Counterpublic Spaces and Movement-Building

Oksana Mironova

To make themselves and their causes visible in traditional public arenas like streets and parks, social activists require counterpublic spaces, where communities come together to define goals and to carry out the unglamorous work of movement-building and organizing. In this article, Oksana Mironova reflects on the emergence of counterpublic spaces in the context of current resistance to the politics and policy of the Trump administration, identifying challenges for activists also striving to provide sanctuary spaces in a time of crisis.

On January 21, approximately 4 million people[1] marched across the United States. These coordinated protests are being billed as the largest public action against a sitting president, if not the largest coordinated demonstration[2] in United States history. The breadth of mobilization points to a real possibility for a popular resistance that can not only effectively challenge Trumpism, but also usher in broader, progressive change. However, I cannot help but think back to February 15, 2003, when I, along with 10–15 million people in 600 cities across the world, marched to oppose the war in Iraq. Older New Yorkers may remember June 12, 1982, when one million people rallied for nuclear disarmament at the Great Lawn in Central Park. Both the nuclear-freeze and anti–Iraq-War movements ultimately deflated: nuclear weapons are a greater threat today than they were on January 19, 2017, and Iraqi civilians continue to suffer as a result of American foreign-policy decisions. Aware of this history, activists like Women's March co-organizer Linda Sarsour[3] and scholars like Frances Fox Piven (2017)[4] are calling for a popular movement based in grassroots organizing, punctuated by sustained, multidimensional creative resistance.

Resistance movements become visible in traditional public spaces. However, they gain strength just below the surface, in community centers, faith-based institutions, bookstores, and other spaces that serve as local hubs for the development of oppositional discourse. In New York City, older spaces like Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, as well as newer hubs like the Mayday Space in Bushwick, Brooklyn, provide a safe environment for people to meet, build trust, and organize, offering the stability necessary for long-term movement-building.

However, many neighborhood hubs are under threat from a 30-plus-year history of urban policies that result in privatization and displacement. Further, in the currently fraught political environment, these spaces, and the people who maintain them, will likely become even more stretched for resources. To nurture a successful popular movement, cities have to counteract policies that destroy spaces where popular movements are built.

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1. See: www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2017/01/united-states-women-march-washington-170122214110286.html.
2. See: www.vox.com/2017/1/22/14350808/womens-marches-largest-demonstration-us-history-map.
3. See : www.buzzfeed.com/coralewis/heres-what-the-womens-march-organizers-want-to-happen-next.
4. See: www.thenation.com/article/throw-sand-in-the-gears-of-everything.

Subaltern counterpublics

As anyone who has ever tried to lie down on a bench in a park or used an unpermitted amplification device at a New York City protest knows, public spaces are heavily policed and often have fairly stringent regulations on permitted behavior. While traditional public spaces are great for displaying mass discontent, they are less than ideal for nurturing the growth of popular movements, because they are *too public*. At the same time, truly private spaces, like most homes, are *too private*, without the spontaneity and openness of public space.

In "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy", critical theorist Nancy Fraser (1990) argues that people belonging to nondominant social groups develop their own, parallel public spheres, which she calls subaltern counterpublics. These spheres, according to Fraser, serve as sites for "withdrawal and regroupment" and "as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (p. 124).

Counterpublics manifest in a variety of different spaces. Some, like queer dance clubs or feminist bookstores, are privately owned commercial spaces targeted to the needs of specific groups. Others, like community rooms in affordable-housing developments, basements of faith-based organizations, or student activity rooms in universities, are seemingly neutral spaces within larger institutions that are politicized over time, often in response to a specific external threat (for example, a tenant association organizing against the impending sale of a federally subsidized affordable-housing development or a Muslim student association at a public university responding to police monitoring). Finally, some spaces, like activist cafés and social centers, are created explicitly to provide space for social-justice organizing.

While counterpublic spaces vary greatly, most share a couple of distinct characteristics. Straddling the line between public and private, these spaces are private enough to provide a safe venue for members of marginalized communities to be open about their identities and to build trust, while public enough to allow for a relatively free flow of both people and information in and out of the space. Most are deeply rooted in neighborhoods and relatively visible, providing a stable and predictable space for a community (either defined by a geography or an identity) to come together and organize over time. They are the site of the unglamorous and hidden aspects of movement-building, which precede any successful and visible action: meetings, phone banks, poster-making, and strategic planning. Counterpublic spaces also provide room for the social side of movement-building, including informal gatherings that let people build loose networks that can be activated in a time of need.

