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Modern Social Imaginaries

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gland.[11] But at the highest level, it promoted the ethic of civic humanism as a rival to the ethos of commercial society, or perhaps as a compensation for the dangers—of enervation, corruption, loss of liberty—that this modern form brought with it. This was not a marginal concern; it occupied some of the most influential thinkers of the age, such as Adam Smith.[12]

These worries and tensions have remained a central part of modern culture. In one form, they could lead to a transformed redaction of the modern idea of order—to save civic virtue or freedom or nonalienated self-rule, as we find in the philosophies of Rousseau and Marx. In another, they were indeed seen as a potential threat of degeneracy inherent in the order, but by people who in no way wanted to reject this order merely to find some prophylactic for its dangerous potentialities. Smith, and later Tocqueville, belong to this category.

The concern about leveling, the end of heroism, of greatness, has also been turned into a fierce denunciation of the modern moral order and everything it stands for, as we see with Nietzsche. Attempts to build a polity around a rival notion of order in the very heart of modern civilization, most notably the various forms of fascism and related authoritarianism, have failed. But the continued popularity of Nietzsche shows that his devastating critique still speaks to many people today. The modern order, though entrenched, perhaps even because entrenched, still awakens much resistance.

6 The Public Sphere

The economic was perhaps the first dimension of civil society to achieve an identity independent from the polity. But it was followed shortly afterward by the public sphere.

The public sphere is a common space in which the members of society are deemed to meet through a variety of media: print, electronic, and also face-to-face encounters; to discuss matters of common interest; and thus to be able to form a common mind about these. I say "*a* common space" because although the media are multiple, as are the exchanges that take place in them, they are deemed to be in principle intercommunicating. The discussion we're having on television now takes account of what was said in the newspaper this morning, which in turn reports on the radio debate yesterday, and so on. That's why we usually speak of the public sphere in the singular.

The public sphere is a central feature of modern society, so much so that even where it is in fact suppressed or manipulated it has to be faked. Modern despotic societies have generally felt compelled to go through the motions. Editorials in the party newspapers, purporting to express the opinions of the writers, are offered for the consideration of their fellow

citizens; mass demonstrations are organized, purporting to give vent to the felt indignation of large numbers of people. All this takes place as though a genuine process were in train, forming a common mind through exchange, even though the result is carefully controlled from the beginning.

In this discussion, I draw in particular on two very interesting books. One was published almost thirty years ago but recently translated into English, Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which deals with the development of public opinion in eighteenth-century Western Europe; the other is a recent publication by Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic*, which describes the analogous phenomenon in the British American colonies.[1]

A central theme of Habermas's book is the emergence in Western Europe in the eighteenth century of a new concept of public opinion. Dispersed publications and small group or local exchanges come to be construed as one big debate, from which the public opinion of a whole society emerges. In other words, it is understood that widely separated people sharing the same view have been linked in a kind of space of discussion, wherein they have been able to exchange ideas with others and reach this common end point.

What is this common space? It's a rather strange thing, when one comes to think of it. The people involved here have, by hypothesis, never met but they are seen as linked in a common space of discussion through media—in the eighteenth century, print media. Books, pamphlets, and newspapers circulated among the educated public, conveying theses, analyses, arguments, and counterarguments, referring to and refuting each other. These were widely read and often discussed in face-to-face gatherings, in drawing rooms, coffeehouses, salons, and in more (authoritatively) public places, like Parliament. The general view that resulted from all this, if any, counted as public opinion in this new sense.

This space is a public sphere in the sense I'm using it here. That a conclusion "counts as" public opinion reflects the fact that a public sphere can exist only if it is imagined as such. Unless all the dispersed discussions are seen by their participants as linked in one great exchange, there can be no sense of their upshot as public opinion. This doesn't mean that imagination is all-powerful. There are objective conditions: internal, for instance, that the fragmentary local discussions interrefer; and external, that is, there must be printed materials, circulating from a plurality of independent sources, for there to be bases of what can be seen as a common discussion. As is often said, the modern public sphere relied on "print capitalism" to get going. But as Warner shows, printing itself, and even print capitalism, didn't provide a sufficient condition. They had to be taken up in the right cultural context, where the essential common understandings could arise.[2] The public sphere was a mutation of the social imaginary, one crucial to the development of modern society. It was an important step on the long march.

