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Debates

How public can public spaces be?

A short reply to Phil Hubbard's "Defending the indefensible? A response to Carina Listerborn's 'Prostitution as "urban radical chic": the silent acceptance of female exploitation'"

Carina Listerborn

I appreciated Phil Hubbard's response in *City* (Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 399–402) to my debate article in *City* (Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 237–245), as a just and fair comment from a knowledgeable researcher on prostitution in the city. Still, I want to make some further remarks to clarify my viewpoint that a lot of the contemporary urban research on public space is gender-blind and uncritical towards what is happening in the area of prostitution and trafficking in women. Indeed, the landscape of patriarchy is very complex, as Hubbard concludes his reply.

Hubbard claims that the commentators who bemoan the 'purification' of public space, of which the removal of street prostitution is part, do so because they are 'concerned about the fact that many urban populations and practices are currently being Othered, squeezed out by corporate capital and neo-liberal politics' (Hubbard, 2004, p. 400). Their purpose, it should be clear, is not to defend prostitution as such, but rather to defend public spaces. Furthermore, Hubbard argues that a displacement of prostitutes from the public realm can have a negative effect on prostituted women, as they would be removed from areas where a certain degree of social control is in place, and would be forced to work in areas where they become more vulnerable (Hubbard, 2004, p. 402). It seems easy to agree with these arguments, but I believe the debate needs to be further elaborated.

Hubbard's arguments are in fact based on two taken-for-granted assumptions, which are exactly the postulations which I want to contest. The first is that public spaces are getting less and less public, and the second, that prostitution will always exist and can never disappear from our society—hence the need to regulate rather than eradicate it. The disagreements between Hubbard and myself emanate from different basic political standpoints. I want to further develop my arguments here.

Public spaces may be more public than ever

In geographical discourses on public spaces, not the least in the Anglo-Saxon sphere, it is often claimed that public spaces are being 'purified', for example through safety work, in order to pave the way for a growing middle class to return to the city centres. Neo-liberal policies have created public spaces that increasingly exclude the Other, such as the homeless, prostitutes, vendors, skateboarders, etc. My first question is

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whether it is generally true that urban public spaces are becoming less inclusive. I share my public spaces in an ordinary European mid-sized town with people of all generations, gender, colours, classes—including street drinkers, skateboarders, homeless men sleeping outdoors, street musicians, suburb kids driving their mopeds too fast, smoking teenage girls, and even some complete lunatics. People sit on the benches playing with their kids, people stroll, shop, sell magazines and homemade items, people socialize; old ladies are chatting away and middle-aged persons rush to their offices. Is this not just a very ordinary, yet very typical, example of a rather open and inclusive public space that can be found across (continental) European towns and cities? In my experience of other European cities, the everyday use of urban public space as described here is *not* an unusual sight—it is, in fact, typical.

I want to claim that public spaces are not simply becoming more exclusive. In fact they are in many ways *more* inclusive today than they have ever been in modern urban history. There is no 'point zero' in urban history when public spaces were truly and essentially 'public', or 'open for all'. The use of urban public space has always been contested by different social groups with sometimes outright contradictory interests. To claim that the neo-liberal onslaught on our cities has rendered public space 'more exclusive' is a rather blunt conclusion that needs refinement and nuance.

Historians have shown that specifically two groups, women and workers, were severely controlled and under supervision in public spaces in the 19th century (Stansell, 1986; Walkowitz, 1992). For women the commercial places like department stores, and later shopping centres, became areas where they could move around safely (Bowlby, 1987; Nava, 1997). The idea of a historically open public space is contestable; ironically, it was in particular the commercial spaces that played a significant role for women's access to public spaces.

Both these points are relevant to the discussion on contemporary public spaces. First, it proves that the idea of a totally open free public space is erroneous. What would the 'point-zero' of public space be? How public is public? Can a context-free space exist, which is not influenced by the values in our society? Whose freedom should be employed and who should be freed from whom, and what? There is a prevalent risk to romanticizing public space. Second, even commercial spaces can be emancipatory to some people, for example the elderly and handicapped. For many people shopping malls or urban shopping areas are intriguing and appear as safe places. Many teenagers find their hangout in shopping malls. For Marxist critical geographers this is not an acceptable viewpoint, but I argue that capitalism, and commercial spaces—just as patriarchy—are very complex phenomena and not one-sided. When certain public spaces are too quickly being dismissed as Othering and exclusive, maybe some groups of the population are being ignored. Certainly more knowledge is needed as to how public spaces actually are being used in our contemporary societies.

