

On the Concepts of "Public" and "The Public"

That which is "public" or has this attribute -- whether it relates to a space, social aggregate, an artifact, institution, service or an activity, or intentions or ideas -- is in closer examination an unusually complex and interesting social and cultural phenomenon.

In common spoken language the term "public" is used quite often with numerous different meanings and syntactic bearings. Most often it denotes the opposite pole to the notion of "private." This polarity is nevertheless new. It has been an on-going reflection, a sort of birth-mark record of the genesis of the dichotomy of public and private in Roman Law. This division of public laws (concerning mostly the interests of the Roman state and laws in participation in various institutions) and private laws (representing mostly family and property laws) as if they strictly differentiated two separate worlds, two specific entities, which are distinct and not in contact with each other. Nevertheless such a strict separation of public and private does not exist in reality. There are many historical and contemporary examples which illustrate that on a scale from public to private there are other degrees softening the rigid social and cultural definition of these phenomena. And we cannot talk at all about the impossibility of communication between these spheres as we know a number of examples documenting the entry of "public" into privacy or the private environment (the activity of the media is a almost classic example) or the elevation of the "private" into the public sector (the conflict of public interests with private ones, corruption scandals but also the publicizing of private individual initiatives, and the like).

Also the notion of "the public" is historically and socially and culturally determined, mutable, and developing. At present this notion is most often understood as the larger part of a society (nation or the people, respectively) which is engaged with the consequences of social activities of broad effect and involved in social events themselves. It is a specific social group to which the decisive sphere, political parties, mass media, producers, distributors and many others make advances. These, to a certain extent "elites", make advances to the public (among others) of non-forceful, non-violent psychological means, above all by credenda and miranda. Miranda, the induction and stimulation of admiration, are based on the emotional effect upon large groups of people and masses of ceremonies, celebrations, flag-waving, spectacular musical productions, etc. They are, in short, based on the ritualization of public ceremonies, which are, often without rational consideration accepted by people as something beautiful and evoke among participants the feeling of power-sharing. Credenda appeal rather to the rational aspects of human consciousness and form a person's belief in aristocratic, charismatic or democratic authorities which can bring about the consensus of the majority.

The public is a mold in which not only conflicting interests but also the discord between traditions and innovations and their other effects are re-shaped. The response of the public is usually called public opinion and it usually has a primary function of social control. But the definition of the public itself is neither uniform nor without difficulties, though it is generally

accepted that the public is not a homogenous whole and that within it there are always more active and more passive subgroups. Along with the common concept of the so-called "general public" there exist the concepts of particular, specific "publics" related to various social stratum and professions which usually can be divided into the so-called lay and expert segments of the public.

"Public issues" are usually those presented to the public. They are questions, problems, topics and the like which become the subject of discussion and controversy. The transfer of private issues to public issues is a very discrepant process with numerous crucial political, economic, human, and ethical consequences. This is apparent for example in the concepts of culture capital and in the issue of "abolishing scarcity" or in the democratization of access to education. At present it is almost impossible to gain acceptance of a certain topic as a public issue without its proper publicity, but beware -- as the saying goes -- "you can also discredit yourself in the public". Let us have a brief look at some of the compelling sociological contexts for what is "public" and from the great amount of issues before us, let us focus solely on certain correlations and problems. Individualization, the forming of a subjective, unique human character and social experience, does not, by any means, represent an inaccessible autonomous enclave. Individualization cannot be even realized unless there is correspondence to the surrounding "public" sphere. A number of private needs and interests cannot be even satisfied by private means. Think at random of some of the spaces, institutions or activities which we encounter -- public services (e.g. "cursus publicus" mail), public meals, public baths, public libraries (in metaphoric speech -- a concentration of "the complete memory of mankind"), public administration, public roads and public transport, public servants, public media, public beneficial activities, public rooms, parks, lighting, lavatories, play-grounds, public order, public opinion, both sides of public welfare, public nuisance, public interest, public service announcements, and so on. This range of public forums and activities take on, above all, various definitions of social roles and social and cultural functions. They enable the rise of ad hoc communities connected with an experience (not identifiable with a crowd) and they are an expression of the necessity of the shared life among people.

From the sociological point of view, the most crucial fact is that public spaces (both sacred and profane) and public institutions and activities:

1. are concentrated around a certain set of cultural meanings and values
2. are connected with the symbolism of places and events
3. create an irreplaceable socializing environment
4. fulfill the extremely important function of social integration
5. are the environment for encountering people and their expressions, for interaction and communication
6. enable the presentation of individual or group performances and the formation and assertion (in the words of S. Sontag) a new sensibility -- sensitivity and receptivity.

These concluding remarks relate to the aim of the project "The Work of Art in Public Space". The specific meaning of the phenomenon of "public" as it relates to culture and to art was grasped inventively by K. Mannheim in his program lecture "The Soul and Culture" (Lelek es Kultura, Budapest, 1918). He understands the fact that we enter into relations with another human and even with ourselves only by putting some material, a piece of art between ourselves and other humans as our most essentially human feature. Mannheim then notes that "our human fate is that there are lots of us and we exist separately", with the consciousness of the need of mutuality. But it is precisely the work of art that can serve as an interpersonal bridge -- "a piece of art becomes a cultural object by working in this social context." In accordance with Mannheim's thoughts, in our consideration of public space and the presentation of a work of art -- "a public issue" sui generis - we can make the analogy to the interpersonal bridge conditioning the continuity of culture.

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