

Rethinking the Public Sphere¹

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Nothing is more basic to present day social change and social problems than unsettling of the relationship between public and private. This is so whether we ask in which realm religion belongs or ask about the relationship between public health and private provision of health care. The issue is manifest when we speak of the public good vs. private goods, public finances vs. private property, public security and the surveillance of private life, or public culture, creativity and communication and the private control of knowledge as intellectual property rights. In all these arenas, and others, a tacit consensus about what is public and what is private has come unstuck.

This consensus reigned especially in the second half of the 20th century. It did not stop arguments about whether the government should support public television or whether military service was a public obligation. But it gave stability to the meaning of the terms in those arguments. Moreover, the arguments were mostly about modest shifts of balance.

Today, arguments about what is or should be public and what is or should be private are more momentous than at any time since the New Deal and World War Two. They are reshaping the role of NGO's and the relationship between civil society and both government and markets. They are challenging the very idea of public universities. They are putting enormous pressure on efforts to increase diversity and the representative of minorities in a range of institutions.

The distinction between the two realms is not natural or obvious. And while it is commonplace to oppose them, the two in fact grew together to shape the modern era as one centrally concerned with both the private lives of individuals and public communication and the pursuit of public goods. Neither term makes sense without the other, and in much of human history neither privacy nor publicness have been very pronounced. Indeed, as the root of the term suggests, privacy was more a matter of deprivation than a desirably autonomous space. And public life was not a matter of sociability among diverse people so much as the publicity with which religious and political elites disseminated their messages and affirmed their grandeur. But during the modern era, not only did privacy come to appear as a positive value linked to both individuality and the family, the idea of a public linked by communication of all sorts grew in importance, reshaping ideas of political legitimacy and underwriting the rise of democracy.

Two basic themes are linked in the idea of “public”. First, the notion of public goods—provided by collective rather than individual action, and usually shared. Clean air, protection against infectious diseases, and security are prominent examples. Second, the notion of the public sphere as an arena of open communication among strangers— together with its necessary supports of free speech, transparency of government, access to information and availability of diverse media. Both have grown more important through

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the modern era. Both are under considerable threat today. And in each case, key questions concern relations between states and markets.

During the postwar period, tacit agreement in the United States assigned social security to the realm of public responsibility and health care for the most part to private. Yet health care was not altogether private, for health insurance and employer health care plans were crucial. And pension plans were a vital source of retirement benefits. If they were nonstate, they were not purely individual. Proposals to change social security and other social programs amount to a new privatization of risk.

In most of Europe health care was seen as a public right, but recent reforms have scaled back entitlements. European unification may expand the scale of the public in some senses, but it scales back public support in many others. Not only do European levels of support retreat from those achieved in the richer social democracies, there is less of an active public sphere at the international level.

Turning to the rest of the world, one of the basic questions is whether individuals and families must fend entirely for themselves or have the chance to benefit from collective, public management of risk. In countries like China, state provision of public benefits was a fundamental feature of communist government. But it is fading as a two-tier system of health and other benefits develops, to the advantage of those who work for joint-venture firms and other major corporations. In much of Africa, AIDS and other health risks overwhelm nation-states; the international community becomes the primary “public” provider of ARVs and other treatments. Yet the support of UNAIDS, USAID, and a range of “private” foundations only reveals the ambiguity in the notion of public. The benefits they offer are generally open to all, not restricted on the basis of private statuses like ethnicity or employment. But the policies that govern such benefits are not made through public debates. Perhaps they serve the public good, but who is to decide if not the public beneficiaries?

Here the double meaning of “public” can be confusing. Does it refer to the state or other providers of public goods? Or does it refer to the participants in an open discussion among strangers who are nonetheless members of a larger whole? When we describe philanthropy as “private action for the public good” we mean, I think, this larger whole. We distinguish the Ford Foundation (and others) from the government by virtue of their status as creatures of private property and legal incorporation, but we indicate that their purpose is to serve the public in the sense of all those dispersed strangers who are nonetheless members of a larger whole (and that is the basis, of course, of the claim to tax exemption and more generally a special status—not because the Foundation is “nonprofit” but because it serves a public rather than only its own members). But if strangers become a public because they are connected to each other in a larger whole, then at the center of the idea of public must be the processes of communication that make this possible.

