



Politics in Transitional Spaces: Direct and Indirect Political Participation

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Accepted: 14 March 2023 / Published online: 15 April 2023

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Abstract

This paper seeks to build on Carriere’s (2022) work on the complex, pervasive, and dialogical nature of politics and extend this treatment to examine the politics of the transitional, liminal, and “in-between spaces.” In particular, we analyze the theatrical nature of politics by examining how roads and streets become a “dynamic stage” (Valsiner, 2004, p. 2) where private and public policies enter into dynamic dialogical relationships. We distinguish between direct, direct but distanced, and indirect peripheral political participation and explore how roads and streets enable redundant and dramatic communicative processes that feed into the internalization/externalization meaning-making processes (Valsiner, 2014). Finally, we analyze the process of the emergence of roads and streets as a result of complex interactions between public policies, ordinances, and values. We extend this exploration to an illustrative case in Oahu, Hawai’i to demonstrate how streets become constructed and organized to provide affective guidance. We conclude by arguing that the absence of political messages or overt political actions does not mean the absence of politics – power dynamics are still at play in the liminal and transitional zones of human living.

Keywords Liminality · Transitions · Streets · Politics · Peripheral participation

In *Psychology in Policy: Redefining Politics Through the Individual*, Carriere (2022) makes a persuasive case for exploring politics from a cultural psychological standpoint. Carriere argues that political psychology has focused on *outcomes* instead of *processes*, *institutions* instead of *individuals*, and *statistics* instead of *stories* (p. 5). Cultural psychology provides a necessary corrective to examine the personal, subjective, and processual dimensions of politics. From Carriere’s treatment, politics is a pervasive mode of life and a basic meaning-making activity: it is an inevitable condition of being human and living in the *polis* (ibid, p. 21). Therefore, there is no escape from the political arena nor from engaging in political

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acts. Like the air we breathe, or the statues and memorials erected in the center of our towns, politics are central to our ways of being and yet so omnipresent to be rendered invisible. This brief paper seeks to build on Carriere’s work on the complex, pervasive, and dialogical nature of politics and extend this treatment to examine the politics of the transitional, liminal, and “in-between spaces” of paths, roads, and streets. We explore how individuals modulate their relationship to the political field or stage as direct and indirect political participants.

Roads and Streets as a Stage for Direct Political Participation

Paths, streets, and roads¹ are conduits of movement – they facilitate the flow of human bodies and minds, human mobility technologies (e.g., cars, bicycles, motorcycles etc.), and ideas. Streets are liminal and transitional zones full of “potentiality” or “what may be,” to borrow Turner and Turner’s terminology (Turner & Turner, 1978). Streets link the private setting of home with public settings of social interaction and coordination. Yet streets become politically and psychologically interesting because of the people who make, use, and modify them for their own intentional, and goal-directed efforts facing heterogeneous audiences. Streets are therefore a “dynamic stage” where people construct and present their stories and enact dramas as they move onto and through them.

Historically, streets have been accessible to the entire *polis*, elite and non-elite members of society. Markers distinguishing high from low caste and class have always been prevalent, and movement has always been guided and guarded (Valsiner, 2004); however, even those on the margins could move, live (willingly or not), conduct business, and commit elicited acts outside of the peering eyes of social others and authorities. The liminal nature of streets facilitated wide access for those with marginal identities to coalesce into groups where “workers, poor people, and racial minorities [could]

...broadcast messages to large numbers of people...A decision to strike, a meeting’s outcome, or a festive gathering could move quickly from an assembly into a marching line that conveyed a message to coworkers, neighbors, and the city at large” (Davis, 1986, p. 33, cited in Valsiner, 2004, p. 11).

Public demonstrations and protests have long been a collective and personal way to directly dramatize political, social, and psychological needs and capture the attention of those in power, or potential sympathizers, and thus participate in politics. Individuals take to streets to make visible what was out of public view and communicate relevant social messages. These messages are further amplified and become, in Marisco and Valsiner’s (2022, vi) terms, fodder for the “ravens of journalism” and become part of “television politics” (p. vi). Demonstrations and protests have limits

¹ We recognize the different nuances between *roads* and *streets*. However, for the rest of the paper we do not distinguish between these terms and use *streets* for the sake of brevity and to reduce the awkwardness of repeating these terms together frequently.

and often fail to change social conditions or shift public attitudes towards contested public policies, as Carriere notes (p. 81); however, demonstrations and protests are a rich phenomenon that allow researchers access to analyze human imagination and creativity in situations where individuals have limited power. For instance, Chinese citizens have taken to the street and public places on university campuses to protest their government's Covid-19 lockdown policies (Pollard & Goh, 2022). Protests include individuals holding up blank sheets of paper allowing demonstrators to creatively circumvent official censorship policies and communicate their dissent in dramatically subtle ways. Silence can be a dramatic and powerful political act.