We are now in a slightly better position to understand what kind of thing a public sphere is, and why it was new in the eighteenth century. It's a kind of common space, I have been saying, in which people who never meet understand themselves to be engaged in discussion and capable of reaching a common mind. Let me introduce some new terminology. We can speak of common space when people come together in a common act of focus for whatever purpose, be it ritual, the enjoyment of a play, conversation, or the celebration of a major event. Their focus is common, as against merely convergent, because it is part of what is commonly understood that they are attending to, the common object or purpose, together, as against each person just happening, on his or her own, to be concerned with the same thing. In this sense, the "opinion of mankind" offers a merely convergent unity, whereas public

opinion is supposedly generated out of a series of common actions.

An intuitively understandable kind of common space is set up when people are assembled for some purpose, be it on an intimate level for conversation or on a larger, more public scale for a deliberative assembly, a ritual, a celebration, or the enjoyment of a football match or an opera. Common space arising from assembly in some locale is what I want to call "topical common space."

But the public sphere is something different. It transcends such topical spaces. We might say that it knits together a plurality of such spaces into one larger space of nonassembly. The same public discussion is deemed to pass through our debate today, and someone else's earnest conversation tomorrow, and the newspaper interview Thursday, and so on. I call this larger kind of nonlocal common space "metatopical." The public sphere that emerges in the eighteenth century is a metatopical common space.

Such spaces are partly constituted by common understandings; that is, they are not reducible to but cannot exist without such understandings. New, unprecedented kinds of spaces require new and unprecedented understandings. Such is the case for the public sphere.

What is new is not metatopicality. The Church and the state were already existing metatopical spaces. But getting clear about the novelty brings us to the essential features of the public sphere as a step in the long march.

I see it as a step in this march because this mutation in the social imaginary was inspired by the modern idea of order. Two features stand out in this regard. One has just been implied: its independent identity from the political. The other is its force as a benchmark of legitimacy. Why these are important will be clear if we recur to the original idealization. say, with Grotius or Locke.

First, in the Grotius-Locke idealization political society is seen as an instrument for something prepolitical; there is a place to stand, mentally, outside of the polity, as it were, from which to judge its performance. This is what is reflected in the new ways of imagining social life independent of the political, namely, the economy and the public sphere.

Second, freedom is central to the rights society exists to defend. Responding both to this and to the underlying notion of agency, the theory puts great importance on the requirement that political society be founded on the consent of those bound by it.

Now contract theories of legitimate government had existed before. What is new in the theories of the seventeenth century is that they put the requirement of consent at a more fundamental level. It was not just that a people, conceived as already existing, had to give consent to those who would claim to rule it. Now the original contract brings us out of the state of nature and even founds the existence of a collectivity that has some claim on its member individuals.

This original demand for once-for-all historical consent as a condition of legitimacy can easily develop into a requirement of current consent. Government must win the consent of the governed—not just originally, but as an ongoing condition of legitimacy. This is what begins to surface in the legitimation function of public opinion.

These features of the public sphere can be clarified by articulating what is new about it on two levels: what the public sphere *does*; and what it *is*.

First, what it does, or rather, what is done in it. The public sphere is the locus of a discussion potentially engaging everyone (although, in the eighteenth century, the claim was only to involve the educated or "enlightened" minority), in which the society can come to a common mind about important matters. This common mind is a reflective view, emerging from

critical debate, and not just a summation of whatever views happen to be held in the population.[3] As a consequence, it has a normative status: government ought to listen to it. There were two reasons for this, of which one tended to gain ground and ultimately swallow up the other. The first is that this opinion is likely to be enlightened, and hence government would be well-advised to follow it. This statement by Louis Sébastien Mercier, quoted by Habermas,[4] gives clear expression to this idea:

> Les bons livres dépendent des lumières dans toutes les classes du peuple; ils ornent la vérité. Ce sont eux qui déjà gouvernent l'Europe; ils éclairent le gouvernement sur ses devoirs, sur sa faute, sur son véritable intérêt, sur l'opinion publique qu'il doit écouter et suivre: ces bons livres sont des maîtres patients qui attendent le réveil des administrateurs des États et le calme de leurs passions.
>
> (Good books depend on enlightenment in all classes of the people; they adorn the truth. It is they who already govern Europe; they enlighten the government about its duties, its errors, its real interest, the public opinion that it should listen to and follow: these good books are patient masters who await the awakening of those who administer states and the calming of their passions.)

Kant famously had a similar view.

