

The Enunciative Presence of the Vernacular: An Example from Istanbul

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DEFINING SPACE

Space is becoming a critical analytical category for the intersecting discourses on geography, social theory, and women's and cultural studies. The importance of space is recognized in contextualizing and grounding of politics, power, and ideology of different groups. Identities are produced and experienced in space and are bound to a spatial consciousness from which they derive a radical social praxis. Theoretically, the emphasis on spatiality originates from the premise that everyday routine activities of a given social agent takes place on space, whereby, individual presence is intertwined with spatially-organized social structures. With this in mind, feminist geographers argue that space is inadequately articulated to this day. Accordingly, they reject the pseudo-binary distinction between subjective meaning and social structure in favor of a theory more inclusive of the role of the space in social practice. "The grand debate in social theory between those stressing the causal power of human subjectivity and meaning - represented in geography by humanists - and those who emphasized structure - marxists in geography - would be ended by the recognition that individual human agents knowledgeably undertaking everyday routine tasks through time and across space produced and reproduced the structures of society, the economy, the polity and culture" (Rose 1993: 20). This recognition of space, however, requires new definitions of space itself in order to include the encounters between differences. According to Rose, space should not be articulated as transparent, exhaustive, and universalist, all of which characterize a 'public' space that represses all differences and assumes an agency that is homogeneous and disembodied. On the contrary, for women, for example, just as bodies are sites of struggle, the spaces they occupy are contested fields of representation to explore their differences. As Doreen Massey puts it, a place is only definable as a process containing multiple identities (Massey 1993). Personal and political subjective identities and the identities of place are constituted similarly: "Just as personal identities are argued to be multiple, shifting possibly unbounded, so also, it is argued here, are the identities of place" (Massey 1994: 7). Social beings invest social power in places and constitute a grounding place for identity through material, representational and symbolic activities.

DEFINING THE VERNACULAR

One of the leading issues in contemporary theory today is how to define agency in terms of difference. The construction of a difference is a dialectical move. The desire to dispossess is often co-present with the desire to assimilate. The 'different' (re)appears in social institutions, religion, law, family, and so on, as systems of codes of difference between groups, classes, ethnicities, and/or sexes. Occasionally, they are reified as "exotica", as in Stuart Hall's reference to multicultural differences at the global level: "You take it in as you go by, all in one, living with

difference, wondering at pluralism, this... condensed form of economic power which lives culturally through difference and which is constantly teasing itself with the pleasures of the transgressive Other" (Hall 1991: 31). In response to this kind of incorporation, the different Other tries to represent herself/himself through codes for presence, identity, and history. This is the self-empowering *enunciation* of the difference, an identity construction through a practice of signification. (Butler 1990)

A similar line of thought comes from the celebrated postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha. Similar to Hall, Bhabha articulates the enunciative function of identity construction in hegemonic contexts: "My purpose in specifying the enunciative present in the articulation of culture is to provide a process by which objectified others may be turned into subjects of their history and experience" (Bhabha 1994: 178). Hence, the function of culture is not epistemic but enunciative in order to affirm a sense of self and identity.

For both Hall and Bhabha, subject identity is not 'given' prior to its construction. It is situated at present, constructed in language, and functions to explicate differences according to systems of power and hegemony. Hence, identities are formed in resistance and in accommodation (to other identities) by intertwining diverse elements. This construction, however, always remains partial, contradictory, and hybrid. Identities are never complete or closed. They are never bounded by structures that are natural and a-historical. Laying out the constitutive aspects of discourses of identity allows us to place claims of authenticity within the enunciative function of identity politics. Therefore, claims to authenticity are performative, as identity is performative. Such claims are the outcome of dialogic relations of power configurations between different groups. To put it differently, even the often-used categorical duality between the traditional and the modern is simply the designation of identity locations, which are embedded within the modern signification itself.

