The Transformation of Public Space in Hanoi

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Summary
The following article is a research note concerning an ongoing project on the trans-
formation of public space in Hanoi, Vietnam. The research itself focuses on the
changes in power relations between the state and society and how these are re-
flected in the physical environment of the city. Since the introduction of the Vietnam-
ese *Doi Moi* economic reform programme in 1986, a physical transformation of public
space has been observed as well as a shift in its symbolic meaning. Based on the
assumption that diverse social groups attach different meanings to urban objects,
power relations in the city's landscape become visible. While the private sector domi-
nates the development of new public and semi-public spaces like New Urban Areas
and shopping malls, the general public in Hanoi constantly redefines existing public
spaces by utilising them for private economic and social activities. Embedded in the
discipline of urban sociology, the project seeks to contribute to the discussion of the
correlation between the public sphere as a sociological/political category and the
morphology and practices of public space.

1   Introductory notes on the topic of public space

According to Evers (1984: 481), access to urban land is one of the basic human
needs in urban areas. It is the basis for the production of living space as well as for
the reproduction of manpower. In this sense, access to urban space determines pat-
terns of living and working in the city. In the context of the ongoing global urbanisa-
tion in particular, regard has to be paid to the transformation of public space. Zukin
(1995: 45) defines public spaces as "places that are physically *there*, as geographical
and symbolic centres, as points of assembly where strangers mingle". Sennett (1990:
27) adds to this by pointing out the attraction of several diverse activities as a further
determinant of public space. That is why public space is crucial to the 'liveability' of
a city. It offers space for the residents' recreation and social interactions (Douglass
et al. 2002: 4-39). High population densities as well as a lack of housing facilities in
emerging mega cities endanger its existence, however. Public spaces mainly con-
sisting of parks and city squares are easily transformed into building land. A current
trend in cities all around the globe is the privatisation of public space. Private com-
panies take over control and maintenance of public spaces and create new, so-called

'semi-public' spaces like shopping malls.[1] The former premise that public space is accessible to anyone then becomes obsolete.

In addition to that, urban public spaces play an important role in the period of nation-building as well as in maintaining political legitimacy. Monuments and statues representing the nation's history and legends are located in public spaces, notably in national capitals. Furthermore, authoritarian states utilise public spaces for political performances on occasions such as celebrations of National Days, anniversaries, etc.

Taking these different aspects of public space into account, it becomes evident that public space is a place of continuous contention and renegotiation where different interests, meanings and values collide (Goheen 1998: 479).

Public spaces provide the material locations for the development of an urban public sphere, which is a crucial element of urbanism (Arendt 1958, Sennett 1990). It provides an arena for communication and political activities. To Eisenstadt and Schluchter (2001: 10), the public sphere is culturally and institutionally differentiated from both the official and the private sphere. What distinguishes the public from the official sphere is that the common good is taken care of by people from the private sphere, outside the ruler's domain. They expect that in every civilisation with a degree of complexity and literacy, a public sphere is likely to evolve, but not necessarily of the civil society type: "a civil society entails a public sphere, but not every public sphere involves a civil society whether of the economic or political variety" (Eisenstadt, Schluchter 2001: 12).

What is important is the recognition of a sphere between the private and the official one. Therefore, the concept of the public sphere is most relevant to the analysis of state-society relations in Vietnam. According to Eisenstadt and Schluchter (2001: 10), an analysis of state-society relations in non-European countries seems to be more appropriate via the concept of the public sphere rather than one of civil society.

This approach corresponds very much to the ongoing debate on the development of civil society in Vietnam. Following Eisenstadt and Schluchter, a civil society is associated with both political and economic liberalisation. While the Vietnamese state has already introduced economic reforms, it still hesitates to initiate political reforms.[2] It is therefore difficult to apply the term 'civil society' to Vietnam. Unlike development agencies that make use of the concept of 'civil society' to formulate

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[1]   Zukin (1995: 28) presents the example of New York City, where the public sector has been replaced by the private one with respect to controlling and maintaining Central Park.

