2 CRAIG CALHOUN

Calhoun, Craig ( 1998) The public good as a social and cultural project. In: Powell, Walter W. and Clemens, Elisabeth S., (eds.) *Private Action and the Public Good*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, USA, pp. 20-35. ISBN 9780300064490

# *The Public Good as a Social and Cultural Project*

A good deal of ink has been spilled in arguments over whether the public good is distinct from the sum of private goods, and if so, how. Broadly utilitarian approaches have been pervasive not just in economics but in legal reasoning and politics. By contrast, parts of both conservative and radical traditions have long stressed that the goods that unite people cannot be reduced to individual interests. Individuals are not independent, and their interests are always shaped and reshaped through social life rather than fixed in advance. Accordingly, we cannot explain social life nontautologically in terms of individual interests alone. Instead of summation of individual interests, such theorists have asserted alternative conceptions of the public good, starting with classical ideas of moral virtue. In recent years, a number of theorists have tried to build on this heritage and to offer a "communitarian" alternative to conventional political and economic discourse. This would restore moral language and ethical reasoning to public discourse alongside more utilitarian understandings of interests. Although I am sympathetic to much of the communitarian effort and wish to appropriate parts of it, I want to call attention here to issues that make it more problematic than most communitarians take it to be. In particular, I suggest that in considering the public good we need to think more clearly of the public as a realm or realms of discourse and contestation within which both identities and interests are constituted. The public good cannot be discovered independently of this public process, by communitarians any more than utilitarians.

The language of community can be misleading, first of all, because it elides the important differences between webs of personal relations rooted in face-to-face interaction and large-scale societal organization dependent on complex organizations, markets, and various other forms of indirect relationships and representation through cultural categories rather than personal networks. Second, communitarians too commonly present the public good as though it could be assessed objectively and externally, as though they could offer a form of cost-benefit analysis alternative to one based on economic interests. This happens mainly when the public good is seen ahistorically in substantive terms—for example, as rooted in communities that always already exist or in Aristotelian virtues—rather than in terms of historically specific human action. This draws attention away from the continuous reshaping of the identity of any public and of communities within it as well as of the goods which different actors pursue. Third, communitarian thought often neglects to ask questions like Which public? and Whose good? The community as a whole is too easily assumed to be unitary or

This is a revised version of a keynote presentation to a Lilly Foundation conference, Indianapolis, November 1993. I am grateful for comments from Lis Clemens, Woody Powell, and Jonathan Sher.

at least differentiated only into equivalent subsidiary communities and thus the potential bearer of a single good.

In each of these three senses, communitarian thought often militates against seeing the public good as a social and cultural project. It presumes a unity that needs to be examined precisely and sometimes questioned and that in any case can exist only to the extent that it has been constructed by various actors. Modifying *good* with the term *public* ought to signal to us the importance of discourses across lines of difference and the creation of settings in which the project of relating different goods (and different communities) to each other can be pursued. To see the public good as a simple unity would generally be misleading with regard to small-scale local communities but is necessarily so with regard to countries of hundreds of millions of highly diverse citizens.

The issue is not whether to accept exclusive reliance on utilitarian individualism, but how to go beyond it. The communitarian strategy stresses substantive conceptions of the common good. Community is an aspect of the common good; at the same time, a particular social whole — the community — is seen as the bearer of this common good. This, however, closes off in advance what should be the active and never-ending process of constituting and reconstituting both collective and individual identities. I want to argue instead that even if we accept community as an important positive value (as indeed I do), we need to distinguish that generic characteristic of life together or mode of social organization from actual, historically specific communities. The latter are more arbitrary and more subject to changing constitutions than communitarian theory generally recognizes. At the same time, we need to distinguish community from public life and see public life as a process, one often involving multiple discourses or institutional bases for discourse, in which individual and collective identities are reshaped through communication and interaction and in which alternative conceptions of what is good are brought to the fore. This argument necessarily leaves the actual constitution of any collective identities or claims on individuals indeterminate and open to social, political, and cultural construction and contest.

As befits a southerner and a preacher's son, let me use a story, a parable, to illustrate this indeterminacy of concrete communities and collective goods identified with them. It is an especially appropriate story because it concerns Indianapolis, where the Lilly Foundation brought scholars together to inquire into "private action and the public good," thus initiating the proximate chain of events leading to this book.

## WHICH PUBLIC, WHOSE GOOD?

Through the first half of the twentieth century, Indianapolis had a thriving African-American population, with industry, a nationally important jazz scene, and a sense of identity. Spatially compact, partly because of forced segregation, this population formed two communities, northwest of downtown and on the near eastside. They were internally diverse and included their own public institutions like churches and theaters, their own commercial establishments, and both prosperous and depressed sections.

Like many African-American communities, those in Indianapolis were hit hard by the Great Depression. After World War II, economic recovery was only partial, and the cohesiveness of the communities was undermined both by new opportunities for individual mobility that drew many talented young people away and by the penetration of large-scale business organizations replacing local establishments. Each community nonetheless survived, maintained in significant part by close-knit webs of interpersonal relationships and mutual support and also by shared knowledge of important local traditions. But to outsiders and to some of Indianapolis's black elite, the communities appeared mainly as depressed and as public problems. They were finally destroyed in the name of community development.

Earlier efforts to improve the lot of impoverished African Americans had presumed that they would stay more or less where they were. Public housing was thus constructed in the midst of the existing communities. In this context, the public housing projects became relatively stable socially. But the new thinking did not see maintenance of community as a value in and of itself and instead sought to disperse what had been the concentrations of African Americans in traditionally black communities and to bring in new economic resources by removing so-called eyesores and building new buildings for new uses. A centerpiece in this effort was the construction of the Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis campus near the center of what had been an African-American community. Public housing projects, among the country's oldest, were razed to make way for university student housing. Thousands of people were forced to move.

Developers championing revitalization were aided by well-intentioned philanthropists and urban planners. They sought to make a better Indianapolis community, conceptualizing this community on the level of the city as a whole, rather than seeing Indianapolis as a public realm within which many communities and diverse groups might need to maintain distinctive identities or want to contest their relationship to the whole. They built office complexes that made downtown Indianapolis look more and more the same as other American cities and that simultaneously left streets full of cars and empty of pedestrians, deprived the great downtown department stores of their markets, and dispersed African Americans from what had been real, centered communities into a mix of suburbs and more impoverished urban districts.

The older black communities had also been bases for public participation. They housed a wide variety of voluntary associations and public institutions: major and vital churches, the Indianapolis *Leader,* the Flanner Guild, the Twentieth Century Literary Society (and many others), the Woman's Improvement Club of Indianapolis, and the Afro-American

Council. The African-American communities were prominent enough to lure national organizations like the Knights of Pythias and the Anti-Lynching League to hold meetings there (Ferguson 1988; Specht 1989). They were politically organized and indeed began to shift allegiance from Republican to Democratic parties in 1924, eight to twelve years before the main national realignment of black voters, because of their own effective mobilization as well as because of the reactionary leadership of the Indiana Republicans, who were linked to the Ku Klux Klan (Griffin 1983).

The black communities were also centers of employment and business development. Most famously, one was the base for Madame C. J. Walker, the first African-American woman to become a millionaire entrepreneur. Madame, as she was known, employed three thousand people in the manufacture of cosmetics and hair products, with a payroll of about two hundred thousand dollars by 1917 (Doyle 1989). Beyond party politics and business, her community had been a center of artistic and cultural activity. It had remained a community not just because of jobs, but because of a sense of cultural continuity—something we might consider a public value in itself.

But most black kids in Indianapolis today do not know that J. J. Johnson, Freddie Hubbard, and other jazz greats were born there. Johnson in fact moved back, but in four years did not play publicly in Indianapolis, complaining that there was simply not the audience that existed, say, in Chicago. Madame C. J. Walker became a lady an isolated theater is named after—if she is remembered at all.[1] The solidarity and continuity of the Indianapolis African-American community were reduced in nearly every aspect of the public realm.

The moral to my story is this: public life depends on communities—multiple and diverse—but not on the presumption of or attempt to create a single larger community. Even on the scale of Indianapolis, let alone on the scale of America, to think of the public good as equivalent to the good of *a* community can lead us to underestimate the workings of power and large-scale economic forces in reshaping the very communities in which we live. It is also apt to divert attention from the diverse, concretely interpersonal communal settings within which people are knit together in favor of focus on larger categories of common identity. And it inhibits concentration on the problem of how members of such communities—and in general, people who are different from each other—might enter into the project of public discourse about what would be good to do. Positing *a* community as the basis of *the* public good is apt to obscure contests over collective identity and disempower those whose projects are not in accord with those of dominant groups.

