Cosmopolis: public spaces, cosmopolitanism, and democracy

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Abstract What is the role of public spaces in contemporary cities? Despite the growing interest in the theme of public spaces in the last decades, a significant number of authors appeal, directly or indirectly, to ideas of the “regression”, “decay”, and “crisis” of public life, public sphere, and public spaces. Without disregarding this hegemonic point of view, in the present article we would like to consider other perspectives, which recognize the importance of public spaces, public sociability, and cosmopolitanism for the democratic societies in the context of the contemporary city, the cosmopolis. We therefore propose a bibliographic review that deals with the political nature of public spaces, the dimension of contestation within public sociability, the advent of virtual public spaces, and the geography of cosmopolitan encounters. The article concludes that urban public spaces remain essential for the existence and functioning of democratic societies and institutions.

Keywords Public spaces · Public sociability · Cosmopolitanism · Democracy · Virtual publicity

Introduction

The specialized bibliography on the theme of public spaces has experienced fantastic growth in recent decades. Something has been happening in cities all over the world to awaken the interest of intellectuals and theorists from the most diverse areas of knowledge and epistemological, theoretical, and methodological nuances, transforming the theme of public spaces into one of the most popular among those studying cities. In general, we can classify this extensive bibliography into two main perspectives: pessimistic viewpoints and optimistic viewpoints. The first perspective, the pessimistic, which became hegemonic in the specialized literature, appeals to ideas of “regression”, “decay”, and “crisis” to describe the situation of public spaces in contemporary cities. On the other hand, the second perspective, the optimistic, reaffirms the importance of public spaces in societies and contemporary cities.

If there is a consensus among specialists on the theme of public spaces, it is related to two authors considered the first to systematically reflect on this object of scientific investigation—Hannah Arendt (2007) and Jürgen Habermas (1984). The authors of these two studies are widely recognized as the most responsible for the “conceptual architecture” of the
notions of “public life”, “public sphere”, and “public space”, which are distinct concepts but are interpreted as constituent categories of the same political phenomenon. Upon reading these two essential studies, however, the attentive reader will certainly perceive that these concepts were born under the banner of “retraction”, whereby ideas of “regression”, “decay”, and “crisis” of public life, public sphere, and public spaces, strongly present in these pioneering studies, had an outstanding influence on the reflections that appeared thereafter (Caldeira, 2000; Davis, 1993; Fyfe, 1998; Kohn, 2004; Light & Smith, 1998; Low & Smith, 2006; Mitchell, 2003; Sennett, 1989; Serpa, 2007; Sorkin, 1992; Staeheli & Mitchell, 2008; Zukin, 1995, 2010; among others).

Taken as a group, these and other studies compose that which could be described as a truly regressive narrative on public spaces, which became known in the specialized bibliography as the thesis on the end of public spaces (Madden, 2010; Mitchell, 2017). In contrast to this dominant point of view, which refers to a global process of “erosion” of the political function of public spaces in contemporary cities, nowadays, numerous signs can be seen that appear to suggest other interpretive possibilities. In other words, decreeing the “regression”, “decay”, “crisis”, or, as the pessimists prefer, the “end” of public spaces, can therefore be considered questionable (Felix de Souza, 2018). Without disregarding this point of view, it is necessary to recognize that there are other interpretative possibilities, which we would like to consider.

We are using the term cosmopolis here to refer to contemporary large global metropolises (Warf, 2015), where extremely diverse social groups of different nationalities, ethnicities, cultures, social classes, religious matrices, genders, ages, urban tribes, beliefs, world views, etc., live socialized together, constituting the same network of social, functional, economic, political, and public interdependence. This expression, which was used by Richard Sennett to refer to the major cities and capitals of Europe after the Renaissance, is applied to large contemporary cities in different senses. In these cities and many others, practically everything is mediated by the interaction between extremely diverse individuals and groups in their work, leisure, politics, consumption, production, public life, etc.

Among other things, this is the result of important changes brought about by new circuits of population mobility and migration put into motion by globalization, war, poverty, epidemics, climate events, tyrannical governments, etc. This is far from being a phenomenon exclusive to large contemporary metropolises; cities have always been a fundamental locus for interaction between diverse groups and individuals. What is new is the fact that contemporary cities are inhabited by much more diversified groups (ethnicities, classes, nationalities, civilizations, cultures, and all forms of alterities) than they were 50 years ago, for example. In this article, we propose a theoretical reflection on the importance of public spaces, public sociability, virtual publicity, and cosmopolitanism for democratic societies in the context of contemporary cities, the cosmopolis.

Public life, public sphere, and public spaces: politics, democracy, and sociability

In July 2017, there was an international seminar entitled Espaços Públicos, Espaços Políticos (Public Spaces, Political Spaces) at the Instituto de Geociências da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (IGEO/UFRJ) (Geosciences Institute of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro). The seminar presentations aimed to reflect on the political dimension of public spaces from different perspectives and examples in response to the following question: How, when, and in what circumstances can public spaces be conceived as political spaces? Broadly speaking, it can be said that most of the reflections convened at the seminar gravitated to two distinct perspectives on the political statute of public spaces and the political concept itself. The first of these approaches consider “public life”, the normal daily use of public spaces, a phenomenon of great political significance; “the basic horizon of that which is seen as political life in democratic societies” (Gomes & Ribeiro, 2018, p. 11). In contrast, the second approach states that public spaces are only sporadically transformed into a political phenomenon during extraordinary events; politics is thus conceived as “an institutional and operational system for the resolution of conflicts of interest that materialize in laws and rules of behavior” (Castro, 2018, p. 14).

