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Saleh, Mohamed; de Roo, Gert; Shim, David

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The Fuzzy Side of Publicness: Visualizing Street Politics of Everyday life through the Lens of Distance

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Mohamed Saleh¹ , Gert de Roo¹, and David Shim¹

Abstract

The description of public space usually hinges on two narratives of publicness: one narrative criticizes the State's attempts to condition publicness on the basis of functionality, and the other denotes publicness with space that can be appropriated by ordinary people. However, there are no “pure” moments in which either narrative is neatly differentiated since they are simultaneously active, or *fuzzy*, in situations of everyday life. Exploring this fuzziness, we propose a visibility framework for studying the physical and social embodiment of publicness as a lived experience. The framework employs socio-spatial distance as a variable for interpreting the emergence of situations that promote urban justice. Based on visual ethnography in public spaces in Cairo and Alexandria, the framework allows us to interpret the multi-valence and uncertainty characterizing the fuzzy side of publicness. The article concludes with reflections on the tense interface of control and self-organization that animates the dynamics of street politics.

Keywords

Public space, urban justice, socio-spatial distance, fuzziness, visibility, street politics

Introduction

Planners, urban designers, and institutions governing our surroundings describe open spaces of the urban built environment with immediacy as public spaces. The urban literature, however, argues that publicness is an acquired character of space, which transforms over time and differs starkly from one location to another (Parkinson, 2012). The publicness of space is difficult to assume a priori based only on knowledge of its physical properties. Often, the descriptions of public space turns into an arena of conflated meanings, because these meanings are interpreted through a variety of frames of reference. What a government official recognizes as public is likely to be a space that falls under the State's objective rules and regulations. A lay person, on the other hand, may refer to public space that fosters the feelings of recognition and civic participation. Publicness is rather an ongoing process, which is co-produced by contrasting tensions between objectives of order and recognition (Springer, 2011): a tension between the narratives of

¹University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands

Corresponding Author:

Mohamed Saleh, University of Groningen, Landleven 1, Groningen, 9747 AD, Netherlands.

Email: mohamed.saleh@rug.nl

“publicness according to the State” and “publicness according to the people.” The former narrative is argued to be rising due to securitizing and commodifying urban public spaces, while the latter clearly conceptualizes public spaces that promote urban justice (Sezer & Maldonado, 2017). This article offers a relational lens in order to analytically unpack how the two narratives overlap in certain routines of everyday life. This is with the aim of identifying urban routines in which public space still enables collective practices of recognition to frequently emerge.

Using original data from fieldwork in Cairo and Alexandria in Summer 2017, we show that the overlapping between practices of control and recognition gives rise to the *fuzzy side of publicness*. Fuzziness¹ means that there are no “pure” moments in which either narrative about publicness can be neatly differentiated (De Roo, 2012), since they are simultaneously active in an ever-present play in street politics. Following Bayat (2013, p. 11), street politics is understood as “a set of conflicts, and the attendant implications, between an individual or a collective populace and the authorities, which are shaped and expressed in the physical and social space of the streets.” The simultaneous visibility of control and recognition in everyday routines is described as a “circular motion” (De Backer, 2018, p. 11) through which publicness gradually circulates between control to recognition depending on which urban routine is being observed. Urban justice is activated whenever publicness promotes collective acts of solidarity, and wherever public spaces are appropriated by ordinary citizens seeking to make their identity-based expressions recognized. Constructing an analytical tool for handling this type of fuzziness is the central contribution of this article. From the case studies, we found that the visual analysis of the social distance and physical distance between users of public space helps in this endeavor.

The case studies highlight how distance, proximity, and in-betweenness can signify the inherent uncertainty that characterizes the daily life complexity in a given cultural context (Bourdieu, 1996; Brighenti, 2017). We explore how physical distance and social distance between users of public space can be used as metrics for the observer to analyze the embodied experience of publicness. By understanding distance as a multivalent relation permeating both physical and social spaces between people, this contribution advances a relational framework that correlates the observable (i.e. material) and perceptual (i.e. immaterial) aspects of publicness. Tali Hatuka (2016) revealed the potential of socio-spatial distance as a lens for urban scholars to analyze the rise and impact of civic protests, which are extraordinary events not representative of everyday life. This contribution builds upon this by further developing the socio-spatial distance lens to understand how publicness is embodied in everyday routines.

