

The publicization of public space

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Abstract

In this article, we start by jointly examining the shortcomings contained in the substantial definitions of publicity commonly applied to the analysis of both public spaces (physical) and public spheres (political). We propose instead to consider publicity as a potential and publicization as a process, observable both in urban spaces and in the media. Building on John Dewey, we argue that when this process reaches its logical end, it determines and brings together a problem, a place, a sphere and a group of people that it makes public. It also leads to mechanisms of political action that constitute the ends of public space. Using the example of New Orleans post Katrina, we illustrate this process by discussing three obstacles that often stall or reverse publicization processes, which we believe deserve further study. Finally, we ground the values on which the process of publicization rests on the shared experience of trouble in potentially public spaces. This pragmatists approach opens the door to the study of publicization processes and public spaces beyond western cultures, and suggests an empirical way to deepen and reassess liberal conceptions of public space.

Keywords

Public space, publicization, public sphere, publicity, accessibility

In English, but also in French, the notion of public space carries many ambiguities. One source of confusion can be found in the translations of Jürgen Habermas' foundational opus: *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Habermas, 1962). This book was first translated into French in 1978 under the title: *L'espace public: archéologie de la publicité comme dimension constitutive de la société bourgeoise* (Habermas, 1978) (*Public Space: archeology of publicity as a constitutive dimension of the bourgeois society*) and in 1991 into English as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1991). Thus, *Öffentlichkeit* is commonly translated with the word “publicity”, but also “public sphere” and “public space”. For Habermas, however, the notion neither describes an existing environment nor achieved conditions, but the quality of an action conducted in an open fashion.

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Habermas notes in the very title of the book that this quality must be approached as a process of “structural change” and not as a stabilized state.

The shortcomings of substantial definition of public space and public sphere

These translations and uses of Habermasian vocabulary denote an evolution of the notion of public space away from the idea of a process. They lend themselves to a substantification of both public space and public sphere. In accordance, publicity is not anymore conceived as a potentiality that can be studied via its historical and contingent actualization. It is usually understood as an established quality, conquered and stabilized, even domesticated within the bounds of a specific environment: a space or a sphere. Moreover, these environments should be endowed with the ability to make public everything that enters their perimeter. Thus, squares and streets being public by definition, anything that happens there should *ipso facto* be considered public. In the same way, mass media being considered as components of the democratic “public sphere”, everything mentioned by newspapers, broadcasted on television or displayed on the World Wide Web should also become *ipso facto* public. We argue that this substantial definition of publicity presents two main faults. First by distributing publicity indiscriminately to all streets, media and what they contain, it tends to dilute its meaning and make it into an everything-goes-in black box without any clear signification. Second, by conflating public spaces and public sphere in the same definition, it obscures the way physical spaces and the media partake in a complementary fashion in processes of publicization.

Publicity and accessibility

Following the common understanding of publicity as an achieved state, entering the perimeter of public space or accessing the media is the main condition for anybody to participate in public life and in politics. As a consequence, studies on publicity often focus on the question of access to public space and the public sphere as a principle of the practice and rights of citizenship.

Thus, a long tradition of media analysis exposed the role of “gatekeepers” fulfilled by the media (White, 1950) and the operations of selection which, excluding the discourses of certain categories of the population, confine them to the margins of public life and keeps them in subordinate positions. In a parallel vein, research in urban studies has insisted on accessibility as a measure of the quality of a public space aimed at promoting equality of the citizens and freedom of movement. And the law has indeed taken accessibility seriously, when it made illegal the restraining of access to public areas by people of color during the civil rights movements in the USA or, more recently, and more quietly, when it required public areas to be made accessible to persons with reduced physical mobility. More generally, discrimination against categories of the population usually considered as minorities, women (Gardner, 1995), people of color (Day, 1999), homeless people (Amster, 2003), etc. is often taken as a reliable measure of the publicity of urban space. William H Whyte (1980) for example proposed the male–female ratio as an indicator of the public usability of New York’s privately owned public plazas.

Public space and accessibility

On the surface, accessibility is undeniably pertinent: being in the street means acting in public, in other words, being accepted and exposed to the gaze of unknown anonymous

others and behaving in accordance. Georg Simmel (Wolff, 1959) first noted this distinctive characteristic of urban space, which he associated it with the presence of the “stranger.” He defined this anonymous person, who does not belong to the community, as the main analyzer of urban public sociability. Notably, urbanites are conducted to constantly demonstrate “civil inattention” (Goffman, 1967) – a mix of reserve and tact – towards many situations in which they refrain from getting involved, even though they take place within eyesight, earshot and reach of hand (Goffman, 1973). Thus, the urban environment organizes copresence and mutual visibility of strangers in a way that teaches them how to behave in public and get along with others.

