

Obstruction

Counter-Pedestrianism and Trajectories of an Infrastructure Public

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Introduction

In this presentation, I reconsider a long-held opposition between obstruction and motion in the law of the state. The urban historiography since the mid-19th century also accepted unobstructed motion as the fundamental paradigm of urbanism. In today's presentation, I revisit this opposition, and argue that obstruction makes certain forms of collective living possible. I describe the possibility of such collective living as 'infrastructure publics'—a rather new noun compound—that I hope can interrogate the taken-for-grantedness of both 'public' and 'infrastructure'.

Certain other developments necessitating my reconsideration are firstly the increasing multiplication of graded precarity under conditions of neoliberalism especially, as it might apply to street vendors and similar kinds of livelihood earners on the streets. A related development of this order is the increasing limitations impressed upon the street as a public site of protest whereby specific spatial and temporal demarcations tend to specify exactly what part of our material existence can be accessed as the infrastructure of political activity. A third development may refer to a new spell of protests in our times that try to create a climate of conversation and solidarity among social classes. In Hyderabad, a street hawkers' association publicly proclaimed its logistical support to the students' movement at HCU when the University authority cut the provisioning of electricity, internet, food and water in the protest-ridden campus. Perhaps, for the first time in history, street hawkers and University students organized a joint march in Kolkata after the institutional murder of Rohith. In early 2016, some political analysts began to talk about a possible grand alliance among sections of Dalits, Muslims, and the Left against the Hindutva front. How to characterize these emergent collectives? Who constituted the 'people' in these assemblies? And how to think of these collectives in a time of neoliberal rule as making claims on both politics on the street as well as of the street? These are certain provocations not all of which I elaborately address. But through this presentation I want to at least highlight some of these.

In what follows, this essay discusses a particular mode of engagement of street hawkers with the governmental state and the larger public in contemporary Indian cities. I call this engagement ‘counter-pedestrianism’. I show how counter-pedestrianism might offer a working framework to study a mode of collective infrastructure appropriation through which the hawkers transform the authorized use of the sidewalk, reimagine a public, and add new meanings to infrastructure. I hope to describe via this, the rudiments of a formative association taking shape between the hawker and the realm of democratic politics in India that might actually lend certain directionality to the way in which large masses of working populations might have to stake their claims of livelihood and entitlements in the future. The point then is to both describe as well as yield an analytic of ‘politics’ if by that term we understand the ways in which groups of people participate in the manner and matter of their own ruling.

Section I

Street hawkers often face eviction as they are deemed as obstructing pedestrian flow. Often the pedestrian becomes the symbol of the urban everyman being increasingly run off the sidewalk by aggressive street vendors. Unlike the abstract pedestrian’s rights, which are fundamental to the law of public space in a city, the street vendor’s ‘rights’ have usually been founded on a series of exceptions and contingent legality. The law frame street vending in the light of a perceived conflict between the pedestrian and the hawker. The Street Vendors Act, 2014 in India is in a way a legal ‘formalisation’ of the hawkers’ right to livelihood, which paradoxically enacts a mechanism to protect street hawkers by restricting and zoning the means of their livelihood, i.e., the act of vending.

Within the scope of this Act, street vending can be regulated by partitioning the entire city into vending and non-vending zones. Here, it should be mentioned that the Act is concerned more with the sedentary/stationary hawkers – ‘objects’ that can potentially obstruct pedestrian flow. In this respect, I think, the SVA is consistent with a number of earlier municipal acts over which it prevails. These municipal legislations have for long forbidden, ‘structure or fixture’ or even moving vehicles for vending, having cast them as obstructions to bodies and movement on streets. The SVA modifies this approach to make for an allowance of vending-material that are easily collapsible. But this continues to harbour a governmental rationality founded upon a clear distinction between static objects and infrastructures of exchange and circulation. In this sense, the street hawker is nothing more than an urban object legitimate only in so far as she does not obstruct the pedestrian flow.

Measures like the SVA then, continue to pronounce law, in howsoever modified ways, upon the conditions of demolition. In dealing with them, we then perhaps need a radical but also practical critique of the pedestrian-centric understanding of the sidewalk in law and policy.

Section II

The proto-legal entity of the pedestrian could very well be a necessary medium for the operation of a governing principle for disciplining bodies and objects on streets. This principle following Nicholas Blomley could be termed 'pedestrianism'. Pedestrianism focuses on concerns such as flow, placement, and circulation of bodies and things, and as Blomley explains, 'pedestrianism can treat the human subject as essentially "an object", either in motion or at rest.' How, then, is it possible to counter pedestrianism, which 'structures the ways in which state agents think about and act upon the spaces of the city?' (p. 106) Blomley is convinced that the alternative should emerge from 'within pedestrianism'. (p. 111). Blomley leaves us here.

