

CONVENING PUBLICS
The parasitical spaces of public action

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1). The value of publicness

This chapter investigates how and why the topic of the public sphere, or publicness more broadly, is important for the ways in which political geography conceptualises democratic politics. Democracy is a system for making binding, legitimate decisions, one which puts a premium on the principle of ‘rule by the many’. The idea of the public sphere needs to be approached with this understanding of democracy in mind: “Democratic theory focuses on accountability and responsiveness in the decision-making process; theories of the public sphere focus on the role of public communication in facilitating or hindering this process” (Ferree *et al* 2002, 289). It is important to emphasise this relationship between decision-making and communication in understandings of democratic publicness. In geography, some fields of research – electoral geography, in particular – focus upon the decision-mechanisms through which preferences are translated into clear expressions of the public will. But elections are moments of closure, and they communicate remarkably little information about what people actually think, feel, and favour. Geographical research heavily inflected by cultural theory tends to think that these sorts of occasions are poor approximations of genuine democratic politics. They give greater weight to the value of non-closure, on-going contestation, and the free play of difference in their accounts of what democracy is all about. In so far as it considers the problem of binding public authority at all, this line of work tends to fall back on a vocabulary of ideological legitimation and coercion. But this has the unfortunate side-effect of encouraging the idea that publicness is a value in and of itself, rather than being a means to an end as well.

This chapter tries to steer a path between the over-emphasis on either the intrinsic or instrumental value of publicness to democratic politics. Section 2 sets out just what is at stake in thinking about the value of publicness for democratic theory, a value that turns on a set of paradoxes between autonomy and obligation, liberty and collective action; Section 3 considers whether there is a distinctive geography implied by the centrality of publicness to democratic theory and practice, and Section 4 argues for a clear distinction between public action and public spaces; Section 5 then outlines an understanding of the parasitical qualities of democratic publicness; Section 6 considers some questions of the style of public action.

2). What kinds of things are public(s)?

Just what is meant by ‘public’ in discussions about the public sphere, public space, the public realm, or public life? To focus our thoughts on this question of definition, let’s start by asking two questions which might help us clarify what is at stake in these debates.

Firstly, we can ask “what kind of thing is a *public*”? One way of thinking about publicness is to assume that the word public is a noun. Public can be the name for a certain type of collective *subject*: ‘the public’. In this sense, ‘the public’ can appear as roughly synonymous with other entities, such as ‘the people’, ‘the community’, or even ‘the nation’. The public, then, can be thought of as all the members of a given society, perhaps specifically all of

these people gathered together over issues of shared concern. But just what would these issues of shared concern be?

This leads to our second question, which implies a different way of thinking about publicness: “what kind of *thing* is public?” This suggests that publicness is a characteristic that is ascribed to some types of phenomena, but not to others. We might think that decisions about the level of general taxation are a matter of public concern, and so might be the decision over where to locate a new airport. But it would be a surprise if many people thought that my decision to collect stamps rather than butterflies is a public matter. The latter might reasonably seem to be none of anyone else’s business. A large part of what is at stake in deciding just what sort of thing is a public matter has to do with deciding what should remain personal or private matters.

So ‘public’ might be used to refer to the *subject* of concerted action, or it might be used to refer to the *object* of concerted action. In both respects, the value ascribed to publicness is closely related to the principle that some issues gain their importance both from affecting and being addressed by people acting together in concert.

But there is another sense of ‘public’, one which refers to the idea that some things are carried out in the open and are open to participation by all comers. When we combine the first two senses of public with this third idea, then we begin to get at why publicness might be so important to theories of democracy. In political theory, the value of democracy and democratic citizenship is closely related to the idea of “public reason”. This is the idea that democracy acquires its value not just by embodying the preferences or will of the many, but also by involving free and open discussion and debates about the means and ends to which public power, such as that of the state, should be deployed. The American political philosopher John Rawls (1993, 213) argues that public reason “is public in three ways”. Firstly, “as the reasons of citizens as such, it is the reason of the public”. This is the first sense of ‘public’ noted above, the idea that the public is a collective subject, composed of citizens engaged in debate and deliberation. Secondly, “its subject is the good of the public and matters of fundamental justice”. This is the second sense of ‘public’ above, the idea that some objects of concern are public by virtue of mattering to everyone and affecting the basic structure of a polity. And thirdly, “its nature and content is public”. By suggesting that public reason is public by virtue of being conducted in the open, Rawls adds in the third aspect to the understanding of publicness noted already. Public refers not just to a *subject* of action, and not just to an *object* of action, but it also refers to a particular *medium* through which action should be conducted. This chapter argues that, in fundamental respects, this dimension of publicity, which relates to the medium of action, plays a constitutive role in shaping *who* counts as a public and *what* counts as a public matter. In developing this argument, I will also argue for a reorientation of the spatial imagination that geographers should bring to the normative analysis of democratic publicness.

What does it mean to suggest that the subjects and objects of publicness are constituted through the mediums of publicity? Well, just look at the ways in which ‘the public’ makes its appearance felt. People speak about what ‘the

public' thinks, feels, and favours, and when they do so, they tend to have recourse to the results of elections, or statistical surveys, or opinion polls. These technical mediums are the ways in which the voice of the public is often expressed. For example, we might think of a public as something which is made through mediums like public consultation procedures (Davies 2006, Barnes *et al* 2003) or public opinion polls (Herbst 1996, Fishkin 1995). One might even say that publics are 'assembled', in the sense that they are put together through various combinations of devices, procedures, things, and mediums (Latour and Wiebel 2005).

This conceptualisation of the meaning of 'the public' may appear to be a little dangerous. It invites the suspicion that any given expression of public will, opinion, or preference, is just a fabrication made in the interests of those who claim to speak in the publics' name or interests, and that behind these fabrications there lay the genuine, untapped will of the people. Some of the worst excesses of our times have been made in the name of populist movements who claim to embody the singular will of a unified people against the inauthentic, divisive impostures of parties, experts, elites, or other representatives. So, one reason to embrace the mediated appearance of publics is to cultivate a healthy scepticism about any given claim to embody 'the' public will or interest.

Part of the vital value of publicness to the life of democracy lies in his double relationship: a public seems to be a singular collective subject, but by the mode of its appearance, any public also seems divided against itself, thereby opening a space in which claims and counter claims as to its true opinions, feelings, wishes, and interests can proliferate. We should embrace the resulting sense that 'the public' could never actually appear in its own right, without some sort of prosthetic support. The philosopher Jacques Derrida (1992, 88) argues that 'the public' can show no sign of life "without a certain medium". He argues that 'the public' does not, cannot, and should be expected to speak in its own voice, in the first person. Rather, it is only cited and *spoken for*.

The fabricated qualities of the public are at the core of debates in democratic theory. Some strands of contemporary liberal political theory often worry that no procedure for arriving at the public will – voting procedures being the model – can actually fairly and rationally embody all the preferences of the governed (Dummett 1984). There is a worry that any attempt to arrive at such decision mechanisms threatens to impose a tyrannical form of rule over autonomous individuals. Although not all liberal theory invests unqualified trust in the market, there is a strain of liberalism that is led towards arguing that the ideal expression of the general, public will is the 'spontaneous order' created by a perfectly competitive market. On this interpretation, the link between democracy and public communication is based on a thin model of information-processing, rather than in terms of the exposure of opinions to argument, challenge and justification.

