In A. Benchimol and W. Maley, eds.: *Spheres of Influence: Intellectual and Cultural Publics from Shakespeare to Habermas* (Oxford: Peter Lang).

Public Discourse and Political Experience:
T. J. Wooler and Transformations of the Public Sphere in Early 19th Century Britain

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Liberal theory is famously grounded in a presumed link between private property and political independence. This link was built into classical 18th century conceptions of the public sphere, suggesting that independence rooted in private existence enabled people to reason in disinterested ways about public affairs. Such "bourgeois" thinking was derided by Marx, among many others, both for legitimating the disfranchisement of workers and for failing to recognize the extent to which allegedly "free" bourgeois thinking was in fact shaped by the categories and constraints of capitalism. In its place, Marx advocated a revolutionary class struggle that would transcend any politics of individual opinions and usher in a new era in which an end to private appropriation of capital would provide for a more truly free public life. In effect, Marx argued that so long as private property underwrote a deep diremption of private from public life, there could be no collective freedom, no effective democracy. Marxists thereafter tended often to be dismissive of "bourgeois" democracy.

In the early 1960s, Jürgen Habermas challenged the Marxist position, suggesting that there was in fact unfulfilled radical and progressive potential in the categories of bourgeois democracy, including the 18th century bourgeois idea of the public sphere as a realm of private

persons debating the affairs of society at large and influencing the state. Habermas's argument enjoyed considerable immediate influence, and renewed prominence after its belated translation into English in 1989.[1] Recently it has animated a wave of important historical scholarship on the late 18th and early 19th century cases Habermas took as the bases for his ideal-typical account.

In both the initial reception of Habermas's book, and in the more recently debates, two criticisms have been central. One is the notion that Habermas neglected the proletariat, and the other the argument that he privileged reason too much over experience as a source of political judgment. Both figured in an early and influential response by Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge that anticipated a range of later critical arguments.[2] The proletarian public sphere worked in parallel to the bourgeois one, Negt and Kluge suggested, but with much more learning from experience and therefore a distinctive capacity for radical transcendence of the imprisoning categories of bourgeois reason. Similar ideas were developed in feminist theory and they took prominent form in Nancy Fraser's account of the importance of "counterpublics".[3] Like Negt and Kluge, Fraser was appreciative of Habermas's work and supportive of his attempt to generate a more progressive version of democratic theory. But, she suggested, though Habermas acknowledged that the actual bourgeois public sphere did not always live up to its ideal of open access, he was insufficiently attentive to the various exclusions on which it rested: gender, for example, and the proletariat.[4] In fact, Fraser suggested, subordinated social groups often found it "advantageous to constitute alternative publics". She called these "subaltern counterpublics"

> In order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.[5]

Habermas himself acknowledged the force of these and other criticisms: "The exclusion of the culturally and politically mobilized lower strata entails a pluralization of the public sphere in the very process of its emergence. Next to, and interlocked with, the hegemonic public sphere, a plebeian one assumes shape."[6] The idea of counterpublics caught on, theorized perhaps most fully by Michael Warner, and then was read energetically back into historical analyses of late 18th and early 19th century England.[7]

The resulting scholarship has greatly expanded our understanding of the period's public life. Yet, important as the idea of counterpublics clearly is, its usage can be misleading. This is so especially when analysts, eager to tell the story of the subaltern counterpublics, overestimate the extent to which these were simply parallel to a dominant, possibly bourgeois public sphere, rather than created by more or less violent expulsion from it. "Expulsion" is the right word, because the 18th century public sphere was more inclusive, more open in many ways than its 19th century successor. Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke were in the same discursive public, however opposed their ideas about the French Revolution. But in the wake of that Revolution, and the wars England fought with Revolutionary France, radical voices were expelled from the dominant public sphere. This was no voluntary constitution of an "advantageous" counterpublic simply reflecting different interests. It was the constitution of the dominant public sphere as bourgeois by a new grounding of it on both property and conformity to state power.

This new definition of the terrain of legitimate publicity fell especially hard on radical journalists. Men like William Cobbett, Richard Carlile, and T.J. Wooler all understood themselves as important and respectable voices in the public sphere of England, not simply one of the country's multiple publics. Carlile and Wooler, especially, were more or less direct heirs

of Tom Paine (and even Cobbett, late in his life, paid homage to a man he had attacked in his earlier Tory phase). But where Paine could be a respected, if contentious, voice both in America and in his native England, his successors could not. And the difference was not class (though it was partly the greater respect accorded artisans in the 18th century). Paine the former apprentice stay-maker was not privileged by property nor Carlile and Wooler excluded by poverty. On the contrary, each gave up prospects of prosperity in order to stick to his political principles (though neither gave up the desire for it). So too Cobbett, though he was never a straightforward Painite rationalist. Taxes, trials for sedition and blasphemy, physical intimidation and seizure of property were all used to keep them from participating in the public sphere. And yet, they strongly identified with that public sphere, *the* public sphere of England at large, and until it was absolutely impossible, sought voice within it. They did not seek an alternative proletarian public; if they helped make a counterpublic, it was a response to circumstances they decried and a second-best to the open discourse of an inclusive public which they favored.

The opposition between liberal ideals and Marxist debunking of bourgeois realities makes it hard to do justice to radicals like Wooler, Carlile, and Cobbett. It also makes it hard to see the extent to which they fought for an integrated public sphere, and resigned themselves only reluctantly to a politics of counterpublics. Conversely, it is important to see how their expulsion was part of the constitution of the bourgeois public sphere as such. We cannot address all aspects of this story in the present paper, but will focus on T.J. Wooler, publisher most famously of the *Black Dwarf*. Wooler was one of the most important radical intellectuals of the early 19th century and one of the most entertaining. Especially in the Black Dwarf, which he launched at the beginning of 1817 and kept publishing even after the suspension of Habeas Corpus led Cobbett

to flee to America, he fused imaginative literature with political argument. His Black Dwarf corresponded with the "Yellow Bonze" of Japan, describing a Britain all too similar to the notoriously despotic East. He told the "Green Goblin" in Ireland how the same regime that oppressed that country now oppressed its own people at home. Wooler's politics were shaped by Paine, Bentham, and radical constitutionalism. But they went beyond these sources, we will suggest, precisely in the way Wooler imagined the public sphere and the experience of it as the basis for politics. If not "typical", he was enormously popular, and thus a key voice in English popular radicalism. Wooler exemplifies key issues faced by early 19th century radical intellectuals who were expelled from the primary national public sphere and cast their lot with working people who had never been represented in it. Not least, his growing engagements with popular assemblies and protests pushed him to think about learning from political experience in ways writing alone had not. Craft communities, class inequalities, and cultural traditions all shaped the attitudes of popular radicals, but they became *political* though the experience of acting together, not only the experience of inequality or injustice, and not only rational analysis.

Radical Publics and Counterpublics

Workers' radicalism is often explained by economic grievances and social dislocations. At least in early nineteenth-century Britain, however, it was also a claim to politics. In publications, popular meetings, and the innumerable ways in which they constituted craft, community, and movement organizations, popular radicals put public political participation at the center of both their thinking and their practices. Even when motivated partly by the gravest

of material concerns, they called for a more rational structure of Parliamentary representation, greater transparency in government, and an end to corruption.