Following Robert Park, the Chicago school sociologists emphasized the emancipating power of the city (Park et al., 1967). In his article, “The City: Suggestions for the study of human nature in the urban environment”, Park quotes an

old German adage that declares, “city air makes men free” (*Stadt Luft macht frei*). This is doubtless a reference to the days when the free cities of Germany enjoyed the patronage of the emperor, and laws made the fugitive serf a free man if he succeeded for a year and a day in breathing city air. (Park, 1925: 12)

This tradition highlights the mobility of urbanites that, confronted to a range of moral regions, experience a pluralistic social organization, where public opinion is called to play an important impersonal regulatory role. To live in the city can then help urbanites break free from total and tight-knit personal relations characteristic of primary groups, of local attachments and of a social control based on mores and family traditions. These characteristics have led researchers to consider the city as a public space par excellence, pluralist, cosmopolitan, emancipating and purveyor of democratic civility, fostering tolerance, cosmopolitanism and empathy (Joseph, 1998; Lofland, 1998; Young, 1990). However, Robert Park concluded too quickly that the city should be an environment naturally dedicated to the production of publicity. Indeed, nothing guarantees the formation of a tolerant public opinion rooted in the spaces of anonymous copresence, accessible to all and stripped from the diverse attributes of class, ethnicity, etc.

Another more recent trend in urban geography considers access to public space as a part of the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1968) particularly important for the poor and the outcast who constantly have to struggle to resist exclusion. Two urban parks studied by prominent scholars, Tompkins Square in New York City (Smith, 1996) and People’s Park in Berkeley (Mitchell, 1995) have become emblematic of this struggle. According to these authors, public space must be protected against a tendency to privatization spurred by neo-liberal capitalism. It must be maintained as a place of last resort for the part of the population that has nowhere else to go in a city increasingly devoted to leisure and consumption.

Indeed, as more and more private or semi-private organizations manage what was previously publicly owned urban spaces (Blackmar, 2006; Cybriwsky, 1999), they blur the limit of the supposed public domain and enact exclusive regulations. Thus, residential areas called “gated communities” are closed to strangers, meaning all but the inhabitants and their guests (Caldeira, 2001; Low, 2003). In a similar vein, commercial centers and business improvement districts restrict access to segments of the population that fit specific consumer profiles. They use both municipal and private police force to regulate and exclude all sorts of “undesirables” such as youth, street vendors, beggars, homeless people, etc. (Mitchell and Staeheli, 2006; Tonnelat, 2007). Meanwhile, poor neighborhoods are disinvested by capital and public services and become too dangerous and inaccessible to visitors (Anderson, 1999) or off-limits to children after dark (Matthews et al., 1999). According to this conception, spaces and spheres can be placed along a continuum that

goes from private to public. Houssay-Holzschuch and Teppo (2009) propose to call publicization the process that makes a space more accessible and takes it closer to the public end of the continuum. According to Don Mitchell, that process is a struggle and it defines both the nature and “the ends of public space” (Mitchell, this issue).

This perspective, however, tends to restrict the scope of public spaces to accessibility to the more visible plazas and parks of western cities, making it mostly an issue of presence and representation.

Public sphere and accessibility

Accessibility as a measure is also problematic for the public sphere. How many causes and affairs remain in an embryonic state and struggle to be taken up and defended even though they benefit from an unimpeded access to the media? Anything available in the media is of course published. But is it necessarily publicized, in other words, does it foster the constitution of a public concerned by the situation at hand and aiming to solve its problematic aspects? Some highly controversial and widely distributed news trigger a sustained attention. But many reports, whistle-blowings, and claims are only met with indifference. Getting published does not automatically mean getting public.

This becomes obvious when considering the fate of documents that became public long after their publication. After Second World War, Primo Levi had a difficult time finding a publisher interested in his testimony of an Auschwitz survivor. Finally, *If This is a Man* was published in 1947 by a small press, Francesco De Silva, who printed 2500 copies. At this time, the book did not meet any public interest. In 1958, however, Giulio Einaudi, at the head of one of the main presses of Italy, printed a new version, which this time found a favorable reception. Thanks to a budding collective sensitivity to the fate of the victims of Nazism, Primo Levi’s testimony was finally read and it became a major contribution to the constitution of publics of the *Shoah*. As Annette Wieviorka (2006) has shown, this case is far from unique. She notes that the first organizations of survivors were places of self-help and solidarity, but that they were not aimed at reaching out to others who had not lived the same experience and who were thus only indirectly concerned.

Personal, individual memories, confined within closed, family-like groups, had been generated since the events took place. But these memories were not part of the cultural mainstream and had little political meaning. Before the memory of the Holocaust could penetrate the public sphere, the political climate would have to change. Testimony would have to become relevant beyond its personal meanings. Its importance would have to be recognized by society. (Wieviorka, 2006: 55)

A long collective work was necessary for the *Shoah* to become a public concern, arousing the attention and interest of people who had not been directly involved in the events, and thus for the formation of a favorable environment for survivors testimonies. In this new context, Primo Levi’s text appeared worthy of public interest. It was translated in many languages and remains a classic today. The fate of this book reminds us that the publicization of a discourse is not guaranteed by its own quality, or even by its publication, but that it is dependent on the social dynamics that preside over the formation of a public sensibility.

Accessibility and the tyranny of publicity

Some critical scholars have focused on the reverse side of publicity, showing that exposure to the gaze of others entails a tyrannical potential, eventually actualized in disciplinary

surveillance. Michel Foucault underlined how urban life and exposure to the gaze of others are the heritage of the spatial and social organization of French cities, marked by the epidemics of the 17th century, which made anybody venturing the streets the target of a panoptical gaze. “The plague-stricken town, traversed throughout with hierarchy, surveillance, observation, writing; the town immobilized by the functioning of an extensive power that bears in a distinct way over all individual bodies – this is the utopia of the perfectly governed city” (Foucault, 1978: 198).