This interpretation puts a premium on respecting the privately-formed, autonomous preferences of individuals from undue interference. But it is subject to all sorts of objections. Primary amongst them is that it supposes that

autonomy is a wholly private value. But it is quite plausible to suppose that people's preferences might just be accommodations with existing patterns of inequality. Preferences, in short, are adaptive. Jon Elster (1983) calls this the "sour grapes" phenomenon, to capture the idea that people adjust their preferences, expectations, and wants in relation to the availability or unavailability of different goods. People deprived of some options, because of lack of resources or information, may end up not wanting the things they have been deprived of. Their continuing deprivation cannot therefore be justified on the grounds that they express no preference for these things, since the absence of the preference is the result of the initial deprivation: "why should the choice between feasible options only take account of individual preferences if people tend to adjust their aspirations to their possibilities?" (Elster 1983, 109).

To suppose that democracy simply means respecting the expression of private preferences formed in such circumstances is to risk condoning social injustice in the name of claiming to do justice to autonomy. So-called 'deliberative democrats' argue that it is a category error to suppose that democracy is simply an aggregative mechanism through which the 'pre-political' preferences of individuals are added up to establish the general will (Sunstein 1997). For them, only a process of preference formation which takes place in the open, through the medium of public debate and discussion, approaches democratic legitimacy, because this exposes people to more information and forces them to take account of the perspectives of others. From this perspective, then, autonomous preferences are only normatively valid if they are formed in the context of a robust and diverse process of public deliberation. Here, then, we have a much stronger, thicker notion of deliberative public communication as quite basic to the functioning of democracy.

These two positions can be called a broadly 'liberal' one, and a broadly 'republican' one. They represent two different, but intertwined positions on the qualities of public expression in the long tradition of democratic theory (Elster 1997). On the one hand, there is a market model, one that privileges a liberal understanding of the primacy of individual rational choices aggregated through markets. On the other hand, there is a forum model, one which is associated with traditions of civic republican thought, which privileges the value of collective deliberation as a means of arriving at expressions of the general will. From the first perspective, the main task is to find the best mechanisms for discovering what the raw data of public opinion actually is. Elections might be thought of as one way of doing this, scientific polling another, or perhaps referenda. From the second perspective, the challenge is to find the best, most just and justifiable mechanism not for *discovering* but for *forming* and *making* public opinion. This perspective presumes that only opinions and preferences arrived at *in* public, through the medium of public debate, should be ascribed the value of being 'democratic'.

I am broadly sympathetic to the latter position. But we shouldn't dismiss the liberal perspective too quickly. It does address a key dilemma in democratic theory. There is something quite compelling about the liberal respect for the autonomy of private preferences. It is guided by an admirable respect for the

pluralism of opinions and preferences, as well as by a deep suspicion of the idea that some people should decide that some other people don't know what is in their own best interest (see Goodin 2002). The republican image of transformative public deliberation seems compelling because it provides a picture of self-less, concerned citizens able to act in the general interest. It is grounded in a telling critique of how the liberal position can inadvertently lead to the reproduction of serious injustice and the diminution of real autonomy. But it is not without its own problems. In particular, the republican position can underestimate the genuine importance of privacy as a condition for the sorts of virtuous citizenship it speaks on behalf of (Squires 1994).

Both the liberal and the republican viewpoints agree that preferences should be the basis of political life, but then we reach a conundrum: is it justifiable to intervene to reshape people's preferences and tastes, in light of the 'sour grapes' phenomenon for example, without risking doing serious harm? A classical liberal position would err on the side of caution here, worrying about the intrusive potential of concerted efforts at forming preferences. However, across a wide spectrum of contemporary political thought, a pressing concern is whether efforts to shape tastes and preferences are legitimate: How can they be justified? What means they should use? Who should pursue these efforts? And to what areas they should be limited? This is a particularly acute problem for traditions of left-wing political thought, which have in the past often paid scant attention to the dilemmas of squaring collective action and individual autonomy that liberalism has to be given credit for keeping at the forefront of democratic theory. As this chapter develops its argument about publicness, spatiality, and democracy, it is therefore worth keeping in mind what Claus Offe (1997, 89) identifies as the key challenge for progressive political thought today:

“to develop arguments which, while respecting individual freedom of preference formation and the pursuit of preferences in the realms of markets, politics, and private life, also provide justification for a wide range of taste-shaping and taste-discriminating interventions by democratic governments which are seen as valuable for themselves or instrumentally indispensable for the sake of maintaining and furthering such collective values of solidarity, welfare, autonomy, deliberation, and democracy itself”.

As we will see, the value of publicness to democracy derives in large part from the ways in which it provides mediums for working through this challenge in ways that respect the equally compelling imperatives of facilitating concerted, legitimate action around issues of shared public concern, while respecting the pluralism of citizens' values, opinions, and life projects.

There is an irreducible tension between finding ways of making collective decisions which are broadly legitimate in the eyes of citizens and which accord to reasonable principles of justice, while also ensuring that people are allowed to carry on as much of their lives as is deemed appropriate without undue interference, obstruction, or approbation from sources of authority. It should be noted that these two imperatives are not two poles of a continuum; nor do they serve as the outer limits to one another; nor are they simply in

contradiction. They are, in fact, internally related. The democratic legitimacy of collective decisions is supposed, in principle, to depend on the freely given consent of citizens, and yet one purpose of collective rule is to cultivate the flourishing of autonomous, active citizens whose consent is, indeed, freely given or withheld rather than coerced.

3). Setting the public sphere adrift

We have established the idea that, one way or another, publics are constituted in part through the mediums of their representation. The next question we need to ask is whether there is any special relationship between the values ascribed to ‘the public’ or ‘publicness’ and particular spaces, places, or geographical configurations.

To put my own cards on the table straight away, I think we should follow Derrida, who doesn’t think that the public does have any proper place: “Does it take *place*? Where is it given to be seen, and *as such*? The wandering of its proper body is also the ubiquity of a specter” (Derrida 1992, 87). But this image of the ghostly quality of the public, cut adrift from any proper location, runs against the grain of most research in geography. Geographers tend to argue that there are, in fact, some places, spaces, and spatial configurations that are peculiarly valuable as scenes of genuine public life and authentic public expression. I want to argue against this claim, on the grounds that it fails to register the intrinsic value of publicness in itself, as well as the instrumental value of publicness to the functioning of democratic rule, and is therefore poorly suited to thinking creatively about the spatialities through which equally compelling imperatives can be played off against each other.

One place to start investigating the possible relationships between publicness and geography is in the rather arcane tradition of legal reasoning known as Public Forum doctrine. Public Forum doctrine is an important aspect of First Amendment jurisprudence in the United States of America, one means through which the constitutional legal system decides upon what counts as ‘speech’ that is worthy of protection from unwarranted government regulation. Public Forum doctrine is interesting because it defines some types of expression as protected ‘speech’ by virtue of where they are uttered. Some spaces, according to this tradition, are defined as ‘public’ because they are traditionally defined as offering unfettered opportunities to speakers for addressing other people on matters of broad, general concern. In guaranteeing that some spaces should remain open to all speakers, public forum doctrine enforces on citizens an obligation to be exposed to issues and views “that would otherwise escape attention, and that would not have been chosen before the fact” (Sunstein, 2001, 196).

The interesting thing about Public Forum doctrine is this *functional* definition of what counts as a public space. This is potentially quite radical, since it implies all sorts of spaces and places could in principle be defined as public, if they meet the criterion of providing opportunities to address others on matters of common interest. The problem with Public Forum doctrine, though, is that it tends to restrict its definition of such spaces to the ones traditionally defined as public forums by eighteenth and nineteenth century

common law – street corners, public squares, parks, and so on. In practice, recent First Amendment law has tended to restrict the definition of public forums to classic spaces like streets and parks, rather than extend them to include shopping malls, airports, or television stations.

