

Civil Society and the Principle of the Public Sphere

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For Henry

The centerpiece of Henry Johnstone's theory of argument is his contention that all philosophical arguments are *ad hominem* (Johnstone 1952, 1970). In order to have validity, Johnstone's claim imposes the requirement that an argument be understood as addressed to someone specific and must engage the reasoning of the interlocutor. Obviously this position advances a conception of validity other than one that is formal. It takes a rhetorical twist by requiring that arguments be adapted to the assumptions of one's interlocutor in order to reveal the contradiction in that person's position. The *argumentum ad hominem* that Johnstone has in mind is the attempt to undermine a person's position not by mudslinging, but by forcing the interlocutor to confront the logical requirements of her position and the consequences that follow. Ultimately, by exposing inconsistency the *ad hominem* calls the self into conscious awareness of the tension between the internal contradiction of opposing premises it espouses. The *ad hominem* is a call to self-awareness and the responsibility of one's own beliefs.

Johnstone further advances the rhetoricality of the call to self-awareness in his later thinking through his concept of the *wedge*. He explains the relationship of rhetoric to the wedge and, in turn, to self-consciousness as follows (1990, 333): "Rhetoric, as I see it, is a means—perhaps the only means—of evoking and maintaining consciousness. It accomplishes these ends by driving a wedge between subject and object. For it is the instrument that objectifies stimuli or presuppositions not hitherto perceived as objects." By this Johnstone means that rhetoric, by which I take him to mean rhetorical *argument*, calls assumptions into question. It forces the interlocutor to consider a matter formerly taken for granted as somehow problematic. It opens a gap between the subject and what was formerly fused with the subject as an unconscious presupposition, now bringing it to consciousness as an object of consideration, as something apart from the self. It claims the attention of the person addressed by evoking his interests in a way that confronts him with the self-involving burden of choice.

The development of Johnstone's theory and its evolution from an anti-rhetorical to an authentically rhetorical formulation carefully avoids claims about the type of popular discourse that traditionally has been the preserve of rhetoricians. He qualifies his claims by asserting that he has philosophical argument in mind, leaving to professional rhetoricians the business of extending the implications of his theory into the realm of popular discourse. And in a panel sponsored by the American Society for the History of Rhetoric to honor Henry Johnstone, his co-founder of this journal, Carroll Arnold (1987), made that extension. He maintained that discourse from another or discourse addressed to oneself can "awaken me to similarities, differences, and choices among ways of being" (124). Arnold saw the wedge functioning in public and self address as instigating a process of reflection in which one's mental activities were themselves rhetorical, "evoked as response to attempted influence on myself; self-consciousness is maintained in and through my on-going self rhetoric" (124).

Yet, it seems to me, neither Johnstone's insightful analysis of the way in which validity in argument depends less on formal criteria than the demands of a position being addressed and of how *ad hominem* argument calls one to self-awareness, nor Arnold's insightful extension of the rhetoricality of the wedge to the complex reflections of self address go far enough in drawing out the implications of Johnstone's position. Specifically, in his reformulation of the wedge principle Johnstone alludes to the "potential" and "implicit" elements of his theory with respect to public discourse, oral and written, by observing, "What applies the cachet of full-blown rhetoricality to the address of the orator, in my view, is the possibility that the audience *could* at any point respond." Such an interruption would lead to a full-blown bilateral exchange in discussion of the points raised (Johnstone 1990, 336). I wish to consider further the potential and implications of his theory for public argument, specifically as it occurs in what has come to be called the public sphere. My intent is not to make a systematic extension but rather to show how the ideas of the *ad hominem* and the wedge weave through consideration of the discursive presuppositions that underwrite a rhetorical formulation of the public sphere.

The nature of the public sphere is, arguably, the central consideration conditioning the possibility of a participatory public life. In an era when special interests and the state have reduced politics to mass media spectacle, and "audience" has become an economic variable of spectators expected to applaud and purchase, current deliberations over the public

sphere advance a critical antidote. By returning the medium of deliberative discourse to political relations, this discussion reasserts the rational function of citizen action as evaluation and judgment.