Working off this analysis, many activists and researchers suspect any demand of publicity of attempting to control them. They defend subversive action organized so as to escape the gaze of a potentially disciplinary eye both in the streets and in the media. The hacktivists “Anonymous”, for example, call for civil disobedience in order to resist attacks on freedom of expression. They use the reticular organization of the Internet to lead collective electronic raids, without being ever identified. They form an international movement that has neither name nor its own website, but that is identified with the attacks they lead and the causes they defend. Their slogan, which punctuates each action, is particularly clear: “We are Anonymous. We are legion. We never forgive. We never forget. Expect us. Right behind you.” The video appearances of the group are carried out by a synthetic voice hidden behind the mask of Guy Fawkes (worn by the main character of the graphic novel *V for Vendetta* to carry his own vengeance). When in urban spaces, members of the Anonymous hide behind the same mask to display their collective membership and conceal their personal identity.

This form of activism constitutes what Fraser (1990) and Iveson (2007) have called “counter publics,” resistant to demands of publicity. They form entrenched moral regions from where their members can launch attacks on the established order or where they can withdraw in their own micro-society. These scholars rightly praise the resistance of people who strive to open spaces of emancipation under autocratic or totalitarian rule. However, shouldn't we consider that under such circumstances, the meetings and conversations that withdraw to the domestic spaces make up whatever is left of public life when it is systematically repressed by dominating powers? Weren't the collectives constituted around kitchen tables in Czechoslovakia under the communist regime simply publics in the making (Goldfarb, 2007)?

In the end, the question may not be whether a group is a “public” or a “counter-public”. In both cases, the analysis does not break from the idea of an existing achieved and indistinguishable “public space” and “public sphere”. The action of “counter-publics” thus does not subvert the liberal thought which attributes an emancipatory value to publicity. It only reverses its value. Their opposition lies in their view of the liberal public space and sphere, which they suspect of an ontological flaw that justifies the underground struggle to subvert it. Ultimately, all parties agree to act on the assumption that public spaces and public spheres already exist as reified dispositive with intrinsic qualities. The only difference is that where one party sees emancipatory virtues, the other is wary of the hidden flaws that hide an oncoming tyranny. But contrary to Habermas' description of the initial bourgeois public sphere as originally independent of the court dominated sphere, when “counter-publics” want to enact change, they always end up reaching out to the sensitivity of people, awaking their interest or their concern, in order to constitute a larger more diffuse public (see Scott, 1990). This suggests that “public” and “counter-publics” are not separate matters, but constitute an experience to be organized (in urban spaces and through communication processes) rather than bounded spaces or networks to be occupied.

Our point is not to settle this controversy between liberal publics and subversive counter-publics; in some way both parties are right. The streets and the media carry both an

emancipatory and a tyrannical potential. But they are both mistaken when they determine what these environments are: they confuse categories when they take the “public” as an essential (emancipative or tyrannical) quality, when it is in fact a potential or a becoming.

Public space and the economy of public attention

Distinguishing between accessibility and publicity also sheds light on the discrepancy between the disaffection of politics and public life that political scientists often wonder about. Indeed, many scholars have pointed at the impracticability of relying on active public spaces, public spheres, and their publics to regulate the city and government. The models of the agora or the forum have lost their appeal (Arendt, 1958; Sennett, 1977). For more than a century, political officials have lamented the indifference of citizens and their lack of interest in the “public affairs” of the nation. They remarked that pressing questions that belong to the public domain on the streets and in the news, and that are therefore displayed or published and available for pick up, in fact struggle to meet popular attention. Interestingly, this regret is not privy to representative regimes only. It is also voiced in institutional systems that open a large right of participation to their citizens. Thus, as soon as 1913, A. Lawrence Lowell pointed at the high rate of abstention of Swiss voters during the consultations organized as part of a semi-direct democratic institutional system (see Lippmann, 1927: 9). In fact, Lippmann used this example to rejoice that everything that is published does not necessarily become public.

The need in the Great Society not only for publicity but for uninterrupted publicity is indisputable. But we shall misunderstand the need seriously if we imagine that the purpose of the publication can possibly be the informing of every voter. We live at the mere beginning of public accounting. Yet the facts far exceed our curiosity. The railroads, for example, make an accounting. Do we read the results? Hardly. A few executives here and there, some bankers, some regulatory officials, some representatives of shippers and the like read them. The rest of us ignore them for the good and sufficient reason that we have other things to do. (Lippmann, 1927: 33)

Against the grain, Lippmann understood that, just as urbanites cannot acknowledge the presence of every stranger on the street for fear of suffering from a mental breakdown (Simmel, 1950), citizens cannot get involved in every question regarding the functioning of society and its administration. He considered that as well as urban life needs “civil inattention”, an economy of public attention is the guarantee of a good democratic system. Citizens have neither the time, nor the money, nor the competence, to follow all the questions that affect their collectivity, and even less to get practically involved to change them. According to him, the ideal of a fully participative democracy, in which each and every citizen would have equal access to all public spaces and information in order to take part in every decision, could only lead to a dispersion of attention, and ultimately to the ruin of the public. This is why he advocated for a “phantom public”: public attention and action are precious resources, not to be wasted in the management of administrative routine. They must instead be saved for solving problematic situations by tilting the scale on one side or the other of a controversy brought in front of citizens’ vote by experts. He concluded, quoting a Swedish representative, that “even after the victory, there will always remain in political life the leaders and the lead” (Lippmann, 1927: 9).