As Gomes and Ribeiro (2018) argue, the specialized literature on the theme of public spaces rarely confers great political significance on the more ordinary and banal use of these spaces. Generally, it is
normally said that public spaces are only politically activated when they are temporarily occupied by more or less organized, large-scale social mobilizations, the so-called political manifestations (protests, occupations, marches, etc.). In recent decades, the world has experienced truly “seething” politics with large-scale manifestations of extremely diverse forms and contents having multiplied across the public spaces of numerous cities on the five continents, reinforcing the relatively common idea that these spaces are only politically activated when occupied by large-scale extraordinary mobilizations (Gomes & Ribeiro, 2018).

When observing the daily life of public spaces, however, a set of rituals and rules of coexistence can be perceived, regulating the copresence of various people in the same space. Over time, that space has the potential to transform the prevailing orders (political, social, cultural, economic, identity, behavioral, etc.) through the visibility of actions and practices that have a place in such spaces. In other words, the negotiations and the clashes, the conflicts and the agreements carried out between individuals and diverse groups gathered in public spaces transform these daily actions and practices into political actions and demands. These rules and rituals of interaction and coexistence can be considered, in this sense, true “political debates”—forms of presentation, attitudes, and behaviors that often pass unnoticed in daily public life. Upon being reproduced or contested in public spaces, with all their inherent properties, they constitute essentially political forms of interaction (Gomes, 2010; Gomes, 2012; Gomes & Ribeiro, 2020).

For the political scientist John Parkinson, both from the symbolic point of view and the practical, it would be difficult to think of the constitution of democratic political regimes without the existence of public spaces, where it is possible to construct, transform, and contest individual and collective representations and demands. For this author, there is a performance dimension in democratic political regimes, which, without the existence of authentic public spaces that enable civil society to compose various publics, simply could not be considered “democratic” or “republican”, something that more orthodox political scientists rarely admit clearly. Democratic political regimes do not consist of only institutional, normative, and administrative guidelines; democracy is a political-social system, put into practice by people, considered individually and collectively, who live socialized alongside each other in physically constituted spaces (Parkinson, 2012).

Despite being distinct, the concepts of democracy and public space are intimately related. The concept of public space does not exclude the idea of politics or of democracy; the public space is an expression of the existence of the political phenomenon, and, simultaneously, a condition of its very existence. As Parkinson argues, the concept of public space can be understood as a physical subset of the public sphere; the spatial and behavioral arrangements are to public spaces as the institutional and normative arrangements are to the public sphere. According to Parkinson’s interpretation, Habermas clearly distinguished a formal public sphere of government from an informal public sphere of citizens in his work. Thus, the public sphere (abstract dimension) and public space (physical dimension) should be seen as constituent elements of the same democratic political phenomenon (Parkinson, 2012).

In the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt, notions of politics, democracy, and public space completely lose a sense of existence when thought of in isolation. In reality, the conjunction of these three concepts represents the core of western political thinking since the fundamental contribution of the philosophers of Classical Antiquity, especially Plato and Aristotle, and, subsequently, the contribution of modern philosophers such as Montesquieu, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Marx, to cite a few classics (Hoskyns, 2014). It was the philosopher Hannah Arendt who best united these three notions to think about the modern world, demonstrating how liberty, equality, and diversity constitute some of the most important attributes of political/public life, despite there being numerous contradictions (Mensch, 2007).

The work of Hannah Arendt, however, which is concentrated on the discussion of freedom as an essential value to political life, offers little theoretical support to another fundamental value of democracy, citizenship, and public life: equity. Nevertheless, a series of contemporary political philosophers have concentrated on demonstrating that without equality there is no politics, without equity, there is no public sphere, and without isonomy, there is no citizenship (Verméer, 2008). In this sense, it is not possible to leave out the fundamental article of philosopher
Nancy Fraser, which strongly criticizes the existence of democracies in bourgeois societies. According to Nancy Fraser, it makes no sense to speak of an egalitarian and democratic public sphere, where all the individuals and groups that make up civil society participate as equals, within the context of capitalist societies characterized by the production and reproduction of the most diverse forms of socio-spatial, structural, and systemic inequalities (income, assets, class, gender, race, ethnicity, etc.). In short, while there are inequalities, democracies will never be complete (Fraser, 1990). We can thus complement this list of essential requirements: without public spaces there are no de facto democratic societies.

Despite various authors from different fields of knowledge appealing to the “corrosion” of the political dimension of public spaces in contemporary cities (Miles, 2015), the bibliography contemplating this theme has various empirical and theoretical studies that suggest other possibilities (Howell, 1993; Lees, 2004). Thus, the daily public life of public spaces appears as a fundamental phenomenon for the existence of a public sphere that is developed outside of the political institutions of the State, both in the past and currently (Purcell, 2021). Comprehensive political theories merge with those of daily life; the political philosophy of authors such as Arendt and Habermas, for example, join the premises of interactionist movements of authors such as Erving Goffman (De Backer et al., 2019). The relationships established between the concepts of public space and the public sphere are explained according to the examples arising from different parts of the globe (Bharne, 2010; Cassegard, 2014; Irazábal, 2008; Machado, 2018; Terzi & Tonnelat, 2017).

