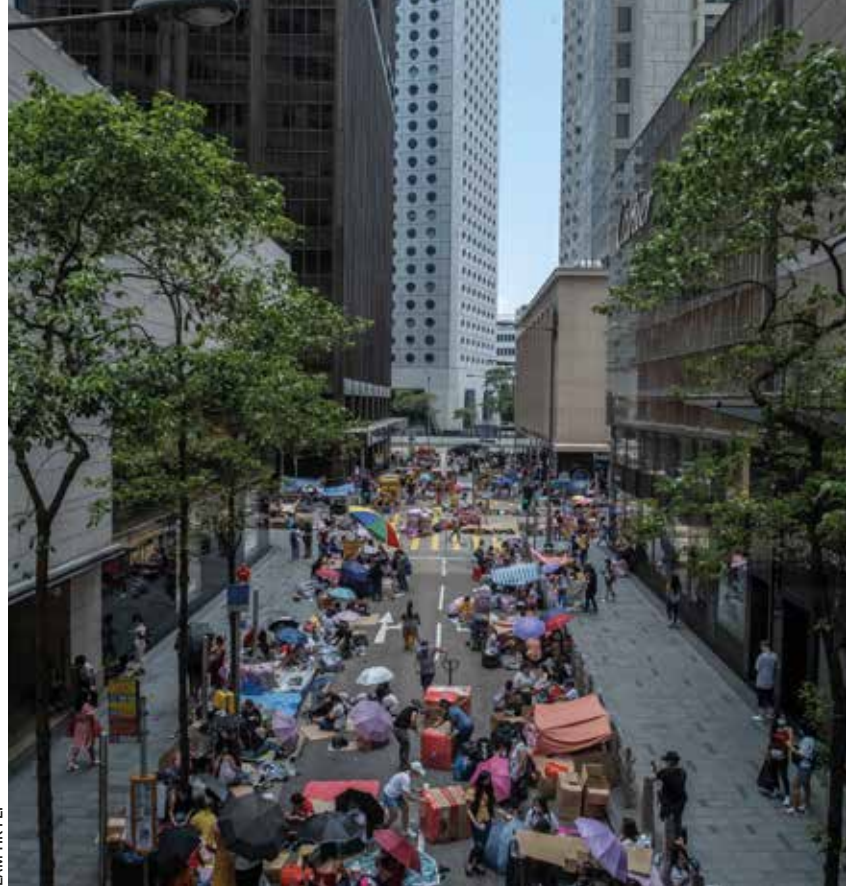


Publicity

Maintaining a public space commons requires constant collective appropriation and activism, autonomous in the face of both state and market control, writes *Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago*



Movement through public space is heavily manipulated and regulated, as shown by Larissa Fassler's *Regent Street/Regent's Park (Dickens Thought it Looked Like a Racetrack)*, 2009 (opposite). But public space commons can be collectively appropriated; every Sunday, on their day off, migrant domestic workers, largely from the Philippines, claim space in Hong Kong's commercial district (right), eating picnics and talking, but also having manicures and haircuts. Much public space is hostile to subaltern activity and is in fact owned by private corporations, as *Space Hijackers* highlighted in the apparently public space around the former City Hall in London (below)



LAM YIK FEI

The language of the commons has become ubiquitous in debates about public space. For much of the 20th century, the state enjoyed hegemony over the imaginaries of public placemaking, at least in Europe and North America.

The roll-out of neoliberal urban policies from the 1980s onwards complicated this picture, with increasing pressure from business interests to introduce a revanchist agenda marked by exclusion and enclosure. In the 1990s, against the background of rampant privatisation and the rise of zero-tolerance policies, critics including urban theorists Mike Davis and Michael Sorkin declared the end of public space, and intense controversy raged over the decline of publicness and its consequences for democracy.

However, this analysis failed to identify ongoing struggles to appropriate publicness from below: the creative energy that keeps public spaces alive. In the following years, in fact, a range of mass collective actions – such as the Reclaim the Streets protest parties in the late 1990s, guerrilla gardening operations, and the wave of square occupations and tent camps following the Arab Spring in the early 2010s – revealed the increasingly global spread of a collective aspiration to take back, expand and reimagine publicness beyond state and market control. Since then, public space has been repeatedly presented as the quintessential urban commons: a sphere of shared practices and a vessel of communality, waiting to be reclaimed and redefined from below.

