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Joanne Massey

Commodification, Control and Civic Space: A Mancunian Perspective

Abstract

This paper will focus on the experience of the city of Manchester which has undergone intense regeneration as a result of the 1996 IRA bombing and hosting the 2002 Commonwealth Games. Whilst the rebuilding has led to the creation of new civic spaces which are more heavily used post-regeneration, certain groups (most notably youths) have been subject to increased control and surveillance (Massey 2007). As a consequence of this imaginative ways of legitimising (Mitchell 2003) the youth population's presence in such spaces, led to the inception of a Peer Youth Work project. This paper tells the story of the struggles and contests (Smith 1996) around public space and the impact of tighter regulation and control on public space (Raco 2003). Drawing on interview data the notion that the peer youth workers have become agents of control themselves as they are 'policing' the area will be explored. An important question here is whose values and rules are the peer youth workers upholding and enforcing?

Introduction

"Capitalism, even in the so-called advanced capitalist societies, has only now truly penetrated every aspect of life [...] the logic of commodification, accumulation and profit maximisation penetrating every aspect of our lives." (Wood 1997: 551 cited in Jenkins 2006: 199-200)

Culture-led regeneration programmes utilise architecture as a semiotic tool to increase their economic and cultural status (Jenkins 2006). For example in Manchester, Urbis was used as an iconic image for the city during the 2002 Commonwealth Games. The links between culture and capitalism will be explored here by looking at the presence of a large youth population in a recently regenerated area of central Manchester. The area was initially intended for tourism as in the post-fordist economy, culture is a rapidly growing sector, despite the fact that the social and economic effects of tourism are often overrated (Jenkins 2006). The main areas of debate surrounding the commodification of public space in this instance are social control and surveillance, the contested nature of public space and policing youth. Each of these debates will be explored in more detail, but first let us turn to the methods employed to answer the question whose values and rules are upheld in the public space under study?

Methodology

This paper is part of ongoing research into public space which commenced in 2001¹. Young people became the primary focus of this research in 2006 and since then approximately six focus groups have been carried out with young people. This paper will draw on two focus groups carried out in April 2007 with peer youth workers and an informal 'off the record' interview with adults connected to the peer youth workers conducted in May 2008. The focus groups were digitally recorded, consisted of a number of open questions and the young people advised that their comments would be in confidential and the ultimate destination of the data would be an academic journal article. The informal interview with the adults was recorded by note-taking in the setting and was transcribed shortly afterwards. It is envisaged that the use of such a range of qualitative methods will give insight into whose values and rules those involved with the peer youth work project upholding and enforcing.

Social Control and Surveillance

Surveillance occurs either face to face or more commonly it is technologically mediated via CCTV and as we live in a 'surveillance society' (Lyon 2007) being observed has become a ubiquitous part of everyday life. Arguably who is surveilled and why is an important question. Lyon (2007) notes that governance plays a role here as those in power carry out 'social sorting' which marginalises and excludes certain groups, thus the political process becomes a personal one. Indeed if you are young, black and male your image is more likely to come up on CCTV than that of other's. As ultimately the city is an entrepreneurial space concerned with profit-making, surveillance acts as a means of making spaces safer, thus more appealing to investors whilst simultaneously increasing urban inequality (Coleman 2005). Historically surveillance was made possible by the introduction of street lighting whereby being visible in urban space became linked to social control (Lyon 2007).

"In modern times, surveillance appeared as part of the political economy of capitalism (Marx), as a product of bureaucratic organization (Weber) and as a shift from punishment and spectacle to self-discipline (Foucault)" (Lyon 2007: 4).

In the past we had walled communities to ensure safety, now we have CCTV (Malone 2002).

More recently the notion of order maintenance stemming from Wilson and Kelling's (1982) influential work 'Broken Windows' had a significant impact on the policing of public space. The notion that keeping an area well-maintained and free of litter and eyesores promotes safety is widely accepted and provided the foundations for zero tolerance policing. Indeed the British legal system has recently seen the introduction of on the spot fines for various types of anti-social behaviour including littering, graffiti and the consumption of alcohol in public. In such a climate the behaviour of young people is often punished and every effort is made to control them. The term 'surveillance' has become synonymous with policing and crime control. Cities are particularly heavily populated sites of surveillance, with CCTV, police officers, street wardens and private security companies. Surveillance also allows bodies such as the police to decide where crime 'hot spots' are located (Lyon 2007). Post 9/11 regulation of public space has also been legitimated by terrorist attacks.