Cultural political psychology has the potential to examine the personal meaning-making processes that emerge as people move from the private to the public sphere, make visible their support for, or grievances with, public policies, and individually and collectively act towards imagined future-oriented possibilities. How does a protester make visible or conceal their reasons for protesting as they engage in public settings such as the street? How does an individual overcome their hesitation or ambivalence in making their personal standpoint public? How do individuals negotiate concerns and values of personal safety or safety for their family with their desire for change or desire to demonstrate personal solidarity with a cause? Human beings are far from rigidly consistent and constantly construct “hierarchies of semiotic mediating devices” that regulate their relationship to immediate environment (Valsiner, 2007, p. 120). How can cultural political psychologists capture and analyze the microgenetic trajectories of this meaning-making process and the semiotic regulators that enable *or* prohibit participation in protests and demonstrations? As Carriere deftly demonstrates, inaction is a form of political act worthy of study (2022, pp. 13 – 14). Movement, or contemplated movement, from the stability of home to the public setting of streets to externalize sociopolitical messages elicit self-reflective processes since these messages are directed towards audiences and possible resistances. However, *direct participation* through demonstrations and protests is only one way individuals use streets to communicate political messages and values and engage in political actions.

Direct but Distanced Political Participation

Human beings have found many ways to communicate and guide the thinking, feeling, and acting of social others through messages encoded for members of the *polis* in transit through streets. We might call this *direct but distanced political participation* as individuals create and use material artifacts and objects to mediate and communicate political messages. Individuals do not need to be physically present with their political messages, nor in proximity to social others, since they can encode them into signs, flags, murals, or bumper stickers (Fig. 1). Carriere argues that a person displaying a “Make America Great Again” bumper sticker provides an example of a “deep psychological meaning-complex that the individual must negotiate” (2022, p. 2). We agree and would add that the bumper sticker communicates messages whose meanings are out of control of the sender. The message makes an appeal, but it depends on how the recipient interprets or, in Karl Bühler's notion, fields the message (Bühler, 1990). Thus, the person creating and

Fig. 1 There have been numerous proposals to develop land in the rural areas of the North Shore of Oahu. “Keep the Country Country” and similar slogans are commonly seen on bumper stickers and signs near houses on Kamehameha Highway, Oahu, Hawai’i. Photograph by Gatlin A. Jordan



communicating a message must imagine their audience and imagine the response of their intended or unintended audience (see below for further elaboration).

The boundary between the private space of home and vehicle, and the public space of the street is the interface and site of much direct but distanced political participation. Here the signs are stationary, and the passersby become a compulsory audience to these social and political messages (see Fig. 2). Critically, individuals who create signs, draw murals or paintings, or place signs with political slogans would not necessarily identify as activists or “political hobbyists.” However, the person desiring to “Keep the Country Forever” (see Fig. 3) expresses their values by communicating their political position about complex social issues involving land rights, encroaching development, and rural autonomy. In contrast to protestors in the street, those who place a bumper sticker on their car, paint a mural on a building, or place a sign on their fence, remain in the background and physically distanced from their message.



Fig. 2 Political messages on public facing private property. Laie, Hawai’i. Photographs by Gatlin A. Jordan

Fig. 3 Sign on the fence of a private residence facing Kamehameha Highway, Oahu, Hawai'i. Photograph by Zachary Beckstead



Peripheral (Indirect) Political Participation

Redundant social messages encoded in our environments and episodic dramas encountered as we move through streets towards specific settings and activities feed into our meaning-making processes. Walking, taking a bus, or driving to the grocery store is usually not seen as a political act. But as we make our way to our destinations, we might encounter neighbors' signs with political slogans, or if we live in Palestine, we must pass through checkpoints as we go to work in Jerusalem. Our peripheral participation in social life becomes peripheral *political* participation as we move from the private territory of home to the public setting of the street and encounter implicit and explicit political messages in our ordinary movements and episodic events (i.e., demonstrations, public executions, convoys of cars and trucks). Peripheral political participation is compulsory participation since one cannot easily leave society. Whether we agree or disagree with a bumper sticker, mural, or yard sign, or public policies regulating what is off limits, where we can park, or how fast we can drive, we tacitly and at times reflectively grapple with these messages. Cultural psychological models of internalization/externalization processes (Valsiner, 2014; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015) have potential to analyze the individual and idiosyncratic development and formation of personal political values that have been missing in political psychology.