Lippmann’s view is still relevant today, perhaps even more so than in the 1920s. As access to open spaces in cities improves, more often than exclusion, it is the indifference of passers by that affects the homeless (Stavo-Debaugé, 2003). Similarly, many public addresses in

urban spaces are only met with indifference by passers-by (Iveson, 2007). In order to counter this general apathy, activists and artists attempt to “awaken” the public in urban spaces. They stage events designed to elicit indignation, remorse and engagement. In Paris, for example, an organization called “les morts de la rue” regularly attempts to publicize the conditions endured by homeless people by organizing memorials at the exact location where people have died on the street. Though spectacular and well meaning, these actions remain mostly ignored by “inhabitants” and “neighbors” which they address (Gayet-Viaud, 2011).

Similarly, internet-based media communication systems (twitter, facebook, etc.) provide an enhanced access to information, which multiplies the solicitations to mobilize, and divides people’s attention. Despite this improved access, however, voters in many countries abstain in greater and greater number every year, as if they had lost trust in their representative institutions.

These observations finally leave little role for an established public sphere and urban public spaces and gives a larger place to experts able to analyze and treat complicated situations and managers to control space. Paired with calls for accessibility and transparency, this evolution makes way for a general distrust in elected officials and experts suspected of collusion and corruption by interest groups (O’neill, 2002). In the end, the discrepancy between pro democratic expectations generally weighing on public spaces and public spheres and the reality of political participation and transparency only weakens the meaning of publicity. It tends to transform the streets and the media into ineffectual apparatuses of a make-believe democracy.

Participation and publicization

Studies in accessibility are undeniably pertinent and they have revealed many aspects of urban spaces and of the media that point at their emancipatory or, to the contrary, at their tyrannical powers (Low and Smith, 2006). However, they leave many questions unanswered. What these studies lack, we believe, is a notion of publicity as a historical and contingent process that bears political consequences for the people involved. The question may not be whether a situation is public or not, but to better understand how and to what ends it could become public. This requires an analysis of the consequences of publicization as well as of the conditions that make a process of publicization possible, or to the contrary, that prevent it from developing.

For example, the Occupy movements in many cities have been trying to reclaim urban open spaces for active publics (see Mitchell, this issue) concerned with widespread inequalities. Rather than defending public space, we argue that these mobilizations are attempting to make space public in order to push a political agenda. They call for another conception of the public than one defined by accessibility, which only leads to Lippmann’s phantom public. We find it in John Dewey’s work, himself a contemporary debater of Lippmann. For Dewey, the challenge, also very relevant today, was to come up with a realistic definition of the “public”, whose attention does not disperse in all urban stimuli and published materials, nor exhausts itself in a constant demand of mobilization, while at the same time is not limited to the caste of experts recommended by Lippmann. How do publics get formed, and where? The notion of publicization stems from this disputed question of participation.

Publicization as a process

One way to illustrate a publicization process is to look at historical events that transform the status of an urban environment. In Tunisia, for example, the streets of cities have long served

as a foundation for tight police surveillance. However, in December 2010 and January 2011, after a young fruits and vegetables vendor set himself on fire outside the governorate of Sidi Bouzid because municipal police had confiscated his cart and scale, hundreds of thousands of Tunisians re-appropriated these streets demanding the demise of president Ben Ali (Dégage!) and expressing their indignation in reaction to the armed repression against demonstrators in cities inland. Shouldn't we consider that, at this occasion, their actions have contributed to publicize the streets? By demonstrating and facing the menace of armed police, they seized the potential of urban space for publicization and used it to protest the regime. Thus the urban spaces that had long served the power of the police became the environment for a public experience. It allowed the citizens of Tunis to speak about anything they wanted at street corners, taxi stands and cafés. It would be presumptuous, however, to say that Tunisian urban spaces are now "public spaces." Their publicity remains a potential and its actualization is always uncertain and contingent. One only has to look at the many street confrontations opposing defenders of the Arabic Muslim identity of Tunisia to the advocates of freedom of expression and creation to realize how fragile this publicity is (Laacher and Terzi, 2012).

The same urban space can serve at one point as a means of openness and mobility calling for the formation of an emancipatory public opinion, and it can also morph the next moment into a disciplinary dispositive heralding a general enclosure. We thus have to recognize that only certain spatial and social configurations of urban environments are conducive to the practice of public freedoms and that, sometimes, going down the street means exposing oneself to the dangers of threatening gazes (of a political or religious police, a sniper, etc.). This is to say that urban environments are not all "public" to the same degree at all times.

The process of publicization: The determination of a troubled situation

John Dewey explicitly worded the resistance to substantive denominations. He introduces his analysis of the dynamics of publicization with a critique of the common uses of the concept of "The State". What he says about it deserves as much to be said about "democracy" and "public space."