Many of these studies demonstrate how, in most cases, the political dimension of public spaces emerges as an essential part of the existence of that which we usually call democratic public life (Orum & Neal, 2010). As these authors argue, public spaces continue to be privileged places for political/public "debate", and, even more importantly, for the realization of practices resisting the political, economic, behavioral, and normative status quo of contemporary societies and cities (Hoskyns, 2014). “These practices oppose dominant orders and the rules of established structures” (Frers & Meier, 2017, p. 124). Therefore, the quality of the civic engagement of citizens will also depend, to a certain extent, on the existence and quality of public spaces (Calhoun, 1999; Mannarini et al., 2009; Meier, 2017; Trenz & Eder, 2004).

As argued by Robert Fishman, political institutions and civil society constitute systems of mutual influence, whose relationship directly or indirectly conditions the distribution of the resources, rights, and duties of citizens (Fishman, 2016). According to Fishman, comparative empirical studies demonstrate the fundamental importance of urban public spaces to strengthening civic engagement in the democracies of the contemporary world. They provide places for monitoring, making demands, and exercising pressure on political institutions and state bureaucracy, bestowing visibility on the demands of the various groups that make up civil societies, especially the disadvantaged sectors. However, for these demands to be effectively transformed into egalitarian public policies, these groups need to be recognized as part of the same social and political pact; in this context, public spaces play a central role, in uniting diverse publics, and constructing and reconstructing social, cultural, and political ties between different groups (Fishman, 2012, 2017).

When discussing the importance of “territorial practices” of certain groups of activists, Lucy Jackson and Gill Valentine, for example, demonstrate how the choice of specific public and symbolic addresses for on-screen causes is essential for the success of the ventures, that is, so that the performances gain visibility before public opinion and enter the public sphere (Jackson & Valentine, 2017). These contentious manifestations take on the most diverse forms possible; public art and its performative dimension, for example, is much more than a simple artistic intervention (critical or otherwise) that occurs in public spaces. In order to really speak on “public art”, there should be a constant reflective interaction between the performance that occurs publicly and the public, that is, a co-produced debate space emerges whereby the public and the art should compose the same forum of reflection (Guinard, 2018; Haskins & DeRose, 2003).

All forms of use and appropriation of public spaces beyond the physical-material dimension occupy a point in space and are also a form of symbolic-identity-political use and appropriation. Public spaces function as eternal arenas where distinct symbols coexist (Batuman, 2015). In the public spaces, the representations and identities are social constructions that are publicly produced through the coexistence of
differences or the cohabitation of plurality, whereby individuals and groups of civil society, respecting essential democratic principles of liberty, equality, fraternity (and diversity), compose various publics (Jovchelovitch, 2001). It is in public spaces where social and individual behaviors and representations are confronted and questioned, where various collective values are constructed, and, simultaneously, where these values can be opposed, where publics and counter-publics interact freely and democratically (Bailey & Iveson, 2000).

For the philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1984), the public sphere is an abstract notion, a sphere that mediates between civil society and the State, where organized civil society, that is, private citizens that gather as the public making use of rational debate, express themselves according to public opinion on behalf of public interest and the common good. As the philosopher Hannah Arendt argues, the public space is a fundamental arena for political struggle; coexistence between free and different/equals; and a place of manifestation, discussion, and conciliation of conflicts of interest; that is, political spaces (Arendt, 2007). Putting it simply, the public space can be understood as a means through which the public sphere is constructed, maintained, and represented (Fraser, 1990). In other words, it is from the interaction of a variety of publics coexisting in public spaces that different forms of conflict and representations gain visibility and are transformed into publicly conceived, manifested, and debated social constructions (Parkinson, 2012; Hopkins, 2014). According to this point of view, public spaces can be conceived as one of the places for the simultaneous empirical manifestation of public life and the public sphere, providing the expression, medium, and condition of existence of this political and democratic phenomenon (Gomes, 2010).

Public sociability and insurgent citizenship: copresence, negotiation, and contestation

In the present article, we would like to recognize the public space as a fundamental place for the exercise of what the German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel (2006 [1917]) called sociability. This is understood as a specific form of association or interaction between individuals and groups, in which the main objective or purpose of the interactional act is the social interaction itself. As Simmel argues, there are infinite forms of social interaction, that is, individuals and groups can associate with each other in extremely diverse ways. When these forms of social interaction are detached from their objective purposes, when individuals and groups gather with the express purpose of socializing or socially interacting, they receive the name sociability: "That which to the rest is only a form of interaction becomes its most significant content" (Simmel, 2006, p. 76). As Simmel teaches, the only nature or essence that is properly human is that which is related to the fact that we are all unconditionally social beings, accustomed to life in society (Simmel, 2006).

Public sociability can therefore be conceived as a system of behavior, a behavioral code of coexistence characteristic of public spaces. These behavioral codes of coexistence are associated with a set of ideas, principles, and values which, as is known, have become essential to the political and public life of the modern world, especially in democratic societies. Courtesy, civility, politeness, urbanity, citizenship, and cosmopolitanism constitute a way of being in/of public spaces. In light of this singular point of view, we aimed to glimpse new interpretative possibilities, conceiving public spaces as essential places for the construction and transformation of this behavior system (Felix de Souza, 2020). As such, this is a product of centuries of maturation of public life, in general, and, more specifically, of various forms of face-to-face interactions in public spaces. It is a process of uninterrupted and unfinished behavioral formatting, which was always and will always be subject to ongoing transformations in the most diverse societies (Bobbio, 2002; Boyd, 2006; Gordan, 2017; Elias, 1994a, 1994b; Hoffmann, 2007).