Streets as the Setting for Intra- and Inter- Personal Dialogues

We have argued that human beings reorganize their environments to include pathways for mobility and saturate these settings with explicit and implicit messages intended to regulate others' actions and feelings. We can conceive of these messages encoded into the environment (e.g., posters on the side of the road, flags, etc.) as externalized signs that are a result of internalization processes (Valsiner, 2014). Messages such as "Keep the Country Country" (see Figs. 1 and 3) entail communication by intentional and goal-directed individuals that makes the link with the past, present and future. Given the historical and current context in Hawai'i, this statement relates to previous

colonization efforts to develop Native Hawai’ian’s land (*re*-presentation), the present efforts to develop this land (*co*-presentation), and the possibility of these renewed efforts of development succeeding (*pre*-presentations). Yet, given the divergence between social roles and positions between sender and receiver of these signs (Bühler, 1990), different meanings might emerge. For example, the past experiences and current understandings, a tourist driving along and viewing the message may question why a rural resident would not want the “modern conveniences” of new development.

Internalization/externalization processes, therefore, are constructive and dialogical processes through which signs are constructed, worked on, amplified, and transformed. These dialogical processes involve heteroregulation and autoregulation (Valsiner, 2001). The person creating or displaying the political message or sign (e.g., poster, flag, ribbon around a tree, etc.) must consider the perspective of the passerby and therefore reflect on where to place their message best suited for viewing by those moving quickly by the stationary object. Additionally, they may imagine their messages reception in the minds and attitudes of those who pass by – either as agreement or disagreement, assent or dissent, or acceptance or rejection.² The imagined other may be the specific other of a neighbor or the generalized other, in Mead’s terms. We can conceive the following hypothetical intra-personal dialogue as someone is considering communicating a message encoded onto a poster in their yard (e.g., “Keep the Country Country”)

“(A1) I want to keep *our* land free from increased development. (2) And I should communicate this message to those ignorant tourists.”

The first utterance (A1) is a sign that is constructed in time and the second (A2), as a social rule and normative statement, develops in dialogue to the first promoting the potential act of communication of political messages. This newly constructed sign hierarchy emerges out of the flow of human experience and signs come to regulate each other and the activities of the person. However, semiotic regulators can promote *or* inhibit the flow of action and feeling. We can see the inhibitory role of signs in the following:

“(A1) I want to keep *our* land free from increased development. (A3) But communicating this in public might offend visitors who are unaware of our local politics.”

Here the second utterance (A3) modifies the first (A1) and constructs it as an unrealistic desire and therefore blocks the person for communicating the sign or redirects their actions and feelings. Of course, the semiotic regulatory system can proliferate into an endless cycle of uncertainty – e.g., “Our land should be free of development” → But I don’t want to be rude → “But is stating the truth really rude” (see Valsiner, 2002 for different forms of dialogicality). To put it differently, the intra-personal loop, or I < > Me loop of sign construction, links with the inter-personal loop, or ME < > World loop (Valsiner, 2014, p. 40) as signs and messages are constructed and reconstructed intra-personally and feed forward to guide the feeling and action. The public nature of streets and roads are critical for bringing competing values into relationship with each other and triggering private (intra-personal) and social (inter-personal) dialogues.

² The very dissent and imagined antipathy the message *may possibly* evoke may also promote and fortify externalizing the message.

We have briefly examined the meaning-making processes of those who construct explicit messages and encode them on or adjacent to streets and roads. Likewise, the meaning-making process of those traveling along these paths entails similar processes. Our necessity for moving along streets for our everyday life needs make us, as noted above, peripheral and *compulsory* participants in political processes. The mobile person then encounters the heterogeneous messages sometimes encoded into the environment or dramatically displayed through idiosyncratic and synchronized human action (e.g., marches, protests, executions). From the flow of experiencing, these passersby are able to distance themselves from (though within) the setting as they construct signs of different levels of generality (e.g., “this street has menacing teenagers” → “this street is dangerous”). As noted above, these signs link the past, present and future and new signs are constructed in response to the initially constructed signs to create semiotic regulatory systems (e.g., “this street is dangerous with these menacing teenagers” → “But I should not be so judgmental about teenagers – they are usually misunderstood”). These signs are flavored by our affect and enter into dialogical relations with each other and guide (or inhibit) our actions and feelings, and have the potential to become hypergeneralized values where individuals agree with measures to impose curfews on teenagers, for example. Thus, people on the move are encountering externalized meanings and social messages that they selectively ignore or make sense of through semiotic mediational processes.