Sites for movement-building, sites for sanctuary

Spaces that foster movement-building are not necessarily ideal sites in times of crisis. Reacting to the rising threat to refugees and undocumented immigrants, a range of institutions, most prominently campuses and faith-based organizations, have moved to declare themselves sanctuary sites. There are multiple layers to this declaration: a symbolic one, creating a welcoming space for undocumented students, parishioners, and community members; one related to information and data, where a campus may decide not to share information about its students' legal status with federal authorities; and a physical one, where a space can choose to actively shield a person from unjustified persecution, including deportation.

With each of these layers, the risk to the space and the people operating it increases. The federal administration has threatened to withdraw funding support from sanctuary campuses. Further, while law-enforcement officials do not like to make arrests in places of worship, it is a matter of practice, not of law. For example, the Justice Department successfully prosecuted[5] a number of activists active in the 1980s Sanctuary Movement, which used religious institutions to shield undocumented

[5] See: www.nytimes.com/1986/05/02/us/6-convicted-5-cleared-of-plot-to-smuggle-in-aliens-for-sanctuary.html.

Salvadorans and Guatemalans from deportation. The prosecution's cases were built on information gathered by government agents who moved freely in and out of the faith-based institutions that acted as sanctuary spaces.

Truly private spaces, like homes turned into safe houses, may be more secure than counterpublic spaces for shielding individuals from unjust laws, for the same reasons that they are often not ideal movement hubs – they are controlled and not easily accessible. However, by leveraging their moral authority to skirt unjust laws in a highly visible manner, sanctuary sites can be effective in buying time, and this is sometimes enough to figure out a pathway out of a crisis (through a legal defense, for example).

Judson Memorial Church and Mayday Space

New York City has a rich and varied landscape of spaces that nurture the development of counterpublics. Some faith-based institutions serve this purpose because they are rooted in neighborhoods, carry an implicit moral authority, and are somewhat insulated from the real-estate market, providing both long-term stability/visibility and free or cheap meeting space. Most mosques, synagogues, and churches incorporate charity work into their mission, building on the concepts of Jewish *tzedakah*, Muslim *sadaqah*, and Christian almsgiving. Faith-based institutions that become part of the counterpublic sphere show a stronger commitment to the concepts of social justice and mutual aid, seeing disenfranchised people as active agents of change, rather than passive recipients of charity. At the same time, faith-based institutions illuminate the inherent tension in counterpublic spaces. They may not be universally welcoming to all disenfranchised communities. For example, a faith-based institution can have an active role in neighborhood anti-displacement organizing and hold conservative views on social issues like LGBTQ rights and abortion access.

The 127-year-old Judson Memorial Church offers an example of a faith-based institution that had been a movement-building site for a large portion of its history, nurturing the development of multiple counterpublic identities. Starting in the 1960s, Judson participated[6] in "the local and national movements for civil rights, peace, women's rights, and gay rights." Some of its work falls more into the category of direct service, including abortion referrals pre-1972. However, during the HIV/AIDS crisis, which had a profound impact on Greenwich Village, Judson hosted patient/caretaker support groups and was one of the few churches to perform funeral services for victims of the epidemic. Going further, Judson was the site of an early private drug trial of experimental HIV/AIDS medication. By providing a space for the expression of grief and support, and even, as Robert France states in *How to Survive a Plague: The Inside Story of How Citizens and Science Tamed AIDS* (2016), the launch of a "scientific revolution", Judson was a key site for the development of a national response to the AIDS crisis, which incorporated people with HIV/AIDS, gay-rights activists, and medical professionals.

Today, Judson continues to provide space for a cross-section of social-justice organizing, hosting everything from an annual anarchist book fair to fundraisers for the Urban Justice Center's Street Vendor Project.

Unlike Judson, which was imbued with radical politics over time, the Mayday Community Space in Bushwick was established explicitly to nurture the development of counterpublics and as a movement-building institution. Mayday's website states:

> "[M]ovements and organizations need sustainable and supportive infrastructure to maximize their impact. There are few inviting spaces in NYC that serve as both organizing hubs and social venues to promote solidarity across a wide range of groups and communities...By coming into a shared space, disparate activists and organizations will feel connected to a broader social-justice community, allowing for the cross-pollination of ideas and relationships. As many of our organizations are unable to effectively advance a policy agenda on our own, the trust and

[6] See: http://classic.judson.org/Historical-Overview.

