element of social bonding – as Marazzi (2007) put it: "Money, in other words, is the form which value takes on in a certain relationship of exchange between buyer and seller". Although this bond is very specific, it is a kind of 'lossy compression', in contrast to barter where the exchange itself is linked to socio-economic position of stakeholders (as a lumberjack exchanges timber for fish from a fisherman). Therefore, trade originally strengthened the already fixed roles of the participants in the social and economic structure of society, but money breaks this link between stakeholders of the exchange and their social role. Any socialisation is connected to language conventions (Ochs, 1993), therefore trade could be also considered as a kind of communication; however, we must be aware that money radically distorts this communication for the reasons mentioned above.

If financial operations, especially the act of buying, could be defined as a process of compressing humans-in-the-wider-context into a pure act of exchange, the crucial moment is the reversing act of 'decompression'. This act is not a sovereign act of human will, but rather a contaminated process where the wider context overpowers the human as such. Those who see the system of ethics within capitalism (from Frédéric Bastiat to Ayn Rand and further), reduce man to his conscious, rational decision (the same rationality is also present in Habermas theory). Christian theology claims it as false: we can say that in the process of decompression money becomes 'contaminated' by what is irrational – human desires, emotions, caprices. It is contaminated by what does not fully belong to the subject, but to the external world, by what is managed by gossip, advertisements and other people. Therefore, in the process of the 'decompression of money', in the act of re-establishing a human social position and the act of social self-creation, humans are not alone and they are not free. The process of 'decompression of money' is also closely connected to language.

However, in contrast to the financial manipulations, which are based on a kind of 'topological continuity', natural language is full of gaps and discontinuities. Natural language does not provide the information in the absolutist sense, zero-one code, but instead within a series of insinuations. The specificity of the natural language is not a transfer of information, it is not even a transmutation of information, but is instead the existence of holes, which necessitate the construction of connections. Communication in natural language, *id est* human communication, is based on the freedom to create, not the freedom of choice. This aspect of natural language supports the importance of face-to-face communication over any digitalised kind of contact.

Aaron Betsky (2008) argues that buildings are the tombs of architecture. Perhaps so, but even the tomb contains meanings and activities - each building is a kind of generator which even in its simplest sense generates movement of people. Buildings are also significant as meaningful objects that provoke emotions. Therefore, in the urban environment humans have to deal with the flow of information and the streams transmitted by various objects - buildings, advertising, people, etc.

However, what is crucial for understanding the relationship between information / knowledge and the city is not only the various elements associated with the production / transmission of knowledge, but also the structure of their interrelationships and dependencies. Contrary to the simplified vision of Richard Florida (2005), who considers a tolerant urban crowd as a crucial and sufficient element supporting the modern post-industrial city's development, the Bjorn Asheim (2007) typology of knowledge seems to be a much more useful tool for our analyses. According to Bjorn Asheim, there are three types of knowledge:

- analytic (pure science based, e.g. mathematics)
- synthetic (engineering based, sharing by doing)
- symbolic (creativity based, face to face interaction, 'buzz')

If we agree that the production of knowledge (innovation) is vital to economic success in today's global economy, we must also ask - what urban structures will facilitate the production of certain types of knowledge? Putting Florida's theory into the context of Asheim's typology, it becomes clear that Florida is focused only on one type of knowledge production - the symbolic one. The production of symbolic knowledge needs urban 'buzz'. The problem is that other types of knowledge could be produced outside cities: synthetic knowledge could be (and primarily is) produced in industrial clusters while analytic knowledge needs research institutes for its production. Both clusters and research institutes do not have to be (and usually are not) located in the city.

Using this methodological perspective it becomes obvious that Florida's approach (broadly accepted and adopted by European policy makers[1]) defines the city only as a phenomenon of cultural production. Taking this approach to the extreme, putting the contemporary city into the context of the Internet as a new environment where culture could be (and is) produced – the entire point of the city becomes questionable. Does the city still have a reason to exist, or does it exist only by inertia?

6. Beyond cognitive capitalism, towards the woven space

Spaces where people can gather and come together in interactions are the essence of the city. This is why the discussion of the spaces 'between' 'public' space or Spaces of Social Interaction' are in fact discussions about the city as a specific organization that manages human life.The reality of cognitive capitalism at the beginning of 21st century - the language/cultural turn and the shift from material into immaterial production - seems to reinforce Habermas's notion of the importance of public space as a space of encounter and dialogue.

The only apparent controversy we can observe in our cities concerns the privatization of space and changes in accessibility to it: this conflict is seen as a fight for the 'right to the city'. However, we would argue that the cultural turn, the 'de-materialisation' of public space (often combined with the development of the Internet and other contemporary communication technologies), is a real threat to the city.

At this point it is worth asking how, if the immaterial has overpowered material production and fixed relations in the contemporary economy are dominant, why *does it not melt into the air*? It is a possibility that the element preventing de-materialisation of urban space is the human body. Corporeality provides a connection between what is material and what is immaterial. Any relationship/communication, also those via financial operations, is based on the weave of different actions and positions - but always requires the existence of a real body. Even if one purchases an mp3 file in an Internet shop using a credit card, it is still his/her musical taste, his/her need or whim which becomes crucial for the act of purchase.

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[1] Richard Florida in 2009 was named European Ambassador for Creativity and Innovation.

Since modern capitalism (with its obsession with of GDP) tries to maximize the number of transactions (the intensity of capital flows), it is obvious that this human imperfection in generating needs and the two most important human 'flaws' are limited time and limited attention, (Davenport and Goldhaber, 2001) the human-limited desire, is the greatest obstacle to capitalism (the problem of a lack of cash has been eliminated by the invention of credit cards). Contemporary ('financial' and 'communicative') capitalism attempts to overcome this obstacle - it is enough for both capital and information just to circulate (Dean, 2009) and the human involvement seems not to be essential any more. Slavoj Zizek (1997) argues that modern technology is a fetish in contemporary capitalism which leads people to the state of *interpassivity,* preventing their 'flaws' from disturbing the functioning of the *inhuman* systems. This is definitely a case of contemporary urban public spaces. Therefore, human imperfections embodied within the human body are a key element of any strategy to improve the contemporary city.

SoSI should be constructed as a complex, political and spatial, porous structure, celebrating human imperfections and flaws.

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