What is the origin of public space, why does it exert such a hold on our political imagination, and why do we so often perceive it as being threatened to the point of extinction? Throughout its history, the concept of public space has seemed fraught with insecurities. It represents at once the promise of a more transparent social order where undistorted intellectual exchange is possible, and something to which we are exposed, a space in which we are subjected to the gaze or the voice of another that draws us out of ourselves. Here I will tell three stories. The first one could be called the rise and decline of public space, and is the most common one; the second concerns public space as something that is structurally defined by a conflict that will turn it into a battle zone, and where the dream of undistorted communication is but a sweet lie that cloaks the reality of power. The third and final one is not about overcoming the conflict, but attempts to unearth something like the common root of the first two. This will hardly be a solution but a genealogical account of the problem that, hopefully, allows us to see it a bit clearer.

I. The rise and fall of public space

Most reconstructions of the genealogy of this concept piously point to its origin in the agora, the central place in the Greek polis, whose symbolic value resonates throughout Western histo-
ry. It is important to bear in mind that this space is an idealized and ideological construction, indeed a kind of retroactive fantasy: Greek public life comprised only free men, and it excluded slaves, metoics, and women. This notwithstanding, it still captures the political imagination, primarily because it was in this form that it was rediscovered by Rousseau, and through him transmitted to a whole spectrum of small-scale visions of modernity; it represented the promise of a restored Gemeinschaft, a community seemingly without representation. This vision was relayed—to some extent contradicted, but on another level reinforced—by the emergence of an “ideal” public space during the latter half of the eighteenth century, a world of rational reflection, communication, and judgement that we find outlined in the writings of Kant. This was a vision of the Enlightenment as a forum where all dogmas, theoretical as well as moral and political, can be subjected to a debate open to anyone who is willing to act as a “public” person and not as bearer of official authority (such as the judge, the magistrate or the priest). This is the reason why Kant can say “Reason as much as you want, but obey!”—a statement that has occasioned many ironical remarks, but in fact simply means that whoever acts as a figure of public authority must go by the book, as it were, in order to ensure what Kant in another texts calls a certain “mechanism of society,” that is the predictability of courts, magistrates and legal processes. And while this obedience does not exclude critical reflection (“reason as much as you want”), it only tells us that such reasoning belongs to another form of discourse than the one endowed with public authority.

For Kant, this process of reflection is necessarily open-ended. We are living in an age of enlightenment, Kant stresses, but it is not an enlightened age: enlightenment must be understood as a process where ideas and arguments are presented publicly, addressed to a “world of readers” (eine Leserwelt), as he says in the preface to the first edition of the Critique of Pure Reason from 1781. If this process were to coalesce into a theory, into a stance,
it would become a dogma, and reasoning would come to an end. Whoever says of himself “I am enlightened” ceases in the same moment to be enlightened.

The collective nature of this process for Kant depends on the “maturing capacity for judgment” of the period, which makes it all the more essential for each of us to attempt to “think in the place of everyone else,” as he later will say in the Critique of Judgment. The process of reflection is the ongoing creation of intersubjectivity as an exchange of perspectives; as such it always places us in a present that responds to the past at the same moment that it projects a possible future.

This temporal dimension also comes to the fore in other parts of Kant’s political philosophy, where he talks of the impact of empirical history (notably the French Revolution) on philosophy, and introduces the concept “sign of history” (Geschichtszeichen), which incidentally can also be read as a theory of a certain type of public art or, even better, as the outline of a logic of monumentality. In the second part of his The Conflict of Faculties, Kant debates with the faculty of law whether we can find proofs of historical progress or not, and he proposes that we should not look for any empirical facts that would verify the existence of an improved moral disposition in man, but instead we should attempt to locate signs that act as indirect presentations, or “hypotyposes”—with the French Revolution being his paradigmatic case. The sign of history will have a tripartite form: it is a signum rememorativum, demonstrativum et prognosticon: there has always been (sign of memory, re-memoration), there is (a demonstrative sign, indicating a case that appears to verify the hypothesis), and there will be (prediction, prognosis) signs of progress that establish the hopeful continuity of history, a constant tendency toward improvement. For Kant, the French Revolution is such a sign of historical progress, although not through its violent effects. A utilitarian calculus weighing losses and gains, for instance in human lives, could in fact lead us to say that we would have been better off had the revolution never occurred, although this
is not the point. The value of the revolution does not lie in its factual success or failure, but in the change in affectivity it produces among its spectators, what Kant calls “enthusiasm.”¹ Since the spectators—in this case, the Germans—stand outside the pathological effects of the event (they have nothing to gain by acting like the furious actors on the stage of history, but in fact everything to lose in their own country), their enthusiasm will be directed toward pure moral principles, and it indicates a receptivity to ideas (eine Empfänglichkeit für Ideen) hitherto unknown in history.