De Lint (2000) argues that the distinction between social control and surveillance derives from the internal and external nature of these processes. Social control involves an aspect of internal and individual behaviour, whereas surveillance is linked to power and external observation. Foucault's (1991) notion that the individual would alter their behaviour if they knew they were being observed now pervades urban life.

"The assemblage of 'panopticism' or security surveillance has evolved over time as a short-hand of the trivialization of the individual in the shadow of the state or corporate power" (de Lint 2000: 46)

The main element of social control is self-regulation and refers to a set of practices which ensure people conform and contribute to social order. It is important to question whose values and goals constitute the social order? Arguably they are those of the state and ultimately capitalists. Shared value systems are seen as a tool for the regulation of public space resulting in what Sibley (1995) has termed the 'purification of space' (Malone 2002).

Contesting Urban Space

As we have seen urban public space is constantly subject to the never-finished process of control and regulation, yet this is not the only struggle occurring. Increasingly urban space is commodified and newly regenerated areas are viewed as valuable, thus individuals and corporations fight for a presence there. Manzo (2005) argues in comparison to the totally commodified space of the shopping mall, *“traditional public spaces exist to support every social form”* (2005: 84). This argument can be rejected though as there is evidence to show that in fact public spaces do not support every social form, in this case the youth population (Massey 2007). That is not to say that the streets cannot be a site for democracy as

“streets are the terrain of social encounters and political protest, sites of domination and resistance, places of pleasure and anxiety” (Malone 2002: 157)

Indeed one of the reasons why cities are viewed as so problematic and are subject to intense regulation, is due to the scope they offer for freedom, which results in an inability of their inhabitants to govern themselves (Osborne and Rose 1999). Urban spaces are increasingly imaged to appeal to the affluent as the main aim is to make a profit. Thus such spaces are experiencing gentrification, or according to Smith (1996) a more vicious process – revanchism. Revanchism aims to securitise (Raco 2003) public space and give it a much safer ideological focus, which has a significant impact on those with a legitimate presence there. Those marginalised by this process (minorities, women, the poor, gays and immigrants) are seen as having ‘stolen’ urban spaces, moreover they are a threat to morality and neighbourhood security (Smith 1996). Fear becomes associated with certain groups such as the homeless (Anderson and Holden 2008) and teenagers as their appearance is marked by the ‘aesthetics of fear’ (Zukin 1995).

However, it is not only people that seek a presence in public space but corporations, or more specifically global brands. Yakhlef (2004) argues that brands can be viewed in spatial terms and allow us to navigate and read space. They may attract or repel us, though the most important factor is that we should always have a choice about this. In other words a brand should not make us feel uncomfortable or inferior due to our socio-economic status. As aforementioned safety in urban space is paramount to investors (Raco 2003) and this is a reciprocal arrangement as certain brands may make us feel safe. We may feel safe in a coffee bar as we know such spaces and the brands associated with them do not attract ‘unsavoury’ characters or behaviour. This is what Atkinson (2003) calls ‘domestication by cappuccino’. Whilst brands may serve a purpose in the sense that they allow us to navigate space and possibly feel secure it should be noted that brands are also exclusionary and ultimately their aim is to make a profit from the generic spaces they create (Yakhlef 2004).

Unfortunately teenagers do not fit into the entrepreneur’s image of the city as sites of bustling but safe places offering the ultimate urban tourist experience (Osborne and Rose 1999). Whilst the visibility of youth culture could be seen as a triumph of space for teenagers, youth are generally viewed as ‘other’ and must fight for their right to be included in public space (Malone 2002).

“in contemporary society, there is a new surge of “moral panic”, structured by gender, class, age and racial fear with public space continuing to be a contested domain, a place marked by paradox and tension” (Malone 2002: 160).

As previously stated this has resulted in the inclusion of an increased security presence (private security guards, CCTV, street wardens etc) and a proliferation of legislation and policy to tackle the 'problem' (ASBOs, on the spot fines, dispersal orders). Young people like public spaces that are safe and whilst communities may be keen to create a space for young people away from the urban core (Malone 2002) this often does not consider the personal safety of teenagers.

Policing Youth

One of the central paradoxes surrounding youth as a category is that they are both the victims and perpetrators of street crime. They are viewed as potentially violent, yet vulnerable simultaneously (Pain 2001). However, we are more familiar with the image perpetuated by the media and politicians of 'yob culture' in connection with youth (McDowell 2002) as young people often used as a scapegoat for society's ills and viewed as a source of fear of crime. Teenagers are particularly problematic as they are too young to go to playgrounds where they are protected from those on the street (Malone 2002) and too young to go to public houses. Malone (2002) argues that young people can be grouped with others on the margins such as gays, lesbians and refugees as they hold different cultural values, as do homeless populations (Mitchell 2003).

