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## The Public Sphere in the Field of Power

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Distinction of society from the state was basic to the early modern development of liberalism. Society itself was understood as further differentiated into several spheres: family, religion, economy, and so forth.<sup>1</sup> While these were related, they were held to be largely autonomous. No one of them exercised complete authority over the others. This was at once an actual process of social differentiation and a hegemonic understanding of how society ought to be organized. The image of differentiation informed policies that secured real differentiation, but it also led people – including theorists – to imagine that spheres were more autonomous than they were, to underestimate ways in which each was influenced by activity in others, and to neglect both the ways in which the terms of this very differentiation were shaped by culture and social structure, protected and influenced by the state, and challenged by social movements.

It is instructive to situate the idea of the public sphere in this context. This gives the influential account of Jürgen Habermas its central pathos: the public sphere arises as part of civil society, incorporating adults who have gained maturity and intellectual autonomy in another of its parts, the family. It is oriented to forming rational-critical opinion on matters of universal interest to citizens, and through this informing state policy. But it is debased and corrupted when the state/society division collapses amid bureaucratization, organized interest-group politics, and mass society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

In Habermas's account the political public sphere has distinctive importance as an institutional formation – and an ideal – underpinning democracy.<sup>3</sup> It is marked off from material exercise of political power, from other discursive arenas, and from the economy and what might be considered the “functional” reproduction of society. The political

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1 Max Weber's later formulation of the differentiation of “value spheres” would become the most influential general formulation of this notion. See *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968; orig. 1922).

2 *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989; orig. 1962).

3 To be clear, Habermas was not committed to the term “public sphere”. He used its German equivalent in his original 1962 text, but more often “*öffentlichkeit*” which translates more directly as “publicness” and is often rendered as “public space” (not least in the French translation of Habermas's book). See “Public Space and Political Public Sphere – Biographical Roots of Two Motifs in My Thought,” in *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008). Nonetheless, Habermas was and has remained committed to a general idea of the modern differentiation of realms of social organization as a kind of necessary background condition that locates and limits the role of normative and communicative reason. For example, he draws on Parsons and Luhman to distinguish the ways state and economy are constituted by non-linguistic steering media (power and money respectively) from the role of communicative action in the lifeworld and civil society. See *Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon, 2. Vols., 1980 and 1984).

public sphere is thus an arena of rational-critical discourse among individuals and distinct from invocations of superior entitlement on the basis of inherited status, enforced party loyalty, use of money to sway opinion, and social movement mobilization. It is also distinct from other public spheres in which citizens may develop the capacities for effective public discourse. Habermas stressed the culture-forming literary public sphere; others have rightly emphasized the importance of public discourse focused on religion.

But though these other public spheres might prepare people for effective participation in the political public, Habermas conceptualized the latter as distinct. It was committed to rational-critical public discourse about matters of the public good and distinctively identified, therefore, with the state that both helped to identify and bound the nation as collective beneficiary of that good and established the possibility of conscious collective action to pursue that good. It was also understood to work precisely by virtue of its simultaneously autonomy and openness – open in principle to all and free from determination of arguments by social status.

The ideal has proved powerful and promising but fraught with complexities and questions. Despite its ostensible openness, it seems to exclude from participation many kinds of voices, arguments, and views that are not expressed in the forms of argumentation regimented as properly rational-critical. As Negt and Kluge argued soon after Habermas's book appeared, this includes many potential contributions that reflect the experience of workers and other subordinated groups.<sup>4</sup> The theme was later developed, most especially with regard to gender-bias, but also race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, cultural style and other dimensions. This encouraged reliance on the idea of "counterpublics" which contested the hegemonic construction of dominant publics. And while many of these arguments were developed with an eye on social movements and participatory politics in and after the 1960s many also were engaged to rethink understandings of late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century public life that shaped Habermas's original formulation.

In the present paper I consider these questions further both in general theoretical terms and in reflection on late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. Specifically, I ask (a) whether the ways in which the early bourgeois public sphere was structured - precisely by exclusion - are instructive for considering its later development, (b) how consideration of the social foundations of public life calls into question abstract formulations of it as escape from social determination into a realm of discursive reason, (c) to what extent to which "counterpublics" may offer useful accommodations to failures of larger public spheres without necessarily becoming completely attractive alternatives, and (d) to what extent considering the organization of the public sphere as a field might prove helpful in analyzing differentiated publics, rather than thinking of them simply as parallel but each based on discrete conditions.

## **The Public Sphere and Ostensibly Neutral Reason**

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<sup>4</sup> Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *The Public Sphere and Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993; orig. 1972).

The notion of the political public sphere centered on the idea that private persons might come together through reasoned communication to consider public issues and inform public policy. Because the parties would be well-formed individual persons, and because their discourse would be both rational and critical, the resulting public opinion would be a productive resource for guiding society, not the lowest common denominator of popular passions. The public sphere, in this sense, depended crucially on its being understood as part of the private realm, of civil society rather than the state. It brought private persons together. At least ideally, it also provided participants with a means of overcoming the differences of status that otherwise divided them and made their opinions sectional rather than truly public. As Habermas put it, in a book influentially articulating the 18<sup>th</sup> century ideal, the best version of the public sphere was based on "a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether". It worked by a "mutual willingness to accept the given roles and simultaneously to suspend their reality" in order to consider the public good as such.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the modern era, new ideas about public discourse were complemented by development of new communications media; rising literacy and education levels; growth of the state; and expansion of popular political participation. In this process, the distinction of public and private took on new importance and complexity. First, the realm of public interaction expanded; cities were the primary setting for this, especially cosmopolitan trading and capital cities. Public spaces appeared literally with coffee houses, parks, theaters, and other places where people who were not bound by private relations gathered and communicated. They also grew metaphorically with printed sermons, pamphlets, newspapers, books in vernacular languages, journals that reviewed them, and other media of public communication. Second, the state also expanded and with it the range of *res publica*, public things which included property held in common and matters of concern to the whole polity. Publicness took on a dual sense referring both to openness of access and interaction and to collective affairs as managed by the state. The public referred both to the collective subject of democracy--the people organized as a discursive and decision-making public--and to its object--the public good.

The two dimensions were linked in the notion that political debate among responsible citizens was a way to arrive at sound understanding of common affairs. This idea developed in science, religion and literature as well as politics.<sup>6</sup> Processes of

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5 Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, p. 131. The ideal of the public sphere thus anticipate John Rawls' notion of evaluating social arrangements from behind a "veil of ignorance" with regard to where in those arrangements one would be placed. See *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

6 See Yaron Ezrahi *The Descent of Icarus*; David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture*; Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *The Institution of Criticism* and James van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*. Both science and religion are surprisingly missing from Habermas's account. Habermas also suggests a historical sequence in which literary publics precede political ones; this corresponds to his notion that individuals develop the capacity for public life inside bourgeois families and then venture out. As Melton notes, this seems wrong. Certainly political debate flourished alongside of and in close relationship to literary and other forms of public debate from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The link between publication and critical debate seems to have been forged as much on religious themes, and directly in politics, as in literature. Moreover, print-mediated political discussions preceded the rise of *feuilleton* criticism and the sentimental novels (like Richardson's *Pamela*) which Habermas sees as shaping the

rational-critical debate were held to form educated public opinion as distinct from other forms such as the ‘representative publicity’ of monarchs appearing before their subjects or the ‘mere opinion’ of uneducated masses. Interest in such public opinion grew alongside civil society as a self-organizing realm of social relations and especially with the rise of democracy. But over the same centuries, there was also a third expansion, in the scale and intensity of social organization accomplished by markets and formal organizations outside the state. Whether understood as structures of capital accumulation, economic systems “steered” by money rather than discourse, or an organizational revolution, these changes split the notion of civil society.<sup>7</sup> The “social” came to incorporate (a) the project of meaningful discourse to establish the terms of life together, (b) the production and reproduction of social relations through impersonal markets, and (c) the creation of large-scale organizations intervening with varying degrees of power and resources into both discourse and markets.