The concept of the State, like most concepts which are introduced by "The," is both too rigid and too tied up with controversies to be of ready use. It is a concept which can be approached by a flank movement more easily than by a frontal attack. The moment we utter the words "The State" a score of intellectual ghosts rise to obscure our vision. Without our intention and without our notice, the notion of "The State" draws us imperceptibly into a consideration of the logical relationship of various ideas to one another, and away from facts of human activity. It is better, if possible, to start from the latter and see if we are not led thereby into an idea of something which will turn out to implicate the marks and signs which characterize political behavior. (Dewey, 1927: 8)

These remarks tend to limit the reach of philosophical reasoning and conceptual definition. They could therefore very much appear as obstacles to research. However, looking more closely, this way of equating what we call "The State" to "facts of human activity" is a call to the social sciences for observation, description and analysis of empirical processes.¹ This is what Dewey had explicitly foreseen. Indeed, as soon as public spaces and spheres are considered elements of a historical and contingent process, the activities that go along with it escape conceptual analysis and enter the prerogative of ethnography.

While being a mostly open ended and unpredictable process, publicization can thus be studied empirically. In the first place, any publicization process starts off with a troubled situation:

it is the very nature of the indeterminate situation which evokes inquiry to be *questionable*; or in terms of actuality instead of potentiality, to be uncertain, unsettled, disturbed. [...] It is the situation that has these traits. *We* are doubtful because the situation is inherently doubtful. (Dewey, 1938: 105–106)

The process of publicization consists in making perceptible both the troubled situation and its problematic consequences, so that appropriate measures can be taken. According to Dewey, it transforms a troubled situation into a more determinate one characterized by different public aspects that can be observed and described. First, when an inquiry problematizes the situation under scrutiny, it becomes a public problem in the making. Such a problem calls for the elucidation of its why and wherefores. For this, the publicization process needs physical situations of experience and communication. They constitute public spaces in the making. The role of space is thus different than the role of the media. Contrary to Habermas' conception of publicization as open debate, bodies and sensations in space are involved in the constitution of a public problem before its discussion. But they are not sufficient. The problem also needs to focus the attention of people who are not necessarily copresent via the media to such an extent that they will feel indirectly concerned.² This is the simultaneous constitution of a public sphere and a public. As the definition given by Dewey suggests: "The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for" (Dewey, 1954 [1927]: 15–16).

As a result, a publicization process is always associated with the organization of a problematic situation, presenting spatial and temporal dimensions, with a beginning and an end. An inquiry aims at defining the troubled situation in all its dimensions: its problematic consequences, the people indirectly concerned, its physical environments, and the spheres in which it is discussed and analyzed. When the inquiry begins to publicize these aspects of the troubled situation, a specific process of political resolution of a social problem is at work. When carried to its logical end, it leads, according to Dewey, to the designation, for a variable duration of time, of public officials in charge of dealing with the problem, and thus to the creation or the reinforcement of more or less durable political institutions. Publicization is thus a process directly linked to what Dewey called "political behavior" behind the functioning of "the State." (Although it is not the only one.)

Three obstacles to publicization

More often than not, publicization processes are stopped at one point or another of their course and remain incomplete or even aborted. There are however, frequent processes of publicization, that develop quite unpredictably in a more or less complete fashion with political consequences as we have seen above. One way to understand their emergence could therefore consist in analyzing the means that enhance or impede the potential of publicization of spatial and media environments. These can be found by studying the obstacles to the processes of publicization. We evoke three specific obstacles that we have encountered in our respective fieldwork and which we believe deserve further study: the obstacles to the experience of trouble and inquiry; the obstacles to the transmission of the experience of trouble and inquiry; and the obstacles to the reaching of an ecological scale by a process of publicization.

Obstacles to the experience of trouble and the publicization of space

In New Orleans, after the 2005 passage of Hurricane Katrina that laid disaster over the city, the inhabitants of the Lower Ninth ward were not able to make sense of the catastrophe until they build an observation platform that made their situation in the delta region more perceptible. They had to hack through old bushes and climb over a floodwall to realize how much the bayou that had worked for many decades as a barrier against tidal waves had progressively died off because of the infiltration of salt water through a navigation canal maintained by the Army Corps of Engineers, the very “public” institution that was supposed to protect their city. By trying to understand what happened during the flood, the inhabitants and the visitors, some of them professional biologists and landscape architects, progressively transformed an indeterminate situation into a public problem. They distributed the results of their inquiry as widely as possible and got organized into the public of a bayou needing restoration. During this process, the bayou acquired the status of a public good worthy of interest. The observation deck built to gain access to the bayou became a public space accessible to all – including people far away thanks to pictures posted on the Internet and newspaper articles, wherefrom to observe and discuss the ecological state of the delta region, and where each visitor was able to get a first hand experience of the situation. This work on the accessibility of the perception of the problem and its consequences required the overtaking of the obstacle materialized by the wall and the opening of a small gathering place. But it would not have structured such a wide public if it had not also been spurred by the work of an old inhabitant who took it upon himself to maintain the space, welcome visitors and describe the progressive degradation of the bayou by salt water, thus keeping up the potential of publicization of the observation deck (Tonnelat, 2011, 2012).

