

Reign of Appearances

The public sphere, be it the Greek agora or the *New York Times* op-ed page, is the realm of appearances – not citizenship. Its central event is spectacle – not dialogue. Public dialogue, the mantra of many intellectuals and political commentators, is but a contradiction in terms. Marked by an asymmetry between the few who act and the many who watch, the public sphere can undermine liberal democracy, law, and morality. Inauthenticity, superficiality, and objectification are the very essence of the public sphere. But the public sphere also liberates us from the bondages of private life and fosters an existentially vital aesthetic experience.

Reign of Appearances uses a variety of cases to reveal the logic of the public sphere, including homosexuality in Victorian England; the 2008 crash; antisemitism in Europe; confidence in American presidents; communications in social media; special prosecutor investigations; the visibility of African-Americans; violence during the French Revolution; the Islamic veil and contemporary sexual politics. This unconventional account of the public sphere is critical reading for anyone who wants to understand the effects of visibility in urban life, politics, and the media.

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Reign of Appearances

The Misery and Splendor of the Public Sphere

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For Nicole

All significant truths are private truths. As they become public they cease to become truths; they become facts, or at best, part of the public character; or at worst, catchwords.

T. S. Eliot

Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley

And [Sosicrates] adds that [Pythagoras] used to compare life to a festival.

“Some people came to a festival to contend for the prizes, and others for the purposes of traffic, and the best as spectators.”

Diogenes Laertius

The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers

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Preface

The public sphere is one of the most popular terms – indeed buzzwords – in our contemporary political and intellectual culture. It does not only describe a central phenomenon; it has a heavy normative load as well. Hence the common wisdom that a vibrant public sphere – and by this one means the whole society dialoguing in a civil fashion about the common good in town halls, the streets, the media, and on the internet – is essential to a well-functioning liberal democracy. Hence the appeals that we hear everywhere about the virtues of actively, openly participating in these spaces.

Yet the conventional thinking about the public sphere is unrealistic. As is the standard talk on its close synonyms, such as “the public realm,” “the public domain,” or “the public square” – often used interchangeably. Civic, civil, egalitarian, widespread dialogue among simple citizens, seen as the *raison d’être* of the public sphere, is elusive, if not unverifiable. In any case, consequential and engrossing public events, and public life in general, don’t assume the form idealized by those who speak and write about the public sphere. More important, the public sphere, by subjecting all its contents to the gaze of anyone, can pose a threat to liberal democracy and citizenship – just as it can undermine law and morality.

The public sphere is faultily glorified because most commentators miss its essence. They miss the very notion, the very experience of “being in public.” What makes the public sphere (a town square, the *New York Times* op-ed section, or a television show) public is that its contents are open to general sensory access. In effect, the public sphere is simply any space where we are visible. What characterizes it is not what exists or happens in it: all sorts of things exist and happen in it, not just enlightened

debate. A public is not a body of active citizens talking or deliberating about the common good. It is a rather more prosaic, pedestrian entity: an audience, a collection of silent spectators faced with the same spectacle. This is why the public sphere is mostly an inegalitarian institution, producing a steep hierarchy of attention, marked by an ineradicable asymmetry between the few who act and the multitude who watch. The more important a public event or public discourse, the more marked the asymmetry will be.

The public sphere is not the realm of civic dialogue, a deliberative order in which citizenship is exercised. It is simply a space of appearances. Its central event is not dialogue, which is fundamentally something spoken, egalitarian, and symmetrical. Public dialogue, the fixation of so many intellectuals and activists, is but a contradiction in terms: the moment there is an audience, a dialogue will inevitably mutate into a spectacle. In effect, the main event of the public sphere is spectacle, which is fundamentally something visual, inegalitarian, and asymmetrical. The public sphere, because it abandons all its contents to the gaze of anyone, cannot but objectify anything that appears in it. The widely lamented maladies of the contemporary public sphere – lack of participation, spectacle, inauthenticity, and objectification – constitute the very nature of the phenomenon. What many seek in it – reciprocity, dialogue, authenticity, and intersubjectivity – can only truly, without denaturalization, survive in the confidential cocoon of the private sphere. Some citizenship takes place in public – but not its single most important act, which is voting. And the effects of publicity on citizenship are anything but unequivocally positive.

In the pages that follow, I propose a realistic account that emphasizes the sensory – and especially the visual – core of the public sphere. This account is not predicated on imponderable motivations or habitually breached dialogue etiquettes. By contrast, I seek to understand public life as it is, as it is lived both on the street and through media – and not just as civic talk. The account that I propose is couched in the lived experience of being in and of attending to things in public. It considers not only participation, but also spectatorship. It covers both exceptional occurrences and routine events in public.

What makes events in the public sphere potentially consequential is that they have the possibility of getting publicity. This highest form of visibility is not, as the common wisdom says, the wide dissemination of information. Nor is it, as many philosophers and economists argue, something that simply produces common knowledge. Rather, publicity is attention on a focus by a collectivity consisting of spectators who think

or know that others are watching the same thing. Much of this book is about the fateful effects that publicity has on information, meaning, people, politics, law, and morality. Illustrations come from a wide array of cases: homosexuality in Victorian England, the 2008 stock market crash, anti-Semitism in Europe, confidence in American presidents, electoral and congressional voting, communications in social media, the court of Louis XIV, special prosecutor investigations, the visibility of African Americans, the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution, the Islamic veil, sexual politics in America, public executions, and pricing in contemporary art.

Another aim I pursue is to capture the relationship between politics and the public sphere: political actors exploit, but are also constrained by, the public sphere, which is both regulated and transformed by politics. Political power shapes the private-public distinction by determining what can appear in public spaces, especially in those receiving high levels of publicity. Much of political conflict revolves around the same issue as well. Censorship – the quintessential content regulation in the public sphere – is an integral part of all governance and politics. Their common lip service to free speech notwithstanding, political actors of all sizes and stripes persistently attempt to restrict what can be attended to in society. Censorship, because of its pejorative connotations, but equally because of its unacknowledged rampancy, is a murky topic. Its logic is indissociable from that of publicity.

Very frequently visibility is equated with surveillance, by which one means the visibility of information about individuals to governments and corporations. Yet this phenomenon, the vertical and often stealthy observation of individuals who are not visible to one another, is a different beast from general visibility. The public sphere is where a huge portion of surveillance in society happens, but such surveillance is horizontal or bottom-up, with its proper phenomenology. Unfortunately, the consequences of the visibility of individuals to one another, as well as that of the government to individuals, are not well understood. A common yet unquestioned assumption is that top-down surveillance is bad; governmental transparency and open citizen participation in the polity, good. But, as we will see, horizontal and bottom-up transparency has far from always beneficial effects on social, political, and moral life. A good deal of what follows is, then, about the misery of the public sphere.

Yet the public sphere has also its pleasures, allures, freedoms – for both those who access it and those who appear in it. These are altogether different from what most commentators praise about the public sphere, though. Most thinking on the issue, while glorifying the civic participant, belittles,

even pathologizes the spectator. But spectatorship is the very essence of public life, which is largely a visual experience involving distance. And there is a unique and very much unappreciated transcendence to spectatorship too: one that liberates us from the bondages and burdens of the private sphere and endows us with an aesthetic orientation toward the world. This orientation is not inferior to civic participation; it is in fact the very core of urban experience as well as of culture in general. So what follows is also about the splendor of the public sphere, a splendor that is at once all shallow appearances and existentially indispensable – a splendor that is not without a certain grandeur.

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