

REVIEWS

Masses, Classes, and the Public Sphere. Edited by MIKE HILL AND WARREN MONTAG. New York: Verso Press, 2000. Hardcover. \$30.00. 276 pages.

Benjamin Shepard

By “the public sphere” we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. . . . Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association.

—Jürgen Habermas (1964)

“Inside there are a bunch of government and corporate elites holding meetings to form policies many of us consider criminal, yet those who have come to dissent are treated like cattle,” a protestor observed from the vantage point of a police pen, blocks away from the World Economic Forum (WEF) meetings in New York last

February. By the end of the day, the police had corralled off some 10,000 of those in the streets, costing the city millions in overtime to secure the public spaces, chain stores, and retail outlets around the Waldorf-Astoria, where the WEF was meeting. The image that many took from the WEF meetings was of a high-stakes conversation costing the privileged some \$25,000 each for a place at the table. Yet the question remains whether a party with an \$11 million police/security tab that relegates those who cannot pay to the street constitutes civil discourse. In between the media hysteria about the violence of dissent at the protests and the revelations about Enron’s influence on the Bush administration energy policy, a number of core problems about American democracy and civil society were exposed. In an era in which public

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spaces are cordoned off and fenced up, as activists are dismissed and corporate lobbyists welcomed, it remains to be seen whether, as philosopher Jürgen Habermas posits in the quotation above, access to the public sphere is actually guaranteed to all citizens.

Conversation about the public sphere emerged in West Germany as the first postwar generation, born after 1927, came into its own. This was a generation that, unlike its demoralized parents, came to experience the introduction of a liberal, Western system of government that encouraged the formation of a civil society. Habermas's public sphere was intended to thrive alongside, not at the expense of, future economic successes. His was a vision of a post-authoritarian civil society in which a public sphere supported critical debate rooted in democratic political institutions. Yet the question remained whether democracy was truly rooted in postwar German society or merely superimposed on a passive and exhausted populace. In turn, many wondered whether Habermas's ideal of a public space—modeled on eighteenth-century England, where discussion was thought to thrive outside of the interference of markets and the state—could be understood as a political reality within the late twentieth century (Hohendahl 1995, pp. 29–33).

The End of History?

By 1989, Habermas felt the answer was ensured. The Wall was crumbling as the peaceful Velvet Revolu-

tion offered what Habermas considered the ideal opportunity for his public sphere to be realized within a regulated capitalist democracy. Yet questions remained. Mike Hill and Warren Montag, the editors of *Masses, Classes, and the Public Sphere*, situate their anthology within just such a quandary brought to the fore during a conference celebrating the 1989 English translation of Habermas's 1961 *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. On hand for the proceedings was none other than Habermas himself. After acknowledging the competing debates over his work, Habermas confidently assured the audience that the transformation then under way in Eastern Europe could certainly be seen as a victory of civil society over despotism and a confirmation of his ideas. Yet the usually unflappable Habermas, some sixty years old at the time, was rattled by a question out of an era that many of the conference's participants had decried as "irrevocably past." During the question-and-answer period, feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser asked: "If, as you have argued, 'markets and state bureaucracies are a necessary feature of life in complex societies' must we not ask whether capitalism is compatible with a 'non-exclusionary and genuinely democratic public sphere?'" (pp. 2–3).

"I'll have to get over the shock to answer such a question," Habermas stammered. While he considered himself the last Marxist, he could not envision "any type of revolution in societies that have such a degree of

complexity” (pp. 1–2). Hill and Montag comment in their introduction, “Since Fraser did not raise the issue of revolution or the question of how a people might rid itself of capitalism, but only the question of capitalism itself, we are left to conclude that the impossibility of revolution here is a substitute for the impossibility of there existing (at least in complex societies) anything other than capitalism” (p. 2). If anything, the decade following the fall of the Wall has done nothing to confirm “the end of history,” but rather has opened up a series of difficult questions: What kinds of civil societies, networks, labor practices, and democratic institutions, such as public spheres, can exist in a period of expanding income inequality in which capitalism is rarely challenged by the left or regulated by the center?

