

Rending the “Cosmopolitan Canopy”: COVID-19 and Urban Public Space

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I am writing during the “socially distanced” summer of Covid. This means that, like almost everyone else, I am trying to figure out what this “new normal” means. Aside from the horrendous toll, the disease itself has taken on family, friends, and colleagues, we are all increasingly aware of the havoc that the necessary efforts to contain its spread are now wreaking on economic and social life, and, in particular, on the public life of cities. Those of us lucky enough to be able to work from home now joke about what the blurring of the line between public and domestic space means for our everyday lives: attending “zoom” meetings in sweat pants (or no pants); how long it has been since we have put on a dress or a suit; the little glimpses of the private lives of our colleagues and bosses that spill over onto the screens. Yet, I don’t think we have fully begun to grasp the implications of the sudden withdrawal from public life has meant for our social relations and our politics.

Of course, trying to figure out what this all means while the crisis is still going on is a risky business. By the time you read these words, there is a good chance many of these observations will seem very dated, if not dead wrong! As Nygaard and his colleagues remind us, “history shows us that the ways we organize our cities are often resistant to abrupt change—even in response to catastrophic events” (Nygaard et al. 2020). Or to quote the warning of a recent Noble prize winner: “don’t speak too soon for the wheel’s still in spin.” Listening to the pundits forecast the end of dense cities and predicting a new middle-class exodus to the suburbs and exurbs, one cannot help but be reminded of the aftermath of “9/11” when many leading thinkers quickly pronounced concentration in central cities a thing of the past and pointed toward a “poly-nucleated” urban future. In the wake of the collapse of the towers, we were told that no one would ever want to work in a tall building again, and certainly no one would want to live in one. Yet, a decade after the towers fell Frank Gehry’s “Eight Spruce Street,” at the time the tallest residential building in the western hemisphere, opened a few hundred yards from the World Trade Center site. Today the three tallest residential buildings in the world are all in Manhattan, which should, if nothing else, teach us to be cautious about cliché ridden predictions of urban doom.

Still, there are some things we can say about the dangers of sudden withdrawal from public space if only because the responses to pandemic are accelerating trends that were already underway. The first to note that while the pandemic affects people everywhere,

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its impacts are greatest in the cities. Or as Nicole Gelinas recently put it, “Covid-19 has hit the cities so hard because of what they do so well: bring people closely together for fun and profit” (Gelinas 2020:A19). Being in public—that is, in the presence of strangers in spaces, we do not control—is the quintessential urban experience. The attributes of public space, with its particular rules and combinations of formality and informality (as explored by Erving Goffman 1963), its emphasis on artifice and appearances, the possibility of serendipitous encounters, and its promise of social membership and sociability (as discussed by Richard Sennett 1978; 2018 and Ari Adut 2018) are among of defining characteristics of urbanity. Exclusion from public spaces, as women were from the Athenian Agora or African Americans were (and too often still are) in segregated America, is one of the clearest markers of being less than a full member of the civitas.

This is one of the reasons both early civil rights activists and feminists put access to public places high on their agendas, from lunch counter sit-ins to “take back the night rallies.” It was not that African Americans were particularly anxious to dine shoulder to shoulder with whites at Woolworth’s, or that feminists saw an inherent benefit it being able to safely share the late-night streets with men. It was not even that access to historically “white spaces” or “male spaces” (see Anderson 2015) was a guarantor of quality of service, although that did come in to play in battles over neighborhood and school segregation. It was instead that access to the public world signified full citizenship. Exclusion from that world was a statement of practical noncitizenship, often enforced by state and extralegal violence.