What is so civic and democratic about exploitation and homelessness?

While aiming at defending the marginalized and excluded Hubbard, and others, manage at the same time to get some severe social problems and unjust situations on board; put briefly—why defend the indefensible? Is it the case that increasing neo-liberalism in the Western world has made us forget that societies do carry responsibility for their citizens, and that we as citizens and researchers can make a difference? Is homelessness and prostitution defensible in a civic and democratic society? And what is so inclusive about the public places where they are forced to work, hang around or stay overnight?

Street prostitution and human trafficking, that is the public selling of (mainly female and children's) bodies, is arguably the most

perverse form of neo-liberal capitalism. Relations of prostitution existed before the rise of capitalism as a mode of production of course, but they are now incorporated in and regulated through the most obscene forms of 'neo-liberalism unbound'. Contemporary neo-liberal spatial disorder is—literally—embodied in prostituted and trafficked women. To fight the neo-liberalization of public space is to fight the ongoing and increasing public commodification of the body—from pornified bodily images on billboards to the prostituted bodies of teenage girls imported from developing nations. As a consequence, the interpretation of the removal of prostitution from public space as a conspirational move by capitalists and city boosters interested in the development of inner-city tourism, regeneration and real estate investment, thereby excluding large groups of society, is one-sided. To use Hubbard's example of Times Square: how many *women* rather than men, how many *flâneuses* rather than *flâneurs*, would have felt at ease strolling around Times Square in the days of sex shops and shows, compared with today's Times Square? Times Square is today being *recommodified* to serve the contemporary interests of corporate capital. That is deeply problematic, but to argue that Times Square before its Disneyfication was less commodified, less exclusionary, more public or more inclusionary, is also problematic. Yesterday's Times Square may have been just as commodified and exclusionary as it is today, albeit in different ways and for different groups. The only ones who were not excluded in either version of Times Square were probably able white men.

Furthermore, Hubbard claims that fighting prostitution in one area usually moves it to another area, where women will be more vulnerable (Hubbard, 2004, p. 401). I do not disagree with this, but society's responsibility does not end here. Of course, if prostitution is taken off the street it will flourish elsewhere, e.g. on the internet, but this is going on as much in countries where street prostitution is allowed, as in countries where it is not accepted, because capitalism will always search for new markets. Therefore, many different measures must be taken to fight exploitation. It is not only a matter of moving the scene of prostitution, but of doing something about the *laissez-faire* attitude amongst researchers and politicians. Prostitutes are not safe in red-light districts either. Prostitution is by definition a risky business because it is based on an unequal power situation. Sex work is not an urban event 'given by nature'. It is a political decision to accept it or not. Men *can* stop buying sex and regarding women's bodies as accessible properties, but that requires a gender-equal approach.

I am the first one to agree that crime prevention, zero tolerance and safety work can have a negative effect on urban life (Listerborn, 2002), but we cannot simply group all the problems and different social groups together as a common phenomenon. Some situations and incidents are a part of a diverse society, and some are not. Borders for acceptable behaviours are being crossed and set up constantly, for better and for worse. Murders are not okay. Most people object to child abuse. We can discuss what we consider to be acceptable or not, but let us not take things for granted or be carried away by romanticized versions of the Other in public spaces or elsewhere.

The 'bottom line' is that the city is still being analysed from a white male perspective. I have tried to challenge some common pre-assumptions here and hope that a thought-provoking discussion can follow.

Acknowledgement

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Carina Listerborn has her PhD in Urban Planning and Design and is a researcher at the Department of Social and Economic Geography, Lund University, Sweden. E-mail: carina.listerborn@keg.lu.se

How to live when the war comes home

Paul Chatterton

Being a 'Loiner' (someone from the city of Leeds) I have had first-hand experience of the neighbourhoods which the world's attention turned to briefly in early July 2005. In my school days I lived in Beeston, home to two of the London suicide bombers, in a large Victorian end terrace near Cross Flats Park. I often visited South Leeds fisheries for fish supper on a Thursday, long before Mahmood Khan, the Edgware Road suicide bomber, worked there. I had a paper round, delivering the *Yorkshire Evening Post* at the local newspaper shop, run by an Asian family and worked and socialized with many young friends from Asian families. My days after school were filled with hanging out with the kids of the area, Asian and white. We would cruise the streets in my Mini Metro, playing a mixture of bangra and techno after the summer of love in 1990.

