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Whose Streets? Exploring the Political Pertinence of Public Space for Feminist Resistance to Neoliberalism

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Abstract:

This essay traces the effects of neoliberalism as a distinct form of rationality across political institutions, social infrastructure and discursive spaces. Through examining the conscription of second-wave feminist discourses into the neoliberal project, the essay explores the importance of an agonistic feminist politics for contemporary democratic thinking. By drawing upon the work of key post-Marxist and anti-essentialist feminist thinkers, the essay engages critically with recent social movements that use public space as a site of political resistance. The essay explores the centrality of interdependency and plurality for feminist politics committed to resisting neoliberalism and to reinvigorating our political and social imaginaries.

Approaching feminist politics through a conceptualisation of the political connotations of space affords possibilities for resistance to the contemporary neoliberal order that has established hegemony over the manifold spheres of public and private life. Today, neoliberalism represents a malleable global order that extends far

beyond economics, where neoliberal hegemony now dominates our political and social imaginaries. Hegemony, as elaborated by Antonio Gramsci, signifies the contingent articulation of plural identities into a collective will that is capable of instantiating a particular social order.[151] Neoliberal hegemony has instituted a shift in our relationship with political and social life—previously governed by noneconomic values, these spheres have now become 'economised' in a way that renders them legible primarily through economic and market logics, inaugurating what Wendy Brown defines as a "neoliberal rationality."[152] Bolstered by discourses of individualism and responsibilisation, as well as material strategies of economisation and privatisation, neoliberalism dismantles public spaces of democracy, delegitimises the interdependency and collectivity associated with the people, and reprivatises discourses and material infrastructure that once occupied a place in public debate and institutions.

The material and ideological transition from state-organised capitalism to neoliberalism occurred coeval with the feminist movement of the 1970s. This period witnessed the conscription of feminist discourses to legitimate the establishment of neoliberal hegemony, resulting in a resignification of feminist ideals.[153] Nancy Fraser argues that the feminist movement's demand for the recognition of identity and difference signified a form of identity politics that overextended the critique of culture at

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[151] Jacob Torfing, "Hegemony," in *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Zizek* (Blackwell Publishers: Oxford, 1999), 103.

[152] Wendy Brown, "Undoing Democracy: Neoliberalism's Remaking of State and Subject," in *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Zone Books: Brooklyn, 2015), 21.

[153] Nancy Fraser, "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History," in *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London: Verso, 2013), 218.

the expense of an integrated critique of political economy, resulting in the subordination of socio-economic struggles to those of recognition.[154] Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler assert that by understanding neoliberalism as a "political rationality"—conceptualised not solely as a mode of economic management and corporate governance, but also as a "matrix of intelligibility" that supplants the political with corporate, technocratic and post-political rule—we can begin to traverse the economic and cultural divide strategically distinguished by neoliberalism[155] and undergirded by second-wave feminism's identity politics. As such, conceiving the co-constitution of cultural, political and economic injustice under neoliberalism is vital for both feminist thinking and democratic politics.

Understanding gender as socially constructed and as a production of social relations that institute hierarchies of power allows for the theorisation of feminism within the framework of radical democratic politics. Chantal Mouffe contends that the social agent exists as an ensemble of "subject positions" that do not correspond to any unifying essence; as such, attempts to unearth the essence of the category of "women" proves futile. Instead, Mouffe argues that it is necessary to ask why and for what ends is sexual difference made a pertinent distinction in social relations.[156] As such, Mouffe proffers that feminist politics can be understood as the pursuit of feminist goals within the context of wider demands aimed at transforming all social relations, discourses and practices that utilise the category of "women" to instantiate

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[154] Fraser, "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History," 219.

[155] Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, "A caveat about the "primacy of economy"," in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2013), 40-41.