This transformation of civil society not surprisingly complicated the idea of the public sphere as the part of civil society devoted to open, ostensibly neutral and rational-critical formation of opinions on matters of public concern. Habermas addressed this through an account of the degeneration of the public sphere produced by a collapsing of the public-private distinction and the intervention of large-scale organizations. Others argued that the Habermasian ideal was flawed because it (a) failed to allow for a multiplicity of publics – and sometimes counterpublics - reflecting different social circumstances, collective identities, and political choices and (b) was framed too much in terms of the setting aside of disparate social identities and experiences rather than their thematization as bases for public discourse. For this reason, critics suggested, Habermas saw as degeneration later developments which in fact included new opportunities. In the present paper, I argue that the critics are largely right except (i) insofar as they, like Habermas, frame this in terms of later developments rather than seeing it in the very construct of the “classic” public sphere, (ii) insofar as they see emphasis on parallel or counterpublics as a satisfactory substitute for direct engagement with the issue of inclusion in the more general public sphere, and (iii) insofar as they approach the issue in terms of the public articulation of experiences or interests based in different private circumstances rather than as the shaping and reshaping of identities in politics and public life.

Complementing the growth of the public sphere from the outset were new senses of the private. In relation to both “private property” and the ‘privacy’ of the family new usages gave a positive sense to privacy in place of a notion that it signaled deprivation by virtue of exclusion from public life.<sup>8</sup> The virtues of private family life were affirmed in novels, religious and moral discussions, and social inquiries into the

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necessary juxtaposition of individual and social.

<sup>7</sup> When the idea of civil society returned to fashion in the late 1980s and 1990s, it was informed by frequent reference to late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century sources, notably the Scottish moralists to Hegel. But often without clarifying why, late 20<sup>th</sup> century authors typically differed from their forebears in treating civil society as a realm of voluntary action outside both state and economy. This was precisely the claiming of one dimension of the social distinct from the others.

<sup>8</sup> See the defense of the older usage in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1958) and discussion in Calhoun, “Private,” in T. Bennett and L. Grossberg, eds., *New Keywords* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2004).

“problems” of the lower classes. But they were also reflected in the gendered character of the public sphere. Women and children were increasingly sequestered in private homes, especially among the bourgeoisie (and precisely through an era when child labor would demonstrate class difference as well as, for some, society’s moral failure). Habermas’s account of the public sphere incorporates the modern idea of the individual as nurtured in private as preparation for action in public. But the issue here is not only that this applied initially only to men. It is that it presented participation in public as an activity for fully-formed individuals whose identities and rational capacities for setting aside personal interests were achieved in advance. This was recurrently a basis for exclusion, not just in terms of gender but also of education and images of the lack of discipline among workers and other non-elites (who were constantly subjected to disciplinary measures).

At the same time, economic activity was increasingly moved out of the household. In one sense, thus, going to work meant going out into public, being exposed to the public gaze. In another sense, however, property relations continued to be understood as private in the sense that they were to be managed by individual persons and not the state.<sup>9</sup> The eventual rise of business corporations, political parties, trade unions, and other large-scale organizations further complicated the distinction. Habermas focuses on the ways in which these used their control of resources and to some extent of their members to influence public opinion, thereby distorting rational discussion. Of business corporations I would add that the dominant understandings of these intrinsically challenged the public/private distinction. They held property as artificial private persons but operated as collective, public actors, especially when shares of ownership were openly available on the market rather than closely held within families.

As the example of corporations and private property suggests, the distinction of public and private was sometimes difficult to sustain. This undermined the classical notion of the public sphere, at least as Habermas describes it: “The model of the bourgeois public sphere presupposed strict separation of the public from the private realm in such a way that the public sphere, made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state, was itself considered part of the private realm”.<sup>10</sup> Corporations became public actors while still claiming the status of private property. At the same time, states began to intervene ever more into civil society and even intimate life. These trends joined with the rise of mass media, and especially professions and institutions devoted to the manipulation of

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9 Habermas’s account relies very heavily on the initial distinction of public from private and its later collapse. These categories have indeed played constitutive roles in the self-understanding of modernity, but Habermas idealizes bourgeois privacy and family life. This has been the basis for legitimate feminist criticism, with Nancy Fraser among the important early voices; see “What’s Critical about Critical Theory?” A number of historians have also engaged the issue, though with some ambivalence as to whether they are showing the distinction never to have been so strong as Habermas implies, or indeed to have been strong but illegitimate and contrary to other liberal ideals. See, e.g., Anna Clark: *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class*; Dena Goodman, “Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime”; Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*; and Mary Ryan, “Gender and Public Access: Women’s Politics in Nineteenth Century America”.

10 Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, pp. 175-176.

public opinion through mass media (advertising, public relations) to undermine the conditions for the effective operation of the public sphere as a source for educated public opinion.

This is an account of modern history up to the 1950s. It is an account that left Habermas pessimistic at the end of his book and inclined in his later work to locate the potential for a rational learning process in communicative action and human psychological potential rather than such historically and institutionally specific conditions.<sup>11</sup> In and after the 1960s, there was a renewal of public life that included greater participation for women, greater recognition of legitimate diversity within nations, and a renewed public prominence of social movements. That many of these were “new social movements” linked to specific identity claims raised questions about the integration of democratic struggles. This contributed to enthusiasm for the idea of counterpublics and doubts about the idea of a more integrative public sphere. As I have argued elsewhere, the new social movements of the 1960s and after were not unprecedented. A variety of religious, spiritual, gender, sexual, moral, racial and other identities animated social movements in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as well.<sup>12</sup> Jon Klancher points to a similar “fragmentation” of the public sphere in late 18<sup>th</sup> century England.<sup>13</sup> This was, we should remember, a public with room for William Blake as well as Tom Paine, and for both Mary Wolstonecraft’s reply to Paine on behalf of women and her daughter’s Romantic reconsideration of progress in *Frankenstein*. The notion of abstracting from particular statuses to constitute the ideal participants in the public sphere was always problematic.

### **The “Classical” Public Sphere**

Habermas recognized that the public sphere necessarily depended on social foundations – clubs, coffee houses, newspapers – and that these were both supports and limits. The openness of the public was partly based on markets in which commodity exchange was not limited by prescriptive identities. A market basis implied access limited to those with money, of course, even though the idea of market openness could encourage valuing openness more generally.

However exclusive the public might be in any given instance, it could never close itself off entirely and become consolidated as a clique; for it always understood and found itself immersed within a more inclusive public of all private people, persons who – insofar as they were propertied

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11 Though his theoretical work took other turns, Habermas didn’t abandon hopes for the public sphere. He returned to it in relation to law in *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) and in relation to questions of religion and secularism in some of his most recent work, e.g., “Religion in the Public Sphere” in *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

12 See Calhoun, “New Social Movements’ of the Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century,” *Social Science History*, vol. 17 #3: 385-427.

13 Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

and educated – as readers, listeners, and spectators could avail themselves via the market of the objects that were subject to discussion.<sup>14</sup>

The “print capitalism” which Benedict Anderson later argued played an important role in enabling national consciousness was thus also important to the public sphere.<sup>15</sup> Still, there a tension from the outset between the ideal of openness and the reality of closure. Habermas has accepted the criticism that he initially approached the public sphere mainly as a category of bourgeois society and neglected the parallel development of a plebeian or proletarian public sphere.<sup>16</sup>

A different picture emerges if *from the very beginning* one admits the coexistence of those processes of communication that are excluded from the dominant public sphere. ... The exclusion of the culturally and politically mobilized lower strata entails a pluralization of the public sphere in the very process of its emergence. Next to, and interlocked with, the hegemonic public sphere, a plebeian one assumes shape.”<sup>17</sup>

As Nancy Fraser argued more forcefully:

We can no longer assume that the bourgeois conception of the public sphere was simply an unrealized utopian ideal; it was also a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule.<sup>18</sup>

“Also” is a key word in this passage, for the fact of gender and class exclusion did not entirely vitiate the more inclusive ideal. Indeed, that there was an ideal of the public sphere encouraged efforts to secure its realization. These came not only from within but especially from those excluded from and often dominated by the hegemonic public sphere. While Fraser stresses the fact that women, workers, and other subordinated social groups often found it “advantageous to constitute alternative publics” we should be clear that they often did so in disappointment and with an enduring commitment to reforming the dominant public or creating a new one that would be more inclusive.

Building on Negt and Kluge, Fraser called these “subaltern counterpublics”:

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14 Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, p. 37.

15 Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, rev. ed. 1991).

16 The most influential early critics on this point were Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *The Public Sphere and Experience*. Their point, as their title suggests, was not only that there was a proletarian public sphere, but that it was informed by distinctive experience, and learning from experience is significant alongside the rational-critical debate model on which Habermas concentrates. The terminological distinction plebeian vs proletarian recognizes that those without property and political privilege in 18<sup>th</sup> century were not necessarily constituted as a capitalist working class.