The deployment of Public Forum doctrine is just one example of the widespread assumption that the value of publicness is best expressed by spatial relationships of close physical proximity. It is often supposed that, ideally, a public space should conform as closely as possible to the configurations of face-to-face interactions. This is a problem for both normative and empirical reasons. Let me explain why, by way of an example from geography.

The cultural geographer Don Mitchell (2003) has written extensively about the legal regulation of public spaces in the United States. There are two important points that Mitchell makes. Firstly, the value of the idea of the public sphere lays in the idea that politics is legitimated as democratic by virtue of being embedded in forms of inter-subjective communicative action. Secondly, if democracy requires opportunities for communicative interactions between citizens, then this means that geography and publicness are strongly connected. Mitchell combines these two points by defining a public space as a “place within which a political movement can stake out the space that allows it to be seen. In public space, political organisations can represent themselves to a larger population” (Mitchell 1995, 115).

This definition nicely captures the idea that publicness has something to do with communicating with others. Mitchell argues that this definition supports a sharp distinction between what he call ‘real’ public spaces and ‘virtual’ public spaces. ‘Real’ public spaces turn out to be spatial contexts of face-to-face interaction like street corners, parks, and public squares. ‘Virtual’ public spaces, like TV, radio, or the internet, are understood to be less authentic, secondary sites for communicating with others.

Mitchell is hardly alone in arguing that discussions of the ‘public sphere’ need to take more attention of ‘real’ and ‘material’ spaces of public interaction. For example, it is a commonplace of geographers’ discussions of the influential work of Jürgen Habermas (1989) to complain that his notion of the public sphere has only a weak, metaphorical reference to material spaces and places (Goheen 1998, Howell 1993, Mitchell 1995). Habermas emphasises all sorts of communicative practices of talking, discoursing, and deliberating in his account of the public sphere. Geographers, in contrast, claim that what we really need to do is focus attention on the ‘materiality’ of public space.

This line of criticism takes us in the wrong direction. It misses the point about what might be the problem with metaphors like the public *sphere*, the public *realm*, public *domain*, or the public *sector*.

The problem is not that these are spatial *metaphors*. It is that they are *spatial* metaphors.

They are, more precisely, metaphors that conjure up images of contained, circumscribed spaces. By thinking that these should just be made more ‘real’, provided with more precise ‘material’ reference points like streets or parks,

geographers actually end up inadvertently compounding what is the main problem in Habermas' original account of the public sphere. In reconstructing eighteenth-century public spheres as an ideal form, Habermas did not ignore the geographical dimensions of public life at all. He told a story all about the circulation of pamphlets, newspapers, and novels through spatially extended networks of communication. One enduring lesson of his work is the idea that the space of publicness is a *circulatory space*. But Habermas sees the circulation of written texts as simply a secondary, additive means for continuing a face-to-face conversation. This ideal of the conversational quality of public communication assumes that any written communication, once sent out into the world, always reaches its intended destination, is received as it was intended, and is thereby integrated back into a set of convivial, familiar relations.

Habermas provides us with an image of the public sphere as a circulatory space of communication. We do not need to 'ground' this image in 'real' or 'material' spaces. Quite the contrary, this gesture detracts from the really important insight in Habermas' work, which draws our attention to the degree to which a public sphere is all about the process of discoursing. But, in order to think about the spatialities of discoursing, we do need to suspend the presumption in Habermas' original account that circulation is a circular, tightly bound process (see Lee and LiPuma 2002). It might be better thought of as a process of *scattering* and *dispersal*. One problem with all the spatial metaphors noted above is, certainly, that they fail to capture "the mobile, elusive, and problematic character of publicness" (Newman 2005, 2). But more than this, if we take seriously the idea that the medium of publicness is discourse, then we should also take seriously the degree to which publicness is a process: it's something people *do*, rather than a space they inhabit.

And just what is this process of discoursing in public? Above all, it a process of *addressing* others, and of being *addressed* by them. If publicness has a spatiality, then it resides nowhere else than in the treacherous and promising space that is enacted by throwing words, signs, and tokens out into the world (cf. Arendt 1958, 177).

What difference does it make to talk about the public sphere in terms of circulatory spaces of address? And why does it matter to think of publicness in terms of scattering and dispersal rather than 'material' and 'real' spaces of urban life? In particular, why does this matter to thinking about the relationships between publicness and democracy?

Well, there are two reasons.

Firstly, the idea that city streets, public parks, or other spaces of face-to-face relations actually serve as the primary scenes for public interaction and communication amongst members of large, complex societies seems a little out-of-date. Sticking closely to Mitchell's own definition of public space – places that provide opportunities to be seen and represent oneself to audiences – suggests that all sorts of spaces can, in fact as well as in principle, serve this function. In terms of the relationship with democratic decision-making, there is no good reason to suppose that streets and parks are, in principle or practice, privileged public spaces:

“They are not the only or even the most important places for communicative activity. Other areas – perhaps mailboxes, probably railroad stations and airports, certainly broadcasting stations – are the modern equivalents of streets and parks” (Sunstein 1995, 102).

It is these spaces of distanced, mediated communication which are the most ‘material’ spaces for public democratic communication, if by material we mean the most relevant, the ones most pertaining to the issue at hand - which is the opportunity for addressing people where they are to be found. The geographer Paul Adams (1992) captures this nicely when he describes television as a ‘gathering place’ for modern citizens. One can over-do this sort of idea, but its importance lies in recognising that the places where potential addressees for communications on matters of public concern are to be found aren’t, after all, *places* at all. They are stretched-out, complex networks of circulation. Elsewhere, Adams (1998) distinguishes between types of communication mediums on the basis of their different network qualities. This is one line of investigation that geographers might pursue in thinking about the geographies of public space. Different infrastructures of circulation and communication have different formal features that encourage and enable certain styles of interaction more than others, some of which may conform to a lesser or greater degree to different norms of publicity or privacy (see Gaonakr and Povinelli 2003).

The second reason why we should be suspicious of invocations of ‘real’ or ‘material’ public spaces is that this fails to accurately register the ways in which spaces like streets and parks actually function in contentious politics. One of the features of modern social movement politics is the deployment of what is sometimes called strategic dramaturgy, or theatrical styles of protest that enact claims and grievances, often in non-deliberative ways. The aim of these strategies is to demonstrate the size and intensity of a campaigns’ support, and to attract public attention (Tilly 1994). The reason such movements organise their protests in places like Washington D.C., or around Westminster Palace in London, or in the cities where major international diplomatic meetings like the G8 or WTO are held, is because these are the *stages* upon which they can project their presence to wide audiences through the mediums of newspaper, radio, and television media. In a sense, such protest events temporarily *enact* city streets or parks as public spaces. That is, they use them to *address* others with the aim of *attracting* attention.

These days, then, the supposedly ‘real’ and ‘material’ spaces that geographers like so much only ever function as ‘public spaces’ when they are embedded in more extensive social networks and technological relations that project outwards from any scene of contained interaction (see Adams 1996, Barry 2000, Calhoun 1998). And it is worth noting that, contrary to Adams’ comforting image of ‘gathering’, the public significance of electronically mediated communication inheres in their qualities as mediums of *dissemination*. Radio and television provide the opportunity to address others without being able to guarantee that this address will arrive at its intended destination, or any destination at all (Scannell 1995). And in that, they help us

recognise the public potentialities that inhere in any and all modes of communication, irrespective of their medium.

