A Walk in the Park as a Democratic Right

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summary

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This paper will focus on one element of the history of public green open spaces in an urban environment ('public parks'): the gradual process of democratisation. It will show a long process of change, i.e. over a period of approximately five centuries, illustrated with examples of a number of trend-setting European cities and projects. The intention is not to give a comprehensive or factual-historical account, but rather to present a framework. This will show how over time public parks in cities have become increasingly 'democratic' in purpose, design and usage, in line with the broader developments in society and in turn enhancing those political developments. The final paragraph will reflect on consequences for the public parks of today.

1. The genesis of the modern public park

1.1. Selective access to the private park

Strictly speaking, from an etymological point of view 'public park' is an oxymoron. The historical root of the word 'park' lies in the Latin *paricus,* referring to a fenced area of nature. In late medieval times in Europe this would refer especially to an enclosed hunting ground. In this area a King, Lord, Duke or other sovereign would keep animals for hunting. It was fenced or guarded to avoid the animals to wander off and no doubt also to keep poachers out. Hunting was an aristocratic privilege and these original parks were the opposite of public. The name *Tiergarten* in Berlin for instance refers to an original hunting ground and was still used as such in the 16th century.

Such hunting grounds for obvious reason often where close to the castle and precisely around some of these castles towns emerged growing in size and in economic and political power. Many hunting grounds decreased and were transformed into major gardens around or near the castle/palace. Moreover, many sovereigns would see the countryside as their base rather than towns and might use their residence in a particular city only occasionally or for short seasons. At the same time political changes took place in these cities, where a new class of rich merchants demanded political recognition. All this accumulated in the French Revolution where the royal family and all aristocratic privileges were attacked. But the actual process was much slower and more subtly, as the history of parks demonstrates.

As early as in the 16th and 17th century selected citizens were achieved access, initially often haphazardly, to the enclosed parks. This gradual process can be observed for The Netherlands (where one would expect it, given the fact that this new country was established as a Republic, with cities and the merchant classes as the main political power), Paris, London and many other major European cities.

Especially in the 17th and 18th century in many towns the local gentle classes had regular or sometimes even permanently access to the aristocratic parks. Though this was recognition of economic and political power, it most certainly did not mean that all town inhabitants were welcome. Initially only few selected 'friends' would have been given a key. Sometimes access would be given only on specific days or during seasons where the Family would be absent. Certainly people who entered such a park were guests and were expected to dress and behave accordingly. Selection would be at the gates. Park supervisors might ensure that strict social codes would be adhered to, e.g. evacuating a seat for those of a higher standing. 'Hoi polloi' (the masses) normally remained excluded though they frequently would manage to get access illegally, typically by climbing over the wall.

The public park as tool of royal appeasement

Thus this process of granting the upcoming and established urban middle classes access to parks can be interpreted as sharing of privilege. Though this was only one element of a much broader political change process, the gesture had no doubt great symbolic value. A key motive was political appeasement, re-establishing or enhancing social harmony. Failing to do so could cost the King his crown or even his head. Over centuries ruling families became increasingly aware of this very real threat.

The theory about the need and opportunities for emperors and kings to use parks in this 'appeasing' manner was written down, amongst others, by the Danish lawyer J.P. Willebrand (1775) and by the German Christopher Hirschfield (1785). The latter introduced the theoretical concept *Volkspark* (people's park), though not to be misunderstood in a more modern sense of the term. The people welcomed to the parks Hischfield described belonged still to the better classes. They would come to these Volksparks not just for leisure but also to be seen and to be 'educated', for instance by rows of statues of national heroes offered as role models. In such parks, Hirschfield predicted, one would see a sovereign walking freely, without any fear, amongst his people. What a tempting prospect to the royal rules, just on the eve of the French Revolution. In the first Viennese gardens opened to the public – Augarten and Prater – the Kaiser 'often goes amongst his people, without guards, just surrounded by the love of his subjects'. (Hirschfield, 1785, p. 68).

Around 1800 in Vienna, of all European cities, the enlightenment towards public parks had progressed furthest, but it was probably in the German city of Munich that the first purpose-built public garden, named Theodorspark, was created on the initiative of the sovereign of Bayer. The year was, significantly, 1789.

2. The genesis of the civic park

2.1. The municipal park as civic pride

The French Revolution and the military campaign of Napoleon marked the end of aristocratic privileges per se in many Continental-European countries. Parks owned by noble families were opened up or donated to 'the people'. Though after Waterloo some aristocratic privileges were restored, a new chapter in political history had been opened. In Western-European cities this was reflected in the creation of purpose-built public parks. In the nineteenth century citizens would not longer have to depend on a park to which in benevolent spirit they were given access or that was donated to them in exchange for 'eternal gratitude'. They would actually start creating themselves such spaces. But the purpose of these did reflect the very basic nineteenth century concept that those who made the biggest financial contribution should benefit most and should make all key decisions on location, design and rules for usage. The decision to create a park was first of all a matter for the city fathers, mostly elected (or rather selected) because of their wealth and representing the interests of the higher classes in towns.