As in the example above, the obstacles to the experience of trouble and inquiry can be physical and prevent the perception of a problematic situation. In the city, numerous separations and divides reduce the visibility of potentially problematic situations.³ This is why accessibility to spaces of direct sensible experience in the city and elsewhere is an important condition to preserve and sustain their potential of publicization. In many cases, physical barriers double up with symbolic limits that also constrain the possibility of perception of the situation causing a trouble. In addition, such a perception can only trigger the formation of a public if the affected people are able to launch an inquiry aiming at transforming the trouble and the emotion they experience into a problematic situation, sufficiently defined so as to identify its causes and consequences. Such community of inquirers can face innumerable objections to the inquiry, which can be physical and symbolic (violence, intimidation), material, legal, administrative, deontological, theoretical, ideological, etc. Whatever their nature, they can impede the transformation of an undetermined situation into a problem, the constitution of its publics, and the spatial and temporal organization of its experience. They can prevent directly concerned people to reach out and indirectly concerned people to get involved in the inquiry, be it a neighbor stopped by a fence, a journalist threatened or corrupted by the police or by gangs, or a researcher equipped with such a robust theory that he is convinced of his findings even before entering the field.

These few remarks underline how much accessibility to the diverse spaces of direct sensible experience of trouble is important for the potential of publicization. The example of the Lower Ninth ward also shows the work of explanation, of support and care that physical spaces need to maintain their public potential. It is the occasion to reveal and study the numerous “public characters” (Duneier, 1999; Jacobs, 1961) – public employees,

grassroots activists or vendors and inhabitants – who take care of the maintenance of urban spaces. Their continuous work nurtures the potential of publicization of urban spaces and saves the possibility of inquiries nourished by sensible perceptions of the experience of trouble. In brief, the role of space in processes of publicization is primordial.

Obstacles to the transmission of experience and the publicization of trouble

We have seen that accessibility alone cannot suffice to guarantee the processes of publicization. If open spaces can provide a perceptual access to a problematic situation, they do not guarantee that an inquiry will be led and a public including indirectly concerned people will be formed. We must therefore be attentive to the qualities that make a situation and its experience graspable by others. This is where the media can play a complementary role to physical spaces, by fostering a public sphere.⁴

The transformation of an undetermined situation into an identified problem implies its statement and qualification. Very often, successive discourses and the media reframe the situation in a way that ignores the existential causes and the sensible experiences that manifested the trouble in the first place. During the dramatic events caused by Hurricane Katrina, reports by the national press and television contradicted the testimonies of inhabitants. Most famously, people struggling to retrieve food and water from stores were commonly described as looters and sources of a general insecurity that led to a state of military occupation (Fahmy et al., 2007; Robinson, 2009; Sommers et al., 2006). The superdome, where thousands of people were stranded, became the locus of fantastically atrocious events backed by a general absence of inquiry (Lovell, 2013).

More generally, in the media and in policy and research circles, constant editorializing, emphasizing or dismissing the importance of a social phenomenon, ignore the information stemming from direct experience and inquiry. They often rely on provoked emotions of pity (Boltanski, 1999) and ready-made solutions that contribute to mislead audiences or demobilize them. As Dewey wrote:

to set up a problem that does not grow out of an actual situation is to start on a course of dead work, nonetheless dead because the work is “busy work.” Problems that are self-set are mere excuses for seeming to do something intellectual, something that has the semblance but not the substance of scientific activity. (Dewey, 1938: 108)

In New Orleans immediately after Katrina, as in many other situations post catastrophe before and since (Erikson, 1994), the constitution of collective concern by the media about the situation has proven depoliticizing. Instead of showing that beliefs are temporary and can always be revised through an inquiry, the presentation of the problem only confirmed already established values and distorted evidences about race and urban violence that did not let any public problem emerge from the actual trouble experienced by the inhabitants. In general opinion as well as in science, dogmas only make the bed of cynicism, blindness and resignation because pseudo-inquiries only produce unfounded results that audiences must either believe unquestionably or resist.

The Challenge for the media to act as a public sphere is therefore to sustain the “problematicity” (Patočka, 1999), the shaking of certainty, which renders situations amenable to inquiry. This requires a watchfulness against the numerous attempts to restore the “landmarks of certainty” (Lefort, 1986) be they religious, political, judicial, ideological, theoretical, methodological, etc. Logically, a necessary but not sufficient condition for publicization is the preservation of the continuity of the inquiry and of its

sensible dimensions from the existential situations, where the trouble is experienced and expressed, to the physical and dematerialized arenas of discussion and debate, where indirectly concerned individuals can decide to get involved more or less intensely and durably, according to the values that bring them together.

The inquiry and the diffusion of knowledge contributing to the publicization of a trouble, a space, a sphere and a circle of people is most of the time of a conflicted nature as it implies a critical reassessment of inequalities, received ideas and clichés. A condition for publicization to occur is therefore to guarantee as much as possible, in the street and in the media, the freedom of expression of troubles, so that dissensus stemming from inquiry can be voiced (Rancière, 1995). The challenge is to collectively decipher the means to discuss and acknowledge divergent experiences and opinions. The limit to publicization is thus not the expression of conflict, but to the contrary, its suppression through silencing by consensual peer-pressure, separation, segregation, dissimulation or violence.

