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How to think about public space

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1). Introduction: emergent publics

This chapter examines why geographers and other social scientists sometimes worry that public space is being enclosed, why they are concerned that public culture might be becoming less serious or less rational, or why they think that public services shouldn't be privatized. Why, in short, they think that 'public' things are to be valued.

Since the translation into English in 1989 of Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas 1989) the concept of the public sphere has become a central reference point across a range of fields for trying to evaluate rapid changes in the institutional configurations, economic foundations, technological mediums, and socio-cultural formation of contemporary public life. Habermas told a tragic story, in which the conditions which laid the ground for the emergence of a classic model of a liberal public sphere in the eighteenth century (not least, a vibrant, commercialized press) end up in the twentieth century undermining the norms of that public sphere (because people end up watching too much TV). Subjected to an enormous critical literature, what Habermas' account retains a basic challenge for any consideration of the value of publicness: the challenge to how we approach concepts such as the public sphere, which are at once descriptive *and* evaluative.

In order to clarify the challenge of capturing the dynamic transformation of public life both descriptively and evaluatively, consider the ways in which publicness is currently discussed which generally don't succeed in doing both of these things well at the same time without reducing the descriptive to the evaluative.

Contemporary evaluations of new public cultures remain caught between pessimistic discourses of *decline* and optimistic discourses of *originality*. The framing of debate about publics and publicness within these two discourses has produced an impasse that blocks conceptual, empirical and normative analysis. The pessimistic perspective discerns consumerism, individualism, marketization, and privatization as leading inevitably to disengagement and withering of public life. In contrast, the optimistic perspective sees new technologies as panaceas for past injustices and exclusions, leading to the restoration of direct participation, the proliferation of opportunities for personal expression, and the re-birth of movement activism.

[Insert image: On-line publics]

Both pessimistic and optimistic discourses, of the fall and rise of the public sphere, leave in place settled criteria inherited from the past. In both cases, empirical changes in the material, institutional and social configurations of public practices are judged against static criteria of what public action should look like, where it should take place, who should participate, towards what ends it should be directed, and in what registers it should be articulated. It is settled images of these matters that allows the proclamation of new subjects of public life, or the proliferation of new objects of public concern, and the

celebration of new mediums of public expression. But the same settled criteria also underwrite laments that public life has been coarsened, fragmented, or individualized. Different narratives alight on different aspects of publicness to either celebrate new forms – the self-organizing dimensions of flash-mobs, the exuberant deliberations of on-line forums – or to bemoan them – the replacement of properly informed citizenly media by celebrity-dominated, emotive registers of public culture, or the fragmentation of diverse publics rendering impossible any unified, concerted opinion-formation to take place.

[Insert image: e.g. X-Factor]

It is between the optimistic and pessimistic narratives about public life that Habermas' challenge lies - how are we to derive criteria of evaluation of emergent trends from historically specific models which might themselves be in the process of being let behind? This chapter responds to this challenge by trying to define with a little more clarity than is often the case just what sort of values are invested in the concept of 'the public' and its various derivatives.

Summary

Evaluations of contemporary transformations of public life tend to oscillate between optimism and pessimism.

The conceptual challenge of traditions of public sphere theory is to negotiate a path between these two poles.

The key challenge in thinking about the value of ideas of public space and the public sphere is to think more carefully about how criteria of evaluation derived from one context can be applied to new contexts.

2). The grammar of public value

One problem that any discussion of the public, the public sphere, public life – publicness in general – immediately faces is that of definition. Just what is a public? Or is that even the right question? Is a better question 'What is public?'

- Is public a name given to particular spaces, by virtue of their openness?
- Is public a name given to certain institutions, by virtue of their function or degree of accessibility?
- Is 'the public' a collective subject of some sort, and if so, who is it composed of?
- Is public a name we give to certain sorts of action done from particular motivations – in the public interest or publicly spirited?
- Or is public a name given to actions undertaken in particular patterns of interaction, collectively, as a public, as distinct from privately?
- Or is it better to think of publicity as more like a medium into which and out of which one can move – by going public, making things known exposing oneself or others to scrutiny of an indeterminate yet attentive audience?

By raising this cascade of question, my point is to suggest that if we attend in this way to the *grammar* of ‘public talk’, we can begin to see some of the difficulty in trying to nail down a clear and concise definition.

So, what do we notice if we attend to the grammar of public talk in this way?

We will notice that ‘public’ is at once a noun and an adjective, something one can be *in* as well as something you can *move* into (by going public). In this latter sense, public is also used as a verb, something one does – for example, as in publicizing, to publish.

