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Conclusion: Notes on Cities, Undergrounds and Closed Upper Rooms

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The Sociable Spaces of Culture

This book is one outcome of a one-day workshop/symposium on "Underground Music-Making in Hong Kong and East Asia," held at the ACO Bookstore and Cultural Outreach centre in the Wan chai District of Hong Kong in December of 2018. It did not go unnoticed that this event, devoted to "underground" culture, was held on the fourteenth floor of a multi-purpose building. The venue exemplified the familiar, even stereotypical ways, in which Hong Kong's cultural life claims place within the verticality which is one of the city's most distinctive features. The invisibility of these spaces within the visual landscape of the city is in marked contrast to the ubiquitous illuminated signs signalling commerce and entertainment which were, for a long time, an equally emblematic and stereotypical feature of Hong Kong (Fernandez 2018).

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In the weeks before I travelled to Hong Kong, I had become interested in the "upper rooms" which have been one kind of space for cultural ferment. I had found myself deep in readings of the history of what, in France, are now called "sociabilités littéraires" (literary sociabilities). This term encompasses the ways in which social life organizes itself around particular cultural forms (in this case, literature), and the characteristic places and event-forms in which this sociability will unfold. Admittedly, much of the scholarship on these *sociabilités* is about France exclusively, and is concerned with cultural life in Paris in the nineteenth century (contexts far away in time and place from those of twenty-first-century Hong Kong). Nevertheless, the space in which the Underground Music-Making workshop was held evoked, for me, the closed, upper rooms which were one of the first sites of Parisian literary exchange.

In the history of these sites, as recounted by Glinoer and Laisney (2013), the closed, upper room (or *cénacle*) hosted private meetings of writers and their followers, in which new work was read aloud and commented upon. Membership in these meetings was limited, and by invitation, and these closed rooms were invisible to the world outside. We know about what transpired in them only because a few members wrote about them in their diaries or their letters. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the *cénacle* largely been superseded by what was called the *salon*, a term which then, as today, may designate both a particular kind of room (typically, in contemporary houses, the "living room") and a distinctive kind of event (the sociable gathering of those interested in culture or ideas). Parisian salons were often organized by women, for whom they offered opportunities to engage in a cultural life otherwise closed to them. At a salon, writers might read their work, but the overall tone was much more casual and conversational than that of the *cénacle*. The salon was more likely to encourage gossip, the trading of news and the cultivation of a network. Then, by the end of the nineteenth century, both the closed room and salon began to lose their centrality within Parisian culture life. More and more, artists—painters, musicians, writers—began to meet in public, commercial establishments: in bars, cafés, cabarets and so on.

There were several reasons for this move out of closed rooms into the public spaces of the city. Electric lighting made cities both visually

interesting and more hospitable at night. The heterogeneity of social types and identities meeting in these new public spaces was itself viewed as an embodied form of information about urban cultural life, and artists increasingly felt the imperative to observe and participate in that heterogeneity.

If I have dwelt so long on the rarified atmosphere of nineteenth century Parisian literary life, it is because the distinction between these kinds of spaces—between the closed room, the salon, and the bar or cabaret— remains with us in the present moment. The closed room (whether "upper" or not) may be simply the space of snobbish or professional exclusion, like dj booths in well-known dance clubs of the past, as described by Tim Lawrence (2016), or the back room at Max's Kansas City in New York, in the 1970s. We might ask whether the music studio is like the closed room or *cénacle*, or whether the backstage area at concerts is something like the salon, with its open but controlled accessibility. In the life of art gallery openings and literary festivals, likewise, we may distinguish been closed and open spaces—between those in which entry and sociability are tightly controlled and others in which they are more open, looser.

The challenge of alternative musical cultures, of course, is that of managing the passage of music between these kinds of spaces: between (a) the closed space in which innovation is possible under conditions of isolation, (b) the more open but controlled private space in which ideas may be tested and discussed; and (c) the public, sociable space in which underground music may connect with the broader energies of city life. The risk of remaining in the first is that your little group leaves no traces, has no transformative effect on the broader culture. (This, alas, has been the fate of so many late-night jam sessions in different musical genres.) The challenge of the second is resisting the absorption of culture within a generalized group sociability whose own logics supersede the project of moving culture along. And one risk of the third, which joints creative activity to the broader buzz of urban life, is that music becomes instrumentalized, by city tourism boards or others who want to turn cultural production into a simple token of urban effervescence.

The closed room also has a prominent place in the history of insurrectionary movements, like underground political parties. (A museum in

Belgrade memorializes the secret room which hosted a printing press used by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia during the Axis occupation of the country in the 1940s.) We may wish to think a little more about the benefits of enclosure and invisibility in the current political climate. In his powerful contribution to this volume, Ahkok Wong points to the way in which variously authoritarian regimes—not only in Hong Kong, but, we might add, in other places, like Brazil or Poland, which find themselves under the shadow of resurgent fascism and right-wing populism—have produced a new urgency for those engaged in making and experiencing culture. In this urgency, the simple idea of an alternative culture, marked by small-scale activity and a bohemian resistance to commercialism, has receded. It has retreated, perhaps, in the face of the genuine need for culture, which is underground, invisible to the powers in place and linked to other forms of radical social struggle. Culture is driven to become underground, Wong writes, when it must be concerned with its own self-protection.

