INTRODUCTION:
Street Life

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This special section of City & Society is the outcome of an international conference on Street Life held by the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies (CDTS) at the University of Toronto from April 18–22, 2007.¹ The conference was co-organized and hosted by the Director of CDTS, Professor Ato Quayson. Professor Quayson and I would like to extend our thanks to the participants in the conference for laying the intellectual groundwork for this publication. We would also like to thank C&S editor, Petra Kuppinger, for bringing the publication to fruition.

The street is a social space with its own particular cast of characters, its own forms of social organization, and its own vernaculars. It is also the site for particular kinds of politics and forms of knowledge, as well as for distinctive genres of music, literature, performance and visual art. The centrality of the street to modern life is reflected in the attention it receives from a wide range of scholars, including philosophers, historians, literary critics, anthropologists, political scientists, linguists, and geographers. Since the street often stands as a synecdoche for the city, a focus on the street serves much the same function as does the broader focus on city life: it provides a conceptual or empirical anchor for interdisciplinary conversations about the dynamics of modern public life. Even when the street is studied in its particularity and not taken to stand in for the city as a whole, it may still provide a route into the shifting social and cultural terrains of urban life. For ethnographers struggling to find a way to draw limits around their urban objects of study (Hannerz 1980:296–308), the street offers a relatively bounded empirical ground for broader claims about contemporary social, political and cultural life.

The street is attractive as an object of study not only because it seems possible to delimit, but because it is constantly throwing up new objects and new social formations, which pique our curiosity and nudge us toward interpretive acts. The preeminent figure of this curiosity is undoubtedly Walter Benjamin’s (2002:416–455) flâneur, a person who wandered the streets in an effort to directly experience urban life. For Benjamin, the late-19th century Parisian flâneur marked the emergence of a new form of ironic subjectivity: a peripatetic and ambivalent voyeur, fascinated by commodities, new technologies and the prospect
of encountering the unexpected. The flâneur appeared within the crowd constituted by industrial capitalism, but rather than marching in lockstep with the masses, he remained intellectually distant. By wandering the streets and taking note of changes in the physiognomy of the city, he could enjoy the social and material products of capitalism, while remaining relatively aloof from the masses.

There are good reasons to be suspicious of flânerie. The flâneur is essentially a bourgeois or rentier subject and the freedom he enjoyed on the streets of Paris would not have been available to a flâneuse, even if she was a member of the propertied classes (Wilson 1992:61). If adopted as a method or pseudo-method by researchers, flânerie runs the risk of taking for granted a certain “freedom” of the street, which in fact is given only to certain categories of persons. Similarly, one runs the risk of reproducing a particular class and gender subjectivity—a highly particular view on the street—through one’s choice of what is observed and how it is described.

Yet what remains appealing about flânerie is the way it provokes questions about broader historical transformations. While wandering the streets suddenly one opens oneself to the possibility of being struck by the impression of a new building with an entirely novel design that encourages a new kind of sociality. What brought the building to this place at this particular historical juncture? Or one might notice that people who walk a given street are not the same people who walked it a year ago or ten years ago. What brought these newcomers and where did the people who used to walk these same streets go to? Simple questions such as these may spark one’s curiosity about the broader patterns underpinning street life and the broader social world of which they are a part.

The papers in this volume address questions like these in a variety of contexts, from the streets of Toronto to the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, Paris, Tokyo, and São Paulo. The questions are local and particular. From whence comes the functional ordering of the heavily trafficked intersection of St. George and Bloor? What happened to all the informal street side cafés at the Turtle Lake traffic circle and why does nobody miss them? How was it that the streets and pathways of Yanaka came to be so well appointed with flowers and shared gardens? What was it about Rue Lafitte that captured Heinrich Heine’s imagination? What were the processes that led peripheral neighborhoods like Lar Nacional to receive street lighting and sewer service? While the questions are highly particular, they serve as entry points into a broader problematic that animates virtually all anthropological research on street life: the question of whether the street is a terrain for creativity and a starting place for democratic or oppositional politics, or whether it is a terrain pre-structured by political, legal and economic forces that reinforce existing social hierarchies and patterns of exclusion.

