



# Cultural Transformations of the Public Sphere

Contemporary and Historical Perspectives

BERND FISCHER AND  
MAY MERGENTHALER (EDS)

Peter Lang

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## Cultural Transformations of the Public Sphere

# CULTURAL HISTORY AND LITERARY IMAGINATION

EDITED BY CHRISTIAN J. EMDEN & DAVID MIDGLEY

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## Introduction

The idea for this volume developed during a larger interdisciplinary project on 'The Public Sphere and Modern Social Imaginaries', a lecture series and a conference that took place at The Ohio State University between 2009 and 2012. We invited those participants and several additional colleagues, who were particularly interested in conceptual work on the cultural implications and aesthetic formations of the public sphere, to contribute to this volume. Our thanks go foremost to the authors, who responded so convincingly to our invitation; to the participants of the conference and the lecture series; and to the colleagues from OSU's departments of Comparative Studies, History, Political Science, Spanish and Portuguese, and Germanic Languages and Literatures who participated in the conception and organization of the larger project. Special thanks are due to Alice Schlingman, who helped with the editorial work that fell largely into May Mergenthaler's hands. Finally, we would like to thank the College (now Division) of Humanities for generously supporting the lecture series, the conference, and the publication of this volume.

Pondering the potentials, limits, hopes and hazards of expounding the role of aesthetics and culture in the formation of public spheres and social imaginaries, it is perhaps helpful to search for possible beginnings. When Immanuel Kant, in his 'Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' (1784), introduced his notion of a public [*Publikum*] that has the potential to enlighten itself, his anticipated model was a yet to be established uncensored intellectual exchange of ideas and arguments. Reason alone was to determine the validity of any published argument, and in the process of its quasi-scholarly self-enlightenment, the public would not only debate innovative and diverse ideas, it would also learn how to reason. Culture and aesthetics did not come into view. For Kant, gratuitous rhetorical devices, polemical structures and aesthetic embellishments were, as he

pointed out throughout his work, warning signs for a cautious and sceptical reception, signals that the presented argument might somehow be insufficient or faulty. If at all, culture is in this essay revealed as the history of political and religious indoctrination that has kept the public in a state of immaturity and servitude, incapable of overcoming the convenience of being told what to think and too gutless to use its own capacity for reason. It is not until Kant speculates on the possibility of his political telos, the (ultimately world-encompassing) republic of republics, that culture raises its (still) ugly head again. By the time he writes *Perpetual Peace* (1795), he concedes that the public does not seem to want such a world state, because it (stubbornly) insists on difference and wants the particularity of its languages and religions to be recognized in political structures and societal formations. At least for the time being, Kant is forced to dismiss, as he says, 'in *hypothesi* what is right in *thesi*' and replace his vision of a world republic (including the utopian notion of world citizenship rights) with the much weaker proposal of an alliance, at best a federation, of autonomous states.

Aside from the (French) politics of the day, it was, no doubt, Johann Gottfried Herder's alternative conceptualization of history that must have convinced Kant to scale back his political project: primarily Herder's ethical demand for the recognition of the world's cultures or civilizations by the unique standards of their own inherent measures and, following from this, their right to find their own political (national) structures and build their own unique societies. Herder – this point is often neglected – was less interested in sub-national cultures, such as sociolects, dialects, and cultural or religious regionalisms. Quite to the contrary, in order to develop (and educate) a national German public, he felt it quite imperative to enforce a standard German language and to build a common national canon for a reading public to come.