17 “Further Reflections on the Public Sphere,” in Calhoun, ed.: *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. 425.

18 Fraser, “What’s Critical about Critical Theory: The Case of Habermas and Gender,” in *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 113-43.

In order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.<sup>19</sup>

The idea of counterpublics then joined the core idea of the public sphere to inform a wave of new historical analyses of late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century England, the setting which had been so central to Habermas's original formulation.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in a historiography full of attention to contestation and resistance, there was something of a celebration of counterpublics.<sup>21</sup> This should not lead us to forget either the extent to which protagonists of counterpublics often sought integration into a more general public, or the larger theoretical question posed by Habermas's study – whether it is possible to form public opinion in rational, critical, and open ways and thereby influence not only immediate government policy but the very shape of collective institutions.

The idea of counterpublics has proved fruitful, but it commonly remains embedded (as in the passage quoted from Fraser above) in a formulation of “parallel publics”. Even though the goal is to bring out contestation, this implies more autonomy and less struggle than history reveals.

With this in mind, Eley points to the virtue of thinking in terms of hegemony.<sup>22</sup> A hegemonic public is always engaged in struggle to maintain perpetually fragile ascendancy and adapt to new circumstances. It is not only counterpublics that are contentious or less than universal. As Eley puts it, “Habermas ... misses the extent to which the public sphere was always constituted by conflict. The emergence of a bourgeois public sphere was never defined solely by the struggle against absolutist and traditional authority.”<sup>23</sup> Different political public spheres did not develop separately from and parallel to each other, but rather in a field of contestation. Indeed, in the 1790s and early 19<sup>th</sup> century there was enough open contestation that the notion of hegemony with its implication of power sustained by cultural saturation rather than material force may not be entirely apt. Class division was important and made more important by government use of material force to exclude radical authors and their readers from the public sphere. In this context, social movements provided social bases for many just as coffee houses and salons did for others.

Bourgeois intellectuals and political actors struggled to win social space from aristocratic domination, but also to exclude plebeian and proletarian voices from the

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19 Fraser, op cit., p. 123.

20 Among even more, see Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); James Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Andrew McCann, *Cultural Politics in the 1790s*. London: Macmillan, 1999; Jon B. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

21 See Orrin Wang, “Romancing the Counter-Public Sphere: A Response to Romanticism and its Publics,” *Studies in Romanticism* 33 (1994), 579-88 at 579. Wang's response is to a special issue of *Studies in Romanticism* with articles by many of those whose books are cited in n. 10 above.

22 Eley, “Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures”.

23 “Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures,” Pp. 289-339 in Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. 306.

public sphere they helped create. This was not only a matter of exclusion of “the mob” (“the mobility,” as elites saw ostensibly rootless non-elites mobilized for public action and about which most were always ambivalent at best) but also the expulsion of more radical intellectuals, shopkeepers, and artisans. Many of the latter were active in 18<sup>th</sup> century public debates, notably from the 1760s to 1790s.<sup>24</sup> Elites were always ambivalent and often hostile.<sup>25</sup> But there was a new closure in the shifting political context occasioned by the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. This was closure precisely against new democratic claims, like that signaled by the London Corresponding Society with its principle “that the number of our members be unlimited”.<sup>26</sup> Expulsion of those without sufficient property, or connections, or respect for established institutions led to a delimitation of the “legitimate” public sphere on the bases of ideology and class. It became the specifically bourgeois public sphere by virtue of this exclusion as much as by virtue of bourgeois leadership in the struggle against aristocratic status claims.

This may have reflected bourgeois confidence that popular voices were no longer needed to counteract aristocratic domination. It certainly reflected anxieties about radical voices and popular collective action. This was not just a matter of men of property afraid of mobs, though it certainly was informed by that straightforward fear. Nor was it only an anxiety formed after the French Revolution turned bloody. Nor was it only conservatives who feared the direct entry of the multitude into politics. Even many elite radicals were worried by the “undisciplined” character of popular collective action. The libertarian radical and founding theorist of anarchism William Godwin thus held that speculation on “an order of society totally different from that which is now before our eyes” should be among “the prerogatives only of a few favored minds” partly because reform needed to proceed by “slow, almost insensible steps, and by just degrees”. He sought a harmonious, gradual expansion of enlightenment through the community.<sup>27</sup> One reason for the emphasis on prior enlightenment and gradual reform was that late 18<sup>th</sup> Century elites had an image already in mind of the dangers of religious enthusiasm based on the notion of direct access to revealed truth rather than disciplined by learning, reflection, critical discourse (and of course, for some, property).<sup>28</sup> In any case, some of what would later seem the “conservatism” of an Edmund Burke was actually more widely shared among

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24 From the era of “Wilkes and Liberty” through the American Revolution to the rise of English Jacobins, as John Brewer points out, there was never simply a developmental “mainstream” but always alternative structures and frames for politics. See Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) and “English Radicalism in the Age of George III,” in J.G.A. Pocock, ed., *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

25 See, for example, *George Rudé, Wilkes and Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); Peter D.G. Thomas, *John Wilkes: A Friend to Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

26 E.P. Thompson’s account in *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, Rev. Ed. 1968) remains classic. See also Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

27 See Paul Keen, “When Is a Public Sphere not a Public Sphere?” pp. 151-74 in A. Ben-Chimol and W. Maley, eds., *Spheres of Influence* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007); both quotations from Godwin are drawn from Keen’s article. As Keen emphasizes, Godwin was hardly the extreme case of elite anxiety about popular action, and he stood by John Thelwall and others more radical and more activist than himself.

28 See A. Ben-Chimol, “Cultural Historiography and the Scottish Enlightenment Public Sphere: Placing Habermas in Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh,” pp. 105-50 in Ben-Chimol and Whaley, eds., *op cit* and several recent studies of Scottish Enlightenment thought discusses there.

leading voices in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century public sphere, including others who would be claimed as ancestors of an opposing “liberal” tradition. The division of conservative and liberal camps – within a more encompassing liberalism - was in fact produced partly in this context (as well as ensuring 19<sup>th</sup> Century struggles). But the disciplinary ideal was integrated into elite notions of an enlightened public debate from early on, and incorporated into Habermas’s account – partially as encapsulated by the notion of the formation of individuals in private life, including in the bourgeois family, as a necessary preparation before they were ready to enter the public sphere.

Long-nurtured ideas about how enlightenment might inform social change and about the virtues of gradualism combined with more immediate panic over events in France and the coming of war to encourage a new “security regime” in which measures were taken to exclude both radical and popular voices from the public sphere. This was enforced both by directly repressive measures – from censorship to ransacking of printshops and destruction of stock to legal intimidation – and by the use of taxes to raise the price of publications and thus manipulate the market to produce a directly class-structured exclusion. It was this exclusion that created the context in which several radical journalists and intellectuals took up new connections both to artisans, workers, and others outside the propertied elite and new orientations to collective action itself.<sup>29</sup>

This produced a division between the “entitled” public sphere and a disenfranchised or subaltern and often insurgent one. This was at least as important as the differentiation of liberal and conservative positions within the entitled public, and it did not map precisely onto the liberal/conservative spectrum. To be sure, there were relatively consistent liberals, empowered voices in the dominant public sphere who nonetheless supported not only the ideal of greater freedom but the actual work of excluded radicals. Jeremy Bentham thus distinguished himself as a consistent advocate for press freedom and an ally of excluded radicals like T. J. Wooler.<sup>30</sup> In any case, it is a mistake to see the bourgeois public sphere as defined unambiguously by openness. On the contrary, it became the specifically bourgeois public sphere precisely by work of exclusion in which most of its protagonists colluded.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the ideal of openness often was articulated more forcefully by those the bourgeoisie and the government sought to exclude. As Wooler put it in the *Black Dwarf*, “It is only the *union of numbers*, and the *concentration of opinion*, which has any weight in checking the mischievous views of a wicked administration.”<sup>31</sup> Like other radical journalists who found their readers largely among artisans and workers, he did not immediately embrace the idea of a proletarian or plebeian public sphere. On the contrary, he called for public communication embracing the nation as a whole, identifying “the people” with the legitimate public. As Eley remarks, “The classic

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29 See Calhoun and Michael McQuarrie, “Public Discourse and Political Experience: T.J. Wooler and Transformations of the Public Sphere in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain,” pp. 197-242 in Ben-Chimol and Whaley, *op cit*.

