

## Chapter 32

# Reflections on the Public Realm<sup>1</sup>

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What I would like to lay out is several ways in which in the last century concepts of public life have changed and now need to change again, including my own concepts of the public realm. At the time of the French Revolution when political philosophers used the word public they tended to try to get hold of what it meant for a society to shift from court-based power to urban power, from court to city. And “le publique” would no longer be a public that referred to the workings of royal power but was instead something that was self-constituting. Probably the most significant moves made to understand that shift in political philosophy were made by Kant and Hegel in terms of equating the public with the impersonal. And the problematic, for Hegel in particular, was “how could an impersonal realm be self-constituting?”

Hegel’s answer to this dominated most of nineteenth-century thinking about the public realm. He tried to give an account of the self-constituting impersonal public by making an equation between the impersonal and the rational. Basically what it meant was that the public realm was a realm of political action bordering on state power and the citizen’s participation was in the realm of the state rather than civil society. That is, he made a distinction between the public and the civil, where civil society is the realm of partial interests. It is also the realm of face-to-face associations which, Hegel argued, are inherently irrational because they lack the properties of having a universalizable law. Civil society is one of fractures and partialities. And that equation of the impersonal to the rational in terms of laws which apply to everyone was not a useful way of trying to understand the public realm from the nineteenth century – it permeates Mill, it permeates Marx. It makes a separation between the public and civil society.

### **Simmel’s Mask of Rationality**

In our century the story I want to begin to pick up is the way in which in thinking about the public realm this separation of the public and the civil was eroded. We owe this in particular to Simmel 90 years ago both in his *Philosophy of Money* and various Berlin lectures, and the one we all know (and his earliest), *The Metropolis*

*and Mental life.* What Simmel tried to do was to drag the issue of impersonal rationality back into civil society, and specifically to the city, as the fundamental institution of civil society. And you may remember the peculiar way this occurs. Looking around the Berlin of his time what Simmel observed in others, and certainly felt in himself, was the fact that this enormous, dense city provoked in people at the bottom level a sense of psychic overstimulation. At the physical level people living in the city were threatened with a kind of chaos of multiple stimulations. Nobody, he said, could live as an animal in the city, meaning by that that no one could live by his or her senses in the city. In order to deal with this psychic overstimulation, the intensity of urban life he observed in Berlin at that time, Simmel formulated the notion of the mask of rationality. That is, he redefined the issue of rationality not as a question of law, but as the kind of qualities of behavior which would lead people to be able to manage their physical sense impressions. What he means by “rational” is rather neutral exchanges between people in a state of equilibrium among strangers.

Simmel argued that the impulse to trade using money for instance was not at the heart of urban life – something that had to do with the accumulation of profit, but had to do with a way of balancing out relations between strangers in public so that they did not have to deal with each other face-to-face emotionally and so on. Money and all kinds of rational trades based on money stood for Simmel as a medium for ironing out this terrible chaos of stimulation in the city. He looked at money as a psychological transaction rather than as an economic one, which seems very bizarre to us now. But the notion more largely with Simmel is that when people are faced with the condition of density and diversity they have to take refuge from it, they cannot live in it. And they take refuge from it by forms of impersonal relations in which the players know the value of what they are doing (as it were), in which there is very little room for interpretation and in which the relations are equilibrated. So that people for instance will see on the street somebody who has had a heart attack and they will know to walk around that person rather than to try to ask the person what has happened. It is that kind of notion of indifference as a defense mechanism that Simmel argued had a rationality to it, which is the rationality of equilibrating impersonal exchange.

