

Public

The concept of **public** derives from Greek and Roman conceptions of the rightful members of polities. Its philological roots lie in the Latin *poplicus*, or people, which shifted to *publicus* apparently under the influence of its restriction to *pūbes*, adult men. The shift makes clear the tension in the term between a general notion of open access and more specific understandings of who is entitled to membership in the public. This persists into modern usage, in which public is increasingly opposed to ‘private’, and denotes most prominently, and in varying combinations: (1) the people, interests or activities which are structured by or pertain to a state, (2) anything which is open or accessible, (3) that which is shared, especially that which must be shared, (4) all that is outside the household, and (5) knowledge or opinion that is formed or circulated in communicative exchange, especially through oratory, texts, or other impersonal media (Calhoun 2001).

Notions of public good and public administration both appeared in English by the late 15th century, reflecting simultaneously the rise of modern states and their concern for the public good (*res publica* or public things in Latin, and often “commonwealth” in English). Securing the public good was initially understood as the responsibility of the king, understood to have “two bodies,” one his “private” person and the other his “public” being as sovereign ruler (Kantorowicz 1957). Kings consulted with other nobles whose public roles were ascribed, and often inherited, as specific rights and eventually with a growing number of commoners. Ideals of nobility implied an ability to rise above merely personal concerns, as did the notion of citizenship in a self-ruling republic.

Popular rule required public deliberation. By the late 18th century, the notion of a right to assemble in public, for example, was increasingly claimed for the citizenry as a whole, by contrast to the specific rights of nobles to assemble and petition the monarch. Instead of inherited position, the capacity to act in public was determined by a combination of character and material possession. The two were linked in the notion of independence, praised for example by Locke (1690), and equally a virtue of mind and a material condition predicated on private property. The capacity to be a public person thus reflected in two senses attributes of what would today be considered private persons: their psychology and their wealth.

The idea of public as the whole people or nation was closely related to the notion of public as ‘open’—like a public park. Public spaces make possible interaction that is not based on intimacy, but instead connects strangers—like walking down a city street, going to the theater, or participating in political rally. The public person idealized in this usage is at ease amid the diversity and unfamiliarity typical of cities (Sennett 1977). The urban analyst Jane Jacobs (1972) famously praised the public character of 19th century cities—their sidewalks, cafes, human scale, and mixed use neighborhoods—and deplored its loss in 20th century transformations.

Newspapers and other media support public discussion as much as these physical spaces do. Informed public debate depends also on public access to information. Until the 19th century, the English Parliament refused to allow its debates to be published. Laws on

public secrets still vary, as to regulations on how much information private businesses must disclose. The rise of public-access television and efforts to defend the openness of the Internet also reflect concern to provide citizens with means to participate in public communication.

The political elites that run governments are narrower than the broad publics affected by governments. The same is true of public discourse. Even when it is about matters that affect the whole public, only a smaller public is active in it—and this is often a matter of active exclusion not just apathy. The right of women to speak in public was as much contested until the 20th century as their right to vote. There is a distinction, thus, between the public capable of (or entitled to) political speech, and the public that is the object of such speech or its intended political effects.

Democracy centers on trying to give political power to those affected by political action, so democrats have always been committed to expanding political participation. But democracy also depends on the public deliberating effectively about political choices, and enlargement of participation has often seemed to undermine the use of reason in public discourse, substituting techniques of persuasion based on money and mass media. Jurgen Habermas's (1962) famous phrase “structural transformation of the public sphere” refers to the process in which expansion of the public sphere achieved democratic enlargement at the expense of the rational quality of discussion (and thus its ability to identify the best policies for the public interest). The challenge is to get both at once.

The idea of public debate is not limited to politics. Science itself is often held to depend on its public character, as for example findings should be published and theories debated. But while public debate may help to reveal the truth, majority votes may still reflect error (Dewey 1927). Nor is all public communication rational-critical debate; much is expressive or aesthetic activity, and efforts at persuasion also take other forms (Warner 2001). And as Arendt (1958) stressed, public communication can include create “world-making”, as for example the framers of constitutions help to make countries.

It is always possible for some to try to shape public opinion by controlling the availability of information instead of by open discussion. This may involve presenting only positive information, or attempting to restrict public awareness of negative information, or indeed spreading false information. Scientists occasionally fail to report negative results of experiments. Much more often, politicians, business corporations, and others hire “public relations” specialists to manage public opinion.