These are two empirical reasons for being suspicious of geographers' disciplinary preference for 'real', 'material' public spaces when it comes to making sense of ideas about the public sphere and democracy. But they both lead to a more fundamental point. Even ideally, these types of spatial archetypes – streets, parks, and the like - shouldn't be thought of as the best analogues with which to think about the normative issues at stake in discussions of publicness and democracy. Sticking only to the definition of a public space as any space which provides opportunities for addressing and interacting with other people, then there is no reason to assume that such spaces are exemplified by shared locales of spatial or temporal co-presence. When we add the sense that public communication is important to democratic theory and practice only in so far as it can articulate with mechanisms of collective decision-making, then we can even say that the 'real', 'material' spaces that geographers favour when they write about the public sphere are not necessarily material to the relation between publicness and democracy. If we take material in the sense of being most relevant to the case in hand, then spaces of physically co-present interaction are not, on their own, the most important arenas for the articulation of public communicative action with binding, collective decisions.

4). Public action and public space

The analysis in the preceding section leads to a preliminary conclusion: we need to stop thinking of publicness primarily as a type of *space*, and instead focus on the type of *action* that is attributed the status 'public'. Some work in geography has begun to explore the contingent relationship between various sorts of public action and the types of spaces in and across which such action takes place. Lynn Staeheli (1996), in her research on women's activism in the United States, shows how public action in the sense of concerted citizenly action oriented to matters of general interest can take place in putatively private spaces like the home. Likewise, Sophie Watson (2004) shows in her work on various forms of civic association in the UK that public spaces can be, sometimes must be, fleeting, hidden, and temporary. And Murray Low (2003) shows that one of the most important forms of public action we undertake as citizens – voting – is only of any value as a public act by virtue of being undertaken in secret. Each of these examples underscores the idea that the democratic value of publicness lies in certain sorts of action, and that these actions are not, actually or conceptually, contained within particular configurations of place, space or territory.

We might also learn from media and communications studies, a field with its own well-developed sensitivity to questions of space and place (Couldry and McCarthy 2004). For example, Samarajiva and Shields (1997, 451-542) capture the way in which the criteria for distinguishing between 'public space' and 'private space' are not 'spatial' at all, in the sense of referring to locational categories, but are based on the distinction between different types of interaction:

“Public spaces are characterised by a relative openness to initiation of communication by others, and private spaces are characterised by a relative closedness to initiation of communication” (Samarajiva and Shields 1997, 541-542).

Notice that this definition does not only define publicness by reference to opportunities for speakers to communicate to others. It also emphasises the importance of variable dispositions to be willingly on the receiving end of uninitiated expressions from others in defining the nature of democratic publicness.

One thing this definition reminds us of is the importance of values like privacy and autonomy in mediating the relationship between democracy and publicness. There are all sorts of occasions when we might quite rightfully not want to be open to unwanted, unexpected encounters with others. Another important point about this definition is that it defines the publicness of a space by its internal, formal qualities of address and reception, and not by reference to the conditions of access to any space. This is a more contentious point. It directs our attention to the intimate connection between notions of publicness, democracy, and relationships of property ownership and commodification. Private space has been traditionally defined as an important realm for the cultivation of the essential virtues of democratic citizenry – of tolerance, criticism, and mutual trust, for example. Staeheli and Mitchell (2004) observe that contemporary societies are increasingly characterised by a steady erosion of the forms of privacy that should remain important resources for wider forms of social engagement, as states and corporations extend their capacities of surveillance. But the private realm is also sometimes defined as a realm of negative freedom, upon which the state cannot properly impinge. This second sense of privacy raises questions regarding the degree to which rights of private property are consistent with values of democracy and democratic publicness. If the erosion of privacy is one threat to the health of democracy, Staeheli and Mitchell also identify another in the steady privatisation of public space, by which they mean the process by which seemingly more and more activities which are of public importance are re-organised according to the economic imperatives of private commodity production and consumption. In particular, more and more putatively public spaces are being commodified; access to them is more and more tightly controlled by private organisations, and is often explicitly based on the ability to pay (Low and Smith 2005). This is true of both ‘real’ spaces like city centres or shopping malls, and also ‘virtual’ spaces like television and radio.

Both of these ways of controlling access to spaces is, by definition, exclusionary. But it is worth noting that on Samarajiva and Shields’ definition of the publicness of spaces, one that emphasises patterns of interaction rather than conditions of access, this is not necessarily a sign of a diminution of their public value at all:

“The ‘publicness’ of a space depends on openness to initiation of communication among inhabitants rather than the terms and conditions of access to that space”. (1997, 542)

Just because one might have to pay a fee to enter a 'real' or 'virtual' space, does not necessarily vitiate its quality as a space for public action. Now, this flies in the face of a great deal of research in geography, which tracks the privatization and commodification of space and automatically concludes that this is equivalent to a shrinking of the public realm.

My point is not that we should not be concerned by such processes. But we should be clear about what it is about 'publicness' that we consider to be of value before we jump to the conclusion that structural changes in the design or regulation of public infrastructures are necessarily destructive of public life. In particular, we should remember that the value of public communication, when it comes to questions of democracy, is not an end in itself. Public communication is considered valuable by reference to the idea that decision-making in a democracy should be undertaken within a broader web of relations of deliberation, oversight, and scrutiny (Emirbayer and Sheller 1999, Keane 2004, Przeworski *et al* 1999, Young 1999). The commercialisation and commodification of spaces of putatively public communications might, on these grounds, have much more ambivalent implications for public life and democratic politics than is often supposed, since there is no *a priori* reason why these sorts of spaces cannot sustain cultures of deliberation, self-expression, and accountability (see Barnett 2003).

We can begin to see why a functional definition of publicness - one which focuses on types of action that are in some sense 'public' - is important for understanding the relationship between publicness, spatiality, and democracy. Public communication is important to democracy because, and not in spite of, the fact that democracy is a system of rule, that is, a mechanism for making binding decisions in a context of irreducible pluralism in opinions and non-reconcilable differences of interest. Action that is public by virtue of *what* it considers, as well by virtue of *who* is drawn together to deliberate over these objects of concern, is not found only in locations like streets, parks, or other exemplars of public forums. Public action can take place anywhere. It has no proper place at all.

5). Parasitical publics

There is a strong strand of thought that defines democratic publicity primarily in terms of the intrinsic value of a distinctive type of sociability. Often enough, interaction in urban social life is the privileged analogue of such public activity. The attractiveness of this sociability model of publicness lies in its ability to model the possibility that people with plural interests and different identities can come together as a collectivity (Young 1990). This strand of thought is very good at explicating the idea that a crucial aspect of a vibrant democratic public life is our exposure to the identities and perspectives of others (Bridge 2004). But the problem with making urban spaces of sociability, surprise, and pluralistic encounter into the exemplary models of publicness is that this completely ignores the sense in which, in democratic theory, publicness is instrumentally related to maintaining the legitimacy of binding collective decision-making.

In this section, I want to develop the idea that public action has no proper place at all. To do so, I will introduce the arguments of two very different writers on the theme of publicness: Michael Warner, a literary theorist who is one of the most acute commentators on contemporary theories and practices of publicness; and John Dewey, a doyen of mid-twentieth century American liberalism, and one of the key theorists of the public life in modern social theory. I deploy the arguments of both writers to explicate the idea that publicness is always and only ever derivative of other spaces, other concerns, and other social relations from which it emerges, and which it in turn helps to reconstitute and transform. Together, Warner and Dewey enable us to appreciate that thinking about the equally compelling importance of intrinsic and instrumental aspects of publicness requires us to let go of the idea that public space is either ‘material’ or best modelled on scenes of co-present interaction.