In short: the “public sphere” is an essentially contested concept. It matters greatly what we see as properly public. And part of our present predicament is that both provision of public goods and public communication are under attack at the same time that we have a hard time articulating what it is we value about the public sphere. Take the question of affirmative action: is it about the fair distribution of private goods—the

opportunities opened by education or employment—or is it about a public good—such as the diversity and sense of open opportunity basic to a free society? Or take the availability of ARVs for the fight against AIDS: should governments enforce private claims to intellectual property rights or public access to needed medicines?

We often have difficulty even articulating arguments that turn on the idea of “public” while those that turn on the claims of private persons and private property are intuitively clear. Those who equate communicative rights with unregulated freedom to use private wealth to control media have an easier time making their arguments than those who want to show the public importance of diversity in media. And when we do make claims on the public, we find it too easy to equate this with a single common identity—like the idea of a nation—rather than emphasizing the idea of participating in a common public life that bridges lines of difference.

We often raise the idea of the public sphere because we are concerned that public goods are being withdrawn, that what was previously available to all citizens is increasingly available only to those with money to pay. This is the issue in privatization of risk, for example, and in the transformation of public universities. It is a key dimension of transformation of the media. And it is an issue when patterns of urban development or security concerns make previously public spaces inaccessible.

But the relation between public and private is also unsettled when what we have considered realms of privacy are invaded. What should be the public use of public regulation of surveillance, data accumulation, linkage and data sets, and mining of records created as byproducts of a host of seemingly private transactions?

As important, our thinking about the public sphere is challenged by the visible public influence of religion—which many secular thinkers have thought clearly private. In fact, world religions like Christianity and Islam themselves offer arenas of global communication. They constitute transnational public spheres just as secular civil society organizations and movements do. But it remains true that most thinking about democratic public spheres has been deeply secular, and so is challenged by the prominence of religion—and especially new forms of religious engagement, different from older ideas of civil religion. And of course while “faith-based” provision of public goods is as old as religion itself, it is a newly contentious issue both in domestic social programs of the world’s rich countries and in international action like the struggle against AIDS.

I have suggested that the stakes of whether and how we can articulate ideas of public goods and public communication—the public sphere, if you will—are very high. They are not merely academic, but inform how social movements organize, how people vote, how lawyers frame legal arguments, and how regulators conceive their tasks. Questions about the public sphere affect media, universities, health care, social security, and very centrally, communications.

The stakes of this include the very nature of social solidarity, equality, and liberty: What makes some people *the* people of democratic self-rule? Historically, not every person was seen as qualified to be a public person. Famously, white property-owning men were given privileged status in public life. Discrimination against women was formulated precisely in terms of the public/private distinction.

Democracy, however, depends not just on inclusion, but on connections. That is, citizens need to be able to communicate with each other. They also need to be able to access important information. The struggle to secure open access to government records has been a long one and is basic to democracy. But the ostensibly private transactions of business corporations also affect all of us. Rules exist to promote transparency—not least for the benefit of investors. But recent scandals make clear that the veil of privacy which shelters corporations as legal individuals weakens oversight of their conduct and threatens the public interest.

The capacity for citizens to communicate with each other is largely a question of media, but also of education and of physical public spaces. The capacity for citizens to gain access to information they need is largely a question of laws and regulations. But both are crucial to enabling citizens to make democratic choices. Liberty is sometimes discussed as though it is only a private matter, freedom *from* regulation. But it is equally a public matter, the freedom to make agreements, launch social movements, and shape public policies. If citizens have real power, indeed, they are able collectively to choose institutions not only policies, to participate in the creation of the social order in which they live, rather than simply accepting what is dictated by history, material necessity, markets, or those in power. But here think of the way media and politicians commonly present the challenges of neoliberal globalization: too often as a sort of irresistible force to which citizens must adapt (usually in ways that benefit elites). We could wish for more emphasis on active participation in the public sphere as a way of choosing approaches to globalization.

The term ‘public sphere’ is a shorthand for speaking about all these issues and their interconnections. It is a spatial metaphor for an only partly spatial phenomenon. To be sure, public spaces from the Greek agora to early modern marketplaces, theaters, and parliaments all give support and setting to public life. But public events also transform spaces normally claimed for private transactions—as parades transform streets.

