Political geography: democracy and the disorderly public

Lynn A. Staeheli*

School of GeoSciences, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH8 9XP, UK

Abstract: This progress report reviews recent research on the role that disorder plays in fostering democracy. Disorder can be a powerful tool in fostering democracy because it highlights the conflicts, the agonism, that are inherent in democratic politics. More than a form of government or a set of outcomes, democracy can be conceptualized as a process through which agonism is expressed and action is taken. Yet agonism disrupts what seem to be settled relationships and practices, as new people, voices, and ideas enter the public sphere. Research in political geography has examined material and virtual spaces for public address in which groups struggle to expand, and in some cases reorder, democratic publics.

Key words: democracy, disorder, public space, public sphere, transgression.

I Introduction
Teens. They are cast as the bane of urban life. In public spaces across the city, they hang out, loiter, look fearsome, and often misbehave. They frighten other users of public spaces, drive away commerce, and make parks and sidewalks unusable for families. Such is the way that teenagers are often described when they are present in public, and particularly when they congregate in public. In response, many businesses and local governments in Britain have begun to install 'mosquitoes' – machines that emit a high-pitched whine that only people under 25 years of age are supposed to be able to hear. The noise is so unpleasant that youth do not loiter. The mosquitoes, though, have met with controversy since they were introduced. The controversy is in at least two forms. First, many people worry about the implications of painting all young people as potential criminals and purging them from public space. Youth, they argue, have human rights, and making them feel unwelcome in public is certain to send a message that they are unwanted individually and as citizens of the places in which they live. Second, and in distinction to the first, some people argue that the mosquito is not effective enough in that it only reaches youth. Homeless people, drug dealers and other criminals are also blights on the urban street, they argue, and should also be shooed away. In response, the inventor of the mosquito added a new frequency to the machine that emits a high-pitched whine, but one that can be heard by a broader spectrum

*Email: lynn.staeheli@ed.ac.uk

© The Author(s), 2009. Reprints and permissions: http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0309132509105006
of people. Local governments and property owners are said to be very interested in placing the new machines in underpasses and in parking garages where homeless people and ‘the criminal element’ loiter. Some people cheer the ‘cleansing’ of public space of those who are unruly and disruptive, while others argue the mosquito effectively makes public space inhospitable to everyone. As a means of managing disorderly behaviour, they argue, the mosquito denies the possibility of public assembly and participation in public life.

The conflict between different users of public space and between order and disorder has a long history, of course (Sennett, 1970; Goffman, 1971; Keller, 2008). It is often cast as a management or policy issue, and sometimes as a policing issue. And it is both. There are real questions at stake in how a space can be maintained so that a wide variety of users feel comfortable. In many western cities, the management issue seems to have been resolved in terms of regulating spaces such that they are comfortable for the middle classes and for business people. The widespread adoption of Business Improvement Districts that have been given responsibility for maintaining and policing publicly owned parks, squares, and sidewalks in business areas stand in testimony to this (MacLeod, 2002; Hoyt and Gopal-Agge, 2007; Swanson, 2007; Ward, 2007). In this progress report, however, I argue that the stakes in maintaining access to publicly accessible spaces are higher. I argue that the mosquito is simply one example of broader attempts to regulate the public and the public sphere, and that, collectively, these efforts speak to the possibilities for and qualities of democracy in cities around the world.

II Democracy and disorder

There have been extensive debates about the nature of democracy, how it is constituted, and the kinds of political, economic, and social relations that are required to support it (Dahl, 1989; Young, 2000; Whitehead, 2002; Staeheli, 2008). Yet, for all the literature in which these debates are played out, the question of why democracy is important often remains unasked; it remains just below the surface of concern. Perhaps, as I suggested above, the importance seems obvious: democracy is associated with self-government and freedom. Often unspoken, though, are
the underlying values or normative stakes of democracy. From this normative perspective, freedom and self-government are not necessarily goals in and of themselves; rather, they are seen as primary means by which justice and the human right to self-development can be achieved (Gould, 2004). It is, in other words, held to be the basis of the good life.