1. Madame Walker is, of course, celebrated in some teaching of African-American history on a national scale. But her legacy has become general and abstract, not rooted in locality or everyday life.

**IS THE PUBLIC A COMMUNITY?**

In recent years, American politics has become visibly focused on struggles over self-definition and collective identity. African Americans, Asians, Hispanics, women, gay men and lesbians, and a host of other groups have sought both to constitute their own collective identities as meaningful for each other and to win for themselves positive recognition in the broader public and sometimes various material benefits.[2] This has meant confronting internal differences as well as differences from "mainstream America." Does one speak of Hispanics, thus, or of Puerto Riqueños, Cubans, and both Chicanos and Chicanas?

These struggles feel newly challenging, but the politics of identity is not new; it is a part of all politics insofar as actors contest the identities under which they are incorporated into political processes and the identity of the broader political field itself. The politics of identity is at stake when Muslims debate their loyalty to secular states, nations without states, and international Islam. It is at stake when workers are urged to identify with the labor movement rather than with their employers, their local communities, their ethnic groups, their crafts, or their religions. Social movements, political action, and public life all depend on the constitution of certain identities as salient and in turn open participants to processes of struggle over and possible reformulation of identities at both collective and individual levels. As the name "Evangelical Christian" has become a potent public identity in recent years, for example, it has changed not just political processes but personal lives and local communities.

The politics of identity often appears as an assertion of difference.[3] In response, many of us grow angry over what we take as rejections of our community by one another, refusals to acknowledge the priority of the common good over the various separate claims of identity and interest. One-sided articulation of differences can indeed be a problem. But we commonly fail to see that the whole is an ideological construct, that it privileges certain constituent identities over others. This is a tendency not just in everyday discourse but in otherwise more sophisticated social and political theory. The public is a realm in which differences are articulated and notions of the public good constituted; it is poorly grasped by the language of community, especially when the community is assumed to be preexisting and relatively fixed.

In facing up to a divided America and an even more divided world, we face problems that have developed not just because of what we do not share, but because of something we do share. We share an idea that really strong public life

2. For discussion of the substantial literature on these processes, see Calhoun ed. 1994 and Calhoun 1995.

3. It is of course equally true that every assertion of difference between groups involves a corresponding claim to identity (and thus implicit sameness) within groups. See discussion in Calhoun 1995, esp. chap. 7.

depends on agreement as to basic values and identities. When speaking of the public good, in other words, we tend to emphasize an image of our similarity as members of a category — Americans, *the* public — rather than the more differentiated relations we may have as members of concrete social networks and interdependent social systems.[4] The image of categorical similarity ironically shapes the thinking of both those who lay claim to the language of the public good and those who see it as repressive. The former seek to identify the underlying commonalities that constitute the public as a category of similar persons. The latter charge that such commonalities and apparent agreements must be coerced, a product of repression of some more essential difference. Both sides miss the possibility that what makes a public is not agreement among interlocutors but a discussion in which each party gives reasons for and attempts to understand views that may be quite divergent.[5]

The result is that the idea of public in the phrase *public good* is generally either taken for granted as a sum of what we share or rejected out of hand in the name of what we do not. But we are not in this situation because of these new conflicts; they simply reflect and exacerbate an old problem. We have by several routes been drawn into an impoverished and static way of thinking and speaking of the collectivities whose interests or welfare we describe as public.

Consider, for example, changes in the way religion appears in public discourse. Americans have not by any means given up religion or even denied it entrance to the public square, as Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus once asserted (1978). Rather, we have reduced religion to an interest group, reduced religious thought to clichés, and made of religion something to be invoked, not argued over.[6] It is not the same to have Billy Graham or Pat Robertson speak *for* Christians as to have manifold and diverse arguments carried out *among* Christians (and adherents of other religions) in terms of their faith as well as their perceptions of the world — as was the case, for example, in the era of the Founding or the Second Great Awakening. When politicians today invoke the biblical language of covenant, to take one example, they are making an appealing gesture but seldom either taking theology very seriously or expecting us to introduce the language of covenant into our daily conversations. It is now a word for ceremonial speeches, and so, I am afraid, are most other religious terms that enter public discourse. Soul and sin and redemption, meanwhile, either remain closeted in the putatively private discourse of religious communities or make us shudder by the manner of their attempted introduction into public discourse. We have, in short, lost the ability to carry out political arguments in or with relationship to religious terms, and because so much of America's political culture drew on religious vocabulary — even when speakers were militant freethinkers and deists — in the absence of an equally rich replacement, this impoverishes our discourse.

At the same time, attempts to renew religious discourse are as apt to obscure as to address the underlying issues of what sort of communities and what sorts of public life we have and want. Many such attempts, for example, introduce the language of community uncritically as a reference to a global whole rather than a means to differentiate among practical clusters of concrete social relations. With or without religious language, we also need sociological and political language that does justice to societal complexity and provides adequately for contestation in public discourse. It is on these points that I raise questions about — or try to supplement — the work of a number of so-called communitarians. I have in mind thinkers like Robert Bellah, Amitai Etzioni, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre. I want to walk with these communitarians through the valley of utilitarian despair, but on emerging I shall insist that although their challenge to atomistic, interest-based individualism is powerful and their communitarian program in part attractive, the ideals of community remain deeply insufficient as a basis for thinking about and trying to bring about the public good.

The problem is the result of too much emphasis on the word *good* and not enough on the word *public*. Keeping the theme of private action for the public good very much in mind, I challenge the distinction of public from private on which it relies — which, alas, is the same one that allows us to imagine that giant corporations are best understood as creatures of private agreements among individuals and thus deserve to be granted protections from the public gaze. My contention, in a phrase, is that an important task for the so-called voluntary sector is to focus less exclusively on finding and serving the good — the utilitarian interests or the Aristotelian virtues — of a postulated public and more on building the conditions of public life so that publics always in the process of making themselves might also make themselves good.

One key to this effort is to keep the distinction between a community and a public meaningful. The binding interpersonal commitments that make up community are important in themselves and for the individual members of such communities. John Rawls, for example, is right to see the necessity of such immediate, largely face-to-face associations within a larger society and to qualify the individualism of his theory of justice with reference to such "social unions" (Rawls 1971, 421–22). But although these social unions are significant potential bases for participation in public life, reference to them as preexisting social units does not provide an adequate basis for reckoning the interests of a public. In the first place, while society may be in part, as Rawls puts it, a

4. On the analytic language of category and network, see White 1992 and Nadel 1954, 1957.

5. See discussion in Calhoun 1995, especially chapters 2 and 3 and the conclusion, of how communication across lines of difference involves processes of change, not merely translation into a metalanguage that can express underlying agreement.

6. See Carter 1993, though his argument is stated in somewhat tendentiously strong terms.

union of diverse social unions, it is not only that. Societal integration in any modern country is accomplished not only in the manner of the personal relationships that establish community but through markets, bureaucracies, and other large-scale and largely impersonal mechanisms.[7] This means that public issues are not only the sum of the directly interpersonal relations of communal life; public discourse must include attempts to address the workings of these more impersonal social systems. Moreover, if the social unions of Rawls's image are really diverse, then any attempt to achieve voluntary relations among them must depend on a public discourse that is qualitatively different from that which takes place within the purview of more or less binding communal relationships. While public discourse may itself be voluntary, it is not about solely voluntary interpersonal relationships. It is also about large-scale patterns of power and systemic organization. Although public life may depend on relationships and capacities formed in private, the public good is not the sum of any preexisting private or particular interests or a compromise among them. A public, in any large contemporary society, is constituted largely among strangers and among people differing in deep and influential ways. The public good needs to be seen as dynamic, as a project in which varied actors participate, speaking through different cultural understandings, never altogether agreeing on just what the public is, yet producing it continuously if incompletely through their very discourse.