30 Bentham authorized Wooler to print a popular edition of his *Plan of Parliamentary Reform*, for example (the Wooler edition appeared in 1818, a year after the original). He was a public advocate of press freedom for years before the publication of his famous *Four Letters on the Liberty of the Press and Public Discussion* (initially in Spanish in 1820 and in English in 1821; this ed., *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, John Bowring, ed., Edinburgh: William Tait, 1838-1843, Vol. 2.

31 T. J. Wooler, ‘Warning to the People’, *The Black Dwarf*, 3 (27 October 1819), 693-699 (p. 695).

model was already being subverted at the moment of its formation, as the actions of subordinate classes threatened to redefine the meaning and extent of the ‘citizenry’.<sup>32</sup> At his trial in 1817, for example, Wooler addressed the mostly middle class members of the jury as “members of the community—subjects of the country” coopting them into his vision of an inclusive citizenry competent to “act as judges on questions of general policy”.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, nationalism was articulated in the appeals of popular radicals to the rights of all Englishmen, not just in the more reactionary (and commonly manipulated) slogans of Church and King mobs. They may have found themselves helping to constitute a counterpublic, but only reluctantly.<sup>34</sup> Their exclusion from the more elite public sphere, moreover, was effected by means of government policy and economic restriction: censorship, newspaper taxes, seizure of stock, and arrests. It revealed the limits of the liberal ideology dividing state and society into separate spheres. And in this it suggests some of the reasons why social movements, not only conventional political speech, may be vital to democracy.

### **The Limits to Elite Radicalism**

Elite Radicals were more radical in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the issue of liberty was approached as purely political (or occasionally religious) and not much connected with industrialization and class inequality. The primary narrative in Habermas’s account presents change after the French Revolution as the beginning of debasement of the ideal formulation of the public sphere by a long structural transformation that made it more open but less rational. Habermas suggests that this process reveals a contradiction between the ideals of openness and reason. Yet though Habermas’s book ends with a pessimistic account of the 1950s, its overall performative stance is one of optimism. He recovers the ideal of publicness precisely to encourage a renewal of open public discourse about matters of state in response to the silences of Germany’s Adenauer era and more generally the closures of postwar politics.<sup>35</sup> With this more optimistic reading in mind, we may ask whether the closure of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century public sphere was not an early instance of a pattern of political failures rather than simply a working out of a dialectic in which openness and the rise of large-scale organizations undermined reason. Rather than seeing the public sphere as initially bourgeois, we should see it as made bourgeois by the expulsion of dissident voices. And thus expulsion, moreover, was on grounds of their political radicalism as well as their class position. The

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32 Eley, Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures,” p. 306.

33 *A Verbatim Report of the Two Trials of Mr. T.J. Wooler* (London 1817) discussed in Epstein, *Radical Expression*, p. 44.

34 Calhoun and McQuarrie, “Public Discourse and Political Experience: T.J. Wooler and Transformations of the Public Sphere in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain,” pp. 197-242 in A. Ben-Chimol and W. Maley, eds. *Spheres of Influence: Intellectual and Cultural Publics from Shakespeare to Habermas* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007).

35 In this sense, Max Horkheimer read Habermas correctly as encouraging a renewal of popular political activity that the older man feared on the basis of popular participation in fascism. Habermas’s was read by 1960s radicals as encouraging efforts to reopen the public sphere, though they quickly went beyond what Habermas considered appropriate means to this end and especially beyond its containment in rational-critical discourse.

closure of the public sphere supported the distinction of a realm of legitimate but also limited politics.

We can see the issue in terms of the fate of the ideas and reputation of Thomas Paine. Paine's writings were touchstones of political radicalism for decades. He supported democracy and thought an age of reason necessarily challenged religion. He was never a voice with which elites in general felt comfortable. But elite political radicals – and less radical figures like Edmund Burke - read and engaged with Paine in the 18<sup>th</sup> century English public sphere. And conversely many “populists” like William Cobbett (writing as Peter Porcupine) attacked Paine in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century only to transform into his devotees in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Following the French Revolution and with increased force during the Napoleonic Wars, followers of Paine were prominent among those excluded from the dominant – or entitled - public sphere. This reflected both closure against political radicalism – not least because Paine embraced and was embraced by the French revolutionaries - and closure on class bases. In other words, it was a failure to live up to the ideal of openness not a result of increasing openness that produced the initial structural transformation of the public sphere and set in process a series of struggles in which political resistance to openness – and to radical voices – would have as much impact as expanding scale in undermining the ideal relationship of wide participation to rational discourse. Precisely by excluding political radicals as individual voices, “legitimate politics” made itself into a politics of entitlement and pushed those political radicals into an alignment with the development of organized social movements.<sup>36</sup> It was political closure of the dominant public sphere that made movements the necessary way to put new and challenging issues on the agenda for political discussion. Movements might remain focused on discourse alone, or they might bring material force to bear to demand attention from elites or the government. This is one meaning, for example, of the long discussion of “moral force” vs “physical force” in Chartism. Physical force might not mean violent insurrection, but even as a matter of strikes it introduced non-discursive elements into the struggle for public attention.

The tension between discourse and action was longstanding. In the 1790s, for example, a prominent English anti-Jacobin argued that Paine's writings should not shelter under the notion of “fair and candid discussion”: “Under the mask of discussion, they really point to action.”<sup>37</sup> This was the issue in the trial of John Thelwall, one of the founders of the London Corresponding Society, who was charged with treason and sedition. Thelwall sought to distinguish himself from Robespierre and other French revolutionaries precisely in the terms of discourse vs. action: “Daggers and guillotines are not arguments; massacres and executions are not arguments,” he wrote. “There can be no freedom in the world but that which has its foundations in the increased knowledge and liberty of mankind.”<sup>38</sup> Thelwall insisted that “peaceful discussion, and not tumultuary

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36 See Charles Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

37 John Bowles, ‘A Protest against T. Paine's “Rights of Man”’ cited in Paul Keen, “When Is a Public Sphere Not a Public Sphere,” p. 168. On the anti-Jacobins more generally, see Don Herzog, *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

38 *The Politics of English Jacobinism: Writings of John Thelwall*, ed. Gregory Claeys (University Park,

violence [was] the means of redressing national grievances”.<sup>39</sup> The government claimed that Thelwall’s writings were nonetheless an incitement to violence, though to the consternation of anti-Jacobins he was acquitted. But despite the failure of this prosecution, the government and anti-Jacobins succeeded in applying enormous pressure on radicals who sought to express challenging ideas in public – and to non-elite readers and listeners. To “straddle the world of letters and that of popular agitation” was all but prohibited.<sup>40</sup>

The issue was not just violence. It lay also in the distinction between two images of a legitimate public sphere. One imagined a reading public composed of dispersed private individuals, each reading in the privacy of his study, perhaps joining – but calmly - in coffee house discussion. The other emphasized a more active notion of the public, for example as assembled in meetings. Not surprisingly, the latter also involved a wider notion of the kinds of people who might legitimately participate in public life.

For many in the elite, popular meetings were by definition mobs not publics. Radicals saw this otherwise. This had partly to do with reaching less literate audiences, people moved more by speeches than texts. And precisely as radical journalists were excluded from the “entitled” public sphere they had additional incentive to look for other audiences. But if this was a tactical necessity, for many of the radicals it was also a virtue. Indeed, many came to see it as a virtue precisely as they associated further with the social movements of workers and others in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

T. J. Wooler, for example, was always first and foremost a writer. He started out focused on a reading public and he always insisted on the importance of texts and reading. But he came to appreciate the virtues of public meetings more and more. Public meetings created a distinctive performance of publicness, calling an image of the people into being. The experience of gathering in large crowds but acting in disciplined ways helped to constitute a sense of the people as public appropriate to a democratic society. Wooler (and other radical authors) pointed out the orderliness, decorum, and discipline with which large crowds could be gathered. There was great pageantry to protests but also proof that gatherings of unpropertied people should not be understood simply as unthinking mobs.<sup>41</sup> For Wooler, the people constituted themselves as the public in collective actions such as mass meetings:

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PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 95 and 368 (original spelling). See discussion both in Claeys’ introduction to this volume and in Paul Keen, “When Is a Public Sphere not a Public Sphere” op cit.