[2]   Just recently, two Vietnamese lawyers were arrested for giving legal support to political dissidents and for membership in the "Bloc 8406" who aim at a peaceful transition from a one-party to a multi-party system. After a period of political relaxation due to the APEC summit in Hanoi in autumn 2006 and preparations for Vietnam's WTO accession in January 2007, the party-state reinitiated a wave of repression before the National Assembly elections on 20 May 2007 (Mai 2007: 9).

project objectives, most scholars concerned with the socio-economic development of Vietnam avoid applying the term.

Theoretically located in the discipline of urban sociology, my research project aims at assessing the transition of state-society relations[3] in urban Vietnam by analysing the transformation of public space in the capital, Hanoi. The reason for this procedure is the presumption that the constitution of space is always accompanied by a negotiation of power relations. Space is formed in the course of actions (Löw 2002: 190, 194). Furthermore, a contribution to the discussion of the correlation between the public sphere as a sociological/political category and the morphology and practices of public space is sought. The main question to examine is whether public spaces are already an expression of a public sphere or a prerequisite for its development.

2   The current urbanisation process in Hanoi

Until 1986, the degree of urbanisation in Vietnam was quite low. This was due both to a long period of 'zero urban growth' (1954-1975) in northern Vietnam and a period of 'de-urbanisation' of the highly urbanised south after reunification in 1976.[4]

Since the introduction of *Doi Moi* in 1986, urbanisation rates have continuously increased. The UN reported that 25% of the Vietnamese population were living in cities in 2002 and forecast that this number would rise to 35% in 2020. The annual urbanisation rate for 2002 was 3.06% (World Bank 2004).

The economic liberalisation resulted in the country's integration into the global economy. With annual GDP growth rates of 7%, Vietnam has become an interesting location for foreign and domestic investment.[5] At the centre of attention are the two major urban centres, Hanoi in the north and Ho Chi Minh City in the south. Following Castells (1998: 403), the reason for this is that cities have become nodes of

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[3]   When I speak of state-society relations here, I am referring to the works of Heng (2001), Kerkvliet (2001) and Koh (2006). Instead of treating the state and society as separate entities, Kerkvliet (2001: 240) identifies "arenas in which boundaries, rights, jurisdictions, and power distribution between state and societal agencies are debated, contested, and resolved (at least temporarily)". 'Society' then comprises the people of one country who live in the same political and economic circumstances. 'State', again, refers to officials and institutions that are involved in the making and implementation of rules for society (Kerkvliet 2001: 240).

[4]   Murray and Szelenyi (1984: 96) apply the term 'zero urban growth' for a process of industrialisation that is not accompanied by a parallel expansion of urban infrastructure and therefore does not support urban development. A period of 'de-urbanisation' is usually initiated directly after the Socialist Revolution and is connected to a rapid decrease in the size of the urban population. An example of this can be seen in south Vietnam where the percentage of the urban population dropped from 43% in 1975 to 25% in 1979 (Murray, Szelenyi 1984: 93). In northern Vietnam urbanisation rates were particularly low due to the Second Indo-China War. For example, in 1970 (before reunification) 9.8% of the total population was said to be urban (Thrift, Forbes 1986: 92), whereas 19.3% was considered urban in 1986 (Forbes 1996: 30).

[5]   The Asian Development Bank (2006: 385) states a GDP growth of 7.8% for Vietnam in the year 2004 and 8.4% in the year 2005.

transnational flows in the global economy.[6] A further consequence of this rapid economic development is the increasing size of the populace in cities, not least due to an influx of rural-urban migrants. Therefore, there is a growing demand for urban space.

Before *Doi Moi,* the state used to be the main distributor of land and housing. However, in accordance with the transition from a planned to a market economy, allocation of land is now being increasingly determined by market forces as well as by the individual – and in most cases illegal – appropriation of urban land. While the state is trying to maintain its leading role in land allocation, an informal property market has already developed.[7] The property sector offers new business opportunities to both domestic and foreign companies. Furthermore, the economic transformation has paved the way for individuals to make their own housing decisions and create their own livelihood, as expressed in the phenomenon of 'popular housing'.[8] In the process of urban development, new actors have appeared who shape the city and follow their own agenda. Not only do they physically transform the urban environment, but they also attach new meanings to existing places. The party-state, the citizens of Hanoi and the private economic sector are among the 'producers'[9] of public space in Hanoi.