The second reason emerges with the view that the people are sovereign. Government is then not only wise to follow opinion; it is morally bound to do so. Governments ought to legislate and rule in the midst of a reasoning public. In making its decisions, Parliament or the court ought to be concentrating together and enacting what has already been emerging out of enlightened debate among the people. From this arises what Warner, following Habermas, calls the "principle of supervision," which insists that the proceedings of governing bodies be public, open to the scrutiny of discerning citizens.[5] By going public, legislative deliberation informs public opinion and allows it to be maximally rational, at the same time exposing itself to its pressure and thus acknowledging that legislation should ultimately bow to the clear mandates of this opinion.[6]

The public sphere is, then, a locus in which rational views are elaborated that should guide government. This comes to be seen as an essential feature of a free society. As Burke put it, "In a free country, every man thinks he has a concern in all public matters".[7] There is, of course, something very new about this in the eighteenth century compared to the immediate past of Europe. But one might ask, is this new in history? Isn't this a feature of all free societies?

No, there is a subtle but important difference. Let's compare the modern society with a public sphere with an ancient republic or polis. In the latter, we can imagine that debate on public affairs may be carried on in a host of settings: among friends at a symposium, between those who meet in the agora, and then of course in the ekklesia, where the thing is finally decided. The debate swirls around and ultimately reaches its conclusion in the competent decision-making body. The difference is that the discussions outside this body prepare for the action ultimately taken by the same people within it. The "unofficial" discussions are not separated off, given a status of their own, and seen to constitute a kind of metatopical space.

But that is what happens with the modern public sphere. It is a space of discussion that is self-consciously seen as being outside power. It is supposed to *be* listened to *by* power, but it is not itself an exercise of power. Its in this sense extrapolitical status is crucial. As we shall see below, it links the public sphere with other facets of modern society that are also seen

as essentially extrapolitical. The extrapolitical status is not just defined negatively, as a lack of power. It is also seen positively: because public opinion is not an exercise of power, it can be ideally disengaged from partisan spirit and rational.

In other words, with the modern public sphere comes the idea that political power must be supervised and checked by something outside. What was new, of course, was not that there was an outside check, but rather the nature of this instance. It is not defined as the will of God or the law of Nature (although it could be thought to articulate these), but as a kind of discourse, emanating from reason and not from power or traditional authority. As Habermas puts it, power was to be tamed by reason: "veritas non auctoritas facit legem."[8]

In this way, the public sphere was different from everything preceding it. An unofficial discussion, which nevertheless can come to a verdict of great importance, is defined outside the sphere of power. It borrows some of the images from ancient assemblies (this was especially prominent in the American case) to project the whole public as one space of discussion. But, as Warner shows, it innovates in relation to this model. Those who intervene are like speakers before an assembly. But unlike their models in real ancient assemblies, they strive for a certain impersonality, a certain impartiality, an eschewing of party spirit. They strive to negate their own particularity and thus to rise above "any private or partial view." This is what Warner calls "the principle of negativity." We can see it not only as suiting with the print, as against spoken, medium, but also as giving expression to this crucial feature of the new public sphere as extrapolitical, as a discourse of reason *on* and *to* power rather than *by* power.[9]

As Warner points out, the rise of the public sphere involves a breach in the old ideal of a social order undivided by conflict and difference. On the contrary, it means that debate breaks out, and continues, involving in principle everybody, and this is perfectly legitimate. The old unity will be gone forever, but a new unity is to be substituted. For the ever-continuing controversy is not meant to be an exercise in power, a quasi–civil war carried on by dialectical means. Its potentially divisive and destructive consequences are offset by the fact that it is a debate outside of power, a rational debate, striving without parti pris to define the common good. "The language of resistance to controversy articulates a norm for controversy. It silently transforms the ideal of a social order free from conflictual debate into an ideal of debate free from social conflict."[10]

So what the public sphere does is enable the society to come to a common mind, without the mediation of the political sphere, in a discourse of reason outside power, which nevertheless is normative for power. Now let's try to see what, in order to do this, it has to *be*.

We can perhaps best do this by trying to define what is new and unprecedented in it. And I want to get to this in two steps, as it were. First, there is the aspect of its novelty which has already been touched on. When we compare the public sphere with one of the important sources of its constitutive images, viz., the ancient republic, what springs to our notice is its extrapolitical locus. The "Republic of Letters" was a common term that members of the international society of savants in interchange gave themselves toward the end of the seventeenth century. This was a precursor phenomenon to the public sphere: indeed, it contributed to shaping it. Here was a "republic" constituted outside of the political.

Both the analogy and the difference gave its force and point to this image: it was a republic as a unified association, grouping all enlightened participants across political boundaries. But it was also a republic in being free from subjection; its "citizens" owed no allegiance but to it as long as they went about the business of Letters.