But by becoming a buzz phrase, the notion of a ‘public space commons’ may be losing its meaning and political insight. The concept is frequently used as a metaphor, rather than a factual description, to evoke a vague atmosphere of diversity, relaxed conviviality, pure spontaneity and unrestrained freedom; in fact, some readings prolong and reproduce conventional urban ideologies that associate the idea of public space with passive recreation and leisurely sociality. This has little to do with existing commons, which are typically

characterised by active, direct engagement of communities in the production and management of places for immediate use, often related to more or less pressing everyday needs and attempts to secure domains of autonomy from state and market forces. As such, the commons are usually contested spaces, the stake and outcome of permanent friction and negotiation between heterogeneous actors and projects. The facile equation of public space with the commons fails to recognise that ‘publicity’ – the articulation of property and land-use regimes, everyday practices, social relations, and representations demarcating and shaping the realm of open, collectively accessible places – can be actively promoted or regulated to inhibit grassroots and popular practices. Public space is not a commons per se – constant struggle is required to preserve it as a realm of autonomy. Commoning, in turn, tends to expand publicity beyond the narrow delimitation of public space as land owned or managed by the state, penetrating the private sphere to create spaces of cooperative appropriation and collective emancipation.

To develop a more generative sense of the idea of a public space commons, we may begin with its condition as a shared infrastructure that supports individual and collective life. The commons are frequently linked to the collective management of shared resources, often as a result of urgent material needs – commoning is, first of all, an act of survival. Public space should be understood as such: a versatile, if unevenly distributed, ‘resourcescape’ that can be mobilised for various, sometimes contradictory ends. This is hardly a revelation for those subaltern groups who rely on it on a daily basis to eke out a living, shaping everyday publicness through history. For them, at the most rudimentary level, publicity is a means of subsistence with material and relational capacity. It provides opportunities to meet basic sustenance needs and constitutes a platform for the consolidation of collective subjectivities and community organisation.

There is no need to go back to pre-industrial times to



‘Public space is not a commons per se – constant struggle is required to preserve it as a realm of autonomy’

Protesting the increasing use of cars, Reclaim the Streets activists took to the M41 in Shepherd’s Bush in 1996. Taking the form of a street party, stilt walkers concealed people drilling holes in the motorway to plant trees (right). In 2011, Tahrir Square in Cairo – usually dominated by cars and a large roundabout – was the site of protests of over a million people against former president Hosni Mubarak (opposite)



find this principle at work. In industrialising regions across the world, migrants coming from rural backgrounds or less developed areas often reinvent public space in an attempt to reproduce former habits and secure a livelihood. Commoning the public realm for food is the most enduring expression of this process; in New York City many of the poorest people were livestock keepers and let animals forage on the streets and the city fringes well into the 19th century. Pedestrians coexisted with hogs, hens and goats in public space, including in core locations in Lower Manhattan. In 1820, there was one pig for every five inhabitants in the city, and towards the mid-1860s about 20,000 families still fed their livestock on the streets despite ongoing attempts to prohibit this practice.

