



SWEDISH  
COLLEGIUM  
for ADVANCED STUDY

## REGULAR SESSION INFORMATION

**Session:** Reconceptualizing Public Space in the Contemporary World Order

**Session Convener(s):** Jennifer Parker, Pennsylvania State University, Lehigh Valley; Supriya Seth, Government College, Kota; Tribhu Nath Dubey, Government College, Kota

**Chair:** Jennifer Parker, Pennsylvania State University, Lehigh Valley

**Comments:** -

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I) *Finance, Communication, and the 'General Sphere'*  
Carmelo Buscema, University of Calabria, Cosenza

II) *Social Opinion. A Democratic Perspective to Upgrading the Public Space*  
Mascia Ferri, University of Rome "Tor Vergata"

III) *Public Spaces as a Community and Society as Family-blurring Public Private Dichotomy*  
Archana Prasad, Kamala Nehru College, New Delhi

IV) *'World-class' Aspirations and the Transformations of Public Space in Delhi*  
Kulwinder Kaur, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

V) *Bridging Online and Offline Public Social Spheres to Understand Contemporary Leisure Spaces*  
Payal Arora, Erasmus University Rotterdam

## ABSTRACTS

### Session Description

This session aims to highlight papers that address new conceptions of "public space" as reflected in the emergence of new structures and spaces of hegemony. Contemporary public space, for instance, may be increasingly disconnected from discourses of development, democratization, and citizenship while growing increasingly tied to consumption processes, corporate transactions, and social surveillance (Madden, 2010). On the other hand, conventional notions of "public space" as sites of ideological dissent may be transforming on a global level through internet technologies, local-global conditions, and the contestation between the drive to build heterogeneous futures and the proliferation of ideologies of the elite.

### Papers

#### I) *Finance, Communication, and the 'General Sphere'*

Carmelo Buscema, University of Calabria, Cosenza

The aim of my contribution to this session is, primarily, to underline the deep interconnection, incremental and contradictory, that is maturing in contemporary world between communication and financial capital. Such a phenomenon will be analyzed by taking into account their new respective forms, ambits, functions, and modes of development, as well as the pivotal, inedited roles they recently acquired in human history and in the current system.

The methodological choice to understand such both communication and finance throughout the analysis of their reciprocal point of contact and friction, is suggest not only by the increasing amount of empirical evidences. It is also based on the theoretical assumption about the nature of contemporary capitalism I defend. According to this, nowadays social and individual lives themselves are the autonomous source and cooperative actors of value production – even outside, beside and beyond the traditional formal ambits of labour.

Thus, within the new social structure shaped by the capitalistic processes of accumulation, the conventional conception, extent, and functions of communication and finance explode. The one becomes the trendily universal ambit in which the entire reality is caught and "represented." the other turns into the historical adequate form in which capital can economically express material, cognitive, and relational value, and politically command and direct social forces.

I argue that both communication and finance, as well as the process of their mutual and contradictory development, are shaped by the new vector of capitalistic structure of power/knowledge relations consisting of the mechanism of "digitalization."

On this bases, I will finally try to contribute to the necessary effort to adjourn the modern concept of "public sphere" to the contemporary statute and role acquired by communication, by proposing the concept of "general sphere." In fact, I argue it could be able to better highlight, understand, and politically face the effective and potential consequences of the ongoing historical processes, on the social and political levels, and from a geo-hegemonic point of view.

#### II) *Social Opinion. A Democratic Perspective to Upgrading the Public Space*

Mascia Ferri, University of Rome "Tor Vergata"

In this paper, I will present arguments for a critical analysis of the concept of public opinion which is, in my view, inadequate when dealing with a fundamental problem of Western democracies - i.e. the equivocal role played by public opinion in the public space, and the fact that this role does not correspond with the final goal which has, instead, characterized the preceding eras: the legitimization of people's sovereignty.

From the second half of the 20th Century public opinion has, in fact, started to rely entirely on the media; firstly on the mass media and, more recently, on the new media, until it lost its liberal vocation and started taking political stands which were guided by the media. At the same time, Western countries must take account of an unprecedented social complexity and of continuous mutations caused by cross-cultural contamination. For these two main reasons I believe that public opinion must necessarily be analyzed through the categories derived from the Sociology of Knowledge, because they can grasp what I call the «thinking behavior», and not the representation of the thought.