5.i). Publics as communities of strangers

Warner focuses on the distinctively, and irreducible, discursive aspects of the idea of publicness. In doing so, he develops an understanding of the intrinsic quality of publicness as a distinctive type of sociability resting on relations of call and response. Warner’s starting point is that any public can only “exist by virtue of being addressed” (Warner 2002, 67). This doesn’t mean that publics just come into existence by virtue of being addressed. When we address others in a public register, we are presuming a shared scope of concern that is far from certain. The addressees of any public utterance are imaginary, which is not to say that they are unreal. If we can say that a public exists only by virtue of being addressed, then this implies that an address to an audience only gets its public quality by virtue of the type of response it elicits. It depends on whether the address resonates with others. Another way of putting this is to say that what constitutes publics is neither an act of address, nor only of response, but the relation of *attention* that is established in the space that separates and joins these two acts (ibid., 87). And there is no reason to suppose that such relations of attention are contained within scenes of face-to-face interaction; indeed, there is no reason to suppose that these face-to-face encounters are any freer from uncertainty and indeterminacy than stretched-out, distanced relationships.

If the publicness of a discourse depends on establishing a relation of attention, then this means that any public is constituted by a *spacing* between discrete but intimately related acts that are separated and bound together in temporal relations of anticipation, projection, response and reply. Warner’s emphasis on the distinctive temporal qualities of publics and counter-publics liberates the disseminating force of publicness that Habermas’ seminal account of the public sphere had contained within a circle of dialogue. A public, for Warner, is in large part stretched-out across time, in the sense that it comes into being and persists by people writing letters in response to newspaper stories; or writing reviews of books they have read; or citing those books in the things they write themselves; or carrying on the day-to-day talk about last night’s telly.

The *citational* pattern is crucial to understanding the value of public ‘space’. It connects up to the distinctive type of sociability that is bought into being by a public, as distinct from other social forms such as families, parties, friendship networks, or bureaucracies. The citational, iterative quality of the relations through which public attention is secured underscores the idea that when one addresses a public the addressee, intended or otherwise, is actually not there, not yet, not at least as a member of a public. This is one implication of insisting that publics are imaginary entities. But there is a paradox at work here: while one might acknowledge that publics are, in principle, imaginary entities, when one actually addresses a public, you have to forget this fact – one has to assume the existence of an audience, with certain sorts of social characteristics. Any public address that ignores these characteristics is not likely to come off successfully - not likely to gain much attention - because it will end up being completely out of tune with its potential addressees. Once again, we need to emphasise that even though they may be imaginary, publics certainly cannot be conjured into existence just by the force of one’s own intention (Warner (*ibid.*, 14).

If there is magic involved in the constitution of publics, it is an imperfect kind of magic “because of how much it must presuppose” (*ibid.*, 105). What this means is that publics have a kind of double conditionality:

- 1). They are self-organised, constituted only through being addressed, but they also depend upon pre-existing infrastructures of communication and circulation;
- 2). They are in principle open to all comers, but they in fact presuppose specific criteria of shared identity (*ibid.*, 106). You have to have a good idea at least about what *might* resonate if you are to stand a chance of what you have to say *actually* resonating. *But you can never know for sure.*

And here we reach the crux of the issue - the exact composition and identity of a public is unknown:

“A public is always in excess of its known social basis. It must be more than a list of one’s friends. It must include strangers.” (*ibid.* 4).

While the intention of addressing a public presupposes some shared social criteria, any successfully constituted public only “comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers” (*ibid.*, 120). Warner demonstrates his point by reminding us that public discourse has a distinctive grammar. It is as it is once both personal and impersonal (*ibid.*, 121). It is in principle addressed to anyone, but in a tone of some familiarity, and in a register of concern, as if the topic being talked about should matter to addressees. Publics are constituted through a pragmatics that sends out its call in a register intended “for-anyone-as-someone” (Scannell 2000).

The relationship between presupposing and exceeding shared criteria of identity is a defining feature of public discourse (Warner 2002, 105-6). This set of paradoxical relations between what is concrete and given on the one hand, and what is abstract and imagined on the other, accounts for the queer nature of publicness:

“Public discourse, in the nature of its address, abandons the security of its positive, given audience. It promises to address anybody. It commits itself in principle to the possible participation of any stranger. It therefore puts at risk the concrete world that is its given condition of possibility. This is its fruitful perversity.” (ibid, 113).

Here, then, we glimpse a different style of circulatory space than that originally outlined by Habermas. For Warner, public discourse is projective, hopeful, crossed by anticipation, and its ongoing accomplishment depends on any specific act of addressing others being taken up, thrown into circulation, reiterated, passed on, disseminated.

Warner describes what we might call the performative qualities of publicness: publics are constituted by addressing a public, and in this sense, any public utterance does what it says, it brings into being what it presupposes to already exist as the condition of getting off the ground. The ‘space’ of this sort of publicness is a spacing-out of discourse over time, which accounts for the sense in which publics are imaginary entities composed of strangers. Herein lays the *intrinsic* value that can be ascribed to publicness: it is a modality for actively engaging with strangers, for acting-in-concert with others as ends in themselves. Notice, too, that this intrinsic quality of public interaction with strangers in a register of familiarity is dependent upon the prior existence of other social relations and organisational infrastructures. In Warner’s account, publicness feeds off these as its conditions, but only to exceed and transform them in the process.

Warner’s account of publicness is primarily, but not only, focussed on how taking seriously the quality of public *mediums* forces us to think of public *subjects* as particular types of imaginary collectivities. I have focused on the intrinsic value of the type of social interaction that inhere in the formal characteristics of publicness – publicness as a relation of engaging with others as others, as different from oneself, as strangers. Warner does not ignore instrumental questions, it’s true, but to consider this dimension of publicness more fully, I want to shift attention to John Dewey. It is from Dewey that I want to derive a fuller sense of the parasitical qualities of publicness. For Dewey, publics are not only dependent on prior formations of social interaction, as in Warner, which they also exceed. They are also dependent on pre-existing infrastructures of communication and social integration. And above all, for Dewey a public is brought into existence because public discussion is always *about something* of general concern, not just about itself. For Dewey publics are, as it were, intrinsically instrumental, and herein lies their important connection to democratic politics.

5.ii). Publics as communities of the affected

One way of situating the importance of Dewey’s ideas to understanding the relationship between publicness, democracy and geography is by reference to a critical question in democratic theory: how to determine who has the right to participate in democratic public life?

Just who belongs to the public whose consent is meant to legitimise decisions as democratic? Classically, participation in public life is defined on

the basis of membership as a citizen of a territorially defined polity. An alternative criterion appeals to a causally-based principle. This makes participation in decision-making dependent on the idea of affected interest (Shapiro 1999, 38-39). This principle seems well fitted to doing justice to the democratic principle that all those people potentially affected by a decision have an interest in it. The idea of affected interest also implies a different geography of participation. ‘Communities of affected interest’ are not likely to be neatly contained within the boundaries of nation-states (nor necessarily restricted to only human actors; see Eckersley 2000). We all know that decisions made in one place have all sorts of consequential impacts that extend far beyond boundaries of this sort. This principle therefore also seems to be better suited to taking account of relations of power and their complex geographies:

“The causal principle of affected interest suggests that ideally the structure of decision rules should follow the contours of power relationships”, and this means that “if you are affected by the results, you are presumptively entitled to a say” (Shapiro 2003, 219-220).

This type of argument about the spatiality of actions and their unintended consequences is also common in geography, where it is used to argue for a radical extension of the geographical scope of care, obligation, participation, and responsibility (Corbridge 1993, Massey 2004, Smith 1998).