While Kant leaves no doubt that in his political model it is the (republican) constitution that eventually transforms people into a nation (and not the other way around), he was also quite aware of the challenges that sub-national cultural orientations could pose to his vision of a national and latently cosmopolitan public. In September 1784 (a few months before Kant), Moses Mendelssohn had published his essay 'On the Question: What does it Mean to Enlighten?' If Kant and Herder, in the context of their

divergent political ambitions, converge on employing the term ‘public’ – a term that allows for connotations of a reading and viewing public in the communicative and commercial sense of an audience – rather than Habermas’ abstract notion of a public sphere, Mendelssohn’s pragmatic Enlightenment is deferential to an abstract concept of *Bildung* and operates in a political sphere, where philosophy stands ready, as he says, to cover its mouth in the face of political atrocities and inequalities, for it is all too familiar with its own political limitations; and one of his primary appeals is that it ought to be equally aware of its own potential for inadvertently wrecking established cultures and societies when it is tempted to confront them with an unprepared and unrehearsed bout of knowledge. For Mendelssohn, a people’s enlightenment and its culture ought to develop in lockstep. But Mendelssohn does not stop there and proposes that a nation that approaches the pinnacle of its potential *Bildung* is already in danger of falling ill from an overdose of national intemperance and over-indulgence. Healthy nations, Mendelssohn seems to imply, need the spike of inner struggle and strife, of claims for divergent particularities. While philosophy may have no option but to imagine one public for itself and address humanity as such – for ‘man as man is not in need of culture, but is in need of enlightenment’ – it must in Mendelssohn’s concept become aware that it has, in turn, a much harder time reaching man as citizen, as a member of a particular nation, religion, language, estate or profession. This is, of course, the reason why Kant divides man into two personas, private and public, whereby it is the individual’s role in society that is public, while his role within a self-enlightening public is private, in the sense of free.

Kant’s answer to these challenges can be found in his attempt to get to the heart of culture via a rigorous analysis of the individual aesthetic experience and the commonality of taste. His critique of aesthetic judgement uncovers metaphysical assumptions of the dominant discourse on the educational and social value of art and attempts to offer a new foundation by acknowledging the autonomy of an individual’s pure experience of beauty and her coinstantaneous desire for its societal recognition and universal approval (resulting in a latent discourse on taste that forcefully wants to unfold). Kant shied away from attempting to integrate his analysis of aesthetic judgement into his political deliberations, but – as is

already evident with Friedrich Schiller's notion of aesthetic play, which, in itself, is conceivable as an aesthetic sphere of private/public cultural and political formation – he has opened a barrel that remains far from being drained.

Terminologies have evolved and political expediencies have changed, but we believe that many of these fundamental tensions between philosophical, cultural and aesthetic formations of the public (and their eighteenth-century conceptualizations) are still with us today, and some are explored and often radically reconfigured in the essays collected in this volume. In particular, the contributions by Emden, Rebentisch, Menke and Shapiro are, in one way or another, indebted to Kant's conceptual universe. Herder's legacy can be studied primarily in the essays by von Mücke, Lüdemann, Unzueta and Nir. And some of Mendelssohn's conceptual concerns are newly explored by Schiff, Landgraf and Corona.

In the first section, the chapter 'Public Space and the Public: Johann Gottfried Herder's Approach to Real and Imagined Communities' by Dorothea von Mücke explores Herder's changing views of the public, from a historical – before and after the French Revolution – as well as contemporary – after the media-fuelled uprisings in the Middle East – perspective. In the two versions of his essay 'Haben wir noch das Publikum und Vaterland der Alten?' [Do we still have the Public and the Fatherland of the Ancients?] from 1765 and 1795, respectively, Herder conceives of the public in two distinct ways that both present potential alternatives to the model of a deliberative and liberal public sphere as developed by Habermas, finding its origin in eighteenth-century bourgeois society. While Habermas' public sphere is a descendent of the ancient Greek polis and exemplifies Kantian principles of critical and rational thought, Herder, in the first version of his essay, extols the public institutions in a monarchy as places where all subjects can gather and benefit from services directed toward the common good, like law, education and social welfare. He wrote the second version in reaction to the terror regimes following the French Revolution with an elaboration on how different realms of society invoke different kinds of publics, viewing not Greek politics but art as capable of appealing to and helping to bring about an ideal public – one that is neither submissive as in religion, nor ideological as in philosophy, but imaginative, self-reflexive

and critical. Herder, von Mücke maintains, reminds us of the importance of both real spaces and the freedom of aesthetic realms for the emergence of thriving civic societies.