This utilitarian idea remained dominant during most of the nineteenth century. In the classical liberal logic, those who financed the creation and maintenance of public space in cities were also to be the decision-makers and primary beneficiaries, although others were welcome as long as they were willing to conform to recreational ideals of those who had paid for the provision. In terms of design, such open space reflected the taste and requirements of the wealthy urban inhabitants.

Of course with an emerging demand for detached villas in a landscaped environment, parks were also created as commercial enterprise, for instance near (new) railway stations and at commuting distance from town. The same principles could apply to the development of 'villa parks' within town. But the initiative to develop public parks, often though not exclusively, combined with villa development on the fringe, increasingly came from local authority. Especially land that was no longer needed for urban fortifications (due to changes in warfare) was perfect for the creation of municipal parks, often laid out in a landscaped 'English' style. Town extensions included such parks and a general 'greening' of surrounding areas, reflecting civic pride (part of the beautification of cities) as well as a sound policy aimed at ensuring that a city looked attractive to well-to-do visitors and wealthy (new) settlers.

Despite these fundamental changes the 'aristocratic' roots of the Public Garden for some time remained dominant in its design, where parks were laid out almost as large private garden, primarily intended to facilitate amble with parlance. The winding pathways allowed for leisure and appreciation of vistas and conspicuous leisure. The centrepiece no longer was the ancestral castle but still a large, normally

public, building. Sporting facilitates catered for horse-riding maybe tennis. The planting presumed an eye with appreciation for sophistication and botanical expertise. Still in the nineteenth century those not dressed to reflect a certain class might not enter. And servants in some cases could only enjoy the surroundings in the presence of their master or mistress. Yet these restrictions relaxed with the progression of the century. The design of the municipal started reflecting the taste, needs, demands of a growing number of people.

2.2. The park as an industrialists' tool for social harmonisation

In the nineteenth century *noblesse oblige* did not just apply to the 'noblesse'. For instance religious-charitable intention could lead to the creation of parks. In previous centuries donations would have focussed more on the building of churches, orphanages, hospitals and especially on almshouses for the needy, the frail, the elderly. The nineteenth century showed the emergence of the donated park, to which explicitly the less privileged were invited. Though yet again, to avoid misunderstandings, this 'less-privileged' does not refer to the poor, but especially to the lower middle classes and the so-called honest workmen with their families. These respectable albeit not wealthy members of society would be welcomed in well-sized parks often located nearer to the less prestigious part of town or near industrial settlements. Here space for wholesome, open-air entertainment (i.e. no alcohol, no political manifestations) would be on offer. Especially in the second part of the nineteenth century the need for such space, intended and up to a certain extent even designed for others than the bourgeoisie was recognised by enlightened wealthy benefactors. Of course, it has been pointed out that there might have been an even greater need for proper sewage systems, but we have to be realistic: the vanity factor will have played a role as well. The prospect of being immortalised through a sewage system will have been considerably less appealing than giving one's name to a beautiful park full of deliciously scented roses. But though it would be unreasonable to leave these motives of charity or even vanity unmentioned here, for the purpose of this paper another motive is of much greater interest: the provision of the park by mainly industrialists in the context of the emerging 'social issue'.

The motives to get involved in the creation of public parks in the decennia around 1900 might not have been completely identical with those of the noble sovereigns a good century earlier. But there is an interesting parallel nevertheless. And what is more, there is an even more striking parallel in the way these exemplary initiatives were followed up in the form of action by the public authorities during the remainder of the new century.

3.   The genesis of the people's park

3.1. The people's park for popular wellbeing

During most of the nineteenth century, urban green open space was in principle created in the wealthiest residential parts of town, a rational location from a purely economic point of view. This meant that high-density areas of low rent housing were largely deprived of green space. Gradually, awareness grew of the undesirability of this situation. The need for change was recognised for social, religious, public health reasons and no doubt most of all because of political self-interest. Society had to recognise the need of the masses if it wanted to progress economically and if it wanted to avoid the danger of fierce political confrontation. Especially the Russian Revolution illustrated the urgent need to recognise the need for a social reform agenda.

On a larger scale, as far as public parks were concerned, one might say history repeated itself. At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of twentieth century the 'democratisation' of green became more inclusive. Green obtained a social dimension. Working classes were explicitly welcomed in parks, partly as a way to 'civilise' them, keeping them out of pubs, whorehouses and gambling parlours.

As before, the widening of access did have consequences for the design of open spaces that acknowledged the specific needs and wishes of the lower classes. The social provisions of green space turned into self-evidence. Economics started to change as well. In the twentieth century the working classes benefited from growth and saw disposable income increase sharply. Higher income caused a demand for a more prosperous, greener living environment. Civic authorities had to take into account the demands of an increasing number of voters. This process of democratisation meant that the concept

of ownership of the public parks gradually changed. In the early 1900s the idea of the people's park as a green space for the people started to become an accepted idea and in the twentieth century this would develop further in the idea that such an amenity was an entitlement.