We can see how this drama is organized by the divide between stage and audience, which also indirectly points to the rather complex relationship between aesthetics and politics that is always assumed by Kant, but never really clarified. The political becomes sensible to us like an aesthetic effect, although politics as such can never be reduced to a mere aesthetic phenomenon. Enthusiasm and the signs that convey it remain ambivalent, as do the monuments that embody them.

For Kant, the revolution is a not sign of an empirical event, which together with the corresponding element of enthusiasm indicates a permanent historical possibility—even though the actual revolution could well derail, or lead to a restoration. In the same way, the process of Enlightenment is ideally speaking irreversible and can never be undone, all temporary setbacks notwithstanding. The function of the monument in this context would be to preserve this sign: to incarnate and provide it with an outward permanence that will underwrite the hopeful continuity of history. Through its permanent material presence, it insists on the present and orients the spectator to affectivity, while through its function as an idealized sign it points ahead to the ideal content that still remains to be actualized. The monument is part of historical semiotics, the outwardly visible form of the speculative narrative (Hegel’s mistake, Kant could perhaps

¹ See the lucid commentary by Jean-François Lyotard, L’enthousiasme. La critique kantienne de l’histoire (Paris: Galilée, 1986).
argue, is that he attempts to unify these two aspects, to reduce the necessary inner distance of the “hypotyposis,” and thus collapses the political and the aesthetic into one another). This particular example, the “sign of history,” shows the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the process that produces consensus through reflection. Kant proposes many such alternative models, and it is far from clear how they are connected. The Critique of Political Reason was indeed never written, and Lyotard suggests this reflects the nature of the things themselves: the open-ended quality of reflective judgment, which begins in taste and is then projected into politics, forbids any clear-cut a priori principles.

This idea of a rational community based on arguments has been thoroughly analyzed by Jürgen Habermas as the mediated place where society constitutes itself through debate and reflection, as an open-ended process of legitimization and production of a consensus that no longer acknowledges the decrees issued by a sovereign power. This is the forging of a modern political space, with Kantian criticism and the French Revolution as the two founding moments—or in Claude Lefort’s term, this would be something like the “democratic invention” or the “invention of democracy,” where the subject that speaks (the “people”) is the very subject to be brought forth in this discourse, via a kind of political performativity that hollows out the theological and/or ontological foundation of politics: there is politics because there is no longer any foundation, and in this sense modern democratic societies are based upon a constitutive void and absence.\(^2\) Habermas is reluctant to draw this conclusion, which explains his emphasis on the “transcendental” status of his theory of communication (which also emerges in what at least I see as his

\(^2\) Their philosophical differences notwithstanding, Lefort’s and Habermas’ discussions provide two complimentary versions, which both amount to a narrative of the emergence of political freedom as connected to a space of public life; cf. Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft (Luchterhand: Neuwied, 1962), and L’invention démocratique. Les limites de la domination totalitaire (Paris: Fayard, 1981).
rather spurious use of Wittgenstein: language as gaming surely cannot be formalized into a set of rules, since the very idea of “following a rule” is indeterminate, as we can see in the discussion that followed Saul Kripke’s critical remarks on this topic).

This communicative space, however, is necessarily also conceived as being under attack. The somewhat pessimistic conclusion of Habermas’ classic investigation proposes that the media-centered system once posited as the site for rational debate is now being absorbed by commercial interests that increasingly generate spectacles according to their own logic (this conclusion dates from 1962, but more recent developments in the media world can hardly be said to have mitigated it). If one wants to adhere to the idea of a single public space governed by the rules of rational communication, then the multiplicity of contemporary modes of address and speech, that is the fracturing of the “we,” can only appear as a tragic loss. In a similar vein an architectural theorist like Michael Sorkin proposes an analysis of the privatization of public space that in the end predicts the imminent “end of public space.”