39 Thelwall, *Peaceful Discussion, and Not Tumultuary Violence, the Means of Redressing National Grievances* (London, 1795; cited in Keen, “When Is a Public Sphere not a Public Sphere, p. 172).

40 E.P. Thompson, *The Romantics* (New York: New Press, 1999), p. 163.

41 Samuel Bamford’s extensive account of preparations for the Peterloo meeting emphasizes how the meeting was organized to present an image of orderliness and decorum, deployed women as a sign of peaceful intent, and arrived unarmed despite mounting tensions prior to the meeting. See Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (London: Frank Cass, 1967; orig. 1844). Accounts in the *Black Dwarf* and other contemporary publications make similar points and radicals’ visual representations portray a similar image: a large and orderly crowd peacefully displaying its reformist agenda before being run down by the Yeomanry. Indeed, the symbolic significance of Peterloo came to reside not just in the fact that the Yeomanry Cavalry murdered peacefully assembled people, but that it was the Yeomanry, not the people, who acted on emotion rather than reason and brought disorder into what had

It is only in public meetings that the real voice of the people is ever heard. On such occasions, venality is ashamed, fear loses its influence, and party is banished from the discussion. The assembled multitude loses all sight of private interest, and every heart beats only for the general good. The spark of patriotism runs with electric swiftness from pulse to pulse, until the whole mass vibrates in unison.<sup>42</sup>

In Wooler's view, the constitution of the people as a public was aided by the experience of gathering together. Craft organizations, churches, and social movements provided not only ideas and material social foundations, but also experience which shaped both learning and creative adaptation.<sup>43</sup> When radicals made and remade their own public sphere in response to new circumstances, thus, this was not simply a matter of choosing new tactics but of improvising on the basis of the accumulated learning—often tacit or embodied, not fully discursive--from previous action. Far from being an indication of mere determination by social conditions or material objectives, this process of improvisation and embodied learning is precisely the way in which political speech socially achieved.

Such peaceful collective action was made necessary by unreasonable attempts to exclude popular radicals and their political claims from the political public sphere. The people of England had the right to read whatever they wanted without government interference and to assemble in public to discuss issues of the public good. If the public sphere was distorted, it was precisely by the governments' actions. The government had used taxes, prosecutions, and intimidation to delimit the public sphere by material force. And it persisted in electing members of Parliament in arbitrary ways that denied fair representation to the people. For the people to respond by means of dramatic public gatherings was an appropriate way of pressing for a more rational, more open, more inclusive public sphere.

Elites always saw the threat of violence in efforts to mobilize non-elites. And of course the efforts of popular radicals to contest their exclusion from the "legitimate" public sphere included strikes and at least threats of armed insurrection. As such popular radicals in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were already engaged in the sort of intrusion of organized action into the public sphere that Habermas saw becoming dominant in the 1950s with negotiations among interest groups and competition between the PR machinery of corporations and trade unions. But then, so were elites and so was government. And the starting point was precisely the constitution of the "bourgeois" public sphere on the basis of economic exclusion backed up by political power.

Yet there was pathos to the situation of intellectuals who sought to join and help lead a popular uprising. In the first place, many had as much in common with participants in the more "respectable" public discourse as with those who mobilized on traditional community lines. Had they not been excluded from the elite public sphere—as much for their opinions and their willingness to take risks than for their economic positions or family backgrounds--they might not have become the protagonists of a partially separate,

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been an orderly occasion.

42 T. J. Wooler, 'Warning to the People', *The Black Dwarf*, 3 (27 October 1819), 693-699 (p. 695).

43 See Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *The Public Sphere and Experience*, for a discussion of the way participation in public life reflects experience and often includes expressive dimensions as well as the rational-critical one emphasized by Habermas.

plebeian public sphere.<sup>44</sup> The crucial class division that shaped the distinction of public and counterpublic was not between the upwardly mobile former artisans like Place and Wade and the recurrently impoverished Carlile and Wooler. It was between the reading public that could not possibly afford to pay for stamped and “legitimate” periodicals, and that not coincidentally was deeply concerned with immediate material questions as well as politics, and the public that could subscribe to the *Westminster Review*. Bentham and Place made honorable attempts to bridge the gap, notably with the creation of University College and the Mechanics Institute, but for the radicals displaced by the industrial revolution no agenda of more gradual self-improvement could be adequate.

Through the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, problems of industrialization and capitalism divided those claiming common ancestry in Paine. Members of the middle classes and the aristocracy were more readily radical on issues that didn’t touch directly on economic power within Britain—such as Parliamentary Reform, policy toward revolutionary America or Wilberforce’s campaign against slavery. Radical ideas made elite figures like Henry Brougham sympathetic to those excluded from the conventional Parliamentary public. Brougham was a powerful lawyer as well as an MP, and defended many in radical opposition to the government. But his conception of legitimate radicalism centered on Parliament and the Courts, not mobilizations in the streets or challenges to the property rights of employers. Increasingly during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the old Radicals became moderates, advocates for the new middle class, and for a more efficient government serving the cause of economic growth. They could support the Reform Acts that gave some workers the vote in the Victorian era, but they could not support the more insurgent popular protests of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nor for the most part did they wish to extend republicanism into democracy. A few—most famously John Stuart Mill—did take up positions farther to the Left. Mill embraced a version of socialism and perhaps even more radically for the time took a strong position on the rights of women. Nonetheless, he spoke in moderate tones for a reasoned transition not a radical insurgency. Some of the old Radicals were ancestors of Fabian socialism as well as individualistic liberalism. Most directly, though, the Radicals helped to inform the genesis of the British Liberal party (the same usage of ‘Radical’ survives also in the name of several Continental liberal parties).

If this usage had remained dominant, Jeremy Bentham (and perhaps Friedrich Hayek) might be considered the great modern influence in radical political thought, not Tom Paine and Karl Marx. Indeed, in important ways Bentham really was radical, though many of his followers backed away from this. James Mill tried to stop Bentham from publishing his *Church of Englandism*. When Bowring published Bentham’s collected

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44 Carlile and Place were close enough to be able to collaborate on occasion. But to give an idea of how small differences mattered, consider this passage on Carlile from George Holyoake, *John Stuart Mill: As Some of the Working Classes Knew Him*. London: Trübner and Co., 1873) p. 24:

Richard Carlile, a man of great courage, eminent for public service in what he dared, but utterly devoid of taste,—persecution had deprived him of that sense,—took up this question, and vulgarised it in a separate publication, which Place regarded as a scandal, and Mr. Mill must have been revolted at. Besides, Carlile’s production cost eighteenpence, and the one distributed cost a farthing. It is not credible that a Utilitarian philosopher would circulate the dearer and coarser paper when the cheaper and better was more than enough.

The publication in question was “To the Married Working People,” a tract advocating birth control.

works, he omitted not only that but *Not Paul but Jesus*. The Radical tradition was being incorporated into the new liberal mainstream and domesticated in the process.

At the same time that the old elite Radicals were becoming mere liberals, however, the lower case usage of ‘radicalism’ spread ever more widely to describe protests and rebellions of London craftsmen seeking a voice in politics, outworking weavers from the Northwest of England seeking to halt the use of machinery to undercut the market for their skills, Irish Catholics demanding full citizenship rights, anti-monarchical Republicans, publishers of the penny press, factory workers trying to form unions, and opponents of industrialization and big government who hoped to restore traditional English liberties and villages. The elite Radicals sometimes sought to portray themselves as the “safe” way for government to head off these more radical challenges. At other times, they viewed the popular radicals as an annoying distraction from their more rational reform projects—or an outright danger.

### **Public and Counterpublic in the Field(s) of Radical Politics**

Already in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, there were in fact multiple discursive communities—multiple publics, if you will—taking up different visions of England’s past, present, and future. These were never sharply distinct, but in varying degrees overlapped each other. Blake and Swedenborgians, Bentham and Paine, Burke and Godwin had overlapping readerships. And those who spoke for and to each--whether preachers or journalists or artists—varied in the extent to which they aspired to reach the broader, more encompassing public that combined them. Some aimed their cultural production at the more “restricted market” of fellow participants in a religious community or political movement; others sought to become voices in the larger (or more widely recognized) world in which newspapers like the *Times* or the *Morning Chronicle* (and eventually elite periodicals like the *Edinburgh Review* and *Westminster Review*) were dominant.<sup>45</sup>

The conflicts between competing claims to the public sphere deepened during and after the Napoleonic Wars. This was first and foremost because of the intensified exclusion—based not only on lines of political loyalty but of property. Moreover, political prosecutions and restrictions made it harder for those who had to earn a living from their writing to sustain their periodicals and even their livelihoods in related trades like printing. And, even when they did produce for the broader public, they inevitably occupied dominated positions within it. Nonetheless, many writers struggled to write both for a social movement readership and for the broader, “authorized” public.