In this way, the article speaks to the heart of the special issue: to utilize visibility as a conceptual tool to assess the public character of space. According to De Backer (2018), studying the visibility of small acts in public space shows how the narratives of control and recognition appear to be closely intertwined. In contrast, Brighenti (2017) postulates a conceptual dichotomy between the two narratives, which stems from a tendency to theorize contemporary public spaces through a lens of either hope or despair about their democratic status. Hope is associated with rare events of radical emancipatory practices, such as popular uprisings (Swyngedouw, 2014); whereas despair draws on contemporary factors contributing to “the end of public space” (Mitchell, 2017, p. 503). But these lenses can overlook the business of everyday routines, in which mo(ve)ments of hope are concealed in the intermediate range of mixed and uncertain descriptions of what constitutes publicness. Paying attention to this range is particularly relevant to better understand the blurred boundaries between private and public that result from urban informality (Boudreau, 2017).

The following sections argue, first, for the need to engage with the fuzzy side of publicness through a relational perspective. Second, this need is addressed through the proposition of socio-spatial distance between people as a suitable lens to handle fuzziness, because it facilitates attention to the dynamic interface of control and recognition. Thirdly, using the lens of distance, we introduce a visibility framework for unpacking the socio-spatial condition that causes some

public spaces to enable or constrain the routine appearance of people-oriented publicness. Fourth, understanding how these situations come to be, the case studies show how some public spaces promote urban justice in unexpected places of Egypt's street politics. Fifth, we demonstrate how socio-spatial distance allows us to productively engage with dimensions of the embodied experience that contribute to the fuzzy side of publicness.

What to Do about Lived Publicness?

Public space, as a type of civic infrastructure, is most effective through its capacity to intensify confrontations and connections between strangers. It invites people to adapt and perceive their differences and commonalities, and increase their awareness of their contribution to collective power (Sezer, 2018). Policymakers agree with critical urban scholars that good public spaces make good cities (Banerjee, 2001); a straightforward idea on the surface, but yet problems arise from the contradicting meanings of "good." On one side, good public spaces in the State's eyes are harmonious—devoid of dissent (i.e. protests) or undesirable subaltern groups (i.e. the homeless) that can potentially prevent the majority and the norm from enjoying public space (Mitchell, 2017). In contrast, the metrics for goodness for public space according to urban justice literature include, amongst other indicators, the capacity to serve the democratic needs of citizens (i.e. freedom of access and assembly), especially for the socially marginalized or institutionally disempowered (Bayat, 2013; Carroll et al., 2019). Conflicting mental images for the desired city root these differences, which contrast the hope for orderliness and neoliberalism against the hope for egalitarianism and empowerment. In the first image, public space can only be used "*passively* through walking, driving and watching," while the second image depicts public spaces that foster "*active and participative* use" (Bayat, 2013, p. 11). In conflict-ridden contexts, it is even more vital to understand the tension between the two images through which authorities and citizens contentiously negotiate power to manage and/or appropriate public space (Carmona et al., 2008).

Publicness is polarized in the literature, first through a narrative that depicts a State-oriented publicness that manifests in practices controlling the passive and generic use of space (Mitchell, 2017) and second, through a narrative that is people-oriented and describes events of radical or sudden appropriations of public space, such as popular protests (Merrifield, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2014). These descriptions are not without critique, however, as demonstrated by Bodnar (2015, p. 2098), who argues that the first narrative is nostalgic about the disappearance of the notion of public space based on a "Western idea of the public-private divide" that neglects variations of urban experiences in the Global South. Similarly, Derickson (2017, p. 4) critiques the second narrative for over-glorifying "a muscular kind of revolutionary rupture at the expense of appreciating the everyday forms of resistance." Polarization occurs because both narratives depart from an idealized understanding of publicness.

From a lived space perspective (see Lefebvre, 2000; Soja, 1998), these polarized ideals are not supportive of understanding publicness as an embodied or lived experience. In everyday life, "one does not directly meet sets with a crisp 'borderline', but quite often it seems that there exists something like a gradual transition between membership and non-membership" (Bandemer & Gottwald, 1995, p. 126). As such, it is plausible to see these narratives as two ends of a spectrum (Figure 1). On one end, publicness is embodied as attempts by the State (or private developers) to strictly condition what manifests in space on the basis of functionality. On the other end, publicness is embodied in fleeting situations in which ordinary people performatively appropriate space to make their (inter)subjective expressions recognized. The spectrum perspective implies that real-life situations are always positioned somewhere between the two ends, representing various degrees of the overlap between control and recognition in everyday situations and lived experiences.

Figure 1. Situations of distance as a relational variable for analyzing various positions on the spectrum of lived publicness, 2020.

Source: De Roo (2018; text inspired by De Backer, 2018 and Hatuka, 2016; aggregated by the authors).

Making Sense of the Fuzzy Middle

Viewing publicness as a fuzzy and gradient notion suggests being more open to uncertainty, ambivalence, and emergence that characterize the immediate experience (Holston, 2009). Manifestations of publicness transition between *generic* and *situational* experiences according to which urban routine is being observed (Figure 1). Consequently, it is important to differentiate between the socio-spatial conditions that foster each experience in order to identify visible attributes of urban routines that enable collective practices of recognition to emerge. That is why we limit the empirical scope to routines that saliently represent a prevailing type of publicness in a given situation, allowing us to illustrate the difference between the two ends of the conceptual spectrum.