Thus, there is clearly a political as well as a social dimension to the question of inclusion. Public space plays a key role in defining and limiting the “polis.” Today we often think about this use the notion of the “public sphere” in metaphoric terms. Yet, it is important to remember that the Agora was a real physical space. It was both a market place and a political space, which is why being allowed there is such an important marker of societal membership. In *The Human World*, Hannah Arendt (1958) argued that lives lived in “the space of appearances” were in some sense what accorded citizens social recognition as truly human. Even Jürgen Habermas for whom the idea of public sphere is largely metaphoric points to the origins of “the public sphere of bourgeois culture” in the prosaic physical confines of the 18th century London coffeehouse. In this public setting, he points to the creation of a third space, beholden to neither the state nor the family (Habermas 1962:51). Of course, today his celebration of the liberal egalitarianism of such spaces generally strikes us today as overblown and naïve. Restricted to bourgeois (white) men, such spaces excluded the great majority of humanity. Still, as Marta Gutman notes, for those “bourgeois private individuals” these spaces provided a real physical space “open to who wanted to come together, reflect on what they had read, discuss politics, and engage in rational critical debate” (Gutman 2021).¹

What happens then, when public safety requires that we all must suddenly avoid such spaces? Will people get out of the habit of going out and mingling? Beyond the many other terrible tolls it has taken, has Covid accelerated the death of a viable public sphere (*Agoracide?*) and its replacement by a world of “virtual communities,” which are neither public nor communities in any meaningful sense.

It is already obvious that poor people, working-class people, immigrants, and particularly people of color are bearing a disproportionate share of the burdens of the pandemic, both the disease itself and the economic dislocations that have followed in its wake. They are far more likely to do the jobs that cannot be done “online.” Decades of declining or

stagnant wages have left many Americans ill-equipped to face any sudden economic downturn, much less one on this scale. Moreover, decades of disinvestment in public services and cynical government bashing by political leaders have left the state sorely ill-equipped to confront the challenges it now faces.

Yet, for many middle-class people, the situation is quite different. One thing we have all learned from life in the shadow of Covid is how many of the tasks of everyday life can now be accomplished reasonably well “online”—assuming that one has money and they type of work that does not require face-to-face contact. In some ways, this is quite new. Imagine for a moment how different things would have been had the virus struck a quarter-century ago, and that we were all trying to hold meetings and teach classes using AOL dial-up connections? Still, the very ease with which many middle-class people can now work, shop, and attend school without leaving home is worrisome. How much will we miss about public space—and what of it will we simply decide we can live without?

Shopping presents an illustration of the problem. As Zukin and her collaborators have argued, local shopping streets do far more than distribute needed goods. They allow urbanites to experience new and different products and ideas. They help define neighborhoods and urban communities, converting spaces into “places.” They are often points of first contact between diverse people in the superdiverse city (Vertovec 2007) and enforce a kind of limited but nonetheless real civility on these encounters (Lee 2002; Zukin et al. 2014). They create social connections—even between people who do not “quite” know each other, in ways digital communications do not (Blokland). Delivery services turn out to be just as efficient at gathering goods we already know we want. But any chance at serendipitous encounters—with products or with people, is gone. In effect delivery services manage to conduct the core function of the activity—getting stuff to people—more efficiently by stripping out all of ancillary but arguably more valuable aspects of the activity. Which is why they make shopping a lot less fun. Yet, many of the types of local businesses Zukin and her collaborators write about are not likely to survive the current crisis—at least not without unprecedented levels of public support (see also Hall 2012). Perhaps, in the age of Amazon, many of them would have been eventually replaced by “on line” delivery services anyway. But the virus appears to have greatly accelerated that trend.

What is true for shopping is true for so many other online activities. By removing the chance to “go out” and encounter the unexpected in public space, we may actually increase the efficiency of delivery of goods or services (such as education). Yet, by stripping out all of ancillary benefits of face to face encounters, they leave the interaction infinitely poorer. And ironically relocating the activity to the customer or worker’s home (where the worker pays the expenses of the work space) is often sold as a convenience: no commuting. Leaving one’s home and going out in public is redefined as burden.

I am now “socially distancing” in New York City. Being here throws this issue into sharp relief. New York is a city of glorious public spaces—parks, theaters, restaurants, concert halls, and shopping streets—and, at best, very modest private ones. To the extent we get used to staying at home, working from home, shopping from home, do places like New York (or for that matter, Berlin, Paris, Amsterdam, or London) become less necessary? And what are the social costs of that? What does it mean for a great city when public life dies?

