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Gender and Public Space in Divided Cities: Dynamics of Everyday Urban Life

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Editorial note

This working paper relates to Research Module B5 'Public Space in Belfast City Centre'. The paper was first presented at the Conflict in Cities and the Contested Sstate annual workshop in Belfast, September 2008.

Biographical note

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Abstract

The paper addresses two connected questions: firstly, in what ways might 'public' and 'private' spaces in cities be gendered; and secondly, what might this mean for the possibilities for complex forms of civility in a divided city such as Belfast? The specific focus on gendered dynamics of entitlement to inhabit urban space in this paper begins with some consideration of debates about the quality and experience of everyday life in cities, and the emergence of commonsense notions of 'public' and 'private' behaviour. Following this, key research concerned with the gendered dynamics of claimed collective, and particularly national, identities are outlined, in order to consider the significance of this literature for any study of the gender dynamics of life in a contested political context such as Belfast.

Keywords: Gender, Parenting, Public Space, Belfast, Civility.

… the multiplicity of imaginings and meanings attached to different spaces necessitates a more nuanced way of thinking about public space and the city. (Watson 2005: 598)

> Claiming social space and being seen in public becomes a way for social groups to legitimate their right to belong in society (Holland, Clark et al. 2007:1).

This paper seeks to explore some of the nuances Sophie Watson points to, in thinking about the ways in which gender operates as an organising mechanism shaping the perceived, conceived and lived dimensions of everyday urban space (Lefebvre 1991: 39). The paper addresses two connected questions: firstly, in what ways might 'public' and 'private' spaces in cities be gendered; and secondly, what might this mean for the possibilities for complex forms of civility in a divided city such as Belfast?

What follows is a discussion of the how everyday life in cities is organised through gendered practices of work and leisure, in ways which are linked with, and in turn reproduce, other social divisions, not least those of ethno-nationality and social class. The specific focus on gendered dynamics of entitlement to inhabit urban space in this paper begins with some consideration of debates about the quality and experience of everyday life in cities, and the emergence of commonsense notions of 'public' and

'private' behaviour. Following this, key research concerned with the gendered dynamics of claimed collective, and particularly national, identities are outlined, in order to consider the significance of this literature for any study of the gender dynamics of life in a contested political context such as Belfast.

Everyday urban life

The development of large-scale cities has had a major impact on the organisation of social life, not only within those cities, but also in non-urban contexts, as ideas about contemporary ways of life have changed (Sheller and Urry 2003). Sennett's landmark study of the emergence of and relationship between public and private life explores the impact of urbanisation on everyday interactions, and, as he puts it, 'the social terms on which human beings are expressive' (1978: 28).

His focus on the 'decline of public man' led him to trace the ways in which city dwellers have come to interact within and inhabit public urban spaces in distinctly 'modern' ways. Contemporary bourgeois cities, which developed through increasingly large-scale commercial activity, encouraged both increasing numbers of people into them, and increasing uniformity in self-presentation. Cities such as London and Paris, he argues, became increasingly marked by the presence of strangers, whose social position could not easily be read either from their clothing or from gleaning knowledge about their family background. Unlike ethnic cities where race or language could provide instant ways of classifying strangers, everyday life in these bourgeois cities involved routine encounters with strangers who could not easily be identified (ibid: 48). A distinction began to emerge between the private and the natural on one hand, and the public and conventional on the other (ibid: 73). Impersonal interactions between strangers, such as those characterising eighteenth century Parisian coffeehouses, where men of all backgrounds freely mixed and deliberately ignored marks of social difference other than gender, were gradually replaced by more distant and circumspect public forms of interaction. This latter development was supported by the emergence of the idea of individual personality in public life, which gained currency not least because it provided a way of giving meaning to life in secular contexts. The increasing prominence of the idea of individual personality in the nineteenth century was not without difficulties, as 'individuals' began to experience a number of anxieties in their encounters or potential encounters with strangers, including:

> ...the fear of involuntary disclosure of feeling, the superimposition of inappropriate private imagery on public situations, the desire to repress one's feelings in order to be shielded in public, the attempt to use the passivity inherent in silence as a principle of public order. (ibid: 128)

The consequences of these anxieties about the need to maintain sharp boundaries between ostensibly 'private' individual personality and 'public' urban life were such, Sennett argues, that the latter became less sociable, and more akin to silent, isolated consumption. Thus, a major distinction between public and private life took hold, at the everyday level:

> In "public," one observed, one expressed oneself, in terms of what one wanted to buy, to think, to approve of, not as a result of continuous interaction, but after a period of passive, silent, focused attention. By contrast, "private" meant a world where one could express oneself directly as one was touched by another person; private meant a world were interaction reigned, but it must be secret. (ibid: 148).

Thus, modern urban life combined public visibility with interpersonal isolation (ibid: 196), where men in particular could escape the rigid confines of domestic life, itself becoming increasingly demanding as the main arena where fulfilling relationships with others could be developed. The heavy focus on intimate life through the prominence accorded to personality has, Sennett argues, resulted in the decline of civility, a social practice which enables sociability without the risks associated with more 'private' forms of interaction where personality is thought to be at stake. The wearing of social 'masks', he argues, is essential to civil forms of interaction (ibid: 264).

Public/Private

Sennett's historical sociology of the public/private distinction through urban development leads to further questioning about the dimensions of these distinctions in contemporary contexts. Firstly, it raises normative questions about urban life, and particularly about what the value of city life should be for its inhabitants. Responses to this question range from communitarian visions of cities based on shared identities and values (e.g. reflected in Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*), to more classical republican ideals of collective life based on a shared set of interests, captured in the idea of the 'common good', to a more cosmopolitan notion of city life, such as

Sennett espouses, whereby strangeness is itself a central feature of urban experience, and is treated as a valuable resource rather than a problematic aspect of city life (Iveson 2007: 43-5). A more civic public culture would depend on promoting interaction between multiple, complex publics (Sandercock 1998:187 in Iveson 2007:45).

Any analysis of public life requires some delineation of the dimensions of publicness and privateness. However, as Mitchell explains, '[...] just what public space is - and *who* has the right to it - is rarely clear, and certainly cannot be established in the abstract' (2003:5). Lownsbrough and Beunderman (2007:14) note how spaces which are perceived as 'public', such as commercial spaces, often have significant barriers to entry. Similarly, the assumption that the home constitutes the epitome of private space, against which publicness can be distinguished, is itself questionable, as demonstrated, for example, by research into women's difficulties with managing the 'private' practice of breastfeeding in the home, especially in the presence of male family in friends (e.g. Stearns 1999:319). Indeed, homes in Northern Ireland have been important arenas where 'public' political conflict has played out:

> … the principal consequence of the Troubles on this space [the home] has been the utter compromise of its supposed privacy, with houses becoming sites of politically motivated intrusion, search, destruction, intimidation, injury, and often murder. (Reid 2007:948)

Thus, relying on a simple distinction between 'private' domestic space on the one hand, and 'public' non-domestic space on the other, is problematic, not least for a study of the gender dynamics of urban life. Iveson outlines three general ways of conceiving of publicness (2007: 8): firstly, as a context for action, which necessarily shapes that action; secondly, as a kind of action in itself, for example through public speech/practice; or thirdly, as a collective actor, in the sense of references to or representations of 'the public'. The ways in which 'publicness' is conceived will necessarily affect what counts as private. Sheller and Urry discuss three alternative ways of establishing the distinction between public and private, ranging from perspectives which distinguish between public (state-led) and private (market-led) economic interests; to political perspectives which define publicness in terms of rational debate and open communication, in contrast to the 'private' arena of family life, economic relations, and individual moral choice; and finally to socio-spatial

perspectives, which tend to distinguish between physical spaces which are public (streets, squares, workplaces, political institutions etc.) and those which are private (primarily household). As they argue, much debate about the public/private distinction is concerned with the dynamics and costs of inclusion and exclusion, and particularly the exclusion of women from 'public' life: 'The dichotomy between the public and the private is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle; it is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about.' (Pateman in Iveson 2007:23)