I now live in Hyde Park, the location of Alexandra Grove and the house which was suspected to have been the infamous bomb-making factory. That hot Tuesday, 12 July, I sat in my bedroom-cum-study redrafting a piece of writing for a journal, mildly distracted by the incessant buzz of police helicopters nearby. Life in inner-city Leeds had made me immune, almost, to such noises. The link was not made until later that day when I wandered down to make a cup of tea and turned on the national news to hear that not five minutes away 600 people had been evacuated from their homes following the discovery of a suspicious substance during a police raid on a house. The house on Alexandra Grove, near the fruit and veg shop where I often pick up groceries, rented by Magdi al-Nashar, the Leeds University chemistry student, and through him to one of the London suicide bombers, was under 24-hour police surveillance for several weeks, ominously obscured with black plastic hanging from scaffold.

I am not writing this to shed some light on the links between communities like Hyde Park or Beeston and the atrocious acts of the bombers. Let's face it: they could have come from dozens of other deprived inner-city areas in the UK with high concentrations of people with south Asian origins. It is impossible to understand the motivations of one, or in this case four, individuals from Leeds who chose to take their, and others', lives. We use labels like 'Islam' and 'fundamentalism' but we will never be certain. The reasons were complex and manifold, and different in each case. It's likely to include push and pull, or internal and external factors—that is to say, immediate concerns of poverty, police harassment and marginalization in deprived communities, along with wider connections to value clashes between Islamism and Christianity, and responses to past and ongoing war and colonialism across the Middle East.

So, this piece is not about trying to understand the motives of the bombers. We may never be able to understand what were the particular quantities of the different motivations—grudge-based, personal, familial, political, religious etc. But we can make some attempt to understand ourselves and where we are positioned. Hence, this is a series of reflections about our role in perpetuating a particular moral way of life in the UK. When discussing our lives many things are usually left unsaid. I want to discuss them here. It is about (re)learning to live when the war comes home.

Relearning history and a sense of place

First, it is worth saying that the war never really went away. It has always been here. It takes different forms in different times and places. A critical rereading of history in a local area normally reveals a very different story to that which we receive. When we look back over the last 250 years of industrial capitalism, historical examples abound of people who were killed and were prepared to kill to protect their ways of life, or at least turn to violence when their backs were up against the wall. In Leeds, for example, in 1664 the decapitated heads of two men charged with plotting a republican uprising were skewered on spikes in the middle of Briggate, now the main shopping street and home to the premier retail outlet Harvey Nichols. In 1734 several people were shot by soldiers on this same street after rioting broke out at the introduction of road tolls. Between 1811 and 1813, over 40 workers were killed in the Luddite uprisings in Yorkshire where wool croppers attacked the new steam-powered factories and their owners, while another 24 were hanged and scores deported to Australia.

The 1960s and 1970s was a time full of such violence across the world against various enemies such as the state, the capitalist economy and industrial civilization itself. The Angry Brigade, Britain's first urban guerrilla group, undertook a series of bombings against embassies, politicians and banks and claimed in one of their communiqués that 'we are ready to give our lives for our liberation'. These were strong words. Although nobody was killed, four people were eventually sentenced for 'conspiring to cause explosives'.

Other similar groups in Europe and the USA included the 2nd June Movement, the Weather Underground, the Symbionese Liberation Army, Bader Meinhoff and the Red Army Fraction. Between 8 and 11 October 1969 the Weathermen undertook their 'Days of rage', when scores of people rioted through the streets of Chicago, burning and looting, ending in brutal repression by the police. John Ross, in his recent book *Murdered by Capitalism* (2004), highlights how bombing is a quintessentially American pursuit. In the development of American society, ever since the Haymarket bombings during the struggle for the eight-hour day in Chicago, bombing has become a commonplace way for people to fight back at an uncaring system. The same rang true in Britain. Bombings have been a long part of British radical and labour history. They are part of a

long tradition of using violence to fight back at the violence of the state, and the excesses of industrial capitalism. Dynamite, mainly due to its cheapness and availability, became the great leveller for the working classes.