[156] Chantal Mouffe, "Feminism, Citizenship, and Radical Democratic Politics," in *The Return of the Political* (Verso: London, 1993), 77-78.

subordination. Such a democratic, plural politics is radically more open to articulating the manifold struggles of oppression.[157]

Mouffe argues that properly political questions, rather than the technocratic politics valorised by neoliberalism or the consensus driven rationality of liberalism, always require that a choice is made between conflicting alternatives. In this regard, antagonism is central to democratic politics because it reveals the impossibility of absolute consensus and exposes the terrain on which politics takes place as a contestable one whose practices are never neutral.[158] In this light, it is crucial to examine the ways in which essentialist identities are reified by neoliberalism and harnessed to support neoliberal rationality through the separation of public and private spheres of life. A post-Marxist, non-essentialist feminist framework offers a means to conceptually denaturalise the public-private distinction. It also provides an avenue of resistance to neoliberalism's strategies of reprivatisation and depoliticisation by valorising public spaces of plurality that support non-essentialist identities and practices, while resisting the foreclosure of radical identity formations and necessary antagonisms by normative notions of community.

I. The division of public and private life

The distinction between public and private space has been long critiqued within feminist politics. Unpacking these divisions occupies a central role in feminist theorisations of gender equality and justice, given the incontrovertible gender hierarchies produced by the public-private dichotomy. The feminisation of private life found valency through the separation of production from social reproduction, where the relegation of unpaid social reproduction to

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[157] Mouffe, "Feminism, Citizenship, and Radical Democratic Politics," 87.

[158] Chantal Mouffe, "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Space," *Art and Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods* 1 no. 2 (Summer 2007), 2-3. http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html

the "private" sphere of the home situated the sexual division of labour within families beyond the scope of public discourse and justice.[159] As Seyla Benhabib notes, the power relations of what she terms the "intimate sphere" were kept off the public agenda through the positioning of private life as a space of values and of non-generalisable interests. Deemed natural and immutable, the intimate sphere was strategically maintained as pre-reflexive and thus rendered inaccessible to discursive analysis.[160] This act of rendering social reproduction discursively mute subordinated its role within the capitalist system. One of the tenets of capitalist ideology is the fallacy of the market's capacity to maintain itself free of human intervention. The neoliberal rationality that renders mute and invisible the vital and embodied activities of social reproduction thus maintains a double myth: that the market does not rely principally upon this work for its most basic sustenance and that "women", as a strategically essentialised sex, must be tasked to perform this unwaged labour within the private, depoliticised sphere of the home.

Benhabib posits that the feminist movement marked a moment in the democratisation of the public sphere by bringing issues to the fore that were once considered private and situated outside public political debate.[161] Second-wave feminism's demand for the end of state paternalism, alongside the class and race reifying effects of an unjust welfare system, was discursively co-opted by the neoliberal agenda, which provided a solution in the form of emancipation from all state support. These demands saw

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[159] Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition and Jürgen Habermas," in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics.* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 1992), 110.

[160] Benhabib, "Models of Public Space," 109.

[161] Benhabib, "Models of Public Space," 112.

disfigured fruition in the roll back of state provision for social reproductive labour through staggering welfare cuts, in what Fraser describes as a "perverse configuration in which emancipation joins with marketisation to undermine social protection". The result, she argues, has been a redefinition of emancipation in market terms.[162] Brown argues that gender subordination is both intensified and fundamentally altered by neoliberalism. Intensification occurs at the material level of privatisation and responsibilisation, whereby women are the group most affected by the dismantling or total elimination of public infrastructure and made disproportionately responsible for the continuation of these support systems through their invisible, unwaged labour; as such, it is evident that familialism functions as an integral, rather than incidental, feature of neoliberal privatisation.[163] Brown argues that neoliberal rationality configures all entities as capital and thus divests the unwaged and unrecognised work of social reproduction of a visual and discursive space within public consciousness. In this way, neoliberalism represents a fundamental alteration of gender subordination, whereby the gendered and gendering dominance and dispersal of neoliberal rationality is "illegible within its own terms."[164] As a result, Brown posits that neoliberalism reinvigorates essentialist identities through "a persistently gendered economic ontology and division of labor," whereby complex and tenacious gender inequality is attributed to sexual difference.[165]

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[162] Fraser, "Crisis of Care?," 33.

