Public Space
People, Power, and Political Economy

Professor Don Mitchell
Department of Social and Economic Geography
Uppsala University, Sweden

Course dates: 30 July – 3 August 2018

Main discipline: Human Geography, Sociology,
Political Economy, Urban Studies

Course Credits: 10 pts (ECTS)
Limitation: 25 participants

Course objectives / learning outcome
Public spaces are contested spaces. They are spaces of protest, often, but also of
relaxation and recreation. In capitalist cities public space are vital to social life – and to
social reproduction. They are the essential complement to the more private spaces of
the home and workplace. They are where the diverse inhabitants of the city meet – or
don’t. Increasingly they are places where people live – or don’t (given the violence of
street life). Public spaces are where people come to be (in all the senses of that term).

Public spaces are power-full spaces. They are sites of intense policing, policing that
itself is becoming more diverse in terms of who does it, if not to what ends it does it. Public spaces are shaped by law, even as law is shaped by struggle in and over public
spaces. Through policing and law, as well as through public spaces’ architecture – or
more generally their morphology – public spaces have the power to determine who can
be in the city, what they can do there, and especially to whom the city belongs: who has the right to the city. In this sense public space is power.

Public spaces are contradictory spaces. More and more the end to which policing of
public spaces is put is to safeguard their role in the successful circulation and
accumulation of capital. As economies in the “global north” continue to shift from an
industrial mode of production to an urban model of production, public spaces are both
essential to accumulation and – often – a barrier to it, as, despite the power of public space to represent the interests of the powerful, people use them in ways not intended (to sleep, to deal drugs, to hang out, to protest, or just to be present when their presence is unwanted). Public spaces are thus, more and more, a problem within capitalist political economies, and, as we will see, also a solution.

The goal of this course is to explore, in a fair degree of depth, just how the contradictory forces of people, power, and political economy come together in public spaces and define urban social life, and thus what contradictions arise when, as city space itself becomes the primary site of capital accumulation, public spaces a primary site of social struggle.

A bit more specifically, we will seek to understand how capital circulates through and shapes the urban landscape (through property as well as built forms) as well as how it doesn’t: how crises and struggle can interrupt the circulation of capital and themselves significantly shape urban space.

Our “dependent variable” throughout will be public space in its many permutations – streets and sidewalks, plazas, urban parks, publicly-accessible but privately-owned spaces, etc. Public space in the city is what we will set out to explain.

We will seek to understand the (changing) position of public space in urban political economies, for, as we will see, public space is a basis for urban life as well as for accumulation; neither are possible without public space (which itself is a contradiction at the heart of capitalism).

Since the early 1990s research on public space in urban studies (and geography more specifically), as well as in critical landscape studies, has exploded. There is now a huge, vibrant but also somewhat incoherent, literature on public space. By focusing on the political-economic contradictions of public space, how power shapes and expresses these contradictions, and what all this means for people in the city, we will bring some coherence to the unwieldy literature on public space. We will ground it in the actually processes of political economy and thus the unfolding nature of lived urban life.
Key Books

3. Henri Lefebvre (2003), The Urban Revolution (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

COURSE OUTLINE
(The short titles of readings below are keyed to the full bibliography that follows; those marked with * are required. The others are optional)

Lecture 1: Social Struggle and the Making of Public Space
This lecture will set the stage by first quickly surveying definitions of public space and then examining how social struggle (including class struggle) is vital to what public space is – and what it might become. The lecture will introduce the major themes of the course as well as point to key topics (property, policing, protest, capital circulation, social reproduction, etc.)

Readings:
- *Cassegård, “Contestation and Bracketing”
- *Harvey, “Labor, Capital, and Class Struggle”
- Kohn, Brave New Worlds, Chapters To Be Determined
- *Mitchell, Right to the City, Chapter 1
- Mitchell, “Controlling Space, Controlling Scale”
- *Mitchell, “From Boise to Budapest”
Lecture 2: **Circulation of Capital and Theories of Public Space**
This lecture continues the arguments laid out in Lecture 1 but roots the production of public space specifically within theories of capital circulation – and its contradictions. In doing so it also moves beyond definitions of public space and examine the evolution of intellectual and scholarly arguments related to it.

