

Mean Streets, Neat Malls, and Market Halls: Commercialization and Public Space in the Age of Globalization

We are all busy selling and buying. Some sell and buy stocks and bonds, real estate, or quickly privatized public property in air-conditioned offices; others hot dogs, crack, used clothes or their bodies in mean streets; some do it for a fortune, others for a penny; some buy on credit from the bank, others beg credit from the local shopkeeper; some like it formal, others don't like it informal but have no choice. Some do the 'right' thing, sell and buy the right stuff at the right place, others just can't do it 'orderly,' they trade on the pavement from a heavy-duty plastic bag, juggle ten jobs at the same time, want money at the red light in exchange for a better social conscience, or linger on city squares in the hope of selling their day's labor.

Citizens from all walks of life are engaged in market transactions yet the invigoration of commercial spirit and the mushrooming of vendors in public space are not necessarily signs of expanding opportunities. Nor are they the expression of "man's propensity to truck, barter and exchange." They are symptoms of a new global order that entails the expansion and intensification of market logic. But genres of commercialization vary greatly, have different price tags attached, and often clash in public. In fact, there is an increasingly visible and unsettling elementary tension between various users and uses of public space: between those who traverse squares and streets, look around, shop and leave and those who stay; between citizens who make a short appearance in public and those who eke out a living by hanging out there, whose own reproduction is inseparable from the reproduction of urban public space. What some perceive as the sordidness and unruly nature of urban public space is its petty commercialization, the blossoming of informal solutions and the precariousness of life that late

capitalism—which some also call disorganized—has brought about, to which public space bears testimony. Public space has lost the idleness it truly had only in bourgeois utopias, the expectation of which was nevertheless deeply ingrained in urban design and politics.

In sharp contrast to the ‘unruly’ streets stands the designated space of formal consumption, the increasingly regulated world of the shopping mall. Its idea and implementation merge two previous genres of commercial public space: the arcades where the theory-forming social type of modernity, the *flâneur*, used to roam and the department store that was the respectable woman’s playground. The mall is similar to the arcades in separating shop interior and mall interior, and allowing easy and unobtrusive access to, and withdrawal from, shops. The interior space of the mall is less private than that of the department store. The division between the interior of the mall and its exterior is, however, very clearly marked, the mall is demarcated from the dangerous streets by non-place parking lots and surrounding highways. It is a disjunctive point on the map, not part of the city. Its non-communicative architecture—lacking shop windows—displays a poor exterior. It stands on its own. Once inside, escape is difficult. The mall is unified architecturally and aesthetically—a total institution. This explains its oppressiveness. The shopping mall with its all-round services and in its social content is the generalization of women’s department store. The shopper is in need of protection; she has to be removed from the dangerous streets and placed in a safe environment that closes every night, that has strict regulations, its own security force, a filtered climate and public. But the mall is not women’s space any more. This time it is the entire middle class—defined as those who own cars and the basic means for formal and regular consumption—that has acquired characteristics that were once feminine. They are the ones who wish and can afford to transcend the fear and disorderliness that pervades urban life. For them the streets are unsafe and unregulated; they are

full of undesirable people who try to live off urban public space—beggars, illegal vendors, pickpockets, panhandlers, molesters, etc. who all want to force encounters with citizens who would rather avoid it. The mall offers an escape from that while its protected and confined space simulates some functions of the shopping street or the town square. Public space is torn by a dilemma similar to that of the public sphere: how meaningful political togetherness and action can be achieved amidst the increasing heterogeneity of citizens, their social polarization and the expansion of the public sphere. Malls offer a solution. It is a thoroughly commercial and depoliticized one, one that enhances—in a limited sense—the heterogeneity of the public and distills it into increased consumption. The gaps in the public are filled with commercial freedom. The significance of this should not be underestimated. The expansion of consumer culture can have liberating effects; it can finally treat some minority groups equally while creating its own minorities.

Mean streets and neat malls are but the obverse sides of the same order that selectively loosens and enhances control over its citizens of all kinds, and the premises of which are thoroughly commercial.

The market hall—newly built or renovated in its nineteenth century cast iron structure—stands between the mall and the open-air market place that is the institutionalization of street vending. It is a protected and permanent market place: covered, has an entrance, hours and rules of operation, and even though it collects a multitude of independent vendors, their togetherness is formally regulated. It is official. But it does not have the physical and social sterility of the shopping mall or even other genres that sell fresh produce, such as the supermarket or hypermarket. Gentrified as it may be with its increasing number of specialty delicatessen shops, climbing prices and hordes of inquisitive tourists in search of authentic ‘local’ flavors, it is still

precarious and volatile. The market hall is the last institutionalized hideout of the small food-producer, of tempered face-to-face haggling, and powerful informality. In spite of several attempts to do otherwise, vendors still have the freedom of not having to give receipts to customers. The market hall gathers produce and people of all kinds, yet has not severed the link between producer and consumer as shopping at other venues usually have. The gourmet still has the privilege of facing the mushroom picker who may potentially poison him. The shopper can warn the farmer that his new hybrid peach is just no good. The market hall is still the belly of the city with all of its connotations. Fresh produce smells and decomposes, the commodity moves around, gaggles, cackles, crows and tweets, and sometimes gets difficult to control. The scent of fresh flowers mixes with the smell of rotten goods and two-legged animal excrement, reminding the haughty late capitalist consumer that (s)he may not have overcome nature and the precariousness of life completely.

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