We will notice that ‘public’ is a name given to certain sorts of agents (the public, the public sector, public Universities), as well as the name for certain types of action (ones distinguished perhaps by their location, and/or their motivation).

And we will notice too that public actions are not necessarily restricted to public agents. All sorts of private agents can undertake actions that individually or collectively serve the public interest – and some people think the best way they can do so is by acting out of self-interest (see LeGrand ++++).

Maybe, to find a way through this thicket of grammatical complexity, we just consult a dictionary? Well, if consult a dictionary for the meaning of ‘public’, we would just enter into an enormous terrain of multiple meaning.¹ We find that not just is the word public, as both a noun and an adjective, variously defined, but that there are a host of designations of things, sites, activities as public - public lavatory, public house, public eye, public nuisance, public opinion, public transport, public holiday, and so on and so on.

[Insert Image(s): public transport

Nevertheless, I think it is possible to identify a family of recurring themes across this variety, broadly divided three ways into thinking of ‘public’ as an adjective, a noun, and a verb.

1. First, there is an adjectival sense of public, defined against things private, which signifies a sense of openness. This might be a spatial sense, where public is related to exposure, to being on shown or available to others; but it is a sense that resonates too across a political-economic terrain of definitions of the market and the public sector, without wholly capturing what is at most at stake in this field.
2. Second, there is the nominal sense where the public is a name for a certain type of collective, a synonym perhaps for the community, or the nation, or sometimes offset against these more *embodied*, substantive collectives. This second sense is crucial to different understandings of the value of publicness, because depending on which field of

¹ The printable version of the Oxford English Dictionary’s entry on ‘public, *adj.* and *n*’ runs to 40 A-4 sheets. Thanks to Engin Isin for pointing the way to this excess of meaning.
<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50191807?query_type=word&queryword=public&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&search_id=bHVF-LGivue-14447&result_place=2> Accessed 27th October 2009.

analysis one looks at, one finds markedly different senses of what sort of existence this collective view of the public can and should have. In certain strands of strongly republican political theory, for example, the public as a collective entity exists only in and through the reflexive medium of its own openness, as it were – this tradition sees publics as self- collectives, gathered together in a ‘space of appearances’ to consider matters of shared concern. It is a tradition that is intensely suspicious of any institutionalization or instrumentalization of the public in organizational form – for example, the idea that the state can embody the public is anathema from this perspective.

3. Yet there is a third sense of public which does open itself up to this more institutional sense of the public as a concentrated, sovereign actor. Here, public refers to certain functions that authorize some actors to act on behalf of others in a particular way – in the name of a quite abstract sense of the public, the public good, public health, or public interest. It is this sense that is captured by the ideas of public service and the work of public servants, who act for, represent, act on behalf of, care for members of the public, sometimes up close and personal, sometimes in the most general of senses. What makes these sorts of delegated agency and trusteeship qualify as ‘public’ is that they are enacted in the name of values of equality and impartiality that loop back to the first sense of openness.

Thinking of these three senses of public – with reference to the value openness, of collectivity, and of serving or representing – as the core values around which publicness is constituted, contested, and transformed might be a way of starting to get a handle on the variety of values associated with publicness. Bringing these three senses together throws into relief the importance of attending closely to the question of what sort of collective actor a public is supposed to be – to thinking about what distinguishes a public from society, the nation, community, the people, audiences, civil society, or the state. Above all, though, and this takes us back to the lesson to be drawn from Habermas, it should alert us to the importance of attending to the variable formation of publicness, through practices, and in relation to problems and issues.

Summary

- ‘Public’ is a name attributed to all sorts of actors, actions, objects, processes, and subjects
- Attending to the grammar of public talk – to how the value of publicness is invoked in specific contexts – might help in understanding the overlapping family of values indicated by such invocations.
- It is possible to identify three overlapping values which public talk is often used to articulate - the intrinsic value of openness, the intrinsic values of collectivity, and instrumental values of concerted action.

3). Imagining the Public

So far, I have suggested that publicness needs to be thought of as an emergent quality, which best investigated by attending to the variable combination of practices, meanings, and, crucially, of values (Mahony et al 2009). The analysis of the formation and transformation of publics should be guided by the question of ‘what are publics good

for?’ The question is meant to attune analysis to the ways in which different repertoires of evaluation and different claims of value are used to sustain, challenge, and transform settled public formations.

