

Publicness: The Site-Specificity of a Concept

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When Jurgen Habermas visited Oslo some ten years ago, he urged his audience, which included the Norwegian philosopher Gunnar Skirbekk, who recalled the incident, to preserve what was called civil society. This society is less a society in the usual sense than an informal and loose cluster of communities somewhere between professional life and family life.

Civil society is not about the status of a civil majority in relation to, for example, the military. Nor is it about a civilized minority as opposed to everyone else. Civil society refers to the non-professional part of society, to working people during their leisure time when they are not at home, to social life between family time and office hours, to the forms assumed by informal networks and activities, before these once again become part of professional life in the form of "network corruption."

Art has increasingly become a part of civil society. This has to do with the constant de-skilling or democratization of art technologies since the advent of the modern avantgarde around 1900. Art, like civil society, becomes informal and, as a profession, contributes to civil society by filling or poisoning it with professional envy and calculation. Art becomes, to an

increasing degree, social engineering. The avantgarde's dream of a de-skilled art praxis merging together with life praxis (according to Peter Bürger in his *Theorie der Avantgarde*) is one of many threats against civil society, precisely because it remains a profession. The threat seemed relatively modest, but this was before consumerism aestheticized all choices in life, before identity shifted from production (modernism) to consumption (postmodernism). Civil society is, in other words, the self-formalizing, informal network between family and work, between private and public. It was this intermediate zone that Habermas, according to Skirbekk, would attempt to save.

When we discuss art and its relation to the public sphere, maybe it is a semi-public space we are really addressing. The keynote lectures earlier today all addressed the power, and the level of spontaneity, within civil society. Publicness, if that is indeed the correct English term for the German *Öffentlichkeit*, is something abstract, like so many value-laden concepts of human affairs, whose reference we tend to take for granted. It is ephemeral like an historical event, after the fact and dependent on all the wonderful documents it leaves behind. The dependency on documents makes publicness conceptually inclined towards nostalgia, that is, something we recognize as always being lost already. This is the case for one of the most famous modern theories of publicness, Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition (Vita Activa)*. It is really a story about how we lost or constantly forget publicness. Arendt delivers a generous Golden Age theory, in which the Greek inventors of publicness knew everything, and everything since revolves around a gradual loss of the original respect for the function and framing of the polis.

Still, we immediately know what publicness is, meant as it is to stand for something attractive, something we can only wish would expand its field and increase in this world. So under one obvious condition, the Roman "res publica," the public thing, is a good thing if it belongs to or promotes our own liberal democracy. Publicness is centristic. It can be nothing but our publicness, our way of life as oppose to theirs, where publicness is lacking or of the wrong kind, for instance a scene designed for the glorious display of power. And this centrism connects publicness to a family of concepts like modernity, urbanism, aesthetic autonomy and the like. Publicness functions as a threshold into our house, that is, modern, western society, no matter how strong the nostalgia for the classical Greek or others spaces of more

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recent date, that pertain to it. This centrism, which connects publicness to the specificity of our culture, also involves the vulnerability of democracy as we understand it. We are not the end of all things, with a given right to subsume otherness as previous stages of our own culture.

Opposed to the public is of course the private, and although publicness means something attractive, this attraction is met differently in different political camps. For the conservative the private is a good term, for the left mostly a bad or at least a contaminated term. That is, for the conservative, both private and public, and the distinction between, them are good. For the left both the private and to a lesser degree the public, and the distinction between them, are deeply problematic. For the conservative the distinction is the eternal law of liberal democracy, for the left it is changing or historically relative, if necessary at all. This means the defenders of publicness, equipped with a historical role model, are inclined towards the conservative camp.