During the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the idea of public opinion stopped referring to opinion that had been adequately tested in public debate, and thus deserved the assent of informed citizens, and began to refer to whatever happened to be believed by the mass of people, regardless of the grounds for their beliefs (Habermas 1989). Beliefs were treated as attributes of individuals, like private property, to be discovered objectively by asking questions separate from actual public discourse. Public opinion research, thus, focuses not on the forming of opinion through public discourse, but on the use of survey methods to identify the opinions of private persons. These are deemed to be

public either because they can be aggregated statistically to represent the whole mass of persons, or because they are on topics of public interest. There is no implication, however, that such opinions have been formed in a public manner, let alone through open sharing of information and rational-critical debate rather than through the management of public relations. A different approach, “deliberative polling”, brings representative samples of citizens together for informed discussion, and then asks their opinions. This is designed to simulate some of the benefits of the classical notion of public debate for representative subsets of the large populations of modern states.

The transformation of the notion of public opinion into an aggregate of private opinions was influenced by the rise of liberal individualism and especially of market society and social theories derived from markets (Splichal 2000). Classical political economy from the 18th century on stressed the idea that free trade among a multitude of self-interested individuals would produce public benefits (drawing on the older notion that private vices might produce public goods and thereby count as public virtues). It also suggested that a good market was itself a sort of public, since it worked best when maximally open and unrestricted, and when all participants had equal access to information. Tradesmen thus serve the public; shops are open to the public—as indeed are pubs (public houses, which are important not only as businesses but as places for members of the public to meet together). Buying, selling and entering into contracts may be activities of private persons, but they have public effects through the aggregation accomplished by markets. In addition, a marketplace (whether physical or ‘virtual’) is public. Entering into this market-public realm is thus contrasted with remaining in the private realm of non-monetarized exchanges of which the family is the paramount example. This usage would in the late 20th century inform feminist theories which analyzed the ways in which women were excluded from public life, including economic activity as well as politics and public communication. How morally laden the distinction of public from private can be is evident in an 18th century dictionary of vulgar terminology which defined “a woman’s commodity” as “the private parts of a modest woman and the public parts of a prostitute”.

The idea of market is recurrently problematic for the public/private dichotomy. It is based on private property, but it is also public in its openness and its effects. It might be left free from government interference because private, or made the object of government regulation because public. Both terminology and political values are confusing. But it is clear that though prices may be “signals” in markets, the integration of markets is based on objective effects rather than achieved through communicative agreements. Likewise, it is common to speak of public ownership or the public sector in ways that equate *public* with the state itself. Public law, thus, is the law that regulates the action of the state itself and its relations with citizens as distinct from the other branches of law that regulate relations among citizens, or the creation of corporations as legal persons. At other times, government is distinguished from the public composed of people who may either resent or support it.

Markets based entirely on the self-interested actions of private actors systematically fail to provide certain sorts of goods which is a crucial reason why governments intervene in

economies on behalf of the public. These public goods are those which must be consumed in shared form (such as security, a clean environment, or indeed a sound money supply). Technical economic usage sometimes restricts the class of public goods to those that in their very nature must be shared, though law can require the sharing of goods which could in principle be privatized, such as public parks, public schools, public television and public beaches or baths. Governments not only act to provide public goods but to limit public nuisances (like pollution).

Governments are said to act on behalf of *the* public, but it is a challenge to reconcile the different views of many different groups each of which may engage in its own public communication. Some speak of publics and counterpublics, in which the latter are simply publics organized in resistance to the dominant public or some of its norms—as for example, one might speak of a gay public, a radical feminist public, of a Christian evangelical public (Fraser 1992, Warner 2001). At the same time, part of the idea of public is precisely that communication furthers integration across lines of difference.

Moreover, publics do not stop at the borders of states. There is growing reference to an international public sphere—of Islam or Christendom, of human rights activists or global media. Likewise, the international law of states is understood to be a form of public law and a basis for establishing relations among states without merger or violation of sovereignty. Indeed, in the early 19th century Europe’s major powers (save France) signed a joint declaration proscribing Napoleon as a public enemy, with whom neither peace nor truce could be concluded. Similar arguments have been put forward in the early 21st century with regard to Saddam Hussein and alleged terrorists.

In short, both the ideas of what the public is and what is in the public interest remain subject to public debate.

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