Feminist concern with the dimensions of public and private life has indeed been longstanding, as captured by the slogan 'the personal is political', an effort to underline that what we may think of as personal (or private), not least our intimate relationships, are strongly shaped by social power and should consequently be the focus of feminist political critique. The extent to which any aspect of life might be deemed 'private', and what that might refer to, has been the focus of much heated debate. However, as Nancy Fraser argues, rather than seeking to eradicate any notion of the 'private', feminist concerns with subjecting 'the personal' or 'private' to political scrutiny in the interests of gender equality is better served by, as she puts it, 'overcom[ing] the gender hierarchy that gives men more power than women to draw the line between public and private'(1997:115). Drucilla Cornell has argued that 'privacy' might best be thought of as the 'imaginary domain' of personal identity and self-realization (1995:33), an arena which includes moral reasoning, but not necessarily economic relations and/or familial/domestic life. From this point of view, the 'public' could be conceived as the arena where 'privately' generated and meaningful projects of self-realization, for example parenting, can be pursued.

This paper draws on this socio-political approach to the public/private distinction, which regards the generation of life projects as relatively 'private', in contrast to a public sphere of practical activity geared towards the realisation of those projects. Thus, parenting is both a public and a private activity, private in its inception and personal meaning, but public in its practical pursuit and, to some extent, it's regulation.

In thinking about the 'public' life of cities however, this non-topographical approach raises a question concerning how to conceive of the spatial, and its gendered dynamics (Massey 1994), in both public and private terms. Topographical approaches which conceive of urban public space in terms of the physical spaces of the city are common, not least because they explicitly take account of the physical

contexts within which human action takes place. This is particularly important in sharply divided cities such as Belfast, where physical space is often clearly marked as the territory of one or other of the antagonists in the conflict:

> Territoriality reflects the continuing importance of place to social networks and mental and emotional bindings while control of space is still regarded as being crucial to identity, power and politics. It also remains a key factor in the conflict in general... (Graham and Nash 2006:262)

Nevertheless, it remains important to distinguish between public and private life on the one hand, and, on the other, processes of territoriality, which, in contested contexts, are based on zero-sum classifications of symbolically marked and actively policed space, legitimated and reproduced through narratives connecting physical place with collective identity and entitlement (ibid:255). Territorially demarcated ethno-national space tends to include both public and private aspects of the lives of those who 'belong' within, as well as those who do not. It is consequently questionable whether a relatively static topographical account of the public arena can respond to the instability of its reference points, as what counts as 'public' or 'private' may shift according to what kind of action takes place in specific spaces (Goffman 1971:52; Iveson 2007:9). Indeed, Sheller and Urry point to the 'de-territorialization' of public and private spaces, as it becomes increasingly possible to move between public and private forms of activity in ways which disrupt apparently fixed spatial boundaries:

> ... mobilities [between and across publics and privates] are physical (in the form of mobile people, objects and hybrids of humans-in-machines), and informational (in the form of electronic communication via data, visual images, sounds and texts). (2003: 108)

Attempts to abandon a static territorial account of public and private spaces then have moved towards what has been termed a 'procedural', or practice-oriented perspective, whereby spaces are defined as public or private primarily in relation to the type of action or practice that takes place within them, taking into account the ways in which specific actions may shift across sites, as well as involving combinations of a range of sites. This may address the ways in which, for instance, '[p]eople [in cars] move within and between the public and the private, at times being in effect in both simultaneously' (Sheller and Urry 2003: 115). As Iveson puts it, '...

procedural conceptions of 'public space' draw explicit attention to the complex geographies of publicness that topographical approaches struggle to capture' (ibid: 11). From this point of view, for instance, certain types of communications media, as well as a persons' bedroom from where they engage in 'public' activity online, would count as 'public' spaces.