In the public spaces of any city in the democratic world, a large daily public gathering occurs. For a variety of reasons, various individuals and groups spontaneously assemble and share the same public spaces on a daily basis. All the actions, behaviors, and activities that are carried out in these spaces by these people are mediated by social interactions. For the individuals and groups that make up these publics, the diverse gathering itself constitutes a fundamental attraction. In other words, as Erving Goffman would say, the gathering itself is transformed into a great spectacle, a public spectacle (Goffman, 2010). So that this “rendezvous” of diversity can happen,
there needs to be suitable places for its establishment. As various authors demonstrate, the places where these gatherings occur, the public spaces, are thus transformed into a key element in the understanding of the meanings and sense of this process of democratic spatial coexistence, which we are calling public sociability (Gomes & Ribeiro, 2020).

The existence of conflicts of use and interest in public spaces is a phenomenon common to any city in the world. The coexistence of various people that are strangers to each other in these spaces demands that we think about issues that refer, directly or indirectly, to ideas of order and disorder. In democratic societies, as we argue in the present article, all forms of social coexistence depend, to some extent, on the establishment of certain codes of conduct and behavior, enabling us to live in society. In public spaces, these issues gain special contours, as they are fundamental ideas for the organization of public life and the coexistence of diversity. This eternal struggle between public order and disorder, between "adequate" and "inadequate", "permitted" and "not permitted", "acceptable" and "unacceptable" behaviors and forms of use clearly demonstrates the political nature of public life in public spaces, where conflicts of interest become evident and are simultaneously transformed into agreements of coexistence (Gomes, 2004).

For the geographer Lynn Staeheli, in this context, the public disorder tends to be seen as problematic for public life, as the uses that contest public order are generally taken as antidemocratic (Staeheli, 2010). As James Holston argues, however, the public spaces of contemporary cities (multicultural, multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan, diverse, etc.) constitute fundamental scenarios for the questioning and contestation of the norms and codes in force, it is what he called spaces of insurgent citizenship (Holston, 1998). Both for Holston (1998) and Staeheli (2010), public spaces are more than simple spaces of coexistence and celebration of order, they are the most important spaces of experimentation, negotiation, and, simultaneously, the questioning and contestation of social, behavioral, economic, political, and public order (Holston, 1998; Staeheli, 2010).

As previously stated, the political dimension of public spaces is usually associated with large-scale social mobilizations of a contentious nature (social movements, organized civil society, etc.). In contrast, little is said of the contentious (and political) dimension of interpersonal and inter-group relationships which, like large-scale mobilizations, contest, negotiate, and transform the norms and codes in force with no previous planning or any form of vertical or horizontal organization of the individuals or groups involved. It is what Wyatt, Katz, and Kim called ordinary political conversations (Wyatt et al., 2000). According to this point of view, the simple coexistence of (divergent and convergent) behaviors, actions, and practices in public spaces can be considered a phenomenon of a strongly political character. The uses considered “appropriate” and “inappropriate” can vary greatly according to different socio-cultural groups, urban contexts, etc., that is, there is a geography of public order and disorder that acts differently in the cities, converting public spaces into fundamental places for the contestation of the “status quo” (Abe, 2019; Dijkema, 2019).

It is in this context that we can insert the interesting reflection proposed by Mona Domosh (1998) on the “polished politics” of the women on the streets of New York in the nineteenth century. For this author, in opposition to what the specialized bibliography has maintained, public spaces continue to be essential places of political and public life, as they were in the past. For Domosh, the daily life of these spaces is permeated by what she calls a true “micropolitics”, where a set of small “tactical transgressions” acts systematically in the negotiation, contestation, and transformation of the behavioral, social, cultural, identity, economic, and political orders and norms in force. In this perspective, public behavior, that is the set of individual and collective practices, actions, gestures, and expressions that we use as a fundamental part of the rites of public sociability, is not an imposed normative phenomenon, but is contextually/geographically conceived and contested as an essential part of public and political life, that is, the coexistence of diversity (Domosh, 1998).

For Staeheli and Thompson (1997), the set of individuals and groups that gather in public spaces and constitute what we call the “public”, was always and will always be a contextual construction (socio-cultural, temporal, spatial, etc.). According to these authors, the democratic nature of public spaces does not necessarily guarantee universal rights of access and use for all citizens. There is a geographical and contestation dimension to citizenship that is rarely alluded to (Marston, 1995). Citizenship is not only a...
shared value, it is also a daily construction which, in many cases, has nothing universal, as can be seen in the example of socially excluded groups, to which the rights to the city and public life are denied (Robaina, 2018).

The study of public spaces, that is, the spatial dimension of citizenship/democracy, beyond our excessively normative, idealizing, and romantic point of view, demonstrates that these spaces are also spaces of struggle, contestations, disputes, and of conflict: “it reflects the contested nature of public space, and the use of citizenship claims to gain access to that space” (Staeheli & Thompson, 1997, p. 28). Thus, it can be stated that public spaces are places where “disorganized” civil society also expresses itself in a contestation manner, thus being transformed into legitimate spaces of dissidence (Roberts, 2008). For various authors, therefore, public spaces are places where small divergences and agreements, carried out between individuals and groups in daily life, according to the rites of face-to-face interaction, or public sociability, gain visibility and are transformed into political/public “debates” (Bell, 2013; Dehaene & De Cauter, 2008; Jayne et al., 2006; Kallianos & Fumanti, 2021; Kärrholm & Wirdelöv, 2019; Schaller & Modan, 2005; Torronen & Karlsson, 2005).