The editors’ opening remarks offer a glimpse of the complexities, disciplinary uncertainties, and cultural dilemmas that discussions of the public sphere inevitably present. As professors of English, the editors are making a bold pronouncement in the anthology’s introductory inquiry about the state of capitalism at large. In their eyes, Habermas’s

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conception is that significant in its impact on core understandings of the Enlightenment in relationship to contemporary social and political life. Even some forty years after the original conception, Habermas’s public sphere “has today become an ultimately foundational (and therefore underinterrogated) concept for

assessing everything from intellectual civility and ‘public access’ criticism, to the function of race, gender, and sexual difference.” After a generation of attacks on notions of the Enlightenment by Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and others, the authors suggest, “Habermas seems to have provided ‘modernity’ with its most theo-

retically sophisticated defense” (pp. 2–3). By offering a viable model of civil society for a democratic discourse that is capable of operating in between a regulated market unfettered by monopolies, free from government, and capable of producing the catalyst for social reform, the editors suggest that Habermas’s real-world framework offers an alternative to the collision course toward reification with which other Frankfurt School theorists diagnose contemporary culture. The public-sphere framework understood as a murky realm of civic culture fostering

questions about the possibility of democratic revitalization in a period of high capitalism is just the enigma that makes *Masses, Classes, and the Public Sphere* a dynamic and important contribution to the burgeoning topic of the increasingly controlled nature of public space.

Habermas's contradictions as a Marxist afraid of street-based direct action and who supported the Gulf War for oil because Iraq violated his idea of laws of civil society continue to inspire passionate argument. Kant's notion that conscientious citizens should "Argue but obey," in deference to the state, was a tremendous influence on Habermas (1989), whose public sphere was not intended to offer any sort of "liberation from rule by state authority." Out of this framework we are left with the justification of a police state to modify and, to speak euphemistically, mediate the conflicts between the public's will and the state's support for its capital. Given Habermas's adherence to both an enlightened rational discourse and an ever expanding police apparatus, the editors contend, "We are thus inescapably led to the conclusion that the public sphere and even civil society itself can function rationally only when they rest on a relationship of forces that will guarantee that what cannot be improved upon will be left 'intact'" (p. 7). Montag further addresses Habermas's anxiety about social movements in his essay, "The Pressure of the Street: Habermas' Fear of the Masses" in part II. While he does not go so far

as to call him an unorthodox Marxist, as George Lukács (1968, p. 5) described those Marxists who called for "socialism without any conflict," Montag's introductory charge resonates.

Those who make it through the editors' rich introduction, "What Was, What Is, the Public Sphere? Post-Cold War Reflections," are treated to a series of extraordinary, often thick, but most useful essays. While some of them take a bit of work, most are worth the effort (although Erin Post's translation of Etienne Balibar's "What Makes a People a People? Rousseau and Kant" fails to liberate the subject from the essay's obsequious, dazzlingly vague prose). The essays are divided into three parts, "The Public in Practice," "Philosophizing the Public," and "Public Knowledge," only briefly framed within the introduction with no notes before each section. But they cover an extraordinary cultural terrain, from turf wars between literary critics and philosophers to historic debates, questions about globalization, the role of public intellectuals, public housing, affirmative action, and so on.

While Hill and Montag postulate that the public sphere offers a framework for considering "the function of race, gender, and sexual difference," the work's most glaring omission is lively contemporary discussions of public sexual cultures and spaces in gender, queer, and cultural studies (see Berlant and Warner 1999; Leap 1999), which are nowhere to found in this anthology. Certainly the scope

of the topic would force the editors to draw a line somewhere. Nonetheless, as public spaces in cities are redrawn in terms of their ability to pay for themselves, the potential for exclusion—for citizenship being redrawn as a consumer activity—is difficult to separate from discussion of a public sphere. Today, open green spaces are becoming increasingly rare as cities emulate a suburban vision of urban planning: cities as entertainment parks, replete with entrance fees, surveillance, racial profiling, elaborate security functions, stop-and-frisk policing methods, and parking lots. If, under the public glare, one always has to pay for entrance to a place to talk, to rest, to relieve oneself, the question remains what kind of conversation, what kind of public consciousness, can really thrive? As such, omission of larger discussions of public-space issues presents an important question: To what extent can the public-sphere framework extend itself to broader questions about public culture, policy, democratic participation, and, again the core dilemma, who is included versus who is excluded?