The view that street life can be a terrain for creativity and innovation was most notably put forward by Michel de Certeau. For de Certeau (1984:96), the person walking in the street affirms the fragmentary, plural, and creative quality of urban life simply by the manner
in which she or he moves through space. These movements at street-
level are agentive and transformative, helping to constitute an urban
fabric that is the unpredictable sum of singular, creative acts rather than
a function of the disciplinary logic of the kind of panoptical view privi-
leged by cartographers, architects, and planners. Street life can thus be
understood to serve as a building block for what Doevendans and
Schram (2005:69) later referred to as the “accumulation city,” where
the overall “order” of the city takes shape out of a heterogeneous
mixture of everyday practices that sometimes exceed, or even challenge,
the functional spatial order desired by modernist blueprints and plans.

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961:55–73), Jane
Jacobs likewise describes the pedestrian as a figure moving in opposition
to the centralized, totalizing view of urban planners and others seeking to
control the city and its inhabitants. But she does so in a more sociological
register. For Jacobs, street life is important not so much because it adds a
poetic and creative dimension to the structuring of city life but because
it provides the social basis for civic engagement and political mobiliza-
tion. The street and the sidewalk enrich civic life because they facilitate
what Michael Warner refers to as “stranger-sociability” (2002:56). This
kind of sociability allows for social encounters but does not infringe on
the private lives of city residents. Everyday encounters between diverse
people on the street give rise to a loose-knit form of sociality that is
crucial to the formation of public sentiments. This loose sociality can
gain a more coherent social structure through the actions of what Jacobs
refers to as “public characters” (1961:70), people in frequent contact
with a wide circle of people who ensure that news travels through the
local grapevine. By keeping people abreast of the word on the street,
public characters help to establish a sense of belonging and community
that underpins participatory politics. In Jacobs’ own experience as a
community organizer in 1950s lower Manhattan, it was this sense of
public identity that served as the foundation for political mobilization
against the city government’s modernist development plans.

Writing about Harlem in the 1980s, Philippe Bourgois (2003)
describes a form of street life that stands in stark contrast to that por-
trayed by Benjamin, de Certeau, or Jacobs. The Harlem Bourgois
encountered was at the tail end of the urban industrial urban era, and the
harsh realities of the street meant that there was little space for the
wandering pedestrian or the bourgeois flâneur. When Bourgois walked
through the streets of Harlem he was harassed by the police, who
assumed he was a drug addict and up to no good. The street was not a
space of democratic politics but a space of crime and gangs. The public
characters that Bourgois describes were not community organizers but
lookouts for drug retailers. While they too helped to maintain some sense
of community cohesion, they did so by spreading fear rather than by
building trust. The climate of fear that permeated the street functioned
to protect the underground economy while lending legitimacy to a street
culture that prided itself on its violence, its masculinity, and its illegality.
Bourgois argues that the appearance of this form of street life was a direct
effect of the decline of blue-collar industrial employment in New York and of a deep-seated racism that permeated public and private institutions. For New Yorkers left out of the office towers and capital circuits of the emerging global city (Sassen 1999), the Harlem street offered an alternative social structure, economy, and culture with which they could identify.

In his book *Rogues*, Jacques Derrida reflects on this “corrupt and corrupting power of the street,” which gathers together all the “individuals of questionable morals and dubious character whom decent, law-abiding people would like to combat and exclude” (2005:66). Rather than emphasizing the liberal democratic possibilities of street politics, Derrida is interested in how the hoodlums, thugs and others who emerge from the street represent a threat to public order that “constitutes, even institutes, a counterpower or countercitizenship” (ibid). It is a counterpower that founds its own law and can climb from the street all the way up to the level of nation-states, where so-called “rogue states” challenge the hegemonic international order.