However, the concept has ignited recent debate, with Jürgen Habermas's discussion of the bourgeois public sphere (1989) especially serving as a lightning rod. The term 'public', for instance, is hotly contested as having exclusionary political implications that have worked toward the subjugation of women and uninvested minorities. Then, the location of this domain as existing between the private arenas of the family and the official domain of the state has triggered the objection that it marginalizes issues of the body or the family that have not been historically deliberated in male-dominated arenas of influence and that it essentializes an ideologically freighted concept. Further, the Habermas-inspired imposition of the norm of rational assent to the stronger argument has prompted objection that the concept of the public sphere imposes the value of consensus on the nature of discourse it will validate (Calhoun 1992; Phillips 1996; Robbins 1993; Griffin 1996). The most radical of these critiques not only calls the principle of the public sphere into question, but argues for dismissing it as a theoretically destructive construct imposing undemocratic consequences (Phillips). These objections underscore how important the idea of the public sphere is to our understanding of democratic society and our need for an understanding of it that is in keeping with practices, in Nancy Fraser's felicitous phrase, "capable of theorizing the limits of actually existing democracy" (1990, 57).

I wish to argue, contrary to some critics, that the public sphere is not merely conceptual but has a specific historical referent linked to the Enlightenment's emerging condition and theory of civil society. I will contend that civil society poses an alternative social model to civic virtue, and that the civil society model requires revising our understanding of the public sphere's discursive character. Finally, I will maintain that the civil society model suggests the public sphere, contrary to our understanding of it as a single discursive domain, is composed of nested arenas with a reticulate structure. Throughout this discussion I take *public sphere* to refer to *a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them. It is the locus of emergence for rhetorically salient meanings.* Such a definition conveys directly the process and product contained in the phrase that make it a significant element in the life of a free post-industrial society.

Civic virtue and the organization of civil society

The principle of the public sphere is more than a theoretical construct. It reflects a historical development that arose when *civil society* replaced *civic virtue* as the dominant model for social organization. The ideal of civic virtue permeating Greek and Roman political thought emphasized the role of the individual as a public person. A public performance whose virtuosity commanded respect, including an oratorical *tour de force*, was a personal accomplishment and a sign of *areté* for the Greeks and *virtú* for the Romans. This ancient understanding of rhetoric as a political *praxis* has become problematic in a way that is important for our understanding of the public sphere.

Both Athens and Rome grounded individual identity in citizenship. The Athenians organized themselves in terms of *polis* and *oikos*, city-state and household, politics and economics. The city wall at ancient Athens bore the inscription, "The man with no public business has no business." In fact, the Greek word for the person who was mute on public affairs was *idiot*. The individual citizen was duty-bound to enter the agonistic arena in which, all things being equal, the "truth" would prevail, as Aristotle teaches in his *Rhetoric* (1354b), because in principle arguments based on "truth" were presumed always to be the stronger.

The prominence of the *agôn* in the Athenian archive is a dimension of rhetorical practice and political understanding that reflects ancient Greek culture. The Greeks thought an individual's *areté* was a product of his virtuosity in words and deeds. It was a lifetime achievement. Unlike Christian virtue's aversion to publicity, *areté* sought it. In this regard, the Greeks were not particularly egalitarian. Athenian democracy was achieved through an economy based on slavery, the exclusion of women from public life and their restriction to the domestic sphere, and the embrace of elitist accomplishments as cultural icons. Accordingly, they believed a man established his worth by evoking judgments of his superiority through public accomplishments. These were demonstrations of a sort that required a public space in which to be witnessed (Arendt 1958). Personal attainments demonstrated the individual's superiority; they deserved public acknowledgment (Kitto 1957). At least since Agamemnon and Achilles quarreled over the spoils of conquest, but contemporaneous with Aristotle's theorizing of rhetoric under the architectonic of politics' ethical branch, the public arena's contestiveness echoed Greek cultural understanding of virtue as a defining aspect of character. The individual's emergence as a leader of worth and, by extension, the quality of political

life that constituted the process of affirming *aretê* and of following the leader of demonstrable superiority were coterminous with the politics of Greek city states.

While acknowledging that the Greeks prized community recognition of an individual's excellence, we should avoid idealizing their understanding of individual worth and how it might be demonstrated, even under a democracy. We should not forget the difference between freedom to participate in the political process and liberties enjoyed or denied the individual citizen. The civic virtue model may have permitted the individual to perform in the theater of political action, but the Greek script emphasized the centrality of the state through the regulations and restrictions of law and custom determining what counted as virtuosity.