Approaching the analysis of publics with this question in mind means more than simply looking at what ‘public’ or ‘the public’ means in different contexts; the sense guiding us here is that ‘public’ is not best thought of as merely an empty signifier. Rather, there is a cluster of values that overlap around the vocabulary of publicness: openness, sharing, living together, authority, legitimacy. Attention should focus on how these are assembled and re-assembled in contested claims about what sort of thing should or should not be a matter of public debate, an object of public management, or a benefactor of public financing. We should also learn to attend to how the meanings of the public emerge not least in contrast to other values – values associated for example with ‘privacy’ or ‘the market’. And, finally, we need to negotiate between the idea that there are some activities which just are public by their very nature, and the idea that public things are things contingently named public – if we are to do so, then we need to keep in view the importance of communicative action (e.g. deliberating, engaging, encountering) in delineating the scope and shape of public.

In this section, I want to develop a little further the idea of looking at the ‘grammar’ of publicness outlined in Section 2. I want to do so in order to illustrate how the analysis of the formation of public life might proceed empirically as well as conceptually, without losing sight of the inherently evaluative quality of any investigation into public life. Below, I identify three institutional configurations which have been considered paradigms of public life in different academic fields. The reason for distinguishing these **paradigms of public value** is to draw out the values that are embedded in these institutional models, values which are at stake in critical and diagnostic accounts of the contemporary transformation of these models.

1). The first paradigm of public value is *public space*, the focus of attention in spatial disciplines such as human geography, urban studies, architecture, and urban sociology. Public spaces are, though, also a focus of attention in political philosophical accounts of the public sphere, as either figures of the public or as empirical scenes for certain sorts of practices. This field of literature focuses on particular sorts of spaces – public parks, streets, shopping malls, cafes – as exemplary of certain values of publicness. The first thing to say about this field is that it is primarily concerned with a particular function of the public – the background conditions of a certain sort of sociality that is taken to be crucial to more formally public, citizenly forms of engagement. These are, then, in the vocabulary of public sphere theory, relatively weak publics, not strongly articulated with concentrated sites of authority, but rather scenes where the virtues and capacities of public encounter are learnt and put into practice (e.g. Watson 20++).

[Insert image: Tahrir Square]

One of the crucial contributions of feminist scholars to understandings of public space is to point out that the sorts of virtues and activities often associated with these

paradigmatic public spaces might well go on in more privatized, secluded or secreted locations. This work begins to unsettle the assumption that *public action* is necessarily action that takes place in *public space* (see Barnett 2009). This assumption is further unsettled by work on queer publics which draws into view the ways in which different configurations of public exposure might support emancipatory or oppressive relationships. Related to this functional concern with sociality is the primary concern in these fields with a particular set of public values, primary those associated with openness, accessibility, and inclusion in spaces of interaction.

Specifying the function and values associated with public space in this way allows us, in turn to notice the ways in which transformations of public space revolve attempts to redefine these functions and values. So, for example, concerns with public order and public nuisance lead to regulatory adjustments in the management of public space which give less credence to the citizenly value of unanticipated encounters with difference than to norms of security and safety or put a premium on not being offended. In crucial respects, this logic might amount to a privatization of public spaces in so far as it shifts the balance from openness to uninitiated contact with others towards allowing subjects in public exercise more control of the shape and content of their interactions.

2). The second paradigm of public value has a different function from the first set, one which focuses primarily on the *opinion-forming* aspect of a vibrant **public culture**. This is, of course, one aspect of the public spaces discussed above as well, but a crucial dimension of the notion of the public sphere is the way in which such ‘real’ spaces of face-to-face interaction are embedded within mediated circuits of communication. So the key institutions of public opinion-forming would include broadcasters (public and private), newspapers, print cultures more generally (publishing, public libraries), museums, churches, schools and Universities; and, just to keep up to date, social media and other internet-based spaces of interaction. These form the circulatory infrastructure through which opinions, information, science and religion is made available to dispersed populations. It’s important to acknowledge that this range of institutions illustrates the degree to which vibrant public cultures are often dependent on and sustained by private institutions of different sorts, and not least, by the operations of markets. If the key public function of these institutions is that of keeping citizens informed and allowing them opportunities for free and unfettered expression, then in turn there is a primary value at stake in thinking of these sorts of institutions as public, irrespective of the source of funding or degree of selectivity of particular examples. This is the contribution such institutions make to the development and circulation of a *shared culture*, of a world held in common by all citizens and available to all to engage with and appropriate as their own (Wessler 2009).