**MORE THAN ONE ROAD BEYOND ATOMISM AND SELF-INTEREST**

Showing the limits to individualism is central to communitarianism. In many versions, perhaps most famously in *Habits of the Heart,* this argument is presented as a critique of American or modern culture (Bellah et al. 1985). In other, more theoretical guises, the communitarian argument is presented not against "ordinary culture" so much as against pernicious philosophies. MacIntyre (1981, 1988), for example, writes sometimes as though history were made directly by philosophers, who have only to think an idea for it to wreck havoc. In both versions, the central ideas communitarians challenge have been the atomism and instrumentalism of the liberal tradition. Jeremy Bentham is perhaps the paradigmatic philosopher of such instrumental individualism (though sharply to the progovernment side of a divided liberalism). "The community is a fictitious *body,*" he wrote, "composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its *members*. The interest of the community then is, what? — the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it" (Bentham 1970, 12). Community, for Bentham, is an aggregate of autonomous individuals, not a creature of intersubjectivity or social relations.[8]

Communitarians offer three main sorts of objections to this view: (1) it is impossible to make sense of individuals as creatures so radically prior to community or social life; (2) community itself bears value distinct from the values or interests of current members of communities; and (3) the ways in which individual interests coalesce into collective interests is not a matter of mere addition but involves some internal social and cultural relations or interdependence.

Individualism, communitarians argue persuasively, requires certain social and cultural conditions. The idealized self-sufficiency of much modern individualist ideology — notably in America — is not simply exaggerated but based on illusions and failure to recognize the actual contributions of a variety of communal relations to the creation and nurturance of individuals. The ideal of radical self-sufficiency was probably illusory in this way even on the nineteenth-century frontier; rugged individualists often depended on each other's support in tight-knit communities. This ideal is still more illusory in the 1990s world of giant corporations, global trade, and electronic media. As Taylor (1989) has asked: doesn't the radical prioritization of the individual self depend on some basic misunderstandings about what it means to be an individual, including the need to participate in the shared community of speakers of a language and the way in which our individual thoughts and actions depend on a background of practices, institutions, and understandings that we do not create as individuals? If we treat communities only as sums of individuals, how do we account for the genesis of these individuals: their nurturance as children, their reliance on shared culture — including the culture of individualism — and their psychical as well as social dependence on interpersonal relations and institutions? It is not just that behind every great corporate leader stands a secretary, a father and mother, and a board of directors, but that the very heroic individualism of these corporate leaders depends on the institutional availability of the roles they inhabit, the regimes of private property they dominate, the fiction of the corporation as a legal individual.

If individuals are not altogether and radically prior to community and social life, should we not see community as bearing value in itself, not only expressing the value inherent in the summed interests of community members? Taylor and many other communitarians have set out to articulate notions that some goods are irreducibly social. They belong to us only as members of communities or societies, not purely as individuals. This may be true in the thin sense of many of the so-called collective goods of economists and rational choice

7. Following Talcott Parsons, Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1988) identifies these large-scale modes of societal integration with the "nonlinguistic steering media" of money and power because their basic organizations are not established through the intentions and meaningful interaction of individuals.

8. See Mansbridge, "On the Nature of the Public Good" (in this volume), for a related discussion of the issue of aggregative vs. holistic concepts of the public good.

theorists, but most communitarians wish to describe a much thicker sense in which our goods are irreducibly social. Thus Taylor writes,

> As individuals we value certain things; we find certain outcomes positive. But these things can only be good in this way, or satisfying or positive after their particular fashion, because of the background understanding which has developed in our culture. Thus I may value the fulfillment which comes from a certain kind of authentic self-expression or the experience which arises from certain works of art, or outcomes in which people stand with each other on a footing of frankness and equality. But these things are only possible against the background of a certain culture. . . .
>
> If these things are goods, then other things being equal, so must the culture be which makes them possible. If I want to maximize these goods, then I must want to preserve and strengthen this culture. But the culture as a good, or more cautiously as the locus of some goods (for there might be much that is reprehensible in it as well), is not an individual good. (Taylor 1995)

Taylor's argument is, I think, a sensible one and, coupled with Amartya Sen's famous analysis of "welfarism," shows that a completely utilitarian notion of the public good cannot be adequate.[9] Such a notion suggests among other things that what is good about any social state of affairs can be decomposed into goods for members considered as individuals. But this runs directly counter to recognizing either (a) the way in which shared culture makes possible the very constitution of certain phenomena as goods (for example, the appreciation of abstract art or the enjoyment of Mexican food), and (b) the way in which membership in particular social associations (that may indeed confer benefits on individuals) also commits individuals to particular understandings of their common good such that their welfare functions can no longer be assessed as prior to the collectivity.

In general, communitarians do not suggest that we simply fail to value community or that in our individualism we have no common values. Rather, the point is that we are inhibited in giving adequate weight to the communitarian values we already hold, partly because our reliance on utilitarian individualist thinking makes it hard for us to articulate our values on community. We talk a great deal about making our communities safe, we ask which suburbs will make good communities for our children, we talk nostalgically about the good old days when community was strong. But we have trouble translating this talk into the right sort of action, communitarians suggest, as when we move from one town to another rather than striving to make the first a stronger community.

This is not entirely because our talk of community is mere lip service. Observant communitarian critics see that Americans (or should I say, *even* Americans?) are deeply invested in ideals of community. These ideals have informed Americans' high rates of participation in churches and other religious organizations, in voluntary associations and public service groups, in private charitable activities, in the founding of private colleges and universities, and in democratic self-governance. Rather, the problem lies, according to many communitarians, in the difficulty we have giving weight to community when faced with competing goods.[10] At the heart of the argument is the sound point that in discourses from politics to law to economics to ethics to personal well-being we have lost our ability to articulate the value of community.[11] And this loss is partly due to the proliferation of individualism in philosophies and legal doctrines as well as to the slightly less sophisticated theories of talk show hosts.

It is important, however, to ask just how we should understand community in such an argument. Is it a general term for social relations as distinct from the illusion of autonomous individuals? If so, it problematically lumps together very different kinds and arrangements of social relations. Is it a reference to a specific mode of being together—for example, to feeling at one with each other? If so, it runs the risk of imposing one categorical idea about the whole community on constituent groups and individuals. Is community a term for unchosen bonds among human beings or for those forged in conscious discourse, choice, and interaction? It is not

9. Sen (1979, 468) defines *welfarism* as the utilitarian position that "the judgment of the relative goodness of alternative states of affairs must be based exclusively on, and taken as an increasing function of, the respective collections of individual utilities in these states."

10. The current flowering of a political communitarianism is particularly American, and arguments about individual and community have a special salience in American history (a point noted by Phillips 1993 in his sustained, if tendentious, critique of communitarianism). Nonetheless, the broad outlines of the current communitarian position are shared among a wide variety of thinkers in many countries. Many of these have been conservatives, and part of what is distinctive about the current communitarian politics in America is that it is for the most part a branch of the Left. This is not unique, however, as a moment's reflection on nineteenth-century Europe reminds us (remember communism?). The individualism/communitarianism debate did not start with John Rawls and his critics or with the rise of neo-Aristotelianism or even with the rediscovery of classical republicanism. It has been with us throughout the modern era.

11. Thus the political arguments of Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor are equally moral ones. Taylor has stressed the importance of being able to articulate community as one of what he calls our "strong moral sources." Kai Erikson has tried to show how legal proceedings value economic goods but not the less tangible goods of community; Wendell Berry has argued in a different genre but a similar vein about how we accidentally lose community because we don't recognize its value in a host of decisions we make under the influence of industrial culture. Amitai Etzioni has set out to show the importance of community to the development of a policy analysis adequately sensitive to moral and human issues. The list could go on.

enough, in other words, to know that human beings are social as much as individual or that community has a value. It is crucial to know how to differentiate varying kinds of appeals to social values that may constitute the public good.

Communitarian arguments move us on the path to understanding the public good as a social and cultural project because they show us why the public good must be understood in terms of social relations and culture. At the same time, they inhibit further progress in two ways. First, the communitarian discourse obscures the extent to which different sorts of social relations figure in different kinds and scales of collectivities. I would prefer to keep the terms *community* and *public* distinct to signal one aspect of this and at the same time to counterpose both to systemic social organization that takes place outside either communal organizations of interdependent social relations or culturally differentiated and discursively mediated publics. Second, the communitarian discourse obscures the extent to which social collectivities are forged rather than found. It is not enough to assert that the public good is more than the sum of individual interests or that a community is more than the sum of individual members. This leaves open a crucial variable: the extent to which people experience their social relations as "primordial," or given immutably to them by the past or external forces, and the extent to which they are able to reconstitute their social and cultural lives together through their conscious action and communication with each other.