While Bourgois and Derrida do not view the street as a source of democratic politics, they do view it as a source for alternative political and cultural possibilities. When describing Harlem’s violence, Bourgois keeps reminding his readers that although Harlem street culture was fearsome it also had a highly creative aspect. From graffiti to breakdancing and hip hop, the culture of competitive display yielded new and unexpected cultural forms. Like Derrida’s rogue states, many of these cultural forms have now gone global.

The kind of street-level society described by Bourgois and highlighted by Derrida exists in cities around the world but it varies from place to place. In my own research (Barker 2009) in a poor neighborhood in the city of Bandung, Indonesia, toughs and gangs were until very recently the dominant powers on the street. Like their counterparts in Harlem, they prided themselves on their reputation for violence, but in Bandung the most powerful of these men were feared and respected mainly for their mystical knowledge, such as their knowledge of how to use spells to make their bodies invulnerable to attack. It was not only street culture that took a different form, it was also the relation of toughs and gangs to the state. In Bourgois’ study, Harlem’s underground society seems to exist as a world unto itself, which is either ignored or repressed by the state. In Bandung, toughs and gangs historically had a much more intimate—but also dangerous—relation to the police and the Army. In both the early-1980s and again in the mid-1990s, during President Suharto’s reign, the state sought to diminish the authority of street toughs (*preman*) by sending out paramilitary squads to murder suspected toughs. Thousands were killed and many of those who were not were forced to become spies, informants, and thugs for the regime. For many years, the state effectively ruled the streets indirectly through gangs and toughs rather than directly through the police. In some cases, former gang leaders were even able to achieve positions of authority within the government.
But in the late-1990s and early-2000s, after Suharto’s regime collapsed, this arrangement began to lose its force. In the neighborhood I studied, this was evident in the rise of a new kind of street-level leader, one who did not rely on fighting prowess or mystical power to cement his reputation. The new kind of leader emerged out of a growing contingent of street vendors, who were in need of representation since their activities often put them at odds with the city government and the police. These leaders still laid claim to the capacity to mobilize people for violent aims, but their reputation depended primarily on their capacities to mediate conflicts, to provide their followers with a safe place to sell their wares, and to generate electoral support for municipal officials. In a sense, the new leaders combined characteristics of Bourgois’ drug dealers with characteristics of Jacobs’ public characters: emerging from an informal and illegal economy, they used their contacts with people on sidewalks as the basis for formal political mobilization.

Taken together, the five papers that follow help us to better understand why and how street life can be both a terrain pre-structured by political and economic forces and a terrain for democratic or oppositional politics. We begin with two papers that emphasize those aspects of the pre-structuring process that might not always be visible to an ethnographic gaze. In her contribution, Mariana Valverde reminds us that we must take account of the law—not just politics and the economy—when we set out to understand why street spaces are ordered as they are. While the law is itself socially and politically constructed, once laws come into existence they wield tremendous power over the physical architecture of the street, the street economy, and the social practices that may take place there. To illustrate the importance of law to street life, Valverde takes an inventory of the many legal mechanisms that govern the everyday life of the sidewalk, the roadway, and the buildings at a major intersection in Toronto. This inventory shows that although the street may often be seen as a space of freedom, it may in fact be a space that is overdetermined by municipal regulation. To approach the street as if it is a democratic space of diverse encounters, as Jane Jacobs did, is to overlook the fact that many kinds of encounters have already been foreclosed by the law and those that remain are themselves deeply regulated.