Public spaces and new communication technologies: urban publicity and virtual publicity

The last centuries have been marked by enormous technical and scientific evolution, among other things, which made it possible for humans to create new forms of communication, the most emblematic examples being the telegraph, the radio, the cinema, the television, the telephone, the cellular phone, the computer, the smartphone, and the most revolutionary of all, the internet. In other words, human beings have created a kind of parallel space connecting people to each other in the most peculiar fashion, challenging notions of time and space like never before (Warf, 1995). This is the advent of the so-called virtual public spaces, which, to a greater or lesser degree, affect the way we relate to each other in cities throughout the planet. In the age of information, with the uniqueness of the technical-scientific-informational systems that Brazilian geographer Milton Santos spoke of (Santos, 1996), we therefore live in a society organized in networks (Castells, 1999).

How has this global revolution in communication technology affected public life, public sphere, and public spaces in contemporary cities? In recent decades, many authors have proposed reflections on this debate (Stephen, 2017). The rise of the virtual space of the internet, for example, has meant that the public sphere spoken of by Jürgen Habermas has been particularly revolutionized (Warf, 2011). The global spread of these new communication systems has profoundly altered the way we produce, circulate, share, and debate ideas and information (Baron & Segerstad, 2010). The internet enabled the existence of new forms of interaction in which space–time distances no longer represent effective barriers. This is, therefore, that which Mike Crang called the “electropolis” (Crang, 2000). In the cities of the present and the future, as demonstrated by Marcos Góis, time and space entwine in an increasingly complex manner, socio-spatially reorganizing public and private encounters and divergences (Góis, 2021).

In the specialized bibliography on the theme of public spaces, the rise of new communication technologies is generally associated with the “decline” of the public life of public spaces (Grommé, 2016). From this perspective, urban public spaces are conceived as if they were diametrically opposed to virtual public spaces, that is, in urban public spaces, the publicity arising from physical co-presence would have a distinct nature to that of the “mediatized” publicity characteristic of virtual spaces. For Kurt Iveson, however, this hegemonic interpretation that conceives urban public spaces and virtual public spaces as necessarily opposed phenomena should be overcome, as both constitute modalities of publicity that are complementary in the functioning of the sphere of public life in contemporary cities (Iveson, 2009).

As certain authors argue, the global spread of these new technologies would therefore be problematic for the daily exercise of citizenship and public life, as they would be substituting face-to-face interactions as priority forms for the institution of public debates, which are considered essential in democratic societies (Dijck & Poell, 2015). For other authors, however, the advent of virtual public spaces merely enabled the existence of new forums for discussion and interaction (Humphreys, 2010), which have enormously transformed the way in which we plan and experience encounters and how we debate issues of public interest (Liao & Humphreys, 2015).
Therefore, the research carried out by Hampton et al. (2015) is emblematic, as it compares the individual and collective behaviors associated with the same public spaces that were researched by the urbanist William Whyte (1980) in his well-known study conducted in the context of the Project for Public Spaces, founded by Fred Kent. Based on the same methodological and technical research strategies used by Whyte in the 1970s, that is, filming, systematizing, and quantifying the behavior of people in certain emblematic public spaces, the authors demonstrated that, in the last 30 years: (1) the collective use of public spaces has grown when compared to individual use; (2) the proportion of women that frequent public spaces has grown considerably; and (3) the use of new mobile devices connected to the internet, especially cellular phones, has not made us more “individualistic” when frequenting urban public spaces, which is different to what the specialized bibliography generally suggests (Hampton et al., 2015).

By a geography of cosmopolitan encounters: the cosmopolis of the twenty-first century

In 1784, Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) wrote a short essay that became a classic, Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose, in which he laid the modern foundations for reflection on the theme of cosmopolitanism. The basic supposition of Kant’s text is based on the idea that, at a determined moment in the history of humanity, the creation of a cosmopolitan federation of States that guarantee peace between the nations would be a desirable process, or in a certain sense, indispensable. Kant speaks of a kind of global civil constitution in which all the citizens of the world share ethical and moral codes of conduct, that is, laws and agreements that would be valid for the entire world, based on the universal principles of reasoning: “a state of world citizenship as a cradle in which all the native dispositions of humankind will develop” (Kant, 2004, p. 17).

Despite having been popularized by Kant, the theme of cosmopolitanism had been conceived as an essential element of political thinking in Stoicism since Classical Antiquity. In the nineteenth century, cosmopolitanism was described by Hegel as a theme of great importance for modern philosophical thinking. In the same century, Marx criticized the disintegration characteristic of Nation-states under the aegis of the capitalist regime, advocating a greater integration of people after the human emancipation brought about by communism. Equally, Emile Durkheim, dealt with the theme, evoking (or only dreaming of) the existence of a global society where the different nations share the world and do not only compete for it. More recently, the studies of Ulrich Beck, to cite just one example, speak of a true "cosmopolitanization of reality", which would be related to the fact that humanity now faces “global risks”, that is, risks common to all civilizations of the world (Fine, 2007).

It is not by chance that some authors have called this new boom of studies on cosmopolitanism the cosmopolitan turn (Beck & Grande, 2010). As these authors argue, the precedent opened by the advent of globalization has driven academic production on the theme of cosmopolitanism and its derivatives (Brock & Brighouse, 2005).