Radicals differed in their rhetorical preferences. Some opted for a political language focused on individual rights and liberties in the age of reason; others sustained the older tradition of Constitutional reform, communal responsibility, and civic virtue; a few began to develop radical critiques and claims founded in political economy. Many were willing to use all three and not necessarily worried about consistency. But they were united in their demand for open and free public communication and their insistence that the voices of the people needed to be heard. This shared position situates early 19th century Popular Radicals in a British tradition stretching back at least to the Civil War. It also locates them in the more specific context of increasingly exclusion of popular voices and radical dissent form a public sphere that had been more welcoming in the late eighteenth century. They were excluded not just by government but by middle class intellectuals who had no better claim than workers or artisans to consider themselves heirs of the Enlightenment. The pivotal change came during the Napoleonic Wars and in the first five years of the international peace that followed, which was not quite peace at home.

The political public sphere spanned class divisions much more substantially in the late 1780s and early 1790s than it would for another century. In this period, activists and thinkers from a variety of social and economic positions engaged in an impressively open and participatory dialogue over key questions of the day. They used relatively common modes of expression and appealed to a broad political public. The development of this public was enabled by transformations in communications, changing associational habits, and the development of an

alternative political nation outside the doors of Parliament that was willing to address Parliament and the issues Parliament might have claimed as its own.[8] This was not a classless public, but one in which engagement with political issues crossed class lines, and speakers from diverse social locations were heard by listeners of very different backgrounds.

Almost as soon as distinctively bourgeois political claims emerged, however, so did efforts to distinguish the claims of the bourgeoisie from plebeian and artisanal politics.[9] The rhetoric of such distinction centered on 'independence', though this often translated into possession of private property and sometimes into formal education and prose. Increasingly, members of the aristocracy and middle classes argued that artisans and plebeians were prone to manipulation, moved by passions and base interests, rather than reason.[10] They were also sometimes simply too radical for elite tastes, especially in the heat of the 1790s. As a consequence, repressive legislation was introduced in 1795 and artisanal leaders were harassed both by magistrates and by Reeves' 'Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers'. The result was a significant social narrowing of the political public sphere and the beginnings of its fracturing along class lines.[11] This process of delimitation was furthered by Britain's descent into a twenty-five year war that spanned the globe and made patriotism a potent basis for counter-mobilization, the denigration of radicals as sympathizers to the French, and the passing of other repressive legislation.

The cumulative result of this was a threefold expulsion from the political public sphere. First, artisans and workers who sought access were excluded on the basis of their alleged inability to transcend material necessity, their questionable ability to reason, and their tendency to communicate by crowd action rather than individual authorship or conversation. But it is

crucial to note that the expulsion was organized largely by taxes and costly prosecutions that turned the small businesspeople who published radical newspapers into imprisoned debtors—and thus exclusion was accomplished on the basis of wealth. Second, various Painite politicians, democrats, and some utopian socialists were excluded for violating one of the many limitations on respectable or authorized political speech. These included not only sedition but libel (a much manipulated legal category) and blasphemy. Not only officials but a variety of middle class moralists brought editors to court for criticizing the established church and arguing for free thought—or even just for printing Paine's *Age of Reason*. That these were central charges reveals both the defensiveness elites felt about authority and the minimal commitment to rationalism of the bourgeois public sphere.[12] Expulsion was also organized by attempts to censor or pre-emptively regulate the political content of publications and speeches, not only by restrictions or attacks on circulation and publication as such. The third dimension of expulsion involved the formal operations of law and government much less but was still felt keenly by many of the radical intellectuals. This was the disdain of those they considered their peers--or even their inferiors--who nonetheless occupied privileged positions in the bourgeois public sphere. For many of the radicals who suffered exclusion were artisans who did not doubt their entitlement to participate in the debates of London coffee houses and newspapers. Moreover they frequently argued that they had demonstrated their independence and indeed their intelligence far more than many of those who now sneered at them. They were often autodidacts but not uneducated; they worked for a living, but generally with control over their labor and certainly not in factories. They felt the new class distinction enforced in the public sphere as a personal injustice as well as

a political wrong. And if they responded by expressing solidarity with others in the dominated layers of this class hierarchy, it was not without a sense of their own distinction.[13]

Excluded not merely from elections but from nearly all authorized arenas of political speech, popular radicals carved out their own forums, political practices, and discursive framework. They did so with creativity and verve but never without regret. The creation of a popular 'counterpublic' was not simply a voluntary project, after all, nor did it express a political ideal so much as a necessary tactical response to exclusion. Many of the most prominent leaders of plebeian or popular radicalism sought to speak as independent voices within the broader public sphere in which elites also spoke. Their ideal public sphere would have crossed the boundaries of class.

Radical journalists such as Cobbett, Carlile, and Wooler joined in a popular public sphere that relied on visual symbols like the cap of liberty, street theater, and pageantry. But they also represented concerns of artisans, outworkers, and other non-elites to the broader reading public as well as to members of a specifically radical counterpublic. They never identified their work as simply the expression of material interest or need. While each suffered financially for his radicalism, each also claimed the respectable status of businessman. They appealed to a fluid category of "the people" that included all English and increasingly British citizens. But they stressed those who earned their living honestly, from factory hands who sold their labor to artisans who sold craft products to writers like themselves who sold words and ideas. 'The people' included businessmen and other productive members of the middle classes. This is one reason why these radicals were reluctant to accept a sharp distinction between workers and bourgeoisie such as that between all producers and aristocratic parasites. At his trial in 1817, for

example, Wooler addressed the mostly middle class members of the jury as "members of the community—subjects of the country" coopting them into his vision of an inclusive citizenry competent to "act as judges on questions of general policy".[14]

Cobbett, Carlile, and Wooler all recurrently stressed their independence and argued that this was part of what the government tried to repress when it prosecuted them, raised taxes on newspapers, and seized their print runs. They were independent intellectual voices in the public sphere, bringing forward distinct arguments and helping to inform and animate a popular debate in taverns, public houses and the press that certainly concerned material conditions—though never only material conditions—and in which the respect accorded to speakers reflected not merely their social standing but their arguments.

The idea of independence is crucial. While elite theories identified private property as the source of independence, popular radical critique demonstrated over and over again the corruption of the actual public sphere by patronage and government distribution of favors. As Wooler wrote,

> …where money is to be obtained, though it be only a farthing, they will frame an act of parliament to seize it. And if a spark of honesty is reported to have appeared in any quarter, they will bring forth an act of parliament to crush it. They hate independence, because they know the independent detest them.[15]

And leading radical intellectuals made a point of their own greater independence—not only in their writings and speeches but in the defenses they mounted when brought to trial by a government intent on keeping their voices out of public debate. Willingness to court financial ruin for matters of principle was better evidence of intellectual and political independence than possession of private property.

