Public (Im)potence

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Phrases like 'they finally gave in to public pressure' or 'public opinion responded unintelligently' are pretty standard utterances. The normalcy of such expressions may easily obscure the fact that they evoke a mysterious entity. Indeed, the conjuring up of a public that is capable of performing acts, such as 'exerting pressure', inevitably involves a certain amount of wizardry. But this wizardry often goes unappreciated. Those who want to support a given public will want to affirm its reality. Accordingly, they have little interest in acknowledging the magic involved in its manifestation. And those who are critical of a particular public are likely to follow the strategy of showing that this public is not a real public. They will want to demonstrate that in fact we are dealing here with little more that a few actors with dubious interests: just business people, or leftists. That is, they will try to kill the magic. But an appreciation of the wizardry involved in the emergence of publics is crucial, it seems to me, for a good appreciation of what they may be capable of.

A first rough indication that publics that are capable of action represent a riddle is that, as long as we follow everyday logic, such entities appear to be a practical impossibility. The notion of a public endowed with agency brings together two contradictory demands. On the one hand, 'action' requires that there is an identifiable actor, and preferably an individual, that can be said to do the acting. This is clear from how we deal with questions of justice, for instance. To establish that a particular deed has been done, whether bad or good, we customarily require that there is a specific doer who can be associated with this doing. A bottom line of our everyday logics is that there is no deed without a doer. But, on the other hand, it is an important characteristic of a public that it *cannot* be reduced to an identifiable actor. As a rule, a public must consist of more than a known set of individuals. When it is revealed that behind a public there is merely a particular social grouping, its status as a public is challenged. When it can be said: these are only the environmentalists making a fuss, then we are only dealing with a special interest group. When it is revealed that 'it was the political campaign team that directed the crowd into the hall, to cheer during the candidate's speech' we speak of a scam. A public must thus satisfy two demands simultaneously: it must be capable of agency, but it must not be reducible to an identifiable agent.

How could such an impossible combination of demands nevertheless come to be accepted as normalcy in many contemporary cultures? Crucial in this respect is a particular commitment that is peculiar to advanced democracies: the commitment *not* to accept, as matter of course, that if a public is to act, then a representative must do the acting *for* the public. Indeed, one could say that radical democracies are defined by the requirement that it should be *impossible* to trace back a public's actions to one (or a few) identifiable social actor(s). To sustain this demand, to perform a deepening of democracy beyond representative democracy, all sorts of formats have been developed that enable the public to express itself, and potentially, to acquire agency in the process. The mass demonstration is one solution, the opinion poll is another, and then there are the spectacular protest event and the media debate, and so on. These formats can be regarded as attempts to make the riddle of an acting public workable: to produce a capacity to act without producing an identifiable agent. That is, these formats are to enable the emergence of agency in the absence of a specifiable actor behind the action.

To speak of the formats that are available for organizing the public, is also to say that media have a special role to play in all this. To begin with, the media are sometimes held responsible for bringing about the radicalization of democracy mentioned above. According to some political theories, it was an effect of the rise of print media that the public came to be understood as an audience endowed with a voice. Media must then be held responsible for a certain loss of respect for representative democracy, for instance for the idea that it is sufficient for a public to act through individual representatives. Thus, according to the philosopher Kierkegaard, 'the Press' was to blame for the fact that the public in his time had become an abstract entity. He observed that in ancient times, 'men of excellence' could stand in for the public, but after the rise of print media, the public had taken on the form of 'a monstrous abstraction, an all-encompassing something that is nothing, a mirage – and this phantom is the *public*.' Intriguingly, one of Kierkegaard's main problems with this media-based phantom public was that it was incapable of action.

However, a few decades after Kierkegaard made his gloomy observations, the American public intellectual Walter Lippmann developed the argument that media provide crucial instruments for the evocation of phantom publics, including phantom publics with a capacity to act. According to Lippmann, writing in the 1920s, media like the daily press, the radio and the telephone are indispensable for the organization of publics, that is, for the production of a non-actor that can nevertheless act in certain ways. For him, publicity media make it possible to produce the public as an *effect*. As they report conflicts, provide forums for debate, and poll audiences, Lippmann argued, media enable the expression of publics. In these ways, namely, media give direction to the indefinite and multiple concerns of an open-ended population. They channel these concerns into a current with a definite charge, that of being for or against a given position, decision, intervention.

By redefining the public as an effect of media circulation, Lippmann went some way towards solving the riddle of the public. The trouble with his solution, however, is that by reducing the public to an effect he made the public look quite weak. For Lippmann, to make a public emerge is to extract a definitive 'no' or 'yes' out of content and sentiment circulating in media. It is hard to see what could make a public that obeys this description strong enough to be able to exert force. That is *can* exert such force, however, is clear from phrases like 'they were obliged to respond to public pressure'. Thus, the question that remains open after Lippmann is that of the forces that publics may unleash.

To appreciate this force, I would say that we should at the least recognize the following: the agency of the public derives in part from the fact that this entity is *not* fully traceable. That is, the force of the public has to do with the impossibility of knowing its exact potential. And this for the following reason: when a thing is publicized in the media, whether a person, an object or an event, this involves the radical multiplication of the potential relations that this entity can enter into with other things and people. Thus, when something starts circulating in public media, this brings along the possibility, and indeed the threat, of an open-ended set of actors stepping in to support this entity, and to make it strong. The fact that the public cannot be definitively traced back to a limited number of identifiable sources is thus crucial to the effectiveness of the public: this is what endows publics with a *dangerous* kind of agency.

This also makes it clear why the wish to concretize the public, to boil it down to the real actors that constitute it, involves a misunderstanding of the public. In relating to publics, and in performing 'the public', the point should be to try and *work with* the threat of a partly untraceable potential of connections, and not to dissipate it.

Literature

Søren Kierkegaard, 'Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age. A Literary Review', in: *Kierkegaard's writings XIV,* edited and translated by Howard Vincent Hong and Edna Hatlestad Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978)

Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, [1927] 2002)

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Tags

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