

The Public Sphere & Bowling Alone: November 12, 2004

Peter Perdue started the discussion of Habermas's The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1989).

- The book is the most historically specific of Habermas's works. Later he turned to more abstract definitions of public critical reason
- He derived the basic sources of critical rationality found in specific conditions of the 17th and 18th century Europe.

Critical public rationality requires: concept of the "public" (neither individual, family or state) argument not decided by status or wealth but by validity, extension of topics discussed beyond the personal and the literary to all spheres, implicit inclusiveness of all who desire to join.

Institutional basis for the emergence of the 17-18 century public sphere:

- Creation of absolutist states in the 17th century Europe, replacing monopoly of government by feudal nobility
- Spread of market economy, turning cultural works into commodities available to all, not confined to patronage by nobility, rulers, and the church
- Change in the family system, no longer bound by necessity of survival [as in Greek oikos], but possessing leisure, literacy, and desire to engage in wider sphere
- Specific sites of public discussion: coffee houses, theatres, salons, museums.
- The importance of media: newspapers, print media primarily, and also art and theatre as the public realm

Relevance to China

Imperial China had many of these prerequisites:

- High degree of literacy among male elites in the cities
- Commercialized market for books and cultural products [see Clunas]
- Participation in public debates over culture, morality, and politics [late Ming Donglin, Fushe]
- So why did no genuine public spheres emerge?

Note that Habermas's public sphere is highly contingent, no guarantee it will persist.

- Öffentlichkeit in German is an abstract concept, not a specific place. Close to English 'publicity' in its older meaning (before advertising). Refers to a quality of discussion, not a specific topic. Must be open to all potentially, issues decided by debate, all count equally in it.
- Habermas recognizes that in fact public sphere did not work this way anywhere
- Historians look for examples of the public sphere and considerably modify it : public sphere was never as open as it is supposed to be theoretically.

Perdue cited three works for further exploration:

Mizoguchi Yuzo. "Chugoku ni okeru ko, shi gainen no tenkai," Shiso (1980): 19-38.

Calhoun, Craig, ed. Habermas and the Public Sphere. Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1992.
Wang Di, Street Culture in Chengdu: Public Space, Urban Commoners and Local Politics, 1870-1930. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Discussion

There is a general consensus among the group that Habermas idealized the public sphere. Places that he did not look at are the streets. His is an elitist discourse inside and out.

Kate Hartford: What on earth does the “public sphere” mean? Does the topic of such discourses (for instance, matters related to politics) define what it means? Or, is it the quality of the debate that defines it?

Peter Perdue: It is not the topic of the debate, but the quality of the public debate and the manner such a debate is carried out that defines the “public sphere. So the idea of the public sphere is transportable to places where politics is oppressive. For theoretically, a topic like art can be a legitimate topic for discussions considered taken place in the “public sphere.”

Jing Wang [In response to Peter’s suggestion of locating the “public sphere” in late Ming Dynasty]: I saw in the premodern China field a [fervent] preoccupation with the problematic of “what is modern about premodern studies.” This is in part an effort to rewrite the May Fourth master narrative (i.e., Chinese modernity started with the May Fourth). And of course, the search for “alternative modernity” may also prompt China premodernists to take on all kinds of Western theoretical discourses and use them as the foundational categories/premises for their own work. But why? If we agree that the “public sphere” is such a fleeting historical moment even in the West, why is there such an eagerness to plunge into Western problem consciousness?

Peter and Edward Cunningham: For two reasons. First, to demonstrate the continuity of the past and the present, to refute the conventional wisdom of the thesis of historical “disjuncture” by using the May 4th as a watershed event. Secondly, there is a need to build a dialogue with Western theorists. If you argue for the uniqueness of the Chinese case, then the West won’t (want to) understand it. Then they win.

JW: But then in that process, we consolidate the discursive hegemony of the West by constructing the rest of the world as the West’s mirror image (not to mention it is an idealized image that Western reality doesn’t even live up to). In that light, it’s a problematic principle.

Robert Weller: My reaction is the fleetingness of the ideal public sphere. Such an ephemeral product of one moment in time. Not to mention it contains within itself an internal contradiction. By expanding the participant base of the public sphere as it is supposed to do, the quality of the discussion and the difficulty of maintaining the level of communicative rationality would eventually kill the sphere. Why would anybody take

this notion out of its historical context and generalize it, or bring it to bear on other locales?

KH: One of the premises central to the “public sphere” is that it is possible to have a generalized rationality that is achieved through a successful negotiation among parties of different and conflicting self interests.

Robert Putnam “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital”

Robert Weller prefaced the discussion with the following:

Prior to Bowling Alone, Putnam wrote a book on Italy, comparing North Italy with Southern Italy. He argues that Northern Italy is economically more successful and politically more democratic than the South because the former has a vibrant culture of horizontal ties of trust while the latter is characterized by vertical ties of patrons and clients. The formation of horizontal ties, in this line of argument, allowed Northern Italy to function better in market economy and to limit the tyranny of the state.

Bowling Alone unfolds along similar theses. It deplores the decline of the civic engagements in the US in the last decade. Putnam modernizes the Tocqueville strain of thinking.

Ed Cunningham: I would like to problematize Putnam’s assumption that strong associationalism results in strong social institutions that brought about economic growth and democratic politics. To me, the phenomenon of associationalism (or having strong social capital) is the result, not the cause, of having strong social institutions. Viewing associationalism as an independent variable that has an impact on other variables is problematic.

Ed C: But I appreciate Putnam’s emphasis on the importance of inter-group relations. Varshney made a similar argument in his work on violence and ethnic conflicts in India. He argues that the key to cooperation and trust (social capital) is bridging (i.e., a group reaching out beyond its own to connect with other groups and associations), not bonding (intra-group dynamics that emphasizes reinforcing the single group identity).

RW: The fact is nobody bowls alone. Putnam completely ignores the informal ties that people formed (for instance, at high school soccer games). There is a decline of memberships in formal associations, but not in informal gatherings, places his statistics cannot reach.

Jing W raises a question about *guanxi* and the Putnam’s notion of “social capital” and the notion’s relevance to China.

The Group: Social capital sets up membership boundaries. It excludes others. In fact, within the social-capital networks, the relations between members are never purely

horizontal. It is power play, usually gender and wealth based. Social capital is mashed with hierarchies.

Guanxi in the Chinese context seems both horizontal and vertical. It is like an informal contract and implies a strong sense of reciprocity.

RW (in response to the question of the relevance of social capital as a concept to contemporary China): Lily Tsai's work that shows that active village religious organizations help provide better public goods for villagers. It is interesting that she differentiates how local Buddhist organization (temples) and Christian organizations (churches) resort to different means of providing public goods. The temples appear to be able to acquire resources through good *guanxi* with the local state. The churches, because of their bad *guanxi* with the state, create resources for public goods provision on their own.

RW: Putnam is big on the construction of civil societies. His contribution is putting social capital in contrast to the political capital associated with the nation-state.

