



THE PUBLIC SPHERE

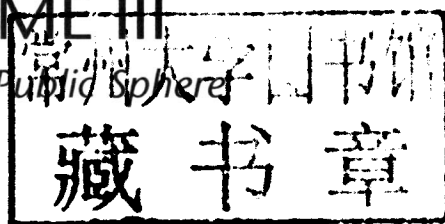
VOLUME I



THE PUBLIC SPHERE

VOLUME III

The Cultural Public Sphere



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THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Introduction: The Cultural Public Sphere

*Jostein Gripsrud, Hallvard Moe, Anders Molander and
Graham Murdock*

In Jürgen Habermas' classic account of the history of the public sphere, the political public sphere was preceded by what Habermas called the "literary" public sphere. This was a social space in which people came together to discuss literary publications of that day and age, typically in semi-private gatherings known as "salons". These were different from the bourgeois political public sphere not least in that they were more open to the participation of women, servants and other social groups – in fact they were as a rule organized by women. But the literary public sphere also differed from the political in terms of the subject matter of discussions. While the issues of the political public sphere would tend to revolve around the private domain of economic action, the discourses of the literary public sphere were rather tied to private life in the sphere of intimacy, i.e., the arenas of family and other close personal relations, where issues might arise from matters of the heart, from concerns about the upbringing of children or from a variety of (other) moral and existential issues.

The sphere of intimacy was and is a primary site of socialization, of the formation of personalities and subjectivities. It also was and is a primary site for encounters with and the practising of various arts: music, literature, visual arts. Since the introduction of broadcasting in the 1920s and 1930s, the home has also been a centre for the enjoyment of drama, via radio and television. More recently, the Internet has become a key provider of any kind of mediated cultural product for home consumption. Habermas said in his 1962 classic that the literary public sphere was a social space for "a rational-critical debate in the world of letters within which the subjectivity originating in the interiority of the conjugal family, by communicating with itself, attained clarity

about itself". The literary public sphere, now more adequately termed the *cultural* public sphere, is thus that part of the public sphere where one finds the institutions, organizations, practices and texts of arts, sports, religion and a variety of leisure activities – and public discussion thereof. From a political point of view, one could say a primary function is the construction and constant updating of subjects capable of meaningful participation in democratic processes and reflection on this fundamental task. This includes, for example, and not least, the development of empathic ability, i.e., the ability to put oneself in other people's places.

But the cultural public sphere is furthermore also a social space for the artistic treatment of any conceivable subject matter, including the immediately political ones. Music, literature, theatre, film and television all contribute to the shaping of general attitudes and dispositions as well as specific perceptions of issues such as immigration, gay rights, and social injustice of diverse kinds. The public sphere last but not least must in today's media-saturated world be seen as counting also any television show, including "reality" series and seemingly mindless chatter, and any sort of public entertainment in or outside the media. It is, in other words, a vast and manifold space, which is very under-researched from the point of view of public sphere functions.

This created particular problems when selecting the texts that go into this volume. Since political philosophy and political science more or less completely have forgotten about the cultural public sphere – Habermas himself is to some extent an exception that proves the rule – we had to rely on work within a variety of other disciplines. Such work has rarely been conducted with direct ties to public sphere theory. The texts selected here are thus largely examples of work that is relevant and useful for a theorization of the cultural public sphere, not necessarily work that in itself represents such theorization.

Section 1: Aesthetics, Ethics, Politics

Section one is divided into two separate parts. The first subsection is entitled *Discourses and Institutions*. The texts it contains are about various dimensions of the modern establishment of art as a distinct social institution or field. This took place in various more and less concrete social ways in Europe in the 18th century, linked to the establishment of a market for art where publishers, commercial galleries, etc., began to operate.

