

# **Publics and Counterpublics**

***So what is a public?***

# **Cody, "Publics and Politics"**

*A European bourgeois public sphere:*

A public that is assembled of private citizens who mediate between state and society rests on the premise that critical discourse can only play its political function if arguments are made in terms of rational common interest and if communication remains free from coercion. (38-39)

# **Newspapers**

Printed books, newspapers, and other mass-mediating technologies allowed for a new sense of contemporaneity to arise as the condition of horizontal solidarities among fellow members of a nation. (39)

# **Modern gender**

In a direct engagement with Habermas's thesis, for example, Landes (1988) argues that "the exclusion of women from the bourgeois public sphere was not incidental but central to its incarnation" (40)

# **The crowds**

If the private serves as one foil against which the notion of publicity is commonly defined, another primary counterconcept is “the masses” or “crowds” (41).

# **The politics of publics:**

- Publics create a sense of homogenous empty time.
- Publics forge their own legitimacy through the medium of common discourse, without having to refer to a transcendent form of sovereignty from without (39).

# **Cody's conclusions**

The formation of publics raises serious questions about the ontological status of the political subject because the very capacity of publics to know themselves and act in the world is premised, not on the instrumental use of communication to represent that which is already there, but rather on recursive processes of mass-mediation and self-abstraction. The political subject of publicity is deeply entangled in the very technological, linguistic, and conceptual means of its own self-production. (47)



**Warner,**

**"Publics and  
Counterpublic**

# **A public, audience, the public**

- An audience is a bounded identifiable thing.
- "The public": "the only public that matters."
- "A public": one public among many

# **Qualities of publics**

1. A public is self-organized.
2. A public is a relation among strangers.
3. Public speech is both personal and impersonal.
4. A public is constituted through mere attention.
5. A public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse.

## **Further points from Warner:**

- It exists by virtue of being addressed (67).
- They are in principle open-ended (73).
- Public speech can have great urgency and intimate import. Yet we know that it was addressed not exactly to us but to the stranger we were until the moment we happened to be addressed by it. (76)

# Counterpublics

"Members of subordinated social groups — women, workers, people of color, and gays and lesbians — have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics..."

# Counterpublics defined

"Subaltern counterpublics" are "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs."

*(Warner 118, citing Nancy Fraser)*

## **Warner adds:**

A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status.

The discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternative idiom but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness. (119)

**Name a moment on campus when you felt  
moved...**

**by public speech with "great urgency and  
intimate import."**