[Insert image: the BBC]

The institutionalized, mediated qualities of public culture in this expansive sense has always been haunted by the worry of paternalism involved in presuming who knows what is good for audiences, listeners, readers, viewers by the way of information, entertainment and education. This paternalist worry has course underwritten a strong

trend towards market populism across various fields of cultural policy and cultural economy. But markets in cultural goods are hardly ‘perfect’ in their responsiveness to the needs and preferences of members of the public. The combined impact of new technologies and privatized media lead some to worry about the fragmentation of a once unified public culture into myriad enclosures means we end only ever being exposed to our dose of ‘The Daily Me’. In contrast to this worry about *fragmentation* of the public sphere, there is a contrasting worry that market-dominated logics in cultural provisioning lead to a decline of *pluralism* in public culture. This concern with pluralism is more interesting because it does not suppose that the value of shared culture needs to be modeled on the ideal of a unified, single culture. Rather, it focuses attention on the quality and quantity of opportunities for sharing as such, where sharing is understood as a process of exchange and communication across difference.

These two paradigms of public value - public spaces, and institutions of public culture – both emphasize the importance of recognizing that the public sphere is about much more than politics or citizenship narrowly conceived. They remind us that the relationship between a wide, dispersed public *culture* and the political functions ascribed to public *deliberation* are complex ones. These two fields are not best thought of as identical or directly, causally connected (Wessler 2009). The question of defining their relationship is, of course, a staple of public sphere theory from Habermas’s original tragic narrative onwards.

3). The **third paradigm of public value** cleaves more closely to what one might call the public function of ‘will-formation’ than the first two, and would include various political formations of the state, including both welfare agencies but also procedures of election, legislation, and policy making. Here, the public is understood to be a collective subject who will is embodied in and whose interests are protected by the institutions of the state, the agencies of the public. In both cases, the function of institutions of will-formation is to filter dispersed opinion-formation into *actionable decisions* and to implement these through programmes of service provision and distribution. And the key value underwriting these configurations, in their idealized social democratic form at least, is that of equality – whether the equality of participation through electoral enfranchisement, or the equality of impartiality embodied in expansive systems of welfare provision (see Newman and Clarke 2009).

[Insert image: +++++]

These three different paradigms of public value embody and enact particular values of publicness – interaction, common culture, equality, transparency - and with different emphasis on the relation between ‘weak’ public actions such as chatting and strolling around parks and ‘strong’ public actions such as electing a government or distributing the revenues from taxation.

All three paradigms illustrate three issues that any consideration of public value should always keep in mind:

- the value of publicness is enacted in various *practices* – in voting, in being counted, in deliberating, in shared rituals;
- public values are expressed through various forms of *communication* – rational ones, reasonable ones, passionate ones;
- invocation of public value always with various modalities of *power* – publics can be weak or strong, they can influence or exercise power, they can act as sieges against concentrations of power or as sluices enabling its more democratic regulation.

The question remains, however, of what this sort of way of thinking about public value as implies for the ways in which *geographers* approach issues of public space. Let's move on to that topic.

Summary

- Three paradigms of public value can be identified, depending on the academic and institutional field you are looking at
- Public value is sometimes thought to be embodied in spatial configurations of action; sometimes in institutional configurations of public culture; sometimes in institutional configurations of state or 'state-like' power.
- Thinking of public value as variable across different institutional fields helps us see that public value is always emergent, always in formation, in relation to particular issues and problems.

4). Spaces of public action

To illustrate this sort of analysis of the variable formation of institutional of public value, it is useful to consider the example of the recent work by the sociologist Craig Calhoun. Calhoun's work crosses a number of the fields in which the theme of public is currently at stake – social theories of multiculturalism and national integration, political theories of cosmopolitanism, public engagement of University institutions, and the privatization of welfare systems. Calhoun (2009) identifies four features that make a public:

- the collective creation of institutions and the sharing of collective life;
- a sense that some goods are inherently public goods, in the sense derived from economics, where we can only enjoy some things if we share them;
- a sense of a public as joining together strangers;
- and a sense of active participation in discussing and deciding what is held to be good.

What emerges from these four features is a strong impression that the value of publicness has to do with forms of *sharing*. Now, sharing sounds like a nice value. But of course, to share something, even to share in something (a pastime, or a meal), also involves dividing, appropriating, making use of. Patrick Chabal (2009) talks of the idea of partaking as a term that captures the ambivalence of collective life - the idea of *taking part* in activities with others, and also of *making use* of shared resources. Chabal is interested in rethinking the value of participation, which isn't quite the same sort of value as publicness, though they are related. Publicness, in fact, seems to incorporate a certain style or mode of participation, of partaking with others. It's worth thinking about this idea

that the value of public life involves certain styles of participation a little further, because it begins to bring out something about the peculiar spatiality and temporality of publicness that geographers should take more notice of than, sometimes in their eagerness to affirm the importance of public space, they are prone to do. There are two aspects to the idea of public participation as sharing-and-dividing worth mentioning.