Something of the second issue is signaled in the passage quoted above from Taylor, in which he speaks very confidently of "this culture" and "the culture," in ways that suggest that he imagines them to be rather strongly integrated and bounded. This singular and integral notion of culture invites poststructuralist critiques and the assertion of innumerable claims to subcultural autonomy. Taylor's terms keep us from recognizing that the sort of cultural context or background that makes possible both collective and individual goods is always plural, always in process, and never altogether coherent. There is never a single tradition to be preserved and strengthened by itself, but always a field within which multiple traditions contend, each weaving into the fabric of the others even if they maintain recognizable distinction. This multiculturalism is not always happy but rather rent through with power and violence as well as excitement and mutual influence. But neither is it merely some new ideal; it is the inextricable condition of life, varying in extent but present throughout world history. Even Confucian China, paradigm case of a self-declared integrated culture, was simultaneously Buddhist and Taoist China, was home to iconoclastic schools of painting and poetry that sometimes drew more eyes and ears than the putative mainstream, and was superimposed, in a sense, as an elite project on numerous and often regionally distinct folk cultures. So it is with America: capitalist, democratic nation of immigrants, "lifestyle enclaves," youth culture, and the opposition of Main Street to both Wall Street and the Beltway.

Taylor's invocation of the common culture as substance rather than discourse was an aspect of another argument; he might revise it on further reflection. In any case, his is hardly an extreme example.[12] But the tendency to speak of the culture that enables us to constitute our public goods as though it were or could be unitary is a problem, and it is worth noting that from this perspective it is all too easy for cultural diversity to come to seem a problem, and not the normal condition of at least large-scale social life. The theme of unitary culture, moreover, is linked to the problematic notion of national community.[13]

## COMMUNITY OF THE WHOLE?

Communitarian theory coincides with certain habits of ordinary speech in trying to describe what knits together the country as a whole (and sometimes even international collectivities) through the language of community. As we have seen, this exaggerates the extent to which very large scale societal organization is accomplished through directly interpersonal relationships. Even where it is acknowledged that community may not always be harmonious, communitarian language tends to emphasize a sense of mutuality and reciprocity and the notion that the large-scale polity can be an equally beneficent totality for all. The polis, as MacIntyre (1988, 200) puts it, "is directed at achieving all the goods of its citizens." It is no accident, likewise, that this formulation treats the citizens' goods as existing (if not necessarily known) in advance of public life rather than as established within individual and collective projects.

Questions about whether America is really a large, internally integral and homogenous community are at least as long-standing as the debates between Federalists and Antifederalists.[14] Early in the nineteenth century, as Americans began to develop national celebrations and myths, the notion

12. Taylor (1992) has, for example, distanced himself from MacIntyre's Aristotelian claim to locate an enduringly compelling substantive definition of the good life.

13. The idea that cultures appear as discrete and internally integrated is a compelling one throughout modern social science, but it may itself be a reflection of nationalist assumptions more than empirical observation or historical analysis (see Calhoun 1995, chaps. 3, 8). In their different ways, both structuralism and functionalism have run into this problem. The tradition of writing history within national boundaries has reinforced the problematic sense of cultural unity, though this has been challenged by some writers of comparative sociology and world history; not least Pitirim Sorokin (1957).

14. This was a manifest issue *between* Federalists and Antifederalists but also a hidden issue on occasion because the habit of not distinguishing national from local community was widespread. Madison, for example, uses the term *community* throughout the *Federalist Papers* in ways that do not distinguish the local and the national (or for that matter the small national elite from the larger national populace). For example, from *Federalist* 49: "The most rational government will not find it a superfluous advantage, to have the prejudices of the community on its side" (Madison 1961, 315).

was widely promulgated that Americans should imagine themselves spiritually descended from the *community* that landed at Plymouth Rock. The language of a single, large national community became ingrained in American speech partly through political rhetoric and partly through the mythologizing of American history carried out by popular historians like Charles Beard, especially in the wake of the Civil War. But this mythology did not take root evenly or everywhere. The South found such myths less compelling, for example, even before the Civil War began to be foreshadowed. Jamestown never became the basis for a comparable story. After the War between the States, the fabric of the nation was rewoven so effectively that, ironically, twentieth-century southerners feel generally more American than most others.

The notion of a unified national history combined with the elision between a small face-to-face community (the Pilgrims) and the larger subsequent nation support the illusion that scale doesn't matter. This illusion (and the mythic narrative that supported it) suppressed discourse on differences; each act of recalling the Founding—as in the pageants of grade school classes throughout the country—was also an act of forgetting that some came to America as slaves, that some were already here as indigenes, that others came as transported criminals, and that still others came as refugees from famine and political rather than religious repression. Differences in the way each group fit into American society were likewise forgotten in the reconstituting of the nation as a single community. As Ernst Renan wrote of France, "Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial. Unity is always effected by means of brutality" (1990, 11).

The American ideology of being a national community—a city on the hill—has inspired not only high ideals but lower realities of prejudice against those who do not fit the model and fear of those in our midst who have seemed different in their ideals, cultures, or characters. This has worked on scales smaller than the nation as a whole. Recall Indianapolis and the way in which the positive venture of overall community improvement was linked with a failure to recognize the existing African-American communities.

Not only has national mythology encouraged the dominant culture's belief in a singular whole with little place for actively different minorities, but many minority groups have adopted similar ideologies of internal unity in the forging of their own identities and the forgetting of intranecine clashes—the solidarity of black nationalism, for example, rather than the tensions between black Muslims and black Christians, or black men and black women. Minority identities are forged not just in and for themselves, however, but in interaction with the broad processes of identity politics.[15] Sojourner Truth, for example, is remembered for words quoted on posters throughout America: "Ain't I a Woman?" Yet these are almost certainly not words she uttered, but rather the reconstruction of a white observer who heard her speak and rendered her words as he thought a Negro ought to have spoken. Sojourner Truth spoke Dutch as her first language and presumably an Afro-Dutch dialect as an adult. She passed her childhood in slavery, but in New York State, not in the South, and in the city, not the countryside. She taught herself to be a brilliant orator, but she did not speak in any presumptively singular black American dialect, neither that of the transcriber's imagination nor that of popular memory.[16] The internal diversity of African Americans, in other words, is as prone to be overlooked or denied as the diversity of the country as a whole.

The problem of relying on purely communitarian imagery to approach political culture becomes more acute in our present age of very large scale social integration, of mass media and giant corporations, and big government. The face-to-face communities in which we invest so much of our faith and hope appear to us as separate from the large-scale world of bureaucracies and the abstract images of various threatening categories of people whom we never meet in ordinary sociable interaction: the residents of inner city ghettos, the advocates of unpopular political positions, the adherents of alternative lifestyles, religious extremists. Within face-to-face communities, we recognize and deal with difference in terms of the individuals involved and our specific relations to them. Beyond this level, however, we are apt to think mainly in terms of categories—identities within which we regard individuals as essentially similar.[17] Thus Indianapolis leaders saw the city's African Americans in a relatively undifferentiated way and chose to eradicate the functioning commu-

15. As E. P. Thompson (1992, 7) has written with regard to eighteenth-century England, "Generalisations as to the universal of popular culture become empty unless they are placed within specific historical contexts. The plebeian culture which clothed itself in the rhetoric of 'custom' . . . was not self-defining or independent of external influences. It had taken form defensively, in opposition to the constraints and controls of the patrician rulers." And equally, there was not simply one plebeian culture, but a range of locally distinct ones.

16. See Donna Haraway's (1992) interesting discussion of this. By contrast, the speeches of white southerners and Yankees alike were generally transcribed in standard English even when their accents were thick and their grammar tended toward dialect.

17. The difference between such directly interpersonal relationships and reliance on categorical identities motivates attempts to try to achieve more and better interpersonal connections across racial lines. On the small scale of shared worship and summer camps, these have been a staple of religious groups' efforts to confront the issue of race. Some such groups have tried more substantial and long-term efforts—like relocating African Americans from Chicago's South Side to small towns in Indiana, where not only their economic prospects are better, but also their prospects for directly interpersonal relations across racial lines. See Paul Schnorr (1993).

nities along with the "social problems" that attracted outsiders' attention. Categorical identities are also at stake in the imagined community of the nation. The nation itself is often understood as one large category of essentially similar members rather than as a highly differentiated web of relationships among diverse people and groups. Minorities within the nation gain recognition mainly as categories—African Americans, Asians, Hispanics—not as parties to concrete relationships. This is partly the result of large scale, not an easily altered matter of attitude, but even so we need to keep in mind the implications of scale and not cultivate the illusion that the kinds of actions appropriate and adequate within face-to-face communities automatically translate into effective policies on a national scale.[18] We cannot solve problems like the deep racial divisions of American society simply by tending to the racial problems in our local communities. However commendable and valuable such actions may be, they cannot speak to the problems of the South Bronx and the South Side of Chicago, to the ghettoization and hypersegregation that guarantee that many blacks and whites will not see each other as neighbors in a community but as categories of threatening or simply distant strangers.