I can't recall publicness being an operative concept in Marx, for instance. And it's interesting to consider the last 30 years of French thought, for example in Foucault or Deleuze, where topics related to publicness are discussed. The most public and entertaining of all philosophers, the French seem to subscribe to a rather dire view of the public sphere. Foucault's discussion of discipline and surveillance is well-known and brought one step closer to postindustrial times by Deleuze in his critique of "control society." In one interview, Deleuze gives, without mentioning Habermas, the reason for his warning: "The quest for 'universals of communication' ought to make us shudder." (*Negotiations*, p. 175). There is not much consolation to be had in an earlier conversation (Parnet, *Dialogues*), in which Deleuze approvingly quotes D.H. Lawrence's distaste for the "dirty little secret" in French novels. Lawrence may have caught a glimpse in the popular novels of his time of the tyrannies of intimacy to come, or maybe it is just the betrayal of the secret which makes it dirty. To Deleuze, our shared public sphere is better off both without bureaucratic control and the flashing of little French secrets.

Two historic role models fuel the two most famous theories on publicness. One is ideal, the classical city-state of Athens in the 5th century B.C. (Arendt), while the second is more real and modest, the London coffee-houses of the 18th century (Habermas).

The main point in the ideal model of publicness is the split between public space and home, *polis* and *oikos*. *Polis* belonged to free men, while the rest, women, children, slaves, cattle and crops, that is, economy, belonged to the family under the command of the *oikos* despot, the father of the house. The despot at home became a man among equals in the public *agora*, where matters of importance for the city-community were discussed. Only land-owners could pass as free men. Private property was an external, rational and specific condition for the *polis*' claims of universality.

In hindsight, the non-conformity between the universal and rational is provocative, but what it illustrates is the specific condition for universality. A healthy dynamic is at work between the two concepts—site-specific reasons like private property versus the universal claims of the *polis*, a society of free men.

Arendt's split between *oikos*, the private, and *polis*, the public, is anyhow a caricature of its Greek origin. Still, even as a caricature it is helpful, exposing both the idealism of the construction, and the price to be paid for the commerce between private and public whenever it occurs, from early modern novels to the contemporary culture industry and feminism.

To explain the enthusiasm and pride that the Athenian *oikos* despot felt for all things public and the institution of the *agora*, we may start with the exemption it offered from *ananke*, the necessities of life. Whatever the variety of tasks and experience, the *oikos* never disengaged from reproduction. Only a free man was, for short intervals of time, given the possibility of transcending the confines prescribed for women, children, slaves, and the world of economy.

In *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Habermas makes the 18th century coffeehouses in London into a model for publicness. A coffeehouse is of a different order and scale than the *agora* of Athens, not least because it is more divided and in fact more private, but this time the publicness is unmistakably modern and bourgeois. It may be hard to believe that a place where people came together to gossip and drink coffee, the 18th century consumer craze for ordinary people, could furnish the purest idea of a bourgeois political culture. In response to the informal character of the coffee house, Habermas is prompted to operate with two sorts of public spaces, the private, where discussion runs free, and the official or representative public space,

directed by the king or state officials for a display of legality and symbols of power. In keeping with the importance Habermas placed on civil society, these coffee houses gave public vent to the opinions of private persons and were the modest beginnings of a change in which the aristocracy and the representative public space suddenly became overshadowed by a literary public, which was acquiring a deliberative, democratic power through common reading and the sobriety of coffee.

Habermas emphasizes time and again how publicness behaves similarly to the concept of the common or the universal. I think it is important to go one step further, and admit that publicness behaves like philosophical idealism. It remains tied to a specific tradition of thought. Using this concept for art-political purposes today may bring in conditions only a few are willing to meet.

The main point in *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, which appeared 1968, ten years after Arendt's book, is what Habermas calls *refeudalization*, recognizable as another variety of the public and political Golden Age in Arendt. The dialectic between private and public, or between rational and universal, is always threatening to an historical ideal such as the origin of the concept "publicness." This is obvious in Arendt's presentation of Athens, but the same goes for the English coffeehouses of Samuel Johnson's contemporaries, and we will never cease to wonder how such a rather unspectacular bourgeois way of life managed to outshine the representative aristocratic public display of its time.