2.1   The party-state

The 'landscape'[10] of Hanoi is mainly defined by the socialist state. Government buildings, urban symbols such as state monuments and memorials demonstrate the party-state's power. Due to Hanoi's role as the nation's capital and political centre, the government attempts to exert direct control over the physical environment.

As already mentioned in the introduction, authoritarian states instrumentalise public space to legitimise their domination. In celebrating National Independence Day, Ho Chi Minh's birthday, by organising military parades and fireworks, the Vietnamese state aims at mobilising the masses. But in recent years it has become quite obvious that the state has increasingly been failing to attract the people. Thomas (2002: 1614) declares that the crowd "has had a huge semantic shift since the 1940s". Popular events like the visit made by Microsoft's executive director Bill Gates or the

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[6]   It should be noted here that Castells was referring to megacities.

[7]   Waibel (2006: 40) noticed that the state increasingly participated in the building of housing stocks in the past by co-operating with foreign companies in joint ventures.

[8]   Referring to Helen Evertsz (2000: 24), 'popular housing' comprises all housing activities that result from individual decisions and self-initiatives of mainly low-income groups. These activities are not subject to official planning and control.

[9]   The term 'producers' is applied here in reference to Henri Lefebvre (1986) who elaborated on the social production of space in "La production d'éspace".

[10]   The term 'landscape' comprises the physical environment as well as the symbolic representation of social practices. Practices of power and resistance form a social microcosm that is the 'landscape' (Zukin 1991: 16 ff.).

staging of the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games tend to cause more people to assemble than state festivities do. Nowadays, the general public organises itself into crowds, which poses a great challenge to the socialist state and its instruments of social control. Former official spaces have turned into places that are used to conduct apolitical activities, which, according to Thomas (2002: 1614), could even be considered 'transgressive' to the state.

2.2   The citizens of Hanoi

Up to now, most scholars dealing with the socio-spatial transformation of Vietnam's cities have referred to the country's economic transition as an explanation, but have not taken social or cultural factors into account.[11] They posited the argument that the expansion of private activities onto the streets is due to the increasing development of the private sector initiated by economic liberalisation. One example of this is the setting up of food stalls and tea stands at the roadside without having the required permission to do so. Thus, public space is treated as a collective consumer good, which everyone can use. It forms the basis of people's subsistence production. However, conflicts arising from this collective but nevertheless individual appropriation have not been examined yet. Given the low average housing area of 4.7 sqm per capita, there is an urgent need for private space in Hanoi (JBIC 1999: 136). That is why Hanoi's citizens have developed strategies to appropriate public space for social activities. Public spaces are gradually being transformed into private spaces, to be used by a given family for cooking, eating and washing. Even family festivities such as weddings or funerals take place on the pavement. Furthermore, the increasing use of official spaces for recreation and leisure activities has been observed in recent years.

2.3   The private/state economic sector

The state and society are not the only ones creating and shaping space, however. As Vietnam finds itself in a state of transition towards a market economy, business interests play an important role as well. Due to the rising demand for luxurious housing and for cultural consumption on the part of the urban middle classes, the economic sector's position in urban development is enforced.

The ones responsible for restructuring the urban landscape according to Zukin (1995: 7) are "'place entrepreneurs' (Molotch 1976), officials and investors whose ability to deal with the symbols of growth yields 'real' results in property development, new businesses and jobs". In the case of Hanoi, the state-controlled *Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUD)* and the construction company *VINACONEX*, as well as foreign investors like the Japanese *Sega* enterprise or the Indonesian *Ciputra* group, to name only a few, can be classified as 'place entrepre-

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[11]   See, for example, Waibel (2002) or Schnepf-Orth (1999).

neurs'. While *HUD* and *Ciputra* are involved in the creation of new private and public spaces within middle-class residential areas, so-called 'new urban areas', *Sega* is responsible for the partial privatisation of Lenin Park. This park, nowadays called 'Reunification Park', is one of the most popular public spaces in Hanoi. But since its privatisation, access to it has been regulated by imposing an entrance fee (Douglass et al. 2002: 4-40).