Though each of the radical intellectuals was distinctive, they shared commitment to independent voices joined in public discourse. Wooler exemplifies the way in which popular radicalism developed on 18th century bases, engaged the British public sphere as such, and after the French Wars found itself pushed out. Not only did Tories reassert state power (seizing an opportunity against some of the Whig elite), but the new elites and "middle classes" who joined aristocrats in the parliamentary public sphere claimed the right to close the door against the *plebs* on grounds of property. Wooler—and many colleagues--struggled to found a different form of public sphere that would escape the limits of class and of the established authorities of state and Church. It would not only be contentious, it would be creative. In terms of 20th century theory, Wooler anticipated Hannah Arendt more than Jürgen Habermas. He was committed not only to rational argument but to the world-making potential of political speech.[16]

Wooler's story thus involves the production of a 'counterpublic', but it also reveals some of the complexities and tensions in that term. The plebian public—it was not in any clear sense proletarian until later in the century—did not simply develop in parallel to the bourgeois public sphere. Rather, both bourgeois and plebeian public spheres took shape through the process by which elites excluded popular voices from what had been a less class-structured public sphere and the specific political experience this entailed.[17] Popular radicals had been--and sought as long as they could to remain--important voices in the more general public sphere, urging that its protagonists live up to high ideals of transparent, honest, and open communication. It is a mistake, thus, to idealize the bourgeois public sphere and see later 19th century openings to broader participation as part of a linear process of expansion.[18] The bourgeois public sphere of the early 19th century marked a continued opening of aristocratic politics to members of the

middle classes, but also a new exclusion of more plebeian and radical voices. The radical counterpublic was formed in response to this exclusion and was always shaped by aspirations either to constitute or to transform the legitimate public.

Though occasioned by expulsion, this radical counterpublic was actively created; it was not a direct expression of prepolitical proletarian experience. While it centered on print media, some writers and publishers linked their print discussions to popular meetings—calling for them, circulating reports of them, and writing what amounted to briefs for debate within them. In many senses, debate—the give and take of discussion—was only possible in relatively small gatherings and, consequently, political clubs as well as public house meetings became important. In contrast, larger meetings tended towards a 'representative public' and a more one-way communication. But radical intellectuals called for the meetings to be organized events centered on speeches and symbolic communication through banners, songs, and even items of clothing, including, among others, laurel sprigs in hat bands and all white dresses for women. The meetings thus provided, among other things, for a popular experience that affirmed the identity of participants not only as workers, or radicals, or critics of government policy but as members of a public. Participation in such public events, along with the radical press, thus involved an element of cultural creation; it mattered as experience and performance, not only as rational-critical discussion.

'Politics' does not refer merely to the exercise of power and the making of governmental decisions. It refers more basically to the creation of social order through public speech. This broadly Aristotelian understanding of politics informs both Arendt's and Habermas's accounts of public life, though historians in search of theory have drawn more on Habermas, and sometimes

in the process neglected this dimension of his thought.[19] The idea of a political public sphere locates a crucial basis for democracy in public discourse—and the social institutions and common culture that support such public discourse.

T. J. Wooler and Political Poesis

Editor of, and principal contributor to the widely-read journal *Black Dwarf,* T. J. Wooler was one of the most prominent voices of the popular radical movement in the post-Napoleonic War period, and one of the most colorful and creative radical intellectuals of the era.[20] More than most, Wooler directly engaged problems of political publics and counterpublics. He developed a project that rested on the creative shaping of the social world through public action--a project of political poesis. In this regard, Wooler was not typical of popular radicals; he was unusual, but unusually popular as well.

As Britain emerged after Waterloo from twenty-five years of continuous warfare, popular radicals had to grapple with the increasingly extensive discursive, cultural, and legal boundaries that were being constructed to exclude them. Not all the political hurdles were of the government's doing. The aristocracy still had a grip on government, and arguably curtailed its own internal arguments and party divisions to sustain this.[21] Struggling for recognition but also gaining a growing share of power, leading representatives of the bourgeoisie emphasized its distinction from those unworthy of political inclusion: village laborers, field laborers, proletarians, sailors, slaves, skilled artisans, degraded artisans, wage workers. [22] This was a group that E.P. Thompson argued was increasingly unified by a common culture, politics, and consciousness of class. However, the exclusion was not only on the basis of class, but also of

excessively radical republicanism. And while some of the excluded were grounded in cosmopolitan and worldly milieux; others couldn't be more particular and local. Some had extensive experience of a print public; others had hardly any. Some grounded identity in community, some in nation, some in religion, some in tavern, some in trade, some in class, and some in ideology. Constituting a public out of this diversity required an act of political imagination and world making; it could not simply express a prior unity. Such a thing was not without precedent in the Atlantic world, but accomplishing it was also a political challenge for radical leaders who themselves were hardly unified in their conception of the world toward which they should strive.

In this context, Wooler and other radicals contributed not only a flow of information, or rational-critical debate, or assistance in mobilizing popular protests. They also helped to reinvigorate and expand a social imaginary. By this term, we mean the ways of understanding how the world works that orient people in their action--a particularly effective and important dimension of culture. Charles Taylor, for example, has described the modern social imaginaries of market and citizenship, each reliant on a notion of the autonomous individual, and each distinct from earlier understandings of the embeddedness of persons in hierarchical relationships.[23] Wooler worked to shape the ways in which his readers understood markets and citizenship, the ways in which they used these categories to grasp their own locations in social life and the options open to them. The notion of social imaginary points to the importance of rhetoric, not merely as persuasive speech but as a way in which culture and individual creativity constitute the literal terms of social life.

One of the most pervasive sources for the radical social imaginary of the early nineteenth century was popular constitutionalism.[24] Exemplified by figures like Major John Cartwright, this discursive formation reinforced radical political claims. It deployed the sanction of tradition in which the past was imagined to be a time of greater liberty and in which Englishmen consequently had greater potential to act on their virtue. Cartwright grounded his ideal polity in a mythologized Saxon democratic precedent, opposing popular discussions to the various conflicts and negotiations that led to a 'balanced' government.[25] Such imaginaries were not simply inherited ideals; they drew on contemporary practices and struggles. For example, constitutionalism was sustained not only by political discourse, but also by serving on juries, chairing Members of Parliament after elections, and affirming the right of habeas corpus. In this respect, popular constitutionalism was the kind of 'living culture' sustained by 'selective tradition' articulated by both E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams.[26]

Neither popular constitutionalism nor other sources for popular radicalism were always progressive. They offered ways in which to voice claims, but did not dictate the content of all those claims. But to say they were 'imaginaries' does not mean they were false, so much as to point to the extent to which any claims about how the world does or should work depend upon language and forms of understanding that make thinking and communication possible. This is as true for ideas of independence and reason as for those of ancient Constitution; for political economy which imagined the world in one way and popular moral economy which imagined it in another. Politics was in part a struggle over which imaginary would have greater sway. For example, the popular radical political imagination was developed in a context in which the economic effects of an emergent industrial capitalism caused many to attempt a defense of more

traditional ways of life.[27] Along with the ongoing defense of traditional ways of life and organizing the economy, radicals and plebeians had to contend with their political exclusion. Popular constitutionalism and moral economy were cultural inheritances that informed most radicals throughout this period.[28] Others attempted to break with tradition and looked to constitute a new polity based upon practices they saw operating in the developing public sphere. Many followers of Thomas Paine, for example, looked to establish a reign of reason in which social differences could be dissolved in the solvent of reason—an effort that frequently ran aground on the rocks of having to figure out what reason was or what criteria underpinned it. The philosophical radicalism of Bentham, Mill, and Place provided one answer, or perhaps a collection of possible answers, but there were others.