Fustel de Coulanges (1956) explores the startling terms of life in the Greek demos in his classic study, *The Ancient City*. De Coulanges argues that the religious foundations of the ancient city gave it a constitution and authority like that of a church. The city had supremacy over the individual, and, although the forms of governance may have changed, the nature of the state as the supreme power governing the lives of its subjects remained total. A man's body was at the disposal of the state, with military duty required at Rome until age fifty, at Athens until sixty, at Sparta for life. Athenian law forbade men to remain single, and Sparta punished men not only for remaining single, but also for marrying late. Personal wealth was always at the state's disposal, so that women could be ordered to surrender their jewels or creditors to relinquish their claims or the owners of olive groves to forfeit their yield of oil. Despite the apparent division of life into public and private, *polis* and *oikos*, as separate realms, the power of the state to impose itself on private relationships was clear, as exemplified by its assertion of priority over parents to dictate the education of children.¹ In de Coulanges's words (221), "The state allowed no man to be indifferent to its interests. . . ."

These conditions are indicative of how ancient Greece lacked a buffer between political and social life; the political organized the personal. Against the idealized vision we project of Athenian freedom under democracy and the spirit of individual accomplishment that expressed a man's *aretê*, civic virtue was an understanding of accomplishment organized by the state. An individual's virtue was not a personal trait but a public quality that had to conform to the ideals and standards inscribed in the laws and customs of the demos: "The human person counted for very little against the holy and almost divine authority which was called country or the state" (de Coulanges 1956, 222).² One's reputation as a person

who exemplified civic virtue was accomplished by actions that served the country, or by activities that were entirely public in the sphere of political activity.

The absence of a buffer between the individual and the state is further reflected in the character of the public realm in which Athenians displayed virtuosity. Since public life was ubiquitous and involved everyone as citizen and dicast, the Athenian political experience did not require a distinction between the discursive domains of the *agora* and the *ekklesia*; the men interacting on public issues in one were the same men who later came together to vote in the other. This meant that although actions by the *ekklesia* were official, the ongoing negotiation of how Athenians would act and interact, or politics, fused discussions in the official assembly with those in the street since the same persons occupied both arenas. The symbiosis of *agora* and *ekklesia* reproduced the absence of a buffer between the political and the social, leaving Athenians without a need to conceptualize a public sphere as a discursive arena apart from that of the legislative assembly.

Later, the Roman empire exerted equal power to organize the individual's public life. *Civis Romanum sum* issued an individual's claim to status and right because it identified a person's place in the world. The claim to citizenship carried an entitlement to respect and full protection under Roman Law. Equally, the emperor's power intruded on all aspects of Roman life. Although the political fiction held the emperor to be of the people, in reality the people had no buffer between them and the emperor's power, no means to interdict his will or prevent him from imposing his political vision on their social relations. Nothing illustrates the political organization of Roman social life better than the Justinian code, which gave uniform organization to relationships among citizens flung to the corners of a vast empire. The legal code, backed by the unsurpassed might of the emperor's legions, gave law-abiding Romans a unique identity as free persons. To be in Roman society, as to be in Greek, most concretely meant to occupy a space defined by its political organization. It expressed the centralized power of the state to organize public life and reminded everyone that the state's authority was inviolable.

Since Athenian participation in the *ekklesia* was direct, and Roman rhetoric of any significance occurred in the official forums of the senate and the courts, the ideal of rhetorical competence developed around skill at public address in which the rhetor persuaded those who were the actual decision makers. It also was an ideal that centered on the individual's virtuosity rather than on society, since the persuasive rhetor also was likely

to ascend to leadership positions and acquire power. However, the moral virtue of such a person was not a private attribute but a communal enterprise enacted through political exchange. It was realized by the citizen's active and continual participation in political affairs. Sociologist Adam Seligman (1995, 202-4) observes that since civic virtue projects itself as conformity of particular wills to the general will, its moral vision is of personal will and action regulated by the sovereign authority of the political community, not the sovereign or despot. He goes on to explain that the community's political authority refers to the obvious sociological fact, not that it is the source of morality, but that the community exists as morality. At its heart, the civic virtue tradition locates social good by subjugating the private self to the public realm.

The rise of civil society

The conception of rhetoric that accompanies civic virtue continues today, not only in our valorizing of rational deliberation, but also in our scholarship that centers on institutional rhetors—elected officials for the most part—and institutional discourse—messages on issues to be decided by elected representatives who are assumed to speak for the community. It reproduces assumptions of the ancient Greco-Roman period when there was no shield between the institutional power of the state and the individual. Those assumptions are inconsistent with the realities of contemporary public life. Our public deliberations occur in multiple forums, not exclusively those of the state, and they lead to shared opinions that, when widely held, set expectations for their consequences on official policies. We refer to this montage of discursive arenas as public spheres. But these arenas themselves are situated in the larger and not always coterminous arena of *civil society*.