Drawing from sociological, political and philosophical literature, I identify two key steps - the «simplification» and the «distortion» - in which individuals work in order to understand the reality. A third step, called «representation», is the time when individual opinions become public.

In this paper, I present some case studies of social opinion, taking in account the results of polls and at the same time some statistical data, to illustrate the process, providing an application of the concept to a social situation. Also I prove that there isn't a significant relation between public opinion and social opinion.

### III) *Public Spaces as a Community and Society as Family-blurring Public Private Dichotomy*

Archana Prasad, Kamala Nehru College, New Delhi

The public-private dichotomy has been an important tool for categorization of knowledge. Sociological literature has extensively used the public-private dichotomy to understand social institutions and processes. For instance it has been used to explain gender relations in society. Most of the early theorists have utilized this divide in the sense of creating two water tight compartment in which different institutions of the society could be place- market, workplace, masculinity, entertainment, rationality categorized as public whereas home, femininity, intimacy and emotions placed in the private sphere. Such a dichotomy resulting from western theorizing is problematic in understanding any social institutions. Many feminist have rejected this dichotomy as an approach to understand gender equality. Taking from these feminists, I would argue that the dichotomy itself is erroneous- the categorization into the two realms is not always correct. It is important to place the dichotomy in the space and time framework. What is meant is that change in space and time adds different meaning to categories placed in this dichotomy.

This paper aims to explore the manner in which 'public' has been conceptualized in sociological tradition and the use of the dichotomy in sociology. Secondly to examine attributes/ aspects of society that has been categorized as public and private. Thirdly to see how changes in socio-economic condition of society changes the traditional categorization. By examining the conceptual understanding of the dichotomy it is important to raise an important question-has the public space in urban areas got privatized? In an attempt to seek an answer to the above question, attempt here is made to explore the public spaces-Metro, mall, PVRs, entertainment park in Delhi. Not only what was considered as public has changed but so has their role and functions changed. These changes need to be examined in order to understand the conceptualization of public-private dichotomy. Two features of urban public spaces needs to be examined- firstly to see how far they fit in the dichotomy and secondly are the attributes of private more close to these public space. The significance of such an analysis lies in the fact that sociological understanding is specific in its context and western hegemonic theorization does not always leads to knowledge.

Rather sociological thinking emerges in everyday interaction. And therefore there is the need to look at public and private not as a dichotomy but as continuum.

IV) *'World-class' Aspirations and the Transformations of Public Space in Delhi*

Kulwinder Kaur, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

It is generally understood in the Western discourse that Indian cities lack any distinction between private and public space. The ground observations, however, would reveal a multitude of trends such as sharp distinctions between public and private realms of social life at one level, blurring of boundaries at another and a reversal of the existing notions of public and private in others, thus defying all prior conceptualizations of public space. Yet in this maze, a few new patterns can be discerned which sort of showcase the changes taking place in mega cities of not only India but other newly developing countries in general.

New Delhi's ambitious forays into achieving a world class city status as revealed in the preparations for Common Wealth Games held last year brought tremendous transformations in its own cityscape as well as the region of which it is a part. The changes in the built and visual urban spaces of Delhi reveal new speed friendly ecologies, urban fear, and increasingly digitized and virtual modes of citizenship. These transformations necessitate analysis so as to re- conceptualize the existing notions of public space, especially in India. In this paper, I underscore three major conceptualizations of public space based on the analysis of my observations of Delhi and National Capital Region as a city dweller; and conversations ranging from very casual encounters in public spaces to some very formal interviews with key resource persons. I argue that similar to long revealed trends in the US cities, and recently witnessed changes in European cities, public space in Delhi and in other neoliberal cities in general is shrinking, while alternative virtual forms are expanding. The older forms of social exclusions thus simultaneously sharpen in some contexts and get blurred in others. The new forms emerge, as well, which provide fresh insights into our understanding of public space.