In these studies, both globalization and cosmopolitanism are conceived as expressions of the existence of world society (Douzinas, 2007). How can we distinguish cosmopolitanism from globalization? Cosmopolitanism can be understood as a product of the social and political history of human civilization in its eternal, and often diffuse, march towards the formation of a global civilization, which dates back to ancestral times. Globalization, in turn, can generally be seen as a more recent phenomenon that interconnects four distinct yet interrelated fields on a global scale: politics, economy, technology/science, and culture. Globalization and cosmopolitanism are multifaceted phenomena, which is ambivalent, and, to a certain extent, contradictory, that is, there are “winners” and “losers” in this debate (Kendall et al., 2009). The great cities and metropolises of the contemporary world, where extremely diverse social, cultural, and ethnic-racial groups coexist collectively socialized are transformed into essential places for the experience of a “visceral cosmopolitanism” (Nava, 2007). In these cities, those “old” values that founded modernity, liberty, equality, and fraternity were and continue to be experienced, celebrated, and questioned, according to the cosmopolitan paradigm and its infinite diversity (Derrida, 2005).

Among geographers, more specifically, the theme of cosmopolitanism has been the source of an important debate, whereby the global scale returned to the center of geographical concerns. Here, we would like to highlight two complementary contributions,
proposed by David Harvey (2009) and Barney Warf (2021). Both authors emphasize the importance of geography and the spatial dimension for the study of cosmopolitanism, albeit according to different perspectives. David Harvey (2009) proposes a kind of critical historical geography of cosmopolitanism, highlighting the “cosmopolitan” dimension of the liberal and neoliberal ideologies; colonialism, imperialism, and capitalist world-system; the inequalities between nations in the international division of labor; the globalization and financialization of the economy; the cultural homogenization; the commodification; the privatization; the global diffusion of bourgeois states; the environmental destruction; the structural and systemic inequalities between different classes and social groups; the circulation and reproduction of capital; the political and social alienation; the precarious and unequal urbanization; the individualism; the consumerism; the racism; etc. (Harvey, 2009).

Barney Warf (2021), in turn, while also critical, conceives cosmopolitanism as a positive phenomenon; that is, he concentrates on its virtues, proposing that which we can call a geographic political philosophy of cosmopolitanism. In general, Warf reflects on the “cosmopolitan” nature of the advent of a global system of ethical, moral, and political values; the passage from a nationalistic conscience to a global imagination; the formation of a global public sphere of debates and interests; the need to construct a world regime of human rights; the appearance of a global agenda in the combat of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, inequalities, and prejudices; the incorporation of the post-colonialist debate; the urgent need to establish new modes of global cooperation on issues such as climate change and global warming; the experiencing of new opportunities for interaction, coexistence, and tolerance arising from the unprecedented diversification of urban populations in major cities; etc. (Warf, 2021). As the Brazilian geographer Milton Santos rightly argued, another globalization and cosmopolitanism are possible (Santos, 2001).

The word cosmopolitanism has its etymological roots connected to the Greek word “polis”, on the one hand, which means “city”, and to the idea of “Kosmos” on the other, which means “world” (Warf, 2021, p. 2). However, as Hannah Arendt (2002, p. 17) argues, in most European languages, the word “politics” also derives from the Greek “polis”, that is, when we speak of cosmopolitanism, we are necessarily speaking of an old project, which is the construction of a global, universal, and cosmopolitan political system. Its existence and functioning depend, both in Classical Antiquity and currently, to some degree, on the cosmopolitan encounters that occur in the “ágora”, the “public space”, the meeting place of the free, different, and equal (Arendt, 2002). The great global metropolises, the cosmopolis of the twenty-first century, are, according to the argument defended here, fundamental places for the experience of global citizenship, which aims to construct a system of rights and duties that promotes liberty, equality, and fraternity equally among global citizens (ethnecities, classes, nationalities, genders, cultures, and all forms of diversity), where public spaces fulfill an essential function, the coexistence of cosmopolitan publics.

Modern cosmopolitanism, as German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel argued, takes the sociological form of the stranger. The stranger, this individual that is displaced in space from one place to another (a continent, a country, a city) without establishing relationships of exclusive belonging, is, in the understanding of Simmel, a typical modern human. The multiplication of the mobility and displacement possibilities of the modern traveler has enabled a new form of social relation or interaction, characterized essentially by anonymity and the impersonal. Distance and proximity, alterity and equality, indifference and involvement, become complementary expressions in urban (and public) life. When being differentiated from social groups and cultural locations, the stranger, while a “new” sociological category, is converted into a differentiated public figure that questions an essential principle of the sovereignty of national States: citizenship as a local right guaranteed to a socially and spatially defined group. Therefore, we can state that the cosmopolitan, or as Simmel would say, the stranger, at least in symbolic terms, is a special type of citizen, a global citizen (Simmel, 1983).

Cosmopolitan gatherings carried out between various individuals and groups in the public spaces of major cities around the globe have been the focus of an interesting debate in the academic community (Watson, 2019), especially in Geography (Qian, 2020). In these studies, the cities and their public spaces returned to being conceived as meeting places of diversity; this is, as such, the diversity-turn. It is possible to classify these recent studies into two
groups: those referring to the theme of copresence in the urban public spaces of cities; and those that deal with barriers and difficulties in the incorporation of diversity into spaces of daily coexistence. In the first group of studies, the coexistence of various individuals and groups appears to be the fundamental focus of the reflections. In the second group of studies, the geographers demonstrate more caution in relation to what some call an exacerbated romanticizing of public contacts in contemporaneity, which are seen as being among the inducers of improvement in the interpersonal and inter group relationships of urban populations (Ye, 2019).

