



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Publics and Counterpublics

Michael Warner

Public Culture, Volume 14, Number 1, Winter 2002, pp. 49-90 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/26277>

---

## Publics and Counterpublics

*Michael Warner*

**T**his essay has a public. If you are reading (or hearing) this, you are part of its public. So first let me say: Welcome. Of course, you might stop reading (or leave the room), and someone else might start (or enter). Would the public of this essay therefore be different? Would it ever be possible to know anything about the public to which, I hope, you still belong?

What is a public? It is a curiously obscure question, considering that few things have been more important in the development of modernity. Publics have become an essential fact of the social landscape, and yet it would tax our understanding to say exactly what they are. Several senses of the noun *public* tend to be intermixed in usage. People do not always distinguish between *the* public and *a* public, although in some contexts this difference can matter a great deal.

*The* public is a kind of social totality. Its most common sense is that of the people in general. It might be the people organized as the nation, the commonwealth, the city, the state, or some other community. It might be very general, as in Christendom or humanity. But in each case the public, as a people, is thought to include everyone within the field in question. This sense of totality is brought out in speaking of the public, even though to speak of a national public implies that others exist; there must be as many publics as polities, but whenever one is addressed as *the* public, the others are assumed not to matter.

This essay has been abridged from the title essay of the volume *Publics and Counterpublics*, forthcoming from Zone Books. I thank the Center for Transcultural Studies.

*Public Culture* 14(1): 49–90

Copyright © 2002 by Duke University Press

A public can also be a second thing: a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space, as with a theatrical public. Such a public also has a sense of totality, bounded by the event or by the shared physical space. A performer on stage knows where her public is, how big it is, where its boundaries are, and what the time of its common existence is. A crowd at a sports event, a concert, or a riot might be a bit blurrier around the edges, but still knows itself by knowing where and when it is assembled in common visibility and common action.

I will return to both of these senses, but what I mainly want to clarify in this essay is a third sense of *public*: the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation—like the public of this essay. (Nice to have you with us, still.) The distinctions among these three senses are not always sharp and are not simply the difference between oral and written contexts. When an essay is read aloud as a lecture at a university, for example, the concrete audience of hearers understands itself as standing in for a more indefinite audience of readers. And often, when a form of discourse is not addressing an institutional or subcultural audience, such as members of a profession, its audience can understand itself not just as *a* public but as *the* public. In such cases, different senses of audience and circulation are in play at once. Examples like this suggest that it is worth understanding the distinctions better, if only because the transpositions among them can have important social effects.

The idea of *a* public, as distinct from both *the* public and any bounded audience, has become part of the common repertoire of modern culture. Everyone intuitively understands how it works. On reflection, however, its rules can seem rather odd. I would like to bring some of our intuitive understanding into the open in order to speculate about the history of the form and the role it plays in constructing our social world.

1. *A public is self-organized.*

A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists *by virtue of being addressed*.

A kind of chicken-and-egg circularity confronts us in the idea of a public. Could anyone speak publicly without addressing a public? But how can this public exist before being addressed? What would a public be if no one were addressing it? Can a public really exist apart from the rhetoric through which it is imagined? If you were to put down this essay and turn on the television, would my public be different? How can the existence of a public depend, from one point of

view, on the rhetorical address—and, from another point of view, on the real context of reception?

These questions cannot be resolved on one side or the other. The circularity is essential to the phenomenon. A public might be real and efficacious, but its reality lies in just this reflexivity by which an addressable object is conjured into being in order to enable the very discourse that gives it existence.

A public in this sense is as much notional as empirical. It is also partial, since there could be an infinite number of publics within the social totality. This sense of the term is completely modern; it is the only kind of public for which there is no other term. Neither *crowd* nor *audience* nor *people* nor *group* will capture the same sense. The difference shows us that the idea of a public, unlike a concrete audience or the public of any polity, is text-based—even though publics are increasingly organized around visual or audio texts. Without the idea of texts that can be picked up at different times and in different places by otherwise unrelated people, we would not imagine a public as an entity that embraces all the users of that text, whoever they might be. Often, the texts themselves are not even recognized as texts—as for example with visual advertising or the chattering of a DJ—but the publics they bring into being are still discursive in the same way.

The strangeness of this kind of public is often hidden from view because the assumptions that enable the bourgeois public sphere allow us to think of a discourse public as a people and, therefore, as an actually existing set of potentially enumerable humans. A public, in practice, appears as *the* public. It is easy to be misled by this appearance. Even in the blurred usage of the public sphere, a public is never just a congeries of people, never just the sum of persons who happen to exist. It must first of all have some way of organizing itself as a body and of being addressed in discourse. And not just any way of defining the totality will do. It must be organized by something other than the state.

Here we see how the autotelic circularity of the discourse public is not merely a puzzle for analysis, but also the crucial factor in the social importance of the form. A public organizes itself independently of state institutions, law, formal frameworks of citizenship, or preexisting institutions such as the church. If it were not possible to think of the public as organized independently of the state or other frameworks, the public could not be sovereign with respect to the state. So the modern sense of the public as the social totality in fact derives much of its character from the way we understand the partial publics of discourse, like the public of this essay, as self-organized. The way *the* public functions in the public sphere—as *the people*—is only possible because it is really *a* public of dis-

course. It is self-creating and self-organized, and herein lies its power as well as its elusive strangeness.

In the kind of modern society that the idea of publics has enabled, the self-organization of discourse publics has immense resonance from the point of view of individuals. Speaking, writing, and thinking involve us—actively and immediately—in a public, and thus in the being of the sovereign. Imagine how powerless people would feel if their commonality and participation were simply defined by pre-given frameworks, by institutions and law, as in other social contexts it is through kinship. What would the world look like if all ways of being public were more like applying for a driver's license or subscribing to a professional group—if, that is, formally organized mediations replaced the self-organized public as the image of belonging and common activity? Such is the image of totalitarianism: nonkin society organized by bureaucracy and the law. Everyone's position, function, and capacity for action are specified for her by administration. The powerlessness of the person in such a world haunts modern capitalism as well. Our lives are minutely administered and recorded to a degree unprecedented in history; we navigate a world of corporate agents that do not respond or act as people do. Our personal capacities, such as credit, turn out on reflection to be expressions of corporate agency. Without a faith—justified or not—in self-organized publics, organically linked to our activity in their very existence, capable of being addressed, and capable of action, we would be nothing but the peasants of capital—which of course we might be, and some of us more than others.

In the idea of a public, political confidence is committed to a strange and uncertain destination. Sometimes it can seem too strange. Often, one cannot imagine addressing a public capable of comprehension or action. This is especially true for people in minor or marginal positions, or people distributed across political systems. The result can be a kind of political depressiveness, a blockage in activity and optimism—a disintegration of politics toward isolation, frustration, anomie, forgetfulness. This possibility, never far out of the picture, reveals by contrast how much ordinary belonging requires confidence in a public. Confidence in the possibility of a public is not simply the professional habit of the powerful, of the pundits and wonks and reaction-shot secondary celebrities who try to perform our publicness for us; the same confidence remains vital for people whose place in public media is one of consuming, witnessing, griping, or gossiping rather than one of full participation or fame. Whether faith is justified or partly ideological, a public can only produce a sense of belonging and activity if it is self-organized through discourse rather than through an external framework. This is why any distortion or blockage in access to a public can be so grave, lead-

ing people to feel powerless and frustrated. Externally organized frameworks of activity, such as voting, are perceived to be (and are) a poor substitute.

Yet perhaps just because it does seem so important to belong to a public or to be able to know something about the public to which one belongs, such substitutes have been produced in abundance. People have tried hard to find or make some external way of identifying the public, of resolving its circularity into either chicken or egg. The idea that the public might be as changeable, and as unknowable, as the public of this essay (are you still with me?) seems to weaken the very political optimism that the accessibility of the public allows.

Pollsters and some social scientists think that their method is a way to define a public as a group that could be studied empirically, independently from its own discourse about itself. Early in the history of research in communications theory and public relations, it was recognized that such research was going to be difficult, since multiple publics exist and one can belong to many different publics simultaneously. Public opinion researchers have a long history of unsatisfying debate about this problem in method. What determines whether one belongs to a public or not? Space and physical presence do not make much difference; a public is understood to be different from a crowd, an audience, or any other group that requires co-presence. Personal identity does not in itself make one part of a public. Publics differ from nations, races, professions, or any other groups that, though not requiring co-presence, saturate identity. Belonging to a public seems to require at least minimal participation, even if it is patient or notional, rather than a permanent state of being. Merely paying attention can be enough to make you a member. How, then, could a public be quantified?<sup>1</sup>

Some have tried to define a public in terms of a common interest, speaking for example of a foreign-policy public or a sports public. But this way of speaking only pretends to escape the conundrum of the self-creating public. It is like explaining the popularity of films or novels as a response to market demand; the claim is circular because market “demand” is entirely inferred from the popularity of the works themselves. The idea of a common interest, like that of a market demand, appears to identify the social base of public discourse, but the base is in fact projected from the public discourse itself rather than being external to it.

Of all the contrivances designed to escape this circularity, the most powerful

1. An instructive review of the methodological problems posed by such a project can be found in *Communications and Public Opinion: A Public Opinion Quarterly Reader*, ed. Robert O. Carlson (New York: Praeger, 1975); see, in particular, Floyd D. Allport, “Toward a Science of Public Opinion,” and Harwood Childs, “By Public Opinion I Mean——.”

by far has been the invention of polling. Polling, together with related forms of market research, tries to tell us what the interests, desires, and demands of a public are without simply inferring them from public discourse. It is an elaborate apparatus designed to characterize a public as social fact independent of any discursive address or circulation. As Pierre Bourdieu pointed out, however, this method proceeds by denying the constitutive role of polling itself as a mediating form.<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas and others have further stressed that the device now systematically distorts the public sphere, producing something that passes as public opinion when in fact it results from a form that has none of the open-endedness, reflexive framing, or accessibility of public discourse. I would add that it lacks the embodied creativity and world-making of publicness. Publics have to be understood as mediated by cultural forms, even though some of those forms, such as polling, work by denying their own constitutive role as cultural forms. Publics do not exist apart from the discourse that addresses them. Are they therefore internal to discourse?

Literary studies has often understood a public as a rhetorical addressee, implied within texts. But the term is generally understood to name something about the text's worldliness, its actual destination—which may or may not resemble its addressee. Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, to take a famous example, remained addressed to his son even after Franklin severed relations with him and decided to publish the text; the public of the autobiography was crucially nonidentical with its addressee. Of course, one can distinguish in such a case between the nominal addressee and the implied addressee, but it is equally possible to distinguish between an implied addressee of rhetoric and a targeted public of circulation. That these are not identical is what allows people to shape the public by addressing it in a certain way. It also allows people to fail, if a rhetorical addressee is not picked up as the reflection of a public.