Civic republicanism, millenarianism, popular constitutionalism, Lockean understandings of social contract and universal rights, moral economy, Painite republicanism, and philosophic radicalism were all influential in the early nineteenth century. Wooler drew on all of these in his formulation of a particular social imaginary rooted in the circumstance of exclusion and popular radical efforts to contest it. This is suggestive of his syncretism and ability as a *bricoleur* and perhaps even a 'trickster'.[29] Most radicals deployed arguments based upon these inherited political idioms because they were either the origins of the language used in the effort to exclude them and, therefore, yielded results when reformulated, or they were developed specifically in response to such exclusion. Throughout this period all popular radicals had to contend with a class analysis from above that argued they and their constituents were incapable of virtue or reason due to their lack of independence from necessity. This analysis had to be dealt with because it justified political exclusion and repressive legislation including the Stamp Act, the

Anti-Combination Act, and various rounds of repressive legislation including the Two Acts in 1817 and the Six Acts in 1819.[30]

Wooler was expert at deploying arguments from a variety of political traditions; indeed, this has often made it difficult to situate Wooler relative to other radicals. However, the emphasis on received political language can cause us to overlook the world Wooler was actively trying to create through his political activity. Wooler argued that the productive people could become producers in the world-making sense, not just in the realm of material fabrication, but in the realm of politics as well. To some extent all popular radicals shared this view, favoring world-making by working people over the dominance of a corrupt aristocracy. Cobbett's relentless lambasting of "Old Corruption" was embedded deeply in the popular social imaginary and encouraged a corresponding assumption that in binary reversal virtue resided unambiguously in the people. Engagement of 'the people' in productive activity only made them more suited to public action than aristocratic 'parasites'. Most radical intellectuals sought to create a polity in which the public would be able to apply deliberative and solidarity-building skills to remaking state and society.[31]

However, Wooler went beyond this in nurturing a social imaginary that posited complete unity of the people and the public. This approach at once delegitimated the elite public sphere, representing all acts of exclusion as both anti-people and anti-public, and also implicitly affirmed the strength and respectability of the people. In other words, he insisted centrally that there was one legitimate public sphere, and that it was composed of all productive people of the country. The middle classes were in it alongside the workers. And if they sought to deny this, to side with

aristocrats in excluding nonelites, they were engaged in factional politics not public discourse, they were traitors, or at best they were mistaken.

Wooler sought to enact and represent this social imaginary in collective actions such as electing legislative-attorneys, creating forums for debate in print and clubs, and organizing mass meetings that represented the public-that-could-be in microcosm. Representative publicity was crucial to the popular public, as it had been to monarchies, but alongside and in the service of more rational-critical discourse and with more agency for ordinary people.[32] Meetings weren't just about education or discussion, they were necessarily about representation, not least of the fact that the people and the public were coterminous. One could feel that in a crowd as orderly as it was large.

Wooler's journal, the *Black Dwarf*, offered a medium for representing the people as the public through its arguments and through its imagery, as for example when the Black Dwarf explains to the Yellow Bonze that while "it is the practice in some places to *punish first* and *try afterwards*" in the "free country" of England "they have improved the precept and *punish without trying at all"*.[33] At the same time, Wooler used the *Black Dwarf* to reflect the activities of a broad public through reports of mass meetings. These were meant to illustrate that the opinion, like the behavior, of the public was orderly, reasoned and unified rather than the chaotic play of inflamed emotions elite feared.[34] Such large-scale actions helped constitute the public, and Wooler joined in organizing them. From this that we can derive a sense of his imagined polity, and also of a dimension to this that moves him beyond syncretism to creative originality. This representative, and simultaneously constitutive, approach to *enacting* the public is central to Wooler's distinctiveness as a radical leader.

While it is perhaps easy to understand the logic in what Wooler wanted to do, his choice to take on this project does not follow obviously from his social or economic background. He was a skilled printer who could have been successful—and more safely--without seeking a larger readership in a popular radical movement. He flirted with liberalism and Philosophic Radicalism but he rejected them on the same grounds that he rejected Owen's plan—they did not envision the world-making possibilities of a public rooted in the productive people.[35] Wooler's project may not have been dictated by class, but it was certainly shaped by a self-understanding rooted in craft production. Wooler was himself a producer, not just of print, but of imaginaries, constituencies and, he hoped, of a better polity. His commitment to political poesis may have prefigured Arendt, but he would have been offended by her distinction between *homo faber*—who created material things—and the more fully human man of action who spoke and created a political order through symbolic action in public.[36] He and his readers were both, he insisted, and indeed the latter because also the former. The fact that he was an elite artisan and certainly could have survived as an independent printer shaped his understanding of productive citizenship—which was shared as part of a broad social imaginary. The social grounding of his dispositions and orientations informed but did not determine Wooler's acts of cultural production and political innovation.

By itself, Wooler's location of political legitimacy with the people does not really separate him from numerous 'gentleman leaders' of popular radicalism[37]. This claim could be based on an assumption about the universality of human reason, or developed by adding the language of the social contract to oligarchy; as such, it was a source of legitimacy for all popular radicals. The crucial distinctions among these radicals lay elsewhere. Wooler drew on both Paine

and more general claims to human capacity for political reason, but he also drew on the craftsman's social imaginary rooted in self regulated productive work and on classical republican conceptions of civic virtue and the commonwealth.[38] Specifically, when Wooler articulated the 'People's' claim, he didn't simply demand equality for his constituents; he argued that political virtue was not based on landed or even movable wealth--as it so often seemed to be in civic republican discourse. Rather, Wooler relocated virtue, arguing that: 'all virtue has arisen from the *democratic floor*', or the productive people. He said:

> The causes of all great revolutions are to be found in the conduct of *the great*. The people are not prone to change—they love quietness—they seek repose. The ties that bind them to the world are too dear to be rashly endangered. They are not slaves of avarice or ambition. They do not look forward to the favor of princes—they are not ready to sacrifice religion and honour to obtain splendid establishments:--they are satisfied with the reward of honest labour, and happy when that labour can procure for them the necessaries of life.[39]

For Wooler the issue at stake was not a class one, but a political one between producers and parasites. The political nature of the exclusion of the productive and virtuous people only made it more appalling. While Wooler's exclusion was political, he found a natural constituency in artisans and workers who were excluded on the basis of class. A common claim among popular radical leaders was that aristocrats used war and the privileges of rule to justify milking the productive population of the goods of their labor through taxation; and in this activity they were in cahoots with 'moneycrats' who financed government debt. Those producers—masters and journeymen, workers and owners— who together created the wealth of the nation were, Wooler argued, united in opposition to these social and economic parasites. When disputes arose within the ranks of productive people Wooler argued that the application of reason would result in a solution that all could agree to.[40] Similar in this to Cobbett, Wooler located economic problems in the burden of taxation, and taxation was, as with the American Revolutionaries, also a political problem of representation.[41] The solution to this, Radicals argued, was parliamentary

reform. Despite the political nature of their claim, Radical efforts were met with silence, as reflected in Parliament's ignoring of their petitions.[42] Wooler's outrage at this reaction is evident: 'Had the petitions been fairly discussed, a rejection of the claims would not have been half so painful to those who petitioned. But to see their petitions thrown in, and then swept out of the honourable house, with as little ceremony as shreds are treated in a tailor's shop, was an outrage neither to be forgotten nor forgiven.'[43]