When we think that unity must be founded on sameness, then difference immediately arouses anxiety. The idea that we can be Americans only by being the same as each other actually makes our American identity very vulnerable. This sameness seems under attack from new waves of immigration, from new ideas about gender, from new claims by gay men and lesbians. How can we still be a community, we wonder, when we are so different from each other?

I do not mean to suggest that we have in the past always handled our problems well or enjoyed a better national community. We would be mistaken to think that all our problems are new or that in the past we had some perfect basis for national unity—some essential shared ingredient of the American soul which, now lost, can never be replaced. The idea that a once clearly common culture is only now threatened by diversity is simply false. Our American unity has always been a fabric subject to tears and reweaving; different cultures have long contended. So it is today.

But today, problems of diversity within the polity are exacerbated. In the first place, we have seen a change in political culture that makes it difficult—at least explicitly—to advocate simple repression of difference; we have developed a society based crucially on consent (even though consent may be engineered or coerced). Second, we have come to recognize and include in explicit ways within our political culture (and corresponding organizations) various categorical identities—blacks, Asians, women, gun owners—that are highly effective in the mobilization of interest groups and social movements as well as salient objects of discourse. To offer a language of national community without explicitly recognizing the illegitimacy of repression and the diversity of legitimate identities within the polity is either to be naive or to attempt a performative erasure of actual conditions. Community—specific webs of dense and multiplex social relations—remains powerful as a way of achieving integration across lines of difference without repression. But it does this not at the level of the country as a whole but in numerous local constructions, crossings of specific boundaries, and mixing of specific identities. Some communities bring together people of different races, thus, but only within a common class. Others bring together people of different classes, but only within a common religious orientation, and so forth. The adding up of these multiple, cross-cutting connections is crucial to the achievement of social solidarity, but in itself it does not account for any whole or afford a basis for speaking of the public good.

Public discourse is a crucial means of achieving connections across the categorical divisions of the population, of which race is perhaps the most obvious. Yet the media and other institutions segment such discourse as much as unify it—identifying and even constituting group-specific markets—but also reproducing within various groups some of the same issues that beset the larger polity. There is, thus, a genuine nationwide black public sphere in America today.[19] It transcends locality and incorporates diverse African-American voices. It works through newspapers and radio talk shows, self-help programs, black Muslim preaching, and black feminist writing. While it may sometimes employ the language of a singular black community, discourse in this realm is public in the sense that it may be entered by members of many communities and addresses issues that cut across them; within it, various ideas of African-American identity and of the public good are formed and changed, not just reflected.

At the same time, however, African Americans have differential access to this public discourse, to its component discourses, and to the goods which it thematizes. Their everyday lives are grounded in communities of varying strength, for example, and communities which offer them varying social, economic, psychic, and intellectual resources for participation in the broader black public sphere (let alone in any cross-racial public spheres). Perhaps even a deeper threat than the division of America into communities that have a hard time speaking to each other is the division into those whose lives are rooted in supportive communities and those whose lives are not. The destruction of the Eastside community in Indianapolis, for example, both undercut black participation in public life by removing a communal base and radically

18. One of Ronald Reagan's famous lines was the argument in a television broadcast that balancing the federal budget was just the same as balancing the family checkbook. However reassuring such imagery, it is false and misleading. Such elisions of the distinction between large-scale systems of societal integration and immediate practices of the life-world is a basic source of much populist politics; see Calhoun (1988).

19. See the discussion of the Black public sphere in the special issue of *Public Culture* (Winter 1994).

reduced the intersections among groups of African Americans: middle-class professionals and unemployed youths, teenage mothers and political activists, passionate churchgoers and drug-users, jazz musicians and their audiences.

The social problems concentrated in African-American inner city ghettos seem as apt to produce despair as constructive action partly because of the seeming failures of previous attempts to integrate the American community conceived as a singular whole. To have tried to address racial inequality — however half-heartedly — and to have failed has changed the basic sense of what is possible for many Americans, including many well-intentioned liberal Americans. This pessimism cuts across racial lines. In Cornel West's (1993, 15) words, "The major enemy of black survival in America has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat — that is, loss of hope and meaning. . . . The self-fulfilling prophecy of the nihilistic threat is that without hope there can be no future, that without meaning there can be no struggle."

The worry is spreading that America's history of racial abuse and oppression can no longer be redeemed. But the very way we talk about the public good may be part of the problem. By approaching it as a matter of ascertaining either the greatest good for the greatest number or the one right good for the community as a whole, we systematically prejudice our discourse against competing visions of the good affirmed by minorities. When we affirm universalistic accounts of the public good that turn out in practice to be based on taking the positions of the dominant culture as universal, we remove credibility from the public discourse that might help us deal with difference. This has been the problem with bourgeois individualist ideas that represented the universal man as a property owner, and with discourses of human rights that represented the universal human as a man. It is a pressing issue with regard to cultural diversity in America today because the majority discourse has so radically lost credibility in relation to some minority discourses and because commonplace attempts to redress imbalances (as through multicultural curricula in schools) too often amount to essentializations of particular minority identities. We need something more to foster a dynamic discourse about differences and the public good.

In a way, thinking of the race issue in the terms of the civil rights era has become ironically comforting for white Americans. We can view television representations of the bad old days — like the recent series "I'll Fly Away" — with a sense of progress that pulls our attention away from the continuing crisis (and that also implies that the main issue is whether *we* white people choose to accept black people). African Americans may no longer be excluded in the same ways from full participation in predominantly White communities or national public life, though such racism does continue. But the issue of race has been changed by the fact that for many Americans (including whites and others but especially blacks), poverty and oppression are not any longer primarily experienced within strong communities offering members mutual support and sustenance. They are in many cases experienced in relative isolation by members of deeply damaged social groups, reproduced in a cycle of deepening crisis by troubled families and social institutions, amidst spreading violence as well as racism. As West (1993, 16) puts it, we have to face up to the "shattering of black civil society." This shattering has been produced in part by drugs and crimes and other familiar ills, but it was produced also by well-intentioned actions like the destruction of Eastside.

If problems of race (and closely correlated problems like drugs and AIDS and teenage pregnancy) are too commonly grasped in contemporary discourse as problems of individuals — individuals allegedly lacking morality or intelligence, for example, communitarian discourse tends to a symmetrical error. It turns our attention away from the large-scale political economic sources of these problems and toward a new discourse about "the deserving poor." White liberals delight in novels by black women that describe their strong families, but the attraction is partly rooted in the contrast to pervasive images of a very different kind of life in many of America's black ghettos. Reading Toni Morrison is too often linked to a fantasy — not her fantasy, but that of readers drawn to the illusion that simply opening the boundaries of implicitly white American community life will solve the problem of race that troubles our conscience.[20] But an end to racism doesn't mean merely letting nice, middle-class black families live unmolested in suburban neighborhoods. Nor is tolerance the solution to teenage pregnancy. To redeem ourselves, we need to reach for new moral (and political-economic) resources, ones that will reach *beyond* community to produce basic social structural transformations. Without such transformation, talk of community will remain illusory even at the local scale and especially at the national.

## PUTTING THE PUBLIC BACK IN PUBLIC GOOD

A strengthening of local communities — and for that matter of "communities without propinquity" — is all to the good and may provide important bases for public life, but in and of itself it is no substitute for invigorating the public sphere.[21] While communitarian discourse has the rhetorical advantage that community sounds intuitively good to almost all

20. Compare Nancy Robertson's account (in this volume) of the ways in which white northern women active in the YWCA thought about racial equality and their correspondingly ambivalent relationship to Black women.

21. "Communities without propinquity" was Melvin Webber's evocative phrase for those important affiliations that bind moderns across spatial distances: professional networks, for example, play some of the role for many of us that local communities played for our ancestors. We should not underestimate, however, the differences in sense of what community means that are implied by supralocal affiliations. Bonds are less likely to be multiplex and more likely to be single purpose, for example, and networks are likely to be less dense. See discussion in Calhoun (1980, 1987).

Americans, we do not seem to have the unambiguously positive sense of *public* that we do of *community*.

