Publics and Post-Publics
The Production of the Social

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According to Simon Sheikh, the erosion of the nation-state has led to a post-public situation, in which the public sphere of 'the public' can no longer be specifically located. The answer is not a nostalgic return to outmoded notions of the public and its spaces, but an analysis of the relations between publicness, consumption and production, culminating in new public formations where action can be taken.

How is a notion such as 'the public', be it as a people, a space or a notion, produced? And how is it actualized? Are these three products interchangeable and synonymous with each other and the term public, and, if so, how can they be entangled from the production process itself – linguistically, conceptually and socially – and are they the only emergent forms of this production?

Part of my position has already been given by the title, 'Publics and Post-Publics: The Production of the Social', indicating that the public is something that cannot only be pluralized and perhaps deconstructed, but also that it is something that produces – a construction, and not a given. It is not a fixed entity we can enter or exit at will, but rather something that has constitutive effects on the social, on how we socialize, and are indeed socialized. Secondly, I must add that the notion of publics and post-publics indicates how the public – again, be it a people, space or notion – is a mainly historical notion, a nineteenth-century concept based on specific ideas of subjectivity and citizenship, that cannot be so easily translated into the modular and hybrid societies of late global capital, into the postmodern as opposed to emerging modern era. Indeed, in can be argued that the public sphere may not even be an adequate term to describe contemporary forms of representational politics (in art and culture) and political democracy (in democracy and its others). The question then becomes, what can be put in the place of the public?

In the place of the public sphere? was also the title of a symposium, later published in book form, that I organized in 2002. Here, we took our point of departure in the connection between the public as a political construct and public artworks as representations and interventions within this spatial formation, and in how changes within both the conception of the public and the production of contemporary art has radically altered the possibilities for art works in terms of articulation, intervention and participation. We asked: How does one perceive and / or construct a specific public sphere and positional and / or participatory model for spectatorship as opposed to (modernist) generalized ones? Does this entail a reconfiguration of the (bourgeois) notion of the public sphere into a different arena and / or into a mass of different, overlapping spheres? Or, put in other terms, what can be put in the place of the public sphere?

The last question, as Miwon Kwon accurately pointed out in her contribution, must be read in two ways: both as what objects and acts could be placed in so-called public spaces, but also what kind of spatial formation that could replace the public sphere as designated and

imagined in the historical, bourgeois model? [1] Here I shall attempt to address both questions in turn, and not least how they are connected in a continuous process of articulation as constitution, since the idea of the public and its doubles, *the private*, obviously, but also *the counterpublic*, is simultaneously something imaginary *and* localizable – its condition is *always* being *and* becoming in one movement, a double meaning and a double bind. Thus, any attempts at answering the sweeping question of an *instead*, of *replacement*, has to go precisely through *placement*, through the condition of the connection between imagination and implementation.

The Metaphor of the Blueprint

It is perhaps, then, no coincidence that the main theorist of the bourgeois notion of the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas, used the metaphor of a 'blueprint' to describe this historical model.

[2] In discussing the public sphere's social structures, Habermas outlines what he calls the basic blueprint, by which he means a sketch of the new public sphere that was set up in between the private realm and state power in early bourgeois societies. But the phrase is very telling; a blueprint is not (only) a sketch, but rather a matrix from which forms are produced, such as in the printing of a book. It is moulding, setting into practice. The blueprint is, thus, that which is set in motion not to describe society, or a category here of such as the public sphere, but in order to produce specific social relations, ways of doing and thinking socially, culturally and politically. Moreover, a blueprint does not emerge organically from social structures, but is imposed upon them in order to configure or, possibly, reconfigure them.

However, of what exactly does this blueprint consist? According to Habermas, the public sphere is principally a sphere in-between individuals and the state, a kind of buffer zone, and is made up of three basic features: political deliberation, culture and the market place. These features, or spaces, if you will, are not clearly demarcated, but nonetheless placed inside a given society, in the sense that they are strategically placed in between the private realm of economic exchange and family relations on the one side, and sovereign state power and police actions on the other. It is thus a space that mediates between these two more clearly demarcated entities, and is as such the space for public debate in a political sense. In this way, the bourgeois public sphere is modelled on the ancient Greek polis, where only those who where exempt from the struggle of daily life and labour could be understood as free and thus capable of political speech for the common good, not just self interest. Public speech is always, then, outside individual concern, outside economy and family in the sense that it is above it. Only the father of the household can participate in public matters. In the modern version, however, this meant an exclusion of specific concerns rather than subjects from public debate, as well as a focus on rational argument. Excluded from politics, was, in effect, economy in the form of labour relations, and by extension class struggle, as well as family relations that were confined to the private realm, basically gender relations, domestic work, sexuality and childrearing.

