

SOCIO-POLITICAL PHENOMENA AND THE RENNAISSANCE OF THE PUBLIC SPACE IN THE CITY: THE CASE OF CARACAS, 2002-2003

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Abstract

The Latin American City is today a melting pot of contrasting urban conditions, social inequality, political tension and financial de-regulation due to globalization factors. In recent history, the city of Caracas has been urban-shaped by much of these factors, including modernist-style revival in the 60s, massive implementation of road infrastructure due to the booming economy in the 70s; and explosion of informal settlements in and around the city until today. As a result, the city lost the traditional (European) public space in the form of squares and pedestrian-oriented streets, shaping itself around the use of the automobile. Additionally, recent changes in the political structure of the city, have delimited a 6 million inhabitants Metropolitan area, counting 4 Metropolitan Districts encompassing two different State jurisdictions, ruled by five Mayors, with 5 different Police forces and which contains the seat of the Central National Venezuelan Government. In others words a truly ungovernable city. However most recently, in a city where public space had been reduced to enclosed areas reachable by car, where the concept of ‘street’ had given way to the highway; and where the remaining street space has been invaded by the growing presence of the informal economy; an amazing phenomenon created by a political crisis has created an unprecedented way to re-occupy the city and validate its space as ‘public’, in the form of city-wide massive public demonstrations; which have transformed the highways in *impromptu* pedestrian boulevards, at the obvious absence of any other relevant-size public arena in the city.

“The only adequate conceptual framework for understanding the city is one which encompasses and build upon both the sociological and the geographical imaginations. We must relate social behaviour to the way in which the city assumes certain geography, a certain spatial form. We must recognize that once a particular spatial form is created it tends to institutionalize and, in some respects, to determine the future development of social process. We need, above all, to formulate concepts which will allow us to harmonize and integrate strategies to deal with the intricacies of social process and the elements of spatial forms...”

David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (1)

The Latin American City is today a melting pot of contrasting urban conditions, social inequality, political tension and financial de-regulation due to globalization factors. Throughout its recent history of the last 50 years, the city of Caracas has been shaped in its urbanity by much of these factors, including the Modernist-style revival in the 50s and 60s, the massive implementation of communication & roads infrastructure due to the booming economy in the 70s; and the explosion of informal settlements in and around the city throughout this period and continuing as of today. As a result of this, the city lost the traditional (European) public space in the form of squares and pedestrian-oriented streets, shaping itself around the use of the automobile. As it has occurred with other Latin American Metropolises, the resulting urban tissue is a kaleidoscope of different city typologies, where the only common denominator present is a network of highways, which further subdivides the city.

The City as Theater of Socio-political expression

Agora: a???? ? (Greek) from ageiro (to gather, probably akin to)

1. *any assembly, especially of the people*
2. *the place of assembly a. for public debating, b. for elections, c. for trials, d. for buying and selling, e. for all kinds of business*
3. *market place, street*

Cities have since ancient times developed spatially around the inclusion of the staging for gathering and expression of people. Traditionally, the ancient concept of the Greek Agora - the space of political, commercial, administrative and social activity in the city – has been assimilated historically as the portion of *Cityscape* (Soja; 2000) (2) that cities have until today devoted to public expression, gathering and demonstration. The City Square, the locus *per excellence* of the public space in the city, has evolved into such and other spatial forms including its own version of the *Agora* in each particular city. Whether it is a *Place Bastille* in Paris or a *Trafalgar Square* in London, a *Piazza del Popolo* in Rome or the *Mall* in Washington, the socio-political expression has occupied an important role in the use of the cityspace. In the case of Caracas, progressive disappearance of the traditional public space has virtually eliminated the survival of this type of relevant-size public arena in the city, to stage mass visibility as in other urban centers. The massive privatization of the cityspace in terms of proliferation of enclosed Shopping Malls, the ubiquitous concerns for individual safety added to urban patterns based on the use of the automobile, have accelerated the process of ‘splintering’ (Graham, Marvin; 2001) (3) in the urban structure and the creation of the so-called ‘analogous city’ (Boddy; 1992) (4), co-existing with the remaining street space. This - in the case of Caracas - “[has] *come to symbolize public life, with all its human contact, conflict, and tolerance*” (Boddy; 1992) (5) in terms of serving as ‘squatted’ space for the purpose of the growing informal sub-economy, in the form of street vendors populating the sidewalks of the city core.