The subsection opens with Jürgen Habermas' classic, quite concrete, historical description and characterisation of the early cultural public sphere in Germany, Great Britain and France. Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is a key text in the philosophical constitution of art as a separate, in principle, autonomous institution, freed from instrumental demands whether from the church, the state or other powerful agents. The excerpt

included here is about the nature of aesthetic judgments, i.e., about the preconditions for critical public discourse about art, a key feature of the cultural public sphere. Kant shows that aesthetic judgments differ from purely subjective expressions of likes and dislikes (“I like English breakfast”) by implicitly referring to or presupposing a universal human faculty called the “play of the imagination” which operates in combination with the equally universal human faculty of reason in the appreciation of artworks. This is why people actually discuss the quality of art rather than just regard any judgment as totally subjective and random, as in popular expressions such as “everyone has his own taste” or “there is no disputing about taste”.

Almost two hundred years later, the autonomy of the institution of art was also a key element in Theodore W. Adorno’s understanding of the social role of art. His main point in the selected excerpt from his posthumous *Aesthetic Theory* is, however, that autonomy does not mean that art is totally a- or extra-social. While it has always been a *fait social*, he says, “in becoming bourgeois art its social aspect was made explicit”. Art is social not only because it is produced in a certain social context, and not only because its thematic material is of social origins: “Much more importantly, art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art”. The idea is that art through its form, by being different from everyday communication, by refusing to be “useful” in any straightforward way, represents by its mere existence a critique of a society in which everything is supposed to be useful, i.e., oriented toward some purpose outside of itself. Adorno’s thoughts are in line with an understanding that has been present to some extent in avant-garde art circles at least since the late 19th century.

But a much more common perspective is that art in fact influences its public and society at large through its “content” and “message”, and in the 18th century many were discussing such quite direct and concrete relations between art and the rest of the public sphere. Theatre could possibly be called the centrepiece of the bourgeois public sphere until about the end of the 19th century. But Jean Jacques Rousseau was, for example, not at all particularly enthusiastic about it. In the text selected here, he argues against the establishment of a public theatre in the city of Geneva. Rousseau’s view is that theatre, not least since it is a commercial enterprise which has to please the public, cannot expect to change anything important, especially not in a positive direction. In comedy it ridicules its subject matter, in tragedy it places it outside of the reach for ordinary human beings. It is far more likely that it strengthens not so virtuous tendencies.

Friedrich Schiller, on the other hand, himself a playwright, saw a great potential in the theatre for a variety of social and cultural purposes. To him, it is capable of enlightening and morally strengthening citizens in a variety of ways. “As surely as visual representation is more compelling than the mute word or cold exposition, it is equally certain that the theatre wields a

more profound, more lasting influence than either morality or laws". The theatre exposes vice and portrays virtue compellingly; it ridicules stupidity and other faults or shortcomings. However, by allowing identification even with criminals and wrongdoers, the theatre also contributes to increasing humaneness and tolerance. It generally allows for general popular enlightenment: "More correct notions, more refined precepts, purer emotions flow from here into the veins of the population; the clouds of barbarism and gloomy superstition disperse; night yields to triumphant light". And as an extra bonus, it builds national identity.

The second subsection – *Aesthetic Experience and Political Impact* – goes further into the question of whether art is of any importance when it comes to political developments. The hermeneutically oriented literary scholar Hans Robert Jauss was particularly preoccupied with the writing of literary history as a history of literature as *read*, by real people, not as a history of texts isolated from their social contexts. In the excerpt presented here, he employs the hermeneutic idea of reading as an encounter, not always harmonious, between the mental "horizon" of the reader and the literary horizon of a certain text at a certain time, in a certain social space. In this encounter lies the possibility of literary experience to influence socio-cultural and political developments. The reader's "horizon of expectations" when starting a new book is not only based on her or his previous reading, it is also based on extra-literary experiences, norms and convictions. Similarly, any literary text carries extra-literary ideas, values, etc., and so the encounter between a convincing text and a reader's "horizon" can change the reader's ways of thinking and acting.