On the positive side what Simmel did was to show that rationality was a social construct in everyday life and that that begins to distinguish a man of our time rather than a man of Hegel’s time. That rationality is a reaction to something else – it is a social construction. It is not a property of state law – urban rationality as in Hegel – nor even, as in Weber, is rationality a property of civic action. It is something that is rooted in the inability of people to live in cities openly as animals. The negative of this Simmelian notion of the mask of rationality is that information is exchanged in this way but communication is lowered, particularly communication that transcends self-interest as well as communication of an emotional sort. The way in which you create an impersonal public realm is by lowering, as it were, the amount of information given. What this mask does is restrict the amount that people can know about you. It is reduced to information that can be codified and exchanged like money.

Importantly what is missing in this notion of the urban mask is that people never get beyond self-representations to each other. By that I mean that when Simmel looked on the streets of Berlin, what he saw his fellow urbanites doing in public was

identifying themselves to others in such a way that the others would know that they were not going to be invaded. For example, people would never come up to a stranger and begin talking in a wild way or without introducing why they were saying what they were saying. The notion would be that in the public realm you would always identify yourself in such a way that the anxiety about the other was damped down by giving them clues about who you are. Probably the most brilliant of all Simmel's insights in this regard was his notion that this kind of city rationality would be more effective if it operated by the eye than if by the mouth. That is, that this is a visual order rather than an oral one. You can create that sense of exchange on the street more easily if you do not speak but take clues from each other about how to look. So it is a privileging of the visual over the verbal in the name of this peculiar thing that he called urban rationality that I am calling the mask of rationality. And that is how, in my reading of Simmel, what we think of as the modern problem of public order, of the public realm, takes shape.

What Simmel gave to us as urbanists was a notion of impersonal life as being caught between the bodily experience which was unmanageable, and a kind of self-repression through rationality which gradually constricted the urban realm so that it was a realm of neutral information rather than full self-exposure which operated by more visual than verbal cues. To give you just a practical idea of what he meant by the notion of strangers meeting on the street: they know what to do to pass each other. They know how to manage their eyes so that they do not stare into each other. All of these are codes for managing the insanity of overstimulation, an irrational that is their exchange relationship.

### **Getting Beyond the Mask of Rationality: Notions of the Public for Arendt and Habermas**

So there, in my view, is where our problem in thinking about what is the public realm began – with this very particular theory. The problem in the twentieth century that theorists of the public realm have had to deal with is not the first or positive part of Simmel's achievement – that is the notion that rationality is an essential construct – but the second or more negative part of this theory, which is that rationality in this form is repressive. It is in general a problem that appears in Freud for instance, and it appears in all the permutations of negative dialectics that inform the Frankfurt School. For urbanists it has inspired two very different responses particularly after the Second World War. One of them is a trajectory that is embodied in the writings of Hannah Arendt and Habermas. The other is a trajectory that is much more social-scientific embodied in the writings of people like Erving Goffman, Clifford Geertz, and some of my own writing. I would like to give you a brief account of how each of these two schools have tried to deal with Simmel's negative – that is the problem of the public realm being a realm of repression.

Arendt interestingly was a very close reader of Simmel, and what she tried to argue was that the public realm need not fall into this kind of Simmelian self-repression. What it meant for Arendt is that there is a kind of space, a metaphoric space in society, which transcends self-interest. Arendt went back to some of the Hegelian notions about the refusal of civil society as the location for the public realm. Particularly she refused the notion that labor constitutes anything that we can

call public life. The argument that is made in *The Human Condition* is that there has to be a space in society where people no longer have to speak in the name of their labor, most of which she found to be labor which was oppressed, where they were free from representing themselves as economic animals and where they were free from fear of speaking. When that could happen and people were freed from the fear of speaking, they entered the public realm. That is, she reversed the Simmelian notion of sight and speech and argued that the public realm was a realm in which we had to privilege speech over sight.

That is what this idealized agora and the idealization of Athens itself is about in Arendt. It is a space that is no longer a visual space but a place for speech. The notion of it is quite humane in a way, in that if what we have is spaces of self-representation à la Simmel, then of course in a capitalist society the people who have the most power will be the ones who colonize the public realm. It is an idealization of entering and leaving civil society in order to empower everybody with speech, and this is why Arendt insists that the public realm has to be founded above all on equal rights of discourse. It is also why the whole constitutionalism in Arendt is founded on the notion of free speech. That is the public realm.