The concept 'vernacular', in conventional use, refers to naturalized, localized, a-historical, nativist modes of knowing and practice. In that usage, it stands for 'tradition' as opposed to the 'modern' (Wright 1998). One of the most notable person who reflects on the impact of the appropriation of the city on the vernacular, advocating the role of space in the post-modern city in the dynamics of power, is Sharon Zukin (1992). However, her approach to vernacular is different than what is proposed here. Zukin's text reads as if the vernacular pre-existed the historically meaningful 'becoming' of the contemporary city. In other words, *doer* exists before doing. For this reason, the vernacular in Zukin's work is not the same as the performative agency as presented in this paper.

The vernacular, as it is deliberately used in this paper, refers to the agency of the enunciative presence of the subaltern. Furthermore, depending on the context, it might refer to the individual agency of a singular woman/man, to group agency, and/or to a particular position of a spatial community, such as the squatterhousing of Turkish cities, the

gecenkondu. Either way, the vernacular is constituted at the crossroads of alternative spaces of performative levels: at the level of the bodily presence of the agent, *vis-a-vis* citizenship (economic/political/social agency), or within the distributive/re-distributive mechanisms of the contemporary metropolitan (global) city. More importantly, this vernacular embodies the dialectical relationships of constituting differences. The above use of vernacular helps to shift the emphasis away from a subject of mere consciousness, a state of mind, or a set of pre-determined cultural values. It enables us to approach the biography of the vernacular as a material, symbolic, and political practice, which are situated at the junction of negotiations within regimes of power. Henceforth, the vernacular has to negotiate in daily activity different levels of class, patriarchy, hegemonic nationalisms, religious fundamentalisms, global capitalism, and so forth.

It must be noted that biography as approached in this manner is different than the usual approach to 'identity'. The former is embodied, unlike the disembodied self-consciousness of the latter. The body in turn is situated within the larger body-politic. On the one hand, the body's movements, day in and day out, take place within contradictory, heterogeneous and hybrid regimes of hegemonic interpretations and economies of desire, performing as woman, peasant, migrant, worker, transvestite, and so on. On the other hand, the vernacular-biography asserts agency, desire, and the power of resistance against hegemonic articulations.

The discourses on nationalism, modernization, globalization, authenticity and religiosity, among others, present themselves as the medium in which the vernacular operates. However, as the vernacular acts within this space, it also affirms its difference and negotiates for power. In this process, the vernacular assumes a mimetic relation to power/regimes. According to Irigaray, woman in patriarchy, for example, often use the strategy of mimicry "to *undo* the effects of phallogocentric discourse simply by *overdoing* them... Irigaray's undermining of patriarchy through the overmiming of its discourses may be the one way out of the straitjacket of phallogocentrism." (Moi 1993: 140)

Following Irigaray, Moruzzi claims that women assume the feminine role deliberately and as an imitation of a constructed feminine essence so that they transform subordination into corroboration: "Feminine mimicry, or masquerade, may allow a (female) subject to acknowledge the genealogy of her victimization and her practical experience of its constraints without becoming immobilized within the identity of the victim" (Moruzzi 1993: 262). To put it differently, vernacular agency affirms itself in multiple ways without being totally appropriated by hegemonic spaces by mimicking and masquerading symbolic constructions, so that it can negotiate its way out. 'Out' does not mean moving to an unproblematical de-political space, but rather out of one discourse of truth and authenticity into the other. In this way, (dis)location takes the vernacular from one corner of the hybrid self to the other, representing a (dis)location in metaphorical, symbolic and physical space. This ought to show us the ambivalence in the vernacular's position *vis-a-vis* the expectations and the definitions of the situated domains, be it public or private, rural or urban, traditional or modern, Eastern or Western, and so on. As confronted by the vernacular, these locations, distinguished and reified by the center, are not separate domains. Each performance is a political enunciation of self, sexuality, the body, labor, and family, all of which take place on these very spaces.

THE ENUNCIATIVE VOICES OF THE VERNACULAR IN ISTANBUL

Istanbul is an overlapping space of micro-geographies. It is commonly referred to as a 'village-city' as well. In this claim, a crisis situation is implied to exist between the 'urban-elite culture' and the 'peasant-culture' of the immigrants. In various narratives, from social sciences to the media, the immigrant 'people' (*halk*), who come and make place

in their squatter-neighborhoods (*gecenkondu*) is a generalized construct of people with a pre-modern, localized culture. This generalized space of people, as the source of the 'authentic' oral folklore of Anatolia is situated in opposition to the Westernized citizens. In this approach, while culture is reified (in terms of a fixed set of beliefs and values), power and difference (modern versus the popular) are reduced to a single binary.