Generally speaking there is a misconception that children should be seen and not heard (Valentine 1996 cited in Malone 2002). With reference to teenagers their rebellious streak and desire to experiment does not place them in this category. The city offers the perfect arena for the creation of identity, along with more freedom than is allowed at home, or locally and a sense of safety. However, as they are

"excluded, positioned as intruders, young people's use of streets as a space for expressing their own culture is misunderstood by many adults" (Malone 2002: 157).

Public spaces are in fact incredibly important for the expression and identity of teenagers. Sadly

"there is a mounting danger, as privatization of public space increases, that young people will be excluded from places the "public" now inhabits. The perception of youth as a potential threat places them in an ambiguous zone in relation to space" (Malone 2002: 162).

Malone (2002) argues that young people should participate in decision-making and offers three ways to recognise and affirm young people's spatial needs

- 1) political representation of group interests
- 2) celebrating diversity and distinct features of groups
- 3) re-imagining the street as a site for collective cultural production and consumption (Malone 2002)

One way in which young people's presence has been legitimated in the case of Urbisⁱⁱ in Manchester is via the Cathedral Gardens Project (CGP) which has resulted in the employment of a number of Peer Youth Workers (PYWs). The aims of the CGP are

- safeguarding young people
- providing young people with a voice
- enabling young people to actively and positively develop their own community

- integrating this young people's space into the city, reducing any conflict with other city centre users and addressing negative perceptions on all sides.
(<http://www.urbisunderground.com/help/CGP1.htm>)

The project began initially on a voluntary basis but secured funding from the City Centre Management Company (CCMC) in April 2006. This enabled the recruitment and training of 16 PYWs whose main aim was to increase pro-social behaviour. The project also has many regular volunteers and has engaged hundreds of young people in structured activities. The project has received part-time adult supervision by representatives from the De Paul Trust and Connexions since its inception. Whilst feedback from the CCMC and other stakeholders was very positive funding ran out in December 2006. Since then the PYWs have been funded and tasked by bodies such as the Drug and Alcohol Strategy Team and the Youth Contact Team. PYWs and young volunteers have also successfully applied to various funding bodies including the Youth Opportunity Fund. The PYWs have worked with various bodies including Street Wardens, the Youth Contact Team, NHS Stop Smoking, and Urbis.

In Spring 2008 the project has secured more long term funding from and is now called the Urban Alternatives project. It is now supervised on a full time basis by a representative from Depaul Trust and has secured office premises near to Urbis. They are currently looking to recruit volunteers and are looking for input from young people on their ideas for the project. They are also in the process of building a new website to replace the urbisunderground site.

Data Analysis

The Peer Youth Worker's View



Peer Youth Workers in Newcastle for Training

When asked to talk about the values of the project in their own terms the PYWs were keen to stress that being the same age and belonging to similar subcultures as their peers facilitated a mutual respect. There was a general feeling that young people's views are not listened to by those in authority due to a having '*no experience*' and that the city centre did not offer many options for young people with a limited budget. Interestingly one PYW mentioned that there were coffee shops, but they cost money and '*not all people want to sit in a coffee shop*' thus supporting Atkinson's (2003) notion of '*domestication by cappuccino*'. Ultimately they were keen to promote pro-social behaviour which involves reducing violence, littering, alcohol and drug consumption. Many of these aims fit with Wilson and Kelling's (1982) notion of '*broken windows*' as ensuring that the area is free of social pollutants and litter make the area safer. Their main priority though was their peers some of whom came '*from pretty dismal backgrounds*', thus the main aim is to give young people a space to go and ensure that new people keep coming. This fits with Malone's

(2002) notion of streets being a place to encourage social encounters. The following quote sums up their aims quite succinctly:

“we have to look out for people, we have to look out for the youths we have to help them, try and do our best for them and stop them giving a bad impression to the council” (PYW)

Clearly whilst the young people come first the PYWs are also mindful of the council. Thus we can conclude that although the PYWs have the interests of young people as a priority they are also maintaining social order on the council's terms (Malone 2002, Coleman 2005, Lyon 2007).

The project has a number of substantial outcomes, including the urbisunderground web site, the production of a drugs and alcohol leaflet and managing to stop the council imposing a dispersal order on the youth population. Here we can see that by sharing the same views on social order as the council the project has been successful; both groups want a safe space and by working with the council to provide it the project has managed to prevent the somewhat extreme exclusionary measure of dispersing young people from the city centre.