The roots of European civil society¹ lay in the removal of centralized power from Rome and its distribution among the hands of the few: the church and the kings. The rise of Christianity undermined the exclusive power of the state to organize people's lives. The church was an alternative institution autonomous of the state, whose dogma led the faithful to organize their individual lives around a different set of principles and ideals than political ones. Christians were members of two societies: one temporal and the other spiritual, neither subjugated to the other. Furthermore, monarchs were constrained in their efforts at nation building by the power of feudal lords who had firmly established property rights, as did the church. To counter this pre-existing social force, kings sought

to enhance their own power by granting autonomy to towns. These became havens from feudalism in which new ideas might develop (Hall 1995). They also became the source of another political power in the burghers. The rise of burghers, who were both feisty in their independence and too wealthy to be ignored, unsettled the monarchy's success at forging political accord with vassals and bishops. For some time monarchs had found it necessary periodically to convene the body of estates to raise resources for governing and waging war. Now they found themselves vulnerable to the uncertainties of the estates themselves.

Both the church and the estates provided a sense of social identity apart from citizenship. They provided a mode of social organization apart from the state, in which members could engage in discourse unregulated by the state. They also caused great instability to states, which eventually provided support for the doctrine of absolute monarchy as the only viable mode of governance. It could raise money and armies independently, thereby dispensing with the need to convene the estates in order to be militarily effective. This view was justified by influential theories, such as Hobbes's, that undermined the medieval understanding of society.

Hobbes's theory marked a return to the identification of society with its political organization. It suppressed features of social contract theory that posited that society's existence was prior to the state's. In response, Enlightenment thinkers, such as Locke, Montesque, and Rousseau, reintroduced the idea that humankind forms a community of sorts constituted under natural law and in existence prior to society, which is itself prior to the government. Their refutation of the Hobbesean identification of society with its political organization posited the idea of *civil society* as a third arena, independent of the family and the state, engaged in conscious acts of self-management that were integrated with the state.

By *civil society* I refer to a network of associations independent of the state whose members, through social interactions that balance conflict and consensus, seek to regulate themselves in ways consistent with a valuation of difference. The tradition of civil society arose in response to the diversity of interests and opinions that came into contact when national borders were thrown open to trade. Its roots are different from those of community, which values common beliefs and shared social practices. At its heart, civil society is concerned with relationships among diverse groups and interests. Enlightenment thinkers developed its accommodation of diversity in their reflections on economic, political, and moral relations.

The economic basis of civil society was elaborated in Adam Smith's free market theory of economic cooperation. The doctrine of *laissez faire*

advanced a model of economic behavior in which the open marketplace, freed from control by institutions of church or state, functioned in a self-regulating manner. Since consumers established value and wealth, those who entered the marketplace sought commercial alliances and adapted to marketplace conditions to secure profits. The passion of avarice was mitigated, he argued, by pursuit of interests, which required cooperation with the different interests of economic partners and sensitivity to changing conditions for economic success.

The political basis of civil society, more important than *laissez faire* for this discussion, lies in the concomitant rise of an autonomous *public* integrated with the state through expressions of its own opinion. The Enlightenment concept of *public* represented a new understanding that went beyond what was objectively there and open to everyone's inspection. It designated the citizens', or at least the literate ones', recognition of a *common* concern. Moreover, these common concerns were expressed in new discursive spaces—newspapers, personal exchanges in coffee-houses and salons, political clubs, and the like—that extended beyond the *agora* and the *ekklesia*. These were sites for open dialogue in which reasons for and against an idea were elaborated, tested, refuted, extended, and, ideally, resolved to the extent that everyone recognized it was held in common. This recognition represented a novel conception of public opinion as more than the sum of individual opinions. The dimension of common recognition that emerged from the conversations within civil society gave public opinion a strong sense. It also introduced the radical idea of such opinion formed outside the channels and public spaces of the political structure, such as parliament or court. Even more fundamentally, as Charles Taylor (1995) has observed, public opinion “developed outside the channels and public spaces of any authority whatever, since it is also independent of that second focus of European societies, the church. Governments were used to facing the independent power of religious opinion, articulated by churches. What was new was opinion, presented as that of society, elaborated through no official, established hierarchical organs of definition” (217).

The moral basis of civil society arose through the Enlightenment concern with a virtuous society. Here we encounter a subtle but important shift from the tradition of civic virtue. The civic virtue tradition subordinates the private self to the public realm, as is found in the work of Arendt (1958). By contrast, the eighteenth-century Scottish moralists saw the moral basis of society as a private ideal. A *civil* society was one in which individual responsibility for actions toward others could be counted on to

exceed pure exchange value because, as Adam Smith argued, humans are naturally inclined to benevolent sentiments toward one another.

Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1976) developed a psychology based on a person's ability to project himself or herself into the situation of the other. Smith argued that sentiments, which condition our approval or disapproval of actions and, therefore, guide actions, arose from our ability to imagine, from our own sensations, the pain or sorrow or joy we would experience were we in the other's situation (10-13). The capacity to project ourselves into the other person's situation bore equally on explaining approval or disapproval of another's opinions. It was not just that we accepted or rejected what they held, but that our *approbation* or *disapprobation* came from their capacity to arouse our sympathy. Moreover, since the aroused sympathy was internal to the judging individual, it actually was approval of what he or she personally held true. Even in those cases where a person's opinions imitated views of the powerful, the wealthy, or current fashion, Smith regarded the locus of approval as internal to the individual, by "the man within the breast, the abstract and ideal spectator of our sentiments and conduct" (153).

Smith's doctrine on sympathy carried over into the public arena of civil society, for which benevolent sentiments ultimately were responsible for guiding conduct. Enlightenment thinkers recognized that in civil society you did not have to like those with whom you interacted; as long as interactions in the complex web of human dialogue were marked by tolerance and kindness, differences could be overcome (Seligman 1995, 204). Unlike the tradition of civic virtue, in which a person's merit was established by public conduct, in the civil society tradition, the quality of relations with strangers found its basis in the individual self rather than in a person's public being. Individual actions were seen and judged by others, not in terms of *virtuosity*, as they are in the civic virtue tradition, but in terms of *propriety*. Smith contended that when we judge matters of conduct, we are like a spectator who "must endeavor, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other" (1976, 21). This spectator was generalized in the *impartial spectator* as arbiter of social passions leading to generosity, humanity, kindness, compassion, mutual friendship, and esteem "even towards those who are not particularly connected with ourselves" (38).

The impartial spectator provided a referent outside the individual subject, whose judgment insured the virtue, first, of personal conduct by freeing the individual from purely subjective and self-interested understanding of conduct. As such this imagined judge gathered our approbation,

even in our personal judgment of our own conduct: "We endeavour to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it. If upon placing ourselves in his situation, we thoroughly enter into all the passions and motives which influenced it, we approve of it, by sympathy with the approbation of this supposed equitable judge. If otherwise, we enter into his disapprobation, and condemn it" (110). Smith's model founded morality within the individual and then extended its belief in benevolence to provide guidance for the self-regulation of society. It presented the impartial spectator as a guarantor of virtuous public actions that accommodated differences without being blind to personal interests or blinded by them. The pursuit of interests was thought to counterbalance the stronger passions that, if left unchecked, produced the tyranny of feudal lords who kept their vassals in economic servitude and the injustices of avarice and ambition that interfered with free association and commerce (Hirschman 1997). The natural inclination to advance one's interests within the "marketplace" of civil society inevitably brought them into competition with those of others, and here the *communal* other of the impartial spectator, internalized as the "invisible hand" (Smith 1976, 184), offered the rational basis for comparing and reaching a just resolution. Smith's words on this point deserve repeating because they reflect confidence in a public exchange guided by a morality that accepts difference as inherent to public life: "Before we can make any proper comparison of those opposite interests, we must change our position. We must view them, neither from our own place nor yet from his, neither with our own eyes nor yet with his, but with the eyes and from the place of a third person, who has no particular connexion with either, and who judges with impartiality between us" (135). Smith founds public order on the private morality of internalized community standards that become the basis for "approbation"—the approval bestowed by the impartial spectator—and provide for "fellow-feeling." They are the foundation for our "sense of propriety," which elicits "sympathy" for the joys and sorrows of others, and allow us to judge the moral quality of their acts as well as our own (16–34).

Certainly not all thinkers of the Enlightenment were in agreement with Smith's specific views on moral sentiments. However, his views are representative of the new ideas then emerging about economy, public opinion, and moral conduct, whether considered apart or as interlocking components, as expressing society's identity apart from the state and, moreover, as establishing social coordination as *self-regulation* within domains independent of government.

Importantly for rhetoric, the arenas for public opinion formation were different from those of the *polis* in which the same persons populated both the *agora* and *ekklesia*. Whereas classical rhetorical theory theorized a politics based on civic virtue, the moral thinkers of the Enlightenment located political foundations in society. They rejected a politics founded on civic virtue because it lay at the core of a society based on slavery. New conditions of social congress that accompanied expanded commerce, trade, and urban growth led to an ideal of encountering diversity through tolerance and to the idea of civil society as the network of associations that emerged from interactions with the other. The discursive spaces within this network displaced the state's claim to exclusivity as the domain in which social will was articulated and executed. These new spaces afforded a public sphere in which a public could form its own opinion that might challenge the state's primacy in setting social purposes and that might expect its understanding to bear on what the state did.