One can easily understand, then, why debates over democracy are so wide-ranging and complex. They include: different understandings of justice and self-development; questions about the role of care in relation to justice and self-development; how an autonomous political subject, capable of participating in governance, is to be developed; what the bounds of autonomy are, and what autonomy means for obligation towards others; and questions of whether there are universal standards for evaluating democracy or whether a more contingent, positioned evaluation is appropriate (Young, 2000; Gould, 2004; Held, 2006; Phillips, 2007).

Geographers have made important contributions to these debates by pointing to the embedded nature of democracy, highlighting the geographical and historical contingency – or the path-dependency – of systems of government and their ability to foster self-government within particular places and under different economic and global contexts. Several issues have featured prominently in this literature, including: how globalization reshapes the contextual features that condition democratic governance (Anderson, 2002; Agnew, 2006); the social relationships within places that condition citizenship (Martin, 2004; Marston and Mitchell, 2004); the ways in which ideas about place are mobilized in political movements (Castree, 2004); and the ways in which political opportunities at different scales and places are used to achieve particular ends (Miller, 2000; Low, 2004). This research helps us understand the spatiality of political opportunities and the democratic potential of particular systems of governance. This research also highlights the ways in which a feeling of ‘publicness’ is developed such that populations cohere under various forms of governance. Significantly, this research has also pointed to the ways in which space is implicated in the breakdown of democratic systems and practices and the ways in which democratization is limited by geographic relationships and conditions. Place, for instance, can be mobilized to promote anti-democratic practices, such as those associated with ethnic violence (O’Loughlin et al., 2008).

In these debates, however, what seems to be at stake shifts and perhaps stands in tension with the pragmatics of democratic governance. Rather than being a means toward self-development and fulfillment, democracy is often debated as a system of government or a set of sociopolitical relationships that sustain governing. In that shift in the level of abstraction at which the analytical problem is discussed – in other words, in turning the central focus for debate toward government and its relationship with civil society and the economy – it is as though democracy takes on a different definition. Barnett (2008) discusses this as two competing definitions of democracy. One definition takes a broadly liberal slant that emphasizes individual autonomy and ability to make choices, and a second, broadly republican definition emphasizes collective deliberation and produces a system for decision-making. Each of these definitions has implications for the ways in which institutions should be structured to facilitate choice/decision-making. Each is also affected by changes in socio-economic-political contexts. As a result, studies focus on: the implications of neoliberal governance for the ways in which citizenship is conceptualized and enacted (Ilcan and Basok, 2004; Fyfe, 2005; Ong, 2006; Trudeau, 2008); multiculturalism and the ways in which difference is accommodated (Painter, 2002; Geoghegan, 2008; Penrose and Howard, 2008); securitization and its implications for immigrant incorporation (Winders, 2007;
Staeheli and Nagel, 2008); the possibilities of political parties in democratization (Low, 2007); and so forth. Each of these is an important issue, with profound implications for the lives and futures of citizens. But they can also be recast as issues of management and of government, rather than matters of a deeper sense of politics in which agonism and the different conditions for and meanings of self-development are considered, debated, and struggled over. In many respects, the refocusing of research is fine, and indeed, may be inevitable. The underlying agonism of politics and democracy may not be the specific question authors are addressing, if in fact that broader agonism could be addressed in the space of a journal article (the currency with which many academics feel compelled to work).

Yet many scholars are also at pains to ensure that we avoid the implication that we are somehow in a ‘postpolitical’ age in which conflict can be avoided through interventions in civil society or be controlled within systems of government. Radical democratic theorists such as Chantal Mouffe (2005) have been insistent on focusing on the agonism and conflict that is an ineluctable element of working toward opportunities for self-development and to gain the rights to inhabit place and to participate in decisions affecting places, wherever those decisions may be taken (Mitchell, 2003; Purcell, 2008). Agonism is manifest in many of the moments that we commonly point to as examples of the expansion of democracy, including: civil rights and suffrage movements; mothers’ campaigns against disappearances in Argentina; the various-coloured movements that led to regime change in Eastern and Central Europe in 2002; the anti-apartheid movement; and, more ambiguously, the protests against Robert Mugabe’s regime in 2008. Each of these struggles was based on resistance to established patterns of order; to the extent they were part of a process of democratization, they relied on disruption, rather than conformity. They were suggestive – if not fully worked-through examples – of Rancière’s (2006) argument that democracy requires not just inclusion, but a radical reworking of the structures that organize society and maintain order in it (see also Dikeç, 2005).