In short, this site of rational and truly political discourse is always inscribed in a narrative of rise and decline—that public space did indeed once exist, at some point sufficiently removed in time for us to endow it with a certain nostalgia, but all the practices that helped to carve it out from the solid block of the authoritarian tradition will in the end turn against it. Economic interaction, the rise of the middle class, the press, and the proliferation of information: all of these terms will have a double value, and the prospects for the future will necessarily look increasingly grim. Public space is always that which is on the verge of extinction, just as all paradises, as Proust remarks, must necessarily be lost ones.

---

3 See, for instance, the contributions in Michael Sorkin (ed.): Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and The End of Public Space (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).
II. Asymmetries and conflicts

Could there be another story, a counter-history as it were, of the idea of the public, one that does not follow the rhythm of rise and decline? Many have objected to this rise-and-fall type of description, both on the level of empirical facts and of general theoretical strategies. (An interesting inversion of the Habermasian story is provided by Richard Sennett, in his *The Fall of Public Man*, in which the nineteenth century cult of authenticity and depth destroys the freedom of eighteenth century conversation culture, where the possibility of “acting” provided the individual with a way to explore social life without being bound to a particular identity.) “Classic” public life and space (no matter when and where these may be located) were always an illusion, and they were in fact based on exclusions and hidden privileges. “Agoraphobia,” as Rosalyn Deutsche argues against Habermas and Sorkin’s melancholic reflections on the decline of public life may very well consist of a fear of the necessary asymmetry of all public domains, and “non-violent communication” is but a sweet lie that obscures the fact that certain people always maintain the prerogative of speech, which establishes power and hierarchies. Perhaps, she suggests, the meaning of agoraphobia is precisely that it allows us to dream of another time (lost or to come) when the ideal space was or will be realized, and in relation to which our present must always appear as deficient.

Similarly, when Chantal Mouffe proposes a theory of “the political,” she claims that it must be distinguished from “politics” in the empirical sense of processes of policy-making and decision-making. The political dimension for her has to do with the way

---

in which a society is symbolically instituted, and at its heart she finds the possibility of antagonism. Unlike liberal conceptions, which are either based on an “aggregative” model that understands the political in terms of the economy and the market, or on a deliberative model that understands the political as the application of morality, Mouffe points to the fundamental value of passions. Taking a political stance will always involve a separation between an “us” and a “them,” the reference to a constitutive outside necessary for the creation of an identity. This poses the urgent problem of how we can create a democracy that both acknowledges the ubiquity of antagonism and is able to establish a pluralist space in which these opposing forces can meet in a non-violent fashion. This would mean to transform antagonism into “agonism,” a situation where the opposing parties recognize the legitimacy of their opponent, although there is no rational consensus to be achieved. Whether this in the final instance is opposed to liberalism, or in fact constitutes a more dynamic and complex form of it, is an open question.

Every type of political order, Mouffe suggests, must then be understood as hegemonic, whereas the social is the realm of “sedimented practices,” that is acts that conceal their origin and are taken for granted. Every order, however, is fundamentally contingent and temporary, the frontier between the political and the social is unstable, and what is “natural” to any society is always the result of a process of negotiation.

This has important bearing on the concept of public space. Unlike the version proposed by Habermas, where the notion of ideal communication functions as a regulative idea, or that of Hannah Arendt, who develops the theme of “enlarged thought” and intersubjectivity on the basis of Kant’s aesthetics, Mouffe the relation to Carl Schmitt and the conception of the political as oriented along the axis friend-foe, see her anthology The Challenge of Carl Schmitt (London: Verso, 1999).

7 See Arendt, Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, Ronald Beiner (ed.) (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1992.)
understands public space not as one singular entity that could subsequently be overtaken by hostile forces, but as a constitutive plurality. It is a continually contested and non-symmetric space, a battleground fraught with the full range of all insecurities that result from struggles for hegemony.

In art, the idea of “site specificity” that was developed against the claims for universality made by a certain modern, in no way implies a return to pre-modern versions of place-boundedness. Instead it invests the place with a disruptive energy, “x-raying” the public as a domain of struggle and suggesting a kind of negative dialectic. Public space is indeed the space where politics is realized, but this can only occur through acts of confrontation and unmasking that, in the end, must also turn against the authority of the work itself. It proposes the public domain as the ongoing experimental construction, not as a regulative idea against which all empirical places have to be measured and against which they must all appear as deficient. In this way, the kind of place that the artwork wants to occupy when it moves out into the street does not pre-exist the work of the work, as it were. It is never simply “there,” but neither does it simply result from a set of operations performed: the site is always already structured, architectonically, symbolically, ideologically, and the work of the work is to pry it open, to expose its hidden contradictions. Just as reality could not simply be signified by the work, there is no outside that awaits the work.