[163] Wendy Brown, "Revising Foucault: *Homo Politicus* and *Homo Oeconomicus,*" in *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Zone Books: Brooklyn, 2015), 105.

[164] Brown, "Revising Foucault," 106.

[165] Ibid., 107.

In this light, denaturalising the category of "women" is central to the demystification of the sexual division of labour and the public-private dichotomy on which neoliberal ideology relies for its legitimation. It also reveals the importance of de-essentialising identities for democratic politics. For a contemporary feminism committed to this aim, Mouffe argues that resisting essentialist identities is a prerequisite for understanding the variety of social relations in which the principles of liberty and equality must apply.[166] Brown argues that across Euro-Atlantic nations we have witnessed the surreptitious usurpation of a democratic vocabulary by an economic one, resulting in the depoliticisation of democracy and public discourse in favour of total economisation.[167] The meaning and practices associated with democracy that concern equality, freedom and sovereignty have shifted from a political to an economic register, resulting in a concerted thinning of public life and the eclipsing of citizenship as concerned with the public good.[168] Fraser notes how reprivatisation discourses attempt to defend the established boundaries of the "political", the "economic" and the "domestic" as separate spheres. Institutionally, this takes the form of neoliberal economic and social policies—deregulation of the market, dismantling of social welfare and infrastructure, the selling off of nationalised assets—while discursively, reprivatisation means depoliticisation.[169] Benhabib argues that the public sphere of democratic legitimacy

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[166] Mouffe, "Feminism, Citizenship, and Radical Democratic Politics," 76-77.

[167] Brown, "Undoing Democracy," 20-21.

[168] Ibid., 39-41.

[169] Nancy Fraser, "Struggle over Needs: Outline of a Socialist-Feminist Critical Theory of Late-Capitalist Political Culture," in *Fortunes of Feminism* (London: Verso, 2013), 68.

has contracted under the impact of corporatisation, the mass media and the growth in business-style political associations.[170] As such, she posits that feminism requires a critical theory of the public sphere, where a model of public space can be understood as the democratising process of "making" public: that is, making issues accessible to debate, reflection, action and political transformation and therefore open to discursive will formation. This critical model distinguishes "between the bureaucratic administration of needs and the collective democratic empowerment over them."[171] In this way, we can begin to separate the re-politicisation of public space from that of the state, understanding this move as a "politics of the public sphere"[172] in Joan B. Landes formulation, and as the possibility of emancipation from state paternalism in non-marketising terms that allows for "a principled new alliance with social protection," as offered by Fraser.[173]

II. A feminist politics of the public sphere

Contra Benhabib and Landes call for the feminisation of public space and discourse,[174] I would argue that a theorisation of the

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[170] Benhabib, "Models of Public Space," 113.

[171] Ibid., 114.

[172] Joan B. Landes, "The Public and the Private Sphere: A Feminist Reconsideration," in *Feminism, the Public and the Private* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1998), 156.

[173] Nancy Fraser, "Between Marketization and Social Protection: Resolving the Feminist Ambivalence," in *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London: Verso, 2013), 241.