3   Public spaces, spaces of negotiation?

Having identified the different producers of public space in Hanoi, it has also become quite obvious that the various interests are going to collide. It is therefore necessary to negotiate the use of physical space in Hanoi in practical terms. To comprehend the intentions and meanings behind these practices, an understanding of James Scott's work on 'hidden transcripts' is of central importance. Scott (1990: 4) speaks of 'hidden transcripts' as a discourse that is happening beyond the observation of power-holders. That is how he attempts to interpret the political conduct of subordinate groups, an approach that can be well applied to the case of Vietnam.

The question is whether these practices can be regarded as part of a public sphere or not. Public spheres develop within the framework of negotiation processes to articulate societal interests. These negotiations may occur between the state and society or society and the economic sector. In either case, public spheres become crucial where the common good is at stake.

With regard to the continuing dominance of the socialist state in shaping the urban landscape and the forthcoming dominance of the economic sector, it is expedient to assess how the public negotiates and redefines public space. The contestation of the state-defined landscape is expressed through both the appropriation of public – and especially official – spaces and the production of new public and private spaces with their own symbolism. The result is a redefinition of public space:

> "Public space continues to be redefined by publics whose values and demands are in competition in the political arena that is the city." (Goheen 1998: 487)

3.1   State-society relations

When examining the power relations reflected in the physical environment of the city, the concept of 'cultural landscapes' is of relevance. Lily Kong and Lisa Law (2002: 1505) term cities "excellent examples of medium and outcome of power relations". Cities are socially constructed and therefore politically contested. Conflicts between different groups are likely to arise over the shape of this landscape. The reason for this is that a 'unitary culture' does not exist. Due to its symbolic meaning, public space becomes the space of negotiation and contestation in the city. Different social groups attach diverse meanings to places. Because of this heterogeneity, meanings are continuously doubted, negotiated and recreated.

For a deeper understanding of the supremacy of one group in giving meaning to urban objects, Kong and Law refer to Gramsci's (1973) concept of 'ideological hegemony'. The ruling group presents ideas and values which are perceived to be 'natural' or 'common sense' by the rest of society. Landscapes then have the power to institutionalise the given order, "thus contributing to the social constructedness of reality" (Kong, Law 2002: 1505). If we take a look at the 'landscape of power' in Hanoi, the 'ideological hegemony' of the Communist Party immediately becomes visible in the district of Ba Dinh where most of the government buildings are located. Ba Dinh Square is an ideal example of a medium and outcome of power in Hanoi. Being the location of the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum and the National Assembly, Ba Dinh Square is a symbol of the party-state's power. It was here that Ho Chi Minh declared the nation's independence on 2 September 1945. This square is intensively used by the party-state to mobilise the masses on occasions such as Independence Day or the funeral of famous war veterans, etc.

The concept of 'urban symbolism' is instrumental in analysing the power structures of public space.[12] Based on Eco's (1991: 38) perception that everything is a sign that is interpreted as such by its interpreter, the concept of 'urban symbolism' presents an adequate approach to the analysis of meanings of urban objects. In these terms, buildings, streets, town squares, etc. can be interpreted as symbols of power. Nas (1993: 16) adds the distinction between formal and informal meanings of a symbol. In particular, official symbols are chosen to articulate a counter-symbolism. Scott (1990: 45) states that all relations of power also imply relations of resistance. A distinction between formal and informal meanings assists, then, in detecting practices of resistance within official spaces.