Remember the Paradise— Memory and Metropolis

Part I, “The Public as Practice,” presents three essays on notions of public culture, services, and memory in three metropolises, London, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Crystal Bartolovich’s “Inventing London” reminds us that “the difficulties of determining the spaces of capital” posed sig-

nificant challenges long before the emergence of the term “globalization” and its continuing discontents—long before critics of the World Trade Organization, philosophers, economists, and the like debated the pros and cons of local versus global profits during the age of mercantilism, during which Habermas posits the liberal public sphere first took rise (pp. 18–21). Within the context of a globalization project that “increases the speed with which it is possible to move people, possessions and ideas around” (see Graeber 2002), the possibility of community sovereignty, of an autonomous public sphere and civil society, becomes all the more complex and enticing, just as the quest for social justice on the local level becomes more and more enigmatic. Increasingly the public sphere is marked by exclusions based on class and gender lines, bound within a framework where local networks are dispersed as global ties bind. As virtual networks expand, physical public spaces are eroded and privatized, putting local communities in jeopardy. Discussion of this tension is where Bartolovich’s essay is at its strongest, offering a wonderful study of the memory of London’s streets. “The shared memory-space, I would suggest, enables a ‘localized’ public to emerge out of a necessarily territorially ambiguous urban space,” Bartolovich observes (p. 24), before quoting Elizabeth Wilson: “‘The changing nature of cities gives urban dwellers a sense of time that is linear instead of cyclical. ‘Oh, yes,

that's where the old cinema used to be," we say, or "Do you remember, that's where those houses were all squatted before they were pulled down" ' ' (p. 25). Finally, Bartolovich elaborates with the example of Walter Benjamin's "Berlin Chronicle" suggesting that we compile topographies of memories of cities. The implications are that individual experiences of places are essential historical documents to counter capital's domination of the public sphere.

Stanley Aronowitz further addresses the theme of disappearing networks in "Unions as Counter-Public Spheres," recalling, "There is a scene in Orson Welles' film *Lady From Shanghai* depicting a hall similar to many maintained by Seafarers and National Maritime Unions in the 1940's and 1950's." Their contracts obliged employers to fill jobs by using these union hiring halls. So the workers spent a great deal of time there waiting for work assignments, talking about sports, playing cards, and the like, the union hall functioning as glue that held this highly peripatetic workforce together. As such, "It was both a culture in the highly specific sense of bringing people together on the basis of their common occupational and work experiences and a public sphere to the extent that the hiring halls were sites of conversation" (p. 88).

The Subsumption of Labor

After four pages of the familiar critical, *WorkingUSA* litany of labor's decline and the obstacles facing its

renewal, and then a line break, Aronowitz shifts tone, postulating: "Yet, none of the leading forces behind union renewal—either on the left or among the progressives—have addressed one of the underlying issues in labor's decline: the virtual disappearance of a labor public sphere" (p. 86). Aronowitz contends that between the ironclad grip of the corporate media, the ersatz public life of shopping malls, labor's reluctance to foster working-class autonomy, and the descent of direct action and workplace union bargaining, the proletarian public sphere, born of an era of competitive capitalism, may well have come and gone (p. 90). And the result is uncomplicated. Under these conditions, "there is dramatically reduced time for conviviality with fellow workers," Aronowitz elaborates (p. 94), hinting that organizing and solidarity function as far more than material commodities. Their loss resonates in broadly cultural, even spiritual terms. Of all the examples of a decline of a public sphere, for Stanley Aronowitz and Michael Hardt labor offers the most complete example. Their essays integrate the economic, historic, sociological, and philosophical terms of debate in ways that, as Habermas does, rise above a single disciplinary quandary into broad critical theory. Instead of one public policy, neighborhood, or literary reading, the case of labor forces the reader to ponder the implications for the decline of a mechanism that once served as marker and challenge to a vast and rapidly expanding income

inequality, without which both democratic institutions and notions of civil society are jeopardized.

The coauthor (with Antonio Negri) of *Empire*,¹ Michael Hardt comes to the conversation about the public sphere from a unique vantage point. In Hardt's eyes, the era of civil society—most notably marked by institutions of disciplinary police practices—has given way to an era marked by social control. And for Hardt, like Aronowitz, no theme better embodies this post-civil society era than that of the contemporary change in the social organization of labor. His is a framework organized around Foucault's consideration of feudal discipline and Marx's notion of "the formal subsumption of labor under capital." Hardt builds on Marx and Foucault's writings on the historic and shifting relationships between the state, society, and labor, to argue that capital no longer needs to engage labor at the heart of production. Instead it constructs a separate marginal sphere that subsumes and excludes "social forces foreign to the system" (p. 171). Emancipated from the working classes, labor is rendered invisible, its decline emblematic of the withering of civil society. Hardt's point is that, even if we considered civil society a desirable thing—as a series of social relationships dependent on disciplinary and educational institutions—the social conditions necessary for it have disappeared. As such, he argues that a framework of control is a more appropriate paradigm with which to consider a global era of "mobility,

speed and flexibility" (p. 173).