The entanglement of rational conditions and universal aspirations may explain the unstable relation between polis and oikos, public and private, and why any ideal origin of publicness operates under threat. Every expansion of publicness is a threat to its rationale. A logic of distinction is recognizable here: to include every group aspiring towards publicness is to let go of the rational conditions for the universality of the concept. The threshold has to be kept when new aspirants come knocking on the door. The first assault came from the industrialized working class in the 19th century, and later aspirations from within the ruling bourgeoisie, in suffragette feminism. Each time a widening of public space occurs, which reframes the rationality of public discussion.

What happens to the free, deliberate speech of the coffee houses when the enslaved workers and females of the capitalist "oikos" demand their

rightful access to the public sphere? Our task is to see the problem of principle in what is universally moral and self-evidently right, if publicness is not to remain without historical reality or site-specificity. We will have to suspend moral sentiments and ask how publicness survives *ananke* in organizations from below, in the labor movements, or in organizations from within, in feminism, or in general, how it survives the tyrannies of intimacy and capitalization.

To Hannah Arendt, the fall from grace is not a single event. But it has a name, and that is the social. The fall was confirmed when man as a political being, *bios politikos*, was equated with his social being. Starting with the Roman thinker Seneca, and systematized in Christianity, when souls were to contemplate eternity rather than act in the world, and the agora became a church or a hospital, the social had no need to expand. It already is a concept without limits. Modern capitalism did nothing to change this. According to Arendt, even Marx mixes political and social, private and public, and lacks the much needed distance to his British liberalist adversaries. So much criticism of capital since has missed the mark by continuing to take the social to be the truth about publicness. How is one to argue then, in the midst of capitalism's misery, against compassion?

Habermas presents a list of threats to publicness that are equally recognizable as threats to privacy. Through the 19th century and corporate industrialization, privacy shrinks to the small sphere of the immediate family, which is objectified together with a complete loss of paternal authority. The family loses its caretaking function, as socialization is increasingly taken over by other institutions. This process continues all the way up to the modern welfare state. Habermas says that community is turned into a fetish as publicness is remade to fit mass society. His perspective has always been of a *Lebenswelt* being colonized by what he calls the *Systemwelt*.

In a postindustrial global economy, with its consumerism and network corruption, we should also consider the opposite possibility, the life world colonizing the system world. Public space has become irrelevant for real political discussion, blocked as it is by what Richard Sennett calls "the tyrannies of intimacy." And publicness again becomes representative or "directed," as Habermas says of publicness in Communist Europe. In the West, we may say publicness has been instrumentalized and reduced to publicity, as if no argument could ever justify the interest behind it, and therefore

every interest is as legitimate as any other, and it all comes down to who has the power to dominate the public sphere.

Formative for both Arendt and Habermas is the philosopher Kant, a contemporary of the 18th century coffee house culture in England. Towards the end of her life Arendt tried to justify the connection between Kant's aesthetic and political thought, as they both involve what he calls "reflective judgment." I think it is an important reminder that what is often presented as the pure aestheticism of Kant's position is also a basic defense of a cosmopolitics, a universal, ideal community underlying any aesthetic discussion of taste, if and only if the judgment is purely aesthetic. This ideal community is no foundation or *Letztbegründung*. In fact, it is the lack of final justification which unites political and aesthetic judgment.

As to the question posed for the conference - whether art would be the right public "arena" today - I guess everyone would be happy to answer in the affirmative. Sorry to say, I think art is less an arena than it ever was since the beginning of Modernism, even less than the negative example of formalist painting during the Cold War. The general reason has truly to do with the expansion of publicness under the radical changes of its rationality as mentioned above, far outside the influence of any form of art practice. Art as an arena, let's say for political change, must also be weighed against the social engineering inside the art community, which overpowers the networks with corruption and reduces art's form of publicness to publicity. The problem is not art becoming cultural entertainment, of interest even to a politician of the Labor Party, it is rather the inherent risk of a social space defined by instrumentalist fallacy projected onto political praxis by poetic production. Such a projection, or categorical mistake, is unhelpful for any civil society. Art-professional instrumentalism infects the *Lebenwelt* it may wish to disappear within. The reason for this is die-hard aesthetic autonomy, which guarantees that no such disappearance will ever succeed. In addition, the problem is compounded when representative publicness suddenly turns its attention to the humble coffee houses of civil society. A conclusion to my short note would be: if art only thrives in the coffee house, then it must learn to unmake itself and keep its hands off a civil society where boy scouts and bridge clubs should reign supreme.