The sense that a public is a worldly constraint on speech, and not just a free creation of speech, gives plausibility to the opposite approach, that of the social sciences. The self-organized nature of the public does not mean that it is always spontaneous or organically expressive of individuals' wishes. In fact, although the premise of self-organizing discourse is necessary to the peculiar cultural artifact that we call a public, it is contradicted both by material limits—the means of production and distribution, the physical textual objects themselves, the social conditions of access to them—and by internal ones, including the need to pre-

2. The critique of polling appears in a number of contexts in Bourdieu's work; see "Opinion Polls: A 'Science' without a Scientist," in Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays toward a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990).

suppose forms of intelligibility already in place as well as the social closure entailed by any selection of genre, idiolect, style, address, and so forth. I will return to these constraints of circulation. For the moment I want to emphasize that they are made to seem arbitrary because of the performativity of public address and the self-organization implied by the idea of a public.

Another way of saying the same thing is that any empirical extension of the public will seem arbitrarily limited because the addressee of public discourse is always yet to be realized. In some contexts of speech and writing, both the rhetorical addressee and the public have a fairly clear empirical referent: in most paper correspondence and e-mail, in the reports and memos that are passed up and down bureaucracies, in love notes and valentines and Dear John letters, the object of address is understood to be an identifiable person or office. Even if that addressee already occupies a generalized role—for example, a personnel committee, or Congress, or a church congregation—it is definite, known, nameable, and enumerable. The interaction is framed by a social relationship. The concrete addressee in these cases is different from a public.

But for another class of writing contexts—including literary criticism, journalism, “theory,” advertising, fiction, drama, most poetry—the available addressees are essentially imaginary, which is not to say unreal. The people, scholarship, the Republic of Letters, posterity, the younger generation, the nation, the Left, the movement, the world, the vanguard, the enlightened few, right-thinking people everywhere, public opinion, the brotherhood of all believers, humanity, my fellow queers: these are all publics. They are in principle open-ended. They exist by virtue of their address.

Although such publics are imaginary, writing to a public is not imaginary in the same way as writing to Pinocchio is. All public addressees have some social basis. Their imaginary character is never merely a matter of private fantasy. (By the same token, *all* addressees are to some extent imaginary—even that of a journal, especially if one writes to one’s ideal self, one’s posthumous biographers, etc.) They fail if they have no reception in the world, but the exact composition of their addressed publics cannot entirely be known in advance. 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.

Let me call this a second defining premise of the modern idea of a public:

2. *A public is a relation among strangers.*

Other kinds of writing—writing that has a definite addressee who can be known in advance—can, of course, go astray. Writing to a public incorporates



that tendency of writing or speech as a condition of possibility. It cannot go astray in the same way because reaching strangers is its primary orientation. In modernity, this understanding of the public is best illustrated by uses of print or electronic media, but it can also be extended to scenes of audible speech, if that speech is oriented to indefinite strangers, once the crucial background horizon of “public opinion” and its social imaginary has been made available. We’ve become capable of recognizing ourselves as strangers even when we know each other. Declaiming this essay to a group of intimates, I could still be heard as addressing a public.

The orientation to strangers is in one sense implied by a public’s self-organization through discourse. A public sets its boundaries and its organization by its own discourse rather than by external frameworks only if it openly addresses people who are identified *primarily* through their participation in the discourse and who therefore cannot be known in advance. Indeed, a public might almost be said to be stranger-relationality in a pure form, because other ways of organizing strangers—nations, religions, races, guilds, and so on—have manifest positive content. They select strangers by criteria of territory or identity or belief or some other test of membership. One can address strangers in such contexts because a common identity has been established through independent means or institutions (e.g., creeds, armies, parties). A public, however, unites strangers through participation alone, at least in theory. Strangers come into relationship by its means, though the resulting social relationship might be peculiarly indirect and unspecifiable.

Once this kind of public is in place as a social imaginary, I might add, stranger-sociability inevitably takes on a different character. In modern society, a stranger is not as marvelously exotic as the wandering outsider would have been in an ancient, medieval, or early modern town. In that earlier social order, or in contemporary analogues, a stranger is mysterious, a disturbing presence requiring resolution.<sup>3</sup> In the context of a public, however, strangers can be treated as already belonging to our world. More: they *must* be. We are routinely oriented to them in common life. They are a normal feature of the social.

3. It is this ancient exotic that figures in Georg Simmel’s much-cited 1908 essay “The Stranger.” Simmel fails to distinguish between the stranger as represented by the trader or the Wandering Jew and the stranger whose presence in modernity is unremarkable, even necessary, to the nature of modern politics. One of the defining elements of modernity, in my view, is normative stranger-sociability, of a kind that seems to arise only when the social imaginary is defined not by kinship (as in nonstate societies) or by place (as in state societies until the advent of modernity), but by discourse. Simmel, “The Stranger,” in *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

Strangers in the ancient sense—foreign, alien, misplaced—might of course be located to a degree within Christendom, the *umma*, a guild, or an army—affiliations one might share with strangers, making them a bit less strange. Strangers placed by means of these affiliations are on a path to commonality. Publics orient us to strangers in a different way. They are no longer merely people-whom-one-does-not-yet-know; rather, it can be said that an environment of strangerhood is the necessary premise of some of our most prized ways of being. Where otherwise strangers need to be placed on a path to commonality, in modern forms strangerhood is the necessary medium of commonality. The modern social imaginary does not make sense without strangers. A nation, market, or public in which everyone could be known personally would be no nation, market, or public at all. This constitutive and normative environment of strangerhood is more, too, than an objectively describable *gesellschaft*; it requires our constant imagining.

The expansive force of these cultural forms cannot be understood apart from the way they make stranger-relationality normative, reshaping the most intimate dimensions of subjectivity around co-membership with indefinite persons in a context of routine action. The development of forms that mediate the intimate theater of stranger-relationality must surely be one of the most significant dimensions of modern history, though the story of this transformation in the meaning of the stranger has been told only in fragments. It is hard to imagine such abstract modes of being as rights-bearing personhood, species-being, and sexuality, for example, without forms that give concrete shape to the interactivity of those who have no idea with whom they are interacting. This dependence on the co-presence of strangers in our innermost activity, when we continue to think of strangerhood and intimacy as opposites, has at least some latent contradictions—many of which come to the fore, as we shall see, in counterpublic forms that make expressive corporeality the material for the elaboration of intimate life among publics of strangers.

The oddness of this orientation to strangers in public discourse can be understood better if we consider a third defining feature of discourse that addresses publics, one that follows from the address to strangers but is very difficult to describe:

3. *The address of public speech is both personal and impersonal.*

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. (I am thinking here of any genre addressed to a

public, including novels and lyrics as well as criticism, other nonfictional prose, and almost all genres of radio, television, film, and Web discourse.) To inhabit public discourse is to perform this transition continually, and to some extent it remains present to consciousness. Public speech must be taken in two ways: as addressed to us and as addressed to strangers. The benefit in this practice is that it gives a general social relevance to private thought and life. Our subjectivity is understood as having resonance with others, and immediately so. But this is only true to the extent that the trace of our strangerhood remains present in our understanding of ourselves as the addressee.

This necessary element of impersonality in public address is one of the things missed from view in the Althusserian notion of interpellation, at least as it is currently understood. Louis Althusser's famous example is speech addressed to a stranger: a policeman says, "Hey, you!" In the moment of recognizing oneself as the person addressed, the moment of turning around, one is interpellated as the subject of state discourse.<sup>4</sup> Althusser's analysis had the virtue of showing the importance of imaginary identification— and locating it, not in the coercive or punitive force of the state, but in the subjective practice of understanding. When the model of interpellation is extracted from his example to account for public culture generally, the analysis will be skewed because the case Althusser gives is not an example of public discourse. A policeman who says "Hey, you!" will be understood to be addressing a particular person, not a public. When one turns around, it is partly to see whether one is that person. If not, one goes on. If so, then all the others who might be standing on the street are bystanders, not addressees.

With public speech, by contrast, we might recognize ourselves as addressees, but it is equally important that we remember that the speech was addressed to indefinite others; that in singling us out, it does so not on the basis of our concrete identity, but by virtue of our participation in the discourse alone, and therefore in common with strangers. It isn't just that we are addressed in public as certain kinds of persons, or that we might not want to identify as that person (though this is also often enough the case, as when the public is addressed as heterosexual, or white, or sports-minded, or American). We haven't been misidentified, exactly. It seems more to the point to say that publics are different from persons, that the address of public rhetoric is never going to be the same as address to actual persons, and that our partial *nonidentity* with the object of address in public speech seems to be part of what it means to regard something as public speech.

4. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

It might be helpful to think of public address in contrast with gossip. Gossip might seem to be a perfect instance of public discourse. It circulates widely among a social network, beyond the control of private individuals. It sets norms of membership in a diffuse way that cannot be controlled by a central authority. For these reasons, a number of scholars have celebrated its potential for popular sociability and for the weak-group politics of women, peasants, and others.<sup>5</sup>

But gossip is never a relation among strangers. You gossip about particular people and to particular people. What you can get away with saying depends very much on whom you are talking to and what your status is in that person's eyes. Speak ill of someone when you are not thought to have earned the privilege and you will be taken as slandering rather than gossiping. Gossip circulates without the awareness of some people, and it must be prevented from reaching them in the wrong way. Intensely personal measurements of group membership, relative standing, and trust are the constant and unavoidable pragmatic work of gossip.<sup>6</sup>

The appeal to strangers in the circulating forms of public address thus helps us to distinguish public discourse from forms that address particular persons in their singularity. It remains less clear how a public could be translated into an image of *the* public, a social entity. Who is the public? Does it include my neighbors? The doorman in my building? My students? The people who show up in the gay bars and clubs? The bodega owners down the street from me? Someone who calls me on the phone or sends me an e-mail? You? We encounter people in such disparate contexts that the idea of a body to which they all belong, and in which they could be addressed in speech, seems to have something wishful about it. To address a public, we don't go around saying the same thing to all these people. We say it in a venue of indefinite address and hope that people will find themselves in it. The difference can be a source of frustration, but it is also an implication of the self-organization of the public as a body of strangers united through the circulation of their discourse. Without this indefinite and impersonal address, the public would have none of its special importance to modernity.

