

Free spaces

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Free spaces are small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization. Since the term became popular in studies of movements in the 1980s, scholars have sought to better identify the features of particular institutional sites that equip them to spur political challenges. They have also probed the role of free spaces in authoritarian regimes, in right-wing movements, and in relation to new digital technologies.

Historians Sara Evans and Harry Boyte used the term “free spaces” in their 1986 book of that title (both Evans and Boyte had separately used the term in earlier work): “Free spaces are settings between private lives and large scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence and vision” (1986: 17). In the dense interactive networks of community-based institutions like churches, fraternal organizations, and cultural groups, people envision alternative futures and plot strategies for realizing them. Free spaces supply the activist networks, skills, and solidarity that assist in launching a movement. They also provide the conceptual space in which dominated groups are able to penetrate the prevailing common sense that keeps most people passive in the face of injustice. In that sense, they are crucial to the very formation of the identities and interests that precede mobilization. Thus the Southern black church, removed from white control and central to the life of black communities, provided the emerging civil rights movement meeting places to develop strategy and commitment, a network of charismatic movement leaders, and an idiom that persuasively joined constitutional ideals with Christian ones.

For Evans and Boyte and many authors who followed them, the free-space concept reflected the insight that the oppressed are not without resources to combat their oppression. Undermining the well-worn opposition between tradition and radical change, it showed that normally conservative or nonpolitical institutions such as churches, literary circles, families, and working-class bars could become seedbeds of political challenge. Undermining another familiar opposition, that between structure and culture, the concept also pointed to the specifically cultural dimensions of mobilizing networks.

The list of free spaces (and analogous sites such as “havens,” “spatial preserves,” “free social spaces,” “sequestered social sites,” “spheres of cultural autonomy,” and “protected spaces”) that have played key roles in spurring counterhegemonic challenge is now long, and includes such varied sites as literary circles for Eastern European nationalist movements, progressive churches for the Central American Solidarity movement, and music festivals for the White Power movement. Beginning with Evans and Boyte, scholars have also seen free spaces as operating *within* movements: for example, the “autonomous zones” of European new social movements, the “women’s only spaces” of 1970s radical feminism, the block clubs created by tenant organizers to mobilize an urban constituency, the alternative food coops, health clinics, credit unions, and schools that flourished in the late 1960s and 1970s. By giving people the freedom and warrant to enact relationships that differ from those characterizing mainstream society, such spaces are intended to prefigure alternative societies.

The early appeal of the free-space concept, however, obscured inconsistencies in its use. Free spaces created by movements clearly played different roles in mobilization than did the free spaces that preceded movements, yet

the differences were not well specified. While many scholars treated free spaces as physical sites, others maintained that free spaces could exist in print, practice, or the Internet. While some saw freedom from the surveillance of authorities as a crucial feature of a free space, others pointed out that federal prison served as a free space for the development of post-World War II radical pacifism. Scholars were undecided, too, about whether all societies possessed free spaces, as well as whether free spaces only became the seedbeds for revolt in contexts of economic and political instability or whether they could help to create that instability.

Behind the dissensus over free spaces' referents and their role in mobilization, Polletta (1999) argued, was a tendency to elide free spaces' structural distance from sites of power with their supposed freedom from hegemonic ideas. Free spaces were treated as, in a sense, empty, and as mobilizing for that reason alone. That view begged the question of just why some institutional settings were able to preserve or produce challenging ideas. It also minimized the extent to which all social settings are characterized by complex dynamics of deference and challenge.

Scholarship in recent years has tackled these issues. One clear finding in the diverse empirical studies is that although people do need some freedom from government surveillance in order to formulate, plan, and organize opposition, they are usually able to find it. Protest has been organized in prisons, in public parks and markets in authoritarian regimes, in the midst of official commemorations and festivals. All regimes and societies have free spaces. But different settings facilitate distinct mobilization tasks and play different roles in more and less repressive regimes. In Eastern European Leninist regimes, the ubiquity of secret police, spies, and informers sometimes restricted the expression of dissent to intimate discussions among friends (Johnston & Mueller 2001). In contemporary China, by contrast, a regime that is both liberalizing and overburdened has failed to stop evangelical Christians from recruiting in public

places like busy streets and public Christmas performances (Vala & O'Brien 2007).