Child-care offers a clear example of a procedure or practice which marks a range of very diverse sites as public and/or private through the activities involved in while 'in public', including feeding and cleaning, engaging in open conversation with children about 'intimate' bodily and relational matters, responding and/or intervening in small children's 'uncivilised' behaviour, and more generally interacting with other people, including strangers of all ages, for example over co-operative play. Such practices often require carers to breach perceived boundaries between public and private spaces in ways which Goffman describes as violations of territorial co-mingling (1971:44). Such apparent 'violations' are not, however, usually perceived or interpreted in those terms in sites which are marked, whether formally or informally, as 'child-friendly', including the more 'public' spaces of the home; playgrounds and parks; children's commercial and entertainment venues; and places for accessing health and other forms of child-care. The dynamics of publicness and privateness in such spaces are defined through the practices of care and play, which take priority over other social norms in these sites. Privateness in these spaces may be observed less through the silence and passivity Sennett identifies as typical of urban public life, for example, and more through efforts not to engage in personality-focused interactions between strangers. Thus, the wearing of a carer 'mask' or persona would seem to allow for civil forms of interaction between strangers in spaces clearly marked as 'friendly' for children (and their carers). The practical demands of childcare would appear to define the boundaries between public and private in ways which are possibly distinct from those in operation elsewhere.

On the other hand, carers who are compelled to engage in intimate or loud (non-silent) behaviour in spaces not clearly marked as 'child friendly' are at risk of violating the 'public' norms of silent non-interaction. Indeed, as Holland et al argue: 'the needs of children and young people are not universally accepted as one of the defining parameters in the design of public space' (2007:34). Those involved in caring for young children or infants face a choice between either avoiding such places, occupying them apologetically or, perhaps, doing so defiantly.

Of course, these processes of 'public' or 'private' child care may take place in territorially defined ethno-national, neutral or shared spaces of a divided city such as Belfast. While there may be violations of public/private sensibilities in specific contexts, these may or may not overlap with violations or observations of ethno-national territoriality. It is the tension between such observations and violations of both procedurally defined public space on the one hand and territorially defined space on the other, which may open up opportunities for cross-group interactions, in a civil, non-personal form. While the outcomes of such breaches may be minimal, related to the specific task of childcare in hand, they are still nevertheless potentially significant, as examples of how more civic interactions across ethno-national divisions may take place.

This raises a series of questions about entitlement to inhabit public space, or, as Lefebvre puts it, the 'right to the city'. Given the norms of contemporary 'public' life identified by Sennett, to what extent do carers of infants and small children, usually women, feel entitled to inhabit the city on an everyday basis? Which carers feel entitled to occupy urban spaces with their young, relatively unsocialised charges, and which do not? Gender in particular would seem to sharply distinguish this sense of spatial entitlement to practice care-giving in cities, social divisions to which this paper will now turn.

Gender, Public and Private

The 'publicness' of public places is conditional and contingent. [...] [H]owever 'public' a place may be, whether or not it is accessible to you depends to a large extent on who you are...' (Holland, Clark et al. 2007:45)

Much research on the gendered dimensions of everyday urban life considers the gendered boundaries of publicness and privateness (e.g. Watson 2006) and particularly the ways in which ethnic or national groups seek to maintain distinctive, gendered boundaries as ways of marking collective identity (e.g. Yuval-Davis, Anthias et al. 1989; Yuval-Davis 1997; Watson 2005). The survival strategies of minority ethnic groups in relatively hostile contexts, through gendered practices, has been the focus of some interest (e.g. Anthias, Yuval-Davis et al. 1992; Fenster 1999). As Guru puts it, 'When cultures feel under threat from more dominant or subordinate groups, it is women that become the target of control in order to mark political, religious and other boundaries' (2003:19). Explorations of the relationship between gender and nationalist political projects and identities have found similar processes at

work, whereby the collectivity draws upon and thus reproduces a normative gender hierarchy, often by drawing on gendered familial roles, as a way of legitimising the larger project of national self-determination (Kandiyoti 1991; Nash 1993; Yuval-Davis 1997).