V) *Bridging Online and Offline Public Social Spheres to Understand Contemporary Leisure Spaces*

Payal Arora, Erasmus University Rotterdam

The Internet is perceived as undergoing a new era termed Web 2.0, a new generation of websites characterized by social-networks and user-generated content. It is considered our new public sphere which is seen as deeply participatory and global. This shift is predominantly social versus technical in nature. In particular, online social sites are characterized by its leisure properties which this paper will argue is by no means novel but deeply rooted in historical, economic, social and cultural spaces and intrinsically tied to offline practices. Thereby, to understand the nature of cyber-leisure spaces and its offline/online, transnational/transcultural and historic/contemporary relationships, this paper proposes the metaphor of "virtual parks" - a critical and comprehensive lens for analysis, making the argument that parks share the rhetoric of online social spaces—that of being open, non-utilitarian, public and free for all. As such, these park spaces seem innocuous but in reality, are deeply contentious and have a significant historical struggle behind them. In fact, parks have taken on diverse forms, revealing an important shift in contemporary society – the struggle to access and sustain public social spaces. Thereby, this paper will reveal the deeply political and socio-economic dimensions of online leisure by drawing continuous parallels to a plethora of park spaces, from historical to current times.

Using metaphors to understand cyberspace is not new. In fact, to conceptualize cyberspace, the metaphor is never far behind. To explain "new" technology spaces and activity, there has been a need to look at the "old:" the unfamiliar resorts to the familiar to make itself known. In talking about social interaction online, we find ourselves

in virtual dungeons, pubs, cybercafes, chatrooms, homepages, online communities and MUD lobbies. In situating ourselves in larger virtual geographies, we're confronted with the electronic frontier, or caught on the information superhighway. In fact, the need to architect a sense of place online has become a paramount strategy in the understanding of cyber-sociality. Thereby the resorting to offline space to explain online space is hardly an uncommon practice.

This paper does not contest such metaphors but rather builds on them to cater to an aspect that is believed to have been at large overlooked in conceptualizing spaces online: that of leisure. In a sense, one can look at this as accepting of the popular construct of Internet as a virtual city and thereby, focusing on a specific yet universal spatial construction within (and across) cities since the 1900s – that of parks. In other words, if the Internet is a city, this paper argues that its online common leisure spaces are its parks. The blurring of the virtual and the real is thereby an evolving social and spatial interaction and construction.

So in viewing such cyberspaces through the lens of parks, historically, transnationally and transculturally, the intent is to reveal the complex polity in accomplishing the creation and sustenance of such spaces in society, disrupting a common notion that leisure is non-contentious, with little overt economic, utilitarian and/or 'productive' value or predetermined goal at hand. In doing so, this paper investigates a range of park spaces to make transparent the diverse needs and accomplishments of actors in this tremendous social accomplishment of leisure, both offline and online.

Significance: One can say that we have come a long way from the Puritan perspective of leisure as sin to that of luxury. And now, it is perhaps the prime commodity of the next century where the luxury of yesteryear becomes present day necessity. There are faint memories of leisure spaces as contentious but for the most part, this memory remains buried away in the chronicles of a bygone era. Thereby few will question the presence of parks and fewer will see its buried controversies and struggles as one strolls through its manicured landscape. Meanwhile, much attention is being paid to leisure social spaces online where people check each other out, share their views on movies or just mindlessly browse through texts and hypertexts. This is seen as the mark of the 21st century, the arrival of a new kind of movement, a novel means of experiencing, producing and consuming leisure. What is more, these activities are seen as perhaps the most democratic of all, as such common social spaces appear to serve as open platforms for all to participate, circumventing gender, class, nationality and culture.

In fact, technology and leisure have been much debated. For instance, there is a belief in new technology as birthing a new kind of leisure unique to this time and age where traditional practice gives way to novel acts of leisure. Another school of thought highlights the deteriorating social ties and lifestyle through what constitutes as remote and isolating leisure practices online. There is no denial that with new technologies comes some novel social forms of leisure that finds expression in shaping its geography that in turn shapes further action. The goal here, however, is to focus on similarity between offline and online leisure and less on difference; to demystify these claims by grounding cyberleisure hype in situated park contexts. After all, since social cyberspaces have a short history, it can capitalize on the understandings of parks that have a long and eclectic history.