In some ways the Habermasian picture of the public realm is richer than Arendt's because he does not want to particularly exclude questions of labor and economy from the public. The whole trajectory of Habermas's project is to try to find a way to bring that aspect of civil society back into the discussion of what is the public realm, and also to look at impersonality in a slightly different way from Arendt. For Arendt the impersonal meant, as it does to John Rawls, the fact that you cannot identify how rich somebody is and what they do for a living. In other words, there is a veil of ignorance which is cast over the conventional means of categorizing people in the public realm. For Habermas the impersonal means much more that the conditions of talking about interest, fully revealing oneself to other people, gradually means that people begin talking about what interest is, rather than about defending their own interest. There is a kind of idealization in Habermas's work, that the more interactive one's discourse becomes the more the very process of speaking to others begins to work against the simple representation of self-interest. This is what the theory of communicative interaction is all about in regard to the public realm, which then begins to make people separate or objectify the nature of interests from their own interests. Thus public space for Habermas is a realm which forces people to discuss what the objects of interests are, rather than simply say, "I am your employer – do as I say." That is why he put so much emphasis on newspapers, for instance, and letters to the editor in newspapers – these kinds of things are terribly important to him. It is why when the Internet first began Habermas was wildly excited about it because this looked to him like a public realm of the sort that fits this theory of communicative interaction. What he most liked about it was that people could talk to each other in different ways, like the possibility of altering their own identities, and so on. There was some capacity not simply to be classified by speech. But the assumption that is rather different from Arendt's is that the more diversity there is in the public realm, and the more there is a mixture of interests, the more objectifying the process of discourse is going to be. Thus it is a way of recovering the notion of rationality in another form, where in this case, diversity leads to rationality via its objectification of interests.

Now what I would say about both Hannah Arendt and Habermas is that when they use the term “public realm” what they are talking about is an activity, which is first, an activity that is clarified by communication with strangers, and second, it is purified of self-interest through the effort to speak and hear clearly. That may seem like a nice nostrum but what it means, and I think the edge that it has, is that it supposes that discourse among strangers is more complete and objective than discourse among intimates. That is, you do not think as rationally and you do not speak as rationally to those whom you love as to those who are strangers to you – that is the cutting edge of this. This is why Hannah Arendt rejected psychoanalysis and why she thought that politics and psychology could never be reconciled, because the moment that one speaks to a stranger with whom one has no affective relationship is the moment in which one can also leave oneself. So that it is a privileging of the public over the private. That is how Simmel’s negative is dealt with, by arguing that impersonality is a fuller system of meaning than private life. The public person is fuller, more rational, more complete, and more liberated than the person in private life.

### **Putting Aside the Mask of Rationality: Performativity in the Public Realm**

The second response to Simmel – in thinking about the public realm – has a very old name to it; it could be called a school of *teatro mundi* or theater of the world and, as I said, it is represented variously in my writings and in those of Erving Goffman and Clifford Geertz. What it tries to do on the one hand is cut free discussions of public life from questions about rationality – to push this whole issue to the side. Instead it tries to focus on the problem of how strangers express themselves to each other, that is, how they communicate emotionally with people whom they do not know. It is the parallel problem between the way in which an actor or an actress comes on stage and moves strangers to believe he or she is about to die of sickness or is just about to murder his or her mother or whatever, and enacts the problems which people face in everyday life – of making themselves credible speakers to people they do not know. This is not about communicating information but about communicating something that, we might say, has a rhetorical force, but even more that there is a credible scene in which what is spoken is something that the other has to take in and respond to.