[174] Landes, "The Public and the Private Sphere," 156 and Benhabib, "Models of Public Space," 114.

public sphere in non-gendered terms is necessary for a radical democratic politics undergirded by a non-essentialist feminism. A radically open public sphere accounts for the impossibility of democratic debate to be predetermined and requires that the demands of feminism are recognised as coimbricated within the larger social demands of our time. It also accepts what Mouffe has theorised as the presence of antagonism as a necessary component of democracy, providing legitimate space for dissenting voices and thus transforming antagonism into agonism.[175] Athanasiou and Butler discuss the need for contemporary social movements to forge solidarity by contesting the definitions and bounds of human ontology and thus allowing ideas of the human to undergo radical transformation.[176] This necessitates an expansion of affective alliance "beyond claims of similitude and community."[177] It also requires the existence of material infrastructure that gives support to the discursive demands of such movements, which today find global iteration in the embodied manifestation of collective congregation and the occupation of space. This requirement reveals the self-reflexive nature of alliance, wherein it is impossible to act without support and yet necessary to struggle for the supports needed to act.[178] Furthering the Arendtian concept of the "space of appearance"—that is, the space between people that emerges

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[175] Chantal Mouffe, "Politics and the Political," in *On the Political* (Routledge, Abingdon, 2005), 20.

[176] Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, "Conundrums of Solidarity," in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2013), 185.

[177] Butler and Athanasiou, "Conundrums of Solidarity," 187.

[178] Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street" (lecture, Venice, September 7, 2011).

through action and speech and which is simultaneously the prerequisite for politics as well as the site in which politics comes about—Butler includes the bodily dimensions of action, and the material elements that support this action, as fundamental to a contemporary understanding of this space.[179] The dissolution of public spaces and social infrastructure executed by neoliberalism thus represents an affront to the space of appearance, marked as it is by both a material and ideological dismantling of the structures that support political thought, alliance-building and social belonging. Thus, it is possible to understand the contesting of the public-private divide through open, democratic alliance as a form of collective resistance to the remaking of people and spaces by neoliberal rationality. This is a pertinent issue for a feminist politics that seeks to make public those discourses and practices that have been reprivatised by neoliberalism and that intensify gender subordination by bolstering familialism and rendering social reproduction invisible.

Butler writes that "bodies in their plurality lay claim to the public".[180] By asking what it means to occupy and move through space in ways that contest the distinction between public and private life, Butler allows us to reimagine the relationality and interdependency of people and spaces made discrete by neoliberal discourse. By moving from the privatised space of the home into such public spaces as the street or square—though these spaces may be privatised or privately owned—we move into a space of active and discursive visibility. Butler writes that the embodied manifestation of people in the street or square represents "the body politic," whose presence and visibility assert their refusal to be "the

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[179] Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street".

[180] Ibid

glaring absence that structures public life."[181] Such collective, public presence challenges the neoliberal hegemony of individualism and privatisation that is circumscribed by the logic of self-interest, economisation and responsibilisation. It manifests how the body exists politically only insofar as it assumes a social dimension, confronted by an Other who perceives us in ways we cannot know or dictate,[182] and thus marks our presence and visibility as relational and non-individualised. Butler notes that the "I" is not disestablished by this instance of collectivity, but rather its own situation is presented as connected to "a patterned social condition."[183]

Thus, physical presence and visibility can dissolve the boundaries of the public-private distinction and gesture toward the re-politicisation of invisibilised life, which has significant consequences for identities both structured by, and rendered illegible through, neoliberalism. Such identities include women, amongst other gender and sexual minorities, as well as racialised identities, and those bodies deemed dis-abled and unrecognisable by neoliberalism's deficient concepts of the human. The presence of bodies in their plurality represent, as Butler writes, "the persistence of the body against forces that seek to monopolize legitimacy."[184] Demystifying the discourses of individualism and

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[181] Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, "Space of appearance, politics of exposure," in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2013), 197.

[182] Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street".

[183] Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, "The Political Affects of Plural Performativity," in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2013), 180.