Readings:

- *Harvey, Urban Experience* (chs. 1&2)
- *Lefebvre, The Urban Revolution* (all)
- Low and Smith, “Introduction”
- *Mitchell, “People’s Park Again”*
- Staeheli and Mitchell, *The People’s Property?* (chs. 6-7)

Lecture 3: **Property, Rent, and Accumulation**
Public space can only be understood in relation to property, which in turn can only be understood in relation to rent and to overall processes of capital accumulation. This lecture will seek to explain why, while also providing a basis for understanding how and why conflict arises over public space in the forms that it does.

Readings:

- *Blomley, Unsettling the City* (Ch. 1)
- *Harvey, Urban Experience* (Chs. 3&9)
- *Staeheli and Mitchell, The People’s Property?* (Ch. 2-4)
Lecture 4: **Laws of Capital and Laws of Public Space**

Law is what power in public space looks like. Law is both the resolution of conflict and the basis for it. This lecture will begin the development of a theory of law as power to further deepen our understanding of how public space is structured and what public space does in cities. But law – as a legal or juridical relation – cannot be separated from the laws of capital, at least not as long as the city remains capitalist. We will explore why – and what that means for people in the city in general and in public space more particularly.

Readings:

- *Harvey, Urban Experience* (Chs 4&5)
- Blomley, “Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence”
- *Blomley, Rights of Passage* (Chs. 1&3)
- Mitchell, “Property Rights, the First Amendment, and Judicial Anti-Urbanism”
- *Mitchell, “Pretexts, Paranoia, and Public Space”*
- *Mitchell, The Right to the City* (chs. 2, 7 & 8)
- Rannila and Mitchell, “Syracuse, Sidewalks, and Snow”

Lecture 5: **Public Space and the Problem of Social Reproduction**

Public space is a crucial site for social reproduction, which in turn is a prerequisite for capital circulation and accumulation. As with everything else, social reproduction in capitalism is contradictory – it is not only a precondition of accumulation but a barrier to it. We will explore how and why, and how public space both mediates and arises out of the struggle for social reproduction – a point not always fully understood by social reproduction’s theorists.

Readings:

- *Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care”*
- *Harvey, Urban Experience* (Chs. 6, 7 & 8)
- *Katz, “Vagabond Capitalism”*
- Mitchell and Heynen, “The Geography of Survival”
Lecture 6: Gentrification and the Problem of Public Space
Public space is a problem – and the nature of this problem can perhaps best be understood by understanding gentrification not only as a question of “regeneration,” of “privatization,” or even of the class recomposition of the city, though all these are important. Rather, gentrification is a phenomenon of capital circulation within which public space is both an opportunity – a strategy or a tactic of gentrification – and maybe sometimes a bulwark against it. This lecture looks at how and why understanding gentrification as a phenomenon of circulation is vital for understand what public space does in the city.

Readings:
- *Smith, “Towards a Theory of Gentrification”
- *Smith, “Gentrification and Uneven Development”
- Smith, “After Tompkins Square Park”
- *Thörn and Despotovic, “The Urban Frontier”

Lecture 7: Anti-Homelessness
It is with the question of homelessness that all the contradictions of public space – from the people in it, to the power that resides in it, to the shape of capital in relation to it – come bursting forth. This is especially so now that “American-style” homelessness has gone global. We will look at these contradictions in their most local, and their most global, manifestations and in doing so will gain a firmer purchase on why public space is so vital for people.