The lack of continuity in the transmission of the experience that fed an inquiry and formed a public space can also explain the low accountability of supposedly public institutions usually in charge of dealing with a situation and whose work progressively turns into a day-to-day management of a situation without any real influence on its causes. In New Orleans before Katrina, the Army Corps of Engineers had mostly become an opaque institution focused on maintaining an outdated system of pumps and levees. Only the drama of numerous deaths and the rediscovery of the delta environment and its ecology by a public were able to force this organization to rethink its agenda (Tonnelat, 2012).

Obstacles to the definition of an ecological scale of the process of publicization

A third obstacle affecting publicization processes are the barriers that prevent it from reaching an adequate scale, so that the institution called or set up to deal with it will reach all concerned people. This means that the public and the institution that it summons should be determined in an ecological fashion contingent on the problem at hand. The difficulty is that it is impossible to know *a priori* the reach of a publicization process. We must therefore think out ways to measure the extension of a public, endogenous to the process of publicization itself. The only guarantee here is to observe the possibility of re-sizing throughout the inquiry the circles of concerned people according to the extent of the problematic situation. As soon as the scale of a process stabilizes, while remaining available to people not yet involved, it could be said to have reached its ecological size.

Two kinds of obstacles seem preponderant: the limitations to the diffusion of the inquiry and the already existing political and administrative institutions. Administrative and political territories are institutionalized patterns, which exist independently from the emergence of undetermined situations. In some cases, they can fit, and the public can be commensurate with an institution (the village council, the town council, the national administration). In New Orleans post Katrina, the city administration proved unable to deal with the problem of sustainable urban development (Campanella, 2006) and the Army Corps of Engineers, a federal institution working at the scale of the whole gulf coast, progressively became the main actor in addressing the problem of coastal sustainability. But despite its willingness to collect communities' input, the public born out of the catastrophe did not appoint this organization's regional leaders. In many cases, administrations are not well adapted to the scale of the problem and in fact hinder the definition of an appropriately sized public and its organization. Many problems related to

environmental pollution, migrations, financial transactions, urban development, regulation of labor, homelessness and more, do not match existing levels of political representation. They are often under the purview of institutions incapable of dealing with them. Situations can cross national borders without involving a whole country, cross municipal boundaries, or they can involve only a small community (in which case the process of publicization can be close to the management of the commons as analyzed by Ostrom (1990)).⁵ Contrary to technocratic management procedures that strive to apply standardized solutions to problematic situations, the pragmatist approach considers the elaboration and application of solutions a part of the statement and qualification of the problematic situation. The actions of public officials are therefore an aspect of the process of publicization tied to the development of the inquiry. Notably, they should be able to respond to the sensible experience of the problem as it is experienced and discussed in urban spaces and in the media. As emanations of publics, public institutions thus defined should contribute to a process of democratization of the society formed by the citizens concerned by the measures they take. In the end, publicization is a form of social organization (Quéré, 2003) attached to a type of participatory democracy formally much more demanding on its chosen officials than a parliamentary representative system. While it is usually not actualized, it can appear sporadically and carry political consequences in many parts of the world.

The importance of space for the values undergirding publicization

Publicization is a specific kind of experience that emerges as long as an inquiry is led to elucidate a troublesome situation. Its development must reach indirectly concerned circles of people and its findings are tested as the members of the forming public forge new skills and knowledge to deal with the problem at hand in emerging public environments. Therefore, it is clearly a normative process. In this regard, the process of publicization defended by Dewey goes hand in hand with a general education based on an active pedagogy of self and collective teaching through inquiry, which acts as a safeguard against the powers of administrations, interest groups and the pressure of unfounded opinions. In the view of his pragmatist philosophy, "Inquiry is the directed or controlled transformation of an indeterminate situation into a determinately unified one" (Dewey, 1938: 117). It is through an inquiry process that people form a public and that they collectively discover the values they hold dear (Ogien, 2014). Similarly, according to Pierce, inquiry is a process of fixation of belief, understood as tendency toward action.

As the inquiry advances, it opens the way to experimental solutions aimed at solving the problem. All this means that the construction of a public rests on sensitivity and values largely shared by the concerned population. But what are they? For Dewey, its main characteristic is the belief in the virtues of inquiry: public experience can emerge only if people indirectly concerned with a troublesome situation agree to recognize the facts established by the inquiry as a founding base for collective action. Other authors (Habermas, 1995) point that such values can also encompass notions of justice anchored in basic negative rights against discrimination and violence, close to the values of the universal declaration of human rights, and that must be discussed rationally.