This was always a challenge and often frustrating. The divisions grew sharper and the overlaps fewer in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Not only property but also education and

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45 On the notion of production for a restricted market, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988; orig. 1984) and *Rules of Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996; orig. 1992). Bourdieu uses it mainly to distinguish production for more or less autonomous cultural fields (like those of fellow-artists or scientists) that may explicitly devalue fame and mass sales from production for broader economic markets. Analogous trade-offs between purity or autonomy and trying to reach broader publics are also significant in social movements, though, even where economic markets are not central concerns.

other markers of “proper” preparation for public discourse shaped the distinction of the legitimate public from those cast as a counterpublic. Stylistic conventions and lack of personal connections worked to exclude many from the “entitled” public sphere. These barriers blocked especially the participation of autodidacts, like the many artisans and small business owners who sought public voice. But the barriers were not insuperable—as the examples of Francis Place and John Wade suggest.

Place improved his position from that of a poor leather-worker and tailor to become a wealthy cloth merchant. He was also a leading Benthamite Radical, and for several years ran an influential bookstore from the back of his shop. There he met Wade, initially a wool-sorter, who became his protégé. Place persuaded Bentham to help finance *The Gorgon*, Wade’s Radical newspaper.<sup>46</sup> Wade supported the Manchester cotton spinners’ strike in 1818 and John Gast’s organization of the London dock workers in 1819.<sup>47</sup> Over time, though, both he and Place became more conservative about economic and especially class issues. Wade joined the staff of *The Spectator* and eventually received a stipend from the Palmerston government. Place disapproved of trade unions from the outset (and supported repeal of the Combination Acts in the belief that this would hasten their disappearance—though of course it led to their growth). He continued to advocate popular suffrage as a “moral force” Chartist, but his most controversial stance was advocacy of contraceptives.<sup>48</sup>

Both Place and Wade knew popular radicalism closely, and were infuriated with its populist leaders. Wade called William Cobbett a “fool”, John Cartwright “crazy”, and Henry Hunt a “brazen-faced booby”. Both Place and Wade worked conscientiously to maintain their respectability and a more “rational” analysis. If to some extent they spanned the divide between more popular and more elite Radicals, they (and a number of others) stayed clearly in the orbit of ‘respectable’ politics, offering policies but—especially after the 1820s--not really partnership to those protesting and resisting the course of the industrial revolution. They were concerned with fair treatment of workers within industrial capitalism, and of opportunities for their advancement. Place, for example, devoted much of his attention in the 1820s to projects like the Mechanics Institute which sought to nurture self-improvement, giving more workers a chance to move up as he himself had done. And he advocated birth control as a means to eliminate the pauperization caused by too many children to feed and excess labor supply. Cobbett and Hunt promoted an agenda not of upward mobility but of greater prosperity for people who stayed put—in both class and community terms. Cobbett not only did not support Place’s efforts at population control, he specifically argued that as he looked at England

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46 *The Gorgon* is now readily available as Volume 3 of Paul Keen, ed.: *The Popular Radical Press in Britain 1817-1821*. The quotation comes from p. 385 of this edition (17 April 1819).

47 On Wade’s links to Gast and the dock workers, see Iowerth Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century London* (Folkestone: Dawson, 1979).

48 Like a number of other veterans of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Radicalism, he focused later on issues of population and birth control—associating more than their divergent early 19<sup>th</sup> century positions would have suggested with Richard Carlile. He thus did not become conservative on all matters. Indeed, the opposition of conservative to liberal or radical is revealed as oversimplifying and misleading. The split between individualistic libertarian rationalism, and protests rooted in traditional ideas, values, and communities may be more basic. Moreover, the categorization of Place as conservative (or sometimes simply as “moderate” with the implication that this means resisting radicalism and tending towards conservatism) reflects the primacy of labor politics in views of later historians—over, say, gender and sexuality.

*depopulation* seemed a real threat; in the *Register* as later in *Rural Rides* he described once prosperous villages that had lost their economic base and too many of their people. Of course, neither Cobbett nor Hunt had aspirations to be part of the elite Radical public sphere; each clearly felt himself entitled to respect as a person of substance but identified with England's traditional constitution more than with rationalist critique.

Matters were different for Richard Carlile and Thomas Wooler. They were probably the next two most important voices of popular radicalism after Cobbett and Hunt, and for a time in the late 1810s and early 1820s even more influential. But their ideological orientations, their trajectories in the public sphere, and their social roots were different. For one thing, they were urban. Both came from provincial roots, but both became resolutely London-based. Carlile was the son of a shoemaker and apprenticed as a tinsmith in Plymouth before moving to London. Short-time work helped lead him to radical meetings and then to become a publisher. Carlile was arguably downwardly mobile, and his publishing business never provided him with financial security, let alone wealth. He published *The Rights of Man* and other works by Paine in pamphlet rather than book form—an innovation good both for marketing and for evading the censors—and later launched the *Republican*. Carlile became a key radical publisher, sometimes making money enough to begin to feel secure but equally often losing it to government prosecutions (and bad management). Wooler came from a lower middle class background in Yorkshire and apprenticed as a printer in London. This was a stepping stone into publishing, but if anything Wooler was also downwardly mobile, though more willfully, someone who gave up a life of greater ease out of sheer political commitment. Like Carlile, he suffered recurrent prosecution which drained his funds—despite the considerable popularity he enjoyed for a time. Wooler edited the *Statesman*, and then with support from the traditionalist Radical, Major John Cartwright, in 1817 he launched *The Black Dwarf*. This was one of the most important, creative, and popular radical periodicals of the era, and it filled the gap left when Cobbett fled to America after the Gagging Acts were passed and his *Political Register* lost currency.

Carlile and Wooler both had serious theoretical sides and broadly rationalist outlooks.<sup>49</sup> They sought inclusion in the public sphere dominated by the bourgeois elites of the capital. Yet they also reached out to broader readerships (and each depended on income from sales). Wooler and Carlile were ambiguous figures in many ways, speaking sometimes in the populist register of mass meetings and popular constitutionalism, and sometimes as rationalist followers of Tom Paine. Carlile was a more ideologically systematic and committed Paineite. Wooler shifted his perspective to fit the conflict at hand, being consistent only in a preference for liberty and active public debate. Both embraced the project of a more rational society, though they challenged the claims of the elites to have pursued reason all the way to its necessarily radical conclusions. Both Wooler and Carlile aspired not only to matter in the broader public sphere, but to see a public sphere constituted in terms of reasoned debate among autonomous individuals

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49 See James Epstein, "Bred as a Mechanic": Plebeian Intellectuals and Popular Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century England." Also Epstein, *Radical Expression*; Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics*; Joel Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1983); and Calhoun and McQuarrie, "Public Discourse and Political Experience: T.J. Wooler and Transformations of the Public Sphere in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain," *op cit*.

without distinctions of class; both were undermined by their precarious economic positions as well as government prosecution; and both experienced the exclusions of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as bitter betrayals of reason and justice as well as personal injuries.

Wooler edited and republished Bentham's *Plan of Parliamentary Reform* (with Bentham's permission). This, he thought, showed the necessity of radical reform, rather than the merely moderate reform for which many of Bentham's liberal followers were prepared to settle. Yet if Wooler was a rationalist who found much that he liked in Bentham, he also delighted in and found popular resonance with symbolic devices like letters in which the Black Dwarf communicates with the "Yellow Bonze of Japan" about the sorry state of England. This echoed famous literary precedents, like Montaigne's *Persian Letters*. Wooler also created imaginary discussion with such past paragons of liberty as Hampden, Locke, Harrington, and Blackstone. Most of the radicals denounced Burke's evocative literary style—at once too fancy, too "weepy", and too dependent on imagination rather than facts—and aspired to plain and straightforward prose. Wooler, though, was more given to rhetorical flourishes, embellishment, imaginative invention, and parody. He continued the tradition of creative heterodox symbolic production which had flourished in various guises during the 18<sup>th</sup> century—in Wilkes's parodies, for example, and perhaps most importantly in Blake's construction of a whole mythic vision. This was rooted in a kind of "alternative Enlightenment" in which reaction against established religion did not necessarily take the character of irreligion or hostility to spirituality, and in which elements of rational-critical analysis are intertwined with myth-making and the recasting of moral tradition. Carlyle, by contrast, was more consistently hostile to organized religion, less playful in his prose style.