A second clear finding in recent scholarship is that what makes some settings generative of protest is not that they are *empty* of hegemonic ideas but that they are *full* of counter-hegemonic or potentially counter-hegemonic ones. Churches, schools, art and theater groups, and intellectual institutions have preserved or nurtured traditions of dissent in part because they have enjoyed some autonomy from the state. They are often permitted to operate without direct surveillance; they control certain aspects of daily life; and they may have moral authority on issues that are within the purview of the state.

Such institutions' autonomy is never complete, of course, and degrees of freedom are won and lost through hard-fought political battles. Challenges to the state must usually be made obliquely, moreover, in an idiom that is not directly political. But the fact that such institutions possess a nonpolitical idiom for formulating challenge is as important a resource as is their political independence. Cultural institutions often provide moral schemas that can be transposed to political issues. For example, Poles drew on a moral idiom from Catholicism to challenge the communist regime. Estonian choral groups preserved a nationalist impulse in a repertoire of folk songs and Czech theater groups voiced dissent in a language that was understandable to all but government censors (Johnston & Mueller 2001). Free spaces in this sense provide not so much a space as an idiom for formulating opposition.

Scholars have long linked free spaces to the creation of collective identities that can later command much wider mobilization. While past research emphasized the importance of forging tight bonds in intimate settings, more recent scholarship has focused on the fact that groups must become visible to themselves as a collective actor. Converging with work on subaltern publics, this perspective looks to settings in which people become both performers of and audience for a new collective identity. The Internet has become important, in this sense, by

lowering the costs of co-presence in a way that makes it easier to form collective identities. Not only do Internet sites allow people to communicate across geographical distance. People also see that there are others like themselves, who are similarly invested in, and potentially willing to act on behalf of a cause. This is probably especially important where people face stigma in their daily lives: an Internet-based free space allows people to “out” themselves with fewer fears of sanction. Internet-based free spaces may also foster ties among more diverse people and allow them to experiment with new forms of association and relationship (della Porta & Mosca 2005).

Finally, if researchers have shown that public, dispersed, and virtual spaces can nurture dissent, they have also emphasized the limitations of the densely networked and physically bounded settings that we often associate with the concept of free spaces. Most obviously, for opposition to become full-scale mobilization, people within a free space must connect with people outside it. But external links may be important even earlier. Outsiders or relative outsiders may counter pressures to accommodation that come with an institution’s relative autonomy. Links to more explicitly political groups may help to identify the shifts in political alignments that signal opportunities for mobilization. Interestingly, contact with opponents may also be necessary. For example, when imprisoned IRA activists were reclassified as ordinary criminals rather than political prisoners, they were forced into daily confrontations with prison authorities, confrontations that strengthened their commitment both to group and to cause. At the same time, the information they smuggled out to supporters about their plight made them a focal point for a much broader collective identity (O’Hearn 2009).

Understanding the links between free spaces and broader publics and between cultures of resistance and full-scale mobilization remain pressing tasks. Do such links consist primarily of people, institutions, or events? When do

they come into play? In addition, we know little about the free spaces that are created by movements. Collectivist organizations, cultural festivals, and cooperative institutions are intended to prefigure alternative ways of acting and interacting. Do they? What effects do free spaces have on behaviors and institutions outside the free space? Answering questions like these will advance our understanding of the cultural preconditions for and effects of social movements.

SEE ALSO: Abeyance; Cognitive liberation; Collective identity; Internet and social movements; Micro-meso mobilization; Prefigurative politics; Subcultures and social movements.

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