One of the best-known instances of literature that really has had a political impact is Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The article selected here is a recently written introduction to a new edition of the novel which discusses both its impact on the issue of slavery in 19th-century USA and on more recent uses of the book in discussions among African-Americans about identity issues. Another, very different example of a narrative that caught people's attention and caused heated debates, is the 1970s US television drama series about the genocide on Jews during World War II, *Holocaust*. Sigfried Zelinski's article about its reception in Germany is a relatively early example of scholarly attempts to analyse and make sense of such phenomena in the public sphere.

Both *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Holocaust* may well be said to represent, in very different ways, the "macro genre" melodrama. Melodrama was originally a stage format with a blend of dialogue and music, developed for commercial theatre in Paris around the year 1800 by the playwright Gilbert Pixérécourt. Its construction as a morality play with very emotionally charged and engaging contrasts between good and evil strongly influenced both popular entertainment – including, eventually, Hollywood movies – and serious

literature. The perhaps best-known study of melodrama as an element in Western cultural history was published by the literary scholar Peter Brook in 1976 – *The Melodramatic Imagination*. But the first to formulate a similar view of melodrama and the ways in which it represents anti-feudal, bourgeois moral consciousness, was the film scholar Thomas Elsaesser in the essay included here. Melodrama, whether employed by Beecher Stowe, Ibsen or Hollywood directors such as Douglas Sirk has always been eminently suited for emotionally involving presentations of moral issues with political implications.

Bertolt Brecht, finally, respected and made use of melodramatic elements in his writing for the stage. But he also famously tried with his *Verfremdung* (de-familiarization or estrangement) effects to make the public reflect on why they were so emotionally engaged and what the implications of this engagement would mean outside of the theatre. He sought inspiration in sports for his rethinking of the art form and provocatively claimed his ideal theatre audience was to be like a man at a boxing match who smokes a cigar (smoking was forbidden in German theatres) while enjoying the events in the ring in a competent, detached, critical way.

Section 2: Publics and Markets

In the second section of this volume, a key theme is the relation between the development of the market for cultural goods on the one hand and the establishment of a public on the other. The first subsection is entitled *Publics and Readers*. It contains examples of how historical publics of a quite different nature have been described and theorized. The first is taken from Jürgen Habermas' 1962 classic and concerns the public sphere formed around literature in the 18th century. The more detailed empirical circumstances in England are described in the chapter "The reading public and the rise of the novel" from Ian Watt's classic study in the social history of literature, *The Rise of the Novel* (first published 1957) – the chapter was among Habermas' sources. In the third text in this section, film scholar Miriam Hansen portrays the formation of a working class, alternative public sphere around the new medium of film in the USA in the early 1920s where the public consisted to a considerable extent of immigrant workers. All three texts show how these public spheres came into being so to speak by way of new cultural markets, but their relationships with the dominant political public sphere were very different.

The second subsection is entitled *Perspectives on Media and the Modern Public*. The texts included here are all about the relations between the nature of commercial media and art forms on the one hand and the ideal of enlightened, critically reflective citizenry on the other. The toughest and also

classic critique of the culture industry was first formulated by T.W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, both central representatives of the so-called Frankfurt school, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (originally published 1947). They saw the cultural industry as a producer of formulaic, standardized texts that just like the assembly line work it was the leisure parallel to, served as a way to standardize people's minds and rid them of the imagination needed to envisage alternatives to the existing forms of social life. Their argument is largely repeated in a condensed form in the first text by Adorno included here. In a less-known article from the mid-1960s, *Free time*, however, Adorno actually concluded otherwise. An empirical study, conducted by the Frankfurt Institute itself, of how readers of weekly magazines related to the coverage of a royal wedding, showed that people generally had a double set of attitudes to it – at once playfully following it and critically judging it to be of little importance. Adorno appears almost relieved to conclude that maybe people's minds would not become “totalized” for the benefit of status quo after all.

Helen Hughes' little-known article from 1937 is then included here to indicate how a more curious and hence positive approach to the most commercial cultural forms and their publics was already developed and introduced to scholars in a key journal before World War II. On the other hand, we also include an important example of quite recent empirical research inspired by and orientated towards public sphere theory which ends up with results quite critical of a commercially dominated media system, Nick Couldry and Tim Markham's article on celebrity culture: In their study, there is no indication that an interest in popular celebrity journalism is somehow linked to a broader interest in public affairs. An active interest in a central genre in the commercial parts of today's cultural public sphere can in other words seem to imply a retreat from the political public sphere, not a way into it.