> cooperation engendered between activists, community-based organizations, labor, and other progressive institutions will strengthen the coalitions needed to win meaningful reforms."

Mayday serves as a neighborhood hub, responding to the immediate needs of Bushwick and neighboring Ridgewood, Queens. It hosts organizing events addressing tenant displacement and social events like community dinners. It is home to a range of projects, including Derecho a Techo, a tenants' rights organizing initiative, the Language Justice Project, which promotes multilingual access, and People's Collective Arts, a collective that creates visuals for mobilizations and campaigns. Mayday also serves a growing need for affordable meeting and event spaces for social-justice organizations citywide, hosting dozens of events each month. This month alone, it is hosting an HIV workshop and testing, a Million Hoodies Movement for Justice meeting, the electoral committee of the Democratic Socialists of America, a convening of the Metropolitan Anarchist Coordinating Council, art-making for a Purim festival, yoga in Spanglish, and family dinners and birthday parties. Infusing radical politics into its organizational structure, Mayday is collectively run and managed, and prioritizes "people of color, immigrants, women-led groups, LGBTQ, poor and working-class communities." Mayday's intentional approach to its structure and programming allows it to serve multiple, overlapping counterpublics, and to remain nimble in response to new threats – like the election of an autocrat.

Neoliberalism and counterpublic spaces

Unfortunately, counterpublic spaces like Mayday and Judson are increasingly difficult to sustain in New York City. According to historian Kim Moody (2007), cities across the United States underwent a neoliberal transformation in the mid-1970s, responding to the success of urban social movements, and, using urban crises as an opportunity, conservatives "reacted in a highly unified and organized way to establish more direct control" of the city. Long-term, this has resulted in a consensus that a market-driven approach to public land is the most efficient approach to the management of resources. This ideological turn results in cuts to municipal programs and to support for policies that either directly or indirectly contribute to gentrification.

Gentrification is the production of urban space for progressively wealthier (and often whiter) users. This definition, used by geographer Jason Hackworth (2002), moves beyond a focus on residential displacement, and incorporates gentrification's effect on neighborhood culture broadly. The dual impact of increased commercial rents/property taxes and the (forced) dispersal of former residents results in the loss of counterpublic spaces. Theaters, clubs, bookshops, and community centers/organizing hubs are often at the whim of unpredictable and unregulated commercial leases. Even spaces operated by organizations that are relatively isolated from the real-estate market, like faith-based institutions or community centers, are not completely immune.

Where do we go from here?

Today, many cities, including New York, are positioning themselves as sites of defense against a federal assault on immigrants and refugees, civil liberties, free speech, and reproductive rights. As highlighted by Frances Fox Piven, Trump's agenda can only be accomplished with local cooperation. By the same token, resistance to Trump's agenda will also happen locally. In order for resistance to morph into a sustained movement, people need to be able to come together, in space, to build trust and organize.

At the same time, the current political atmosphere will put a strain on counterpublic spaces. Like other institutions across New York, Judson Memorial Church, which was active in the 1980s Sanctuary Movement, publicly reaffirmed its commitment to serving as a sanctuary congregation. However, it is unclear how far the current administration is willing to go to enforce its deportation

order, and how much of already constrained resources spaces like Judson will have to expend on legal and associated costs.

There are a number of actions cities can take to preserve spaces that allow people to conspire and organize, including adopting strict noncooperation policies with federal deportation orders, increasing community control over neighborhood resources through community land trusts, and supporting counterpublic spaces through public property disposition or participatory budgeting. More broadly, mitigation of land speculation through deed restrictions or commercial rent control can help reverse current trends that threaten counterpublic spaces, ensuring that New York City remains hospitable to long-term movement-building.

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Oksana Mironova was born in the former Soviet Union and grew up in Coney Island, Brooklyn. She is a founding board member of the New York City Real-Estate Investment Cooperative (NYCREIC). Her writing about cities, alternative economies, and public space has appeared in *Urban Omnibus*, *Shelterforce* and other publications.

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