In such situations, it may be the case that underground culture must give up the fight for visibility which has marked its politics in different moments. For a half-century, at least, from the "semiotic warfare" described by Dick Hebdige (1989) and others in relation to the first wave of punk, through to the struggle for a "intimate publicness" which David Verbuč (2017) sees as underlying the politics of American DIY musical culture, cultural politics has been conceived as the movement of radical impulses into public arena which they will in some way alter. In my own, perhaps tendentious reading of Ahkok Wong's analysis, it evokes the second condition offered by Davis and Raman to explain those social contacts in which protest does not assume the forms of public visibility:

> When public squares are not routinely occupied, however, we also know something about citizenship. Either there is no claim-making, and the status quo is not under fundamental challenge, whether literally or figuratively; or, conversely, the depth, critique, and extent of citizen dissatisfaction with existing power structures is so great that claim-making and negotiation are bypassed and efforts are directed towards more rebellious and unconstrained insurgent action. In such settings citizens will turn not to the public squares but to the streets or the underground. And in this sense,

while citizenship and insurgency both have a physicality, they suggest a different spatiality: the former is more likely to be enacted in public squares and other physically bounded spaces that are recognized by states as appropriate sites for claim-making, while the latter unfolds in interstitial, marginal, dispersed, and less easily controllable spaces where the state's power and authority is less easily wielded. (Davis and Raman 2013, p. 62)

The building of an invisible, underground culture within "interstitial, marginal, dispersed and less easily controllable spaces" is going on now in multiple places of the world, in which LGBTQ+ or other non-conforming populations find themselves facing threats both longstanding and unprecedented in their oppressive brutality. As Davis and Raman suggest, a radical politics once organized around the choice between engagement and autonomy has shifted, to become a politics focused on the spatialities of insurgency.

Spaces of Culture, Spaces of the City

As I complete this brief *Afterword*, in March of 2020, the steady scaling up of concern over the COVID-19/coronavirus has significantly (if temporarily) altered the way we talk about the role of place and territory in relation to musical culture. In China, the live-streaming of "bedroom concerts", on-line festivals and internet-only "club events" (Raghav 2020) is followed with interest by international media. These sorts of events have moved the "closed room" of the bedroom concert into the broad spaces of social media, just as they have made the bedroom internet connection a gateway to the broad sociability of the on-line festival or club event. One part of these developments exemplifies the movement towards what Amy Catania Kulper has called "ubiquitous domesticity", ". . . a phenomenon in which the horizon of domesticity is indiscriminately extended into the public realm. Its defining feature is the evocation of a single standard or interest–in this case the intimacy associated with the domestic setting–in order to construct 'the social', which, paradoxically, deforms society" (Kulper 2008, p. 111).

These developments have also revived the discussion of "virtual scenes" which was prominent in discourses on music in the first decade of this century. Across Europe, the massive cancellations of concerts and festivals threaten a resurgent live music economy organized around big events. This is occurring even as the closure of bars and night clubs, in the name of ensuring "social distance", has compounded a nightlife crisis whose initial causes were the ongoing gentrification of cities like Berlin (Worden et al. 2020; Hawthorn 2020). People are speculating on social media about a permanent, radical re-structuring of broad segments of social and cultural life, in which the co-presence of bodies in space or face-to-face interaction would give way to remote communication and transmission.

We have heard these prophecies before, of course. Since the early twentieth century, the arrival of each new communications or entertainment media has been seen as causing the death of a place-based culture organized around the co-presence of performer-artist and audience-consumer. The same effect has been ascribed to traumatic events of all kinds, from pandemics to the attacks of September 11, 2000. These are seen as causing a retreat from public spaces and a withdrawal into worlds offering the dual securities of domestic intimacy and distant, mediated participation in cultural life.

And yet, as anyone involved in politics of culture over the last decade will quickly acknowledge, urban physical space has become central to these politics. This has happened to an extent one might not have predicted twenty years ago, when the key logics of cultural change seemed to be those of virtualization and globalization. At the level of both policy and politics, I suggest, the key struggles around culture have been "urbanized": cities have emerged as the key sites in which cultural identities are elaborated, and citizenship is increasingly felt and lived as an "urban" citizenship. As cultural policy and politics have been urbanized, they have, as well, become spatialized. Policy and politics are increasingly about the distribution, protection or transformation of space, actions which unfold in relations of complicity or antagonism with logics of capitalist expansion and administrative governance. In this respect, as the French architect and urbanist Federica Gatta notes, invoking the philosopher Michel Lussault, we have moved from the class struggle to the struggle over place. (My English translation sacrifices the rhyming symmetries of the original

French, "De la lutte des classes à la lutte des places.") Gatta continues: "Faced with the weakening of national economic spaces, as a result of the mobility of international firms, the city offers itself as one of the principal places for the spatialization of economic power" (Gatta 2018, p. 37). This spatialization of economic power has directly confronted cultural spheres who imagine their purpose more in more in terms of the spatial relations of the city: the building of spaces of being-together, of collaboration, of experimentation and transgression.