On its own, though, the causal principle of affected interest might lead us to conflate two different forms of solidarity, in so far as it seems to suggest that a ‘public’ is constituted simply through systems of ‘functional interdependence’. This latter idea refers to a type of relationship based on structural connections that “join people in a mutuality that is not primarily manifest in their own common recognition of it but instead can operate, as it were, behind their backs” (Calhoun 2002, 161). This sort of relationship, one that is not chosen but which we find ourselves already placed in, might well be one condition for the emergence of publics. But in and of itself, it is not equivalent to a public in the broad sense we are defining in this chapter. A public is not simply formed through relations of necessity that follow from functional integration across space and time – they depend on both this sort of solidarity and an element of choice (*ibid.*, 163).

Dewey is often associated with the idea that publics are coterminous with spatially extensive communities of affected interest. But he actually sketches a more complex understanding of publicness than this at first suggests. Writing in the 1920s and 1930s, Dewey focussed attention on the implications for democratic politics of the geographical extension and increasing functional complexity of social relationships. He argued that the spatial extension of transport, communications, economic processes, and trade positively expanded the conditions for democratic public life (Barnett 2000b). This extension of life over space and time inevitably entangles people into relationships of cause and effect, and in particular into relationships in which actions have all sorts of indirect consequences:

“A public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that is deemed necessary

to have those consequences systematically cared for” (Dewey 1927, 16-17).

This might look like an affirmation of the causal principle of affected interest. But actually, Dewey’s primary emphasis is upon not just the extensive and indirect consequences of acts. It is, rather, on the perception and recognition of these. It is this process that is constitutive of a public. Dewey argued against the idea that, in complex social systems, democracy should be reduced to the efficient management by experts, supported by occasional acclamation by a passive citizenry. He argued that people retained their capacity to act as citizens in spatially extensive and functionally complex systems, but he did not stake this on their capacity to process lots of information about how their actions lead to all sorts of dispersed consequences. This was impossible, but this did not militate against the possibility of publics coming into existence. Far from it, for Dewey publics emerged precisely when consequences become so complex, the numbers of actors involved so large, that people cannot accurately calculate how they affect others or will be affected by them (*ibid.*, 52-53).

The extension of social life over distanced, complex systems means that people cannot accurately trace the contours of their own implication in distant consequences. But it does *sensitize* them to the idea that they are, nonetheless, implicated in this way. The extension of communications, in the broadest sense, enabled people to develop “more numerous and varied points of shared common interests” (Dewey 1980: 92), and facilitated “freer interaction between social groups” (*ibid.*). In short, people’s imaginative horizons are expanded, and this is the key mechanism for the transformation of functionally integrated systems into publics. This transformation depends not on relations of expert knowledge, but on a capacity to imagine one’s implication in wider systems of indirect consequences (Goodin 2002). What this means is that a public turns out not to be composed only of all those affected by consequences; a public emerges only when “the perception of consequences are projected in important ways beyond the persons and associations directly concerned in them” (Dewey, 1927, 39). And in principle, this means that the scope of any public is indeterminate, because once one introduces the idea of indirect consequences, the number and location of those affected expands beyond the scope of easy comprehension.

So, for Dewey the conditions for a new type of public life lay in this process of spatial and temporal extension of consequences that enable the expansion of people’s perception of being part of wider communities of interest. The causal principle of affected interest does, then, serve to determine the *object* of matters of public concern in Dewey’s formulation: publics form around the shared concern to intervene and ‘take care of’ extensive systems of action and their indirect consequences. But the emergence of a public as a *subject* of collective action does not follow automatically from the cognitive apprehension of chains of cause and effect. Rather, the extension of consequences and affected interests over space and time serves as the vector through which people learn to abstract themselves from their own perspectives. For Dewey, a public is primarily an imaginative entity:

“The idea of a public that responds to events even though most members are not immediately affected was Dewey’s formulation of the location of the political and of civic virtue” (Wolin, 511).

Dewey’s account of publicness therefore sketches the outlines of what the title of this paper refers to as a parasitical notion of public space. By this, I mean to draw attention to how the matters of concern that define the object of public interest as well as the styles of engagement through which publics constitute themselves as collective subjects both depend on prior processes of infrastructural and socio-cultural development. But publicness *as such* exceeds both the infrastructural conditions that generate objects of public concern and the forms of social solidarity through which people’s dispositions to public engagement are cultivated.

We can now return to the idea that the notion of a ‘community of affected interest’ offers an alternative criteria of participation, one which shifts attention away from the question of ‘who is a member’, the answer to which always ends up seeming a little bit arbitrary, and onto to questions of Who is Affected? (Shapiro 2003, 223). Geographers are drawn to this ‘affected interest’ model because it is easy to think that geography is in a good position to answer the second question. Geography can easily re-tool itself as a way of tracking chains of cause and effect, actions and their dispersed consequences. Unfortunately, the ‘causal’ principle is not quite as straightforward as it seems. It’s actually rather difficult to disentangle simple relations of cause and effect, actions and consequences, when dealing with complex social, economic, or cultural processes. What is more, we might pause for thought before rejecting the territorial criteria of participation out of hand. Territorial definitions have the advantage of efficiently solving the problem of how to determine rights to participate. Any argument against this principle must address the extent to which territorial definitions are basic mechanisms for ensuring effective rights of equal participation (Saward 1998). Territorial models of citizenship presume that any member of a polity has the equal right to participate in collective decisions *even if they are not directly affected by them*. It is this principle, in fact, that is crucial to understanding how publics come into being on the back, as it were, of other processes of geographical expansion and extension. It turns out that nationalism might be the best paradigm available for understanding the possibility of the sorts of imaginative action through which spatially extensive and temporally durable publics constitute themselves (Calhoun 1997).

In both Warner and Dewey, ‘publicness’ is ascribed to a family of related types of action: action-in-concert with others; action undertaken in public, in the open; and actions around objects of widely shared concern. And for both writers there is also a strong sense that public action is parasitical on the material configurations and social relations laid down by other forms of activity, in the sense that it is dependent on these as its conditions of possibility, as well as in the sense that it is these conditions that in turn become the object of transformative public action.

We have learned from Dewey that an intrinsic feature of the relationship between publicness and democracy is that publicness has an instrumental

dimension - that is, that public action is about something. This is not all publicness is, but an account that diminishes this aspect as somehow intruding into authentic publicness is an account that will have difficulty in accounting for just why we are always so worried about the question of the public sphere in the first place.

Political philosophers such as Hannah Arendt, Sheldon Wolin and Claude Lefort all tend to expel any instrumental calculation from the realm of authentic public action and political activity. This same suspicion informs the theories of radical democracy and agonistic democracy developed by writers such as Chantal Mouffe and William Connolly who have also attracted the attention of geographers in recent years. In this tradition, publicness has no object, it isn't about anything, it is a pure means in itself.

These theories are helpful because they acknowledge the value of the affective dimensions of publicness as an important dimension of political action. But they also encourage a style of theoretical evaluation that verges on the self-righteous and narcissistic by supposing that public action and politics are best thought of as activities of pure self-creation detached from instrumental concerns. Public action is made to look like an end in itself. These theories put the normative cart before the practical horse (Elster 1983, 91-100), in that they fail to acknowledge that the qualities of sociable, convivial interaction that they propose as the essence of public life depend on "a range of decisions, actions, and policies that cannot emerge from the flow of everyday sociability alone" (Weintraub 1997, 24). And in this, these agonistic, radical theories of publicness and democracy actually converge with the more liberal, deliberative theories they often take as their conceptual antagonists (Schudson 1997). Both approaches suppose that democracy can do without instrumental procedures for making decisions, because they either think that this involves an illegitimate closure of the free-play of pluralist difference, or because they hope that a deliberative consensus can arrive at fully legitimate decisions while leaving no sore losers. And in fundamental respects, this shared difficulty with imagining how pluralism and autonomy can be squared with binding and legitimate decision-making derives from the fact that both deliberative and agonistic theories underplay the temporalities that articulate the intrinsic qualities of public life and democratic politics with their equally compelling instrumental imperatives (see Barnett 2004, Barnett 2005, Saward 2003).