7 Public and Private

There are, of course, two other such extrapolitical, secular spaces that have played a crucial role in the development of society in the modern West: first, society considered as extrapolitically organized in a (market) economy, which I mentioned above; and second, society as a "people," that is, as a metatopical agency that is thought to preexist and found the politically organized society. We have to see these three as linked in their development, and also as interwoven with other kinds of social spaces that were also emerging at this time.

Habermas notes that the new public sphere brought together people who had already carved out a "private" space as economic agents and owners of property, as well as an "intimate" sphere that was the locus of their family life. The agents constituting this new public sphere were thus both "bourgeois" and "homme."[1]

I think there is a very important link here. The importance of these new kinds of private space, that is, the heightened sense of their significance in human life, and the growing consensus in favor of entrenching their independence in the face of state and church, bestowed in fact exceptional importance on an extrapolitical and secular domain of life. It is hard not to

believe that this in some way facilitated the rise of the public sphere.

I would like to place these forms of privacy in a further historical context, which I already invoked above (chapter 5), in connection with the rise of the economy. This is what I have called the "affirmation of ordinary life."[2] By this I mean the broad movement in European culture, which seems to have been carried first by the Protestant Reformation, that steadily enhances the significance of production and family life. Whereas the dominant ethics that descend from the ancient world tended to treat these as infrastructural to the "good life," defined in terms of supposedly higher activities like contemplation or citizen participation, and whereas medieval Catholicism leaned to a view that made the life of dedicated celibacy the highest form of Christian practice, the Reformers stressed that we follow God first of all in our calling and in our family. The ordinary is sanctified, or put in other terms, the claims to special sanctity of certain types of life (the monastic) or special places (churches) or special acts (the Mass) were rejected as part of false and impious belief that humans could in some way control the action of grace.

But to say that all claims to special sanctity were rejected is to say that the nodal points where profane time especially connected with divine time were repudiated. We live our ordinary lives, work in our callings, sustain our families in profane time. In the new perspective, this is what God demands of us, and not an attempt on our part to connect with eternity. That connection is purely God's affair. Thus, the issue of whether we live good or bad lives was henceforth situated firmly in ordinary life and within profane time.

Transposed out of a theological and into a purely human dimension, this gave rise to the constellation of modern beliefs and sensibility that makes the central questions of the good life turn on how we live our ordinary lives, and turns its back on supposedly higher or more heroic modes of life. It underlies the bourgeois ethic of peaceful rational productivity in its polemic against the aristocratic ethic of honor and heroism. It can even appropriate its own forms of heroism, as in the Promethean picture of humans as producers, transforming the face of the earth, which we find with Marx. Or it can issue in the more recent ethic of self-fulfillment in relationships, which is very much part of our contemporary world.

This is the background against which we can understand the two developments Habermas picks out. First, the saliency given to the private economic agent reflects the significance of the life of production in the ethic of ordinary life. This agent is private, as against the public realm of state and other authority. The private world of production now has a new dignity and importance. The enhancing of the private in effect gives the charter to a certain kind of individualism. The agent of production acts on his own, operates in a sphere of exchange with others that doesn't need to be constituted by authority. As these acts of production and exchange come to be seen as forming an ideally self-regulating system, the notion emerges of a new kind of extrapolitical and secular sphere, an economy in the modern sense. Where the word originally applied to the management of a household, and therefore to a domain that could never be seen as self-regulating, in the eighteenth century the notion arises of an economic system, with the physiocrats and Adam Smith, and that is the way we understand it today.

The (market) economy comes to constitute a sphere, that is, a way people are linked together to form an interconnecting society, not only objectively but in their self-understanding. This sphere is extrapolitical and secularly constituted. But it is in an important sense not public. The time has come, perhaps, to distinguish some of the senses of this overworked term.[3]

There seem to be two main semantic axes along which the term public is used. The first connects public to what affects the whole community ("public affairs") or the management of these affairs ("public authority"). The second makes publicity a matter of access ("This park is open to the public") or appearance ("The news has been made public"). The new private sphere of economic agents contrasts with public in the first sense. But these agents also came to constitute a public sphere in the second sense, because this sphere is precisely a metatopical common space, a space in which people come together and contact each other. It is a space, we might say, of mutual appearance, and in that sense a public space.