5. See, for example, Patricia Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Knopf, 1985), especially 121–46; and James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985).

6. "The right to gossip about certain people," Max Gluckman writes in a classic essay, "is a privilege which is only extended to a person when he or she is accepted as a member of a group or set. It is a hallmark of membership." Moreover, this kind of membership tends to presuppose others, such as kin groups, equally distant from stranger-sociability. "To be a Makah [the Northwest Amerindian group discussed by Gluckman] you must be able to join in the gossip, and to be fully a Makah you must be able to scandalize skillfully. This entails that you know the individual family histories of your fellows; for the knowledgeable can hit at you through your ancestry" ("Gossip and Scandal," *Current Anthropology* 4 [1963]: 313, 311).

The journalist Walter Lippmann picked up on the odd nature of public address when he complained that no one could possibly be the sort of creature that is routinely addressed as the public of politics: the fully informed, universally interested and attentive, vigilant, potent, and decisive citizen. “I have not happened to meet anybody, from a President of the United States to a professor of political science, who came anywhere near to embodying the accepted ideal of the sovereign and omniscient citizen.”<sup>7</sup> But it doesn’t follow that politicians and journalists should be more realistic in their address. To think so is to mistake the addressee of public speech for actual persons. Lippmann thought the appropriate response was an honest assessment of the actual reception of public discourse and, therefore, a more frankly elite administration:

We must assume as a theoretically fixed premise of popular government that normally men as members of a public will not be well informed, continuously interested, nonpartisan, creative or executive. We must assume that a public is inexperienced in its curiosity, intermittent, that it discerns only gross distinctions, is slow to be aroused and quickly diverted; that, since it acts by aligning itself, it personalizes whatever it considers, and is interested only when events have been melodramatized as a conflict.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, Lippmann cannot observe his own advice. Even in writing this passage, he writes to an alert and thoughtful public (“we,” he calls it) with an assumption of activity. Public discourse itself has a kind of personality different from that of the people who make up a public.

In this passage, Lippmann stumbles across another of the principal differences between a public and any already existing social group. A public is thought to be active, curious, alert. But actual people, he notices, are intermittent in their attention, only occasionally aroused, fitfully involved. He thinks this is a sad fact about the people’s character, comparing unfavorably with the greater energies of concentration that elites maintain in their engagement with public questions. But between ideally alert publics and really distracted people there will always be a gap—no matter what the social class or kind of public. This is because publics are only realized through active uptake.

4. *A public is constituted through mere attention.*

Most social classes and groups are understood to encompass their members all the time, no matter what. A nation, for example, includes its members whether

7. Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (1927; reprint, New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1993), 4–5, 10–11.

8. Lippmann, *Phantom Public*, 54–55.

they are awake or asleep, sober or drunk, sane or deranged, alert or comatose. Because a public exists only by virtue of address, it must predicate some degree of attention, however notional, from its members.

The cognitive quality of that attention is less important than the mere fact of active uptake. Attention is the principal sorting category by which members and nonmembers are discriminated. If you are reading this, or hearing it or seeing it or present for it, you are part of this public. You might be multitasking at the computer; the television might be on while you are vacuuming the carpet; or you might have wandered into hearing range of the speaker's podium in a convention hall only because it was on your way to the bathroom. No matter: by coming into range you fulfill the only entry condition demanded by a public. It is even possible for us to understand someone sleeping through a ballet performance as a member of that ballet's public because most contemporary ballet performances are organized as voluntary events, open to anyone willing to attend or, in most cases, to pay to attend. The act of attention involved in showing up is enough to create an addressable public. But some kind of active uptake—however somnolent—is indispensable.

The existence of a public is contingent on its members' activity, however notional or compromised, and not on its members' categorical classification, objectively determined position in social structure, or material existence. In the self-understanding that makes them work, publics thus resemble the model of voluntary association that is so important to civil society. Since the early modern period, more and more institutions have come to conform to this model. The old idea of an established national church, for example, allowed the church to address itself to parish members literate or illiterate, virtuous or vicious, competent or idiotic. Increasingly, churches in a multid denominational world must think of themselves instead as contingent on their members; they welcome newcomers, keep membership rolls, and solicit attention. Some doctrinal emphases, like those on faith or conversion, make it possible for churches to orient themselves to that active uptake on which they are increasingly dependent.

Still, one can join a church and then stop going. In some cases, one can even be born into one. Publics, by contrast, lacking any institutional being, commence with the moment of attention, must continually predicate renewed attention, and cease to exist when attention is no longer predicated. They are virtual entities, not voluntary associations. Because their threshold of belonging is an active uptake, however, they can be understood within the conceptual framework of civil society—that is, as having a free, voluntary, and active membership. Wherever a liberal conception of personality obtains, the moment of uptake that constitutes a

public can be seen as an expression of volition on the part of its members. And this fact has enormous consequences. It allows us to understand publics as scenes of self-activity, of historical rather than timeless belonging, and of active participation rather than ascriptive belonging. Under the right conditions, it even allows us to attribute agency to a public, even though that public has no institutional being or concrete manifestation. (More on this later.)

Public discourse craves attention like a child. Texts clamor at us. Images solicit our gaze. *Look here! Listen! Yo!* But in doing so, they by no means render us passive. Quite the contrary. The modern system of publics creates a demanding social phenomenology. Our willingness to process a passing appeal determines which publics we belong to and performs their extension. The experience of social reality at this level of modernity feels quite unlike that of contexts organized by kinship, hereditary status, local affiliation, mediated political access, parochial nativity, or ritual. In those settings, one's place in the common order is what it is regardless of one's inner thoughts, however intense their affective charge might sometimes be. The appellative energy of publics puts a different burden on us: it makes us believe our consciousness to be decisive. The direction of our glance can constitute our social world.

The themes I've discussed so far—the self-organization of publics through discourse, their orientation to strangers, the resulting ambiguity of personal and impersonal address, membership by mere attention—can be clarified if we remember their common assumption, which goes a long way toward explaining the historical development of the other four:

*5. A public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse.*

This dimension is easy to forget if we think only about a speech event involving speaker and addressee. In that localized exchange, circulation may seem irrelevant, extraneous. That is one reason why sender-receiver or author-reader models of public communication are so misleading. No single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, or even a single medium. All are insufficient to create the kind of reflexivity that we call a public, since a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse. It is not texts themselves that create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time. Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and a responding discourse be postulated, can a text address a public.

Between the discourse that comes before and the discourse that comes after, one must postulate some kind of link. And the link has a social character; it is not mere consecutiveness in time, but a context of interaction. The usual way of

imagining the interactive character of public discourse is through metaphors of conversation, answering, talking back, deliberating. The interactive social relation of a public, in other words, is perceived as though it were a dyadic speaker-hearer or author-reader relation. Argument and polemic, as manifestly dialogic genres, continue to have a privileged role in the self-understanding of publics; and indeed, it is remarkable how little even the most sophisticated forms of theory have been able to disentangle public discourse from its self-understanding as conversation.<sup>9</sup>

In addressing a public, however, even texts of the most rigorously argumentative and dialogic genres also address onlookers, not just parties to argument. They try to characterize the field of possible interplay. When appearing in a public field, genres of argument and polemic must accommodate themselves to the special conditions of public address: the agonistic interlocutor is coupled with passive interlocutors; known enemies with indifferent strangers; parties present to a dialogue situation with parties whose textual location might be in other genres or scenes of circulation entirely. The meaning of any utterance depends on what is known and anticipated from all these different quarters. In public argument or polemic, the principal act is that of projecting the field of argument itself—its genres, its range of circulation, its stakes, its idiom, its repertoire of agencies. Any position is reflexive, not only asserting itself, but also characterizing its relation to other positions up to limits that compass the imagined scene of circulation. The interactive relation postulated in public discourse, in other words, goes far beyond the scale of conversation or discussion, to encompass a multigeneric lifeworld organized not just by a relational axis of utterance and response, but by potentially infinite axes of citation and characterization.

Anything that addresses a public is meant to undergo circulation. This helps us to understand why print, and the organization of markets for print, were historically so central in the development of the public sphere. But print is neither necessary nor sufficient for publication in the modern sense; not every genre of print can organize the space of circulation. The particularly addressed genres listed earlier—correspondence, memos, valentines, bills—are not expected to circulate (indeed, circulating them can be not just strange but highly unethical), and that is why they cannot be said to be oriented to a public.

Circulation also accounts for the way a public seems both internal and external

9. For an example of a promising and rich analysis marred by this misapprehension, see Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Eliasoph's stated but unexamined ideal is that of a continuity of *discussion* from small-scale interaction to the highest organizing levels of politics.



to discourse, both notional and material. From the concrete experience of a world in which available forms circulate, one projects a public. And both the known and unknown are essential to the process. The unknown element in the addressee enables a hope of transformation; the known, a scene of practical possibility. Writing to a public helps to make a world, insofar as the object of address is brought into being partly by postulating and characterizing it. This performative ability depends, however, on that object's being not entirely fictitious—not postulated merely, but recognized as a real path for the circulation of discourse. That path is then treated as a social entity.

The ability to address the world made up by the circulation of cross-referencing discourse seems to have developed over a long period in the West, at least from the late sixteenth century to the late eighteenth. In the English case, for example, many of the promotional tracts for the colonization of the New World address a world of potential investors or supporters who are understood to have been addressed by competing representations. (That is why so many are called “A True Discourse,” “A True Report,” etc.) Yet these same tracts tend to regard this as an unnatural and unfortunate condition that could be righted by properly authoritative and true testimony. Eventually, it became possible to thematize circulation, to regard it as an essential fact of common life, and to organize a social imaginary in which it would be regarded as normative.

It is possible to see this cultural formation emerging in England in the seventeenth century. Let me offer a curious example: a report from the reign of Charles II, in 1670, of the activities in two Whig booksellers' shops. It is an interesting example because the (presumably) royalist author of the report regards those activities with suspicion, to say the least. He describes public discourse without any of the normative self-understanding of public discourse. “Every afternoon,” the report says, the shops receive from all over the city accounts of news (“all novells and occurrents so penned as to make for the disadvantage of the King and his affairs”), written reports of resolution and speeches in Parliament, and speeches on topics of public business. These reports are made available to the booksellers' regular clients, who, according to the report, include young lawyers (“who here generally receive their tincture and corruption”), “ill-affected citizens of all sorts,” “ill-affected gentry,” and “emissaries and agents of the severall parties and factions about town.” The reports and speeches available for these readers were all registered in a central catalog and could be ordered individually from the copyists.