Caracas: Urban and political kaleidoscope

“The dimensions and complexity of metropolitan regions and its unstable relations with global networks requires more than ever of mechanism of regulation and control, which can only be

exercised by means of active form of metropolitan governments and using new planning tools”
Manuel Castells (6)

Parallel to the splintering process that shaped Caracas urbanism, the city grew under anarchic and arbitrary patterns not corresponding to a homogeneous city territory. Typical city growing patterns where center and periphery play a budding role when defining the city region occurred, however at the absence of a geo-political order. Thus, recent changes in the way the city is structured from the geographical and political point of view, have delimited a 6 million Metropolitan area - with the name of *Gran Caracas* (Greater Caracas) (7) - counting 5 Metropolitan Districts, partially encompassing two different State jurisdictions, ruled by six Mayors, with 5 different Police forces; and simultaneously containing the seat of the Central National Venezuelan Government. In others words, what we see is a truly ungovernable city. Different actors impose their mandate on the use of the city space, using it as instrument to create an urban battlefield, where ideological difference takes place in the already fragmented city territory. However: “*Even if a powerful trend towards the fragmentation of the city and the individualization of social relations does exist; people from all social levels, ethnic groups and cultures do create a sense of community, establishing systems of interaction and recreating the urban society from its base*” (Castells, 2001) (8). In this manner, such diverse political mandate over city territories catalyzes urban mobilization by means of exercising *Biopower* (Negri, Hardt; 2000) (9) over movement of masses, creating a momentum in the functioning of the city and its role as the stage of socio-political expression.

Mental perception of the city and the use of the Cityspace

In *The Image of the City* (10), Kevin Lynch described the creation of ‘mental maps’ based on perception of the Cityscape by its inhabitants. Similarly, according to Zigmunt Bauman (11) the social and demographic debate of place, goes beyond the idea of a container, becoming more of an *iconic* notion. This makes the idea of place, a more ephemeral (rather than physical) concept, so when looking at mechanisms conveying the idea of city perception, one must look at a complex referential system, tied to notions of *Heimat* and *Verhältnis* (12). The idea of locality is present, but not fixed. It is rather a result of a familiar references’ saturated web, territorial understanding and social relationships (both inter-personal and between person-objects); along with both behavioural and interpretation patterns. All of these come from our familiar & environmental backgrounds, leading to specific lifestyles and determining the perception of our immediate surroundings, beyond consciousness. In other words, they determine “how we see the world”. This ‘how we see the world’ is embedded in our every day perception of the city, in our daily lives, patterns of movement and use of cityspace. This occurs to an extent that ‘reduces’ the perception of the city to a mental cartography, shrinking the urban map to a simpler scheme, out of which we can extract our daily city experience. In the case of Caracas the highways have become both an iconic element and a physical presence in the urban landscape, which – due to their role on the patterns of many city users – comes to represent an important perception of city space in the mind of its inhabitants. At the obvious absence of any other relevant-size public arena in the city to stage mass visibility, the highways are perceived as a large and visible portion of cityspace to be occupied and to stage the ‘the walk of the masses’. Thus, infrastructure intended for other uses becomes a sort of post-modern variation of the agora, a new agora of the *postmetropolis* (Soja, 2000) (13).