The French Revolution stands at the centre of Susanne Lüdemann's essay, 'Fraternity as a Social Metaphor', which confirms the critical view of the revolutionary public at play in Herder. Yet, Lüdemann, like Herder, locates the dangers of this public not in being manipulated by political leaders, but precisely in what he suggests as a remedy: social imaginaries. She analyses the exclusive and ultimately destructive role that the social metaphor of fraternity played in the aftermath of the Revolution and the foundation of France's First Republic. In Lüdemann's view, social bodies need embodiments and affective bonds, so that after the beheading of the King of France, Louis XVI, a vacuum emerged that had to be filled. The republican constitution with its abstract guarantees of freedom and equality did not suffice to hold together a polity and hence, these ideals were supplemented by the political imaginary of a universal fraternity. However, as Lüdemann shows, the notion of fraternity led in the end – perhaps unavoidably – to its opposite: universal distrust and a regime of terror. She argues, with Jacques Derrida, that fraternity is marked by a paradox: it must be politically constructed and upheld by rituals, like the citizens' oath, while at the same time presupposing its existence as natural. The revolutionaries promised that all humans were brothers, but very soon, women and foreigners were excluded from the republican band of brothers, which ultimately dissolved violently, through rising internal strife and suspicion of secession. Lüdemann thus invites us to reflect on the possibility of creating political imaginaries that avoid both exclusion and self-destruction.

The positive potentials of aesthetic imagination for the public sphere are discussed in the third section of our volume. The second section, 'Cultural and Theoretical Transformations I: The Limits of Public Representation', lays the theoretical groundwork for this section by presenting critical analyses of and supplements to Habermas' notion of the public sphere. The included essays point out the gaps in the concept of the public sphere and already suggest that these gaps may perhaps be filled with the help of imagination and art.

Jade Larissa Schiff argues in 'Repressive Democracy: Pathological and Ontological Distortion in Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action' that the theory of communicative action underlying Habermas' notion of the public sphere, with its presupposition of transparent and rational communication, neglects what Schiff calls 'ontological distortion': 'reciprocal misunderstandings, not of meanings, but of lifeworlds, of whole conceptions of how the world is and ought to be.' Such distortions are necessary for a functioning liberal, democratic public sphere, according to Schiff, because they provide citizens with the – at least in part illusory – assumption that they share the same lifeworld and subscribe to the same norms, allowing them to exchange ideas and form shared opinions. These misunderstandings of lifeworlds are, however, also dangerous for the pluralistic character of a democracy, since they exclude, even repress, in a Freudian sense, other, competing worldviews. Schiff develops her argument on the basis of Habermas' own discussion of distorted communication [*verzerrte Kommunikation*] and his use of Freudian psychoanalysis. In her view, Habermas does not distinguish between pathological and ontological distortion, which results from his falsely understanding all repression and distortion as pathological, while Freud believed that a stable collective existence needs some basic – 'ontological' – forms of repression.

Edgar Landgraf's essay 'Political Autonomy and the Public: From Lippmann to Luhmann' calls into question the fundamental assumptions underlying Habermas' view of the relationship between the public and the state. The author bases his discussion on Lippmann's belief, formed in response to the rise of totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century, that public opinion can never be representative and finds expression only in general terms ('yes' or 'no'), and on Lippmann's proposed remedy: the decoupling of 'the political decision-making process from public opinion'. According to Landgraf, Lippmann pointed to a crucial feature of political systems that Niklas Luhmann later elaborated: the systemic autonomy of government and administration with respect to the public, which Luhmann conceived as a *Publikum*, an audience. In his view, the public and public opinion do not really legitimize the decisions of the government, but merely serve 'as communication devices for its [the government's] self-legitimization'. Public opinion, furthermore, does not express a majority view,

but acts as a 'communication filter' that determines and excludes what is private. However, for Landgraf, the paradox, described by Luhmann, that the public is simultaneously excluded and – in a highly mediated and limited fashion – included in the political process, is not detrimental to democracies and other forms of government. Rather, it is the only way these regimes can maintain stability, while adjusting to the unpredictable changes of modern societies. To illustrate this flexible structure, Landgraf compares it to theatre and improvisation.