Against the time of their coming the Masters of those Shops have a grand book or books, wherein are registered ready for them, all or most of the

forenamed particulars; which they dayly produce to those sorts of people to be read, and then, if they please, they either carry away copies, or bespeak them against another day.

The circulation of the scribal reports went beyond London, too.

They take care to communicate them by Letter all over the kingdome, and by conversation throughout the City and suburbs. The like industry is used by the masters of those shops, who together with their servants are every afternoon and night busied in transcribing copies, with which they drive a trade all over the kingdome.<sup>10</sup>

The two booksellers of the account were producing a market, in what sounds like a very busy entrepreneurial scene. Some of the elements in the account suggest the norms of the emergent public sphere: the scribal trade promotes private discussion of common concerns; it stands in opposition to power (although here that is regarded as “disaffection” rather than as a normative role for criticism); and it occupies metatopical secular space.<sup>11</sup> It is not clear from this account whether the participants understood their relation to one another as a relation to a public. (It is somewhat unlikely that they did; one scholar, claiming that “there was as yet no ‘public,’” notes that “Dryden always uses the word ‘people’ where we should now say ‘public.’”<sup>12</sup>) The genres circulated in this report are themselves mostly familiar ones of correspondence and speeches, both of which have specific addressees. What is striking, though, is the clarity with which we can see in this account the scene of circulation that is presupposed by the idea of a public. And curiously, it is not simply a scene of print, but of scribal copying. That may be one reason why the scene is so scandalous to the informer. The circulatory practices are thought to be illegitimate uses of their genres and modes of address.

In a study that was published ten years ago, I argued that the consciousness of the public in public address developed as a new way of understanding print, in the context of a republican political language that served as a metalanguage for print. (This consciousness of public address could then be extended to scenes of speech such as political sermons.) Reading printed texts in this context, we incor-

10. Quoted in Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 20–21.

11. On the necessity of any public’s being metatopical, see Charles Taylor, “Modern Social Imaginaries,” in this issue.

12. Alexandre Beljame, *Men of Letters and the English Public in the Eighteenth Century, 1660–1744: Dryden, Addison [and] Pope*, trans. Emily Overend Lorimer (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1948), 130.

porate an awareness of the indefinite others to whom it is addressed as part of the meaning of its printedness.<sup>13</sup> I now see that in making this argument I missed a crucial element in the perception of publicness. In order for a text to be public, we must recognize it not simply as a diffusion to strangers, but also as a temporality of circulation.

The informer's report makes this temporal dimension clear, calling attention not just to the (possibly seditious) connections forged among strangers, but also to the punctual circulation that turns those exchanges into a scene with its own expectations. Reports are said to come in "every afternoon" and are indexed regularly. Customers come or send their agents daily for copies, according to rhythms that are widely known and relied upon. We are not seeing simply a bookseller distributing copies far and wide; rather, it is a regular flow of discourse in and out, punctuated by daily rhythms and oriented to that punctuality as to news ("novells and occurrents"). Circulation organizes time. Public discourse is contemporary, and it is oriented to the future; the contemporaneity and the futurity in question are those of its own circulation.

The key development in the emergence of modern publics was the appearance of newsletters and other temporally structured forms oriented to their own circulation: not just controversial pamphlets, but regular and dated papers, magazines, almanacs, annuals, and essay serials. They developed reflexivity about their circulation through reviews, reprintings, citation, controversy. These forms single out circulation both through their sense of temporality and through the way they allow discourse to move in different directions. I don't speak just to you; I speak to the public in a way that enters a cross-citational field of many other people speaking to the public.

The temporality of circulation is not continuous or indefinite; it is punctual. There are distinct moments and rhythms, from which distance in time can be measured. Papers and magazines are dated, and when they first appear, they are news. Reviews appear with a sense of timeliness. At a further remove, there are now regular publishing seasons with their cycles of catalogs and marketing campaigns. The exception might seem to be televisual media, given the enormous significance attributed to their liveness and "flow"—formally salient features of so much broadcasting, whereby televisual forms are understood to have a greater immediacy than codex or other text formats. Yet even with television, punctual rhythms of daily and weekly emission are still observed; think of all its

13. Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

serial forms and marked rhythms such as prime time, the news hour, and the like.<sup>14</sup>

Reflexive circulation might come about in any number of ways. In the French context, as in England, it appeared first in print serial forms. *Le Mercure galant*, a newspaper edited by Donneau de Visé, seems to have pioneered many of the devices of reflexive circulation in the late 1670s, including published reader letters and a rhetoric of readerly judgment.<sup>15</sup> In this case, the idea that readers participated in the circulation of judgments, thought at the time by Jean de La Bruyère and others to have been a solecism,<sup>16</sup> gradually drew the sense of the term *public* away from the image of a passive theatrical audience. For the Abbé Du Bos in 1719, “The word *public* is used here to mean those persons who have acquired enlightenment, either through reading or through life in society [*le commerce du monde*]. They are the only ones who can determine the value of poems or paintings.”<sup>17</sup> In France, this sense of a critical public did not easily transfer to politics since legitimate printed news was almost nonexistent under the ancien régime. Yet, as Robert Darnton has shown, eighteenth-century Paris gave rise to countless other forms of reflexive circulation. Many of them were known by names that “are unknown today and cannot be translated into English equivalents”: *nouvelliste de bouche*, *mauvais propos*, *bruit public*, *on-dit*, *pasquinade*, *Pont Neuf*, *canard*, *feuille volante*, *factum*, *libelle*, *chronique scandaleuse*. More familiar genres, such as popular songs, seem to have circulated in uniquely

14. See Jane Feuer, “The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology,” in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1983), 15: “Television becomes a continuous, never-ending sequence in which it is impossible to separate out individual texts. . . . Indeed the ‘central fact’ of television may be that it is designed to be watched intermittently, casually, and without full concentration.”

15. See Joan De Jean, *Ancients against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 31–77. De Jean (in my view mistakenly) thinks her argument contradicts Habermas’s history: “In the case of *le public* . . . the terminology was not, as the Habermasian view would have it, primarily evocative of a ‘medium of political confrontation’ constructed ‘against the public authorities themselves’ for the purpose of generating ‘debate over . . . the sphere of commodity exchange and social labor.’ Instead, the modern vocabulary of public exchange was initially most remarkable for its connotations of a sphere in which a socially and sexually diverse audience debated for the first time the meaning and the function of public culture” (*Ancients against Moderns*, xv).

16. De Jean, *Ancients against Moderns*, 58.

17. Abbé (Jean-Baptiste) Du Bos, *Réflexions critiques sur la peinture et sur la poésie* (1719), quoted in De Jean, *Ancients against Moderns*, 64. Antoine Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel des art et des sciences* (1690) already has the sense of a public not just as an audience or theatrical public, but as a public of readers. “An author gives his works to the public when he has them printed.” De Jean, *Ancients against Moderns*, 36.

Parisian ways.<sup>18</sup> The differences between these genres and their Anglo-American counterparts say much about the difference between the corresponding senses of public life, its legitimacy, and the conditions under which agency might be attributed to a public. Nevertheless, they were forms for giving reflexivity to a field of circulation among strangers in punctual rhythms.

6. *Publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation.*

The punctual rhythm of circulation is crucial to the sense that ongoing discussion unfolds in a sphere of activity. It is not timeless, like meditation; nor is it without issue, like speculative philosophy. Not all circulation happens at the same rate, of course, and this accounts for the dramatic differences among publics in their relation to possible scenes of activity. A public can only act within the temporality of the circulation that gives it existence. The more punctual and abbreviated the circulation, and the more discourse indexes the punctuality of its own circulation, the closer a public stands to politics. At longer rhythms or more continuous flows, action becomes harder to imagine. This is the fate of academic publics, a fact very little understood when academics claim by intention or proclamation to be doing politics. In modernity, politics takes much of its character from the temporality of the headline, not the archive.

Publics have an ongoing life: one doesn't publish to them once and for all (as one does, say, to a scholarly archive). It's the way texts circulate, and become the basis for further representations, that convinces us that publics have activity and duration. A text, to have a public, must continue to circulate through time, and because this can be confirmed only through an intertextual environment of citation and implication, all publics are intertextual, even intergeneric. This is often missed from view because the activity and duration of publics are commonly stylized as conversation or decision-making. I have already suggested that these are misleading ideologizations. Now we can see why they are durable illusions: because they confer agency on publics. There is no moment at which the conversation stops and a decision ensues, outside of elections, and those are given only by legal frameworks, not by publics themselves. Yet the ideologization is crucial to the sense that publics act in secular time. To sustain this sense, public discourse indexes itself temporally with respect to moments of publication and a common calendar of circulation.

One way that the Internet and other new media may be profoundly changing the public sphere, by the way, is through the change they imply in temporality.

18. Robert Darnton, "Paris: The Early Internet," *New York Review of Books*, 29 June 2000, 43.

Highly mediated and highly capitalized forms of circulation are increasingly organized as continuous (“24/7 Instant Access”) rather than punctual.<sup>19</sup> At the time of this writing, Web discourse has very little of the citational field that would allow us to speak of it as discourse unfolding through time. Once a Web site is up, it can be hard to tell how recently it was posted or revised, or how long it will continue to be posted. Most sites are not archived. For the most part, they are not centrally indexed. The reflexive apparatus of Web discourse consists mostly of hypertext links and search engines, and these are not punctual. So although there are exceptions—including the migration of some print serials to electronic format and the successful use of the Web by some social movements—the extent to which developments in technology will be assimilable to the temporal framework of public discourse remains unclear.<sup>20</sup> If the change of infrastructure continues at this pace, and if modes of apprehension change accordingly, the absence of punctual rhythms may make it very difficult to connect localized acts of reading to the modes of agency that prevail within the social imaginary of modernity. It may even be necessary to abandon “circulation” as an analytic category. But here I merely offer this topic for speculation.

Until recently, at least, public discourse has presupposed daily and weekly rhythms of circulation. It has also presupposed an ability—natural to moderns, but rather peculiar if one thinks about it at all—to address this scene of circulation as a social entity. The clearest example, or at any rate the most eloquent, is the *Spectator*, which ran from 1711 to 1714, some forty years after the report of the Whig booksellers. Like the booksellers’ newsletters, the *Spectator* was a daily form, widely and industriously circulated.<sup>21</sup> “To be Continued every Day,” announced the first number, which was designed to look like the newspapers of the day even though, as no. 262 declares, the paper “has not in it a single Word of News.”<sup>22</sup>

19. Eyal Amiran discusses the temporality of electronic media, in a way that differs substantially from mine, in “Electronic Time and the Serials Revolution,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 10 (1997): 445–54.