Discussion of public life tends to evoke a basic cynicism.[22] We have to a very large extent lost faith in our public institutions. Public opinion polls now present data not on whether we have more respect for politicians or press or police, but for which group we have *less*. Moreover, many of us seem to doubt the very idea that through public discourse and political participation we can make a difference.[23] This may be one reason community appeals so widely as a political concept; it places our attention in a realm in which we have more confidence that we can act efficaciously. Ironically, though, the turn to communitarian language may itself be undermining appreciation for the various virtues of the public sphere.

We may make different demands on communities and publics because they represent two different modes of organizing social life. Community is present in the familiarity of dense networks of social relationships, in the intensity of sharing and commitment that comes from frequent multiplexity in those relationships, and in the cohesion of cultural systems that organize such relations (Calhoun 1980). Public life, by contrast, requires us to engage and care about the needs of strangers. It calls for us to grasp our interdependence with people to whom we are connected only indirectly, through markets, governments, communications media, and similar large-scale organizations and systems. It calls for us to recognize, respect, and communicate with each other when many of our basic cultural values or categories of understanding are not shared.

We are misled in this regard by the excessive idealization of the classic Athenian polis in much political theory. Athens was small, its citizenry a narrow elite that could gather in a single public square of modest size and communicate without microphones or amplifiers, let alone television. This model of the public sphere emphasized a distinctive mode of interaction and discourse among people who were also connected to each other (albeit in varying degrees) by the bonds of community. In complex, large-scale modern societies, we do not have the luxury of resting public life on such communal foundations (and most of us would in any case decry the slavery and exclusion of women and immigrants also fundamental to Athenian democracy).

A public is not a category of essentially similar people. It is a differentiated body joined, at least in part, by the capacity of its members to sustain a common discourse across their lines of difference. As Jürgen Habermas has argued, one of the crucial conditions of the modern polity was the creation of a sphere of public discourse based on but transcending private identities and economic foundations and engaging the state without being contained within it (Habermas 1989). This discursive realm helped to constitute the collective good as the public good—that is, the good identified by (at least potentially) rational-critical subjects through their discourse with each other. The public was a self-producing body, and self-aware through its discourse, rather than being defined merely by common subjection to a monarch or common implication in systems of bureaucratic power or economic exchange.

Following Habermas's classic exploration can help us understand the relationship of civil society to cultural diversity and public discourse. The basic question guiding his exploration of the public sphere was, To what extent can the wills or opinions guiding political action be formed on the basis of rational-critical discourse? This is a salient issue primarily where economic and other differences give actors discordant identities and conflicting interests.

For the most part, Habermas took it as given that the crucial differences among actors were those of class and political-economic status. He focused on how the nature, organization, and opportunities for discourse on politically significant topics might be structured so that class and status inequalities were not an insuperable barrier to political participation.[24] The first issue, of course, was access to the dis-

22. As I shall develop this point minimally, see Jeffrey Goldfarb (1992).

23. I take some heart from Vivien Hart's (1978, xiii) observation that though we inveigh against politicians, we have not lost all faith in government—and especially not in the ideals and constitutional image of American democracy: "The clichés about politicians are an easy way for the inarticulate to express their feelings; deeper probing of these feelings uncovers assessments of the political system as elitist, corrupt, unresponsive, inaccessible, partial to influential groups, and unrepresentative. Yet, curiously, history also suggests that profound doubts about politics have been matched by an equally continuous tradition of the proud affirmation of American democracy." Hart goes on to cite opinion polls indicating that when asked to name "the things about this country" that they are most proud of, some 85 percent of Americans name some feature of the American government or political tradition, compared to 46 percent of Britons, 30 percent of Mexicans, 7 percent of Germans, and 3 percent of Italians. Clearly, we have not altogether ceased to enter into public life, and we have some residual faith on which to build.

24. Habermas's initial focus was on the bourgeois public sphere, one already shaped by class-structured exclusion even while it "bracketed" other economic and status differences among those included. In the later part of his book, Habermas analyzes the transformation of the public sphere—largely, in his eyes, a degeneration—that resulted from the specific forms in which it became more inclusive. Most directly, inclusivity brought a transformation in scale and thereby a reliance on "mass media." At the same time, the larger public sphere was subject to greater manipulation by specialized agents like public relations professionals and in general by a substitution of more instrumental use of language and images for a genuine rational-critical discourse (a concern which continues into Habermas's later work). Habermas's account of this degeneration of the public sphere makes a number of good points but shares many of the problems of mass culture critiques generally. It also tends to foreclose investigation of the conditions under which a serious public exercise of reason might be organized at a scale appropriate to democratic participation in contemporary polities; this must surely involve some level of reliance on the media, which Habermas dismisses

course. This was not so simple as the mere willingness to listen to another's speech, but also involved matters like the distribution of the sorts of education that empowered speakers to present recognizably good arguments. Beyond this, there was the importance of an ideological commitment to setting aside status differences in the nonce egalitarianism of an intellectual argument.

Habermas's approach, however, and that of many working within the frameworks of Marxism and critical theory as well as classical liberalism, has the flaw of treating interpersonal differences primarily as matters of economic interest. This is doubly problematic. In the first place, it leads to neglect of many other kinds of differences. Habermas recognizes the gendered construction of the classical bourgeois public sphere, for example, but passes it by almost without comment. Even when Habermas later acknowledges the importance of gender inclusion/exclusion, he has a hard time seeing the issue as anything other than a matter of the representation or nonrepresentation of one interest group among many; he has difficulty with the notion that the exclusion of women raises more basic categorical issues.[25] He doesn't see, thus, that the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European and American public spheres were structured not just by sliding scales of inclusion and exclusion but by a basic incapacity to thematize certain categorical differences among people as appropriate topics for public discourse. The same goes for race; the capacity shown by America's founders and their European Enlightenment forebears and counterparts for ignoring or waffling on the issue is nothing short of astonishing.

The second problem is perhaps even more theoretically basic. Habermas's account of the availability of free actors for participation in the public sphere turns on the development of a private realm that gives individuals the personal identities and the social, economic, and emotional support to constitute such free actors. He accordingly treats identity formation as prior to participation in the idealized public sphere of rational critical discourse. The intimate sphere of the family and the institutions of private life generally created people (men) who were able to enter the public sphere. The economic circumstances that supported individual autonomy were certainly important, but Habermas does not rest content with this kind of support from civil society. The identities of fully formed individuals are not simple, unmediated reflections of their material interests or class positions. The voices of individuals in the public sphere reflect cultural and other differences in orientation, in personal experience, and also, crucially, in the exercise of reason.

This notion, however, locates identity formation entirely in the realm of private life and therefore outside of politics and public discourse. It is because of this that Habermas cannot see any positive public role for what today are called identity politics. On the contrary, these attempts to affirm or reshape identities through public action appear in his classic work on the public sphere as degenerative intrusions due, first, to growing democratic inclusiveness and, second, to public relations manipulation. Habermas dates this confusion of the public and private spheres especially to the postwar era.

The issue of democratic inclusiveness is not just a quantitative matter of the scale of a public sphere or the proportion of the members of a polity who may speak within it. It is also a matter of how the public sphere incorporates and recognizes the diversity of identities which people bring to it from their manifold involvements in civil society. Where nationalism (or communitarianism) represses difference, it intrinsically undermines the capacity of a public sphere to carry forward a rational-critical democratic discourse.

Identity formation thus needs to be approached as part of the process of public life, not as something that can be fully settled prior to it in a private sphere. The liberal model of the public sphere needs reexamination insofar as it disqualifies discourse about the differences among actors in order to defend the genuinely rational-critical notion that arguments must be decided on their merits rather than on the identities of the arguers. If it is impossible to communicate seriously about basic differences among members of a public sphere, then it will be impossible also to address the difficulties of communication across lines of basic difference. Yet such basic differences cannot feasibly be excluded from the public sphere. Not only is this contrary to the democratic inclusion of women, racial and ethnic minorities, and other groups subject to the same state and part of the same civil society. Not only is the exclusion of difference made enormously more difficult by the continuing movement of people about the globe. In a basic and intrinsic sense, if the public sphere has the capacity to alter civil society and to shape the state, then its own democratic practice must confront the questions of membership and the identity of the political community it represents.

### THE PUBLIC IS NOT JUST A SPHERE OF AGREEMENT

Mansbridge has rightly suggested that the phrase "public good" serves us both as a site of contestation and a means of directing approbation.[26] But one of our difficulties in thinking adequately about the public good, as my introductory parable of Indianapolis and the Eastside community suggested, is that the language of the public good appears often as an approbation of how the greater good of the greater number trumps the goods of subsidiary communities. This problem results both from approaching the public good in

as almost intrinsically foreign to rational-critical discourse. See Negt and Kluge (1993), Calhoun (1988).