Generic experiences become clear in iconic public spaces since they are value-loaded sites upon which formal rules encounter many meanings that circulate in the collective memory of lay persons (Frers & Meier, 2017). Such spaces either stimulate the emergence of new political subjectivities (Arendt, 1958), or manifest an ideology of exclusion and cultural clashes (Springer, 2011). Situational experiences occur more likely through urban routines along with loosened or relatively absent formal rules (Frank & Stevens, 2006); this is increasingly exemplified in the Global South, where “inhabitants are compelled by poverty and disposition to operate . . . and simply live a life in the public spaces” (Bayat, 2013, p. 10; see also Brown, 2006). Lofland (2017, p. 10) describes such situations in which private life spillover onto public space as “parochial realms.” Here, the locally established cultural codes condition the encounters among strangers “involved in interpersonal networks that are located within communities” (Lofland, 2017, p. 10). Clearly, studying this type of publicness poses a challenge for academic approaches that rely on pre-established (or imported) understandings of publicness. Instead, Tornaghi and Knierbein (2014) and Hou (2018) argue that a relational perspective is better suited to understand how local culture influence the publicness of space, which means overcoming dichotomies such as public/private and top-down/bottom-up, and paying attention to their intersectionality (De Backer, 2018).

Fuzziness facilitates a relational perspective that connects the material and immaterial sides of the immediate experience in “specific situations of action” (Boudreau, 2017, p. 17). In other words, this lens sharpens the specificity of multiple framings rather than forwarding a generalized measurement of publicness for a given space. From this lens, it is unrealistic to search for a “one true” world that exists out there for objective study. The observable performances and

structures together with the intersubjective meanings and stories constitute a more comprehensive picture of a given situation (De Roo, 2012). Opposing forces (i.e. control vs recognition) and diverse meanings (i.e. narratives of publicness) produce constant tensions; publicness as a lived experience is animated by these tensions. Thus, the fuzzy situations of publicness lies in the intermediate range of overlapping meanings and uncertain possibilities (rectangle in Figure 1).

From this relational perspective, publicness becomes subject to how space is locally perceived and the everyday interactions that can take place in it (Tornaghi & Knierbein, 2014). This suggests that the ways through which public space is managed and physically shaped can allow publicness as a collective experience to thrive or decline (Carmona et al., 2008). That is what can be called the lived publicness. Lived publicness is seen as the dynamic meshwork of power relations that condition how publicness is culturally perceived in a specific locality and how a given public space is *formally and/or informally* managed (Dovey, 2014); a lived experience of publicness that promotes urban justice is not dictated only by the State's power, and it has the capacity to increase people's awareness of their collective power and freedom to frequently alter the formal function of space.

In sum, studying situations of street politics requires a relational framework that handles three dimensions of the fuzziness of lived publicness: First, to recognize the simultaneity of control and recognition due to constant conflict over the active use of public space. Second, to identify the conjunction between the performative/fleeting/material and the perceived/predefined/immaterial sides of the immediate experience. Third, to navigate the gradual boundaries between people-oriented publicness and State-oriented publicness.

Capturing the Fuzzy Side by Situations of Distance

In an invigorating urban landscape, public space allows strangers to co-exist in healthy proximity from each other. As Arendt (1958, p. 52) puts it, "to live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time." For this purpose, an analytical tool helps address proximity and evaluate in-betweenness that result from the institutional and spatial conditions that planners and urban designers set in motion. Distance, in this light, suitably reflects fuzziness as a simultaneously *relating and separating* characteristic.

Distance's double sense can be broken down first, as the visible area between individual bodies who occupy specific (near or far) locations in space and time (Bourdieu, 1996). It is also the invisible area between social agents situated in (inferior or superior) positions that relate them to each other culturally, ideologically, economically, etc. (Davis, 1999). Understood then as a composite relation, we argue that analyzing socio-spatial distance illuminates the material and immaterial dimensions that characterize the fuzzy side of publicness (top and bottom triangles in Figure 1). This can be better understood and distinguished in the physical and social space of the streets, as the following sections will elaborate.