20. This change is difficult to assess, not simply because the effects of change in the medium have yet to become visible, but because the infrastructure of the medium is itself changing. On this problem, the best account I know is Lawrence Lessig, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). Lessig’s book, though focused on the legal regulation of cyberspace, also raises important topics for the more general discussion of new media and their social implications.

21. Not a weekly, as Habermas mistakenly asserts. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

22. This and all subsequent excerpts from the *Spectator* are taken from the five-volume edition by Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965). Excerpts are identified by their issue number, supplemented where necessary by their volume and page numbers in this edition.

The *Spectator* followed a model worked out by John Dunton, whose *Athenian Mercury* in 1691 was the first to print regular correspondence from readers it allowed to remain anonymous.<sup>23</sup> The *Spectator* developed a rhetoric that gave a new normative force to Dunton's methods. It ostentatiously avoids political polemic. Unlike the output of the Whig booksellers in the 1670 report, it could not be characterized as seditious; yet it describes its readers as an active public, a critical tribunal. Readers are called upon to pass informed and reflective judgment on fashion, taste, manners, and gender relations. The procedure of impersonal discussion gives private matters full public relevance, while allowing participants in that discussion to enjoy the kind of generality that had formerly been the privilege of the state or the church. The *Spectator* claims to be general, addressing everyone merely on the basis of humanity. It is the voice of civil society.<sup>24</sup>

Like Dunton's *Athenian Mercury*, but deploying a much richer formal vocabulary, the *Spectator* developed a reflexivity about its own circulation, coordinating its readers' relations to other readers. It does not merely assert the fact of public circulation, although it does frequently allude to its own popularity; it includes feedback loops, both in the letters from readers real and imagined, and in the members of the club and other devices. Essays refer to previous essays and to the reception of those essays; installments end with, and are sometimes wholly given over to, letters that are, or purport to be, the responses of readers. The fictional persona of the Spectator himself represents the embodiment of a private reader: an observant but perversely mute wanderer ("I am frequently seen in the most publick Places, tho' there are not above half a dozen of my select Friends that know me" [*Spectator*, no. 1], the essential stranger, "Mr. *what-d'ye-call-him*" [no. 4], witnessing in dumb privacy the whole social field, combining "all the Advantages of Company with all the Privileges of Solitude" [no. 131]). His club represents a model of the male reception context (constantly in need of supple-

23. Kathryn Shevelov, *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical* (London: Routledge, 1989). Shevelov treats reader correspondence and "audience production of the text" at 37–42; the development of "audience-building" at 61–66; and the importance of anonymity at 71–74.

24. For a somewhat different analysis along these lines, see Scott Black, "Eighteenth-Century Print Culture: Social and Literary Form in the *Spectator*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33 (1999): 21–42. I have also found much insightful discussion in Michael G. Ketcham, *Transparent Designs: Reading, Performance, and Form in the Spectator Papers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985). Other pertinent treatments of the *Spectator* can be found in Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, eds., *Addison and Steele, the Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); and Bloom and Bloom, *Joseph Addison's Sociable Animal: In the Market Place, on the Hustings, in the Pulpit* (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1971).



mentation by accounts of and letters from female readers). One is continually reminded of “this great City inquiring Day by Day after these my Papers” (no. 10). A repertoire of highly temporalized affects and interests—scandal, fascination, fashion, news addiction, mania, curiosity—is projected as the properties, not only of individuals, but of the scene of circulation itself, without which such affects would lack resonance. This rhetoric represents the subjective mode of being attributed to the public. It describes private and individual acts of reading, but in such a way as to make temporally indexed circulation among strangers the immanent meaning and emotional resonance of those reading acts.

Among early modern organs of print, the *Spectator* first perfected the representation of its own circulation. It marked the emergence of a standard that can now be taken for granted: that public discourse must be circulated, not just emitted in one direction. Even mass media, which because of their heavy capitalization are conspicuously asymmetrical, take care to fake a reciprocity that they must overcome in order to succeed. Contemporary mass media have even more elaborate devices of the kind that Joseph Addison and Richard Steele developed in the *Spectator*: viewer mail, call-in shows, 900-number polling, home video shows, game show contestants, town meetings, studio audiences, and man-on-the-street interviews are some examples. These genres create feedback loops to characterize their own space of consumption. As with the *Spectator*, reflexivity is managed through affect and idiom as well; the *Spectator* essays comment on slang (e.g., *jilts*) in a way that attributes to folk usage the same historical present tense as the essays’ circulation.<sup>25</sup> Mass culture laces its speech with catchphrases that suture it to informal speech, even though those catchphrases are often common in informal speech only because they were picked up from mass texts in the first place. In the United States, sports metaphors are obvious examples, as when politicians describe their speeches or proposals as slam dunks or home runs.

Sometimes the layering of reflexive postures toward circulation can be dizzyingly complex, as happened in 2001 when Budweiser advertisements turned the black street greeting “Whassup?” into a slogan. This “signature catch phrase,” as the *New York Times* called it, once broadcast, could subsequently be “joked about on talk shows, parodied on Web sites, and mimicked in other commercials.” Ironically, all this repetition of “Whassup?” was understood not as new tokens of the street greeting itself, but as references to the commercial. A relation to the mass circulation of the phrase came to be part of the meaning of the phrase. That this should happen, moreover, was the deliberate design of the advertising firm that

25. Ketcham describes this phenomenon in *Transparent Designs*, 130.



designed the commercial—in this case, one DDB Worldwide, part of what is called “the Omnicom Group.”

The team uses sophisticated research and old-fashioned legwork—like checking out new art forms or going to underground film festivals—to anticipate what is about to become hip to its target audience of mostly men in their 20’s and 30’s. The language, styles and attitudes it finds are then packaged in ad campaigns that are broadcast so often that they become part of the public consciousness.<sup>26</sup>

The company sells this circulatory effect to its clients as “talk value.” When office workers use catchphrases to joke around the coffee machine, they unwittingly realize the talk value that has already been sold to the corporation whose products were advertised. Indeed, DDB Worldwide has registered the phrase *talk value* as a trademark. As the phrase suggests, talk value allows a structured but mobile interplay between the reflexivity of publics (the talk) and the reflexivity of capital (the value). Neither is reducible to the other, and the DDB strategy works only if the relation between the popular idiom and the sale of beer is indirect, a process of mutual feedback experienced by individuals as a medium for improvisation.

Public reflexivity and market reflexivity have been interarticulated in a variety of ways from the beginning. In the case of the Whig booksellers, consciousness of a public created a new and expansive circulation for text commodities. With the *Spectator*, a greater range of dialectical stances opened up as the reflex consciousness of a public turned its critical attention on the reflex consumption of commodities in such forms as fashion. In contemporary mass culture, the play between these different ways of rendering the field of circulation reflexive has created countless nuances for the performance of subjectivity. To take only the

26. Patricia Winters Lauro, “Whassup? America’s Asking,” *New York Times*, 16 February 2001, C1, C4.

After being beamed up to an alien spaceship, a family pet takes off his dog suit to reveal that he is an alien creature himself. “What have you learned?” his leader asks. The creature pauses to think, then responds “Whassup?” with his tongue lolling out of his mouth. . . . The Whassup campaign has won practically every award in advertising, including the prestigious international Grand Prix. . . . And, most important to Anheuser-Busch, the nation’s largest brewer, the campaign has helped it sell more beer, not just Budweiser but its light beer, Bud Light. The company’s worldwide sales grew by 2.4 million barrels, to 99.2 million barrels last year, according to Beer Marketer’s Insights, a trade newsletter in Nanuet, N.Y.

Note, by the way, the *Times*’s headline to the story. The idea that all this circulation can be heard as “America” talking is the distinctive contribution made by news media in the layering of reflexivity on a circulation in which, after all, the *Times* story is otherwise merely one more example.

most obvious examples, we speak of a “mainstream,” of “alternative” culture, of “crossover” trends, naming and evaluating stylistic affinities by characterizing the field in which they circulate.

Talk value has an affective quality. You don’t just mechanically repeat signature catchphrases. You perform through them your social placement. Different social styles can be created through different levels of reflexivity in this performance. Too obvious parroting of catchphrases—for example, walking into the office on the morning after Budweiser runs its commercial and grabbing the first opportunity to say “Whassup?”—can mark you in some contexts as square, unhip, a passive relay in the circulation. In other contexts, it could certify you as one of the gang, showing that you too were watching the show with everyone else. Stylistic affinities can perform many functions, of course, but in mass culture they always involve adopting a stance toward the field of their circulation. Characterizations of that field are the stuff of performed stances that can range from immersion to irony or even aggressivity, in a way that always has some affective charge—hipness, normalcy, hilarity, currency, quaintness, freakishness, and so on. What is called “vernacular” performance is therefore in reality structured by a continually shifting field of artfulness in managing the reflexivity of mass circulation. (Many U.S. critics, seeing only one side of this process, like to interpret such artfulness as evidence of a folk or popular style in the “appropriation” of mass culture; for them, this counts as evidence against the Frankfurt School analysis of mass culture.)

The use of such pseudovernaculars or metavernaculars helps create the impression of a vital feedback loop despite the immense asymmetry of production and reception that defines mass culture. It helps sustain the legitimating sense that mass texts move through a space that is, after all, an informal life-world. That the maintenance of this feedback circuit so often takes the form of humor suggests that, as with all joking, there is a lively current of unease powering the wit. Unease, perhaps, on both sides of the recurring dialectic: to be hip is to fear the mass circulation that feeds on hipness and which, in turn, makes it possible; while to be normal (in the “mainstream”) is to have anxiety about the counterpublics that define themselves through performances so distinctively embodied that one cannot lasso them back into general circulation without risking the humiliating exposure of inauthenticity.

Number 34 of the *Spectator*, by Steele, neatly illustrates how these feedback provisions combine with the punctual temporality of the daily form and an emergent ideology of polite sociability to produce the understanding of a public structured by its own discourse:

The Club of which I am a Member, is very luckily compos'd of such Persons as are engag'd in different Ways of Life, and deputed as it were out of the most conspicuous Classes of Mankind: By this Means I am furnish'd with the greatest Variety of Hints and Materials, and know every thing that passes in the different Quarters and Divisions, not only of this great City, but of the whole Kingdom. My Readers too have the Satisfaction to find, that there is no Rank or Degree among them who have not their Representative in this Club, and that there is always some Body present who will take Care of their respective Interests, that nothing may be written or publish'd to the Prejudice or Infringement of their just Rights and Privileges.