25. See, however, Habermas's discussion of this point — particularly in response to challenges from Nancy Fraser — in the "Concluding Remarks" to Calhoun, ed. (1992).

26. "On the Contested Nature of the Public Good" (this volume).

ways which equate it with a summation of individual goods (following Bentham) and from those that treat it as the good of a singular community (in the way I have criticized). And it undermines the needed contestation.

If we are to produce a dynamic discourse about the conditions of collective life in our large-scale society, we need not just a language of community that celebrates our commonalities but a language of public life that starts with recognition of deep differences among us and builds faith in meaningful communication across lines of difference. It must empower us for discourse about the workings of large-scale social and economic systems, not reduce our large-scale conversations to mass celebrations and mass panics. It must allow us to articulate the different ways in which we are knit into a larger world and not offer us the illusion of sharp boundaries.

An implication of this venture of invigorating and institutionally supporting the public sphere is that we rely on the discourse of this public itself and not assume that we should relegate public matters to bureaucracy and specialized expertise. Noting this will return us more directly from the idea of public to the idea of public good. As Robert Dahl (1989, 337) has written,

> No intellectually defensible claim can be made that public policy elites (actual or putative) possess superior moral knowledge or more specifically superior knowledge of what constitutes the public good. Indeed, we have some reason for thinking that specialization may itself impair their capacity for moral judgment. Likewise, precisely because the knowledge of policy elites is specialized, their expert knowledge ordinarily provides too narrow a base for the instrumental judgments that an intelligent policy would require.

Dahl's criticism is far-reaching, impugning the policy elites' judgment not only of moral issues but of many instrumental matters. If we are not to abandon large-scale societal organization — states, capitalist economies — then these systems will produce and require specialized experts. We must not think we can live without either specialists or expertise. But we do need to recognize that reliance on specialists in system maintenance and expansion is a two-edged sword. If it reassures us in the short run that our systems are in good (because expert) hands, it raises our anxieties in the long run because it further distances us from any sense of participating in the decisions over our fates.

The root of the issue is not the moral incapacities of specialists; it is the fact that the public good is not objectively or externally ascertainable. It is a social and cultural *project* of the public sphere, not an aggregation of the private interests of many individuals. It is created in and through the public process, it does not exist in advance of it. Indeed, to term the voluntary sector private is to impoverish our conception of the public sphere by allowing it to be monopolized by state-organized activity. The same is true of the notion that proper public discourse ought to address objectively ascertainable or jointly recognized common interests — and not matters of identity or demands for group recognition.

The eighteenth-century public sphere was conceived in part on the model of science, and its task was to discover the public good. Bentham was extreme but not out of line with his age in arguing that this was in principle amenable to a calculus at once altogether rational and fully empirical. Bentham makes us nervous today; even rational choice analysts shrink from his logical consistency and his willingness to address psychology alongside revealed preference. But much of Bentham and his era is still with us, including a belief that the public good is simply found, not forged. This belief paves the way for legislators and revolutionaries who claim to have discovered what the masses need and who offer the public good as an end that justifies its means. It is most properly this point — not all modernity — that is the target of the grand postmodernist rejections of consistency as a theoretical goal and of schemes for making a better world. We can hardly help today but see the seeds of repression in what seemed to the eighteenth century liberating ideas. Adam Smith asserted a natural identity of human interests such that the invisible hand of the market would work without plan to achieve a public good which was at the same time the greatest sum of private goods. Not sure that nature itself offered evidence of this identity of interests, David Hartley argued for the press of social life: "Association tends to make us all ultimately similar; so that if one be happy all must" (cited in Halévy 1952, 17). And if unguided association didn't do the trick, Bentham proposed that the legislator should wield punishments so as to bring people in line with the greatest good for the greatest number. Although he sometimes appealed to natural identity of interests or to Hartley's notion that interests might fuse as a result of association, he also held that where they did not, it was the job of government to achieve an artificial identification of interests. Government could do this in the name of the only definition of the public good that mattered, the principle of utility.[27]

Bentham, unlike many of his heirs in contemporary economics, was arguing against, not for, unbridled egoism. Like David Hume, he was prepared to see men generally as knaves who were ruled by selfish interests, so he had little patience with idealistic moralizing, with appeals to norms that ran counter to interest. If unbridled egoism was a problem for society, then society through its government had better tame and bridle it with laws. The paths to John Stuart Mill and Fabian socialism were not so very distant. Nor was that idealist Jean-Jacques Rousseau altogether in disagreement, as his praise for Rome and Sparta reminds us. While arguing that people were not knaves by nature but made so by inequality and dishonest society, he commended the use of

27. See H. L. A. Hart's (1982, esp. 88–89) interesting essay suggesting how J. S. Mill articulated this point and especially the link to the question of what a person may expect of government as a matter of right in a way consistent with but not quite found in the writings of Bentham.

persuasion and even coercion to prevent corruption. Public opinion might have to be molded from above to maintain a cohesive society and to prevent the spread of egoism and consequent deceit (see discussion in Shklar 1969, chap. 3, esp. 100–01).

One thing these founders of our modern ideas of the public good shared, despite their many differences, was the notion that the public good might not be accessible to mere public opinion. Mere public opinion was too flighty, too corruptible, too subject to manipulation. Hence the importance of the public sphere Habermas idealized. In this public sphere, people entered into a discourse carried out under stricter rules than mere opinion formation. Here, by virtue of reliance on reason and rejection of the influence that commonly attended the identities of prestigious individuals, opinion might be forged which truly deserved to instruct the state. Here, democracy might be transformed from mob rule to the highest form of republicanism. And from here, in Habermas's story, the public sphere degenerated as it grew in scale and declined in reasoned argument. Greater democratic inclusivity increased vulnerability to undemocratic manipulations of opinion.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* Habermas couldn't see his way out of this dilemma. The reason, I think, had to do with a hidden ambivalence in his conception. Did the public sphere decline because it ceased to be an effective tool for *discovering* the public good or did it decline because it ceased to be an effective arena for *constituting* — and *reconstituting* — the public good? Adopting the latter choice helps us cut into the elitist prejudices of Habermas's account. It makes us wonder if the decline has been so precipitous as he thinks, and it reminds us that in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were multiple publics, each seeking to constitute the public good in somewhat different terms.

Thinking of the public sphere as constituting the public good does not mean that the public sphere is not an arena of decision making or sharing of information. It does mean that it is not only that. It is also an arena of reflexive modification of the people who enter it, of their ideas, and of its own modes of discourse. The public good cannot be fixed in advance because the public itself is always in a process of reconstitution. Our debates about what is good for us are always, in part, debates about whom we want to be. Whether the issue is health care, education, prison reform, or foreign aid, questions of interest are never separable from questions of identity. One of the great faults of the commonplace language of interests is that it obscures this. Of course in some sense we have interests, and of course we can gain greater clarity about our interests through instruction in the consequences of our acts and other more or less externally ascertainable matters. But neither as individuals nor as collectivities are these interests fixed in advance so that the right course of action can simply be deduced from them. Our interests can only be considered when based on understandings of our identities, and these are at stake in the very public deliberations that weigh our courses of action. Am I both Black and a woman? Then arguments from race and gender each attempt to sway my self-understanding, to persuade me to give one of these aspects of my identity greater salience.[28] It may sound easy to affirm the intersection, to speak of "Black woman" as constituting a single identity, but it is not easy when the predominant discourses of race fail to recognize gender and those of gender fail to recognize race. The identity is not available equally, always, and to all who are Black and female. Its availability is increased, however, at the same time that the identity is given more substance and particularity by such entrants into the public discourse as bell hooks, Alice Walker, Michelle Wallace, and Toni Morrison. Their efforts do not simply identify the interests of some preexisting, fixed group, Black women; they constitute Black woman as a potential self-understanding, not fixed but in the flux of self-making.

But the public sphere — any public sphere — may offer richer or poorer conditions for the project of constituting the public good. In its culture, it may encourage (or discourage) the thematization of difference. It may do so in ways that make differences harder (or easier) to bridge. It may be more (or less) open to associational life. Social movements may more (or less) readily place new issues and identities on their agendas. In each of these ways, the shape of the public sphere, its openness and vitality, affects its capacities to constitute a public such that the members of that public can address together the question of what is good for each or any or all of them.