Physical or spatial distance is *performed* on the micro level through spontaneous movements of people and emerges without predefined logic of organization (Bourdieu, 1996). This is illustrated as individuals freely move closer or farther from each other, creating different variations of proximity in response to daily life encounters (Canetti, 1984). Distance, in this sense, is directly influenced by individuals' personal space and their ability or willingness to connect with their surrounding context; it may vastly differ from one person to another and rapidly change in reaction to everyday encounters (Lefebvre, 2000). Intimate distances can bring people together to experiment with new ways of being in common, while remote distances potentially throw people apart and create boundaries made of fear from the different Other.²

Social distance is not such a free-floating variable at the level of society at large; there are those “generally established and universally visible and valid distances” (Canetti, 1984, p. 19), such as the “citizens’ distance from the State,” which incline people to *conform* to certain behaviors in public life (Davis, 1999, p.603). For example, close proximity to the State’s institutions means that citizens are engaged and recognized in the public realm, and distant proximity indicates estrangement from the same public (Davis, 1999). In this sense, spatial practices bridging the State-citizens distance foster urban justice, whereas managing space in ways that increase this distance (e.g. through high degrees of securitization) can reinforce injustice. Social distance is largely predetermined, meaning that it is not easily changed by the contingencies of everyday life. They are part of local power geometries (Massey, 2009) and present accepting individuals with mental barriers demarcated by formal or informal norms and institutions (Hatuka, 2016). Thus, the ability to maintain and challenge social distances depends on which actors have the *power to appropriate* public space.

In a given moment in time, the tangible practices producing spatial distances and the intangible relations maintaining social distances constitute a “situation of distance” (a vertical cross-section on the spectrum of Figure 1). Situations of distance indicate “the correspondence between a certain order of co-existence of agents and a certain order of co-existence of properties” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 12). Hatuka (2016, p. 267) adds to this duality by arguing that distance is forged by a twofold process: “at one end, a central organization that establishes rules of operation and at the other end, self-organization that gives maximum possible power to the people.” Hence, the lens of distance offers a relational variable for capturing how space is socially produced and experienced, and how power is spatially distributed and performed in specific situations of action (Bourdeau, 2016). By virtue of being such a multivalent notion that relates spontaneous performances with normative rules, situations of distance can enhance our understanding of the fuzziness that characterizes street politics.

The key concept of Figure 1 is the conjunction of observation (top triangle) and perception (bottom triangle) along a spectrum that deviates from fully conditioned situations of lived publicness meant for generic performances, which are immediately visible, without room for multiple interpretations (i.e. explicitly conforming to functional rules) to situations that allow processes of self-organization (to perform in any desirable way) supportive to multiple interpretations, however, yet to be conformed according to how people collectively appropriate public space. Thus, fuzziness increases when moving from the left to the right side of the spectrum because it becomes more unclear which meaning of publicness matches what is visible.

Toward a Visibility Framework

This framework employs situations of distance as a qualitative variable for interpreting the public character of space by identifying the match between the interdependent practices of “performance” and “conformance” at the various positions on the spectrum. Spatial distance is studied by analyzing the visible *performances* of the spontaneous movements by strangers in public space. The goal is to discern how the observable features of space affect the strangers’ ability to move in closer or farther from each other? Social distance is studied by analyzing how the behavior of people is shaped by *conforming* to locally established rules of operation. Put simply, which cultural codes or shared perceptions condition the possible appropriation of space for practices of recognition?

Visual ethnography is a suitable method for answering the questions outlined earlier. While the camera is an integral part of research practice when doing a visual ethnography (Pink, 2013), it involves the observation and recording of embodied, material and social practices and performances (Larsen, 2008). This is premised on the assumption that meaningful knowledge can be deduced by analyzing visual representations of particular practices, because visual practices of

recording and/or image-making, allows the researcher to depict and observe specific situations of action as they emerge (Boudreau, 2017). By applying this method to street politics, captured in photographs, this approach acknowledges that the everyday needs to be performed as a particular social performance in order to become effectual. In this light, a picture fixates a moment; this is not necessarily so in Cartier-Bresson's sense of capturing the decisive moment, but in making a specific relation or situation of action observable and therefore explorable.

The approach of visibility enables the comparison of everyday situations while being attuned to their fuzziness. Often visibility—and by implication, public space—is restricted, not available to everyone and thus implied in relations of power. In other words, the control over (in) visibility is an exercise of power. Therefore, relations of seeing and being seen, allowed for instance by the State's practices of security, regulate the conduct of whole and/or particular populations (De Backer, 2018). In this vein, there is a need to pay attention to the everyday tensions of street politics (Bayat, 2013), which stand in contrast to the visibility of spectacle in radical events (Derickson, 2017). Due to these tensions, some public spaces are regularly used in unscripted ways, regardless of how they were officially intended to be (Springer, 2011). For example, public spaces that surround mosques in traditionally Islamic cities are often appropriated for religious practices during which official rules become temporarily suspended (Kostof, 1992). Our goal is to provide a framework to study the embodied experience of publicness in specific situations of action and bring to light that every routine unfurling on public space comes with vastly different experiences, depending on the cultural or political context in which public space is embedded.