In other words, easy access to a public park was now a democratic right rather than a favour or charitable provision.

3.2. Voting with one's feet

Green open space became an integral part of the planned town extensions of the twentieth century. More and more the location of open space was determined according to accepted 'scientific' principles rather than blatant politics. Town planning became professional. Planning on scientific grounds, with clear formulas, started to overtake from high cultural concepts in artistic design. Form followed function (though of course form also defined function). Locational guidelines and normative standards of provision were codified. The concept of 'people' was operationalised as 'communities' with hierarchies and hard quantitative norms: amounts of green space per capita per distance. With these users further defined as categories: gender, age.

Crucially green space, once available in the *right* amounts at the *right* sites, had to proof its worth by being widely used. In the terminology of one of the most trend-setting professionals Wagner, the real value of sites was not the '*daseinwert*' (just being there) but the '*nutzungswert*' (the actual usage). This approach identifies the success of planned open space by measuring popularity and utilisation. It is the ultimate in democratisation: the reason for a public park to exist is defined as the people voting with their feet.

4. The boundaries of the park for all

4.1. Public space in common ownership

So owns the park? Is it really 'all of us' as the concept of democracy suggests? In essence the people's park of the twentieth century was *for,* not *of,* the people. The progress of democracy never challenged the essence of the original public park. The owner of the land has remained the King (in the case of a Kingdom) or more in general the State. As such the Public Park of today, with its long and strong roots in the history of our modern version of democracy, suits perfectly the system of elected leaders who represent the People in general and the Communities in particular at different levels. These politicians exercise control over the public parks, by supervising and directing the professional servants of civil society. They are the custodians, though they could also decide to sell off the land, subject to Rule of Law and result of the local elections.

The view that a public park showed be property of the people, maybe even created by the people themselves became a popular expression of grass root democracy in a number of developed countries in the years seventy. Though it lost in influence in more recent decades, the concept of the *common park* should not be dismissed as a fad. On the contrary, the idea of upside down park provision of commonly owned space might be regarded almost a counter current – albeit less potent - in social history, at times challenging the comfortable conventions of socio-political progress. Rooted in what in England is referred to as a 'common' one could regard this form of public parks, with often its unsophisticated, maybe even undefined or unintentional design, as an alternative (yet not inferior) origin.

Galen Cranz in her book on American 'park politics' noted that contemporary attitudes toward parks were basically threefold. Some will assume that 'parks are just plots of land preserved in their original state'. In some ways the 'common' fits this view. Others, Cranz argues, recognise parks as 'aesthetic objects'. This fits in well with the original concept of the public garden. The third view – more sophisticated according to Cranz – is that the elements of the urban park represent part of an evolving planning strategy 'so that today, as in the past, the citizen visiting a park is subject to an accumulated set of intended moral and social lessons.' (Cranz, 1982, p.253). This analysis also fits neatly non-political dimensions of public parks: environmental/ecological value, cultural/heritage value, and of

course the recreational value. To this one should maybe add the economic value, as expressed in a range of park projects related to the 'villa park'. And for all these historical ideal types of public parks their physical presence, the form of design typical for each category, implicitly reflect a purpose and hence an intended usage.

4.2. On the fringe of the park for all

Putting the public park in a far-focussed vista of political history, demonstrates the gradual democratisation and also the convergence of what might be referred to a the public garden, the municipal park, the people's park and the common park into one dominant concept of the 'park for all'. The reason a park exists is because it is a provision intended (designed) for us all to use. Or is it?

The boundary of the 'park for all' is no longer well defined through a high fence or deep ditch as in the original *paricus* and its immediate successors. In the modern city stone and green space blur into one urban concept. And in a metaphysical sense, the border of the *park for all* is a soft fringe. 'All' might be 'many' but even this is a relative concept and might refer to less people than in previous centuries. Even wholly indiscriminate access might be an ideal rather than a social achievement. In terms of visitors public parks rarely have been happy melting pots. They tend to attract its own type of visitors, in specific space or time. The elite will shun popular places, the working classes will shun elite places, or alternatively they will share the same space but at different times of the day, different days of the week, different seasons.

Though modern designs attempt to be as flexible and variable as possible, it by definition will not be able to accommodate any individual preference in usage. Playing football amongst the rosebushes is vandalism, so one needs to create a separate pitch elsewhere. But playing croquet on a football field is vandalism as well. A park simply cannot accommodate all conflicting demands. Where one will want sport and entertainment, another will want to appreciate the song of birds. One can create optimal diversity, but still in the scarcity of space only dominant voices will be recognised.

And of course, as in previous centuries the modern park for all was visited by the undesirables, who force themselves on the idyllic scene. At night public parks become refuge for homeless, for illicit behaviour, for violence. And depending partly on social and economic circumstances, this darkness might spill over into the daylight. Under such conditions parks no longer are desirable provisions for law-abiding citizens. In extremis once attractive parks turn into green slums.

In other words: the 'park for all' concept is in essence as utopian as perfect democracy.

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