It is in this context of revival of the reflections on encounters and differences in Geography and the Social Sciences that Lucy Jackson, Catherine Harris, and Gill Valentine propose that we rethink certain fundamental categories for the comprehension of cosmopolitan cities. The authors challenge the idea that we have in mind when we use the category “stranger” to refer to unknown people, especially in multicultural and multi-ethnic contexts, as occurs in the large metropolises of the contemporary world (Jackson et al., 2017). In public spaces of great affluence of these cities, as previously stated, individual and collective differences gain public expression, being formed, transformed, and consolidated. In this case, however, the physical and symbolic barriers which, to some extent, crystallize structures, lose some of their meaning given the cosmopolitan nature of the activities carried out by various publics on a daily basis. In these spaces, therefore, the city literally finds itself, socio-spatial segregation is relativized, distinct social groups share the same spaces, diversities coexist, and conflicts and differences gain visibility (Listerborn, 2015; Lobo, 2014; Tchoukaleyska, 2016).

For some authors, these daily encounters with different people in public spaces (from different ethnicities, social classes, genders, sexualities, ages, status etc.) constitute excellent opportunities for the construction of a cosmopolitan sense within us (Roux & Guillard, 2016). Nevertheless, other authors argue that coexistence with different people on the streets and sidewalks, in squares, and other public spaces does not necessarily give rise to “encounters” in the true sense of the word, as there would be little social interaction of any intensity between distinct individuals and groups, which would be bad for the construction of effectively democratic values (Atkinson, 2016). According to this argument, it would be improbable that the realization of these ephemeral encounters in public spaces, even between diverse publics, would make the known social and cultural barriers disappear (Chacko et al., 2016).

When it comes to issues connected to the themes of gender and sexuality, for example, there is an increasing number of studies that emphatically demonstrate the important role of public spaces in the construction, reproduction, negotiation, and contestation of different identity categories, whether heteronormative or those that question the disciplinary mechanisms (Milanović, 2017). In this context, the visibility of diversity in public spaces, especially when it comes to the LGBTQIA+ population, is conceived as an important instrument of political action and the insertion of this theme into public spheres, a debate which only reappeared on the agenda of social sciences, geography, and urban studies more recently (Mitchell, 2008).

Despite the classic study of Hannah Arendt (1958) incorporating central themes to feminist theory, such as female emancipation and universal suffrage, and being considered one of the first studies to reflect on gender/public spaces, it reflected little on the role of women in the process of the constitution of modern cities (Benhabib, 1993). Since the 1990s, however, various studies questioning the “secondary” role consigned to women in public life throughout urban history have been published (Heuvel, 2019). For certain social groups, especially those historically made invisible and excluded from public life, such as the LGBTQIA+ population, public visibility constitutes, at least since the Stonewall Riot in New York, an essential practice of resistance and contestation (Namaste, 1996).

Many of these studies attempt to demonstrate how these urban encounters are inserted into rigid socio-spatial structures (Ruddick, 1996). In this case, all the forms of inequality and socio-cultural hierarchies, questions of class, of income/estate, of status, machismo, homophobia, racism, xenophobia, all forms of prejudice, the marginalization and stigmatization of diverse groups and individuals, the unequal relationships of power, among various others, appear as the main qualifiers of encounters, or rather, of the divergences in the city (Peterson, 2020). As argued by the geographers Gill Valentine and Catherine Harris, the regulation that occurs in these spaces, that is, that
which defines those uses and behaviors considered “adequate”, tends to intensify together with the quantitative/qualitative growth of the frequenting public. This has caused enormous debate in local public spheres and Geography congresses that reflect on public spaces and, more specifically, on the practices of inclusion and exclusion that are enabled in these true spaces of sociability (Valentine & Harris, 2016).

In contemporary cities, inhabited by ever more diverse sociocultural and ethnic-racial groups, the daily encounters in public spaces, in some cases, create a sensation of empathy, and, in other cases, exacerbate differences and alterities (Lobo, 2016). As various authors argue, despite recognizing the importance of diverse encounters in contemporary cities (Latham & Layton, 2019), it is necessary that we bear in mind the fact that symbolic and concrete barriers literally exclude certain groups from public life. When it comes to the theme of encounters and divergences, geographical science certainly has an enormous contribution to offer to the debate (Warf, 2015). In this context, geographers have been demonstrating more and more interest in theoretical traditions thus far undervalued (Bridge, 2008).

As argued by Ulrich Beck (2002), I would not hesitate to state that in cosmopolitan societies, new spaces of political experimentation are appearing, and, in addition to properly institutionalized political spaces, it is to the public spaces of large metropolises that we should look. They are the only spaces that really gather people of various nationalities, cultural and ethnic groups, social classes, religious matrices, genders, beliefs, worldviews, and all the different forms and manifestations of human diversities. Therefore, in contemporary cities, it would be perfectly legitimate to speak of the existence of cosmopolitan sociability, this is what Lyn Lofland called “a world of strangers” (Lofland, 1973). This may seem trivial, but it is not; socially interacting with diverse groups creates a certain sense of citizenship that transcends far beyond our individual and collective differences. In global cities and other large metropolises of the contemporary world, for all the inhabitants to live in society and share its public and urban spaces, whether they want to or not, they need to cultivate tolerance for diversity (Schiller et al., 2011; Young et al., 2006).

If we wish to carry forward the project of a cosmopolitan democracy, of universal citizenship, we need to hoist the flag of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, as that is the only way we can break with the enormous criticism that dominates these discussions (Medina, 2014; Rensmann, 2014). As various authors argue, we should look to big cities, as it was in the big cities that cosmopolitanism was effectively converted into empirical reality rather than continuing to be a mere “conspiracy” of philosophers (Popke, 2007). To study these phenomena, we need to develop new models and scientific approaches, in other words, new epistemological, theoretical, and methodological demands are appearing, and if we wish to really understand this new, globalized world, we need an effectively cosmopolitan science (Beck & Grande, 2010), including reflections on the theme of public spaces (Houssay-Holzschuch & Thébault, 2016).