According to Valsiner, it is our peripheral participation that “provides the input flow for the internalization/externalization processes that continue with the person long after the experienced episode is over” (Valsiner, 2004, p. 6). This suggests that the experiences and meanings constructed by those passing onto, and through, roads and streets remain with them beyond the moments of encounter. Human landscapes and human minds both contain a heterogeneous assortment of signs and meanings. How does this work? Valsiner (2001) points to the process of abbreviation where the external manifestations of the sign disappear, but they are internalized and maintained in generalized and abstracted forms. Zittoun and Gillespie (2015) have examined the ways that these semiotic materials become sedimented and layered in our psyches as we move (with our bodies) between different contexts. Previous experiences (or distal experiences) may be brought to the forefront and enter into dialogues with new proximal experiences. Valsiner (2001, p. 94–95) points to the process of *abstracting generalization* and *contextualizing specification* whereby the latter pushes the semiotic regulators to further levels of abstraction (e.g., ‘love’, ‘clean’, ‘safe’ etc.) that then can be used by the person to regulate specific contexts (i.e., *contextualizing specification*). Externalized sign complexes such as the bumper sticker with the words, “Keep the Country Country” or the similar message displayed on sign posted on the fence (see Fig. 3) may be noticed and retained in the future, perhaps as the person discusses issues of development with their friends or family or decides how to respond to a ballot initiative restricting land use for developmental purposes.

Although a full elaboration of these dynamics is beyond the scope of this commentary, we believe a political cultural psychology of developmental semiotics can pursue how people acting in their social positions and roles construct signs and engage in intra- and inter- personal dialogues through their encounters and movement onto and through the streets and roads. The basic premise that we assume here is that streets and roads are border zones and arenas for dialogues between individuals who

are present or removed but their traces and externalized signs still are maintained. These processes involve the regulatory processes through the organization and symbolic buildup of streets and roads, and messages constructed intra-personal (autoregulation) and between individuals and institutions (heteroregulation).

Streets and Social Guidance and Constraint

Streets are crucial and dynamic links between people and their sociopolitical worlds and make visible what is usually not visible (private or backstage, in Goffman's terms). They provide individuals with the setting to contest and make visible public policies made in private, by other individuals wielding greater power, and often anonymously. Given the transformative potential of streets, and their role in the development of personal political imaginations and future-oriented actions, human mobility inherently engages with questions and issues of politics. Who has access to roads, routes, buildings, and geographical and virtual spaces is regulated and socially guided by institutions and individuals acting according to various social roles. Who can travel from one village or nation to another village or nation and for how long, who has the right to move freely between different parts of a city, or enter particular public or private spaces, is far from arbitrary and entails the establishment of public policies. These public policies are informed by values of safety, protection, social cohesion, economic prosperity and openness, equality, and accessibility. Streets are stages, but the process through which these stages are constructed also reveal socially and psychologically rich meaning-making political processes.

Case Study: Construction and Organization of Streets in Laie, Hawai'i

We wish to further illustrate the material and symbolic construction of streets and how they are organized to provide institutional and personal affective framing. To do so, we will briefly analyze streets near us in the town of Laie on the North Shore of Oahu, Hawai'i. Laie is a small town situated 32.5 miles north of Honolulu and is the home to Brigham Young University – Hawai'i (BYUH). Laie is a community with a history long intertwined with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) and comprised largely by the LDS Church institutional complex including the temple and chapel buildings, the tourist destination of the Polynesian Cultural Center, and BYUH of which the Church is the sponsoring entity with residential areas intermixed. These institutions are geographically and symbolically proximal as they form a network of overlapping and interdependent institutions. The temple is the most prominent feature in Laie, set back but visible from Kamehameha Highway.³

A quick survey of the town draws the observers' attention to the streets and the stark differences between them (see Fig. 4). Residential neighborhoods are typically lined

³ Kamehameha or Kam Highway, as it is commonly referred to, is the primary route residents and visitors must travel on to move between the more populated city areas near Honolulu and the rural areas in the North Shore.



Fig. 4 Two streets in Laie that run perpendicular to each other. Kulanui St. (A) links Kam Highway and BYUH and Hale La’a Blvd. (B) connects Kam Highway and the temple of the LDS Church. Photographs by Gatlin A. Jordan

with cars and signs of the objects of daily human living. In contrast, the road that runs from Kam Highway directly to the temple, has a dramatically different organization and appearance. There are no cars parked to the sides (again, see contrast with photo A), there is a manicured and cultivated median, and well-maintained stone walls shielding the view of the residents to the street (and the view of the passersby to the private residences). Workers are even brought in regularly to maintain the beauty and cleanliness of the road.