While the SVA marks the founding instance of both legal recognition as well as strategic manoeuvring of the hawkers by the government, it has perhaps managed to erect itself only on certain grounds of legitimacy that have functioned in lieu of legal measures to enable the hawkers to practice their trade. These grounds of legitimacy were crafted prior to explicit legal sanction through engaged public action. One such initiative was that of the Hawker Sangram Committee (HSC). Founded in 1996 in the crucible of the protest against a large-scale eviction drive in Kolkata named 'Operation Sunshine', the HSC is the precursor to the National Hawker Federation (NHF) and the most influential federation of hawkers' unions in India. I would like to propose, albeit tentatively, that the HSC has sought to devise a world of what might be referred to as 'counter-pedestrianism'.

In March 2009, the HSC leadership decided to organize a mass contact drive to counter a spell of devastating media attack on hawkers. The HSC formed a team that visited hawkers' stalls, and interacted with hawkers, and documented pedestrian behaviour. The idea was to reaffirm the intimacy of the hawkers' connection with the rest of society and establish that hawking was not the primary cause of congestion, accidents, or pedestrian immobility.

As a member of that team, I was asked, in particular, to demonstrate that the notion of a conflict of interest between pedestrians and hawkers was premised on factually wrong assumptions. Our

observation and survey continued for two months in thirty busy street intersections. We spent a considerable amount of time observing how pedestrians and hawkers engaged with each other. We **thus could not but note** how human relations on the street were framed and mediated by the street apparatus – benches, traffic barriers, bollards, street-lamps, municipal water-taps, tree protectors, and so on. And lastly, **we learnt** how the street actors developed their own theories of association.

Generally, hawkers set up their stalls either in front of buildings, and use the walls facing the footpath, and opposite buildings and other shops at the kerbside edge of the footpath, forming a corridor in the middle for pedestrian traffic. The ideal site for a food stall, according to food hawkers, is the mid-point between the municipal water tap and the drain at the kerbside of the footpath. The chances of transaction improve with proximity to busy transit points.

In the garment sector, shopkeepers often comply with hawkers to extend their shop interiors to the footpath – hawkers sell the shopkeepers' merchandise at a lower price to access a different consumer base and, in return, use the electricity connections at the shops and store their wares there when the market is closed. But, the established food sellers, vegetable vendors and fruit sellers usually view hawkers near marketplaces, where they normally cluster, as potential encroachers upon their consumer base; the authorities too feel that they usurp ratepayers' privileges. This antagonism often leads to small-scale eviction of hawkers.

Subsequently, the HSC organized a road show of photographs that demonstrated how hawkers and pedestrians inhabit a kind of shared network in which categories continuously overreach their assigned labels. Many of our pedestrian respondents, for instance, pointed out that in congested hawking areas, the long continuum of tarpaulin roofs protected them from sunburn and rain. Some mentioned how in the late evenings the city was illuminated thanks to the abundance of electricity hook-ups at hawkers' stalls.

The more one follows these arrangements in particular situations, the more one understands how the destiny of an 'object', **no matter how human or non-human by preconditions of vitality**, acquires infinite dimensions but only in association with other objects. In the course of a number of street demonstrations, the HSC pointed out how the demolition of one stall in a particular area could lead to the destruction of backward and forward linkages, and severely affect the way other hawkers carried out business. How does that happen? Since stalls other than mine, understood as part of a network in excess of my existence as a hawker, provide a crucial

condition of my self-definition, my singular existence can make no exclusive claim upon the network composed of human and non-human actors. No hawker can live without being connected. When for instance, hawkers gather their stalls, new spaces between bodies and stalls are assembled whose internal dimensions and consistencies are vital for a collective living.

In their explanation to the public of the many causes of pedestrians' flight from footpaths, which include illegal extensions of shops, potholes, intermittent public work enclosures, etc; the HSC demonstrations actually admitted to hawkers' stalls being potential impediments to pedestrian mobility, but only as one of numerous such impediments. The demonstrations asserted that despite their 'encroachment', hawkers merited a grant of immunity, as they actively contribute to the circulation (the hallmark of pedestrianism) of commodities, money, and bodies. Thus, like pedestrianism, counter-pedestrianism attaches much significance to motion, and the relationality among bodies, spaces and things, and hence emerges out of internal contradictions of pedestrianism.