On both the intrinsic and instrumental definitions of publicness outlined above - the criterion of openness to initiation of communication by others, and the criterion of having to do with the general interest - we can see that the idea that public space is 'material', where this is supposed to mean spaces of co-presence like the street, parks, or the city, or even a causal space of actions and consequences, is entirely inadequate for thinking about the relationship between publicness and democracy. The sense of spatiality that is best adjusted to thinking about this relationship is characterised not by the idealisation of dialogue, or of face-to-face theatricality, or urban sociability, but by reference to a vocabulary of dissemination, scattering, and dispersal (Peters 1999). Addressing a message to others always traverse a spaces full of

the hazards of misfire, misunderstanding, and failure. Messages might be intercepted by unanticipated addressees in unanticipated places, or by none at all:

“Communication occurs only insofar as the delivery of the message *may* fail: that is, communication takes place only to the extent that there is a separation between the sender and the receiver, and this separation, this distance, this *spacing*, creates the possibility for the message *not* to arrive” (Chang 1996, 216).

If, then, the space of publicness is a circulatory space of indeterminate address, this is best exemplified by all those characteristics ascribed by Derrida to textuality: drift, dissemination, chance, and by the separations of temporal deferral as much as spatial distance (Barnett 1998).

6). Cultivating attention

So far, I have suggested that public space is best thought of as a circulatory space of address, constituted through relationships of attention between subjects who approach each other as strangers. But how does this process work? How is it possible that a public can be constituted just by being addressed? What sort of magic is supposed to be at work here?

There is one very influential understanding, indebted to poststructuralist theories of signification, which holds that the constitution of any collective subject must be premised on exclusion. According to this view, an identity can only be constructed by projecting an ‘Other’, against which it defines itself, and by which it is consequently perpetually threatened. According to Chantal Mouffe (1995), any act of political or public speech that posits a collective entity – that says ‘We’ – succeeds only because at the same time it posits a ‘Them’ against which the identity of ‘We’ is both secured.

Despite its popularity, this theory of differential signification does not actually work for words like ‘We’ which are so crucial to public discourse. Indeed, one cannot understand the political force of little pronouns like ‘we’, ‘us’, and ‘them’ by supposing that it does (Barnett 2004a, Taneseni 2005). One problem with this understanding is that it supposes that a public is constituted through establishing a circular relationship of *recognition* between speakers and addressees. If one were to take this understanding as the model for the constitution of a public, then it would seem that a public can be conjured into existence simply by the force of shared collective will to share in such an identity.

To suppose that publicness is constituted in this way, through an assertion of identity that is secured through a collective act of recognition, is to miss the distinctive qualities of publicness as a form of collective endeavour. Any public discourse acquires its publicness only in so far as it *resonates* through successive circulations and iterations, but as we have already seen in Section 5, this implies a movement of opening rather than a moment of closure.

To put it another way, public speech is not just ‘performative’. Too often, the performative dimensions of human activity are still attributed to the force of pure creativity. But the performative force of public speech is not only *illocutionary*, to use a technicality from J. L. Austin (1962). The paradigm of

an illocutionary act is promising, an act which names what it does. Promising is an act in which someone does something *in* saying something. But public discourse, as we have discussed it thus far, also depends on *perlocutionary* acts. These are acts which aim to persuade or convince, warn, or alarm other people. They are acts in which something is done *by* saying something.

The idea that the constitution of publics depends on the force of perlocutionary acts means, amongst other things, that there is an irreducible spatial and temporal *interval* between any act intended to be public, and its successful accomplishment as a public act. Just as, for example, the utterance “I warn you” does not bring about its effect of warning simply by the force with which it is uttered - its success as a warning depends on the responsiveness of others – so too public discourse, such as saying ‘We’ in certain circumstances, needs to be understood in terms of a series of uncertain effects rather than a set of intentional acts with their own inbuilt constitutive force of recognition. Which is to say, public discourse does not work magically at all, but depends for its felicitous accomplishment on dispositions of attentiveness and responsiveness to the needs of others (Cavell 2005).

The poststructuralist interpretation of public, political speech takes a wrong turn in focussing upon the idea that meaning is inherently differential. It wrongly assumes that the meaning of a sign, its identity, is determined by its negative difference from other signs. This is one source of the idea that any invocation of a collective ‘public’ subject must be founded on a dialectic of recognition and exclusion. But on the performative, or more specifically perlocutionary account sketched above, it seems that Saying ‘We’, understood as the paradigm for conjuring publics into being, is a kind of invitation addressed to an audience to see themselves as part of this ‘We’. This type of public act can only come off because saying ‘We’ is the kind of hazardous, chance-ridden gesture that only works by risking not getting any response at all, or getting a response from wholly unanticipated quarters. Rather than being constituted by exclusion, the constitutive force of public acts derives from the irreducible openness to strangers of this sort of discourse. As the archetypal public utterance, ‘We’ is only ever addressed to an imaginary addressee, to a stranger, since the address itself can only presuppose but not determine in advance the identity of those recipients whose assent, by being moved to respond, might secure its accomplishment as public. Saying ‘We’ is, then, less an assertion of identity as much as it is a *claim for attention*.

If public discourse works through this type of call and response dynamic, then it means that we should take seriously the idea that publics are things that make their appearance through the force of *convening*, that is, through a set of relationships between addressing and responding. ‘Convening’ certainly brings to mind the sense that a public is an assembly or gathering of some sort. But I use the formula ‘convening publics’ because I want to emphasise the active sense of calling on others to gather together, which in turn requires an active response to heed any such call. This sense of convening helps us appreciate the sense in which publics appear through representative acts being spoken for and being spoken to.

We saw at the outset of this chapter that publics are always *spoken about*, and more to the point, they are always *spoken for*. Now, speaking for others seems to many academics to be impossible, if not a wholly unjustifiable presumption. But I want to follow Stanley Cavell (1979, 18-28; 1969, 67-68), who suggests that the possibility of saying ‘We’, or what he calls the “arrogation of voice” which is always involved in supposing that one can rightfully speak for others, is only considered impossible or scandalous because we forget about the relationship between *speaking for* and *speaking to* others. And, in turn, we tend to think that *speaking to* others is much simpler than it is. We forget that it is risky, hazardous, that it only works by risking the chance of misfires and infelicitous outcomes. We need to keep both points in mind if we are to appreciate why the idea of ‘convening publics’ makes a difference to the sorts of questions we ask about public action: the first point reminds us that public discourse is, pre-eminently, discourse addressed to others; the second point reminds us that any such address to others only comes off as a public act because of a relationship of attention between speakers and addressees that is constituted by the response of the latter.

So in speaking of ‘convening publics’, the emphasis should be on the active sense of convening, rather than a sense of a convention already successfully gathered together, or conforming to a rule already agreed upon. The activity of public-making inheres not in gathering, nor even in assembling, but in this activity of convening, that is, in calling out to others, attracting their attention. When one remembers the hazardous quality of the process of *speaking to* others, one can begin to better understand how *speaking for* others is not a zero-sum game of silencing or exclusion, but an invitation, an opening up of a scene of claims and counter-claims.