Wooler did not merely abstractly invoke this imaginary of a polity based upon the unification of the public with the productive people. He actively set about creating it. The *Black Dwarf* was as much a forum for discussion as it was a vehicle for Wooler's leadership. Diverse opinions were expressed and letters from various figures, both prominent and obscure, were reprinted within it. The *Black Dwarf*, by bridging space and through the manner of its address, enabled and reproduced an imagination of the people as a public—one in which people were expected to act virtuously in the application of their reason. Wooler also promoted the formation of clubs, organized actions of various sorts, and established committees to deal with various wrongs (relief for political prisoners, defense of jury trials, etc.). These activities were not simply intended to be a platform for Wooler's prominence and leadership; he called upon the people to take an active and central role in the making of the polity. For example, in the wake of the Two Acts in 1817 Wooler separated the virtuous--who would act--from the servile and passive: 'There is no defence against these machinations except Ourselves! We are masters of our own destiny, if we are masters of our own determination.' The government had thrown down the gauntlet against the liberties of Englishmen, 'and he who hesitates to take it up, and call for the dismissal of the present ministers, deserves to die a traitor—or to live—a *slave*.'[44] In short,

contesting exclusion required the active participation of the people and that enabled political *poesis* in a way that could only be imagined, not realized, in print.

It was necessary, however, that political activity be grounded in the reasoned deliberation of the people as a whole, not in the limited reasoning capacity of individuals. Deliberation would simultaneously underpin social solidarity among movement participants. To enable this sort of poesis through reasoned speech, Wooler actively set about supporting the creation of clubs of 'Political Protestants'. The assumption here was that the movement was not some natural political expression of its constituents, it had to be constructed even if one started with the best raw material: active citizens; and, in this sense, Wooler had a very Habermasian notion of poesis rooted in reasoned deliberation. For example, in a debate with other Radical leaders, Wooler observed:

> Some writers have affected to avoid clubs, and meetings. Stay at home and read. Opinions may be formed at home perhaps better than elsewhere; but they can only be tried in society. It is only in communion with his fellows, that man rises to the full importance of his being. Prejudice and previous habits interpose a powerful barrier to the full exercise of reason; but the air of conflicting opinions is the element of truth; and the theatre of action is alone able to produce the development of reason.[45]

More importantly, in the face of political exclusion many radicals realized that the application of abstract reason was decidedly limited in terms of what it could achieve. Wooler knew that other tactics and ways of imagining the public needed to be developed to deal with this limitation. As it turns out (and somewhat contrary to Habermas' assumption that it is sufficient to rely on abstract reason), a public based on abstract reason alone was not realizable in the popular radical experience, despite the fact that Wooler and Carlile both insisted on its importance. In this context, the world-making power of speech that was realized in reasoned debate needed to be complemented by the experience of the people as public, and some institutionalization of this that could be sustained in the face of opposition. Many argued that mass meetings were not

amenable to deliberation, but by 1819 Wooler argued that mass meetings were central to the constitution of a unified People. Moreover, mass meetings represented the orderliness, reason, decorum, and discipline of the People—an essential point to make when some were trying to exclude unpropertied people because of their presumed susceptibility to acting as an unthinking mob.[46] For Wooler, the people as public constituted itself and represented itself as the public in collective actions such as mass meetings:

> It is only in public meetings that the real voice of the people is ever heard. On such occasions, venality is ashamed, fear loses its influence, and party is banished from the discussion. The assembled multitude loses all sight of private interest, and every heart beats only for the general good. The spark of patriotism runs with electric swiftness from pulse to pulse, until the whole mass vibrates in unison.[47]

Moreover, mass meetings were a source of power that enabled the successful institutionalization of the people as public:

> Some one will always be found bold enough to brave an arbitrary law, and publish truth in contempt of penalties... But PUBLIC MEETINGS *once suppressed*, or *tamely surrendered* by the people, the liberty of the subject is really at an end. [because] It is only the *union of numbers*, and the *concentration of opinion*, which has any weight in checking the mischievous views of a wicked administration.[48]

For Wooler, the constitution of the people as a public through collective action was made necessary by the unreasonable exclusion of popular radicals and their political claims from the elite political public sphere actually represented in Parliament. Wooler expressed this notion while reflecting on the successful first election of a 'legislatorial-attorney'--in this case Wooler's friend Sir Charles Wolseley--to represent the rapidly-growing city of Birmingham to Parliament:

> The honourable house has very dexterously put all petitions for reform *on the table*, and thus got rid of the question [of parliamentary reform] by mean evasion. Instead of a petition, the inhabitants of Birmingham have now, to try the question of *right*, having chosen a representative, who cannot be got rid of by being *laid on*, *or put under their table*. He will compel them to argue, and to decide; and if properly assisted by the conduct of other populous and unrepresented towns, open a side door into the house for a little honesty and integrity, which is no where more wanted, nor anywhere less likely to get in by other means.[49]

The legal standing of a 'legislatorial attorney' was dubious but the logic was clear: towns lacking official representation through the corrupt electoral system would simply constitute themselves

as constituencies and choose a representative on their own rather than the Crown's authority. It was not only good theater, but good political learning through public participation.

To sum up, there are three components to Wooler's conception of the people as the public. First, the 'People' referred to *active* people, people experienced in productive work (ideally with some degree of autonomy) who would act in defense of their 'liberties' and who were not, therefore, 'slaves'. Second, Wooler valued the reasoned deliberation in public that enabled the identification of the best course of action for the world-making activity of the radical movement. Third, constituting the people as a public required solidarity building, the representation of the people as the public, and the experience of being part of this public as it was enacted in collective action such as mass meetings.

This active conception of the People and the idea of collective action as necessary to the constitution of the public separates Wooler from many other radical leaders. Wooler wasn't trying to embody the people or speak for producers. Rather, he wanted to constitute a public in which the people could act for themselves. It was activities such as deliberative assemblies and mass meetings that constituted the people as public in Wooler's imaginary, not his own syncretism or his publication of the *Black Dwarf*. In this sense, he believed his own rhetoric about the virtue that resided with producers. As a result, he argued with Cobbett over the importance and role of clubs, the necessity of universal suffrage, and the role of a radical leader. Wooler's perspective is in marked contrast to the other imaginings of the people that saw them as an economically-determined mass—a view that unified bourgeois and aristocrat and even some artisan leaders and proto-socialists such as Francis Place and Robert Owen. Unfortunately, it was this very imagining of the productive people as unitary and capable of poesis that would ensure

the radical imaginary, and Wooler's imaginary in particular, would be severely challenged and undermined by events.

Wooler's imaginary, and the tactical repertoire that it called into play, both failed in the face of the most significant event in the years of the mass platform—Peterloo. The enormous and momentous meeting held at St. Peter's Fields in Manchester in August 1819 was the culmination of a series of mass meetings that had two goals. First, for Wooler and some others these meetings were to constitute and represent the people as the public. This was a new conception. Prior to this series of meetings, mass gatherings were viewed as destructive of reason, as deliberation was thought to be inevitably drowned out by emotion—a worry that Wooler himself earlier felt.[50] However, in the process of organizing and witnessing the Radical gatherings that culminated in Peterloo, Wooler revised his views. Most importantly, he came to see these meetings as constructing unity out of diversity. In the sense of *homo faber*—creator at once of material and symbolic goods--upon which Wooler wanted to ground the polity, the People constituted themselves in action in these meetings. The second goal was to elect 'legislatorial-attorneys' to represent the mushrooming manufacturing towns of the Midlands and the North—a device to highlight and challenge the illegitimacy and exclusion of official Parliamentary representation. However, shortly after the meeting began it was charged without warning by the Manchester yeomanry and eight people were killed along with others who later died of their wounds. The crowd fled and several radical leaders were arrested for treason including 'Orator' Henry Hunt, Samuel Bamford, and Wooler himself.