Differences between these streets are not arbitrary but result from the proximity of the road to a highly valued building of great religious significance and a complex political process involving federal, state, city, and private interactions. As we mentioned above, public policies, in this case by the politicians representing the city of Honolulu, dictate and regulate the make-up of and activities permissible on streets. In 2003 the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints decided to fund a \$5.5 million-dollar project to renovate and beautify Hale La’a Blvd., the street running from Kam Highway to the temple. The Church President at the time, Gordon B. Hinckley, delivered a dedicatory prayer stating that the purpose of the project was that “those who drive along the Kamehameha Highway may be constrained in their hearts and minds and slow down and look to the House of the Lord, and... to come and go about the grounds and visit these beautiful places.” Adding the hope that this might “result in greater respect for (Thy) church and its people and its purposes and its desires” (Hinckley, 2003).

This case demonstrates the use of affective framing applied to movement through a cultivated environment as a means of promoting a certain feeling orientation towards the temple and the Church institution itself. The spatial organization and aesthetically

cultivated sense of place embedded into the street suggests how one should act, think, and feel while on the move in the present setting. Passersby encounter such a setting with the holistic structure guiding the meaning-making processes. The careful upkeep and construction of the road is designed to guide individuals towards generalized meanings of aesthetic relevance, particularly related to clean <> non-clean meaning complex. Such meaning construction is established in part due to the contrast with the more mundane, communal streets that run perpendicular to it. In fact, the cluttered nature of the street (developing from the non-clean field of meaning), further emphasizes the significance of Hale La'a Blvd. in the passerby's mind. This serves to encourage meaning to be constructed in a particular direction (e.g. 'clean', 'good', etc.) and promote action onto the street, and towards the temple. Yet, the meaning is personally constructed by individuals who feel into the setting (see Valsiner, 2020 for an extended discussion of Theodor Lipp's notion of *Einfühlung*) or construct the meaning of the road as "artificial" or "too clean" that regulates how they act and/feel towards the setting and temple.

Furthermore, both public (blackletter laws or ordinances) and private policies (social norms) obscure explicit political messages, since these are not allowed in the median and the walls erected through the renovation project block political signs in the yards that used to face the street. Yet, since most houses along the street are taller than the walls separating them from the street, political signs, and messages, including national and political flags, are visible to those passing by if placed high enough (see Fig. 5) and

Fig. 5 Flags over a stone wall along Hale La'a Blvd., Laie, Hawai'i. Photograph by Gatlin A. Jordan



create input into the flow of their internalization/externalization processes. The dialogue of visibility < > non-visibility becomes even more critical in this liminal space.

We see how politics extends beyond public policy and government officials, and becomes tied up with individuals, communities, and religious groups. For those raised in secular societies, the general belief is that Church and State are supposed to remain separated. The reality however, is that their relationship is deeply intertwined. During the planning and renovation of Hale La'a Blvd, different policies had to be created and followed. Federal and state regulations controlled how, where, and when renovations were allowed. Similarly, the Church, or individuals acting in their institutional roles, are guided by values such as safety as well as aesthetic and religious values, constructed and organized the street in a specific way with specific goals. However, this street enables direct but distanced political participation (see Fig. 5) and could become the setting for direct political participation through possible vehicle convoys or other dramatic individual or collective acts.

Conclusion

Roads and streets afford movement and political participation. But it is the person who determines the relationship to the political field as direct political participants or as intermediate and indeterminate direct but distanced participants. As peripheral participants, individuals can never leave the political field or exit the stage. Politics is a theatrical endeavor that involves the complex relating between the backstage < > frontstage, visible < > non – visible and private < > public dialogues. The street is the boundary or “dynamic stage” where these dialogues play out. Streets are politically and psychologically rich arenas where *individuals* perform their stories, enact their roles and positions, and externalize and amplify their desires and intentions. Individuals also internalize these explicit and implicit messages through the construction of signs that become hierarchical semiotic regulatory systems (Valsiner, 2001). Signs are constructed to regulate the actions and feelings of others and the self in relation to their world. Furthermore, the absence of political and personal messages on roads or streets does not mean the absence of politics – power dynamics are still at play, especially in the liminal and transitional zones of human living. Who controls the space between private buildings and public settings is highly contested and impacts how, when and where people move, and what messages can be communicated. These issues entail power dynamics and are regulated by values (hypergeneralized feeling fields). As Carriere brilliantly illustrates in his book, politics is not a separate activity or sphere of human life; instead, it is a pervasive and theatrical part of human living.

Author contributions Z.B. was the primary author for the main manuscript. G.A.J. made significant contributions by researching and writing the case study, providing valuable feedback regarding content, and editing throughout. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

Declarations

Ethics Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by the authors.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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