Instead of building networks of social relationships and mutually engaging public discourse across lines of difference, we tend to identify with categories of people similar to us on one or more dimensions. These include ethnicities and races, both religions and religious orientations — like Evangelical or other coded qualifiers of Christian, and interest affiliations like the National Rifle Association. Unlike political parties, which are in part vehicles for building coalitions among different identities and interests, these categories are frequently represented as though for relevant purposes they are internally homogenous. While they may present images of the public good, therefore, they do not directly facilitate the production of shared ideas of the public good among those with somewhat different initial positions. The extent to which these categories cut across each other is seldom thematized. Rather than interconnections across and among categorical identities, and thus real relationships and discussion with people different from ourselves, we tend to see categorical differences as leaving us the alternatives of conflict or tolerance. To call for tolerance or gain a sense of broader solidarity, we appeal mainly to other more encompassing

28. W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) grasped this issue through his notion of "double consciousness," thinking especially of the duality "negro" and "American." See also Gilroy (1993).

categories of alleged similarity — we are all Americans — rather than to a public discourse that engages us through our conflicts and cross-cutting affiliations.

Tolerance by itself does not ensure engagement across lines of difference. Indeed, we in America seem close to deciding that the only way to tolerate those different from ourselves is to have very little interaction with them, to separate ourselves into enclaves within which everyone is similar. Thus in a sense, we approach communities in a frame of mind similar to that in which people commonly think about nations on the global scene. Even in local residential communities, by a variety of mechanisms from zoning to economically structured planned developments, we produce high levels of economic and social homogeneity. It is as though we presume we can build enjoyable and satisfying social networks only within these categories of similarity. We would save community, on that smaller scale, at the complete expense of public life.

Communities cannot be self-sufficient; they can't even keep up much of an ideological pretense of self-sufficiency anymore. So just as we cannot recover a sense of strong community in mere sameness, we can't find it in isolation. We have to overcome the sense that what happens in New York's South Bronx or in Central Los Angeles is someone else's problem. But to do so requires us to approach such concerns not through false claims to be a single community, as though the interests of those in Beverly Hills and South Central Los Angeles were really the same, but through a recognition of interdependence despite difference and a conception of public discourse that grants participants respect and dignity on bases other than familiarity. The same is true for the various moral issues and movements that set us at each other's throats — for and against abortion, for and against gay rights. We can deal better with these if we are willing to see our task as the development of communication across lines of difference rather than either the discovery of common denominators that make our differences negligible or mere negotiation among people who cannot really communicate about their competing interests.

## CONCLUSION

It will now be clear, I hope, why I think communitarian language is problematic for coming to terms with the nature and identity of the public in America today. First, the public must be an institutional arena within which we not only live with but cherish difference. Within our families and our local communities we know we are not all the same — and though we emphasize our commonality, we know also that we are knit together by appreciation of some of our differences. But when those differences appear to us in the larger public realm, they too often appear as enormous categories of people with whom we cannot identify and who inspire mostly fear in us. The language of community is too often used either to evoke a spurious unity of the whole or to describe those categories within which people are "like us." Yet in the country as a whole, as in every family and town, variety is not just the spice of life but one of its essential ingredients. And for the country as a whole, there is no web of directly interpersonal relations to counterbalance purely categorical images or identities.

Second, within the institutional arena of the public sphere we need to nurture modes of discourse that go beyond the forging and affirmation of commonality or identity to the articulation of reasoned arguments. Clearly, abstract, rational reason cannot settle all our debates or solve all our problems. As the exclusive vocabulary of public life, such an idealized notion of reason would neglect soul, spirit, tacit knowledge, practical understanding, prayer, mystery, luck, and a sense of limits. But especially in the public sphere — as distinct from community — it is important to emphasize the giving of reasons. We cannot demand that our discourse be purely rational, but we can demand that those who enter it be prepared to give reasons for their views and to consider those given by others.

Third, the nurturance of this public sphere would require us not simply to identify commonalities with each other but to rebuild civic institutions. One reason we seek unity in visions of an imaginary giant community or in bellicose foreign policy is that we have lost faith in the domestic institutions central to the real, practical unification of American life. Too many of us are not just worried but outright cynical about the legal system, the public schools, the media, and, above all, the government. These are institutions that we depend on to organize our relations — including relations across lines of difference. They are also the institutions that make much of the story of the uniqueness and greatness of American democracy real and not just a chauvinistic claim. Perhaps most important of all, they are institutions that enable us to communicate with each other in a public sphere of civic discussion, to carry on a discourse about what our country means, how we should live together, and what we all need and have to offer. While we must confront cynicism directly as a problem in itself, we must also confront the issue of institutional reform. For both civil society and public sphere are creations of social institutions; discourse is a product not just of minds and mouths but of cafes — and, for that matter, big political barbecues — in which the minds meet and the mouths eat as well as speak. The institutional arenas required include both those that nurture subordinate, subcultural publics — among African Americans, for example, or among those committed to evangelical Christianity — and those that provide for cross-cutting linkages among participants in these subordinate publics.

## REFERENCES


Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. 1985. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. New York: Harper and Row.

Berger, Peter, and Richard J. Neuhaus. 1978. *The Naked Public Square*. New York: Basic Books.

Calhoun, Craig. 1980. "Community: Toward a Variable Conceptualization for Comparative Research." *Social History* 5:105–29.

——. 1987. "Class, Place and Industrial Revolution." In *Class and Space: The Making of Urban Society,* ed. P. Williams and N. Thrift, 51–72. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

——. 1988. "Populist Politics, Communications Media, and Large Scale Social Integration." *Sociological Theory* 6(2): 219–41.

—— (ed.). 1992. *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

—— (ed.). 1994. *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

——. 1995. *Critical Social Theory: Culture, History, and the Challenge of Difference*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Carter, Stephen. 1993. *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivializes Religious Devotion*. New York: Basic Books.

Dahl, Robert. 1989. *Democracy and Its Critics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Doyle, Kathleen. 1989. "Madame C. J. Walker: First Black Woman Millionaire." *American History Illustrated* 24:24–25.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. [1903] 1994. New York: Dover.

Ferguson, Earline Rae. 1988. "The Women's Improvement Club of Indianapolis: Black Women Pioneers in Tuberculosis Work, 1903–1938." *Indiana Magazine of History* 84:237–61.

Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Goldfarb, Jeffrey. 1992. *The Cynical Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Griffin, William W. 1983. "The Political Realignment of Black Voters in Indianapolis, 1924." *Indiana Magazine of History* 79:133–66.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1984, 1988. *Theory of Communicative Action*. 2 vols. Boston: Beacon Press.

——. 1989. *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Halévy, Elie. 1952. *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*. London: Faber.

Hamilton, Alexander, James Madison, and John Jay. *The Federalist Papers*. 1961. New York: New American Library.

Haraway, Donna. 1992. "Ecce Homo, Ain't (Aren't) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape." In *Feminists Theorize the Political,* ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, 86–100. New York: Routledge.

Hart, H. L. A. 1982. "Natural Rights: Bentham and John Stuart Mill." In *Essays on Bentham: Jurisprudence and Political Theory*, ed. H. L. A. Hart, 79–104. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hart, Vivien. 1978. *Distrust and Democracy: Political Distrust in Britain and America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1984. *After Virtue*. 2d ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

——. 1988. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* South Bend: Notre Dame University Press.

Nadel, Siegfried. 1954. *Foundations of Social Anthropology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——. 1957. *Theory of Social Structure*. London: Cohen and West.

Negt, O., and A. Kluge. 1993. *The Public Sphere and Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Phillips, Derek. 1993. *A Critical Appraisal of Communitarian Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.

Renan, Ernst. 1990. "What Is a Nation?" In *Nation and Narration,* ed. Homi Bhabha, 8–22. London: Routledge.

Schnorr, Paul. 1993. "Denied a Sense of Community: Problems of Class, Race, and Community Form in a Voluntary Resettlement Effort." Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University.

Sen, Amartya. 1979. "Utilitarianism and Welfarism." *Journal of Philosophy* 76:463–89.

Shklar, Judith. 1969. *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau's Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sorokin, Pitirim. 1957. *Social and Cultural Dynamics*. Boston: Sergeant.

Specht, David. 1989. "A Church and Its Neighborhood." *National Civic Review* 78:456–64.

Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self.* 1989. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

——. 1992. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

——. 1995. "Irreducibly Social Goods." In *Philosophical Arguments,* 127–45. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Thompson, E. P. 1992. *Customs in Common*. New York: New Press.

West, Cornel. 1993. *Race Matters*. Boston: Beacon Press.

White, Harrison. 1992. *Identity and Control*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.