The idea of ‘convening publics’ is, then, intimately related to the queer force of ‘perlocutionary effects’ – ‘doing by saying’, as distinct from ‘doing in saying’. Cavell calls perlocutionary speech a form of ‘passionate utterance’ – a form that engages addresser and addressee in relations of response that are *expressive*, that *move* the participants. This relates to the question of whether there are limits to the type of expression that can, in practice, perform the role of convening public attention. One of the criticisms levelled at political philosophers like Habermas and Rawls is that, in their influential formulations of public deliberation, they circumscribe the styles of communication that are legitimately allowed to be deployed. While both writers emphasise the importance of publicity as a crucial medium in democratic life, they also presume that public deliberation aimed at sustaining democracy and justice should be governed by the norms of civil conversation - the idea that people entering into public life should adopt as disinterested a perspective as possible in order to consider what is in the general interest.

The criticism levelled at both Habermas and Rawls is that these norms of rational, argumentative deliberation tend to elevate forms of discourse that are formal, general, dispassionate and disembodied (cf. Dahlberg 2005). Feminist theorists point out that defined in this way, public deliberation “does not open itself equally to all forms of making claims and giving reasons” (Young 1997, 64). This in turn means that some categories of person, and some forms of

injustice, might be inadvertently silenced in this type of idealised public deliberation. It is on these grounds that Cavell (1988, 101-126) takes issue with the image of the ‘conversation of justice’ in Rawls’ work, according to which the benchmark of reasonable public action oriented towards justice is the commitment to giving principled expression to ones’ grievances. Cavell suggests that there are modes of claiming injustice which exceed rational discourse. These claims can take the form of a cry of frustration or a scream of anger. They are, in short, types of passionate utterance, ones which work as much by moving people as by their rational coherence. Cavell’s point against Rawls is that he does not allow for the full range of ways of articulating one’s grievances and feelings about relationships with other people - ways that exceed rules, knowledge, and principles. Amongst these, one might include non-deliberative modes such as gesture, jokes, poetry, or storytelling (Young 1997, 2001).

The point of this argument is not to wholly abandon norms of deliberation, justification, and reason giving. To suppose that this is the reason for affirming the affective qualities of communication would run the risk of reducing public action to nothing more than the expression of purely personal moral convictions which are considered valid in and of themselves, that is, beyond the scope for transformation through public encounters. But as we have already seen above, a crucial aspect of the democratic value of publicness is that it is *about something*, about matters over which people have good reason to be concerned with and care about together. The affective styles of publicness act as supplements to rather than substitutes for cognitive reasonable dispositions of public discourse (Woodward 2004).

Cavell’s analysis of Rawls’ account of the conversation of justice is concerned with elaborating the multiplicity of ways through which the intelligibility of selves and others to one another, and a mutual accommodation despite their differences, is made possible. In arguing that claims to justice are shown as well as rationally asserted, Cavell maintains a commitment to the idea that political action is irreducibly a form of public conduct that depends on scenes of address and response. But publicness is no longer restricted to forms of dispassionate deliberation – the role of affective, passionate utterances is just as important to democratic public life.

The account of the irreducible relationship between publicness, passion, and democratic action developed in this section suggest a preliminary answer to Offe’s question posed in Section 2. He asks what sorts of interventions in the field of ‘taste’ are legitimate in a democratic culture that puts a high value on people’s autonomy. One answer might be that efforts to cultivate virtues of ‘attentiveness’ can be justified in so far as they are crucial to maintaining the sorts of ordinary activities through which public life is sustained. If publicness depends on relations of attention, then measures which aim to sustain both the affective and cognitive dimensions of care and concern might be not only justifiable, but also essential for underwriting the relational value of autonomy itself, in so far as this involves a capacity to reason with and respond to others.

7). Thinking publicly

So, after all this, what is publicness, and how does it relate to democracy? Ferree *et al* (2002, 316) suggest that there are, at least, four different criteria upon which the relationships between public communication and democracy can be evaluated:

1. The first criterion focuses on *who* participates. For example, should democracy be thought of as a system of elite, expert rule regulated by elections, or whether it should be more participatory?
2. The second criterion focuses on *what sort of process* is taken to embody public communication. For example, what are the relative merits of a 'market-place of ideas' model compared to more deliberative practices?
3. A third criterion focuses on *how ideas should be presented* in public communications. For example, how far should norms of detachment, disinterest, and civility govern public debate, or how far are forms of narrative and non-deliberative symbolic acts not only legitimate but essential elements of democratic public communication?
4. And finally, the fourth criterion focuses on the *outcomes* of the relationships between discourse and decision-making. For example, is consensus around decisions the primary goal of public communication, and should debate be restricted once a decision has been made, or is this emphasis on consensus and closure systematically undemocratic?

This chapter has touched on aspects of each of these criteria:

1. I have presumed in favour of an expansionary understanding of *who* should be involved in democratic decision-making, while recognising that a certain division of labour between roles is both inevitable and valuable, in complex societies.
2. I have also presumed in favour of an expansive, deliberative conception, while trying to acknowledge that market-led models of private preference do carry an important normative lesson, in so far as they are guided by a presumption in favour of respecting people's own opinions as to their best interests and by a healthy scepticism about paternalist interventions in the name of others.
3. And I have favoured a notion of public communication that acknowledges the importance of non-deliberative, affective styles of presentation, but without supposing that these are wholly opposed to rational, reasonable, cognitive forms of justification.
4. It has been the last of these four criteria, though, that this chapter has given most attention to. This is because quite a lot of research in geography forgets that the reason for worrying about publicness is because of the *relationship* between public communication and democratic decision-making and accountability.

It is because he keeps this relationship constantly in focus that the work of Habermas remains so compelling when it comes to thinking about issues of public life and democracy. Habermas might well over-rationalise the style of communication that is required for public life to contribute to thorough-going

democratisation, but his project retains its power in spite of this precisely because he keeps his eye on the key *relationship* between publicness and democracy - that is, the relationship between chatting, joking, deliberating, and the problems of legitimate and just popular rule.

By emphasising that the democratic value of publicness inheres in the quality of this relationship, I mean to suggest that the democratic qualities of any public sphere should not be judged narrowly by whether it promotes rational deliberation, or alternatively by whether on its own it is accessible or inclusive. Rather, what is crucial is the degree to which the overall network of public practices enables people to “keep tabs on the political world” (Schudson 1998, 238). The fundamental issue at stake in evaluating the democratic qualities of public life is

“whether, when an issue arises, citizens have various effectual access points to governmental decision-makers. The effective operation of a public sphere depends also on whether, through the networks of talk, complaint, letters, petitions, interest groups, parties, suits, demonstrations, and picket lines, people feel they can and actually can move issues onto the public agenda” (ibid).

The main point of this chapter has been to suggest that when assessing this question, we need to focus on a set of relations between different types of action, some more open and fluid than other, more strategic forms.

I have argued for an idea of publicness that reorients our attention to thinking about public space as *any* communicative space of address-and-response. Rather than modelling public space on the idea of gathering and assembly in the presence of others, we should look at the ways in which publics are convened through practices of dissemination, dispersal, and scattering. This notion of the convening of publics is related to the sense that any ‘public’ always holds something in reserve, because the public is always *spoken for* and *spoken to*, which is another way of saying that ‘it’ might always answer back in unexpected ways. The public is, therefore, not to be found anywhere special, it has no proper place, nor any exemplary spatiality. As we saw above, publics can’t come into existence without presupposing infrastructures of communications and patterns of social interaction, but neither are these material or social configurations in themselves publics. A public emerges when these presupposed forms and patterns are exceeded, made strange, and used as a medium to imaginatively project towards an unknown addressee, to invite them to share one’s concerns, to care about things together.

We need to retain an appreciation of the magic that is involved in carrying off the acts that help make up and sustain democratic publicness. Publics are called into existence, they are *convened*, which is to say that they are sustained by establishing relations of attention whose geographical configurations are not given in advance.

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