Not very long ago, in the face of conservative national governments in much of North America and Western Europe, one could speak of what Joan Subirats (2018) called the "redistributive" role of cities. Subirats was speaking, in particular, of those cities whose governments were more progressive than those of the nation-states which surrounded them. (A casual way of referring to this was as the "Bad Presidents, Cool Mayors" phenomenon.) In the face of national austerity regimes, cities might institute local policies which softened the impact of national politics – through local minimum wage laws (as in Seattle), the protection and expansion of public housing programs (as in Vienna), or the legal acceptance of things like same-sex marriage (as in Mexico City). If "Cool Mayors" were often seduced by the fashionable doctrines of the creative city, waterfront regeneration and entertainment districts, at their very best they might invest in culture as a means of softening forms of social division which national governments either ignored or were too willing to exploit for their own preservation.

If the era of the "redistributive" local government marked the first decade of this century, the second has witnessed something very different. The municipality has become the political level at which the violence of contemporary economic life is felt and enacted most strikingly. Gentrification is one word for a whole set of transformations which encompass the growth in homelessness, the destruction of neighbourhoods, the growing gap between rich and poor, the diminished aspirations of younger generations, and, with particular pertinence to this volume, the disappearance of spaces of alternative or underground culture.

In the "redistributive" city, the heterogeneity of urban places was seen as an antidote to the levelling uniformity produced at the level of the

nation or region by global trade agreements and national capitulation to them. "But if that is partly true," Subirats suggests,

> we can also observe the growing importance of 'place', of those spaces which accumulate capacity, resources and opportunities. Cities, many cities, are still privileged spaces in which things happen which do not happen elsewhere (or at least not in the same way) in other places. At the same time, they are spaces in which conflicts and social contradictions both old and new come together. (Subirats 2018, p. 13)

The way in which urban spaces condense histories, possibilities and contradictions, is, of course, one of the things that has made them central to ideas of cultural politics, even as such spaces have become the ground level for transformations which we might judge to be oppressive and restrictive. Subirats adds: "Cities are also places for experimenting with, and upgrading, the structures for new dynamics that we might call those of an extractive collaborative economy" (p. 13). What is Air BnB, for example, but a system for the further extraction of value from places already embedded in the capitalist markets for housing and urban infrastructure?

In her introduction to a 2018 issue of the Lisbon-based magazine *Contemporânea: Cronicas de Arte/Art Chronicles*, editor Antonia Gaeta suggests one way of conceptualizing a city—as "a container for relationships, actions, words and memories" (Gaeta 2018, pp. 4–5). The cold functionality of "container" here is offset by the warm, human-centred character of those things that a city contains. At the workshop which inspired this book, there was lively talk of "relationships, actions, words and memories", but there was recognition, as well, that these are not enough to guarantee the kind of cultural life we might want. The things in Gaeta's list need to be "contained", not simply in cold material structures, nor in the abstraction of the city as unitary form. Rather, they must find their place within those forms of collective life in which cultural expression unfolds: in scenes, undergrounds, networks, social circles, subcultures and political movements (to name just a few). These forms are themselves containers, at a lower level: they mould the elements in Gaeta's list into more-or-less coherent mixes of act and affect.

Here is another definition of city, from the British geographers Ash Ami and Nigel Thrift: "Cities are spatial radiations that gather worlds of atoms, atmospheres, symbols, bodies, buildings, plants, animals, technologies, infrastructures, and institutions, each with its own mixes, moorings and motilities, each with its own means of trading, living, and dying" (Ami and Thrift 2017, p. 5). Here, the human is all but absent, gathered up with other kinds of bodies and animals, in a list that exemplifies the currently fashionable decentering of the human in favour of other kinds of materiality, both physical and social. The spaces of cultural expression, we might guess, find their place amidst these elements, in the interstices of insurgency, perhaps, or in those points of convergence in which solidarities reveal themselves. They are distributed within those "spatial radiations" which Ami and Thrift see as the defining form of the city.

At the risk of sounding platitudinous, we might conclude that we need both visions of the city: one focused on "relationships, actions, words and memories" and another respectful of the material and biological variety within which these things find their place. Cultural undergrounds are places of exchange and connection, but they are also life forms which struggle to survive amidst the "mixes, moorings and motilities" (Ami and Thrift 2017) of the contemporary city.

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