Mr. Spectator relates that the members of the club have been relaying to him "several Remarks which they and others had made upon these my Speculations, as also with the various Success which they had met with among their several Ranks and Degrees of Readers." They act as his field reporters, allowing the Spectator to reflect on his own reception.

What follows is a fable of reading. Will Honeycomb, the ladies' man, reports that some ladies of fashion have been offended by criticisms of their taste; Andrew Freeport, the merchant, responds that those criticisms were well deserved, unlike those directed against merchants; the Templar defends those, but objects to satires of the Inns of Court, and so on. Every member of the Club inflects his reception of the essays with the interests that define the social class of which he is a typification. In the aggregate, each cancels out the others. It is left to the clergyman—a character who scarcely appears anywhere else in the essay series—to explain "the Use this Paper might be of to the Publick" precisely in challenging the interests of the orders and ranks. The result is a sense of a *general* public, by definition not embodied in any person or class, but realized by the scene of circulation as the reception context of a common object.

"In short," concludes Mr. Spectator, "If I meet with any thing in City, Court, or Country, that shocks Modesty or good Manners, I shall use my utmost Endeavours to make an Example of it." He continues:

I must however intreat every particular Person, who does me the Honour to be a Reader of this Paper, never to think himself, or any one of his Friends or Enemies, aimed at in what is said: For I promise him, never to draw a faulty Character which does not fit at least a Thousand People; or to publish a single Paper, that is not written in the Spirit of Benevolence and with a Love to Mankind.

Steele here coaches his readers in the personal/impersonal generic conventions of public address: I never speak to you without speaking to a thousand others. This form of address is tightly knit up with a social imaginary: any character or trait I depict typifies a whole social stratum. Individual readers who participate in this discourse learn to place themselves, as characterized types, in a world of urbane social knowledge, while also detaching themselves ethically from the particular interests that typify them—turning themselves, by means of a “Spirit of Benevolence” and “Love of Mankind,” into the reading subjects of a widely circulating form.

And not just reading subjects. The achievement of this cultural form is to allow participants in its discourse to understand themselves as directly and actively belonging to a social entity that exists historically in secular time and has consciousness of itself—although it has no existence outside of the activity of its own discursive circulation. In some contexts, this form can even be understood to act in the world, to claim moral authority, to be sovereign. To be sure, a great deal must be postulated in order for it to work in the world: not only the material conditions of a circulating medium, but also corresponding reading or consuming practices as well as the sort of social imaginary in which stranger-sociability could become ordinary, valuable, and in some ways normative. Such a normative horizon was, by the historical point marked by the *Spectator*, well articulated in England. An ethical disposition, a social imaginary, an extremely specialized set of formal conventions, and a temporality—each could seem to imply and follow from the others.

The discourse of a public is a linguistic form from which the social conditions of its own possibility are in large part derived. The magic by which discourse conjures a public into being, however, remains imperfect because of how much it must presuppose. And because many of the defining elements in the self-understanding of publics are to some extent always contradicted by practice, the sorcerer must continually cast spells against the darkness. A public seems to be self-organized by discourse, but in fact requires preexisting forms and channels of circulation. It appears to be open to indefinite strangers, but in fact selects participants by criteria of shared social space (though not necessarily territorial space), habitus, topical concerns, intergeneric references, and circulating intelligible forms (including idiolects or speech genres).

These criteria inevitably have positive content. They enable confidence that the discourse will circulate along a real path, but they limit the extension of that path. Discourse addressed to a public seeks to extend its circulation—otherwise, the public dwindles to a group—yet the need to characterize the space of circu-

lation means that the public is also understood as having the content and differentiated belonging of a group, rather than simply being open to the infinite and unknowable potential of circulation. Reaching strangers is public discourse's primary orientation, but to be a public these unknowns must also be locatable as a social entity, even a social agent. Public discourse circulates, but it does so in struggle with its own conditions.

The *Spectator* is understood as circulating to indefinite strangers, but of course the choice of language and the organization of markets for print make it seem natural that those strangers will be English. The closing peroration of the essay cited above coaches its readers in an ethical disposition of impartial publicness; but it is also the ethos of a social class. The essay's style—a landmark in the history of English prose—moderates all the interests and characters of its reception context, enabling a voice that can simultaneously address the merchant, the squire, the courtier, the servant, the lady; but it is also the marker of a social type (masculine, bourgeois, moral urbanity) itself. In these and similar ways, although the language addresses an impersonal, indefinite, and self-organized expanse of circulation, it also elaborates (and masks as unmarked humanity) a particular culture, its embodied way of life, its reading practices, its ethical conventions, its geography, its class and gender dispositions, and its economic organization (in which the serial essay circulates as it does because it is, after all, a commodity within a market).

The *Spectator* is not unusual in having these limitations. If anything, it is unusual in the degree of its social porousness, the range of voices that it makes audible, and the number of contexts that it opens for transformation. Even in the best of cases, some friction inevitably obtains between public discourse and its environment, given the circularity in the conventions and postulates that make the social imaginary of the public work. To some degree, this friction is unavoidable because of the chicken-and-egg problem with which I began: the imaginary being of the public must be projected from already circulating discourse.

One result is a special kind of politics, a kind that is difficult to grasp in terms of the usual framework of politics as a field of interested strategic actors in specific relations of power and subordination. In such a framework, the contradiction between the idea of a public and its realization might be said to be more or less ideological. Evidence will not be wanting for such a view. When, in *Spectator* no. 34, the reading audience is characterized as “Mankind,” we have a rather obvious example.<sup>27</sup> Because the positive identity of a public always remains partly covert

27. Paula McDowell, in her otherwise excellent study *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace, 1678–1730* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), goes so far

—given the premises of address to strangers, self-organization through discourse, and membership through mere attention—the limitations imposed by its speech genres, medium, and presupposed social base will always be in conflict with its own enabling postulates. When any public is taken to be *the* public, those limitations invisibly order the political world.

Many critiques of the idea of the public in modern thought rest on this covert content. It is one of the things people have in mind when they say, for example, that the public is essentially white or essentially male.<sup>28</sup> It has become customary, in the wake of arguments over Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, to lament or protest the arbitrary closures of the publics that came into being with the public sphere as their background. The peculiar dynamic of postulation and address by which public speech projects the social world has been understood mainly in terms of ideology, domination, or exclusion. And with reason—the history of the public sphere abounds with evidence of struggle for domination through this means and the resulting bad faith of the dominant public culture. What the critiques tend to miss, however, is that the tension inherent in the form goes well beyond any strategy of domination. The projection of a public is a new, creative, and distinctively modern mode of power.

One consequence of this tension in the laws of public discourse is a problem of style. In addressing indefinite strangers, public discourse puts a premium on accessibility. But there is no infinitely accessible language, and to imagine that there should be is to miss other, equally important needs of publics: to concretize the world in which discourse circulates, to offer its members direct and active membership through language, to place strangers on a shared footing. For these purposes language must be concrete, making use of the vernaculars of its circulatory space. So in publics, a double movement is always at work. Styles are mobilized, but they are also framed as styles. Sometimes the framing is hierarchical, a relation of marked to unmarked. Sometimes the result can be more relativizing. Quite commonly, the result can be a double-voiced hybrid. The differential

---

as to depict the representational conventions of the *Spectator* as a strategy for displacing and silencing the female authors with whom Addison and Steele were in competition—an interpretation that has some force, but in my view misses the distinctive features of the public as a form and shows the limiting effect of our conception of politics as strategic.

28. See, for example, Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988); and the essays by Mary Ryan, Nancy Fraser, and Geoff Eley in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992). On Landes's claim that the public sphere was "essentially, not just contingently, masculinist," see Keith Michael Baker's astute discussion in "Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France," in Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*.

deployment of style is essential to the way public discourse creates the consciousness of stranger-sociability. In this, it closely resembles the kind of double-voicing of speech genres classically analyzed by Mikhail Bakhtin: “For the speakers . . . generic languages and professional jargons are directly intentional—they denote and express directly and fully, and are capable of expressing themselves without mediation; but outside, that is, for those not participating in the given purview, these languages may be treated as objects, as typifications, as local color.”<sup>29</sup> Bakhtin calls this the “critical interanimation of languages.”<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps for this reason, the *Spectator* obsessively represents scenes on the margin of its own public, places where its own language might circulate but that it cannot (or will not) capture as its addressee. One example is a hysterical moment in *Spectator* no. 217. Mr. Spectator has received a letter, signed “Kitty Termagant,” which turns out to be another of the many letters describing clubs similar to the Spectator’s own—in this case, the Club of She-Romps. Its members meet once a week, at night, in a room hired for the purpose (i.e., a place that is significantly public, though also secluded from open view). “We are no sooner come together,” writes Kitty, “than we throw off all that Modesty and Reservedness with which our Sex are obliged to disguise themselves in publick Places. I am not able to express the Pleasure we enjoy from ten at Night till four in the Morning, in being as rude as you Men can be, for your Lives. As our Play runs high the Room is immediately filled with broken Fans, torn Petticoats, lappets of Head-dresses, Flounces, Furbelows, Garters, and Working-Aprons” (2: 345).

The She-Romps seem to be designed almost as an inverted image of the Spectator’s own club. His is all male, theirs female. His is regulated by an ethic of bourgeois moral urbanity—differences of class and self-interest correct each other through the general discussion. Theirs throws off the restraints of decorum. Differences are not balanced through equable conversation but unleashed through raw physical play. It’s a bitch fight. And although men might have their own pleasures in fantasizing such a scene, the *Spectator* more than hints at some antipathy. Kitty Termagant tells us that the She-Romps refer to the rags and tatters of their discarded clothing as “*dead Men*” (2: 346; emphasis in original).

Women, of course, are hardly excluded directly from the public of the *Spectator*. Quite the contrary; in no. 4, Mr. Spectator announces: “I shall take it for the greatest Glory of my Work, if among reasonable Women this Paper may furnish *Tea-Table Talk*” (1: 21). Women readers are crucial to the *Spectator*’s sense of its

29. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 289.

30. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 296.

public, and gender relations are made the subject of critical reflection in a way that must have felt dramatic and transformative. The *Spectator* represents the Club of She-Romps to highlight, by contrast, the urbanity and restraint of its own social ethic. Mr. Spectator neither excludes women outright nor frankly asserts male superiority. He does, however, draw attention to what he regards as the essentially unpublic character of the She-Romps' interaction. He uses an uneasy mix of mocking humor, male fear, and urbane scandal to remind the reader of the polite sociability required for his own confidence in a public composed of strangers.