One way to think about this – and that is what Goffman’s theory of role playing, and my, or Geertz’s, notions of theatricality are about – is the idea that other people can act information so that it becomes believable, moving and arousing to other people. To give you a specific example of this, you will remember something many people quote who have read Habermas’s work on the public sphere – the discussion of newspapers and coffee houses. What he focuses on is the fact that in these newspapers which are read in coffee houses for the first time during the eighteenth century you have cheap mass-produced instruments of communication among strangers. A different way of looking at that as a public activity is the kind of thing I tried to do in *The Fall of Public Man*, which is to understand what happened when people discussed with each other what they read in the papers – how did they go about doing that? And what I found is that these places – these coffee houses – are the origins of our modern insurance companies. For example, Lloyds of London

began as a coffee house and maybe it has stayed that way. For information to be freely exchanged and for people to believe what they heard, even though they might be of very different classes – you had a kind of theatrical activity – which was that people spoke in these coffee houses in imitation of what they heard in theatres, so that they had powers of eloquence which they literally borrowed from theatrical speech as a way to convince others that the information they were giving them was credible. It is a realm in which there is the privileging of speech over the eye – and of course where this is between somebody who is a tailor and somebody who might be a baronet looking at each other, then they obviously know that they are not in the same realm. But by using this highly artificial language that is similar, this highly theatrical language, they have a kind of common speech which creates an “as if” as though they are in the same realm – and this is literally a suspension of disbelief.

This kind of analysis of role playing in public is what this other tradition of public life is about. In terms of cities this kind of approach to the public domain is much more tied to the material conditions of daily life, which we can understand if we think back to Renaissance practitioners of *teatro mundi* like Inigo Jones, for instance, in London. Inigo Jones would try out architectural designs on stage that he thought about in terms of “is this a space in which people can move around in believably, and does it work as an architectural space?” This long tradition of thinking about whether the kinds of spaces in which people are noticing others who are different and are reacting to them, which has strangers paying attention to them and so on, is part of what this tradition of *teatro mundi* has been about. So it is a much more visually orientated way of thinking about the public realm à la Habermas and Arendt.

In my own work I argue that the spaces which are most possessed of these powers – provoking role playing and this *teatro* of public life – are multifunctional rather than monofunctional – an argument I made in *The Uses of Disorder*. That is to say, that disorder in public is something that provokes the impulse, the freedom to be disorderly in public, and provokes more vivacity in public spaces. Thus the privatization of space occurs by making it monofunctional. What I have argued is that there is a very complex relation between convention and disorder of public space and that the more that that play between the disorder of public spaces and conventional behavior can be exploited and encouraged, the more public life is enhanced.

The second thing I would say about this tradition of *teatro mundi* is that by design it is more attuned to engage with the question of difference and make the question of difference concrete – certainly more than Arendt, and I also think, Habermas have done. In Arendt, the whole notion of the public realm is one that transcends difference by design. That is to say when you enter into the public, you take off the particularities of being black, a woman, or poor and you enter into the community of equalization of speech in which self-reference is seen as a violation of the norms of politics. Habermas’s notion is that with fuller communicative interaction the differences do not go away, but they do not matter to people, so it does not have that Arendtian fiction of the agora. For Habermas, if you have a vivid public realm, eventually if there is enough interaction, a poor black will feel himself/herself entitled to speak openly to a rich white. So for Habermas the whole politics of the public realm is to make that kind of entitlement, that kind of growing together so that one thinks about what race is or class is without self-reference, occur more and more.

By contrast other writers, and in this regard I think of Erving Goffman and Clifford Geertz most, tried to emphasize the ways in which the conventions of behavior with others in public depend on people dealing with and acknowledging the differences of others in terms of age, race, class, sexual preference, and so on. In this case, the notion is that people are self-dramatizing with respect to their differences in the public realm. That is what they mean by public behavior – it is a kind of self-dramatization which they think is good.