Readings:
- *Becket and Herbert, Banished, Chapter 1
- *Blomley, Rights of Passage (Chs 2-4 6-8)
- *Mitchell, “Homelessness American Style”
- *Mitchell, Right to the City (Chs. 4-6)
- Mitchell, “Tent Cities”
- *Speer, “Right to Infrastructure”
- Speer, “Tent Wards”
Lecture 8: **Policing Space, Policing Race in Public**

A – if not the – primary role of policing in the city has become to safeguard capital circulation and accumulation. As such, police-led management of surplus populations and other unruly people (like protesters) has become exceedingly important in the political economy of cities. This happens in public space and changes its nature. Yet policing itself is dynamic and contested. We’ll examine the policing of public space – public space’s most overt exercise of power – and who is subject to it, with an eye to understanding why the policing of public space is shifting so fast.

Readings:

- *Gilmore and Gilmore, “Beyond Bratton”*
- *Kelley, “Thug Nation”*
- *Mitchell, Attoh, and Staeheli, “Policing-Centered Community Cohesion”*
- *Vitale and Jefferson, “The Emergence of Command and Control Policing in*

Lecture 9: **Uprising: Protest and the Politics of Public Space**

If policing in one force shaping public space, then protest is another. Public space is the traditional home of protest but protest is increasingly squeezed out – even as it struggles to open public space back up for political action.

Readings:

- *Dikeç, Urban Rage, (Ch 1)*
- *Mayer et al (eds) Urban Uprisings, (Ch 1)*
- *Smith and Mitchell (general eds.) Revolting New York (Introduction)*
- *Staeheli and Mitchell, People’s Property (Ch. 1)*
Lecture 10: The Fight for Public Space in the City of Capital

People fight back. Power is not a mere imposition, but always a dialectic of order and struggle. Public space is right at the heart of any effort to make a just city. The right to the city is the right to be in the city and the right to make the city, and as such is grounded in the fight for public space.

Readings:

- *Attoh, “What Kind of Right”
- *Blackmar, “Appropriating the Commons”
- *Harvey, Rebel Cities, Chapter 5
- Lefebvre, “The Right to the City”
- *Marcuse, “From Critical Urban Theory to the Right to the City”
- Mitchell, The Right to the City, Conclusion & and Afterword to 2014 edition

In Addition

There will be at least two (optional) excursions to examine public spaces in Oslo – both in newly developed areas and in older ones. These will be held after lunch and will end before dinner time. The goal will be to discuss and debate our growing theoretical understanding of public space in relation to the actually-existing spaces of this city.

Course Reading List (* = Required)

- *Attoh K (2011) What kind of right is the right to the city? Progress in Human Geography 35: 669-685


About the Lecturer
Don Mitchell is Professor of Cultural Geography in the Department of Social and Economic Geography at Uppsala University as well as Distinguished Professor of Geography Emeritus at Syracuse University. He has been researching and writing about issues related to public space – particularly homelessness, protest, law, and policing – since the early 1990s. He is the author of The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space (2003/2014), The People’s Property? Power Politics and the Public (with Lynn Staeheli, 2008) and has just completed editing (with the late Neil Smith) Revolting New York: How 400 Years of Riot, Rebellion, Uprising, and Revolution Shaped a City (2018). He is currently at work on a book entitled, Mean Streets: Homelessness, Public Space, and the Limits to Capital.

Besides research on public space, Don also researches the role of labor in producing landscape, particularly in agricultural California, having published The Lie of the Land: Migrant workers and the California Landscape (1996) and They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape and the Struggle Over Industrial Agriculture in Bracero-Era California (2012). He has also been known to weigh in on the question of how to theorize culture in human geography: Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction (2000).

He is the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (1998), two Fulbright Fellowships (2002, 2013), a Guggenheim Fellowship (2009), and the Andres Retzius Medal in Gold from the Swedish Society of Anthropology and Geography (2012). He has been a visiting scholar at the University of Oslo, the Annenburg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Chile, and the Advanced Research Collaborative at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He previously taught in the Oslo Summer School in 2006.