First, for social thinkers concerned with understanding publics as a distinctive feature of modernity, such as John Dewey (+++++) for example, a key feature of publics was their emergence through processes of ‘indefinite extension’, associated with the development of communications innovations such as print, railways, and telecommunications. The significance of this extension of human communication lies, for thinkers like Dewey, not just in the stretching out over time and space of social interaction, but in the associated development of new forms of subjectivity shaped by the indefinite qualities of these mediums of extension – publics are characterized as collectives in which social bonds work through rather than just in spite of anonymity and difference.

Second, in both classical literary accounts of the modern public, as well as recent literary-theoretical and philosophical accounts of the public sphere, a key feature of a public is this idea of a community of strangers. Both reading publics and the modern city are recurrent figures for this type of collective, in which the value of openness of a public space or medium is specifically related to being exposed to ‘initiation of communication by others’.

If we combine these two emphases, one on the quality of *indefinite* extension characteristic of the mediums of public communication, and one on the binding together of *strangers*, you can begin to glimpse a sense of publicness as an emergent quality which oscillates between dependence on a pre-given background of social relations, communications mediums, urban infrastructures; and the transfiguration of this background in an excessive movement of reflexive self-organization (see Warner 2002). Or, to put it another way, a sense that public is the name given to a place you can go to, or an institutional configuration; and a sense of public value as something expressed in action, as something performed in practice.

[Insert image: a private space made public – e.g. Zuccotti Park]

So here is the lesson for how to think about public space: what makes a space public, or not, is how it is used, how it can be used, to what use it can be put. Or, if you prefer, public action determines the definition, shape and extent of public spaces. We need to stop thinking of publicness primarily as a type of *space*, and instead focus on the type of *action* that is attributed the status ‘public’. And public action, by definition, is not actually or conceptually, contained within particular configurations of place, space or territory (see Barnett 2009).

Summary

- A key feature of definitions of public value is an emphasis on the value of sharing

- Sharing is understood to be foundational to public life in so far as it implies modes of being-in-common which depend upon division, diversity, anonymity.
- Public value is dependent on the contexts in which actions are undertaken, and this means that the public status of spatial configurations cannot be established in advance of an analysis of the mode of action under which they are constructed and made use of.

5). Investigating emergent publics

I have presented a rather abstract analytical framework for investigating the variable formation of public life. This framework is guided by a conviction that public value is an emergent quality, by which I mean that issues of public value ‘break out’ around problems, issues, and processes that are not easily anticipated in advance. There are, I would suggest, three dimensions to the formation of any new configuration of public life, three sets of questions to ask when investigating the contemporary transformation of public life:

1. The emergence of new objects of public action.

The concerns over which public debate and decisive action are demanded, and around which communities of affected interest are formed, have multiplied. For example, the proliferation of environmental concerns transforms the most mundane of everyday, domestic practices into activities with public significance.

2. The emergence of new subjects of public action.

The identities around which collective, participatory agency is mobilized have likewise been transformed. For example, the restructuring of welfare systems generates new forms of rights-based mobilization by patients groups, while ‘living wage’ campaigns engage multiple identities around contingent, issue-specific campaigns of limited duration.

3. The emergence of new mediums of public action.

The means through which issues emerge as public concerns, through which demands for attention are addressed, and through which action in response to these concerns is enabled have been reconfigured. For example, new communications technologies restructure the rhythms and norms of public media cultures, while the potential for markets to serve as mediums for public action is being explored by a variety of activist campaigns.

The account of public value developed in this chapter suggests that these three different dimensions of *public emergence* might be combined in different ways in specific situations. When investigating transformations of public life, it’s always best to avoid idealizations in which public is offset against private, state against market, communal virtues against self-interest; start instead by asking how existing public values are invoked and reconfigured in specific situations.

So, what is a public? Or what counts as public?

The answer is: It depends.

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Useful Websites

The Social Science Research Council (SSRC) hosts a web-resource dedicated to academic and policy debates about the public sphere from across a range of disciplines:

<http://publicsphere.ssrc.org/>

The SSRC has a number of ongoing programmes of research on aspects of contemporary public life around the world:

<http://www.ssrc.org/>

The SSRC's programmes of research are closely related to work at the Institute of Public Knowledge at New York University:

<http://www.nyu.edu/ipk/>

The Centre for Citizenship, Identities and Governance at the Open University has a Publics Research Programme, which also contains information and links to various ongoing projects of work on public life:

<http://www8.open.ac.uk/ccig/programmes/publics>