The gender symbolism at work in efforts to maintain ethnic or national distinctiveness have clear implications for women's status (Okin, Cohen et al. 1999; Werbner and Yuval-Davis 1999). Fenster, (1999) for example, tracks the isolation experienced by Bedouin women as a result of the failure of town planners to take account of group-defined boundaries between 'forbidden' and 'permitted' spaces when designing settlements in the Negev area of Israel. For these women, as for Jews living within *eruvim* (Watson 2005), 'private' space where movement and interaction is permitted includes the domestic home and some aspects of the local neighbourhood. Beyond that, space becomes forbidden, and women's freedom of movement is severely restricted. As Fenster argues, the nomadic Bedouin have responded to their forced settlement, a dramatic change which has threatened to undermine their way of life, by tightening internal social codes, surveillance and control in ways that are particularly felt by women, and in this case reinforced by town design.

This sort of gendered response to perceived threat to collective survival is not unusual, and has been widely analysed in studies of the dynamic interactions between gender and political struggles over collective continuity (e.g. Jayawardena 1986; Yuval-Davis, Anthias et al. 1989; Aretxaga 1997; Fenster 2005). The well-known analysis produced by Yuval-Davis and Anthias (1989), and much subsequent research (e.g. West 1997; Cockburn 1998; Banet-Weiser 1999; Al-Ali 2000; Ranchod-Nilsson and Tétreault 2000; Puri 2004), illustrates the ways in which women are often central to the production and maintenance of national identities, that is, those collective identities characterised by a political claim to recognition or self-government. Women's distinct roles as child-bearers and mothers, involved in passing on collective cultural and symbolic resources and practices, are often established as vital to collective continuity. Beyond these survival-oriented practices, however, gender is also frequently used to symbolically mark collective boundaries. For example, nations are often represented as women (e.g. Marianne, Liberty, Mother Ireland/Russia/India, etc.), in need of protection and defence by men, as part of the legitimisation of nationalist projects. Women's and men's distinct sexuality and bodily comportment are often taken as important markers of nationhood, and the use

of rape as a weapon of war suggests the strength of gendered iconography in thinking about these sorts of collectivities (Bracewell 2000). The conventional gendered family has become a common idiom of nationalist politics, since it offers a way of naturalising the existence of nations through asserting an apparent equivalence with families, as well as inspiring intense loyalty and legitimising inequalities, particularly those of gender and age. Thus, the idiom of the family is often central to gendered nationalist politics, in ways which assign women and men distinct and unequal roles (Calhoun 1997; Poole 1999; Puri 2004).

Despite the broad interest in the connections between gender and nationalisms, there is a lack of in-depth studies of the ways in which female members of actively nationalist groups get through their everyday lives, particularly where they are responsible for the care of small children or infants, in contested urban contexts. In what ways does gender operate in conjunction with ethno-national division to shape women's everyday lives? How are the boundaries of public and private collective life defined and negotiated by women, who are most directly affected by such boundaries, particularly those women involved in providing everyday care for 'uncivilised' infants and small children? As already noted, territorially defined spaces are important in contested national contexts, given the significance of territory in many forms of nationalism (Calhoun 1997). However, the dimensions of public- and private-ness are not limited to physical territories, and may shift in surprising ways, as Fenster found in her study of Bedouin women, where larger, more anonymous cities were defined as more 'private' and thus more accessible than smaller towns, where the risk of being exposed in forbidden 'public' space was heightened:

> Whereas the use of public spaces within towns is more restricted, travelling to public areas of cities nearby does not demand the same rules of modesty. It creates a fascinating spatial [...] pattern in which Bedouin women's mobility is very limited within the town, but other cities, which are large and anonymous, are considered less public in terms of codes of modesty than neighborhoods in the town itself. (1999:239)

