

SETHA LOW AND MARK MAGUIRE

Public space during COVID-19

When the public square is closed, all that remains is the tower and its shadow. As anthropologists of space and security, we watched as COVID-19 emptied our streets. The shadow fell on distant friends, then on close family; we also used the chilling language of ‘common sense’ to instruct others in these exceptional times. There is a lot wrong in wishing for a return to normality if ‘normal’ is oppression, but anger at injustice does not excuse intellectual paralysis. We must be on guard now, alert to the dangers posed by security.

Foucault begins his meditation on panopticism with discussion of early-modern plague measures. ‘If it is absolutely necessary to leave the house’, one must ‘avoiding any meeting’. Administrators dreamt of the perfectly governed city, where the tower dominates the square. Today, we must insist that ‘sunset clauses’ be written into emergency legislation, and we must police the police and health authorities.

Of course, states and states of emergency differ. Copenhagen’s municipal employees assist ‘distancing’ by asking joggers to run clockwise in parks. UK police recently sent drones to shame recreational walkers. East Hampton police tape public benches and scour public space, often finding extended families instead of wrongdoers. Johannesburg’s poor are forced to choose between hunger and police violence, while the death toll from ‘security’ continues to rise in Manila. In the USA, the president gives a booster shot to xenophobia by calling COVID-19 the ‘Chinese virus’. And everywhere we are in a ‘war’ against an invisible enemy. William James once wondered if we should wage a war against ‘war’. Perhaps the time is now?


Class segregation is becoming the new normal as wealthy families flee the city. Southampton, the home of wealthy New Yorkers, went from 60,000 to 100,000 residents in just a few weeks. The biopolitics sound more like class struggle when neighbours talk about the workers coming from ‘up-island’ (perceived as working-class parts of Long Island) and infecting East Hampton. At the same time middle- and upper-class residents of elite towns crowd together as if the rules do not apply.

The world has a new excuse for surveillance, gating, exclusion, unequal access to health care and employment vulnerability, and new securityscapes may restrict public space and any chance of imagining a more democratic and socially just future. Public space is crucial to a flourishing society. A common world needs space to breathe; the networks of the square are our best defence against the shadows of isolation and the looming tower of authoritarianism.

To share experiences, we’re inviting you to send us your (distant) observations of public social life during social distancing (slow@gc.cuny.edu ‘Public Life During Social Distancing’ as subject line) for our website. Moreover, we must pressure those who police us, at home, wherever that is, or far away, to add sunset clauses to emergency

legislation and to monitor closely the policing of public life. In answer to the poet Juvenal's question, *Quis custodiet Ipsos custodes?*, it is we who must watch the watchers.

Setha Low 
The Graduate Center
CUNY
New York, NY
USA
slow@gc.cuny.edu

Mark Maguire 
Department of Anthropology
Maynooth University
Maynooth
Ireland
Mark.h.maguire@nuim.ie