Included in the public sphere, was, as mentioned, culture, and not only artistic expressions and forms, but also art institutions played a crucial role in the establishment of the bourgeois public sphere and its separateness from daily life. Early art institutions were indeed self-organized spaces, such as the German *kunstverein* – that is spaces run and funded by enlightened citizens of the city, as both a representation of their values and an authorization, as Frazer Ward has aptly coined it.[3] The emergent bourgeoisie reflected its values and ideals in such spaces, making them into representational spaces in more senses then one, artistic as well as culturally class based. Secondly, the art institution was – crucially – a place for aesthetic debate and judgment, on what was beautiful and true, valuable and significant in art, and by extension in the world. It was not only a cultural space, but also cultivating, and had as such an educational role.

The aesthetic debate, however, also played a significant political role, since aesthetic judgment and debate worked as a rhetorical rehearsal of more proper political speech in the public realm and its role in the emerging bourgeois political hegemony, where state institutions became, principally, objects for public scrutiny and debate. This could take place through the employment of rational argument as the privileged mode of speech: knowledge about art, and soon the quaint discipline that is art criticism, became a rational way of speaking about the fundamentally irrational objects (and statements) from artistic production itself. And this is why there still today is this division of labour between subject and object, between analyst and analysand, and, importantly, a crisis in the system of representation that is the bourgeois art institution when the artist / producer refuses his or her historical role, and actually takes on the role of analysis and argument in any politically coherent – seemingly rational – way of speaking, although that is a whole other story . . .

Buffer Zone

For now, the important issue is one of spatial formation, namely, the in-between-ness of the public sphere and its mediation between the political, matters of state, and the non-political, labour and gender. What I have called its status of a buffer zone. Additionally, there is the issue of the placement of this spatialization of the concept, as inside, never outside society, either suggesting an emergence from within the social, or, more accurately, that the social is framed by certain boundaries, both real and symbolic. First, the notion of the buffer zone: in geopolitical terms, a buffer zone indicates a zonal area designed to separate two other, opposing areas, such as nations or tribes. The buffer zone may even itself be a nation, but its purpose is to alleviate tension, or war, between irreconcilable forces or interests – the same way Habermas views state power as opposed to private being. It is for this reason that the public sphere – as the buffer zone – by definition must strive towards consensus and equilibrium, as well as towards preventing the two areas from blurring or merging.

Indeed, within this way of thinking, the apparent 'crisis' of the public sphere, as it is seen by Habermas and his followers, has exactly to do with either side of the equation dominating too much, as in the case of too much privacy become public (from feminism to tabloid celebrity culture!), and with the diminishment of the buffer zone itself (as in the loss of the bourgeois public sphere, from communism to commercialization). Only certain spaces and certain experiences can be formulated as political, regardless of *how* they are experienced. Rather, it is a question of *when* and *where*: not at home and after work. Commonplaces are, then, not public spaces.

In any case, the notion of the buffer is always to separate, never to bring the different spheres closer, and as such the buffer is not only a location for politics, but rather for rendering certain things, emotions and economies, *political* and others decidedly *non-political*. It thus not only enables political speech, but also hinders it, blocking it from becoming public. And this was precisely the point of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's

critique of the Habermasian model, tellingly entitled *Public Sphere and Experience*.[4] Their claim was that the exclusion of the private and the spaces of production (work and school and so on) from the term public, was in fact an act of blockage of experiences, of de-politicization of certain areas from the sphere of politics that was public space. Instead, they tried to posit spaces of production and reproduction as political, as discursive spaces of experience, and thus as in public spaces, in the sense that they are organizing collective experience. By placing the emphasis on the notion of experience, Negt and Kluge do not only point to the inequality of access to the public sphere in Habermasian terms, it also allows them to analyze modes of behaviour and possibilities for speech and action in different spaces. And they argue for a specific, but plural, public sphere that can be termed 'proletarian' in opposition to the normative 'bourgeois' public sphere, where common places become public spaces.

Counterpublics

This proliferation of spaces to be considered public, or to be publicized, so to speak, not only brings antagonisms into the light that the bourgeois public sphere tried to shade and even hide, but also leads to a fragmentation of the very idea of public space as one kind of place, as one specific location (even when it exists in a limited number of forms). In opposition to the normative, and very exclusionary, stand a number of other public formations, or what has also been termed counterpublics. That is, spaces that share some of the same organizational features as classic public formations, such as clubs, groupings, publications, but for other or opposite aims: other spaces for other subjectivities.[5] Historically, these were of course the public formations of the counterculture and new social movements. We can therefore only use the notion of public in a plural sense, as multiple, co-existent publics – historical (residues), actual (present) and potential (emerging).