[184] Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street".

economisation affords the opportunity to parse the manifold effects of neoliberalism across diverse and seemingly discrete communities and people. It allows us to see how the forces of socially assigned dispossession, of material and existential proportions, are resisted through the relational and embodied forms of public presence. Thus, Butler argues, the body politic calls for the most fundamental requirement of democracy, demanding that "political and public institutions are bound to represent the people, and to do so in ways that establish equality as a presupposition of social and political existence."[185]

In this regard, the demands of today's diverse and far reaching movements that gather in spaces of public visibility—Tahrir Square and its many scions, the Chilean protests, the Sardines movement, the Women's March, the movement for reproductive rights underway in Argentina and ongoing in Ireland for communities who remain unprotected by new legislation—contest the boundary between public and private in ways that have profound meaning for feminist politics. By bringing the work of social reproduction into the streets and squares, and having this work shared by people indiscriminately, such movements generate a space of discursive and material presence for the infrastructure and individuals rendered invisible by neoliberalism. Whether it be through the longer-term occupations that require material encampments, with shelter, food and cleaning stations, or temporary mass demonstrations that mobilise people over several hours, such movements represent how bodies materially support, protect and care for each other through public solidarity, offering space for the reproduction of collective memory and the reimagination of alternative modes of thought that offer a counter to neoliberal hegemony.

Though such movements may be met with a diversity of retaliatory measures, some excessively violent and further dispossessing of lives, the structure of plural collectivity that gives

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[185] Butler and Athanasiou, "Space of appearance, politics of exposure," 196.

them shape, as individuals move into spaces of visibility through collectivity, marks a moment of radical re-politicisation. It signifies a form, as Benhabib has noted, of "making" public through action, where space can be conceptualised as existing *within* action, beyond the physical rootedness of a particular place, as well as beyond the symbolic boundaries demarcated by neoliberal rationality. Athanasiou notes how shifting from the idea of the space of appearance to that of "spacing appearance" provides a means to understand this action as "taking space" and "taking place."[186] Though the demands of such movements may be concrete in their call for judicial or legislative change, socio-economic reform, commitment to democratic values and so on, the absence of predetermination in how such movements can give shape to new hegemonic social relations and modes of thought sustains their radical openness. Where there has been global loss of both actual and symbolic public spaces of democracy and social infrastructure as a direct consequence of neoliberalism, spacing appearance through the action of collective will formation that remains radically open to pluralism and agonism offers opportunities for a new form of democratic citizenship that is bound by a conceptualisation of the individual as taking shape in and through collectivity and interdependency. It signifies, as Athanasiou notes, how the embodied agency that takes place in public congregation marks not a claim "merely to individual, individually owned, self-sufficient bodies, but rather to the relationality of these bodies."[187] It thus echoes Mouffe's call for a new approach to individuality that reinstates its social nature and embodies a non-individualistic conception of the individual, offering space to counter the individualism of liberal politics that

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[186] Ibid., 194.

[187] Ibid., 178.

denies the multiplicity of identities and subject positions that comprise each person.[188]

In light of the neoliberal economisation of all spheres of political and social life, it is vital that we understand the reimagination and regeneration of public spaces as a pertinent issue for democratic feminist politics today. The recent global reinvigoration of mass movements and protests is one such example of how public spaces can be reclaimed and renegotiated through collective embodiment. Such movements reveal how the values of interconnectedness, interdependency and plurality have not been lost wholesale to neoliberal rationality, but can in fact serve as a method to radically resist the effacement of individuals, communities and public spaces by neoliberal logic. Athanasiou writes that destabilising neoliberal hegemony requires "opening up conceptual, discursive, affective and political spaces for enlarging our economic and political imaginary."[189] Resisting the neoliberal myth that individualism, responsibilisation and the economisation of identities and everyday life garners gender equality and liberation is crucial for a feminist politics committed to the formation of egalitarian social relations, practices and institutions unbound by essentialist thinking. Such a politics necessitates the support of public spaces of democratic plurality to recenter discourses and practices that have been reprivatised under neoliberalism and requires that such spaces be reclaimed through a plural collectivity committed to egalitarianism across all social relations.

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[188] Chantal Mouffe, "Towards a Liberal Socialism," in *The Return of the Political* (Verso: London, 1993), 100.

[189] Butler and Athanasiou, "A caveat about the "primacy of economy"," 40.

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