Christian J. Emden confirms, in 'Constitutionalizing the Public Sphere? Habermas and the Modern State', that the relationship between government and public is paradoxical and that this structure is a necessary component of a thriving democracy. At the same time, he conceives of the paradox of the public sphere, and of democracy, in a fundamentally different way, taking his recourse from Habermas. According to Emden, it consists in the fact that the constituent, legitimizing power of the public can manifest itself only in the shape of the constituted norms and institutions of the state and that, consequently, the public's opinion and influence becomes recognizable only in hindsight. At the basis of this paradox lies the constitutional paradox described by Hannah Arendt, Derrida and others, that in establishing a constitution, the constituent power (the public, or their representatives) can grant itself what is principally unlimited power only retrospectively and, at the same time, must curtail this power, so as not to destabilize the very constitution it has created. Thus, unlike Landgraf, Emden believes that the public actually possesses constituent power and is not merely a 'communication device' for an autonomous government's self-legitimization. At the same time, he also views this power as to a large extent shaped by the state. Emden even suggests that, according to Habermas' normative understanding of democracy, the state leaves limited room for the public to exercise its constituent power on its own terms. Yet, instead of calling for an insurgent democracy, like Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt and others, Emden maintains that, in order to return power to the public, a functioning democracy requires space for struggle, or *agon* (Wenman; Mouffe), between the government and the people.

The third section of the volume, 'Cultural and Theoretical Transformations II: The Aesthetic Potentials of Public Spheres', opens with

an essay by Juliane Rebentisch that reflects on the conditions that enable the conflictual and productive relationships between the people and the government, necessary for democracies, as described by Emden. In 'Mass – People – Multitude: A Reflection on the Source of Democratic Legitimacy', Rebentisch first explores how people can maintain their individuality and power of reflective judgement, which Habermas views as necessary for a functioning public sphere, by critiquing the notion that democracies face the threat of being ruled by a uniform, manipulable and irrational masses – thus fending off Herder's worries, as described by von Mücke. Rebentisch then defends Hardt and Negri's idea of the 'multitude' (of people) against the latter's call for absolute democracy, that is, a direct rule of the multitude. Rebentisch believes that Plato's and Nietzsche's classic critiques of the rule of the masses, which they both liken to theatre audiences, misunderstands the nature of theatre, and of aesthetic and political judgement. The very openness of the audience for new influences from the stages of theatre and politics does not, in Rebentisch's view, suggest their unlimited manipulability, but rather their ability to make 'free judgements' and to lead self-determined lives, in ways that also challenge the boundaries between public and private. The multiplicity of perspectives present in any people prevents their unification in a mass – people are a 'multitude'. However, these multiple viewpoints can never be represented as such: as soon as they are voiced in the arena of politics, they are inextricably bound up with sovereignty or the state – confirming Emden's analysis of the paradox of the public sphere. What prevents a democratic state from becoming resistant to unavoidable social changes and thus non-representative of the people and undemocratic are, in Rebentisch's view, not only the necessary differences and conflicts between the government and the public, but, crucially, the 'self-difference' of the people – their internal division into the multitude and its partial public representations that enable a public to oppose and transform both the government and itself.