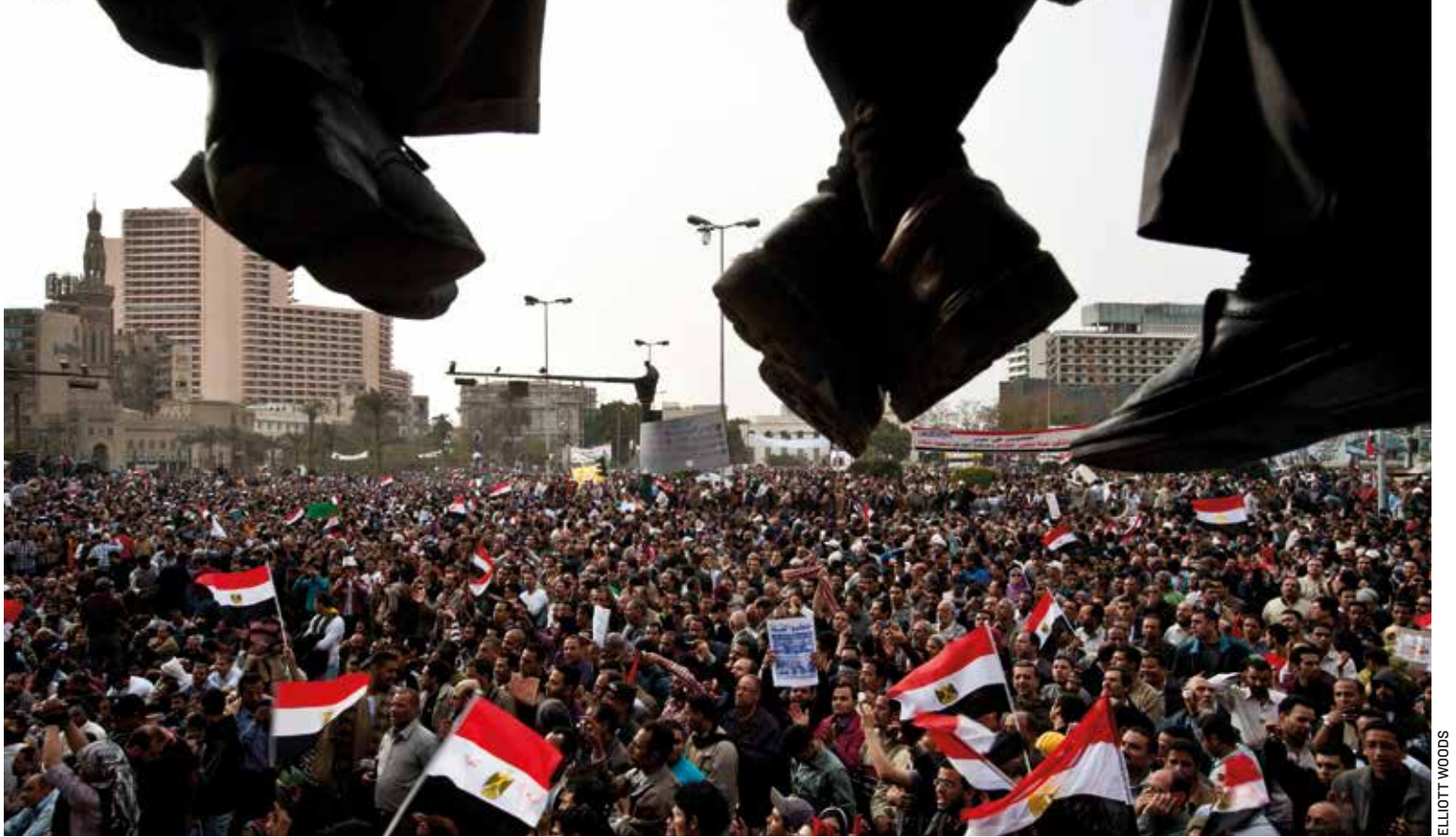
A less controversial phenomenon today, grassroots and community gardening stemmed from a similar sociohistorical background at a time when the divide between urban and rural cultures was still incipient. Informal gardens on vacant lots and rented or squatted periurban land are a regular feature of subaltern provisioning systems in the capitalist city, and a form of commoning that extends the boundaries and purposes of public space. They provide not only an opportunity to reduce food insecurity, but also places for popular interaction and recreation. For instance, the *Laubenkolonien* (garden colonies) developed on the outskirts of Berlin and Leipzig in the late 19th and early 20th centuries included shared areas and central squares for events that nurtured a robust culture of working-class leisure. Urban agriculture has transformed both public and private land into communal space in challenging times, as exemplified by the use of parks and vacant areas as food gardens during the world wars in Europe, by dispossessed farmers and displaced migrants trying to absorb the shock of urbanisation in contemporary China, or by residents of declining neighbourhoods in postindustrial rustbelt regions in the US.

Urban scavenging is also a persistent feature in the subaltern mining of street commons, sometimes entangled with these makeshift food systems. In Cairo, for example, the *Zabbaleen* (rubbish collectors) community has used household organic waste

picked on the streets across the city to feed their pigs, poultry and goats for over a century. A fundamental, if contested, element of the local metabolic regime, waste processing still supports the livelihood of about 70,000 Cairene families and has been recognised by the United Nations as one of the world’s most efficient and sustainable waste management systems.