There are three further points that are important to remember. First, these struggles are often expressed (at least initially) in the politics of recognition addressed in my previous progress report. What I wish to highlight here is the way in which recognition is linked to broader political claims about redistribution, inclusion, and the reconstitution of the public realm. Second, the outcome of struggle is not predetermined. There is no guarantee that the struggles associated with agonism will further democratization. Indeed, history suggests they are likely to be more and less successful over time, more and less progressive, and highlights the various definitions of and expectations for democracy held by political agents who draw from different sources of power. Finally, the disruptions and struggles associated with democratization are not limited to the spaces of formal, institutionalized power, but may be most powerful when they involve spatial transgressions of one form or another and a ‘relocation’ of the public sphere.

III Democracy and the public sphere

Many theoretical arguments about democratization emphasize the expansion of ‘the public’ as a key marker of democratization. The public is conceptualized in many different ways, but generally is that group of people recognized as being legitimate participants in political discussion, deliberation, and governing; very often, the public is conceptualized as being the citizenry or polity.2 Central concerns in debates about the public include: the characteristics required for self-governing, autonomous citizens (Honig, 2004; Gould, 2004; Rose, 2007); how new political subjects enter or become included in the public (Young, 2000; Iveson, 2007); the processes by which publics are formed.
encounters with difference in creating inclusive publics (Kohn, 2004); and whether it is better to conceptualize a singular, undifferentiated public or to conceptualize multiple publics within a given place (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002; Watson, 2006). The public sphere is also conceptualized in many ways (eg, as in representative liberal theories, participatory liberal theory, discursive theories, and constructivist theories; see Ferree et al., 2002), but is generally understood to be the forum for discussion and public address. Central concerns in the literature on the public sphere include: the characteristics of political subjects that are required for effective participation in the public sphere; the nature of interactions within the public sphere; what makes a matter worthy of public discussion as compared to a private concern; and the power relations that characterize debate and deliberation (Calhoun, 1992; Bohman and Rehg, 1997; Goode, 2006; Ryfe, 2007).

One of the central issues in the formation of publics and public spheres is the possibility of address. It is through address, subsequent dialogue, or interaction, and the development of some feeling of commonality or shared experience, that publics are formed. As indicated above, however, there is no inevitability to this (eg, just because I speak or write, it does not mean anyone will listen or bond with me), no predetermined form (eg, deliberative theories do not exhaust all possibilities), and no expectation that address will be uncontroversial. The central issue political geographers have explored relates to the spatial possibilities of address: the different spaces and locations of address; the rules and expectations regulating those spaces and locations; and the implications of these different spatialities for the quality of the publics that may form and their positioning with regard to other publics (Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008a). Any number of controversies surrounding houses of worship, for example, indicate the ways in which social norms and expectations regarding ‘appropriate’ use can take on a force akin to law and can even be used to change the law (Nagle, 2001; Salvatore, 2004; Cesari, 2005).