The dualism of formality and informality can be observed well around the Lenin Monument opposite the Army Museum. Originally, the monument was erected to represent the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the socialist state. Therefore the state defines the formal symbolism. Its informal symbolism is constituted by Hanoi's youth who use it as a gathering point for skateboarding and break-dancing.

Besides ideology, history is another important determinant of symbolism. Korff (1993: 230) views the city as "a container of history and of meanings, which can be selectively activated":

> "Due to the relative persistence and immobility of spatial structures, they play an important role as 'facts' for the invention of tradition. The tradition is easily and convincingly verified by reference to remains from history." (Korff 1993: 230)

The 'invention of history' is reflected in the decay of French colonial buildings as well as the erection of socialist edifices. A second way of inventing history is by redefining colonial buildings through their occupancy by government agencies of

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[12] The volume 'Urban Symbolism' edited by Peter J. M. Nas (1993) offers an insight into various concepts of symbolism in presenting examples of different cities. Nas (1993: 14) understands 'symbolism' as the ascription of meaning to an object.

the socialist state. Due to their material persistence, they cannot be extinguished, but their function can be transformed. This is how the government attempted to erase Vietnam's colonial past from the collective memory.

However, it is not only the state that leaves its imprint on the architectural environment. In recent years, Ba Dinh Square has become increasingly occupied by Hanoi's residents for the purpose of conducting social activities such as sports and meeting friends. Yet, it is not only apolitical activities that take place here; political interests are articulated in this public space as well. Public protests are still rare in Hanoi, but whenever they do appear, official spaces are chosen to challenge the party-state.[13] On 30 April 2000, the day of the fall of Saigon, a group of 30 farmers assembled on Ba Dinh Square to demand political reforms. Not only did the farmers choose a symbolic site to do so, but they also selected a date of major importance to the socialist state. In June 2001 protestors claimed land compensation in front of the National Assembly (Thomas 2002: 1618). The result of these apolitical and political practices is a redefinition of Ba Dinh Square by Hanoi's public. Thomas (2002: 1612) already considers this spatial phenomenon a first step in the development of a public sphere. She views public space in Hanoi as "a site through which transgressive ideologies and desires may have an outlet" (Thomas 2002: 1614).

Reviewing the redefinition of the two public spaces, the Lenin Monument and Ba Dinh Square, urban symbols are to be regarded as an integral part of the urban public sphere.[14] A public sphere seems to emerge exactly in those places where counter-symbolism is articulated.

3.2 Social versus economic interests

Within the framework of urban development, negotiation processes not only increase between society and the state, but also between society and the economy. The formation of a public sphere is of central importance in order to articulate social interests as opposed to economic ones.

The term of the 'symbolic economy' introduced by Zukin (1995: 2) helps to assess the power of the economic sector in shaping the urban landscape by introducing new patterns of cultural consumption and living to urban Vietnam. A city's 'symbolic economy' consists of two production systems: firstly the production of space and secondly the production of symbols:

> "... the *production of space*, with its synergy of capital investment and cultural meanings, and the *production of symbols*, which constructs both a currency of commercial exchange and a language of social identity." (Zukin 1995: 23 f.)

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[13]   Although Thomas (2002: 1620) states that protest by local people "usually never moves beyond the individual or the family", she argues that with the assistance of organisations such as professional associations or environmental groups, opinions can certainly be formulated and interests articulated.

[14]   In this context, Colombijn (1993: 61) talks of urban symbols as public symbols, which are "open to the general public".

The 'symbolic economy' is determined by the growth of cultural consumption and its industries. Thus, every effort to restructure urban space is also an attempt at 'visual re-presentation' at the same time (Zukin 1995: 24). Both architects and developers have concrete ideas about the usage and symbolism of their objects. Allen (2006: 445) makes the argument that design and layout are already instruments of power which limit people's interaction and movement within space. One of the most well-known 'visual re-presentation' projects in Hanoi is probably the new urban area known as Ciputra Westlake.[15] In suggesting that there are intended meanings at stake, the main question is how these new spaces are accepted and used by the people inhabiting them. In 2006, the local newspaper *Tien Phong*[16] published a whole series of articles on residents of new urban areas complaining about poor housing conditions like the lack of clean water and electricity. Furthermore, many inhabitants are dissatisfied with the provision of public space within their housing areas. The shortage of places for recreation and gathering like children's playgrounds is one of the most frequent issues. Another case is brought forward by Logan (2000: 238). He describes how professional associations protested about the construction of the Golden Hanoi Hotel near Hoan Kiem Lake, which was supported by the media. The discussion in the media already indicates the existence of a public sphere that actively participates in urban planning and tries to impose its interests on the economic sector.