The central institution established in Western Europe to provide some counterweight to the commercial forces in the public sphere has been public service broadcasting. Therefore, we have included one of Paddy Scannell's many valuable contributions to the study of how this institution has become part of people's everyday lives, contributed significantly to the shaping of identities, and motivated social and political participation.

The section then ends with discussions of the relations between public sphere theory and originally British critical traditions in media and cultural studies. Jim McGuigan critiques much media and cultural research for either ignoring the role of affect and affective forms of communication in the public sphere – or uncritically celebrating whatever comes out from the cultural industries. McGuigan argues that a revival of Habermas' notion of the literary or cultural public sphere seems a promising tool in the amendment of both kinds of mistakes. Paul Jones in a sense continues this line of thinking, albeit differently. In an article he himself says “gestures towards a somewhat ambitious project as a contribution to further developing cultural sociology:

a reconstructive reconciliation between the ‘sociological’ legacies of Frankfurt critical theory and cultural studies”. In such a project, public sphere theory must play a key role, according to Jones.

Section 3: Identity, Identification and Imagination

The cultural public sphere plays three essential roles in facilitating deliberative engagement. It provides spaces in which we can discover, develop and test the social identities we wish to own. It encourages us to enter the lives of strangers, both real and imagined, and by walking in their shoes, to understand the forces and circumstances that have shaped their lives and views of the world. And, by confronting us with circumstances and positions that we have no direct experience of, it offers us opportunities to cultivate our capacities for empathy and argumentation

Several important contributions in this area could be mentioned even if not included in this volume for different reasons. For instance, Martha Nussbaum (1997) says a good society is one which grants its citizens full access to a range of “capabilities” that provide the essential preconditions that allow them to live in dignity and to realise their full potential. Some of these capabilities, like the ability to live into old age, are physical or material, but others are directly related to political participation, such as the abilities to engage in critical reflection on one’s own life and beliefs and to empathise with the situation of others. For Nussbaum, the task of cultivating these cultural capabilities falls to education and she draws on the tradition initiated by classical Greek philosophy to argue that training in moral reasoning and self reflection is the core of a liberal education since without the ability to think critically people may talk to each other but they cannot engage in the genuine deliberation on which democracy depends. In a different but related argument, Robert Goodin (2000) holds that deliberation takes place not only “externally” in face-to-face encounters, but also “internally” in the arguments that we stage in our heads as we confront and respond to counter positions. Encountering others who are imaginatively present, in novels, dramas, and other cultural forms, is, Goodin argues, central to this process. He offers the example of slave narratives, which he argues played a significant role in supporting the abolitionist cause but offering a way into understanding the multiple injuries of slavery’s denial of recognition and respect.

Cultural forms may not only illuminate the lives of others, they can also shed new light on our own experiences and beliefs. In the extract reprinted here Imelda Whelehan and Maroula Joannu, examine the key role played by the popular consciousness raising novels of the 1960s in opening a door to feminism in women’s lives, as readers reconsidered their own situations in a

flash of recognition. As Michael Hanson's examination of the relations between black music and black politics demonstrates, however, the links of popular cultural forms, social identities, and political mobilisation are often uncertain and unpredictable. The militant assertion of black identity in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s was accompanied by the formation of a new black aesthetic formulated by political activists and avant-garde artists, who sought to express the rising tide of Black Nationalism. But as Hanson argues, it was relatively unsuccessful at a popular level and it was left to the commercially oriented black soul and funk singers like James Brown and his iconic hit, "Say it Loud I'm Black and I'm Proud" to articulate black consciousness in everyday life