Many scholars have highlighted the way in which law reinforces existing order and is an example of the state sustaining the privileges associated with class, race, religion, sexuality, ableism, and gender. But the law is not simply a means of exercising the muscle of the state. The orderliness laws are supposed to maintain is also argued to be a precondition that provides a measure of safety as people who may otherwise be marginal within a society enter publicly accessible spaces (Helms, 2007; Koskela, 2009), and thereby, it is often assumed, the public. Even more, some forms
of policing – often based in communities – are seen as generative of new and better publics (Crawford and Lister, 2004; Herbert, 2005; Paskell, 2007). While renewing and expanding the public may be the stated goal, policing and the accompanying surveillance strategies often work to make places inhospitable to marginalized individuals, such as people without homes and teenagers. Indeed, one could argue that anti-social behaviour ordinances target classes of people as being unworthy of being in public (Bannister et al., 2006; Flint and Nixon, 2006; Belina, 2007). There are other mechanisms, however, that are also used to maintain order in publicly accessible spaces. One of the most interesting is the engineering of spaces to disrupt accessibility and to channel flows of people (ie, keep people moving rather than loitering) in particular directions (Blomley, 2007a; 2007b). It is significant, however, that these mechanisms are only effective and accepted when they are consistent with social norms. Numerous empirical studies have shown that people respond differently both to disruptions and to regulation of disruptions based on their understanding of local norms, their assessment of their cultural affinity to those whose actions are seen as disruptive, and their assessment of the property interests in the affected spaces (Watson, 2006; Iveson, 2007; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008a; 2008b). Recalling the example that introduced this report, the mosquito was controversial when used against teenagers in part because, to some people, public spaces are sites where teenagers should be introduced to the public as future citizens. To these people, making teenagers feel unwelcome in public was inconsistent with the normative imperative of training people how to behave as members of the public.

If the publicly accessible spaces of the city are easy to understand as ‘locations’ for the public sphere, it is important to remember that they are not the only locations. Indeed, Barnett (2008) argues that geographers have over-emphasized public spaces and have overlooked other, potentially more important, sites for public address and deliberation. Feminists and radical democratic theorists have long highlighted the importance of putatively private spaces of public deliberation and action (Cope, 2004; Painter, 2006; Kofman, 2008). Much of the early theorization of the public sphere and empirical work, including Habermas’s influential *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (1989), highlighted the role of newspapers and print media (see also Dewey, 1927). Recent research on media and the public sphere has analysed the spatiality of radio, television, and other forms of mass communication (Calabrese, 2001; Morely, 2001; Sunstein, 2001; Calhoun, 2002). The virtual spaces of the internet and the world wide web, of course, have also been studied, as authors have considered the potential for organizing, the qualities of interaction, and the qualities of the public that may be formed (Calhoun, 2002; Warner, 2002; Barnett, 2004; Siapera, 2005).

A great deal of the research on the internet and the public sphere has examined the ways in which migrants use communications and information technologies (CIT) to engage in politics in the places where they currently live and the places from which they moved. Much of this work argues that transnational public spheres are being created that link ‘here’ and ‘there’, and in the process shape the political subjectivities of migrants (eg, Georgiou, 2005; Bernal, 2006). One of the arguments promoted through this literature is the idea that a diasporic public sphere has emerged that is not coincident with the boundaries of the nation state (eg, Appadurai, 1996; Bowen, 2004; Vertovec, 2004; Laguerre, 2005). There is a way in which some of this literature overstates the case. Few theoretical accounts have argued that the public sphere was ever contained within the nation state, and many accounts explicitly argue that it is not defined by any sort of state or political institution (see Ferree et al., 2002). The more important point to take from this
research is the complicated geography of public address through the internet, how it connects people in far-flung places, and the ways in which it shapes political attitudes, debates, and behaviours in particular places. In the case of migrants’ use of CIT, the research often highlights the multiple public spheres in which issues are discussed and in which political opinions and strategies are formed (Werbner, 2004). But, rather than interpret these forums as a desire to remain separate from the mainstream of the host society, it may be useful to think of them as examples of the subaltern counterpublics conceptualized by Nancy Fraser (1990) or as examples of the distinction between a public and the public. As Michael Warner has argued, the term ‘public’ is often used rather loosely and several senses of the term are intermixed:

People do not always distinguish even between the public and a public, though in certain contexts, the difference can matter a great deal. The public is a kind of social totality. Its most common sense is that of the people in general … This sense of totality is brought out by speaking of the public, even though to speak of a national public implies that others exist: there must be as many publics as polities, but whenever one is addressed as the public, the others are assumed not to matter. (Warner, 2002: 65–66, emphasis in original)