The Athenian experience linking public decisions to rhetoric is more than a vestigial remnant of democracy's origin. Historically Western politics has sustained the connection between discourse on civic issues and setting public policy. It has regarded the people's interests as its rhetorical, if not theoretical, foundation and has narrated advancing their interests as a primary virtue of governance. The transition from civic virtue to civil society has changed the locus of rhetoric's purview from the sites of official discourse to the spheres of interaction within society where publics form and express opinions bearing on the course of society. However, this transition does not diminish the importance of rhetoric as an inventional social resource. Rather, it provides the basis for exploring the rhetorical conditions in which publics form, form opinions, and assert their authority to guide governmental actions. Whether civil society is colonized by the state and power elites, as Habermas (1975, 1979, 1989) depicts in his rendition of late capitalism, or remains open to the possibility of its own self-regulation, it is itself subject to the rhetorical possibilities and performances it can sustain (Farrell 1993). In less theoretical terms, and accepting the precondition of free speech, whether or not civil society embraces and lives in truth is fundamentally dependent on whether or not its members are informed and attentive to the truth.

The reticulate public sphere

The rise of civil society as a model for social organization is directly related to the principle of the public sphere and an understanding of its

rhetorical features. The contemporary discussion has approached the public sphere in terms of extending or responding to the formulation found in the work of Jürgen Habermas (1984–87, 1989, 1992). His original analysis, without question of monumental insight and theoretical importance, nonetheless is focused on a specific domain, the bourgeois public sphere, in which the rising middle class sought to locate and secure its interests. In the context of civil society, however, the principle of the public sphere is not confined to a single domain of social coordination. The network of associations by which post-Enlightenment Western democratic society engages in self-regulation and which make public opinion an important assertion of will expressed outside authority and constraining on authority admittedly includes the bourgeoisie. But as the feminist critique of Habermas's formulation has made clear, using the bourgeois public sphere as the prototype limits our understanding of its character and function to one that has had a checkered history of class, gender, and ethnic exclusions. Moreover, its emphasis on class interest clouds two important discursive points that emerge from the larger frame of civil society: The need for a public sphere arose when conditions of trade, transportation, and migration immersed European society in a milieu of *strangers* whose interconnectedness required acknowledging and accommodating *competing* interests for the general good. Further, with society now organizing itself outside of power, the capacity of the state to govern depended on the support of society's *disparate* segments whose will was expressed in the form of public opinion.

Both of these factors contributed to a new model for social organization in which differences were resolved not by exemplary manifestations of a superordinate cultural ideal, but through accommodations developed through a discourse conducted outside of authority and regulative of it. At the level of the individual's personal judgments and the collective determinations of the community, civil society modeled society as self-regulated by the rhetoricity of its network of associations engaged in an ongoing conversation.

The structural and consequent discursive features of civil society carry the suggestion that rather than a single public sphere from which we might abstract defining features, civil society contains multiple public spheres, or, alternatively, a superordinate Public Sphere composed of multiple discursive arenas each with its own defining characteristics, including the respective publics that emerge in them and whose opinions, however ephemeral, they express. Nonetheless, there are certain overarching considerations that can aid in discerning the character of any specific public

sphere. I believe we can begin to sketch these characterizing features by focusing on the multiple arenas of the Public Sphere as sites of emergence for rhetorically salient meaning.

The complex multilogue of disparate voices indigenous to complex and pluralistic societies underscores the heteroglossic (Bakhtin 1981) nature of civil society's nested Public Sphere. It is a multidimensional dialogizing space of vernacular conversations (Hauser, in press). The aggregates we refer to as *publics*—those who are actively engaged by a public problem, in considering their interests and how it bears on them, and in forming an opinion shaped by this process of engagement—are susceptible to the contentious behaviors of individuals whose opinions and interests differ. A public is not necessarily a group in consensus. But they are, in some fundamental respect, a collectivity whose interactions, albeit diffused at times across society, are necessarily cognizant of difference that must be addressed as part of society's self-regulating process. Here, I believe, Johnstone's concept of the wedge has normative as well as descriptive value.