This obviously has some quite wide-ranging effects and affects on the different ways in which the public is imagined actualized as an entity along the lines mentioned at the outset of this essay: people, space, notion. A people can thus no longer be understood as one, as uniform, but as fragmented in terms of identity, ethnicity, class, gender and so on. Furthermore, this fragmentation cannot be understood only as (cultural) diversity, but also as oppositionality, radical difference. The same goes for the spatial actualization, with publics and counterpublics, we can first of all not only talk about one space, or a number of related spaces separated completely from others, but rather about a number of possible and impossible spaces with different discourses and modes of address, and, ultimately, the dematerialization of public spaces altogether, in both a positive and negative sense: expansion and disappearance at the same time. And for the more abstract concept of the public as a notion, it means that we must talk about it as an empty signifier, constantly filled with signifying content, with a forming of the social, production of subjectivity and distribution of economy. And in each case we are dealing with a concept where the descriptive and the prescriptive elements cannot be separated chronologically or politically.

The Conflation of Public Spaces

The so-called in-between-ness of the public sphere not only has to do with its placement, but precisely also with its spatialization, and thus institutionalization (both real and imaginary). Again, taking up the line of production and fragmentation from Negt and Kluge, we must understand public spaces not only in the public / private divide, but also in relations to spaces of production. That is, how public spaces emerge *through* production, as ideological constructions, and through economic development. However, today, we would not describe public spaces only in dialectics of class struggle, but rather as a multiplicity of struggles, among them struggles for recognition, partly in shape of access to the public space, as well as the struggle for the right to struggle itself, for dissent. Secondly, as not only critics of the Habermasian model have pointed out, but certainly also Habermasians have publicly bemoaned, we are now witnessing the conflation of public spaces with modes of consumption rather than participation, where consumption becomes the main form of social communication.

The art institution, once an exemplary bourgeois public space, is nowadays finding itself in a difficult transformative phase, where its historical role has become obsolete – the caterer of taste and reason – without another critical role being apparent, or without another constituency emerging, other than commodity exchange within the experience economy (sic) and the society of spectacle. [6] However, it will not suffice to claim that commercialization has contaminated the 'good, old' public space, instead we must examine the contradictions of the concept in its historical genesis as well as its later developments and possible demise. For instance, the strange separation between the market as a social place, the marketplace, and economy and labour as private matters, taking place in non-public places and outside the political. We must replace separation with fragmentation, and as such look at the relations between different spaces of discursive production, in its many forms from knowledge production to the production of consumer goods and back again, leading to another hierarchical relationship between spaces of production and public spaces, a hierarchy that is also geopolitical. We must, then, ask which institutions – which ways of instituting – produce these hierarchies, these uneven global developments? And we must ask: what are the current relationships between publicness, consumption and production, and how can these categories be disentangled, locally as well as globally?

The End of the Public-as-Nation

The spatialization of the concept of the public, had not only to do with its state of in-between-ness of other spheres, but also with its state of being *inside* the social as such, or what we could call its state of being a state. That is, not only a people, but always a *specific* people of *sameness*, of a unity that could surpass differences of gender, class and even interest, namely the modern nation-state. The public sphere is always inside the nation, and the state form becomes the agora, supported by national economy and taxation, education, language and culture, and so on. The social becomes instituted through the nation, and the inside is always defined as essential, in direct contrast to others; other peoples and nations, regardless of the fact that other nations may be structured around a similar principle of nationality, national institutions and cultures. The bourgeois nation-state was, after all, not only founded upon the democratic paradox of liberty and equality, but also on *brotherhood*, which, besides its masculinist overtones, also implies bloodlines and kinship. Ethnic kinship and its others are a basic feature of the establishment of the public as the people, and as a national space. The public sphere is part and parcel of the nation-state, established along similar lines of exclusion, of interiority and radical exteriority, and can as such not so easily be disentangled from nationality, or, indeed, from nationalism.

However, if the public sphere does not emerge organically from the ground of the social,

but rather is seen as a means of grounding the social within society, then the social cannot have any positive content, any essence to express or basis to return to. The public sphere is thus an increasingly empty category, obsolete even, which has not so much to do with the blurring between private and public, or with the conflation between public deliberation and commodity exchange, but rather with the fact that the centre of the *public-as-nation* simply cannot hold, neither as an identitarian, economic nor political concept. Obviously, we were dealing with a projection that intended to produce the social in a specific way within the emerging bourgeois society, as national citizens, first and foremost, a projection that has been shattered by counterpublic articulations, and alternative ways of socializing, of produced social relations. Moreover, we are now witnessing the withering away of the nation-state itself in the later stages of global capital. And this is what we must call the post-public situation, where there is no longer any unity or even fixable locality to the public sphere (in plural).