In thinking of a public, the particular public is always put into relationship with other publics and is positioned with respect to them. In that positioning, the other publics do matter, as the positioning is often reflective and generative of particular forms of power. But the positioning can also be disruptive of power, as when collectivities – publics – form that are hidden from the state (such as in Lefebvre’s 1991 counterspaces) or are formed in putatively private spaces. It can also be disruptive when protest emerges from a public that challenges the public’s norms. Or when a public seems to extend beyond state borders and seems to exercise a kind of sovereign power not amenable to state rule. These disruptions challenge the seemingly settled relations that we often call ‘democracy’, in part by attempting to expand it through agonistic conflict between publics in the public sphere.

These disruptions may be most clear in some of the recent mobilizations associated with the global justice movement or with the Right to the City Alliance. More than just movements that challenge the power of states and capital, these are movements that put forward dramatically different organizing principles for their view of a just world. Part of their strategy is to create new publics, but also new ideas of how publics should be organized. Rather than a model that is linked to the nation state or to other forms of government, these movements organize their publics through ‘entangled geographies’ (Cumbers et al., 2008) that combine virtual spaces with action on the ground, and that link global ideas and political networks with localized resources for organizing and challenging power. Inevitably, their publics confront power in the public.

IV Who and what are not addressed?
If publics are formed through address, then it is important to consider who seems to be unaddressed: who are the people that are not reached? Where are they located? Why aren’t they addressed? At some point in the report, for instance, it must have seemed that the publics being discussed are really urban publics and that the public sphere has been reduced to public space. It is true that there is slippage in the research. Many of the geographers who study publics and public spheres do their research in urban areas (even if they do not call themselves urban geographers), and the association between publics and cities is thereby forged. It is not an accident, for instance, that one of the most interesting recent books on publics is titled City publics (Watson, 2006). Yet, for all the rhetoric about cities being ‘laboratories of democracy’, cities are not uniquely qualified as sites for public formation (Low, 2004).
Rather, with the preponderance of research being in cities, the struggles for public address and for public formation in rural areas is often hidden; this is a particular issue when rurality intersects with gender and or race (cf. Panelli, 2007). What emerges from the literature as a whole is an urban bias, created not through a conscious promotion of urban publics, but rather through the networks of research and interest that permeate and structure human geography.

There is a second, curious absence: research on publics in the Global South. The vast majority of research in geography on publics and public formation is based in the countries and cities of the west. It is probably too strong to say that there is a complete absence of research outside the west. There is, after all, important recent research on public spaces in Turkey (Secor, 2004), Latin America (Low, 2000; Swanson, 2007), China (Lee, 2008) and elsewhere; there is also a tradition of research including the work of Paul Wheatley examining places where people gather in Chinese cities and in the Muslim world (eg, Wheatley, 1971; 2000). These strands of research, as important as they are, however, do not change the overwhelming sense of western-centrism in the literature on democracy and the public sphere.

Why is the preponderance of research in cities of the west so important? Visibility (and vocality, to a lesser degree) have been seen by scholars as critical to struggles of marginalized groups to gain access to a public, and then to the public (returning to Warner’s terms). If scholars are correct in this, then they should be worried that the lack of visibility in academic research has implications for the quality of our concepts and theories of democracy and publics. If political inclusion is a goal, then scholarly inclusion may help to achieve that goal; feminist, queer, and anti-racist scholars should be able to draw the parallel between this and their own struggles for recognition and inclusion. We run the risk of reaffirming very narrow understandings of democracy and of how publics are constituted and operate unless a broader view – and a broader corpus of research – troubles and disrupts what we currently name ‘democracy’.

V Democratization and disorder
Winston Churchill is often quoted as saying ‘Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those that have ever been tried’. One source of Churchill’s discomfort was his assessment of the capacity of voters to make good, informed decisions; another comment attributed to him is that ‘The best argument against democracy is a five minute conversation with the average voter’.4 It was not just that voters seemed to misunderstand the issues; they often misbehaved and were difficult to keep trained on the goals of government. From the standpoint of governments, democracy undoubtedly is unworkable, even if agreement on what constitutes democracy could be reached.5 Yet, based on what I have argued in this report, the unruliness and the struggles between those who seek to maintain particular kinds of order and those who would disrupt it are at the heart of democratization, or of the enactment of democracy (Saward, 2003).