This clash of interpretations, where one side claims the ideal and regulative status of the concept of public space (it is that against which we measure empirical public and political spaces, a kind of political “transcendental”), and the other suggests that we must acknowledge the contingency of our concepts and that we are always inside processes of both subjection (public space as the domain of discipline, of the panoptic gaze and ever more refined technologies of surveillance) and subjectification (public space as the site where political subjectivity is constituted and where resistance of all sorts becomes possible) is surely impossi-
ble to resolve once and for all, primarily since it also implies highly different conceptions of the very meaning of theory as such. One of them could be called “Kantian,” the second “Nietzschean,” and both are able to argue their respective cases with great eloquence. And strangely enough the first version, which stresses universals and communicative action, tends to be pessimistic about the present, whereas the second, which stresses contingency and the necessity of being situated, tends to be pervaded by what could be called a necessarily unfounded optimism. Perhaps, finally, this also indicates the difficulty in simply choosing between them.

III. A common root of the problem: emergence of the private/public domain

Above I used the term “subjectification” and proposed that we hear it in a double way: on the one hand as subjection, on the other as a becoming-subject, or “subjectification.” These two senses are brought together by Foucault in his use of the term asujettissement, and it is to Foucault that I will now turn in these brief last remarks in order to establish a third point of view, one that provides a different take on the “antinomy” produced by the two varieties of public space outlined so far.

A particular question that traverses Foucault’s work, from his earliest text on existential psychiatry to the final work on the history of sexuality, relates to the meaning of experience. What does it mean to become a self, to become a desiring subject that relates to its own existence both practically and theoretically? Far from promoting a simple rejection of the subject—as is often assumed—Foucault’s work in fact deals with the genealogy of subjectivity, of all the various fashions in which “we have come to treat ourselves as subjects and others as objects,” as he says in a late essay.

For my proposal here, it is crucial to note that the emergence of the modern, self-reflexive subject is for Foucault both the
result of a process of discipline and forming, and a certain “subjectification” that produces the idea of a free being, a bearer of individual and inalienable political rights, and capable of participating precisely in the kind of public, “processual” rationality that was outlined in Kant’s political philosophy. For Foucault the emergence of public space is closely connected to the idea of panoptic surveillance, and to the increasing deployment of techniques for monitoring, locating, and fixing the individual in a grid of knowledge. He analyses this process in great detail as it unfolds in the schools, in the hospital, the army, the factory and other venues. The very idea of a “public facility” is fundamentally implicated in a new regimentation of power, which at once forms and moulds the subject from the outside and provides it with a potential for agency.

The subject thus falls within the structure of address (Althusser pointed to something similar in his idea of “interpellation,” although his version is much more one-sided and negative than Foucault’s) that always has two sides: the subject is called upon, summoned forth and interpellated, precisely in order to exert its freedom and its rationality. In this sense there is no contradiction when Foucault says that modern societies uniquely intensify both discipline and freedom, neither of which can manage without the other. The Kantian split between the public and the private character of reasoning (the magistrate vs. the intellectual) is one way of conceptualizing and in a certain way also naturalizing this split. The public subject is always divided between these two sides, and to enter into public space is to be subjected to the gaze of another, while at the same time being called upon to respond to this gaze, even to assume it as a figure of one’s own responsibility. (The “paranoid” quality of Lacan’s analysis of the “Gaze as object a,” to which Norman Bryson points in his essay on “The Gaze in the Expanded Field,” may be rooted in this).8

---

8 In Hal Foster (ed.): Vision and Visuality (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988).
The division between the public and the private, and the differences inside public space itself, originate in this conflicted genesis of the subject: as a figure of disciplinary coercion and as the agency born out of the subjectification of this discipline, and the hollowing out of an “interior” that will be filled with a “receptivity for ideas,” as Kant says. We cannot stop fantasizing about a public space that would somehow be transparent and lucid, something like the ether through which the light of enlightenment would pass without resistance. And yet the very curvature of this space, the way in which it is folded so as to make us into its subjects and objects, cannot but undo this dream as soon as it encounters reality.