

Private

In general, private is the opposite of *public*. This may signal protection from public gaze and regulation, or it may signal “privation,” and in particular the loss of the rights associated with public statuses, as a deposed king becomes merely a private citizen.

Classical Greek and Roman thought regarded freedom, creativity, and political rights as features of the public realm (Arendt 1958). Women, children, and slaves were all consigned to the private realm, meaning that they had little existence beyond that dictated by material desire and necessity. They were accordingly seen as without substantial or important distinctions, a usage that survives in labeling an ordinary soldier who has not attained rank or distinction as a private. Development of full personhood was seen as an activity carried out in friendship, political participation, intellectual debate, military service and other public roles (Weintraub and Kumar 1998).

Early Christianity gave a greater role to the interior life of individuals, but the link between privacy and individual personhood developed most clearly as a core feature of modernity (Taylor 1989). Late 18th and early 19th century Romanticism symbolize the trend, but concern for the quality of private life was already reflected in early modern art with its multitude of portraits, family groups, and interior rooms. Pioneered especially by bourgeois families, this concern for the virtues and pleasures of domesticity spread widely. Closely related to the new moral emphasis on family life and ordinary affairs was increased awareness of interior experience, emotional life, and personal development. This placed new value on the private spaces (both literal and metaphorical) into which one withdrew for spiritual meditation, prayer, and self-examination. Such pursuits focused on self as well as God, and helped to give rise to modern psychology as well as to a more personal orientation to religion (celebrated notably in Protestantism).

This in turn was linked to a new understanding of the body as a properly private possession. Increasingly elaborate codes of manners and norms of bodily discipline arose, not least in relation to sexuality, health, and labor (Elias 1939). A common feature was the treatment of the body as an object of mental control. Movements for hygiene and morality involved the body in new dynamics of shame and eroticism (Foucault 1976, Turner 1997). Sex organs became private parts. An ideology of feminine modesty generally removed women as well as sexuality from public life (though it defined a countertype of immodest “public women”—prostitutes—whose properly private selves were publicly exchanged). On the other hand, a right to privacy could be construed as an important basis for ascribing to each person control over her body.

The logic of possession governed also in defining market exchange as private. Private persons enter markets to exchange their private property. Their rights to do so were conceptualized in the 17th century by extension from the notion of individual labor in the appropriation of the common heritage of Creation or nature (though inheritance raised other questions). Human beings were reconceptualized as possessing individuals (MacPherson 1962). They were also understood as the self-sufficient primary actors of the market so that privacy was no deprivation to them, but an affirmation of their

essential autonomy. This was echoed in a host of secondary forms of privacy: private homes, private offices, private clubs, private boxes at sporting events and even private washrooms. Those without private property, by contrast were commonly without claims to personal privacy. Ironically officers slept in their own bedrooms and private soldiers in barracks.

A central paradox in thought about private property was the social and often very large scale character of its production and accumulation (Marx 1867). Money, business corporations, and a range of innovations in financial instruments made relations of property ever more abstract from both individual persons and physical goods produced by their labor. Most corporations are public companies in the sense that their stock is held relatively widely and traded on open markets; many are also created by government charter rather than only private contract; this publicness subjects them to levels of regulation not applied to private companies. What is at issue is private (individual) appropriation of the produce of public (collective) labor. Understood as tied to the individual, the private is opposed to the collective. Understood as rightfully independent of state interference, private is opposed to government. But private property extends beyond the individual. Indeed, most corporations are public in the sense that their stock is held by many persons and traded on the open market—as distinct from family businesses. Confusingly, these are still considered part of the private sector. At the same time, private wealth could be used for public purposes, as in philanthropic foundations and donations to not-for-profit organizations such as universities or hospitals (Powell and Clemens 1998).

The liberal tradition combines this economic usage of private with a political meaning. The possessing individuals of market society are also possessors of political rights (and indeed, rights against politics). They hold these as private persons—not occupants of public statuses—but the private rights empower them to act in public. Indeed, political life is conceptualized in liberal thought as the coming together of private individuals to make collective decisions about matters of common interest—that is, the public good. While some features of the public good are essentially shared (as, for example, clean air is difficult to appropriate in an individually exclusive manner) most are conceptualized as aggregates of (and thus compromises among) private goods. This is given one of its most influential formulations in the Benthamite utilitarian slogan, “the greatest good of the greatest number”.

The boundaries of the public are given, in this tradition, by family and intimate relations and by the market. Each is granted autonomy from intrusions of the public, which is understood primarily as the governmental. Of course, the conditions of family and market life may be highly unequal, not least in the support they give different individuals for action in public. Accordingly, each boundary has been the object of recurrent struggles--from workers' efforts to subject parts of the economy to state regulation through feminist efforts to make the personal political. Ironically, feminists have often treated the non-familial as indiscriminately public, and labor movements have often sought to defend the autonomy of the family from the market.

Also ironically, perhaps, liberal thought has given rise to the very language of rights used increasingly prominently to challenge the autonomy of putatively private spheres. Thus people claim rights to education, or jobs, or information about what goes on beyond the closed doors of business corporations. Rights are generally attributes of private individuals, in liberal usage, and conceived significantly as defenses against the intrusion of states. The defense of privacy remains a concern in just this sense, and indeed is renewed with regard to new technologies of surveillance. Yet private rights have become increasingly prominent bases for demands of government action, both domestically and internationally.

By contrast, other traditions emphasize the shared activity involved in creating public institutions. They stress that private action by individuals can account for only a fraction of the goods enjoyed by members of modern societies—and also that large corporations are not private in the same sense and often act in ways contrary to the interests of individuals. At the same time, they too would defend the need for individual privacy in relation to governmental surveillance. The idea of private remains contested.

Craig Calhoun

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