Of course, some will argue that this is a romantic vision, out of step with the direction of social change. Many of ways of doing things that now dominate life under Covid, from the Amazon delivery of absolutely everything to online college courses, were well established before Covid accelerated their acceptance.

It is also true that we may have been here before. As Richard Williams (2020) notes, early and mid-20th century modernists celebrated huge and often empty plazas. The vision of the crowded, pestilential slum, from Engels' Manchester, to Bethnal Green to the Lower East Side, pushed generations of urban reformers to embrace light, air, wide boulevards, and towers in the park. Indeed, Williams notes the Le Corbusier's plans to "kill the street" with clean and sanitary superblocks in the 1920s may have been inspired in large part in response to the 1918–1919 flu pandemic.² Similarly, the mingling of crowding, poverty, and communicable disease in images of black and immigrant slums of American cities was certainly on the minds of Frank Lloyd Wright and his disciples when they advocated the sprawling "broadacre city." It is really not until the 1960s that the charms of crowded street life and the ability of such places to create, in Marshal Berman's words, "communities of solidarity and care" was widely appreciated (Berman 1982). Whether that appreciation will be a casualty of Covid has yet to be seen.

In addition, I worry about the effect that withdrawal from public life will have on how we experience the heterogeneity that, which as Louis Wirth (1938) noted long ago, is one of the defining features of the urban experience. Elijah Anderson's (2011) notion of the "cosmopolitan canopy" may be particularly useful here. Anderson argues that there are spaces in contemporary America where people of different and sometimes hostile groups and backgrounds come together. He points to Philadelphia's Redding Terminal Market as a primary example. In such spaces, people who might be at odds in other settings not only tolerate each other's presence—they actually enjoy it. Indeed, diversity becomes part of the appeal. Yet, this appreciation of the joys of diversity seldom extends outside of the cosmopolitan space. In the second part of the book, he examines racially mixed work places in which black and white professionals work together, seemingly with little conflict. Yet, as these are historically "white spaces," there remains an ever-present tension, scarcely noticed by whites, but omnipresent in the minds of blacks. The threat that any encounter or interaction can suddenly "turn racial" is always beneath the surface. Black executives are aware that at any moment, they be reminded that they are interlopers whose right to be there can always be called into question. As such, Anderson argues, the psychic costs of integration are born disproportionately by the black middle class. Yet, despite this tension, Anderson finds value in the "cosmopolitan canopy" spaces in which encounters with "the other" are not only possible, but normal and often enjoyable.

One result of Covid is that many of us have now withdrawn from precisely the types of public spaces Anderson points to; spaces in which diverse people come together. Working at home, staying at home, and being entertained at home means that most of us are sheltering among people very much like ourselves. What does it mean for the "super diverse" city when it becomes so easy to avoid people who are different and ideas unlike our own?

I cannot help but think about this in relationship to the place where I now sit. By most conventional measures, New York is among the most racially segregated of American Cities. Yet, people often note that it does not "feel" that way. As in most of America, residential space is now more segregated than work space or recreational space, and because New Yorkers are far less likely to own cars than other Americans, much of

the population is united by dependence on mass transportation. Thus, when residential spaces are converted into work spaces and when we are avoiding parks, shopping streets, and subways we are, often without realizing it, moving from more cosmopolitan spaces into more segregated ones.

New York is also characterized by one of the other defining features of Wirth’s definition of urbanism—density. It is far more dense than other American cities with more than twice as many people per square mile as Chicago or Boston. This density is another reason New York feels so diverse, despite extreme residential segregation. Many New Yorkers live within a short walk of people of a different race or social class. Density is also one of the things that makes the city so vibrant, so full of striking contrasts, and unpredictable encounters. And, of course, it is that density that has now made the city suddenly seem so fragile. Prior to the mid-20th century, everyone knew that dense cities were particularly vulnerable to epidemics and communicable disease. Medical advances led us to forget that age old truth. Now we remember.