The public sphere is a “space” of communication, and as such transcends any particular place, and weaves together conversations from many. It also transcends particular social groups, involving people who are strangers to each other in communication with each other. Publics grow less place-based as communications media proliferate, yet the spatial image remains apt.

The public sphere is thus a crucial dimension of civil society. Civil society without a strong public sphere lacks opportunities for participation in collective choice, whether about specific policy issues or basic institutions. The public sphere is also a medium of social integration, a form of social solidarity, as well as an arena for debating possible social arrangements. People are knit together not only by cultural similarity, in other words, but by the opportunity to discuss issues with each other and even to consider differences.

In any society—and certainly globally—there are always multiple publics, many associated with particular groups or interests, and some in opposition to others. Some analysts speak of multiple public spheres, but I find it better to think of multiple publics, using public sphere in the singular as we use civil society in the singular, even though there are many different groups, arenas of activism, and social networks in civil society.

But this terminological difference is minor. Much more important for civil society is how these relate to each other, and so too part of what is important about the public sphere is how different publics relate to each other—as for example participants in, say, a feminist public in the US today may or may not have many overlaps with participants in the Evangelical Christian public. John Ruskin wrote in the 19th century that “there is a separate public for every picture, and for every book.” Some social scientists suggest that there is a different public for every social issue. But to the extent that is true, it is actually a problem for democracy for the promise of the public sphere is in part to shape a common understanding of how different issues relate to each other and what priority they should have in public action.

In this regard it is important to recognize not only “integrative” publics, but oppositional “counterpublics” (a term developed especially by Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner). Developing partly separate media and public spaces may be vital to social and cultural movements that seek to challenge dominant orthodoxies. This was important to the women’s movement, for example, which not only contested gender issues in the dominant public sphere but developed alternative arenas in which women could communicate more readily with each other and envision alternatives. The same has been true for the Christian right in recent years, as it has both developed its own arenas of public communication and sought increasing voice in the “mainstream” public sphere. But it needs to be kept in mind that not all counterpublics are voluntarily or happily so; many are counterpublics only because they are excluded from the broader public sphere.

It is important here to keep the idea of “public” distinct from community or even civil society in general. Publicness is a creature of “stranger sociability” and relatively large-scale communications media, starting with print. Publics connect people who are not in the same families, communities, and clubs; people who are not the same as each other. Urban life is public, thus, in a way village life is not. Modern media amplify this capacity to communicate with strangers. And communication itself is vital, for it both creates shared culture and enables debate. In this regard, it is instructive to think of the difference between approaching “public opinion” as the sum of separate private opinions, in the manner of many polls, and as an understanding formed in deliberation.

Publicness is also a matter of the existence of public goods. There are goods which must be shared if they are to exist at all, like clean air; goods which we believe normatively should be shared, like equal opportunity for citizens; and goods which constitute a public by being shared, like open communications. Openness itself has many dimensions: fair access, institutions that encourage rather than restricting diversity, the transparency necessary to public judgment. All of these are necessary to citizenship, which includes but is not limited to involvement with governments. Citizenship is also, of course, a matter of self-organization in civil society. And a great deal of civil society activism—not least of all in the United States itself but also around the world--has depended crucially on a public sphere that was often taken for granted and which is now being eroded.

The erosion of the public sphere and the new confusions about the relationship of public to private have many sources. Reassertions of private property are basic, not just in neoliberal ideology but in the pervasiveness of claims to intellectual property and the romance of business which has paralleled boredom with the state in the last fifteen years.

The control of the some media as private property is especially important, since media constitute the crucial condition for public participation. But new communications technologies are also important and offer opportunities as well as challenges.

I would close, however, by suggesting that though the public sphere has been challenged and compromised it has not lost its importance. Improving our very capacity to articulate ideas about public goods will help to renew it. So will strengthening public access to the media and the institutions that enable public discussion. This is good in itself, but also vital to dealing better with challenges to public health and public education, to responding better to the privatization of risk, and to finding ways to integrate religion into public conversation rather than only confronting religious difference as an obstacle.