As we suggest in the present article, given the coexistence of diversity in public spaces, different categories and dimensions of social, political, and cultural life are constructed and deconstructed, being transformed and consolidated, gaining public expression, and, often, entering the public sphere and the institutional spaces of politics. According to this perspective, the city can be conceived as a complex set of large and small encounters: heterogeneous and homogeneous encounters, public and private encounters, ephemeral and enduring encounters, contentious and pleasurable encounters, individual and collective encounters, professional and recreational encounters, family and cosmopolitan encounters. To interpret these various encounters, geographers and social scientists need to use methodological instruments which, on one the one hand, enable the reading of the materiality of the phenomena (the bodies) and, on the other, the meanings (the signs) of these encounters (Parr, 2001). Therefore, we can state that the public life of the cities can and should be read according to an authentic geography of encounters (De Stefani & Mondada, 2018; Souzis, 2015; Wilson, 2017).

Conclusions

The reflexivity of the social interaction characteristic of public life transforms public spaces into a truly urban catwalk, where there is a parade of diversity. As we argue in the present article, the public encounters that have a place in these spaces, at least in democratic societies, enable individuals...
and the groups in which they participate to compose various publics, creating links of identity and, simultaneously, recognizing diversity as an essential part of the human and public condition. Perhaps if we engaged more freely in urban encounters, we would more emphatically recognize the fact that in the city and its public spaces practically everything is mediated by face-to-face interactions with different types of people.

These public encounters, which we are calling public sociability, can take various forms, considering different cultures, nationalities, genders, ages, social classes, geographical contexts etc. It is in this sense that it can be stated that the reflections on the theme of encounters help us think, simultaneously, on ideas of frontiers, alterity, and the numerous forms of individual and collective representations that social and public life enable, where equality and empathy through diversity are celebrated as fundamental values. When occurring in public spaces, be it occasionally or on a daily basis, these encounters, which can encompass different types of relationships between objects, people, meanings etc., are thus transformed into authentic political acts.

The freedom to come and go in cities and public spaces; to interact individually and collectively in these spaces; the possibility of choosing the manag-ers of public affairs through a vote; isonomy; freedom of expression and of the press; the rights and duties of individuals and collectives, and a series of other conquests of democratic societies did not appear all of a sudden. The maturing of democracies occurred through a long, interrupted process of publicization, which lasted for centuries, and which did not evolve linearly. This process of democratization that modernity has caused to reappear in the West, as is known, however, was constituted as such in light of unquestionable contradictions, which we still have not managed to equate and whose future remains open.

The COVID 19 pandemic, which has stricken the planet since 2020, killing millions of people, has obliged the entire world to adopt social isolation practices as a way of containing the disease and saving lives. The “lockdown”, the total or partial closure of all non-essential activities, functioned as one of the most important instruments in the combat of the pandemic. Cities and their public spaces were literally emptied, social/urban/public life disappeared, profoundly transforming the urban landscape, bringing new doubts in relation to the future of our cities, public spaces, and democracies.

In this context, new communication technologies demonstrate as being essential to the functioning of the cities and democracies of the contemporary world. As observed in recent years, a large part of the activities of daily life can be carried out through electronic devices connected to the internet. However, not all human necessities can be concretely met in the virtual world. Public encounters and divergences, for example, can never be completely experienced only in the virtual world, as the spontaneity of public life is, in different senses, irreplaceable. Virtual encounters are always more “controllable” than urban encounters.

The physical copresence of diversity in contemporary cities (cosmopolitan, multicultural, multi-ethnic) enables us to construct and deconstruct the codes of coexistence, attenuating or invigorating the conflicts of interest that are inherent to social, urban, and public life, especially in democratic societies.

Global political protests and manifestations, equally, which have multiplied around the world in recent decades, constitute notable expressions of how the public life experienced in urban public spaces is currently indispensable to the functioning of democracies. The Black Lives Matter movement is, in this sense, emblematic, as it mobilized thousands of people in the public spaces of different parts of the world in 2020, even at the height of the pandemic, to echo a planetary scream against racism. The realization of these and countless other protests and mobilizations of a global nature demonstrates, among other things: (1) the existence of a global public sphere that connects the entire world in support of common causes; (2) that virtual public spaces are today fundamental for the organization, mobilization, and institution of public debates, although they do not substitute the publicity that emanates from urban public spaces; and (3) that the strengthening of social, cultural, and political ties in democratic societies still depends, to a great extent, on public spaces, which today function distinctly from the Classical Antiquity described by Hannah Arendt and the beginning of the Modern Age described by Jürgen Habermas, although they remain equally relevant.

In conclusion, among all the things that this pandemic has made evident in various parts of the world, such as the importance of the Welfare States; the growing levels of inequalities of different natures...
between individuals, groups, and nations; the fundamental role of international cooperation and multilateral institutions, etc.; we would like to highlight another. That is, the importance of cosmopolitan encounters for the functioning of our cities, and more specifically, for the construction of an effectively plural democratic public life. It has been almost 30 years since the birth of the discourse that decreed the “end” of public spaces, yet theorists from all over the world seem to be engaged in proving the contrary, whereby public spaces continue to be essential to the global exercise of democracy and citizenship.

I agree with the above statements and declare that this submission follows the policies of Geojournal as outlined in the Guide for Authors and in the Ethical Statement.

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