

Introduction: Preliminary Demarcation of a Type of Bourgeois Public Sphere

1 The Initial Question

The usage of the words “public” and “public sphere” betrays a multiplicity of concurrent meanings. Their origins go back to various historical phases and, when applied synchronically to the conditions of a bourgeois society that is industrially advanced and constituted as a social-welfare state, they fuse into a clouded amalgam. Yet the very conditions that make the inherited language seem inappropriate appear to require these words, however confused their employment. Not just ordinary language (especially as it bears the imprint of bureaucratic and mass media jargon) but also the sciences—particularly jurisprudence, political science, and sociology—do not seem capable of replacing traditional categories like “public” and “private,” “public sphere,” and “public opinion,” with more precise terms. Ironically, this dilemma has first of all bedeviled the very discipline that explicitly makes public opinion its subject matter. With the application of empirical techniques, the object that public-opinion research was to apprehend has dissolved into something elusive;¹ nevertheless sociology has refused to abandon altogether these categories; it continues to study public opinion.

We call events and occasions “public” when they are open to all, in contrast to closed or exclusive affairs—as when we speak of public places or public houses. But as in the expression “public building,” the term need not refer to general accessi-

bility; the building does not even have to be open to public traffic. "Public buildings" simply house state institutions and as such are "public." The state is the "public authority." It owes this attribute to its task of promoting the public or common welfare of its rightful members. The word has yet another meaning when one speaks of a "public [official] reception"; on such occasions a powerful display of representation is staged whose "publicity" contains an element of public recognition. There is a shift in meaning again when we say that someone has made a name for himself, has a public reputation. The notion of such personal prestige or renown originated in epochs other than that of "polite society."

None of these usages, however, have much affinity with the meaning most commonly associated with the category—expressions like "public opinion," an "outraged" or "informed public," "publicity," "publish," and "publicize." The subject of this publicity is the public as carrier of public opinion; its function as a critical judge is precisely what makes the public character of proceedings—in court, for instance—meaningful. In the realm of the mass media, of course, publicity has changed its meaning. Originally a function of public opinion, it has become an attribute of whatever attracts public opinion: public relations and efforts recently baptized "publicity work" are aimed at producing such publicity. The public sphere itself appears as a specific domain—the public domain versus the private. Sometimes the public appears simply as that sector of public opinion that happens to be opposed to the authorities. Depending on the circumstances, either the organs of the state or the media, like the press, which provide communication among members of the public, may be counted as "public organs."

A social-historical analysis of the syndrome of meanings possessed by "public" and "publicity" could uncover the essential sociological characteristics of the various historical language strata. The first etymological reference to the public sphere is quite revealing. In German the noun *Öffentlichkeit* was formed from the older adjective *öffentlich* during the eighteenth century,² in analogy to "*publicité*" and "publicity"; by the close of the century the word was still so little used that Heynatz could

consider it objectionable.³ If the public sphere did not require a name of its own before this period, we may assume that this sphere first emerged and took on its function only at that time, at least in Germany. It was specifically a part of "civil society," which at the same time established itself as the realm of commodity exchange and social labor governed by its own laws. Notions concerning what is "public" and what is not—that is, what is "private"—however, can be traced much further back into the past.

We are dealing here with categories of Greek origin transmitted to us bearing a Roman stamp. In the fully developed Greek city-state the sphere of the *polis*, which was common (*koine*) to the free citizens, was strictly separated from the sphere of the *oikos*; in the sphere of the *oikos*, each individual is in his own realm (*idia*). The public life, *bios politikos*, went on in the market place (*agora*), but of course this did not mean that it occurred necessarily only in this specific locale. The public sphere was constituted in discussion (*lexis*), which could also assume the forms of consultation and of sitting in the court of law, as well as in common action (*praxis*), be it the waging of war or competition in athletic games. (Strangers were often called upon to legislate, which was not properly one of the public tasks.) The political order, as is well known, rested on a patrimonial slave economy. The citizens were thus set free from productive labor; it was, however, their private autonomy as masters of households on which their participation in public life depended. The private sphere was attached to the house not by (its Greek) name only. Movable wealth and control over labor power were no more substitutes for being the master of a household and of a family than, conversely, poverty and a lack of slaves would in themselves prevent admission to the *polis*. Exile, expropriation, and the destruction of the house amounted to one and the same thing. Status in the *polis* was therefore based upon status as the unlimited master of an *oikos*. The reproduction of life, the labor of the slaves, and the service of the women went on under the aegis of the master's domination; birth and death took place in its shadow; and the realm of necessity and transitoriness remained immersed in the obscurity of the private sphere. In contrast to it stood, in Greek

self-interpretation, the public sphere as a realm of freedom and permanence. Only in the light of the public sphere did that which existed become revealed, did everything become visible to all. In the discussion among citizens issues were made topical and took on shape. In the competition among equals the best excelled and gained their essence—the immortality of fame. Just as the wants of life and the procurement of its necessities were shamefully hidden inside the *oikos*, so the *polis* provided an open field for honorable distinction: citizens indeed interacted as equals with equals (*homoioi*), but each did his best to excel (*aristoiein*). The virtues, whose catalogue was codified by Aristotle, were ones whose test lies in the public sphere and there alone receive recognition.

Since the Renaissance this model of the Hellenic public sphere, as handed down to us in the stylized form of Greek self-interpretation, has shared with everything else considered “classical” a peculiarly normative power.⁴ Not the social formation at its base but the ideological template itself has preserved continuity over the centuries—on the level of intellectual history. To begin with, throughout the Middle Ages the categories of the public and the private and of the public sphere understood as *res publica* were passed on in the definitions of Roman law. Of course, they found a renewed application meaningful in the technical, legal sense only with the rise of the modern state and of that sphere of civil society separated from it. They served the political self-interpretation as well as the legal institutionalization of a public sphere that was bourgeois in a specific sense. Meanwhile, however, for about a century the social foundations of this sphere have been caught up in a process of decomposition. Tendencies pointing to the collapse of the public sphere are unmistakable, for while its scope is expanding impressively, its function has become progressively insignificant. Still, publicity continues to be an organizational principle of our political order. It is apparently more and other than a mere scrap of liberal ideology that a social democracy could discard without harm. If we are successful in gaining a historical understanding of the structures of this complex that today, confusedly enough, we subsume under the heading “public sphere,” we can hope to attain