In this paper, we have argued that publicization originates with indeterminate situations in which trouble can be experienced and communicated. It starts in an environment where emotions can be made visible and shared, revealing the values that participants can agree upon. Thus the process of publicization finds its justification in an informal register of norms locally expressed, external to values imposed from above by economic and political powers, which counterbalances the government and other constituted organizations

(Church, Corporate Companies, etc.), and makes room for the initiatives of civil society. This is why the publicization advocated by Dewey is different from the search for a participatory consensus. Its strength lies in its capacity to uncover shared values and manage antagonistic positions. Inquiries feeding a public can pit opposing factions while leading to a logical decision, meaning a decision true to the findings, even if some elements of the public refuse to admit it. The main condition for it to remain true is that each opinion or information be heard, assessed and discussed in a circle larger than the directly concerned people, a form of call to a “generalized other” (Mead, 1934; Quéré, 1990). Publicization is thus close to an “institutionalization of conflict”, the oxymoronic expression coined by Claude Lefort (1981) to describe the process of democratization.

What is interesting in this conception of publicization is that it does not rely on values defined *a priori*, but on norms uncovered locally in potentially public space via experience and inquiry. In this sense, the ethics of publicization are contingent and not universal, even if they can be found in many different places. It could be compared to the relational ethics of care developed by feminist scholars (Paperman and Laugier-Rabaté, 2005), where the felicity of an action is evaluated in the interaction itself. As a result, the process of publicization could be studied beyond the western world without necessarily imposing the values usually attached to the notion of public space.

Two states of publicization: Routine and trust, trouble and inquiry

This description of the conditions and values of publicization rests on situated and mediated environments that are often already the products of processes of publicization that preceded them. Thus, the freedom to come and go in the city streets, to talk one’s mind and the freedom of the press that we take for granted in Western countries are the gains of a long and contentious work of publicization and democratization. However, these qualities of accessibility and diffusion are not guaranteed. They must be sustained so that they can be mobilized to deal with specific problems in a public fashion as they arise.

But they do not have to be re-mobilized, or re-publicized, at every instant. Once a public problem has been dealt with (carried to its logical end or not), the spaces where it was first manifested and then debated lose their active public character. Each piece of information, and each urban space, does not need to be constantly publicized in order to raise and solve problems in a continuous fashion. In fact, a well functioning urban space can work by only satisfying routine needs. However, when its functioning becomes problematic (for example, because of exclusionary practices) or when a trouble needs a place to become expressed and visible, urban spaces can be available to become public at the same time as the problem that they help publicize.

This is why there are two distinct states of publicization: a residual or routine state, based on the trust in strangers in the street and in political and administrative institutions, and a troubled or problematic state, based on suspended trust and inquiry. The residual state provides a stable world to lean on, in the shape of open spaces and media, and lets individual delegate their concern to professionals. A street market, for example, can be routinely cleaned by municipal employees, secured by police officers, animated by buskers and vendors and repaired by workers paid by the city. Thus, people are not constantly solicited to participate in the management of urban spaces and social problems. But this does not mean that they should abdicate all political power, as Lippmann argued. If the police begin evicting “undesirables”, an emerging public concerned or shocked by such an exclusionary practice may raise the issue of undocumented vendors in the neighborhood (or city or more) and challenge the monopolistic responsibility of these appointed professionals (Milliot, 2012; Milliot and

Tonnelat, 2013). This is the troubled state. These two states, residual and troubled, are essential moments in a process of publicization and democratization grounded in an absence of stable power and transcendent truths, but trustful in the capacity of people to face problems of the moment in a right and proper manner.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the idea that not all accessible urban spaces and media are or should be automatically considered as public and that not all people entering an accessible urban space and all news made accessible by the media automatically become public. This led us to consider that scholars, rather than assuming the publicity of spaces and spheres they study, should analyze their processes of publicization. Following John Dewey, this process entails not only the joint building of public spaces and public spheres, but also the construction of publics and of public problems. Organized around an inquiry about a specific trouble observed and debated in specific spaces, publicization can lead to political decisions and appointments supported by the values that guide a general opinion. In this regard, publicization is a form of democratic social process anchored in values independent from any universal system, but that can be observed in many human environments, far beyond the borders of the western world in which public space is usually located. Publicization is however rarely conducted to its logical end. Many obstacles prevent spaces from becoming public, people from forming publics and issues from becoming public problems. We suggested three obstacles to publicization that we believe deserve further empirical and theoretical study. Understanding them could help scholars and activists better define the possibilities and limits of the notion of public space.

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Notes

1. Dewey's philosophical analysis meets Garfinkel's critique of "conventional sociology". He reproaches sociologists of using the glossing practices of ordinary people as analytical *resources*, when they should constitute the very *topic* of their research. Garfinkel considers that sociology should adopt the task of observing and describing how people make sense of situations, especially by using vague, implicit or incomplete formulas (see Widmer 1986: 13ss). This "methodological respecification" endeavor requires "going back to things themselves." It substitutes nominal and

conceptual definitions of social facts – those elaborated by “profane sociology” and “conventional sociology” alike – with “real” definitions based on a naturalistic observation of the activities that accomplish them.

2. This is the difference between a crowd and a public according to Tarde (1901) and Park (1972).
3. Engels (1993) made such an observation in 1844 about the shops hiding the degrading living conditions of the families of factory workers to the passing bourgeois in the main streets of Manchester.
4. This is an observation made by journalist Jacob Riis (1997) in the 1880s when he decided to use the recently invented phosphorus flash to make the living conditions of poor New Yorkers in dark alleyways and courtyards known to the city establishment.
5. For a discussion of the relation between public space and urban commons, see Susser and Tonnelat (2013).

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