Still from Drugs and Alcohol Leaflet

On a more day to day basis there were a number of ways the project had made a difference including litter picks, reducing the penalties from wardens, reducing the number of alcohol and drug related incidents and a general reduction in violent behaviour. The penalties from wardens are evidence of discrimination and increased punitive measures against young people prior to the project. It is also clear that there is a notion that cities are somehow exempt from self-regulation

(Osborne and Rose 1999) resulting in increased punitive measures. The PYWs could appreciate that young people had a bad reputation and how this has been transformed as this quote shows:

“because everyone was drunk on there so for people walking through especially elderly people or people with kids because they don’t have a clue what they’re going to be like, if they’re going to be aggressive so people stopped walking through here and then when the project started up, last week was it we had elderly people actually sat on there” (PYW)

Here we can see Zukin’s (1995) ‘aesthetics of fear’ in action as large intoxicated groups provoke anxiety in society.

The PYWs are also trying to establish a number of support groups for anyone who has problems, is worried about a friend, or feels isolated, is in danger or is considering running away. The emphasis was very much on creating a space where young people feel comfortable and get information and advice. This would be led by the agenda of the young people using Urbis as the PYWs gained a good response from consultation with fifty to sixty young people. The following quote highlights the level of communication between the PYWs and their peers:

“we’re out there every week helping and giving advice and doing that unites everyone together, everyone is now united as one almost and it stands out, that’s what’s made it change so much in the most positive way is that everyone is now united, it’s not separate groups everywhere it’s one place and one thing and everyone goes there to be one” (PYW)

The PYWs have worked with a wide range of other agencies including Street Wardens, Urbis, Manchester City Council, City Centre Management Company and Eclipseⁱⁱⁱ (on the drugs and alcohol leaflet). They now felt that they had some sort of representation and a voice at meetings and the threat of a dispersal order had largely facilitated some good relations:

PYW1: The council has backed off with the dispersal order now

PYW2: That’s it with the dispersal order we get along with the police , the wardens respect us as well, we get along with them. If there’s a problem they’ll come and talk to us or we’ll talk to them and try to sort it out if it’s to do with the youth

PYW1: We work together with them quite a lot and we keep in touch like we’ll look out for them every week, like if the police are about we’ll make a special effort

PYW3: Even if it’s just to say hello (PYW interview)

This supports Malone’s (2002) recommendation of youths having representation of group interests. Whilst the PYWs felt able to work with authorities such as the street wardens this relationship was not entirely reciprocal. In one instance the PYWs suggested that the street wardens receive some training on how to speak with young people and to the best of their knowledge this request had not been completed. This suggests that whilst the PYWs had more power than they did before the project they are not viewed as equal to other policing bodies. There is absolutely no doubt though that their role as PYWs has elevated their status and having a badge to wear has been highly advantageous. There was a sense that they were taken more seriously by both their peers and adults due to having a badge:

"I find if I was talking to an adult about a serious situation or something like that, they really do undermine you sometimes, but if you've got your peer youth worker badge on they will treat you as if you were a similar age to them" (PYW)

There was a definite sense that having a badge meant being questioned less and a greater sense of respect from everyone the PYWs came into contact with.

The Adult's View

An informal interview with adults connected to the PYWP (now Urban Alternatives) revealed that there is an expectation by higher authorities such as the local council that the project will be used as a resource to deliver information. This is fine if it fits with the goals of the project which broadly speaking are to promote pro-social behaviour, but the respondents were keen to emphasise that the PYWs were 'not puppets'. Whilst there are some common goals re. the social order on Urbis such as not encouraging drinking, violence and drug use the young people are aware that the contest for space is far from over. One respondent commented that young people are aware *'that space they use is disputed and they as young people are disputed'*. This quote supports Smith's (1996) view of the 'revanchist' city whereby young people may be viewed as having 'stolen' urban space. Despite the presence of PYWs the police still send out letters excluding teenagers, or they tell them to leave Urbis for 24 hours for swearing. Local businesses are not completely enamoured with the youth presence either. One large retailer stated that damage caused by young people to Cathedral Gardens had cost £7k, though this figure does seem to have been plucked out of the air. The notion of the city as an entrepreneurial space (Coleman 2005, Jenkins 2006) justifies this comment.