Both of the goals of the meeting, the effort to constitute the people as public and the direct challenge to the representative structure of the nation, were highly provocative. More

disturbingly for Wooler, the crowd wasn't attacked on the orders of the government. The yeomanry was a sort of locally raised reserve unit and was constituted of Manchester factory masters, shopkeepers, and others who could afford a uniform and the maintenance of a horse. In short, it was the Manchester bourgeoisie that charged the crowd, not the corrupt aristocracy that ran the country. This was a problem for a leader like Wooler who had based his social imaginary and world-making project on the productive people. The crowd was charged by producers—albeit well-off ones. Peterloo was an event that had a chilling effect on popular radicalism, but it had a particularly chilling effect on Wooler. The distinctiveness of his imaginary was its focus on the world-making potential of the productive people. In forwarding this vision, Wooler had papered over the escalating conflicts between masters and journeymen.[51] However, it was impossible to ignore the conflict between these groups after Peterloo, and Wooler, to his credit, recognized the situation. After Peterloo, Wooler located a fundamental social conflict at the heart of the productive people: the appropriation of journeymen's surplus labor value by masters.[52] Here was a shift toward class analysis. The productive people had become fractured and the problem could no longer be laid at the door of a rapacious aristocracy. Wooler's world-making project, grounded upon the notion of the virtue and unity of the productive people, collapsed as a result. In response, he relied more heavily upon satire to ground his criticism, something he occasionally lamented, and flirted more with other perspectives such as the philosophic radicalism of Bentham.[53]

Wooler did not attempt to carve out a distinctive and autonomous counterpublic; he claimed *the* public for the productive people. Many of the practices he advocated were mere adaptations of practices that had been around for some time in different social circumstances. Far

more significant for our understanding of how Wooler and many of his constituents understood the public sphere, is that Wooler wanted the people to take up a world-making project. To Wooler, the active people were the *only* legitimate public. This is not simply a claim for legitimacy within a pre-existing bourgeois public sphere and it is not an argument for establishing an autonomous counterpublic. It was a claim that grounded political poesis in the very group that had been most consistently assumed to be incapable of such activity—the people, otherwise referred to as the 'mob' or the 'swinish multitude'. For example, Wooler argued:

> The cloud of prejudice is fast fading before the light of reason. The people are beginning to *think for themselves*, refuse to be any longer *the dupes of faction*, or the *slaves of ignorance*. Political knowledge is so universally disseminated, the very agents of our oppressors are obliged to confess, that the A*lower orders*,@ as they call them, know infinitely more of the science of politics, than *the highest* did a century ago. From this position, it inevitably results, that if the lower orders *know* as much as their would-be betters did a century since, they are now well qualified to judge, as the A*higher orders*@ of past times. It may be added, that they know *as much*, perhaps *more*, as a body than the A*higher orders*@ of the present day; for while the poor have been wandering after in formation in the wilderness of oppression and despair, the rich have been eagerly endeavouring to lose all the rational advantages of wealth, at the brothel, or the gaming-table; and supplying the vacuum with brutality, ignorance, and the most consummate folly. If *knowledge*, therefore, were the basis of political right, the rich and the poor might fairly change places, and the cap of exclusion be placed upon the pedestal of the present usurpation.[54]

In making this claim, Wooler did not merely take up the challenge posed by Burke and his elite compatriots--a challenge that has been too easily forgotten by many who have grappled with the 'social question' that has plagued modernity. Wooler also insisted that people who work with their hands for a wage could also be world-makers with their minds and public speech.[55]

The "Bourgeois" Public Sphere

The bourgeois and proletarian public spheres were not simply parallel, they were mutually constitutive. The popular radical challenge pressed the bourgeois-dominated (though partly aristocratic) public sphere to articulate and live up to strong ideas of publicness. For example, it was Cobbett, not a more authorized representative of the bourgeoisie, who

published—and fought to keep publishing—the *Parliamentary Record*. This continued an activist pursuit of greater government transparency—a source of information for the public sphere—that was also central to eighteenth-century forms of radicalism, including, among others, the protests of the 1770s that centered on John Wilkes. Wilkes' following included aristocratic radicals and bourgeois activists as well as a large cross-section of the London populace, but by the nineteenth century the primary protagonists of the emerging bourgeois public sphere sought to suppress open reporting of their debates as well as exclude representatives of the propertyless classes. While an old Radical like Bentham might still, in the early nineteenth century, favor any measures bringing greater transparency—and rationality—to government, many of his followers distanced themselves from popular radicalism.[56] This distance was itself basic to the way in which the bourgeoisie conceived the public sphere including their own distinction in claiming the respectable status of participants. Yet, the pressures from below produced some of the gains in democracy and informed the rational-critical public discourse the bourgeoisie would later claim as its own (with some support from political philosophers).

In these early battles over the boundaries of the public sphere, the bourgeois rhetoric was misleading. It was not the inherent limitations of artisanal politics, nor any lack of independence or capacity for reason on the part of artisan intellectuals, that threatened the public sphere. Rather, a public sphere that was open to such deep political contention threatened the projects of class advancement through gradual reform desired by many members of the middle classes, including many middle-class intellectuals. It was political circumstance and social conflict that raised the stakes of defining the boundaries of the public sphere, making this a prize worth

playing for. In this context, it was most often the plebeian and artisan radicals who pushed to open the public sphere and hold it accountable to its own standards. In the face of this claim the majority of the politically active bourgeoisie abandoned claims to citizenship grounded in universal reason and increasingly chose to be on the side of limiting public participation to those with wealth. They did this not only to mark a distinction from an increasingly active and independent artisanate, but also because their own projects of acquiring property and securing recognition by older elites were succeeding. They could accept a property qualification for political participation both because they had property and because the dominant political elites agreed to a changed standard that would include movable wealth as well as land.[57]

This exclusion was accomplished both through legislation such as the Stamp Act, the Riot Act, and the Anti-Combination Act, and through periodic suspensions of *habeas corpus*. Moreover, it was accomplished through the application of laws of libel, sedition, and blasphemy to various political arguments, especially, Painite republicanism. Efforts were also made to contest radical arguments in public, as through the religious tracts of Hannah More, or by subsidizing loyalist journalism pitched at a popular audience such as the *White Dwarf*. Finally, these formal exclusions were only deployed when various other impediments to plebeian claims-making failed. For example, petitions in favor of parliamentary reform were regularly excluded on the grounds of the language used, the manner in which the petitions were collected, and their mode of presentation.[58] These rules and definitions were not simply carryovers from a less-open political era. On the contrary, these rules and practices were elaborated and defined in the course of contending with, first middle-class and later plebeian, claims to legitimate participation in the public sphere.