The She-Romps cannot afford that confidence. For this and other reasons, the Club of She-Romps cannot really be called a public at all. It is a finite club of members known to one another, who would not be able to secure the freedom to meet without the security of mutual knowledge. Like most gossip, which is strictly regulated by a sense of group membership and social position, the She-Romps' discourse is not oriented to strangers. It is not that the She-Romps are unpublic simply in being a closed club; the Spectator's club, after all, is equally closed. Rather, we are given to understand that the She-Romps cannot open onto a public, the way the Spectator's club does within his essays. They express a style of sociability too embodied, too aggressive, and too sexualized to be imagined as the indefinite circulation of discourse among strangers. These women are not content to be "reasonable Women" whose highest mode of publicness is "Tea-Table Talk"; they want their publicness to be modeled on something other than mere private acts of reading. "We are no sooner come together," writes Kitty, "than we throw off all that Modesty and Reservedness with which our Sex are obliged to disguise themselves in publick Places." It is this refusal of any familiar norm for stranger sociability, rather than simple femaleness, that makes them a counterimage to the public.

The She-Romps, however, clearly want to alter the norms of "publick Places" so as to allow themselves the same physical freedoms as men, as well as an ability to meet with other women who share their history of frustration. They aspire to a public or quasi-public physicality. But dominant gender norms are such that this quasi-public physicality looks like intimacy out of place. It looks most antipublic when it looks like sexuality: "Once a month we *Demolish a Prude*, that is, we get some queer formal Creature in among us, and unrig her in an instant. Our last Month's Prude was so armed and fortified in Whale-bone and Buckram that we had much ado to come at her, but you would have died with laughing to have seen how the sober awkward [*sic*] thing looked, when she was forced out of her Intrenchments" (2: 346).



How exactly *did* the queer creature look? Thrilled? Appalled? Or simply speechless? Kitty says no more. Why does description falter here, at just the point where the transformative intent of the club runs up against shame, intimate exposure, and the sexual body? Could discourse go no further? The scene can be taken as representing the necessary involvement of strangers in the subjective life of any public, but with its tone raised first to an anxious pitch and then to muteness by the idea that such involvement might also be corporeal and intimate.

Interestingly, it is at just this moment that Kitty invites the Spectator to open her club's scenes to public discourse as he does with his own: "In short, Sir, 'tis impossible to give you a true Notion of our Sport, unless you would come one Night amongst us; and tho' it be directly against the Rules of our Society to admit a Male Visitant, we repose so much Confidence in your Silence and Taciturnity, that 'twas agreed by the whole Club, at our last Meeting, to give you Entrance for one Night as a Spectator" (2: 346). The women seek, in effect, to open the transformative intent of their coming together onto the critical estrangement of public discourse.

The Spectator refuses. "I do not at present find in my self any Inclination to venture my Person with her and her romping Companions . . . and should apprehend being *Demolished* as much as the *Prude*" (2: 346). This is a bit of a joke, as Mr. Spectator has only a ghost's body to demolish; he is an allegorical form of the reading eye. But he has something to demolish nonetheless: his own enabling ideology of polite publicness, the norms that offer confidence in circulation among strangers.

The *Spectator* essays contain many odd and diverting moments like this one, but few that say more about its public. One has to read this passage only slightly against the grain to see it as the ghost image of a counterpublic: it is a scene in which a dominated group aspires to re-create itself as a public and, in doing so, finds itself in conflict not only with the dominant social group, but also with the norms that constitute the dominant culture as a public. The *Spectator* goes so far as to represent the scene in order to clarify the norms that establish its own confident posture. In fact, the challenge so comically imagined in its pages would soon enough find actual, historical expression. Even in the years of the essays' appearance, the public places and stranger-sociability of London were giving rise to clubs of all kinds of She-Romps, including the so-called molly houses where something like a modern homosexual culture was developing—though it was not until rather later that such scenes could really articulate themselves through discourse as a coherent and freely circulating public.<sup>31</sup>

31. See Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England, 1700–1830* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1992).

Over the past three centuries, many such scenes have organized themselves as publics, and because they differ markedly in one way or another from the premises that allow the dominant culture to understand itself as a public, they have come to be called counterpublics. Yet we cannot understand counterpublics very well if we fail to see that there are contradictions and perversities inherent in the organization of *all* publics, tensions that are not captured by critiques of the dominant public's exclusions or ideological limitations. Counterpublics are publics, too. They work by many of the same circular postulates. It might even be claimed that, like dominant publics, they are ideological in that they provide a sense of active belonging that masks or compensates for the real powerlessness of human agents in capitalist society. But here I merely leave this question aside; what interests me is the odd social imaginary that is established by the ethic of estrangement and social poesis in public address. The cultural form of the public transforms She-Romps and Spectators alike.

In a public, indefinite address and self-organized discourse disclose a lived world whose arbitrary closure both enables that discourse and is contradicted by it. 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. Public discourse postulates a circulatory field of estrangement that it must then struggle to capture as an addressable entity. No form with such a structure could be very stable. The projective nature of public discourse—which requires that every characterization of the circulatory path become material for new estrangements and recharacterizations—is an engine for (not necessarily progressive) social mutation.

Public discourse, in other words, is poetic. By this I mean not just that a public is self-organizing, a kind of entity created by its own discourse, or even that this space of circulation is taken to be a social entity. Rather, I mean that all discourse or performance addressed to a public must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate, projecting for that world a concrete and livable shape, and attempting to realize that world through address.<sup>32</sup>

32. Even if the address is indirect. The most insightful study I know of the tight relation between a public form and a mode of life is an example of the indirect implication of a reception context by a form that refuses to address it outright: D. A. Miller's *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

### 7. *A public is poetic world-making.*

There is no speech or performance addressed to a public that does not try to specify in advance, in countless highly condensed ways, the lifeworld of its circulation. This is accomplished not only through discursive claims, of the kind that can be said to be oriented to understanding, but also at the level of pragmatics, through the effects of speech genres, idioms, stylistic markers, address, temporality, *mise-en-scène*, citational field, interlocutory protocols, lexicon, and so on. Its circulatory fate is the realization of that world. Public discourse says not only: “Let a public exist,” but: “Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way.” It then goes out in search of confirmation that such a public exists, with greater or lesser success—success being further attempts to cite, circulate, and realize the world-understanding it articulates. Run it up the flagpole, and see who salutes. Put on a show, and see who shows up.

This performative dimension of public discourse, however, is routinely misrecognized. Public speech contends with the necessity of addressing its public as already existing real persons. It cannot work by frankly declaring its subjunctive-creative project. Its success depends on the recognition of participants and their further circulatory activity, and people do not commonly recognize themselves as virtual projections. They recognize themselves only as already being the persons they are addressed as being, and as already belonging to the world that is condensed in their discourse.

The poetic function of public discourse is misrecognized for a second reason as well, one noted above in a different context. In the dominant tradition of the public sphere, address to a public is ideologized as rational-critical dialogue. The circulation of public discourse is consistently imagined—in folk theory and in sophisticated political philosophy alike—as dialogue or discussion among already present interlocutors, as within Mr. Spectator’s club. The image that prevails is something like parliamentary forensics. I have already noted that this way of imagining publics causes their constitutive circularity to disappear from consciousness: publics are thought to be real persons in dyadic author-reader interactions, rather than multigeneric circulation. I have also noted that the same ideologization makes possible the idea that publics can have volitional agency: they exist so as to deliberate and then decide. The point here is that this perception of public discourse as conversation obscures the importance of the poetic functions of both language and corporeal expressivity in giving a particular shape to publics. The public is thought to exist empirically and to require persuasion rather than poesis. Public circulation is understood as rational discussion writ large.

This constitutive misrecognition of publics relies on a particular ideology of language. Discourse is understood to be propositionally summarizable; the poetic or textual qualities of any utterance are disregarded in favor of *sense*. Acts of reading, too, are understood to be replicable and uniform.<sup>33</sup> So are opinions, which is why private reading is felt to be directly connected to the sovereign power of public opinion. Just as sense can be propositionally summarized, opinions can be held, transferred, restated indefinitely. (The essential role played by this kind of transposition in the modern social imaginary might help to explain why modern philosophy has been obsessed with referential semantics and fixity.) Other aspects of discourse, including affect and expressivity, are not thought to be fungible in the same way. The development of such a language ideology has, without doubt, helped make possible the modern confidence placed in the stranger-sociability of public circulation. Strangers are less strange if you can trust them to read as you read, or if the sense of what they say can be fully abstracted from the way they say it.

I also suspect that the development of the social imaginary of publics, as a relation among strangers that is projected from private readings of circulating texts, has exerted over the past three centuries a powerful gravity on the conception of the human, elevating what is understood to be the faculties of the private reader as the essential (rational-critical) faculties of man. If you know and are intimately associated with strangers to whom you are directly related only through the discursive means of reading, opining, arguing, and witnessing, then it might seem natural that other faculties recede from salience at the highest levels of social belonging. The modern hierarchy of faculties and the modern imagination of the social are mutually implying. The critical discourse of the public corresponds as sovereign to the superintending power of the state. So the dimensions of language singled out in the ideology of rational-critical discussion acquire prestige and power. Publics more overtly oriented in their self-understandings to the poetic-expressive dimensions of language—including artistic publics and

33. In all the literature on the history of reading, the development of this ideology remains an understudied phenomenon. Adrian Johns makes a significant contribution in *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); see especially 380–443. Johns's study suggests that the idea of reading as a private act with replicable meaning for strangers dispersed through space emerged in the very period that gave rise to publics in the modern form analyzed here; support for this conjecture can also be found in Kevin Sharpe, *Reading Revolutions: The Politics of Reading in Early Modern England* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000); Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, eds., *A History of Reading in the West* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999); and James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor, eds., *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

many counterpublics—lack the power to transpose themselves to the level of the generality of the state. Along the entire chain of equations in the public sphere, from local acts of reading or scenes of speech to the general horizon of public opinion and its critical opposition to state power, the pragmatics of public discourse must be systematically blocked from view.

Publics have acquired their importance to modern life because of the ease of these transpositions upward to the level of the state. Once the background assumptions of public opinion are in place, all discrete publics become part of *the* public. Though essentially imaginary projections from local exchanges or acts of reading and therefore infinite in number, they are often thought of as a unitary space. This assumption gains force from the postulated relation between public opinion and the state. A critical opposition to the state, supervising both executive and legislative power, confers on countless acts of opining the unity of public opinion; those acts share both a common object and a common agency of supervision and legitimation.