Second, what we can see is that there are always many people angry enough at the current way society is organized, and the violence which the state is prepared to commit, to turn to violence themselves. And many of them are not Muslim nor Arab, nor African nor Asian, nor identifiable as different—brown, black, swarthy. They were and are, more worrying for governments, normal-looking white people. They are the enemy within—ordinary people faced with few choices but violence in the name of self-preservation. It normally takes longer to identify such people. Their radicalism undermines the liberal consensus that peace can be obtained as long as the number of outsiders or foreigners in a country can be minimized.

Third, the terrible problem is that in acts of bombing which are random and aim to cause maximum impact, innocent people, or at least those further away from political and monetary power, die, and the guilty, or those closer in positions of power, usually live. What separates the recent bombings in London with those of the Angry Brigade in the 1970s for example, is that the latter consciously sided with the oppressed in the UK and abroad and planted bombs which targeted the institutions of British power, while the former was prepared to kill people randomly to create a mass event. In the bombing campaign of the Weather Underground in the USA in the 1970s, they promised 'responsible terrorism' and 'principled violence', killing no one but themselves accidentally while making bombs. The stakes have risen and now targeted killing is not enough. Mass random killings such as those in New York, London and Madrid may be an attempt to say that there is no such thing as non-complicity in the global web of violence, especially if your government chooses to support war in the Middle East.

Fourth, we assume that peace is the norm, when really our state of peace rests on violence and the use of force elsewhere—Bolivian tin mines, Indonesian sweat shops, structural adjustment policies across the developing world, oil and gas pipelines which are built through communities to name a few. This works on a global and local level—Britain is more peaceful than Sudan, while the suburbs of north Leeds are indeed more peaceful than the inner-city areas south of the city like Beeston.

Finally, we are surrounded by violence in our daily lives, but have largely become blind to it. A simple list in one day would include: passing dozens of homeless people, *Big Issue* sellers and buskers without comment; black and Asian youth being 'stopped and searched' by the police; the deaths of over 1000 people in police custody between 1969 and 1999; the 300 people who die at work every year in the UK due to corporate negligence; asylum seekers being deported or living in squalid housing; the absence of under 16-year-olds in city centres due to curfew orders; and isolated and impoverished people living on decaying housing estates. The latest example is an absence of mass civic uproar at the shameful execution of the Brazilian student Jean Charles de Menezes by the London Metropolitan Police due to a case of mistaken identity the day after the attempted bombings of 21 July.

Violence also happens slowly in our cities so we don't notice it. A road may cut through a wildlife area, council housing is cleared for new loft apartments, rents increase pushing small traders out of city centres. Day to day, this violence cannot be heard, smelt or seen. Only after decades do we realize what violence we have been subjected to, and continue to be so. We may ask ourselves, why did that happen? How could we have let that happen? Why do we not speak out or legislate against any of this, at least enough to bring about real change? But cause and effect have been broken by the passage of time and the complexity which holds together modern-day society.

So how do we understand violent acts in our society? The histories of our cities have always been punctured with violence—both from those struggling against the state, and subsequent reactions from the state to quell dissent. We have to deal, then, with many different types: ongoing, or everyday, violence which is state-sanctioned and flows daily out of the very nature of our social and economic system; non-state-sanctioned violence undertaken by individuals or groups but which is targeted at specific parts of the system through attacks on property, institutions, politicians and elites; and finally the more recent random violence which targets indiscriminately to maximize effect, panic and shock value, highlighting along the way that there can be no innocents. None of these kinds of violence stem from irrational thinking. They variably stem from frustration, marginalization, desperation or a sense that one is morally right or superior. I do not want to condone violence, and so it is worth noting some differences here: state-sponsored violence is largely imposed by a minority on a majority and hence has little legitimacy, while 'targeted' violence by disrupting the system and minimizing the loss of innocent life may have more legitimacy than 'random' violence which aims to shock and panic with little regard for human life. In all cases, we need a much clearer understanding of what we mean by legitimacy, complicity and innocence.

Towards a self-managed, peaceful society

So where does this leave us? At times we seem trapped between religious fundamentalists, on the one hand, and capitalist governments, corporate control and repressive legislation, on the other. This duality expresses the 'with us or against us' approach. But I am on the side of neither. The majority of people in the world suffer at the hands of both. And at times they have risen up against both. So how can peace flourish?