If there was a single pivotal period for this change, it was the five years after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. This conflict was clearly emerging in the 1790s. However, it was not clear that the public sphere would be fractured along these lines until 1819. It was the massacre in St. Peter's fields, carried out against a peaceful and organized crowd by a largely middle class magistracy and Yeoman Cavalry in 1819, that made it clear that limiting access to the public sphere was not exclusively an aristocratic goal but had become a middle-class one as well. Calling the massacre 'Peterloo' was a brilliant rhetorical flourish made meaningful by close proximity in time, and also by the extent to which government and politics were felt to have changed during the war years.

At the same time, radicals were unified in staking claim to a broad conception of citizenship. In doing so they built upon innovations that had been made in the late eighteenth century. Nonetheless, the inability to force the opening of the political public sphere made it clear that inclusion would require more than the reproduction of bourgeois practices of publicity and a capacity to reason. Indeed, this circumstance set up one of the defining problems for radicals of all stripes. There were four readily-discernable responses to this situation. Francis Place and John Wade abandoned the field of politics and turned to economic solutions to the problems confronted by many English working people. The result was a host of investigations with conclusions determined using the utilitarian criteria of Jeremy Bentham. As a result, Place ended up an advocate for positions such as the repeal of the Anti-Combination Act and the use of contraception.[59] Relatedly, Robert Owen began elaborating and disseminating a plan of paternalistic utopian socialism based on his experience at New Lanark.[60] Other radicals were not as prepared to cede the field of politics to those that would exclude them. Many 'gentleman

leaders' argued that they represented the English people on the basis of their own Tory paternalism and the historical precedent of the mythical English constitution. William Cobbett, for example, was not particularly interested in the public as a forum for debate, rather as one in which he could articulate the right and correct views of the people while mocking England's corrupt rulers. Henry 'Orator' Hunt was always interested in public displays of popular opinion, but it was he and his white hat that epitomized the struggle for liberty at popular radical gatherings.[61] T. J. Wooler and Richard Carlile were both editors who had origins in a more Painite and rationalist manner of political argument. They both relied heavily on conceptions of politics that were centered on the public rather than the 'Ancient Constitution'. We should keep in mind that there is significant overlap between these potentially misleading groupings. Nonetheless, all these groupings are unified in that they all offered particular innovations and responses to political exclusion that required going beyond received traditions and the ideal-typical conception of the bourgeois public sphere. [62]

The bourgeoisie had a disproportionate influence in and on the British public sphere through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It was largely their cultural product.[63] But it was never only theirs, and not just because of residual aristocratic participation. First, many of its ideals—like transparency of government and the independence of virtuous political voices—while claimed by bourgeois writers in the eighteenth century, were by the nineteenth more often pressed on it by subaltern participants. Second, it was only with the expulsion of subalterns that the bourgeois public sphere was constituted as such. It is true, as Habermas recognized, that opening the bourgeois public sphere to growing popular participation would challenge some of its discursive norms. What he did not recognize adequately was that before

any expansion there was a contraction, and that the willingness to disregard relative status differences inside the 'legitimate' public--to whatever extent it actually existed--was predicated on the exclusion not only of those without property, but of those who demanded a higher standard of discursive openness, honesty, and independence.

It is true, as many critics have argued, that the bourgeois public sphere was not only incompletely emancipatory but was a vehicle for class hegemony as well.[64] But this was never the whole story either, partly because the effort to structure a public sphere committed to the dominance of bourgeois voices and values itself stimulated the formation of a radical counterpublic. This radical counterpublic, moreover, was not simply a parallel, or alternative space that was content with antagonism from outside. It laid counterclaims to what a more encompassing and legitimate British public sphere should be. Thus the dialectical tension Habermas identifies between transparency and argumentative honesty versus openness to wider participation was not an internal feature of the bourgeois public sphere so much as a feature of the larger cross-class public sphere which was violated by the class structuring of the bourgeois public sphere.

The bourgeois public was constituted not simply as an expansion of an earlier aristocratic one, but as a constriction of an earlier more inclusive public, one that had offered more voice and legitimacy to radicals and non-elites, at least in London. Far from volunteering for proletarian status or a separate public sphere of workers, many popular radicals demanded what they saw as their basic rights within the English public sphere. These included the right to dissent, the right to create new media and new networks of communication separate from those dominated by elites, and the right to assemble in public. But for the popular radicals to become a 'counterpublic

sphere' was not a tactic of choice but a recognition of repression.[65] They would have preferred to be challengers inside a shared public sphere—and to have that public sphere more truly live up to its own ideals of respecting the best arguments rather than the status of arguers.[66]

The popular radicals were forced by their very marginalization within--and eventual expulsion from--the bourgeois public sphere to grapple both with its boundaries and with the specificities of their experience and that of their constituents. They were also forced to relate the printed word to oral tradition, newspapers to popular assemblies and their own role as radical literati to the prominence of populist orators. They were forced to confront the relationship of forms of struggle to ideological content—precisely because the public they sought to address had constantly to be enacted and represented against resistance. Unable to rely on the tacit underpinning of property to give form to their public, they had continually to try to produce a new underpinning. While they might argue for citizenship, or alternative conceptions of property, at the center of their effort was the idea of the 'people' itself, and the very public phenomena of mass meetings, debates, marches, and media in which this public--this people--collectively represented itself.[67] In the course of developing their new understandings—understandings that were informed by tradition, history, their own political activities, and the development of their popular movement—popular radicals moved well beyond the language of necessity and the economic and social needs of their constituents. In doing so, they forwarded an alternative sense of what the public was about that emphasized creativity and fabrication (in the *homo faber* sense of 'fabrication') far more than economic justice, which was usually assumed to be an outcome of democratic politics. And while the fragility of these claims in the face of events like Peterloo certainly marked them as flawed, it also indicates that in our understanding of the

development of the public sphere we need to go beyond the simple categories of economic determinism of many analysts and endeavor to understand the broader realm of possibility that already existed.

Faced with exclusion, the popular radicals did constitute a counterpublic. This drew on an intellectual heritage they partially shared with bourgeois writers and politicians. It also produced new cultural understandings of the contemporary situation in England and patterns of social organization and change in the world more broadly. Not least, it produced new normative arguments, practices, and ideals. To imagine this as truly reflecting independence from material conditions and social identities is to succumb to a misleading self-understanding of the bourgeois public sphere as simply the realm of reason. However much or little this ideal might have functioned within particular debates in the bourgeois public sphere, it relied on tacit—learned and embodied—acceptance of the boundaries of the public sphere. These boundaries excluded not only the popular radicals, but positioned experience itself as a basis for legitimate knowledge.

In attempting to use bourgeois practices of publicity, Wooler and others realized that their subordinate and excluded political position required modifying inherited practices to enable the institution of their imagined world in the face of determined opposition. The creative process was more than a simple teleological move from one type of popular politics to another.[68] Rather, Wooler and the other popular radicals innovated and created based on the logic of their particular social positions. And in stressing publicness and publicity they insisted that both their own social positions and all of these various creative and innovative efforts be open to view.[69] This is one of the meanings of the quasi-biographical self-reporting so prominent in the radical literature

(though certainly egotism figures as well). Popular Radicals debated the implications of innovative approaches, including: political clubs, mass meetings, legislatorial-attorney schemes, arming in self-defense, and methods of dodging the Stamp Act. The successes in this process are the outcome of reflection upon hundreds of other intentional efforts and thousands of unintentional ones, much as the boundaries of and within the public sphere itself were the outcome of thousands of particular social and political conflicts. The creative poesis of popular radicals like Wooler was both an effort to construct a more equitable and fulfilling polity, and an effort to develop new conceptions of publicity that could contend with efforts to silence it.