But the economic sphere proper is not public even in that second sense. The whole set of economic transactions are linked in a series of causal relations, which can be traced and by which we can understand how they influence each other. But this is not a matter of common decision (by public authority), nor do these linked transactions lie in some public domain of common appearance. And yet it is a "sphere" because the agents in an economy are seen as being linked in a single society, in which their actions reciprocally affect each other in some systematic way.

The economy is the first mode of society of the new sort defined above, a society constituted purely extrapolitically and in profane time. It forms part of the background to the rise of the public sphere. It seems very plausible that the explanation of each is interlinked with that of the other.

The second background Habermas picks out is the intimate sphere. Here we see a development of the second main constituent of ordinary life: the world of the family and its affections. As the eighteenth century develops, this becomes the locus of another demand for privacy, this time defined in relation to the second kind of publicness, that concerned with access. Family life retreats more and more into an intimate sphere, shielded from the outside world and even from other members of a large household. Houses are more and more constructed to allow for the privacy of family members in relation to servants as well as outsiders.

The enhanced value placed on family life, in the context of another long-term development toward greater concentration on subjectivity and inwardness, has as one of its fruits the eighteenth-century cherishing of sentiment. Another shift occurs, as it were, in the center of gravity of the good life, within the broad development that affirms ordinary life, and a new importance comes to repose on our experiencing fine, noble, or exalted sentiments. This new ethic both defines and propagates itself through literature. Perhaps its central vehicle was the epistolary novel. Rousseau's *Julie* is a paradigm case.

This literature helped define a new understanding of an intimate sphere of close relations: the home at its finest of noble sentiments and exalted experience. This understanding of experience was further enriched by a new conception of art in the category of the aesthetic. This is another fruit of subjectification, of course, because art understood in this category is being defined in terms of our reaction to it. It is in this century that music becomes more and more detached from public and liturgical function and comes to join the other arts as objects of aesthetic enjoyment, enriching the intimate sphere.

This intimate realm was also part of the background against which the public sphere emerged. And not only because it constituted part of the domain of the (extrapolitical and secular) private, but also because the intimate domain had to be defined through public interchange, both of literary works and of criticism. This is only superficially a paradox, as we shall see below. A new definition of human identity, however private, can become generally accepted only through being defined and affirmed in public space. And this critical

exchange itself came to constitute a public sphere. We might say it came to constitute an axis of the public sphere, along with, even slightly ahead of, the principal axis of exchange around matters of public (in the first sense) policy. People who never met came to a mutually recognized common mind about the moving power of Rousseau's *Julie*, just as they came to do in the early revolutionary period about the insights of his *Contrat Social*.

There is also a third way in which the Reformation helped to create the conditions for metatopical common agency in secular time. I am thinking here particularly of the more radical, Calvinist wing. From the very beginning, Calvinism usually demanded a much more thoroughgoing reorganization of church life than the more moderate Lutheran variant. Later, particularly in the English-speaking countries, it also spilled over into political restructuring and the founding of new political units designed on new principles, as in New England. At this point, this strand of the Reformation also began to fissure and to generate new "free" churches, based more and more on voluntary associations, a process that intensifies in the eighteenth century with Methodism and the Great Awakening.

In this recurrent activity of founding and refounding, we are witnessing more and more the creation of common agencies in secular time. We still have a crucial reference to God, as the one who calls us to this refounding, but the reference to higher time is less and less prominent. It remained, if at all, only in an eschatological perspective, to the extent that the new reforms were thought to be ushering in the end of profane time and the gathering of all times in God. As this perspective dims, the founding activity is confined more and more exclusively in profane time.

The life of these new churches or sects also helped to set the scene for modern forms of common agency in another respect. They usually demanded a strong commitment from their members, drawing them to associate with others beyond the bounds of family, lineage, neighborhood, and traditional fealty. They created societies in which these more partial ties mattered less than belonging to a religious community for which membership was individual and fundamentally the same for all. Something like this, of course, was always part of the theory of the Christian Church, but the modern sect lived this more intensely and accustomed its members to seeing themselves as belonging individually and directly to the whole. The ground was thus prepared for modern "horizontal" or direct-access societies, in which our membership is unmediated by any partial group, as also for a mode of sociability in which new associations are constantly being created.[4]

It is against this whole economic, ecclesial, and intimate-sentimental background that we have to understand the rise of the public sphere in Europe. This means that we should understand it as part of a family of extrapolitical and secular constitutions of "society." On one side, it relates to the economy, even farther removed from the political realm in that it is not a domain of publicity in any sense. On the other side, it helped to nourish the new images of popular sovereignty, which gave rise to new and sometimes frightening forms of political action in the eighteenth century.