Operationalization

The framework is applied to analyze situations from Cairo and Alexandria's street politics. Social inequality, spatial segregation, and absence of public outlets for expressing dissent made these cities key action arenas of political struggles (Abaza, 2017). One important place where those struggles are spatially manifesting is the area around Tahrir Square. This area has a strong symbolic meaning as it hosts governmental buildings and historical events that shape the Egyptian collective memory. In contrast to this formal site, the bustling informality of Egyptian cities appears in their alleyways and areas of traditional culture. There, all that lies between the buildings symbolically belongs to the dwellers of the area. Outsiders are called *aghrab* (strangers), and cannot use public spaces in a way that contradicts with the dwellers' cultural norms. Thus, such spaces are public to the dwellers but their publicness is conditioned by outsiders' consent. Three steps were followed to interpret urban routines in iconic and traditional areas because they capture the generic and situational tendencies of the framework's spectrum.

First, 48 pictures were taken across five inner streets and three squares of downtown areas of Cairo and Alexandria in Summer 2017. Even though outdoor photography is limited in Egypt due to conservative social norms and government regulations, it was still possible through being aware of the contextual sensitivities. Being Egyptian helped the photographing author in considering the local power dynamics and cultural codes. In each case, personal permission had to be acquired from the formal or informal authority of the intended location before taking the pictures. However, this data was limited because it was not allowed to fix the camera on a certain spot to record videos or capture multiple frames throughout the day. Pictures that did not indicate salient urban routines were eliminated, and the rest were categorized into generic or situational experiences of publicness. Two particular routines were selected because they are the most representative of our arguments.

Second, deskwork was conducted on the pictures to interpret physical properties of public space influencing spatial distance, and symbolic meanings of the visible encounters in terms of

Figure 2. The left-hand picture captures a situation that represents the frame of reference of *ard el hokoma*. The right-hand picture captures a situation that represents the frame of reference of *harah*, 2017. Source: Authors.

social distance. For unpacking situations of distance in the visual data, we used color-coded brackets to highlight the diversity of lived experiences and practices. Orange brackets indicated agents who make sure that a certain generally established distance is enacted. Such agents can be described as the agents of distance. Green brackets highlighted agents who are affected by this distance in each situation. Third, the conjunctions between performance and conformance (Figure 1) were employed as criteria to compare the immediate experience of publicness in the two routines, according to which we interpreted how situations that support urban justice gradually emerge.

Handling Fuzziness in Egypt's Street Politics

The two sides of the lived publicness spectrum is represented in two frames of reference that Egyptians frequently use to speak of open spaces of the urban built environment. These are *harah* and *ard el hokoma*. *Harah*, which roughly translates to “quarter,” is one of the historical socio-spatial units of the urban fabric of the major Egyptian cities. Nowadays, it refers to the busy alleyways and small streets of old neighborhoods, which function as parochial spaces that foster strong social ties among their dwellers (Abu-Lughod, 1987). *Ard el hokoma*, in contrast, translates as “land of the government” and is a colloquial word used by lay people to refer to public space which appears to be formally controlled and thus narrowly perceived publicness by Egyptians. The term presents an oxymoronic meaning, highlighting a deep-rooted habit of Egyptians to conflate the public with the governmental. Moreover, this perception hinders urban justice by restricting a sense of symbolic ownership of public space for lay persons. The pictures of Figure 2 capture routine activities that illustrate how these frames of reference are embodied. The first routine is walking through Tahrir Square, which depicts the State-citizens distance as it is locally perceived. The second routine is outdoor praying, which shows how publicness is experienced when space is informally appropriated for identity-based practices.

Social Distance in Ard El Hokoma

The picture on the left was taken from the northeast corner of Tahrir Square. It shows the fences and high walls that surround the Egyptian Museum. In the vicinity of the Museum, there are multiple iconic governmental buildings to which hundreds of commuters travel on a daily basis. Also, depicted in the picture is what some Egyptians call the “heart of Cairo”—one of the major

hubs for traffic circulation. The Square and its surrounding downtown area have witnessed an intense phase of popular protest and political upheaval from 2011 to 2013. Consequently, the State sought to reaffirm its authoritative role in preventing disorder and insurgency, by exercising various forms of coercive practices that express dominance. In this picture, these include the police officer as a subject of distance. One of his responsibilities is to prevent pedestrians from walking on the tangent pavement with the wall, making sure that they stay outside the metal fence, keeping them at a *far distance* from a building that symbolizes the Egyptian national history; far enough that they have to walk unsafely alongside the vehicular street. The officer, therefore, acts as an *enforcer* of distance. This situation captures the extent to which the State's security apparatuses conceive public space as a tool for exercising domination (Abaza, 2017), perceiving the movements of ordinary citizens as a potential threat to the social order.