Building a peaceful society means several things. First, it means challenging many sources of violence and acknowledging the violence which our society is built upon. Some of them are known to us through the mainstream media—that of religious and political extremists (of many different hues). Others are much less known to us—the terror, killings and deportations which our very economy and global empire needed for its take-off, the violence of industrial capitalism and neoliberal economic policies that continue to kill and deprive in the name of profit and consumer comforts. Almost every act of consumption has in some way become an act of violence against someone or something—through environmental destruction, use of scare resources, worker exploitation and transport pollution.

Second, it also means regarding wars, violence stemming from economic policies and terrorism as moral equivalents and being prepared to stand up against all of them. The sorrow of the politicians towards the London dead seems hollow in the face of their complicity in continued deaths across the world, but most recently in Iraq. George Monbiot recently discussed in *The Guardian* newspaper (9 August) the need for an internationalist morality which combated a dangerous patriotism bordering on racism in the UK, and valued humans equally regardless of which country they live in.

Third, we have to learn to act for ourselves, collectively. We do not need people who will kill us indiscriminately to highlight what we need to do. We should have been able to understand this for ourselves. But we haven't. We have to unravel the chains of complicity which connect us to atrocities. And act upon them. Derrick Jensen, in his book *A Language Older than Words* (2000, p. 201), suggests: 'we don't stop these atrocities, because we don't talk about them. We don't talk about them, because we don't think about them. We don't think about them, because they're too horrific to comprehend'. We all need to take responsibility here—by not relying on easy and reassuring messages from the government and

corporate media, and for making more effort to connect with those around us.

We also need to do more to highlight our non-complicity in global systems of violence. This would include everyday acts like changing our consumer habits, to more connected attempts at civil disobedience which involve challenging arms traders and war makers, resisting global institutions such as the World Bank, corporate profiteers or companies who resource-strip developing countries. The list is unfortunately quite long.

A week after the bombings there were peace marches in both Beeston and Hyde Park. In Hyde Park, 400 people gathered and walked the local area chanting 'peace and unity in our community'. The crowd was as diverse as hoped for and the chant was the invention of the local school children rather than the dogma of the local socialist group eager to use the event as a recruitment drive. A number of speeches at the end, one from a central local figure in the 'Mothers Against Violence' campaign, stressed the need for peace and understanding rather than division. Time will tell but the streets of Hyde Park remain quiet, partly due to the absence of the 10,000 strong body of students who live there during the university term. But this community, like many others, is competent enough to heal its own wounds; to manage itself through the resources of its people, rather than through draconian government anti-terror legislation.

There are no good and bad bombs. Most veterans from militant groups look back with anguish and regret at their violent pasts. Perhaps targeted violence stemming from desperation is understandable. But it is not justifiable—drawing lines around the innocent and the guilty is morally difficult. However, unconditionally advocating non-violence is as foolish as trying to defeat the state and its corporate masters through violence. In some situations, violence (including that to property) is a useful last resort to stopping greater violences around us. Groups across the world draw a line in the sand to protect themselves from the excesses of neoliberalism and colonialism. Otherwise they are likely to be steamrollered by current political and economic policies. The Brazilian Landless Peasants Movement, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Mexico, the Unemployed Workers Movement in Argentina, the Soweto Anti-Privatisation Forum and the Free Papua Movement spring to mind to name but a few. In the face of ecocide and genocide how can we not occasionally turn to violent outbursts to stop conditions from at least worsening. I cannot embrace non-violence in the face of hypocrisy, lying and murdering from those who claim to represent our best interests in government and commerce.

However, in the long term a more realistic and sustainable approach is well-connected non-compliance in the structures that perpetuate the violence. The lessons of Northern Ireland tell us that dialogue and negotiation can be a solution to terrorism. There is much work to be done before we can connect and enter into dialogue with each other as equals about our complicity without distorting interference from the corporate media and the state. But this is where the hope lies—with the power of ordinary people in their communities to self-organize in their desire for greater awareness and peace, not in the lies and acts of violence of religious fundamentalists, big business, the state and corporate media.

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Paul Chatterton lectures at the School of Geography, University of Leeds, UK. He is an active campaigner in the city and member of the Common Place, Leeds' autonomous social centre (see www.thecommonplace.org.uk). E-mail: p.chatterton@leeds.ac.uk