I have taken a rather different tack on this question of difference in public life. What I have been interested in with regard to this question of difference is how people portray themselves to others not, as it were, in the centers of places, but at the edges. This is why my analysis is focused not on the hub of communities, on central business districts or places like Trafalgar Square but on all those seemingly dead edges where one community, one difference, meets another. And as a practicing urbanist what I try to do is bring those spaces where the differences touch alive. That is, for me, if you take the dramatization of difference seriously, the place where it really matters – not where you meet a whole lot of people like yourself but where you are reluctant to meet those who are *unlike* you. The deficit about this *teatro mundi* is that it has contained within it nevertheless a certain kind of political indifference, for example as in the work of Albert Speer. What Goffman, Geertz, and I have failed to address in our work is what a liberated politics is – what is a liberating theatricality in the city and what is a repressive one?

I lay all this out to say that this, I think, represents so far how a modern conception can resume a public realm that is composed of people looking on each other, who are strangers and who are impersonal. What is interesting is the fact that the seemingly self-repressive qualities of the public realm that Simmel perceived, and that Freud perceived in another way, (or that Horkheimer and Adorno perceived after the Second World War) took two very different paths. One of them, focused on *the public realm as an action* (the Arendtian, Habermasian approach), tended to try and look to recover once again the Hegelian notion (but in very different ways) that the public and civil society were at least separable. And the other – the *teatro mundi* way of looking at the public realm – focused on civil society to be sure, but tried to throw out the whole preoccupation with rationality and impersonality which marked most of the century, and tried to discover a kind of self-dramatization as a principle of creating a public life. My own approach was to focus on territory – on the issue of boundaries rather than centers and to focus on the peculiar balance between theatricality and disorder in public space itself.

Now we have to take a different tack I think because a century after Simmel two rather different questions about conceiving the public realm have come into being. As discussed earlier, for Simmel the problem was psychic overstimulation, yet it would be very difficult to argue that most modern cities are psychically overstimulating places. In contrast the problem is precisely creating the stimulus of being in the public. And it seems to me that this is going to require a whole different set of thoughts about what the logic is of getting people together who are stimulated by the presence of others, because of the very practical things like the fact that automobiles are probably the ultimate piece of technology for isolating people from the stimulation of difference – you die if you get too stimulated by it. Similarly the cities we know now tend to be much more outward than inward – differences tend to separate

and they are not edges between communities which can be made interactive because there is too much space between them.

A whole range of questions arise as to how to create a public realm in which people will tolerate being stimulated by the other, and this is not just a matter of capitalist domination. The destimulation of the city is something that has also tapped that Simmelian fear of being overwhelmed by difference and there is a confluence of causes between power and desire. So that issue of stimulation, rather than overstimulation, needs to be faced. And the other issue for a new public realm does not concern politics alone, as much as political economy, and the need to focus not on global markets but on the transformation of bureaucracy that has occurred in the last 20 years – both in work and the welfare state, because that transformation of bureaucracy is intensely privatizing and individualizing. The body politic has been rent asunder by the way in which people work, by the relationship to their needs and political economy. There is a long discussion we could have about what these changes in the bureaucracy of work and the changing bureaucracy of the welfare state mean, but the essential point is that the effect on individuals is intensely privatizing. So in thinking about a strong public realm the question is to think about how to countervail this, and the question for us as urbanists is, can powers of place of the public do that work? That is, is place a really meaningful element in countervailing the individualizing effects of these great changes in the work and welfare bureaucracies? For me the issue that now faces us is how this impersonal realm of the public can be conceived in collective terms rather than in terms of issues of rationality. That is ultimately a more political project and also a more open-ended one.

This is a summary of the main currents in thinking about public life in this and the last century. Maybe now the things that have occupied me and earlier generations have come to an end and something else more addressed to the conditions of contemporary capitalism has to grow up as a sense of what public life is.

## NOTE

1. This lecture was delivered as a plenary session of the “Cities at the Millennium” conference in London at RIBA, December 1998.