Since the Public Sphere contains multiple sites where rhetorically salient meanings may emerge, those who enter any given arena must presuppose a shared reference world (Taylor 1971) that encompasses their differences. Otherwise, their discourse would make no sense as an attempt to produce awareness of shared interests and public opinions about them. The search for a *public* opinion—an opinion, as noted above, "presented as that of society, elaborated through no official, established hierarchical organs of definition"—rests on the continuous interrogation of difference conducted outside authority. Certainly this includes the partisan appeals of spokespersons for groups or contesting points of view. But it also includes the everyday vernacular exchanges among social actors engaged by an issue whose rhetorical efforts are directed to personal acquaintances and localities as much as or more than to the larger community of interest.

These vernacular exchanges typically are not to a general audience or an elite one; they are *ad hominem*, addressed to kindred minds but also to *difference*, to the *other*. In calling the other to reconsider her position, the participant's rhetoric exhibits the degree to which she understands both difference and mutuality. Insofar as the *civility* of society rests on the efficacy of driving a wedge between the person and his or her position, Johnstone's theory has normative force as well as descriptive value. The ongoing engagement of vernacular rhetoric is an extrapolation to the social level of the individual's self-consciousness that Arnold observed as

encouraged by the wedge of rhetorical argument. And it is in keeping with the internalized standard of the impartial spectator Smith postulated as the guarantor of a moral or *civil* society.

The civil society model regards public opinion as an expression of social will. It is a judgment that emerges from discursively exploring a public problem whose dimensions are not entirely known and subject to interpretation. Productive exploration of shared uncertainty requires intersubjective meanings, but it does not require that discussants reach consensus, though they may. Nor does intersubjective meaning presuppose that interlocutors share essential agreements, though they may. People may disagree and still make sense to one another, provided their differences are part of a common projection of possibilities for human relations and actions. This projection, as it involves publics, requires interrogating difference with the objective of opening it to a consideration of alternatives and accommodation. For example, the national controversy in 1994 over California's Proposition 187, which would have barred social services, including those of education and health, to the children of illegal aliens, illustrates how a common reference world anchored in common meanings can tolerate a degree of cleavage without rending society's fabric.

At the same time, such cleavages may deepen and widen to the point where those in disagreement, as appears to be the threat of *peuple Québécois*, cease to share a common reference world, a precondition, I would argue, for Johnstone's wedge. At that point they are no longer capable of forming as a public. Sometimes this divide may even result in civil war. When, for example, the IRA was committed to terrorist acts, it signaled that the divide between its reference world for national identity was so at odds with the reference world projected by Great Britain that discourse no longer could contain shared meaning of political intents. They had lost the necessary condition for *ad hominem* arguments, a world of shared meanings on which intelligibility depends. Additionally, a society may access or be addressed by discourse that emanates from a reference world beyond its horizon of comprehension. For example, the Ayatollah Khomeini's death sentence imposed on Salman Rushdie for writing *The Satanic Verses* and issuance of a death warrant to have him executed were difficult for Westerners to comprehend, since they lacked an analogous referent in modern Western tradition. During times when alien communication is in the public domain, its status in a given public sphere is more akin to an object of discussion—a datum to be interpreted—than a dialogizing intersection; it is something interacted *about* rather than interacted *with*.

Civil society's ongoing conversation about common issues and conflicting interests introduces its participants to a *network of associations* from which and in which a communally sustained consciousness of *common meanings* are developed and enriched. Heterogeneous societies involve conversational partnerships among a broad range of individuals and groups whose interests intersect with and offer the possibility of dialogue. Their collective engagements establish the overall patterns of society's conversation and provide the empirical data on which we may base a description and evaluation of its character and quality. They form a mosaic of appeals on which a public's consciousness of its interests and its civil judgment depends. These appeals reflect whether and to what degree formal and vernacular rhetoric exhibits a call to consciousness through *ad hominem* arguments. Viewed from Johnstone's perspective, dialogue is more than a descriptive term referring to interaction; it denotes the *achievement* of common meaning. Common meaning is an achievement because it requires engaged individuals to connect the manifold dialogues in which social, political, and cultural interests are expressed to those whose world they share. The particular manifestations of each public sphere contribute to its dynamic network of associations formed from the manifold of conversations that intersect in society's ongoing disposition of its issues.