COMMENTS/QUESTIONS

Of course you are aware about Negt and Kluge's criticism of Habermas' concept of publicness for being too narrow, too male, heterosexual and white. And of course that was one of the problems for cultures that became visible after Habermas. Would you agree that we should think of another notion of publicness today, which would look more like a counter-publicness? Or do you think such counter-publicness is possible?

You emphasize the universalism of this equivalence, and I emphasize, in order to provoke discussion, its rationality. The point of the idea of publicness, according to both Habermas and Arendt, is really to show its indebtedness to a specific tradition, a way of life. But this means the specificity of our culture makes us vulnerable, democracy is as vulnerable as it is historically specific. It also means we have to be careful when we expand or export the concept of publicness. It was a problem when the working class demanded their due rights, and it was, and still is, a problem when women want to live and work like men, because Western societies aren't reproductive any more. Due to rates of fertility, refeudalization means those cultures win power which are able to lock up their women for reproduction. Let's admit it, and be mindful of the original framing of rationality in the free deliberation between landowners. It's just a price to pay to be specific. And maybe the solution doesn't lie in the vast public space, but in civil society as it became manifest historically in the coffeehouse, and maybe art is bound up in such societies. When it turns too big or too conspicuous, it soon loses its deliberative rationality.

How was idealism connected to the public space?

If you use Marx as an opposite, you can say he is always trying to escape public space as a place where people talk and dream - it doesn't matter as long as the historical machinery lies within the economy. Public space just turns social through the capitalist society. Marx would say, you can deliberate as much as you like, and bring in whatever moral or aesthetic issues you want to, but none of these will explain the dynamism between public and private. You cannot explain the dynamics of public and private by referring to a public discussion. I would just say, it matters how we conclude and how

we ground our arguments. To Marx that would have sounded idealistic, and I agree.

Q *You are maybe talking in more philosophical-analytical terms, than those of idealism. But I was thinking about the artist as an idealist. If the artist wasn't an idealist, then I guess, why should we contribute to the public space? What's the importance of idealism?*

A I guess Freud would say that there's idealism in human sexuality, and with Duchamp we have to admit the idealism in the concept of art. So what can an artist do when he gets the attention that art, as an ideal object, demands, certainly more attention than a civil society person would expect? Attention is a magnetic field of attraction within the concept of art itself. That is why art can do something for the lesser public spaces within civil society.

Q *Is it possible to bring in the aspect of autonomy at this point? I mean, if the artist has the possibility to function like that, this presupposes that that artist, or the institution that surrounds the artist, has some real kind of autonomy. Might that be something to fight for inside the system of the society we live in today?*

A In my opinion the concept of autonomy gets misunderstood when connected to the notion of art as something secluded and contaminated when put towards external political aims. On the contrary, I think autonomy can be seen precisely in projects like Heier's *Sagene bad*. Autonomy is deeply dependent on art's dissemination and value in a public space which is always already political. Instead of finding autonomy in a picture on the wall of the museum, a more pertinent metaphor would be to present aesthetic autonomy as a fatal modern illness, which appears as soon as there is art in societies like ours. It's more like leprosy—you're slowly dying from it, and that's perfectly in order. Art is able to withstand a lot of movement or real commerce between spheres. Contrary to widespread beliefs in the frailty of aesthetic autonomy, I think it is strong, not weak.