The unity of the public, however, is also ideological. It depends on the stylization of the reading act as transparent and replicable; it depends on an arbitrary social closure (through language, idiolect, genre, medium, and address) to contain its potentially infinite extension; it depends on institutionalized forms of power to realize the agency attributed to the public; and it depends on a hierarchy of faculties that allows some activities to count as public or general, while others are thought to be merely personal, private, or particular. Some publics, for these reasons, are more likely than others to stand in for *the* public, to frame their address as the universal discussion of the people.

But what of the publics that make no attempt to present themselves this way? There are as many shades of difference among publics as there are in modes of address, style, and spaces of circulation. Many might be thought of as subpublics, or specialized publics, focused on particular interests, professions, or locales. The public of *Field and Stream*, to take an example well within the familiar range of print genres, does not take itself to be the national people, nor humanity in general; the magazine addresses only those with an interest in hunting and fishing, who in varying degrees participate in a (male) subculture of hunters and fishermen. Yet nothing in the mode of address or in the projected horizon of this subculture requires its participants to cease for a moment to think of themselves as members of the general public as well; indeed, they might well consider themselves its most representative members.

Other publics mark themselves off unmistakably from any general or dominant public. Their members are understood to be not merely a subset of the pub-

lic, but constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public. In an influential 1992 article, Nancy Fraser observed that when public discourse is understood only as a “single, comprehensive, overarching public,” members of subordinated groups “have no arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives, and strategies.” In fact, Fraser writes, “members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics.”<sup>34</sup> She calls these “subaltern counterpublics,” by which she means “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”<sup>35</sup>

Fraser here names an important phenomenon. But what makes such a public “counter” or “oppositional”? Is its oppositional character a function of its content alone—that is, its claim to be oppositional? In that case, we might simply call it a subpublic, like that of *Field and Stream*, although characterized, to be sure, by a difference of degree: it is more likely to display a thematic discussion of political opposition. But there would be no difference of kind, or of formal mediation, or of discourse pragmatics, between counterpublics and any other publics. Fraser’s description of what counterpublics do—“formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs”—sounds like the classically Habermasian description of rational-critical publics with the word *oppositional* inserted.

Fraser’s principal example is “the late-twentieth-century U.S. feminist subaltern counterpublic, with its variegated array of journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places.”<sup>36</sup> This description aptly suggests the constitution of a public as a multicontextual space of circulation, organized not by a place or an institution but by the circulation of discourse. But this is true of any public, not only counterpublics. Fraser writes that the feminist counterpublic is distinguished by a special idiom for social reality, including such terms as *sexism*, *sexual harassment*, and *marital, date, and acquaintance rape*. This idiom can now be found anywhere—not always embodying a feminist intention, but circulating as common terminology. Is the feminist counterpublic distinguished by anything other than its program of reform?

34. Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 122–23.

35. Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 123.

36. Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 123.

Furthermore, why would counterpublics of this variety be limited to “subalterns”? How are they different from the publics of U.S. Christian fundamentalism, or youth culture, or artistic bohemianism? Each of these is a similarly complex metatopical space for the circulation of discourse; each is a scene for developing oppositional interpretations of its members’ identities, interests, and needs. They are structured by different dispositions or protocols from those that obtain elsewhere in the culture, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying.

In the sense of the term that I am advocating here, such publics are indeed *counterpublics*, and in a stronger sense than simply comprising subalterns with a reform program. A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public and to the hierarchy among media. 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. (This is why the She-Romps seem to anticipate counterpublicness: “We throw off all that Modesty and Reservedness with which our Sex are obliged to disguise themselves in publick Places.”) Friction against the dominant public forces the poetic-expressive character of counterpublic discourse to become salient to consciousness.

Like all publics, a counterpublic comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers. (This is one significant difference between the notion of a counterpublic and the notion of a bounded community or group.) But counterpublic discourse also addresses those strangers as being not just anybody. Addressees are socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse; ordinary people are presumed to not want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene. Addressing indefinite strangers in a magazine or a sermon has a peculiar meaning when you know in advance that most people will be unwilling to read a gay magazine or go to a black church. In some contexts, the code-switching of bilingualism might do similar work in keeping the counterpublic horizon salient—just as the linguistic fragmentation of many postcolonial settings creates resistance to the idea of a sutured space of circulation.

Within a gay or queer counterpublic, for example, no one is in the closet: the presumptive heterosexuality that constitutes the closet for individuals in ordinary speech is suspended. But this circulatory space, freed from heteronormative

speech protocols, is itself marked by that very suspension: speech that addresses any participant as queer will circulate up to a point, at which it is certain to meet intense resistance. It might therefore circulate in special, protected venues, in limited publications. The individual struggle with stigma is transposed, as it were, to the conflict between modes of publicness. The expansive nature of public address will seek to keep moving that frontier for a queer public, to seek more and more places to circulate where people will recognize themselves in its address; but no one is likely to be unaware of the risk and conflict involved.

In some cases, such as fundamentalism or certain kinds of youth culture, participants are not subalterns for any reason outside of their participation in the counterpublic discourse. In others, a socially stigmatized identity might be predicated, but in such cases a public of subalterns only constitutes a counterpublic when its participants are addressed in a counterpublic way—as, for example, with African Americans who are willing to speak in a racially marked idiom. The subordinate status of a counterpublic does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public is one of the ways its members' identities are formed and transformed. A hierarchy or stigma is the assumed background of practice. One enters at one's own risk.

Counterpublic discourse is far more than the expression of subaltern culture and far more than what some Foucauldians like to call "reverse discourse." Fundamentally mediated by public forms, counterpublics incorporate the personal/impersonal address and expansive estrangement of public speech as the condition of their own common world. Perhaps nothing demonstrates the fundamental importance of discursive publics in the modern social imaginary more than this—that even the counterpublics that challenge modernity's social hierarchy of faculties do so by projecting the space of discursive circulation among strangers as a social entity, and in doing so fashion their own subjectivities around the requirements of public circulation and stranger-sociability.<sup>37</sup>

If I address a queer public, or a public of fellow She-Romps, I don't simply express the way I and my friends live. I commit myself, and the fate of my world-making project, to circulation among indefinite others. However much my address to them might be laden with intimate affect, it must also be extended impersonally, making membership available on the basis of mere attention. My world must be one of strangers. Counterpublics are "counter" to the extent that

37. For an interesting limit case, see Charles Hirschkind, "Civic Virtue and Religious Reason: An Islamic Counterpublic," *Cultural Anthropology* 16 (2001): 3–34. Hirschkind analyzes complex modes of commentary and circulation in contemporary Egypt; what remains unclear is the extent to which this emergent and reactive discourse culture can still be called a public.



they try to supply different ways of imagining stranger-sociability and its reflexivity; as publics, they remain oriented to stranger-circulation in a way that is not just strategic, but also constitutive of membership and its affects. As it happens, an understanding of queerness has been developing in recent decades that is suited to just this necessity; a culture is developing in which intimate relations and the sexual body can in fact be understood as projects for transformation among strangers. (At the same time, a lesbian and gay public has been reshaped so as to ignore or refuse the counterpublic character that has marked its history.)<sup>38</sup> So also in youth culture, coolness mediates a difference from dominant publics and, in so doing, a subjective form of stranger-sociability. Public discourse imposes a field of tensions within which any world-making project must articulate itself. To the extent that I want that world to be one in which embodied sociability, affect, and play have a more defining role than they do in the opinion-transposing frame of rational-critical dialogue, those tensions will be acutely felt.

I cannot say in advance what romping will *feel like* in my public of She-Romps. Publicness is simply this space of coming together that discloses itself in interaction. The world of strangers that public discourse makes must be made of further circulation and recharacterization over time; it cannot simply be aggregated from units that I can expect to be similar to mine. I risk its fate. This necessity of risked estrangement, though essential to all publics, becomes especially salient in counterpublic discourse and is registered in its ethical-political imagination. Dominant publics are by definition those that can take their discourse pragmatics and their lifeworlds for granted, misrecognizing the indefinite scope of their expansive address as universality or normalcy. Counterpublics are spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative, not replicative merely.

Counterpublics face another obstacle as well. One of the most striking features of publics, in the modern public sphere, is that they can in some contexts acquire agency. Not only is participation understood as active, at the level of the individual whose uptake helps to constitute a public, it is also sometimes possible to attribute agency to the virtual corporate entity created by the space of circulation as a whole. Publics act historically. They are said to rise up, to speak, to reject false promises, to demand answers, to change sovereigns, to support troops, to give mandates for change, to be satisfied, to scrutinize public conduct, to take role models, to deride counterfeits. It's difficult to imagine the modern world

38. See Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999), especially chap. 2.

without the ability to attribute agency to publics, although doing so is an extraordinary fiction. It requires us, for example, to understand the ongoing circulatory time of public discourse as though it were a process of discussion leading up to a decision.

The attribution of agency to publics works, in most cases, because of the direct transposition from acts of private reading to the figuration of sovereign opinion. All of the verbs for public agency are verbs for private reading, transposed upward to the aggregate of readers. Readers may scrutinize, ask, reject, opine, decide, judge, and so on. Publics can do exactly these things. And nothing else. Publics—unlike mobs or crowds—remain incapable of any activity that cannot be expressed through such verbs. Even activities that are part of reading but do not fit its ideologized image as a practice of silent, private, replicable decoding—curling up, mumbling, fantasizing, gesticulating, ventriloquizing, and writing marginalia, for example—are bereft of counterparts in public agency.

Counterpublics tend to be those in which this ideology of reading does not have the same privilege. It might be that embodied sociability is too important to them; they might not be organized by the hierarchy of faculties that elevates rational-critical reflection as the self-image of humanity; they might depend more heavily on performance spaces than on print; it might be that they cannot so easily suppress from consciousness their own creative-expressive function. How, then, will they imagine their agency? Can a public of She-Romps romp?

It is, in fact, possible to imagine that almost any characterization of discursive acts might be attributed to a public. A queer public might be one that throws shade, prances, disses, acts up, carries on, longs, fantasizes, throws fits, mourns, “reads.” To take such attributions of public agency seriously, however, we would need to inhabit a culture with a different language ideology, a different social imaginary. It is difficult to say what such a world would be like. It might need to be one with a different role for state-based thinking; as things stand now, it might be that the only way a public is able to act is through its imaginary coupling with the state.

This is one of the things that happen when alternative publics are cast as social movements—they acquire agency in relation to the state. They enter the temporality of politics and adapt themselves to the performatives of rational-critical discourse. For many counterpublics, to do so is to cede the original hope of transforming, not just policy, but the space of public life itself.

**Public Culture**

**Michael Warner** is a professor of English at Rutgers University. His most recent works include the forthcoming collection *Publics and Counterpublics*, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (1999), and *American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1999).