Examples from other cities have shown that conflicts are likely to arise between the intended and real usage of housing estates by residents. Chua Beng Huat (1997: 84) used Singapore as an example to show that planned public spaces in new public housing estates were not accepted by their inhabitants as intended. Instead, the residents formed new sites of social interaction on the pavement. This corresponds to Sennett's thesis (1991: 11 ff) that modern architecture creates neutral spaces that prevent social interactions, rather than supporting them.

4   Public and private spaces

Having discussed the relevance of public space in Hanoi to the formation of a public sphere and the official sphere as an arena for mobilising the masses, we now come to the third sphere which needs further elaboration – the private sphere. All three are relational. The question that arises is how these spheres are to be detected in Vietnam.

Lisa Drummond (2000: 2377) argues that the difficulty in examining *public space* in Vietnam comes from applying a Western concept to a society where clear distinc-

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[15]   Located next to the main road that connects the city centre with the airport, the attempt at 'visual re-presentation' presents itself in the neo-colonial entrance gate on top of which iron horses welcome the visitor.

[16]   Suong, Phung "Bi hai nha tai dinh cu Ha Noi. Bai 2" (The Tragic Story of the Unfinished Houses in a Hanoi Estate. Part 2), Tien Phong ("Pioneer"), (22.8.2006), No. 179, p. 5.

tions between private and public realms do not seem to exist. Public space as comprehended in Western societies is an arena of social interaction and political activity, whereas private space is associated with the home, a space "free from outright control by outside forces such as the state" (Drummond 2000: 2379). Due to the decentralised administration system that reaches into the smallest societal unit, a private sphere independent from the state cannot be seen in Vietnam's case. As Koh (2006: 7) puts it, the network of mass organisations and the state's machinery "bring the party-state into every home". To meet Vietnamese realities, Drummond introduces the terms *inside out* and *outside in*, the former describing private activities that are carried out in public places and the latter denoting the intervention of the state in the domestic sphere.

While Drummond emphasises the difficulty of applying the Western concept of public space to Vietnam, I, for the most part, see the problem in the adaptability of the private space concept. Richard Sennett (1991: 13) argues that the Western distinction between "inner and outer experience" is routed in the occidental culture of Christianity. The dualism of *in* and *out* had its first manifestation in the demarcation of territories in medieval cities (Sennett 1991: 35). In the 19th century, public space became associated with crime and coldness, and was considered irritating on account of its complexity. Private space, in contrast, was conditioned by order and distinctness (Sennett 1991: 46 ff.). The result was a retreat from public life. This occidental comprehension of private and public domains does not tally with the way everyday life is structured in Vietnam. My argument is that the dynamics of public space can only be comprehended in relation to those of private space. That is why one objective of the study is to assess the private sphere and intimacy from an emic perspective. As Sennett (1990: 133) puts it, private and public sphere are two atoms of the same molecule, or as Habermas (1987: 14) states: "Die Öffentlichkeit selbst stellt sich als eine Sphäre dar – dem privaten steht der öffentliche Bereich gegenüber".

Although Drummond's concept includes not only economic but also social activities, it can be criticised for its exclusion of the political realm. She does not consider a correlation between public space and the public sphere in Vietnam:

> "In brief, then, Vietnam has little history of a public sphere or of public spaces, a social vacuum which has always been filled by the authority of the emperor/state with little place for Western-style public discussion or expression." (Drummond 2000: 2382)

It is interesting to ponder over what will happen if the state is unable to fill this social vacuum any more. In recent years, a decrease in the state's authority, especially in constructing the urban image, has already been observed. This is where the redefinition of public space gains importance because the occupancy or even just negotiation of space by the citizens is a first step in challenging the state.