This illustrates the complexities of women's urban citizenship, as entitlement to inhabit 'public' space is mediated by the complexities of 'public' and 'private' processes of gendered surveillance. What is of interest for the purpose of this paper is less the interlinking of ethno-national group and gender *per se*, and more the possibly shifting gendered dynamics of entitlement to use, and the potential

reconception of ethnic, neutral or even shared urban spaces, as the dimensions of publicness and privateness shift in relation to social practices. What possibilities might women's care-giving offer for cross-collective interaction in 'public' contexts, where the practice of childcare may take priority over the practice of maintaining and reproducing sharp collective boundaries? In what ways might 'public' child-friendly spaces of cities, characterised by the presence of strangers, as well as by the task of caring for somewhat undersocialised young children, provide opportunities for those women engaged in such practices to accommodate or reinforce the sectarian markers of division and hostility, described by Gaffikin, McEldowney et al. as commonsensically immutable (2008: 24)?

Furthermore, what might the implications of such possibilities be for reconceiving a city such as Belfast, in both gendered and ethno-national terms, and in ways that significantly change everyday life? What might the class dynamics of such possibilities be? These questions point towards debates about the value of cities as arenas where encounters across social differences can and do take place, and may even be facilitated by the city's spatial organisation.

Conclusion

> When civility fails in the city, identities remain singular rather than compound; someone who can be easily stereotyped is more vulnerable to discrimination than someone with a more complex social identity. (Sennett 2005:3)

What sort of social changes might offer the best prospect for avoiding a return to conflict in a divided city such as Belfast? It seems clear that efforts to maintain non-contact between collectivities has been an important dimension of formal and informal boundary maintenance, and was, for instance, a key plank of South Africa's apartheid regime (Dixon and Durrheim 2001). From Sennett's perspective, urban life is most rewarding when complex and impartial social contact and interaction can take place. This is most likely in a context where a sense of entitlement to inhabit the city is evenly distributed, a state of affairs that can be achieved to some extent through design, but which also reflects the social divisions, inequalities and hostilities, of the city in question.

This paper's consideration of the gendered dimensions of public life in contested cities raises a number of important questions, not least concerning the ways in which the right to the city may be gendered. Do women have a distinct sense of entitlement

to inhabit a broad range of spaces (public and private) in contexts often shaped by group-defined territory? If so, what drives this distinct entitlement, and how is it further inflected by class and other social divisions? Does this sense of entitlement shift as women move across the city, particularly as they move out of ethno-national territory into neutral or shared spaces (outlined by Gaffikin, McEldowney et al. 2008)?

It would seem that there are competing pressures at work here. Firstly, the symbolic significance of women to collective identity-making, particularly in social contexts shaped by inter-group conflict, has practical effects with respect to self-management, social networking, and child-rearing, leading to minute observations of ethno-national segregation. Secondly, women involved in care work, especially full-time mothers of pre-school children, are faced every day with intensely demanding practical tasks. Their ability to meet the needs of their children, while at the same time building or maintaining social relationships, is shaped by the social fabric of the city itself. For instance, as Holland et al point out in their study of the use of city spaces, although young children were more likely to be accompanied by women to the park, 'in general, males dominated the park, particularly when they gathered in groups' (2007:20). Thus, the leisure spaces of cities are often not neutral with respect to gender, even those spaces frequently visited by women involved in caring for young children. This segregation by gender may reinforce or counter other patterns of ethno-national segregation. Finally, mothers of young children also confront layers of entitlement to the city through their ability to access the 'private' play and leisure opportunities the city may offer. The dynamics of this aspect of the 'right to the city', for both mothers and children, illustrates the tensions between gender and class in particular, and raises questions about how these may intersect with territoriality.

The distinct social position of carers of infants and pre-school, usual mothers or other female carers (e.g. grandmothers, childminders, nursery workers) offers a route into examining the interconnections between the complex dynamics of 'public' and 'private' life in urban environments, ethno-national territorialism and gendered identity maintenance, in contested cities such as Belfast.

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