Social Distance in Harah

The picture on the right was taken in a small street in Alexandria, which is located tangentially to a popular mosque. The picture was taken during a Friday congregational prayer—a weekly event of high importance in the everyday life of Muslim communities. It is a typical routine for local mosques to extend the prayer space to one or more of the surrounding streets, given the limited capacity of the actual building to accommodate the increased number of comers on Fridays (approximately three times normal weekdays attendance). As such, the people's religious rituals (i.e. cultural practices) take over the street from cars (Kostof, 1992). Here, the subject of distance is a local resident who voluntarily serves at the mosque in such crowded times. One of his tasks is to make sure that there is enough space for everyone, by either encouraging people to sit closer to each other or stretching out carpets for the newcomers. He also attends to people with special needs such as the sick or elderly by reserving suitable spots for them. Ultimately, his goal is to bridge the distance among believers, treating them all as equals who come to join one another in an act of solidarity and togetherness. He does not enforce his instructions, but he is rather a *facilitator* of distance. His guidelines still allow for the spontaneous movements of people, seeking to sit or stand under the shade. This freedom is illustrated by the street vendor's location, in which he positioned himself to attend the prayer but also attracts attention to his goods.

Spatial Distance in Ard El Hokoma

The picture on the left shows a space in which the State completely monopolizes how and where the pedestrians' movements take place. The metal fence³ surrounding the Museum is a clear barrier that restricts people from walking safely away from cars, and comfortably away from the harsh Cairene sun. The result is a space that pushes people to pass by quickly and passively, without a chance to assemble or share anything in common. They are even inclined to walk one by one on a thin-line pavement that separates the vehicular movements, despite the fact that Tahrir Square is the largest public space in the entire city in terms of its vast spatial scale and the number of its visitors per day. The absence of sufficient benches or shades is another sign of the State's intentions to keep the space free from the risk of any collective expression or public discontent. In this situation, the neoliberal aspects of security, order and the stable flow of capital are tangibly manifested.

Spatial Distance in Harah

The picture on the right shows a space in which citizens temporarily take complete charge of its material setting. The mosque's community installs an extendable shade made of fabric to provide comfort and invite more people to join. Every participating individual may access the place with

his own small or big carpet to increase the area of praying.⁴ The street vendor places his goods in such a way to reduce obstruction for praying. People, in general, move in close proximity to each other and level potential hierarchies amongst themselves. People treat each other with dignity; their movements fill the available (narrow) space spontaneously, only conditioned by the fear of trespassing on others' personal space or obstructing the spiritual atmosphere during this sacred routine. This convergence between space and cultural expressions of people breed the feeling of recognition and belonging to a familiar public.

Findings

Spatial distances are tangible consequences of the physical structure of public space, which symbolically mirrors the locally established State-citizen distance or the cultural codes in a given urban routine. Earlier, we used socio-spatial distance as a methodological lens to *visibly* read the social and physical embodiment of publicness in two situations in Egypt. By means of the proposed framework, it is possible to reflect on Egypt's street politics through three dimensions of fuzziness: the simultaneity of control and recognition; the gradual transition between degrees of lived publicness; and the conjuncture of performance and conformance in everyday practices.

Distance, as a lens, shows that there are no pure moments in which control or recognition is neatly distinct. Instead, they are simultaneously active in an ever-present play on public spaces. In the first case, the priority is for the movement of vehicles as opposed to people. This way of managing such an iconic space symbolically transmits an estranging State–citizens distance. Tahrir falls under an exceptional condition of securitization due to the recent political turmoil (Abaza, 2017), but this is also what makes it an interesting case to illustrate the fuzzy side of publicness. It shows that what is seen contradicts with what is perceived. Walking through Tahrir recalls the collective memory of Tahrir's immense potential for hosting practices of recognition. In citizens' mental images, this space still symbolically belongs to the people despite the heavy securitization. In the second case, people are empowered to exercise their symbolic ownership of the space. During this religious routine, the street is managed as a temporal parochial space in which locals engage in practices of co-existence. Additionally, this routine fosters certain behaviours that shorten the distance between the *harah's* insiders while increasing the distance for outsiders. The moment locals start spreading carpets on the ground, public space is suddenly formalized in a way that estranges outsiders who do not conform to locally accepted cultural codes.⁵

By looking at the correspondences between the social and physical attributes of lived publicness (Table 1), we find that situations can transition from the left-side to the right-side on the lived publicness spectrum, passing through qualitatively different stages.