Having made these pessimistic observations, I should perhaps end on a more optimistic note. The “Black Lives Matter”-led demonstrations in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Abernathy are arguably the most significant challenges to American racial hierarchies in decades. That they began in the midst of the pandemic makes these events even more remarkable. These events will be written about for years to come, in many cases by observers far more qualified than I, including the authors of the essays accompanying this one. Thus, I will restrict myself to few observations.

Among the demonstrators and their spokespersons, it has become common for people to characterize the anti-black racism so evident in the current incidents of police misconduct as continuous with white supremacy that has characterized American society from its beginnings, going back to 1619 and before. This is appropriate, as, in many respects, it is clearly true. However, there are also ways in which the current wave of demonstrations and other public actions in response to these killings are, in fact, quite different from most of those that have gone before. As is frequently noted, the participants in the demonstrations and other acts of resistance are themselves far more ethnically diverse than in any movement for racial justice in the U.S. history. There are many more whites in the streets (many of the most active centers of Black Lives Matter activities have been in cities with very small African American populations). There are also many immigrants and their children, often venturing into U.S. politics for the first time. The demonstrations reflect a more racially diverse and, perhaps, a more cosmopolitan America, particularly evident among the young.

The other huge difference is that today’s demonstrations and other acts of resistance are taking place almost entirely in public spaces, often iconic public spaces in City Centers. The uprisings of the 1960s were largely confined to African American neighborhoods. While a few major marches such as the 1963 march on Washington were in well-known public spaces, most of the more violent protests happened in places white Americans could easily ignore. This is no longer the case. Demonstrators have converged on major public buildings, courthouses, public parks, and plazas in the most central, visible and familiar spaces in the city.

Given the context of Covid and the age of most of the demonstrators, it is noteworthy that these activities have for the most part not taken place on line. Yes, like the demonstrations of the Arab Spring a decade ago, many protests are organized in “cyber

space.” Online communication has allowed activists to communicate with each other, discuss strategy, and move large groups of people around quickly. But ultimately, it remains important that demonstrations happen in “real” (which is, to say, nonvirtual) space. In some ways, for the politics to be real, to count, it still seems to need to occur in recognizably public space, the risks of Covid notwithstanding. Access to the polis remains a signifier of citizenship. Seizing public space and asserting one’s “rights to the city” remains a fundamentally political act, tied to real physical space.

There may be other reasons for optimism. One fear I have had for New York is that Covid would lead to increased dependence on private automobiles. Yet, as summer has gone on, many streets have actually been closed to traffic as restaurants have claimed parking spaces as outdoor seating areas. This is not a wholly unmitigated blessing. In gentrifying areas, it has accelerated the conversion of neighborhoods into virtual theme parks. Still, given the choice between parking spaces and side walk cafes, my urban sensibility clearly favors the latter. Bicycle usage is also up, a trend that cannot help but be for the good.

This crisis will eventually pass. Yet, the very technological and cultural changes that will make it possible for most of us to survive Covid will undoubtedly accelerate trends toward a more privatized city. It is thus crucial for those of us who value public life and public space to talk about why we value them, why we miss them, and how much poorer society is without them. We must be prepared to reclaim our public spaces the moment it is safe to do so.

Notes

¹For a useful and far more detailed description and comparison of the various social, political and feminist uses of the notion of “public space,” from Rousseau to Jane Jacobs, see Jeff Weintraub, “Varieties and Vicissitudes of Public Space” in Philip Kasinitz (editor) *Metropolis: Center and Symbol of Our Time*.

²It is common to blame a lot on Le Corbusier, from Brasilia to Pruitt Igoe. As such it should probably be noted in light of contemporary concerns about climate change and sustainability, that so long as the “tower in the park,” does not become the tower in the parking lot, it actually does pretty well when it comes to preserving green spaces and reducing carbon emissions while accommodating modern urban population densities.

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