Eric Harms examines a site in Ho Chi Minh City where government regulations have radically reconfigured the experience of street life. In the late-1990s, the Turtle Lake traffic circle was a place where people sitting in sidewalk cafés could look out on each other and on the bustling traffic while taking in the smells and tastes of a steady stream of street snacks offered by unlicensed, itinerant vendors. By 2003 the vendors had been cleared away and the design of remaining cafés compelled patrons to look inward rather than outward at the street. Harms shows that the death of this vibrant street culture, where the divide between public and private spheres had been blurred, was not merely a result of new by-laws but was also an effect of a discourse that made the capacity to maintain a sharp divide between public and private property a sign of “civilization” and urban order. What surprised Harms was how powerful this discourse
was, such that those who remained at Turtle Lake adopted the language of civilization and failed to experience the change in street life as a loss. This disturbing fact, Harms argues, would seem to suggest that the transformation of Turtle Lake was a victory not just for the state but also for the propertied classes who had the most to gain from people’s acceptance of an ideology that protects private property.

André Sorensen’s paper about a neighborhood in central Tokyo contrasts nicely with Harms’ story about Ho Chi Minh City. Rather than the demise of a vibrant street life, he describes a place where residents have reclaimed local streets and public spaces for festivals, art installations and shared use. The community’s efforts were successful in part because they employed a national discourse that emphasizes the need for community self-reliance and in part because community activists engaged in all sorts of activities—publishing newsletters, running educational tours, and holding events for the public—that helped to establish a shared local imaginary about the meaning of neighborhood places. Remarkably, the community enshrined this imaginary in a constitution that laid out the core values that should guide future developments. While residents were not always able to compel developers to follow their constitution, they did manage to affect some change.

Philosopher Willi Goetschel also explores the possibility that the street is a space that produces its own kind of law that can challenge conventional boundaries between the public and the private. Reflecting on passages about the street in Heinrich Heine’s polemic, Ludwig Börne, Goetschel invites us to follow the movement of Derrida’s rogue (voyous) rather than adopt the gaze of Benjamin’s flâneur or de Certeau’s detached spectator. The latter two figures, he argues, “serve the dictate of the structure they imagine,” while the voyous shows us the inherently dialogical quality of street life by contaminating the oppositions through which we try to make sense of urban and political worlds. Heine’s account does not portray the street as a place one goes to take in the view, but as a battleground where the boundary between public and private is constantly being challenged, fought over, and negotiated.

James Holston is also interested in this zone of contestation, but his focus is on the urban poor of São Paulo. In the periphery of the city, where residents have long been building their own residential homes and communities in a process known as autoconstruction (autoconstrução), neighborhood associations have achieved a new level of power. By struggling for rights to land tenure, paved streets, public lighting, bus service, sewage lines, daycare and other basic services, peripheral residents have challenged a long history of differentiated citizenship that excluded the poor from many parts of public life and public space. This “insurgent citizenship,” as Holston calls it, has helped to shape the trajectory of Brazil’s democratization. While it has not erased the lines of differentiated citizenship, it has redrawn some of the legal and practical boundaries that marginalized poor, urban citizens. It has also given rise to a new kind of raw, “in your face” street life where the poor stand up for their everyday rights and where the rich fight back by fortifying their communities and
homes. As Holston makes clear, this transformation is affecting all levels of public life, from the streets to the courts and all the way up into the institutions of national politics.

Holston’s account is compelling. It shows the ways in which laws and discourse were used to disenfranchise and exclude poor Brazilians, but it also traces the ways in which these exclusions provided the grounds for sustained mobilization, protest and conflict, which invigorated and transformed Brazil’s democracy. The result was nothing like the kind of democratic politics that Jane Jacobs envisioned based on her experience in New York. Indeed, Holston makes clear that the political force he describes is a product of street conflict as well as contact. Furthermore, the values and ideas put forward by these self-appointed citizens are deeply informed by the forms of exclusion proper to Brazil’s urban history. In some cases, they even reproduce certain aspects of the social hierarchies they are otherwise contesting. Like all the papers in this volume, Holston’s account should thus serve as a reminder that to understand street life, we must look at both its structuring and its creative tendencies. By studying the interplay between these tendencies, we may gain a better grasp of the conditions under which public culture may be transformed.

NOTE

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