Both feminism and black emancipation are examples of social movements that privilege a particular identity as the basis for political mobilisation in pursuit of claims for the alteration of prevailing structures or inequality and injustice. In terms of scale and reach they are micro public spheres. In terms of their social bases and political projects they are subaltern and oppositional public spheres. Classical public sphere theory however, identifies the public sphere with the nation-state as the space where competing sectional claims are negotiated. In Benedict Anderson's influential formulation, nation-states can only operate effectively as political units, if the nation is imagined as an inclusive community of equal citizens. National media play a central role in this project by offering spaces in which individual participants are continually reminded that across the country, other people are simultaneously engaged in the same activity and sharing the same experiences and the same information. Anderson highlights the central role of a national newspaper press in constructing this sense of communality and shared fate, but an even stronger case can be made for national broadcasting, with its simultaneity of transmission and its celebration of iconic national events.

At the same time, broadcasting in the age of satellite relay also bombards us with images of suffering in far away places. Images of strangers being pulled from the rubble of earthquake zones, blown up by car bombs, swept away in floods, dying from starvation, confront us with pressing questions about our obligations beyond the nation state. For Luc Boltanski, these images and the debates that surround them, have contradictory potentials. They can fuel a politics of justice that roots the causes of suffering in a history of exploitation and domination, or they can support a politics of pity in which problems are alleviated on a temporary basis by charitable donations and official aid. Susan Moeller (1999) and others have argued that the almost unbroken parade of distant suffering can induce "compassion fatigue". According to this way of thinking, as one dramatic image succeeds another, the capacity for empathy becomes increasingly depleted. Birgitta Höijer has, however, in an article included here, shown that there is convincing empirical evidence that the "compassion fatigue" thesis should be discarded in its

simplest forms. In reality, the relations between audiences and media reporting on suffering is more nuanced, more complexly tied to presentational forms and contextual factors that invite further empirical exploration.

Although these representations address events in distant locations they are still overwhelmingly produced either by national news organisations or by media organisations that seek global reach but are still strongly tied to national political perspectives and agendas. This resilience of national frames is part of a wider set of questions surrounding the idea of transnational public spheres to which we will return to in Volume 4.

Section 4: Cultural Policy and the Public Sphere

The modern public sphere is to a considerable extent regulated in a variety of ways by the cultural policies of governments – anything from subsidies for the institutions of art or, say newspapers, to support for amateur activities in local communities; from public scholarships for arts education to the regulation of public service broadcasting; from the formulation of telecommunication laws to decisions about limitations on free speech. Not all of these decisions might formally be counted as *cultural* policies, but many or most will for instance be seen as belonging to the domain of ministries of culture and the media. The texts selected for this fourth and final section in this volume are thus about key questions concerning the nature of and consequences of cultural policy, historically as well as in the future.

Ronald Dworkin's article "Can a liberal state support art?" opens the section because it discusses the legitimacy of a key area of cultural policy in such a manner that quite general principles are formulated and elucidated: Can a liberal state, which should refrain from interfering in citizens' definition of and pursuit of "the good life", defend support for cultural forms that are considered valuable only by a part of the population? Dworkin argues that neither an economic nor what he calls a "lofty" argument is sustainable. What is a valid and solid reason for subsidies to cultural institutions such as museums, operas, etc., is that they maintain a rich cultural structure, which is in the well-considered interest of all citizens, irrespective of their conceptions of "the good life".

This view is in line with what the Norwegian commission on the freedom of speech in 1999 called the government's responsibility for the infrastructure of the public sphere. Jostein Gripsrud's article provides an historical overview of how cultural policies in Western Europe in the 20th century have served to accomplish this and related goals. A key ingredient is the institution of public service broadcasting. Nick Garnham argues this in a thoroughgoing way in the article "Media and the public sphere", where he uses Habermas' work on the public sphere to analyse the role of public service broadcasting in a

situation where commercial media are on the offensive. Finally, Graham Murdock interprets the challenges to the democratic functions of the public sphere posed by the digitisation of all media and the central role of the Internet in a digital public sphere – and suggests an approach and some contours of a policy that might both enrich our common culture and improve democracy. And thus improve our lives.

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