5   Assessing state-society relations in Vietnam

Reading the works of Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt and Richard Sennett is crucial if one is to study the public sphere as a sociological/political category. Habermas (1987: 95) links the development of the public sphere in 18th/19th century Europe to market liberalisation, which comprises the emancipation of commodity exchange from state directives. A process of privatisation has been occurring in Vietnam since 1986, although it has to be noted that the state sector is still dominant in the economy. While Habermas focuses mainly on the political function of the European bourgeois public sphere, Arendt also elaborates on the spatial dimension of public spheres. Arendt (1958: 200) regards the public realm as being distinct from the private and as "the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men". What's more, Howell (1993: 317, 319) stresses Arendt's focus on local and particular public spaces in contrast to Habermas' more universal approach. Arendt's emphasis on the existence of plural public spaces is highly relevant to the research project that has been presented here.

Richard Sennett's contribution to the discussion on urban public spheres was partly presented in the previous section on the differentiation between private and public spheres. A third sphere that he adds is one of intimacy. He proposes that the fear of the anonymity of public life resulted in a retirement from it into intimacy in Western cities. People were guided by the impression that personal development could only be achieved in the protected realm of intimacy (Sennett 1990: 334). Due to people's fear of expressing themselves in public, public space became increasingly empty. This is what Sennett (1990: 331 f.) calls the "fall of public men" and the decay of the public sphere.

In applying these different theoretical approaches to urban Vietnam, research attempts to conceive of the transition of state-society relations. Another definition of the public sphere is the one put forward by Björn Wittrock. He sees the public sphere as the sphere of mediation between subjects and rulers, citizens and government. It is the space where debates on the proper course of politics take place and the common good is the focus of attention (Wittrock 2002: 22). As will be presented in this chapter, this concept corresponds most fittingly to the current state of research on state-society relations in Vietnam.

David Koh (2006: 2 ff.) distinguishes between three different schools of thought in the debate on state-society relations in Vietnam: the 'accommodating state school', the 'structural dominance school' and the 'bureaucratic socialism school'. While the 'accommodating state school' states a 'manoeuvring space of society', which means that state-society relations are characterised by responsiveness and mutual influence, the 'structural dominance school' sees little room for society influencing the state. One of its representatives, William Turley (1993: 269 f.), calls the Vietnamese government system 'mobilisational authoritarianism'. The third school, the school of 'bureaucratic socialism', regards bureaucrats as unresponsive and authoritarian to-

wards citizens. Koh (2006: 9) considers the first school to represent the reality on an everyday urban level, whereas the other two reflect power relations on the national level. Kerkvliet (2001: 244 f.) finds that all three interpretations are appropriate to the Vietnamese conditions. Nonetheless, he goes a step further to conclude that state-society relations should be understood as a 'dialogue', which means that the state and society mutually influence each other. This dialogue becomes most notable in the implementation of laws. The negotiation between the state and society results in an adjustment of existing laws to the people's own practices.

> " ... the party state is generally stronger where decision-making or policy formulation is concerned, but society usually is able to triumph in policy implementation." (Koh 2006: 10)

Thus, everyday practices operated in public spaces in Hanoi can be considered as part of this negotiation process. De Certeau (1984: 95, 96) supports this argument in stating that everyday practices are spatial practices which are beyond the control of the state. Citizens occupy public space for private – and, particularly, economic – purposes, although it is prohibited. The wards' officials, who are responsible for the laws' implementation, often do not intervene. That is what Koh (2006: 9) understands as 'mediation space'. A mediation space emerges where local officials not only act as cadres of the central government, but also as members of the spatial community. This is most likely to happen on the ward level in urban areas because here, officials and local residents know each other best. Local officials then act as mediators between the state and society. That is how Vietnamese society is capable of expressing its demands in a way that changes existing policies.

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