The immigrants to Istanbul encounter hardships in relation to various domains of economic, social, and political articulations. Migration takes place as a result of landlessness, joblessness, war, or maybe for the desire for more of what the city can offer in diversity of spaces. As large numbers flock to the city, they become the post-modern flâneurs for survival in the city. Meanwhile, they enunciate identities through overlapping lines of differences. Over different accents, they search for the familiar that may help find work or a squatter-dwelling to live. In this chaos, the thread of culture binds the masses of the city and brings them together.

The popular culture reveals the ethics and aesthetics of these vernacular identities of the city. The space of popular culture functions in place-making at the encounter. The hybridity and complexity of the urban-scape that reflect the new spaces of self expression of the vernacular. For example, Swiss *et al.* (1988: 17), based on views of cultural theorists like Lefebvre, Grossberg, and others to locate the affect of music (which can be economic, political, bodily, or emotional) within the material practice of space. According to Swiss *et al.*, the realm of aurality is important in creating a sense of place—a practice of spatial imaginary. Different aural spaces correspond to wider differences. The textual/meaning making side of popular culture and the ethnographic aspect of the audiences allow communities to enunciate their presence. Based on Spivak's 'strategic essentialism', Lipsitz claims that it is also possible to take "on disguises in order to express indirectly parts of their identity that might be too threatening to express directly. We might call this 'strategic anti-essentialism,' because it gives the appearance of celebrating the fluidity of identities, but in reality seeks a particular disguise on the basis of its ability to highlight, underscore, and augment an aspect of one's identity that one can express directly" (Lipsitz 1994: 62). The same is true for many of the sounds of Istanbul.

AGENCY WITHIN A CROWD: THE SEARCH FOR PRIVACY IN PUBLIC SPACES

It must be noted that, while one struggles against the hardships and the power of the center's dominating forces, one seeks emancipation from the binding and de-personifying forces of the life of the community as well. Literature points to the authoritarian and alienating dimensions, especially for women, of the public space of civil societies. I will argue here for a contradictory possibility. Jeff Weintraub (1995) has effectively presented how the dualist construction of the private-public separation is ambivalent and slippery, often the concepts referring to multiple spheres. From the economic approach to private/market -state/public bifurcation, to the familial versus the political sphere, the sociality of the private and the public assumes different forms. Among these, and several others not included here, this paper aims to emphasize those aspects of life as lived in public individually. The argument is that the private sphere of intimacy that allows for individual expression of desire is in fact possible for large segments of the population through the life of the city. Early twentieth century theory was explicit on this as we see in the works of Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel and others. However, the spatialized view of agency and memory, as constituted by them, was about a 'way of life of the city' versus the singular 'man'. The way in which the public space came together with the actor was however not the same as how today there are several spatial forms that co-exist in the lives of citizens of contemporary cities such as Istanbul. In other words, the biographical life of the vernacular today is more complex, in the sense that there are overlapping spaces through which

agency operates and political resistance to everyday operations of power take place. Unquestionably, Istanbul, a city whose population increases by three hundred thousand annually, faces typical problems of satisfying basic physical needs, especially housing. But, similarly important are 'cultural' needs that are met by the experience of the public space of the city. Strolling on the streets, promenades by the Bosphorus, public concerts, and/or picnics in the park bring people together from different origins, dialects, patterns of life and religiosity, and economic status. These spaces constitute and offer privacy and a diffused sense of agency outside of the communitarian structures of home and neighborhoods. They are emancipatory as they allow for transgression and subversive modes of action that defy authoritarian forms of (gendered) structures.

In conclusion, the arguments presented above point to a need for new concepts and categories of analysis to study the life of globalized cities of societies that encompass large marginal populations who claim the city in their own ways and enunciate their presence in often subversive ways against the hegemonic structures of the center and power regimes, discursive and/or otherwise.

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