At first, the individuals' *movements* are conditioned by the physical properties of space and the allowed practices in it based on informal or formal rules. In response to the symbolic meaning of these visible elements, they become *aware* of either one of two conditions: (a) participative ways of behaving that are performed by each individual in a seemingly disorganized manner; or (b) State-led practices of control that ensure passive usages. In the case of the latter condition, the transition is blocked from progressing because individuals do not have *agency* to interpret how space can be used. Comparatively, the former condition facilitates individuals to recognize a routine pattern that allows them to *connect* easily. During this routine, the collective conventions and the informally developed (enforced or facilitated) ways to *appropriate* the space are reinforced by the frequency of similar situations. Consequently, a sense of collectivity is strengthened through feelings of familiarity and togetherness that form among individuals. In such situations, publicness, as a collective experience is reciprocally activated, but independently from the physical space. Here, public space attracts peoples' awareness of their collective power and creates a persistent condition for short(er/ened) distances between them. However, these

Table 1. Comparison of the Physical Attributes and Social Practices Affecting How Publicness Is Embodied as a Lived Experience in Each Urban Routine, 2020.

	Informal Management of <i>Harah</i>	Formal Management of <i>Ard El Hokoma</i>
Subject of distance	Volunteering resident on the ground <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Known and trusted.• Facilitates connections.	Police officer watching from a tower <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unknown and feared.• Enforces fixed rules.
Physical features affecting distance	Narrow parochial space <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Carpets on the ground.• Flexible sheds.• Diverse situational usages.	Vast public square <ul style="list-style-type: none">• No place to sit down.• Metal fences around pavements.• Predefined functional usages.
Simultaneity between control and recognition in the embodied experience of publicness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Staying in close proximity.• Possible connections and confrontations among strangers• Participative use of space.• Dominant religion and gender.• The <i>experienced</i> symbolic ownership of insiders creates a subjective barrier for outsiders not conforming to local cultural codes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Passing by as distant individuals.• No chance for connections or confrontations among strangers.• Passive and generic use of space.• Collective memory of recent protests that took place in the same square.• Citizens consider iconic spaces as potential sites for recognition due to the <i>imagined</i> symbolic ownership.
The prevailing type of lived publicness in each routine	People-oriented publicness <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Awareness of a familiar public that enables a participative use of space.• Latent capacity for mo(ve)ments of solidarity and collective action due to being informally managed in a self-organized manner.	State-oriented publicness <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Awareness of the State’s strict control that ensures a passive use of space.• Generic experiences of publicness by formally managing the space in a way that transmits an estranging State-citizen distance.

Source: Authors.

(dis)connective tendencies are still dependent on the physical space. Over time, these immaterial factors become the sole attracting force for lived publicness to emerge. Here, people start perceiving space as an environment with *latent capacity* for supporting further identity-based collective actions, enabling them to exercise their collective power to appropriate the same localized space, or proceed to reclaim the symbolic ownership of publicness in other locations.

The terms emphasized earlier in italics are those mentioned in Figure 1, and they function as the criteria to identify the match between “performance” and “conformance” at the various positions on the spectrum. In terms of performance, we find that the observable practices of agency, movement, and connection indicate the citizens’ ability to move in close or far proximity from each other. In terms of conformance, we find that the context-dependent practices of awareness, appropriation, and latent capacity indicate situations of lived publicness that empower citizens and breed a feeling of belonging to a familiar public. When these practices lean towards the left side of the spectrum, space generates a *generic* experience of publicness pertaining to the conceptualization of space as the “dead,” which is opposed to, or rather detached from, time (Massey, 2009). On one hand, space increases the distance between people and restricts people from any agency in changing the form or the function of space. Public space as such reinforces the stability/durability of urban injustice. On the other hand, space fosters a situational experience of publicness through the conceptualization of space as being “alive” and coupled with time

(Massey, 2009). These loose spaces (Frank & Stevens, 2006) bridge distance among people and manifest in mo(ve)ments through which people (temporarily) take control and (re)appropriate public space. The comparison of Table 1 shows that public spaces that fall under the *harah* perception increase the potential for urban justice by allowing people-oriented publicness to frequently emerge.

Conclusion

This article's aim was to construct a tool for studying publicness as lived experience attuned to the tensions, emergence, and uncertainty that characterize everyday life. What is formally defined as public space in many situations functions differently on the ground, either because users perceive spaces differently, or because the allowable practices in spaces differ. Over time, many functions can be given to the same structure; a public space can temporarily host festivities, playgrounds for children, political rallies, or outdoor prayers. During such fleeting activities and routines, the publicness of space is (re)claimed, depending on the degree of agency that people have to appropriate public space. In everyday situations, the possibility for mismatches between what is "designed" and what is "found" is always there (Franck & Stevens, 2007, p. 39). Fuzziness arises when it becomes unclear which meaning of publicness matches what is actually seen. Thus, tapping into the fuzzy middle between the polarized narratives of publicness allows us to look at the physical and social embodiment of publicness as a lived experience.