Socio-political crisis and the *impromptu* pseudo-public space

During the year 2002, the city of Caracas had reached a momentum in the midst of socio-political crisis, which led to a chain-reaction phenomenon of re-occupying the city with political purposes, which for the purposes of Urban Sociology validated its space again as 'public'. In October of 2002, a large-size square in the Eastern part of the city was squatted to host a political rally that has lasted until today. The square, an object of urban *aménagement* designed in the 40s as part of a Garden City-inspired extension of the city; with a French touch and a pseudo-remembrance of *Place Concorde* in Paris (its most visible element being a 40m-high Obelisk); was suddenly identified with notions of city expression, freedom and public manifestation. *Le Droit à la ville* of Henri Lefevre (14) was exercised, with the support of local authorities and the Mayor of the Municipal District where this particular Square is located. In the urban imaginary, the real name of the Square – *Plaza Francia* – already heavily tied-up to the very-well known French postulates; was directly translated in the mind of the people that gathered there and changed to '*Plaza Libertad*' (Freedom Square), which is how it is now called by large segments of the local population. Thus, a square that was for long mostly ignored by the city population and that had remained largely unused, regained a proper use in the traditional and historical sense (15). This particular case of public space renaissance in the urban landscape, contrasted with the next occurrence in the process of re-occupation of the city with the background of socio-political crisis: Starting in the last quarter of the year 2002 and with remarkable intensity during the last month of this year, entire Highways in the city became the scenario for the 'urban re-occupation', when they were closed and flocked by city-wide massive public demonstrations; transforming them in *impromptu* pedestrian boulevards for specific periods of time. Contrary to what occurs in other countries, where road infrastructure falls under National or Federal Government jurisdiction, the existence of a 'Metropolitan Mayor' for the Greater Caracas Area – a figure whose role is not yet clearly defined in terms of city government – acts as the authority over the use of the Highway Network in the city; and also as chief of the Metropolitan Police - the largest Police Force in the city region. His political alignment against the Central Venezuelan Government and his alliance with other City Mayors, along with a fuel crisis in the midst of a general country-wide strike, plus the subsequent reduction of motor traffic volume; permitted the closing of such vital infrastructure for movement in the city for the purpose of protesting, with the collaboration of the above-mentioned Police Force. A phenomenon that continues until today, this type of 'pseudo-renaissance of public space' - regardless of the factors that cause it – truly represents a remarkable and spontaneous way for the city to re-claim its space, improvising an attempt to recreate the traditional urban agora, using whatever means possible. Far from qualifying it as 'authentic' public space, I would qualify it as 'post-metropolitan' public space induced by socio-political phenomena. **This type of pseudo-public space is forced (squatting infrastructure not destined for it); unpredictable (called for from one day to the next), anarchic (violating the predestined use of the space), non-designed (occurring in a spontaneous manner); non-adequate (as it has not been planned for it), as well as ephemeral (exercised in a temporary manner and not remaining permanently in time).** The functioning of today's Post-metropolis is dictated by same type of forces, especially in what refers to the Latin American City. As Edward W Soja announces: "*Constitutional arguments and property rights laws severely constrained any ambitious extension of [these] principles of spatial and territorial responsibility, but there may be some*

room for their tactical revival in connection with reinvigorated movements for greater regional democracy and spatial justice” (Soja; 2000) (16).

Deleuzean Public Space?

“The key systemic property of a city is nodality rather than centrality...Since network cities easily exercise control at a distance, the influence of a town has little to do with propinquity and even less with formal command over territory. The spatial features of the Network System are largely invisible on a conventional map...”

Manuel de Landa (17)

Following parameters of non-linear thinking to interpret urban phenomena, we can detect the presence of *attractors* in the occurrence of the *Spontaneous Pseudo-public Space* as I have previously described it. Both the catharsis created by means of socio-political crisis, as well as the acting of the Media as a catalyst; induced the appearance of this particular phenomenon in the Cityscape of Caracas. By looking at the spontaneous and anarchic nature of the process, the existence of a Rhyzome organizational structures can also be detected, showing new and unprecedented ways to qualify the nature of the cityspace (18). The city, now seen as a living and changing organism, hosts invisible networks and forces that shape the use of its space, the production of the built and non-built environment and the spatial relation between them. These relationships are highly mediated, and so the newly created spatial relation induced by apparent disorganization and anarchy gives a new quality to the city as a whole. In Latin American Cities, these processes have already influenced the development of the urban fabric in term of informal settlements, and so they have now also contributed to qualify a way of utilizing the cityspace ‘sideways’, violating traditional rules. The *Spontaneous Pseudo-public Space* is a result of extreme de-regularization and the catharsis of a social system.

If the streets and other spaces of the city have always been the *lieu* of socio-political expression, in this case the transformation of the use of such spaces dictates a different way to look at the occupation of the city to call for mass visibility. “*Entwined with [the] refocusing of critical studies of cities and regions and the concurrent spatial turn so integral to it has been the onset of something even more significant, the emergence of an active and situated practice of a cultural politics that is consciously driven by increasingly spatialized notions of social justice, participatory democracy, and citizenship rights and responsibilities. The impact of these spatially conscious practices has not been very great as yet, but there are sufficient indications to suggest that they are likely to play a major role in shaping the postmetropolitan future*” (Soja; 2000) (19).