Under certain conditions, urban scavenging helps to expand the network and purposes of available resourcescapes through tactical encroachment of threshold spaces in otherwise restricted areas such as infrastructural or industrial sites. In the early 1900s, the families of Chicago’s Back of the Yards neighbourhood got the fuel, oil and wood they needed from the refuse of nearby factories and dumps. In 1914, a survey in New York found that ‘a [large] part of the minimum necessary to support life on the West Side [could] be picked up from the streets ... along the railroad tracks or among the warehouses’. If extended in time, these practices not only turn such liminal sites into regular meeting places, but also lead to more robust forms of institutional organisation with transformative political and territorial agency; the cooperatives of *cartoneros* (litter pickers) in Buenos Aires or the prolonged protests of Managua’s *churrequeros* (rubbish scavengers) provide a recent example of these dynamics. In that condition, subaltern publicity serves as a platform for insurgent citizenship regimes, supporting the political inclusion of marginalised populations.

Some of these practices may not intrinsically constitute forms of commoning – many of them are based on tactical, individual behaviours and transactions lacking the institutional infrastructure typical of mature communal arrangements. They become a commons when the shared use of space as a provisional resourcescape acquires mass contours, engendering everyday cultures, solidarities and eventually new forms of cooperative organisation. Subaltern publicity usually grows out of the need to survive, socialise and build alliances in hostile environments, and provides material and relational resources that help communities of limited means sustain and constitute themselves as political subjects.



ELLIOTT WOODS

The blurring of the divide between public and private spheres is especially evident in the use of space as a basis for socialisation, communication and neighbourhood organisation by working classes, beginning with the intermittent perforation of households by communal compromises. The main character of Alberto Moravia's 1947 novel *La Romana* captures this condition laconically: 'In the building where I lived,' she recalls, 'the street was everywhere.' In poorer districts, not only the pavements and alleys but also staircases, backyards and rooftops were appropriated as lively sites of conversation, play and politicisation. Everyday encounters were the pillars of communal identity and a fundamental resource for subaltern autonomy, connecting the realms of production and reproduction, including factory, neighbourhood and domestic spaces. Co-founder of the Socialist Party of America Morris Hillquit describes in his memoirs the centrality of discussions in Lower Manhattan's tenement roofs to working-class radicalisation in the late 19th century.

Albeit privately owned, pubs and other leisure facilities had a similar role as collective places where working-class people could not only eat, drink and entertain themselves in a relaxed environment, but also exchange relevant information about the workplace and the neighbourhood, receive economic support and conspire to riot or strike. According to settlement leader Jane Addams, saloons were 'the centre of the liveliest political and social life' in Chicago's poorer districts. In Germany, Karl Kautsky saw them as the 'sole bulwark of the proletariat's political freedom ... the only place where the lower classes can meet freely and talk about their common affairs' - the police often closed pubs during revolts in turn-of-the-20th-century Berlin to hamper the coordination of rioters. From the 1970s on, occupied, self-managed social centres played a similar part in the education of new generations of activists and the provision of services and shared places for vulnerable communities across Europe.

The drive to establish autonomous spaces has also animated the reorganisation of conventional public space and the creation

of alternative outdoor venues and parks by grassroots and labour institutions. Recent research by Erik Jönsson, Don Mitchell and Johan Pries, for instance, has shown the early role of the Swedish Social Democratic Party in the promotion of 'people's parks' and communal spaces outside municipal control in industrial cities since the late 19th century. In Chicago, socialist and anarchist unions managed their own picnic groves and beer gardens on the city fringes - their festivals included socialist plays and tableaux vivants, commemorations of the Paris Commune, and experiments with dynamite. These initiatives suggest the centrality of convivial spaces in the attempts of the lower classes to build a world of their own, free from state and market influences.

Commoning emerges in these experiences as a collective endeavour that produces and resignifies space as a shared, expansive, decommodified resource to secure forms of material sustenance and autonomy. This regime differs dramatically from hegemonic, state-sponsored conceptions of the appropriate demarcation, content, and use regimes of public space. Consequently, public administrations have mobilised their relative monopoly in the production and regulation of publicness under capitalism to marginalise, neutralise or coopt these dynamics. Urban design, police arrangements, use ordinances, and the planning of city-wide public space and leisure facility networks have been privileged devices to implement this project. In fact, it could be argued that capitalist urbanisation has been engineered to 'decommonise' public space.