The immediate experience of publicness is both socially constructed and physically performed. We advanced a framework, which makes use of *situations of distance as a relational variable* to study publicness as a lived experience. Through this work, distance corresponds with both social and spatial dimensions in specific situations of action. An additional contribution includes new indicators to empirically study the conjunction between the material and immaterial manifestations of publicness in order to advance the concept of visibility. By empirically assessing two vastly different public spaces, we showed that situations of distance help identify the observable signs that make public space become potent with the capacity to increase people's awareness of their collective power. Moreover, distance provides a relational perspective on how *symbolic ownership* manifests for the observer and how it is perceived by those who experience the publicness of space. Beyond the case study's example of outdoor praying routine, the framework can be utilized to assess lived publicness in urban routines in different contexts that spur individuals to coalesce into persistent (micro)publics, such as spaces taken up by children for play (Carroll et al., 2019), or guerilla-like appropriations by artists who perform music concerts in public squares.

Collectives and common identities emerge through practices of co-existence in public places and animate lived publicness. These depend on the way these public spaces are managed according to rules, cultural codes, and shared conventions. When public space is conditioned by formal rules, people act functionally and behaviors are predefined (Carmona et al., 2008). When public space is shaped by a degree of informal self-organization, people dynamically discover commonalities in each other, which makes it easier to come to collectives that are grouped around their own set of conventions and common identity. These informal places foster urban justice because individuals become aware of various possibilities to interact with each other in order to forge shared conventions, instead of complying with the rules being expressed in formal spaces. If more agents are grouping together, the better defined the shared conventions will be and the stronger these conventions will be represented by the collective, until a point is reached that the physical space that allowed the collective to mature is no longer essential for the collective to exist. From that moment on, the collective will be able to persist as a social unit independent from the physical space.

Although bridging socio-spatial distances does not necessarily guarantee progress towards urban justice, we argue that public spaces that allow shortening socio-spatial distances do invigorate the necessary condition for further practices of solidarity and collectivism between strangers. The ways through which public space is *formally and/or informally* managed can increase the possibility of people-oriented publicness to frequently emerge, yielding a fertile ground for potential mo(ve)ments of solidarity and togetherness that might grow into future democratic power geometries. This suggests that the people-oriented publicness exists “in a state of virtuality, not as something given but as something *to be done*” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 21). Unpacking situations of distance, therefore, allows for detecting this continuous possibility, which seems to inhabit the transition space between potential and actual manifestations of urban justice. By delving into the fuzziness of street politics in a given cultural context, the lens of distance captures how the hope for more just urban futures is concealed in routinized publics that thrive in harrah-like spaces—spaces in which social and physical barriers between people are gradually reduced.

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ORCID iD

Mohamed Saleh <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0795-9532>

Notes

1. Our understanding of fuzziness is inspired by the work of Lotfi Zadeh (1965) on the fuzzy logic, fuzzy-set theory and fuzzy science. In these domains, fuzziness is advanced as an approach to cope with the uncertain and vague values that characterize social complexity. The fuzzy logic in particular is often used in order to assess imprecise information, which contradicts with a “true or false” logic.
2. The degree to which short distances are either perceived as empowering or threatening situations highly depends on the surrounding cultural context.
3. The practice of fencing the pavements is a ubiquitous feature of the public spaces of downtown Cairo and not specific only to Tahrir Square.
4. Outsiders may perceive that this religious routine excludes women based only on observation. Yet, it is a typical religious norm in this context that outdoor prayer is specified for men, while women pray inside the mosque.
5. For example, the shared perception of this parochial space among locals would constitute a mental barrier for a group of tourists from knowing how to participate in such a self-organized pattern, or from initiating a cultural practice (e.g. music concert) that is locally perceived to be unallowable in this particular space and time according to cultural norms unrecognizable to outsiders.

Online Resources

- <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/26808/Urbanism-and-the-Arab-Uprisings-Downtown-Cairo-and-the-Fall-of-Mubarak>
- <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/12/19/the-mosque-on-the-square>

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Author Biographies

Mohamed Saleh is a PhD researcher at the Department of Spatial Planning and Design, University of Groningen, The Netherlands. Mohamed’s interests revolve around exploring new frameworks for grasping how people, spaces, affects, networks, and machines are entangled together to co-produce urban patterns of change. Contemplating these dynamic nexuses, Mohamed’s work identifies interval spaces that show how the hope for alternative urban futures is manifested in everyday spatial practices.

Gert de Roo is professor in Spatial Planning, at the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, The Netherlands. De Roo is a former President of the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP). De Roo is author, co-author, and editor of about 30 books. His latest book is titled *Handbook on Planning and Complexity* (2020, Edward Elgar Publishers).

David Shim is senior lecturer at the Department of International Relations and International Organization of the University of Groningen and visiting researcher at the Chair of International Politics and Conflict Studies of the Bundeswehr University Munich. David is interested in the visual and spatial dimension of global politics and works at the intersection of international relations, geography, and area studies.