NOTES:

- (1) HARVEY, David: *Social Justice and the City*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973. (Taken from SOJA, Edward W: *Post-metropolis: Critical study of cities and regions*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. Part 1: “Remapping the Geohistory of Cityscape”, ‘Metropolis in crisis’, p 106).
- (2) Edward W. Soja, an author on critical urban planning and theory, establishes the term *cityscape* as “a set of materialized ‘spatial practices’ that work together to produce and reproduce the concrete forms and specific patternings of urbanism as a way of life” (*Post-*

- metropolis: Critical study of cities and regions*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. Part 1: "Remapping the Geohistory of Cityscape". Introduction, p 7).
- (3) 'Splintering Urbanism', a term announced by Steve Graham and Simon Marvin, denotes the phenomena of de-regularization, privatisation and selective discrimination of cityspace occurring in many cities today: "*Practice of splintering urbanism are starting to emerge in virtually all cities across the globe, whether in the developed, newly industrialising or post-communist worlds, as local histories, cultures and modernities are enrolled into internationalising capitalist political economies in various ways. Such practices, moreover, are closely related to the development and reconfiguration of infrastructure networks between cities* " (GRAHAM Steve and MARVIN Simon: *Splintering Urbanism*. New York/London: Routledge, 2001. p 35).
 - (4) BODDY, Trevor: *Underground and Overground: Building the Analogous City* (in SORKIN, Michael Ed. *Variation of a Theme Park: The new American City and the end of the Public Space*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1992) By using the term 'analogous', Boddy describes the appearance of a parallel cityspace ruled by privatization and the separation of pedestrian movement in selected spaces of the city.
 - (5) *Ibid.* p 123 (My brackets).
 - (6) CASTELLS, Manuel: *La ciudad cambiante en la era de la información*, Cap. 9 'La cultura de las ciudades en la era de la información: La reconstrucción de la ciudad (III): El gobierno metropolitano y la evolución de la planificación'; p 475 (in SUSSER, Ida Ed. *La Sociología urbana de Manuel Castells*. Madrid: Alianza, 2001) (My translation) Original in English: SUSSER, Ida, Ed. *The Castells Reader on Cities and Social Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.
 - (7) Unofficial estimates as of 2001.
 - (8) *Ibid.* 'La reconstrucción de la ciudad (III): La ciudad y las masas'; p 473. (My translation)
 - (9) 'Biopower' is the term used by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in their work *Empire* to explain a mode of control over masses by means of media, technology and consumption (NEGRI, Antonio and HARDT, Michael: *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000).
 - (10) LYNCH, Kevin: *The image of the City*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960.
 - (11) BAUMAN, Zigmunt: *Globalisation*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998.
 - (12) *Heimat* (German): 'Home'. *Verhältnis* is a German term usually used in Sociology to describe 'social relations between objects and people'.
 - (13) 'Postmetropolis' (Edward W. Soja): "*I have chosen the term 'Postmetropolis' as a working title for what might otherwise be called the new urbanism, had not this term taken up by architects and designers for other and narrower purposes*" (SOJA, Edward W: *Post-metropolis: Critical study of cities and regions*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. Preface, p xiii).
 - (14) LEFEVRE, Henri: *Le droit à la ville*. Paris: Anthropos, 1968.
 - (15) The square, with the original name of *Plaza del Obelisco* (Obelisk Square) was first opened on Aug. 11, 1945 in the new urbanized grounds of Altamira, east of Caracas, featuring a 'higher than the Cathedral' obelisk as its main visual feature. In 1967 its name was changed from *Plaza de Altamira* to *Plaza Francia*. After initial splendour, the square fell into decay until 1989, when it is renovated simultaneously with the opening of a new Subway Station on its grounds. Most recently along with its renaissance as a 'Hyde Park corner' in Caracas, it gained notorious reputation due to the shootings that occurred there on Dec. 6, 2002.
 - (16) SOJA, Edward W: *Post-metropolis: Critical study of cities and regions*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. 'Postscript' p. 409 (My brackets).

- (17) DE LANDA, Manuel: *A thousand years of non-linear history*. New York: Swerve, 1997.
“Geological history 1000-1700”: ‘Lavas and Magmas’, p 39.
- (18) “The work of Deleuze, for instance, contains a similar set of functional abstractions: Talking very loosely the **strange attractors are abstract machines, the paths taken by something in a basin of attraction are rhizomes and the areas of phase-shift are plateaus or planes of consistency**. Stable and Chaotic systems are characterised as molar or molecular, the first being efforts of a system to act in a `zero' state of fascism and the second are systems which are `becoming' something else.” (From: “A brief primer on chaos” <http://www.stageone.co.nz/alotronic/persona/chaos.htm> - Emphasis on the original).
- (19) SOJA, Edward W: *Post-metropolis*, p. 407 (My brackets).