The entry of new voices, ideas, and agents into the public realm is, by definition, disruptive, even if not obviously conflictual. New entrants challenge ideas or social norms of who and what belongs in public. Sometimes, they are easily accommodated. Over time, their presence can become normalized and unremarkable, such that the history of their entry into public seems hard to recall. From the perspective of the individuals and social groups that attempt to enter the public realm, however, there is always a process by which they seek a stage for visibility, for vocality, for performance, for some form of address. This is why genealogical approaches are so important (cf. Isin, 2002); they surface the processes by which publics are formed that may jostle against the broader, dominant public, and may ultimately remake the public as part of the process of democratization.
Disorder, however, is not an unqualified good, leading inexorably to more expansive democracies. As I have noted, sometimes disorder can lead to conditions that seem less democratic.\textsuperscript{6} More importantly, though, the outcomes of disruption are not pre-ordained. Agonism and conflict are inherent in politics, and assertions of being in a postpartisan or postpolitical age cannot change that. Instead, I hope I have demonstrated that democratic struggles and democratization are characterized by the interplay between those agents who would seek entry into the public realm (eg, individuals and social groups), the desire to discipline the public through the invocation of social norms, and those people and institutions who wish to govern or control the public to achieve particular goals. All of the agents, norms, and institutions that are involved in this interplay draw on different sources of power that may be more or less effective in different times and places.

What I am calling disorder and disruption need not emerge in publicly accessible spaces or be launched by controversial acts; private spaces and mundane acts can also give rise to disruption. Furthermore agonism and conflict need not be expressed in vituperative debate and physical violence. The point I wish to make is that disorder and agonism are most easily seen and recognized when they enter publicly accessible spaces and when conflict is expressed, rather than simply experienced. Similarly, the importance of norms in regulating the public and in legitimating particular kinds of behaviours, ideas, and bodies in public are most easily seen at moments of conflict. This is admittedly a particular view of democracy and democratization. It is one in which the activism, debates, and challenges to normalized and institutionalized power that are disruptive in large and small ways are at the heart of democratization, a process that is open-ended, rather than pre-ordained, and is inherently disorderly.

\textbf{Acknowledgements}

This report draws from ongoing collaborations with Don Mitchell and Caroline Nagel.

\textbf{Notes}

1. Here and throughout the report, the references that I cite are illustrative of the issues being discussed, and are certainly not comprehensive. I have often chosen the references because they provide good overviews of the debates, rather than because they promote or illustrate a particular position.

2. Saying that the public is often conceptualized as being the citizenry and that the public sphere is seen as coincident with the nation is an empirical statement; many authors make those associations. Much of the theoretical work on the public and public sphere specifically dissociates the public from governmental and national institutions and practices, as noted later in the progress report.

3. It will undoubtedly seem, by this point, that the public sphere is an urban phenomenon. There is a strong urban bias in much of the research on the public sphere, only partially offset by the work on diasporic public spheres and public spheres created through the media. I address the implications of the urban bias later in the report.

4. These quotes are more often attributed to Churchill than properly referenced; they may well be apocryphal.

5. There is, of course, a vast literature on how democracy should be defined, the ‘indicators’ of it, and how it should be measured. Review articles included in the reference list include much of that debate.

6. The current financial crisis, for instance, is likely to destabilize many countries and, if it is like other crises, may lead to a growing conservatism and retraction of rights.

\textbf{References}


Bernal, N. 2007b: How to turn a beggar into a bus stop: law, politics and the ‘function of the place.’ Law and Society Review 41, 1687–702.
Bernal, N. 2007b: How to turn a beggar into a bus stop: law, politics and the ‘function of the place.’ Law and Society Review 41, 1687–702.