These strategies have intensified across the planet in recent decades. In Europe and North America, the governance of publicity has become a cornerstone of attempts to stabilise and control a fractured social fabric, with a renewed assault on autonomous conviviality. Zero-tolerance policies have become increasingly popular and now involve a plethora of mechanisms devised to purify 'prime' city areas. This approach gained visibility in the 1990s when municipalities adopted systematic police-based programmes to clear strategic places of 'undesirable' subjects, practices and

Streets and squares are places of work and sustenance for many people, supporting an informal economy of street vendors, rubbish collectors, barbers (opposite) and many more. These economies were heavily impacted by Covid-19 prevention policies; at a market in Salatiga, Indonesia, traders were allowed to work in April 2020 if they respected physical distancing (right)



GALIH YOGA WICKAKSONO / ALAMY

behaviours, which were often the primal substance of the public commons. Rudy Giuliani's New York City set a standard that would soon be followed by many other emerging global cities; in the US in particular, the 'quality of life' campaigns in both liberal and conservative municipalities targeted the quintessential figure of contemporary urban commoning: unhoused people. The schemes have gradually expanded and now include not only more restrictive forms of publicity and community policing, but also novel regulatory and design approaches, such as stringent, site-specific use ordinances, trespass laws, park exclusion statutes, off-limits orders, and various forms of fortress and military urbanism.

At the same time, public administrations collaborate with private actors, corporate sponsors, and groups of middle- and upper-class gentrifiers to promote sterile projects that recreate a sanitised public space commons and consumption-centred conviviality to attract high-income households, tourists and potential customers. The ongoing resignification of so-called open-streets programmes constitutes a further step in this process, a sophisticated capture of the desire for conviviality in (post)pandemic times. Initially devised to remove vehicles and provide space for children's play in populous working-class areas, and later for bikes in cities like Bogotá, the open-street approach has now become a vector to further commodify community life in central areas.

This dualisation of public space governance is frequent in Africa, Asia and Latin America, where megacities have sometimes become a laboratory to test and expand publicity control techniques. Already in the early 2000s, Neil Smith suggested that a 'global social cleansing' of public space was taking place with the diffusion of zero-tolerance schemes, and the process has intensified across the planet, from Lima to Lagos, from Cape Town to Mumbai, from Guangzhou to Quito. In Latin America, municipalities and business leaders have embraced the revanchist creed and hard-line policing methods in historic centres; Giuliani and his right-hand man at the New York Police Department, 'Supercop' Chief William Bratton, created their own private consulting firms and have been influential

in the design of public space policies in many countries including Mexico, Peru, Chile, Brazil and Argentina. In these contexts, the very formation of middle-class identities, ideologies of cosmopolitan citizenship and new class structures is premised, among other factors, on the reclamation and decommodification of urban public space and the displacement of working-class people.

Often even more fiercely than in the Global North, these approaches have criminalised migrant, racialised and Indigenous populations – that is, those who tend to make active, intensive use of public places – applying increasingly repressive mechanisms that sometimes involve removing entire ecologies of subaltern publicity. However, the protean quality of informality commons has shown an especially elusive, recalcitrant capacity in these geographies. Attempts to suppress them have been only partially successful. Sometimes they have in fact strengthened communal bonds and fuelled grassroots activism around access to public space, as shown in the resistance to displacement by street vendors and unhoused people in core areas of, for example, Cusco, Accra and Mexico City.

Supporting communal placemaking demands that architects, designers and planners adopt a more minimalist approach, embracing the pedagogy of 'commoners'. In order to nurture a genuine politics of communal publicity, commoners should be allowed to establish a new, expansive demarcation of collective space, reclaiming it as the centre of social and economic life, political dispute, and subjectivation: a platform for the emergence of heterogeneous, inclusive publics. This re-collectivised publicity cannot limit itself to celebrating street vitality and cultural difference – it must challenge the uneven distribution of public resources and the conflicts and inequalities endemic to capitalist urbanisation. If released and protected, the ever-changing territorialities of subaltern commoning will reshape their very boundaries, colonising part of the private realm. Publicity should therefore be reframed as a regime of radical, self-managed conviviality that bridges the state/private property divide. Only then will public space become the bedrock of a new commune.