Whereas Rebentisch regards the freedom of a theatre audience's aesthetic judgement as exemplary of the freedom of a political judgement, Christoph Menke presents a theory of how aesthetic freedom, understood as a 'force' [Kraft], can emerge in modern and postmodern societies, in the first place, in opposition to these societies' respective bourgeois and

consumerist ideologies. His essay 'A Different Taste: Neither Autonomy nor Mass Consumption' also seeks to correct accounts of contemporary societies as realizations of aesthetic categories developed in eighteenth-century Europe. According to Menke, the eighteenth-century bourgeois idea of an autonomous subject finds its expression in the social and aesthetic category of taste. In exercising her taste, the bourgeois individual allegedly shows her (paradoxical) ability to judge the objective world freely and subjectively, and to simultaneously recognize things in themselves, as they truly are. For that reason, the 'subject of aesthetic taste is the epitome of the bourgeois idea of autonomy' – if only in appearance. In reality, Menke argues, bourgeois taste is acquired through education and discipline and thus is neither subjective nor objective, but a reflection of society's ideology. In contemporary, post-disciplinary societies, taste seems to have become both more and less free: taste now manifests itself in the ability to constantly adapt to the aesthetics of ever-new consumer products. This adaptation cannot be taught, and everyone can, in theory, participate in it; in reality, it obeys the laws of capitalism. Thus, the postmodern subject is only free to follow the dictates of consumption. Yet, for Menke, this is no reason to despair, as he believes that taste contains the potential for its own subversion and for the realization of true freedom and objectivity: counter-taste, which he understands as a manifestation of the force and passion of aesthetic judgement.

In his essay 'Biopolitical Reflections: Cognitive, Aesthetic and Reflexive Mappings of Global Economies', Kam Shapiro confirms the reflective and self-critical potential of aesthetic judgement, yet he does not limit aesthetics to judgements of taste about aesthetic objects. Rather, he understands it, drawing on the etymological root of the word, as sensuous perception and affective reaction. Furthermore, while Menke advocates a counter-taste directed against current economic and cultural systems, Shapiro modifies Jameson's notion of 'cognitive mapping', exploring possibilities for reflexive 'mappings', of social processes shaping affects and sensibilities. Deviating from Jameson and following Lynch, the author treats mapping as an aesthetic practice that cannot capture the totality of forces shaping economic and cultural systems. The notion – or 'social metaphor' (Lüdemann) – of the 'map' helps Shapiro to illustrate what he is after: a partially intuitive,

partially reflective and critical grasp of the multifarious global political, economic and social relationships that characterize contemporary societies. His main examples – newspaper articles about the production, distribution and use of mobile phones and about the potential connections between the food industry, diet and voting behaviour – show the complexity and dizzying reflexivity of processes of ‘mapping’: we use our mobile phones or tablets to read about the evils of the communication device industry; or we may gobble popcorn while learning about the influence of fat and corn syrup on our politics. Rather than criticizing these recursive structures, as Shapiro suggests Jameson would, the author emphasizes not only their unavoidability, but (seeking support from Lippmann and Dewey) sees them as a chance: their dizzying effect makes us pause and allows us reflect on the complexity and aesthetic dimension of our social and public, in the sense of shared, imaginaries.

How and to what extent newspapers and novels can foster comprehensive and inclusive global public spheres and imaginaries that take into account not only the rational, but also the affective and aesthetic aspects of social discourse and interaction is being discussed in this book’s fourth and last section, ‘Three Case Studies: From Postcolonial to Global Literary Public Spheres’. In contrast to the previous European- and US-American-focused and largely theoretical chapters, the case studies explore these and other questions from the decentred perspectives of postcolonial Latin America and post-Zionist Israel, from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century.

In the opening essay of this section, ‘National Novels and the Emergence of the Public Sphere in Latin America’, Fernando Unzueta explains the role that literature and the public sphere played in the process of nation-building in the nineteenth century, after Latin American states had gained their independence from colonial rule. Whereas in most European states, literature and the arts gained autonomy from social institutions in the late eighteenth century, in Latin America ‘[b]asically the same group of author-politicians wrote the new countries’ constitutions, laws and histories, along with the patriotic poetry and national novels that would enshrine their heroes and other foundational myths.’ Authors like José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi and Blest Gana sought to represent, address