Neither Carlyle nor Wooler was antimodern, but each emphatically challenged the idea that being up-to-date in terms of science, technology, or indeed advances in human liberties and well-being required accepting wholesale the model of modernity packaged by dominant elites. Carlyle and Wooler were, in a sense, advocates for an alternative modernity. They challenged for example the idea that in order to have the benefits of expanded markets it was necessary to have brutal transitions to them; they thought it might be possible to protect the investments workers made in skill just as those in power protected the investments of capitalists in machinery. They challenged the idea that "science" or "rationality" simply dictated the nature of production processes, pointing out that a variety of other ideas and impositions of power were bundled into specific technologies. Thus, they imagined an alternative sort of modernity in which certain traditional values would complement Republicanism and other "improvements" and be pursued alongside advances in knowledge and efficiency in exchange or production.

Within the broader British public sphere, all the working class and upwardly mobile radicals were in dominated positions. Even Francis Place and John Wade, beneficiaries of direct connections to Bentham and other luminaries, were still not in the kind of autonomous position that Bentham himself was. And in the larger field of political power, even Bentham, such well-placed followers and colleagues as James Mill and David Ricardo--and indeed rivals like Edmund Burke--were members of what Pierre Bourdieu has called the dominated fraction of the dominant class.<sup>50</sup> The dominant

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50 See Bourdieu, *Distinction* and *Homo Academicus*. Note though that the idea of "dominant class" is

fraction controlled major capital or occupied senior positions in government or the Parliamentary opposition.

Following Bourdieu, one might think of a series of fields, more specific nested within more general, and with principles of evaluation reversed as one moves up or down levels.<sup>51</sup> If wealth and political connections dominated outside the public sphere, thus, it was important that disinterest and independence be valued inside it—because they marked its distinctive claim and contribution. The emergent and soon to be internally divided public sphere, thus, was not simply “free-floating” but itself situated in relation to other fields and in the larger field of power. The latter, in Bourdieu’s usage, is the field that encompasses all others, decisively formed in his theory by the rise of the modern state.

The British state, and the field of power it dominated, had become increasingly unified during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, reintegrated after the ruptures of the Civil War and the absorption of internal colonies that made Britain a reality.<sup>52</sup> It was still dominated by aristocrats in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the aristocracy continued to exert power well into the 19<sup>th</sup>. During this period, however, industrial and commercial fortunes mattered more and more and so did non-aristocratic political leaders. And of course there were the so-called parties (less formal than today’s political organizations) of Whigs and Tories, with loose links to further oppositions of city to country, great families to gentry. Without suggesting these were irrelevant, or that they can be explained away by some other factor, we can a distinct opposition relevant to the emergence of the public sphere. This pitted those able to secure political influence through their formally recognized positions, wealth, or directly interpersonal connections with others—family, faction, friendship, or party—against those obliged to persuade relative strangers through public communication. The reformers were mostly among the latter group. Their “disinterested” commitment to a public sphere coincided with their interest in political influence.

Within to the political field, the public sphere was itself an organized, quasi-autonomous field. But whereas in the larger field those with the most material power dominated, within the public sphere, a kind of cultural power dominated. According to the ideals Habermas reconstructs for what he calls the bourgeois public sphere, there was

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somewhat ambiguous when referring to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, a period when class domination was not stable.

51 Every field is structured, thus, not only by the hierarchical opposition of high and low but by an opposition that defines the specific stakes of struggle within the field—usually in modern capitalist societies in terms at least partially homologous to the opposition between economic and cultural capital. The field of literature, thus, is shaped by an opposition of art to journalism (or more precisely writing for the restricted market of other cultural producers vs for a more mass market, and seeking returns in prestige rather than cash) as well as by a hierarchy of greater or lesser success. See *Rules of Art*. In this brief extension to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, I am adapting rather than reproducing Bourdieu’s analytic scheme. What I want most to emphasize is the relational perspective Bourdieu employs, more than the specifics of any of his analyses of specific fields.

52 This course of events, the extent to which there was integration, and the extent to which “Britain” or “England” is the right unit of analysis at any point in time is the topic of a voluminous literature and still contested. For one of the best recent guides, see J.C.D. Clark, *English Society, 1660-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2003). Most of what is in contest is not directly relevant to the present discussion, and I do not pretend to offer a general analysis of the structure English society or politics, even for the period under study.

no power within the public sphere save for the power of persuasion by rational-critical argument. Whatever the ideal, though, the actually existing public sphere was neither so egalitarian nor so rational. Some participants benefited from “cultural capital” in the form of credentials, reputation, publications, or training in the arts of rhetoric and capacity to support their arguments with quotations in Latin and Greek. Not surprisingly (and not perfectly) these “gifts” were correlated with social class background. Others, without these advantages, were forever trying to hold the public sphere to its ideal.

Despite its imperfections, the public sphere did empower participants in considerable part on the basis of their capacity to bring forward persuasive arguments or compelling cultural creations. And it was autonomous in the sense that in order to enter it, and seek to be persuasive within it, people had to try to play by its rules of reasoned argument. Of course those with material capital used it to try to shape the public sphere—paying for publications, for example, or blocking others; hiring writers to articulate their interests and views or demanding that the government censor others. But it was autonomous enough that it did not entirely collapse and forfeit its field-specific investment in reasoned discourse. Throughout the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, there were government-supported newspapers and writers paid by the government. These influenced debate, but they never dominated. This is why the government had to resort to stamp taxes, outright censorship, and prosecutions for libel, sedition, and blasphemy.

The opposition of material power to cultural power—and most specifically, speech—is loosely analogous to the opposition of economic to cultural capital deployed by Bourdieu. And as Bourdieu’s theory would suggest, the opposition was cross-cut with another based on the total volume of capital different contributors to public debate possessed, as distinct from the kind. Autodidacts, for example, were always at a disadvantage compared to the formally educated, even when focused on the most disinterested reason or cultural creativity. Blake was at a disadvantage compared to artists at the Royal Academy and university educated poets; John Wade, Francis Place, TJ Wooler and Richard Carlile were all at a disadvantage compared to Bentham—even though Bentham at times befriended or defended each. This doesn’t mean that Blake’s poetry or painting was inferior, only that he started out without advantages others had. Being an outsider in this sense may have facilitated his creativity, freeing him from conventions that might have been stifling. But there is no guarantee that being self-taught and without patronage will have this effect; it can leave cultural producers seeking to conform and seeking acceptance. And if advantages of family and education gave Bentham the chance to pursue his vocation, they do not account for his brilliance or independence of mind. The well-off could still be mediocre (and usually were).<sup>53</sup>

In the public sphere, conceived as a field, success depends on being (or at least seeming) disinterested and independent. This is easier for those who enter the field with high levels of capital—including the financial wherewithal not to need patronage or paying customers. Contributions known to be produced for material gain are intrinsically suspect. This produces the image of an “economic world reversed” analogous to that

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53 See Bourdieu’s strictures against trying to deduce individual intellectual orientations directly from class background or personal characteristics, rather than mediated through the dynamics of social fields: “The Field of Cultural Production, Or, the Economic World Reversed,” pp. 29-73 in Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993; orig. 1983).

Bourdieu observed in the field of artistic production. Success in terms of the field depends usually on eschewing success in financial terms. The most prestigious poets produce for the “restricted market” of other poets, not for mass markets. Likewise, in the field of science, the production of esoteric research or theory that will be read only by a handful of other specialists is prized—if the other specialists value it—far beyond the writing of textbooks that may be sold to millions of students.