Section III

The above discussion indicates the ways in which the facts of complex interdependencies continually haunt, and bring to crisis our current conceptual frameworks. Counter-pedestrianism is an effort to bring into being an alliance, and re-imagine a space of sociability to fight legal and governmental exclusions. It first asserts that we cannot act without the infrastructures/material means of action. It then suggests, we should also emerge as a collective to struggle for installing and preserving those very infrastructures of action. Counter-pedestrianism thus does not take a certain pre-ordained role of the sidewalk for granted. Rather, through everyday negotiations with pedestrians, shop-keepers, property owners, the state, and themselves; the hawkers create, reconfigure and 're-function' materialities of infrastructures (see Butler 2011). In doing so, they periodically sidestep the bourgeois law of property, and appropriate infrastructures, and make infrastructures the focus of a collective existence (Mitchell 2014). At the time of competitive electoral mobilization in cities, such claims define the terms on which these groups are considered parties to the governmental negotiations (Chatterjee 2004, 2008, 2011).

Counter-pedestrianism may not be a stable state of affairs. However, it serves a significant role in bringing into being an infrastructure public. It does so at a time when increasing zoning of protest are producing a normal protest form as a part of a series of other normal civic rights. Further, counter-pedestrianism creates a new imaginary of alliance at a time when we are

undergoing a neoliberal re-ordering of the self, characterized by a strong insistence on self-sufficiency ‘under conditions when self-sufficiency is structurally undermined’ (Butler 2015, 25). The hawkers are often portrayed as micro-entrepreneurs whose responsabilized self learns to navigate wage and employment insecurities, and lives with the contingencies of the unforeseeable. Counter-pedestrianism strategically privileges the *reality* of living together, exposing the *fiction* of entrepreneurial subjectivity.

Now, if counter-pedestrianism is based upon forming alliances, how does the infrastructure public it constitutes implicitly establish lines of demarcation? Let us consider an example. The wage earners among hawkers are counted when the Union pronounces a count of its members. However, they don’t constitute the political public that counter-pedestrianism constructs. The law excludes them when it defines the street vendor as an individual who can legally transfer her/his vending license only to a family member. The law further asserts that if a hawker makes use of other’s labour, then that person should be related to him/her by blood relation, or by marriage. This is where, I think, the enterprise of the union, the state, and the academic arrive at a somewhat dangerous consensus. The consensus is that, in the ‘informal’ economy wage relations and profit motive, while not irrelevant, do not play a dominant role (Chatterjee 2008). The SVA comes to create a norm out of this agreement which de-recognizes wage workers in this sector. This makes it difficult for wage workers among hawkers to claim for the ‘right to have rights’.

The NHF hasn’t so far raised any voice to acknowledge their existence either. Perhaps, this is one of many ‘constitutive exclusions’ by which counter-pedestrianism’s notion of inclusion is founded and demarcated. I think, it is by means of these exclusions that a division between the subaltern and the popular emerges in this sector. While the wage-workers constitute a domain on the edges of recognition, the unionized owner-hawkers come to insinuate political agency, and *speak for all* hawkers. The success of the HSC and the NHF as pursuing a radical democratic politics will depend in future on how it addresses their discursive frontiers, and the issues of wage relations (as very often the hawkers recruit labour), profitability, accumulation and scale as street hawking is increasingly becoming subject to an anonymous market process.

A Concluding Remark

By the terms of this presentation I have tried to highlight the notion of obstruction as providing a conceptual key to unlock urban infrastructure. The motion narrative posits obstruction as its

negation, which it eventually conquers, and keeps on deferring obstruction's final advent—the motionless, deathly city. However, at the other end of this imagined dystopia could perhaps be the possibility of frictionless motion, which is also really no motion but all slippage. We have seen in this presentation; how certain obstructions can actually enable forms of urbanism to thrive. The HSC experiment shows, though it refrains from articulating it explicitly, that streets can accommodate creative obstructions that actually enable motion, albeit of different kinds. Such obstructions as that caused by the hawkers punctuate motion and provide a medium for exchange between bodies and things over space.

The 'public' of the present and future to come, has to 'enrol' more and more such 'obstructions', to enable both its material as well as its political existence. This is even more necessary at a time when not only livelihood but also politics seems to be increasingly a matter of zoning. Zoning is an imposed control over both the 'politics of the street' as well as the "politics on the street'. In existing urban studies frameworks, the former pertains to a referential frame of the 'everyday', the latter invariably becomes the site of the spectacular and increasingly mediatized forms of public protest in various urban centres. You may well remember how Engels described in no uncertain terms the fate of the barricade in revolutionary Europe. He said that even in the era of classic street fights in European cities before 1848, barricade's role was largely symbolic and spectacular, and hence limited only to the level of the insurgents' moral boost. The barricade hardly produced conducive spatial architectonics for tactical manoeuvre. The success of insurrection depended on the insurgents' ability to forge connection with other social groups. If the hawker's demonstration that I described today yields any lessons, it is really one that points towards the necessity of connecting politics on and of the streets. New coalitions of students and hawkers might be enabling exactly something like that.