To talk about any international, or even global, public sphere is, then, quite a contradiction in terms. To exemplify for the public sphere of the art world, we can now say that any national artist is also an international artist. So, when a country selects their participant(s) for their national pavilions in Venice for the biennale, which was historically an international competition, and still is actually, they do not only, or mainly, select the most nationally representative artists, as in a folkloristic approach, but rather the ones with the biggest international renown or possibility. The jury is international, of course, and artists of an international calibre give the single nation a higher chance of winning the grand prize as a nation. A nation's grandeur can be measured in its international stature, within culture as well as within economy and military power – with the combination of all three naturally supplying moral world leadership as well! We do not see this merger of the national and the international only in Venice, though, but pretty much in any major art event, where the artists represented are not only required to be from all over the world, and as such attest to the globalism of (high) culture, but also their individual nation. Just notice how country codes are always indicated behind the artists' names on press releases and invites, as if they were the stickers on the back of a car or participants in a major sports competition. [7] In the post-public art world, perhaps, a national artist is always international.

Post-Publics

Perhaps any trans-national, or post-national concept of the public sphere can only be understood in terms of being (a) post-public, not in the sense of being after or beyond publicness as such, that we are somehow *un*public, or even returning to clandestine *pre* publics states, but rather a double movement of dematerialization and expansion of what could be considered public, affecting both our most local concerns and private senses of being, as well as trans-national economic flows and spaces of production and the geopolitical. Post-publics are also post-colonial spaces. Indeed, I would suggest that the post-public can be understood as parallel to terms such as post-colonial, post-communist and post-feminist, in the sense of not being a radical break or departure, but rather a critical re-examination of its leitmotifs and basic modalities, where the bourgeois notion of the public, and its adjacent counterpublics, appear to us in the form of a phantom, as Bruce Robbins has suggested. [8] That the public does not have any solid ground or placement, but rather an *afterlife*, a spectre-like presence.

How can the post-public then materialize, and which ways of instituting can take place within something so seemingly groundless and ephemeral? How can power be challenged without an agora, without fixed boundaries, but with growing social control and surveillance? How can common ground be found when common places are groundless, we could also say? What must be established, then, are public formations that can exist without the state, even in opposition to it. The post-public condition is not to be dismissed

in any nostalgic returns to bygone conceptions of the public and spaces of production, but needs to be addressed in critical terms, with new questions emerging, corresponding to the new problematics we are facing. Just as in the absence of the public sphere as we know it, as in a return to a superstructure without basis, there lies the danger of having all the visibility of publicness, but none of the possibilities for action and none of the rights of citizenry. In the words of Paolo Virno the main problem is as follows: 'If the publicness of the intellect does not yield to the realm of a public sphere, of a political space in which the many can tend to common affairs, then it produces terrifying effects.*A publicness without a public sphere*. [9]

The post-public condition is not to be celebrated then, but to seen as an analytic mode through which we can understand our actuality in order to act in it, obviously, but also in order to reconfigure it, to imagine it anew, and produce new institutions and ways of instituting the social rather than reproducing the old and the existent ones.

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Footnotes

1. See Miwon Kwon's essay 'Public Art and Publicity', in: Simon Sheikh (dd.), *In the Place of the Public Sphere?* (Berlin: b_books, 2005).
2. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989). [German original appeared in 1962].
3. Frazer Ward, 'The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity', *October*73. Summer 1995.
4. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience – Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). [German original: 1972].
5. For a magisterial account of the concept of counterpublics, and its realtionality to the normative public, see Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).
6. See my essays, 'Anstelle der öffentlichkeit? Oder: Die Welt in Fragmenten', in: Gerald Raunig and Ulf Wuggenig (eds.), *Publicum – Theorien der öffentlichkeit* (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2005), 80-88. and 'The Trouble with Institutions, or, Art and Its Publics', in: Nina Möntmann (ed.), *Art and its Institutions* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006), 142-149.
7. Staying within this metaphor, it is interesting how some TV stations have been indicating the club of the football players in the world cup, when leaving or entering the pitch, probably as some indicator of the skills and quality. Perhaps it would then be more telling if art exhibitions started listing the gallery names in parenthesis after the artist's name rather than the country he or she is from? It would certainly seem more in line with the current state of global capital and its more complex flows.
8. Bruce Robbins (ed.), *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
9. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 40.

Tags

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