With reference to how much autonomy PYWs have and whose values they are upholding the response from adults was that they are treated as adults and given as much autonomy as possible. However, they do try to keep the PYWs out of any 'higher stuff' that is going on, but do obviously speak on behalf of the project where necessary and have the best interests of young people as a priority. The respondents did say that young people are quite risky to work with as there is always the possibility that they may say inappropriate things to their peers, but to date there have been no serious incidents re. such matters. The PYWs are there to advise and guide young people rather than enforce a particular set of rules. In actual fact they have no extraordinary powers of arrest or a 'rule book' to throw at their peers. An example was given of a PYW advising someone not to climb a tree and whilst they may understand their reasons for climbing the tree they would ultimately have to advise against it as the city council would disapprove. This reinforces the notion that the social order is imposed from the top down (Lyon 2007).

The project has come under attack by the local Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership and the Respect agenda. An event lined up which involved dressing up in costumes (which is very popular in Japan) for the younger teenagers nearly had its funding pulled by the local council who implied it had a sexual agenda. The interview raised an interesting point that in 'Every Child Matters'^{iv} there are lots of grand statements about young people making a difference and this being measured by them not breaking ASBOs, yet there is little focus on the more positive contributions young people make to society. The Urban Alternatives project deals with a diverse range of young people who may be categorised as being goths, moshers or emos, thus they are often bullied at school and in their local areas due to their appearance and they enjoy coming to Urbis to gain some respite from this. The fact that the PYWs dress in the same way as their peers is wholly beneficial when they

are acting in an advisory capacity. Whilst the project is concerned with promoting pro-social behaviour it should be noted that its goals are not the same as those of the local council which has a strong economic and marketing agenda. Overall the aim of the PYWs is to advise their and steer them to vocalise their views on the urbisunderground web site.

Summary

It would seem in practice that the PYWs are making considerable effort to meet the demands of the social order created by the city council. However, if we look at the aims of each group there is little crossover in theoretically.

Aims of Council for Management of the Public Realm	Aims of PYWs
Delivery of high quality services to residents, investors and visitors	safeguarding young people
Safe, Secure, clean and well-maintained city centre	providing young people with a voice
Management and cleanliness of streets and open spaces	enabling young people to actively and positively develop their own community
Minor threats and nuisances (skateboarding, begging, illegal street trading) to be dealt with by on street services	integrating this young people's space into the city, reducing any conflict with other city centre users and addressing negative perceptions on all sides.
Service delivery to meet the needs of the consumer	

As the shaded areas in the diagram show there is only one area where the aims of each group compliment each other, which is under the objective of safety. It is interesting to note that the city council aim to deliver high quality services to visitors, which in actual fact the youth population are, though as they do not have the same economic value as other visitors this maybe why they are often chastised and punished for their presence. Also the term 'consumer' in the council's document is a moot point – does consumption have to involve spending money or just using the space of the public realm?

Conclusion

In answer to the question whose values and rules are the peer youth workers upholding and enforcing the results are mixed. They clearly have their own set of values and rules as laid out in their aims and objectives and are equally as concerned with safety as the local council are. However, there is no escaping the fact that ultimately the council have more authority that the PYWs. The fact that large numbers of youths congregate on Urbis does not give them automatic power there as

“geographies of power are less easy to determine than physical marks” (Malone 2002: 158)

that is power cannot easily be mapped onto a place. Clearly the values of the social order (de Lint 2000, Lyon 2007) are imposed from above and this is something which is largely insurmountable by any group regardless of age. To place the findings of this paper in the context of the conference one of the recommendations from the Liverpool Culture Company is 'an inclusive and dynamic

community' which is to be achieved by increasing local participation in cultural activities (Anderson and Holden 2008). One of the lessons learned from this paper would be to include young people in such processes and this should be on a long-term basis rather than fulfilling short-term lip service to maintain a corporate image. The fact is that young people will continue to be attracted to city centres and councils will generally see this as a 'problem' which adds to the ungovernability of the city. However,

"it is part of the very character of the city [...] that it should be, in a sense, ungovernable; or rather that its governability should arise out of its spontaneous ungoverned features" (Osborne and Rose 1999: 758).

In the case of the PYW project this is exactly what has happened as the project was born out of and in response to the threat of a dispersal order and is thus a spontaneous response to the regulation of the city.

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ⁱ During this period over 30 in depth interviews, 84 observations and a number of focus groups have been conducted.

ⁱⁱ It is important to note that the young people refer to the space they occupy as Urbis, but in actual fact it is the public space outside Urbis (Cathedral Gardens) where they congregate.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eclipse is an agency in Manchester giving advice, information, support and treatment for drugs and alcohol for anyone under 19 (www.urbisunderground.com)

^{iv} A government programme for a national framework to support the "joining up" of children's services - education, culture, health, social care, and justice (www.everychildmatters.gov.uk)