While it is hard to disagree that many of the institutions of civil society have eroded, it is difficult to imagine, as Hardt does (p. 173), that the era of fixed social identities has disappeared with them. The mass mobility, the globalization of capital, ideas, labor, media, terror, and soul-crushing strikes at the faceless masses, offer a compelling case that some identities are worth more to capital than others. While certain identities can pass, hide, disappear, or be subsumed and resumed, to posit that we have entered an era in which social identities have disappeared is an overgeneralization. Social constructionists have spent a generation debating this very question. While certainly notions of "race" and cultural categories such as "gay" or "straight" can be better seen as historic productions than as biological realities, when it comes to questions of public policy, of affirmative action or gay antidiscrimination laws that depend on these very social categories, many of the same theorists and activists advocate for a strategic essentialism favoring fixed social identities (see Gamson 1998). The blurring of social identities can be extremely difficult. If you consider the question of gender identity, to suggest the era of fixed identities is over is brushing over stark reality. Just ask any transgender street worker in the front lines of the battles over gender insubordination. In the end, shifting identities has more to do with assets than control. Those who can pay, do, while those

unable to pay remain exposed to the elements and subject to capital's whims.

Yet Hardt's final point is an optimistic one. If the era of civil society is over, then it is time to look beyond the era of discipline. In a nod to the utility of social movements, Hardt submits that we reconsider the role of labor or other "creative social practices" within the culture. Just as labor practices have changed, so, too, should our assumptions about wage labor and its transformations (p. 173). Hardt suggests:

Even in the society of control, labor is still the "savage beast" that Hegel feared, refusing to be subjugated and tamed—and perhaps its potential is even greater today when it is no longer engaged, mediated, and disciplined through the institutions of civil society as it was in the previous paradigm. The networks of sociality and forms of cooperation embedded in contemporary social practices constitute the germs for a new movement, with new forms of contestation and new conceptions of liberation. (p. 174)

The imperative of social movements is, with the exception of Aronowitz, what was missing in the first two-thirds of *Masses, Classes, and the Public Sphere*. While much of labor has been subsumed by capital, its potential as a source of wealth and social ties has not, Hardt concludes in a nod to Aronowitz's musings on the imperative for "conviviality." Labor's capacity to create alternative

spheres, autonomous zones of solidarity, may be its greatest hope for building sustainable communities and resistance to the control of post-civil society.

Autonomous Zones

The theme of activism is an implicit subcurrent of much of the discussion of the public sphere. Paul H. Villa's essay, "The Right to the City of Los Angeles: Discourse and Practice of a Chicano Alternative Public Sphere," offers a useful theme. By transforming a "space of exclusion into the space of freedom," the LA barrio serves as an example of local people realigning the language and tools of their oppressors, thus shifting terms of a discourse, a practice expanding throughout the world. In so doing, LA barrio residents are finding ways of establishing a counterreality within the situations imposed on them, thus making it possible to live in spaces of exclusion "by reintroducing into them the plural mobility of goals and desires. Manifesting alternative needs and interests from those of the dominant public sphere" (p. 58) reveal the possibility for an alternative public sphere.

If, as Naomi Klein postulates, the contemporary global justice movements are an effort to reclaim public space through a burlesque of activism,² Hill and Montag's work could not be any more necessary. Between the influence of corporate influence peddling on government and the privatization of public

spaces, the public sphere is feeling the squeeze. Yet, activism, culture jamming, Ashe, aikido, and countless cultural practices of resistance are thriving as public-space groups are altering both our ways of experiencing urban space and challenging the malling of our cities (see Farrell 2001 and McKay 1998).

After a number of the early, sometimes elegiac descriptions of historic publics in *Masses, Classes, and the Public Sphere*, the reader is left to ponder whether the public sphere is not just another storied space, existing more in memory than in practical application, no different than Hakim Bey's elusive temporary autonomous zones (TAZ) (1991). Between a puzzle offering the possibility for both annihilation and transformation, there may be an advantage here. In his book, Bey explains, "As soon as the TAZ is named (represented, mediated), it must vanish, it will vanish, leaving behind it an empty husk, only to spring up again somewhere else, once again invisible because indefinable in terms of the Spectacle." The stakes could not be any higher.

Notes

1. A well-received tome that places the theme of globalization into a broad framework of European social thought.

2. In her remarks during the panel "Can Movement and Party Challengers Work Together?" at Independent Politics in a Global World Conference, CUNY Graduate Center, NY, October 7, 2000.

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