Writers who earned their living by publishing their work were in problematic positions compared to those who didn’t need to. The independence afforded by inherited wealth could be illusory—since the wealthy are usually brought up in ways that ensure either class-loyalty or at least a view of the world compatible with inequalities of wealth. Nonetheless, radical writers like Carlile and Wooler—and to some extent Cobbett—felt acutely the need to be recognized for their independence. This is one of the subtexts in the narratives they published of their trials and imprisonments—proofs that the ideas and arguments they produced were not for their personal interests. There is a paradox in the extent to which those with material wealth and social position could adopt impersonality as a guarantor of the disinterest required by the public sphere, while those who lived by the sales of their papers had to dramatize themselves to show their independence. As Wooler wrote,

... where money is to be obtained, though it be only a farthing, they will frame an act of parliament to seize it. And if a spark of honesty is reported to have appeared in any quarter, they will bring forth an act of parliament to crush it. They hate independence, because they know the independent detest them.<sup>54</sup>

Cobbett, at the extreme, could never be said to leave his identity aside in order to appeal only to impersonal reason. Or the contrary, his certificate of authenticity, the personal imprimatur of William Cobbett of Botley, was embedded in an ongoing narrative of his independence, from his childhood to his struggle with abusive authority in the present. He simply assumed his readers cared about his memories of his native village, or the trees he planted, as well as his views on political matters (and if sales are an indication, it would seem that they did, that popular politics was very much about the person, not just the policy). Partly as a result of his constant self-presentation, someone like Cobbett could never command real recognition in the elite public sphere. He was like a nouveau riche failing to recognize that he should avoid loud clothes that called attention to himself if he wished to enter a distinguished gentlemen’s club. But this was not an optional matter of style that he could in principle overcome with good sartorial or rhetorical advice. On the contrary, Cobbett’s habitus and self-dramatizing narrative style were well attuned not only to his readership but also to his position in the larger public sphere. Along with others who occupied dominated positions, he had little choice but to choose the approach he did.<sup>55</sup>

At the same time, the public sphere embodied a contradiction. On the one hand the idea of an arena of reasoned debate to identify the public interest (rather than merely a

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54 T. J. Wooler, *The Black Dwarf*, 1, 12 March 1817, pp. 97-8.

55 In a sense, Cobbett pioneered the sort of representation of authenticity made famous in France at the end of the century when Zola wrote “J’accuse”. The writer as individual person, *sui generis*, claims the right to accuse power of corruption.

compromise among private interests) placed a paramount value on independence and disinterested argumentation. This tended to devalue the radical journalists who could always be charged with pressing “special interests” and saying what their popular readers wanted to hear. On the other hand, though, the very idea of publicness also disqualified attempts to close off participation—and especially to close it on the external grounds of material social position. It is, in fact, the contradiction between commitments to the highest quality of rational-critical discourse and to open participation of the greatest number of citizens that Habermas sees driving the structural transformation of the public sphere.

But looking at the public sphere as a field, in Bourdieu’s sense, we see that this is not a “neutral” contradiction in the realm of ideas. On the contrary, it is closely associated with the distribution of capital—both material capital in the larger field of power and cultural capital within the public sphere. In the specific context of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, this contradiction came to a head in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. It divided the public sphere on class lines.

What emerged was a dominant and authorized elite public sphere significantly chastened and inhibited in what ideas could find expression—determined to be moderate would be a polite way to express it. And opposed to this a radical counterpublic came into being, not merely contesting themes with elite writers but appealing to a largely distinct readership and integrating written argument more and more with popular meetings and pageantry.

This radical readership included many who were not (or at least not primarily) cultural producers or intellectuals, as well as those who were. It included would-be insurrectionaries who hatched schemes to overthrow the government—none of which came close to succeeding—and those who thought mass petitions would persuade the King of the error of his ministers’ ways and lead to restoration of justice. Here the stakes were those of politics—principally, efficacy. Political crowds liked good rhetoric, critical analyses, and cultural creativity. They also wanted to win. Moreover, workers and others outside the elite were able to mobilize largely in and through communities and solidary groups like crafts. Their capital was significantly material—positions in webs of social relationships, the entitlements of those who had completed apprenticeships--rather than a capacity for symbolic production. And their loyalties to different leaders were not always based on the quality of reasoned argument alone.

Here we see why Wade was so frustrated with William Cobbett and Henry Hunt. They were persuasive, but on grounds he found irrational. He was comfortable with the struggles of workers whose interests he could understand within a Benthamite analysis of the larger interests of society as a whole—in general, he sought to make capitalism fairer to workers. But Cobbett and Hunt had no analysis comparable to Bentham’s or Mill’s of the overall questions of political economy in Britain. What they had was a compelling ability to articulate the frustrations, anxieties and positive values of many who were being displaced or devalued by the course of political economic change. In Bourdieu’s terms, their “capitals” – of craft skill or local community connections -- were being devalued.

And here we can see more precisely the situation and difficulties of radicals like Wooler and Carlile. They were deeply committed to the public sphere, and they were

deeply committed to radical politics. They struggled to reconcile the two sets of commitments, since at least some of the time, they seemed to pull in different directions. Paine was their polestar but an inadequate guide, for his 18<sup>th</sup> century rationalism suited their republican ideals but not their practical need to connect to a popular radicalism that articulated itself largely in terms of tradition and the English Constitution. Moreover, both Carlile and Wooler needed readers to survive. They could not focus their attentions and aspirations only on the “restricted market” (or restricted public) of their fellow cultural producers and political thinkers—as, say, Bentham could, and Francis Place could as he became more and more financially secure.

The theme that most clearly joined Carlile and Wooler to more traditionalist radicals like Cobbett and Hunt was the critique of corruption. This was a common denominator for professional journalists, activists, and ideologists. Whether one viewed corruption against the background of a golden age when English rulers were better men, or against a vision of a future in which reason governed more than selfish interest, corruption was a scourge. Corruption meant more than just self-dealing. Whether applied to “rotten boroughs” in which a single elector or a few cronies could name a member of Parliament, or to a tax structure that took from working men at the margins of subsistence and small businessmen at the margins of survival in order to support the pomp of the Court, overseas military campaigns, and a growing number of placeholders and officials, corruption always suggested a system not merely in decay but reliant on deception to sustain itself. Corruption suggested not only or not even mainly illegality. It suggested the influence of opulence on republican virtue, and the moral failings of consuming without producing. Corruption was detectable by its smell, and the smell was that of decay in closed spaces. What it could not stand was the open light of real publicity. This was as important to Cobbett—the publisher who brought out records of Parliamentary debates that Parliament wanted censored—as to Carlile and others who insisted in Paineite and proto-Habermasian fashion that public debate was the way to advance reason. Wooler’s *Black Dwarf* sought to embody public discourse, with Major Cartwright, Samuel Bamford and Sir Charles Wolseley all joining debates in its pages. All were engaged in cultivating—even creating—a large scale political public of a sort which hadn’t existed since the Civil War and Long Parliament.<sup>56</sup> Even the tumultuous London politics of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century had not produced echoes of comparable strength throughout the country, nor the scale of mass readership of a popular press.

## Conclusion

Much writing about the public sphere approaches it as a kind of escape from the usual determinations of politics and social life. It is presented, not least by Habermas, as an arena of debate among autonomous individuals, in which status is disregarded, and which advances a learning process towards the universal. Habermas is well aware that the public sphere depends on both material and cultural supports, and thus has limits. But his usage is shaped by Enlightenment-era ideas about the universality and sufficiency of

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<sup>56</sup> See David Zaret, *The Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, on the importance of public life in the 17<sup>th</sup> century—and the neglect of this earlier flowering, linked obviously to religion, by Habermas and later theorists of the rise of the public sphere.

reason, and about rational-critical discourse as an escape from the more mundane world of interests. It is also influenced by the notion of a differentiation and separation of spheres. This is one reason why the intrusion of interests, movement mobilizations, and formal organizations can only appear as a corruption of the public sphere and occasion the pessimistic turn in the second half of Habermas's classic book.

Celebrating counterpublics is not a solution to this problem, however, nor is simply describing indefinite contention. This evades the question of whether or to what extent diverse publics can contribute to the more general formation of public opinion at a scale sufficient to influence the state and other social institutions. We need instead to revisit the idea of a separation of spheres, recognizing that seeing these simply as semi-autonomous and distinct misses the extent to which they are mutually constituting. It is also important to address the relationship of public spheres to social movements.

Situating the public sphere within the larger field of power – contention over the shaping of shared institutions including the state – can help with this. We can recognize the “semi-autonomy” of the public sphere but also that it is always subject to influences from other dimensions of “society” and contending political and/or economic projects. In this way we can approach it not as a privileged vantage point erected outside social struggles to give a view of the universal, and not simply as a product of rational-critical argumentation among individuals. We can see the always plural but not necessarily discrete public spheres instead as products of social struggles, institutional formations, and culture.