As E.P. Thompson, James Epstein, Kevin Gilmartin, Gregory Claeys, and others have shown, this popular public debate was informed by a variety of different intellectual themes and traditions.[70] It was often syncretistic, or rhetorically opportunistic—drawing on references to the ancient Constitution and British liberties; the Rights of Man and Painite rationalism; and a range of other intellectual sources. If philosophical consistency was not a primary concern for popular radicals, neither was it for most participants in the bourgeois public sphere. In each case, there were some intellectuals for whom this was a more important agenda; for example, the Benthamites who perfected utilitarianism and linked it to political economy, or Carlile who for most of his life preached a pure version of Paine. But it is crucial to note that both the local public house debates and the national radical newspapers were informed by a wide admixture of political agendas, including constitutional reform, that were in no sense reducible to questions of material economic interests of particular people or social positions. Moreover, as Anna Clark has shown, these non-reductionist intellectual and political efforts were not always positive.[71]

Conclusion

Habermas is often accused of 'neglecting' the proletarian public sphere, but this isn't precise. He does not simply 'forget' proletarians or plebeians, nor is he ignorant that they carried on public discourse; he himself speaks briefly of a plebeian public.[72] But he regards plebeian public communication as in essence a separate question. It is separate because, according to Habermas, it does not embody the specific self-transforming logic built into the bourgeois public sphere; it is a more straightforward reflection of material interest. Habermas makes clear that in analyzing the public sphere as a constitutive category of bourgeois society, he sees the ideal expressed by liberal ideology and the social conditions of bourgeois life as joined in the notion of the public sphere—and in the internal contradictions that are worked out in the course of its structural transformation.[73]

Many of those who would 'correct' accounts of the public sphere simply by adding workers in, or recognizing an allegedly parallel public sphere of non-elites, miss the theoretical significance of this. Habermas (like many others) fails to attend adequately to proletarian or plebeian public speech because he regards it as primarily determined by the economic and other material interests of workers. The proletariat may be central to the transformation of capitalism in a Marxist model, but not because of the originality of its speech. Habermas does not forget Marx but follows him when he chooses not to accord proletarian speech the specific capacity to break free from social determination that is required for it to be politically constitutive in the manner in which Aristotle meant. As Marx said, "It is not a question of what this or that proletarian or even the whole proletariat at the moment regards as its aim. It is a question of *what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to

do."[74] To the extent that those 'bringing plebeian publics back in' report that workers used public communication to agitate for directly material ends, therefore, they confirm the underlying assumption of the Habermasian and indeed Marxist theories. Ironically, this was an argument put forward in the early nineteenth century by elites who wished to exclude the laboring classes from Britain's political public.

In the same vein, to speak of the proletarian or plebeian public sphere as basically a realm of parallel discourse misunderstands both it and the bourgeois public sphere historically as well as theoretically. Popular radicals—including many craft and other workers—developed their public speech as participants in a more inclusive English (and increasingly British) public sphere. They did not develop a proletarian public sphere immediately on the basis of different material conditions or by choice. Rather, they sought to continue to participate in, and to increase their influence within, the more general public sphere. They were excluded from it, with the shift in structure of the public coming most decisively in the early nineteenth century, during and immediately after the Napoleonic Wars. Exclusion was marked by legislation like the Six Acts, but it was driven not only by the aristocrats who still made up most of the cabinet, or the gentry who backed Tory ministries, but by the bourgeoisie which reconstituted the public sphere as its own by pushing out those without sufficient private property. Many of the artisan-radicals sought unsuccessfully to have their accumulated skill seen as a form of individual property entitling them to legitimate standing in the public sphere. In many ways, they accepted the Lockean notion of independence as basic to politics (which itself built on Greek political philosophy). But they tried to preserve independence on the basis of a mode of production which was undermined

by both capitalism and the political enforcement of a new legal regime which protected some other forms of property and not this traditional one.

Use of the term 'counterpublic' has sometimes implied that subordinated groups simply prefer a public realm of their own, to organize public communication only among themselves. This may be true on occasion, and it may be empowering on occasion as a phase in a struggle to achieve solidarity in opposition and clarity of ideas. But it was not how most radical intellectuals in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries saw the matter. They formed a counterpublic, but only out of necessity and on the basis of exclusion. There was not first a bourgeois public sphere against which the proletariat then organized a public of its own. The more 'authorized' public and more 'contesting' publics were sundered in struggle over the very idea of what public might mean and how public communication might inform politics. This coincided with struggle over material conditions, but cannot be reduced to it.

As many scholars have argued, there was not first class formation and then an organization of communication on that basis. Class gained its definition in social and political conflicts as well as in economic production and exchange. In these conflicts, culture was not simply a resource, a pre-existing basis of commonality. It was a field of creativity, as actors innovated and built upon available idioms, tactics, and practices and adapted them to the situation at hand: an 'alternative phenomenology of the newspaper', the 'mass platform', the 'radicalism of tradition', or new imaginings and practical articulations of the public such as Wooler's.[75] These cultural processes helped draw new lines of difference and eventually became the basis for different boundary definitions.[76] The development of a plebeian counterpublic, thus, like the development of the bourgeois public, was enacted partly in distinctive forms of

communication within itself, and partly in communication aimed to cross incipient class boundaries and contest the terms of a larger public sphere.[77] As E. P. Thompson suggested, class was made, not simply found—but conversely, class alone was not the basis for the making.

Political conflicts increasingly took the form of clashes between the middle classes (themselves increasingly unified) and artisans, plebeians, and wage workers. Bourgeois intellectuals continued to articulate the idea of a universal and participatory public sphere, not least in seeking to eliminate privileges of the still dominant aristocracy (which itself relied less on public communication and more on private connection to sustain its power). But because they were also forced to contest the claims of artisans and plebeians, middle class intellectuals widely agreed that there must be qualifications for entry into the public. These were sometimes economic (as in property requirements for voting or ability to pay stamp taxes on newspapers), often cultural (as in insistence on formal English grammar and a form of political argument abstracted from both experience and allegory), and sometimes directly political (in the form of loyalty oaths and prosecution of 'French-sounding' republicanism). At this time, the most consistent advocates for a truly open public sphere were the artisan autodidact leaders of Popular Radicalism.[78]

Writers and activists like Wooler sought to form culture in the public sphere, not only engage in rational-critical discourse; they sought to shape politics itself, not simply rectify social and economic harms, severe as these were. Their projects of political *poesis* were more expansive. They thought the greatest potential for political *poesis* lay with the creativity of producers rather than the abstract speculations of social parasites and the idle.

This and not simply an initial desire for a separate realm, is the background to their frequent presentation of the radical public as the only legitimate public. This is also the setting in which radicals developed new and innovative practices of publicity. The social and economic situations of different social actors continued to matter a great deal throughout late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century England. They were consequential, but in and of themselves they were not determinative of all claims—and this was itself a crucial radical claim against the accusation of elites that their very material dependency made them ineligible for the public sphere. In fact, working people were able to step beyond their social and economic circumstances in order to engage in world-making projects.