As I indicated earlier, our association of the public realm with the democratic heritage of Western civilization tempts us to link discussion of its rhetorical character to the Athenian archive in which formal rhetoric played a major role. Certainly the comparison bears making insofar as current discursive arenas are agonistic spaces. However, the rhetorical characteristics applicable to contemporary public spheres differ from the Athenian model in significant ways. Citizens in ancient Athens took responsibility for the state's welfare by deciding matters of its military survival and administration of its laws through open deliberation.⁵ The Athenian assumption of civic responsibilities did not entail an expectation that the state, independent of its citizens, would take their wishes seriously since there was no effective separation of the two. Moreover, the Athenian *agon* occurred in a space populated by homogeneous participants: male property owners who were citizens of Athens. It excluded slaves, women, children, nonresidents, and the indigent. In addition, the modern liberal democracy, whether understood in the tradition of Kant or Nietzsche, adheres to ideals of public morality with greater affinity for Smith's location of morality's seat in the individual subject,⁶ whereas the political organization of Athenian social life grounded morality in the

community. In sum, the conditions of public life encompassed by the public space of Greek antiquity were distinctly pre-modern. While expressing ideals of high political involvement, the Athenian experience does not mirror the realities of civil society following the intellectual and political revolutions of the Enlightenment.

The terms of these revolutions ignited the emancipatory movements of workers, slaves, and women. These emancipations, in turn, have produced an invasion of the bourgeois public sphere by a range of issues formerly sequestered in private, such as those of property relations brought by workers, of civil rights brought by people of color, of cultural bias brought by non-Christians, and of the family and control of one's body brought by women. Each of these has made the public realm a domain of heterogeneity in which the model of *agonistic relations* tending toward the recognition of virtuosity or *areté* has been superseded by *associational relations* across *permeable* boundaries, whose shared efforts preclude the possibility of predefining the conversational agenda. Its multiple discursive arenas give the overall Public Sphere a *reticulate* structure.⁷

The contemporary Public Sphere has become a web of discursive arenas, spread across society and even, in some cases, across national boundaries. Each of these arenas is itself composed of those members of society who, at the very least, are attending to a discourse on issues they share and who are able to understand and respond to the vernacular exchanges that exist outside power and yet are *normative* of it. Our direct daily encounters with others who share our discursive spaces may be local, but our awareness of association with others who are part of its dialogue extends to locales and participants who are strangers and yet whose participation we heed and consider. Collectively these web-like structures of a particular public sphere, such as a political party or a social movement or even a metropolitan area's conversation on local issues, are joined to others in the *reticulate* Public Sphere, where their collective rhetorical practices produce society.

The Public Sphere's associative network includes more than discursive arenas whose boundaries touch. The reticulate structure of its actual practices forms a lattice of discursive spaces whose boundaries have variable permeability. In a pluralistic and diverse society, the ideal of civil society suggests these spheres work best when their boundaries are maximally permeable (Taylor 1995, 280), not only permitting but welcoming border crossings by interests and actors from other arenas. For example, the problem of poverty in the United States is addressed on many fronts and levels of the state and the private sector. In addition to federal and

state programs, political parties, churches, service organizations, PACs, welfare recipients, and the general electorate have played an active role. In 1996 and 1997, when welfare reform was at the forefront of Washington's political agenda, the exemplary record of churches in generating and distributing material resources and providing programs that helped their needy members find work led political parties to suggest that they should be entrusted with this public problem. In the context of legislating welfare reform, such proposals inspired considerable cross-talk among churches, political parties, the federal bureaucracy, and Congress that played a vital role in crafting the actual bill that became law and subsequent discussion of its refinement and implementation.

However, openness is not unconditional. Arenas may be more friendly to some relationships than to others. They may even be hostile to certain ones. Openness also raises the possibility that things can go wrong. A public sphere can be invaded by special interests or the state. Information can be withheld, dispensed selectively, or falsified. Media of dissemination can have limited access to relevant data and sources. Distortions are as much a possibility when its boundaries exclude all but voices from a single perspective as when vulnerable to invasion by alien interests intent on manipulation and control. Participants may forego appeals that seek to drive a wedge, relying on the tactics of propaganda and manipulation to control responses rather than to encourage conscious reflection. Significantly, both failures and successes of actually existing democracy are a function of the rhetorical practices that define the discursive character of any given public sphere at any given moment in time.

Conclusion

Because civil society is constituted by difference rather than identity, by diversity rather than unity, contact with alternative ideas and traditions is inevitable. Presupposing conformity of values and ends or imposing a preordained orientation reduces the capacity of discursive arenas to accommodate the range of opinions on an issue and the strength of judgments that emerge from civic conversation. Because divergent perspectives make consensus unlikely, those meanings likely to have rhetorical salience are those producing solutions interdependent partners regard as acceptable for their own reasons (Hauser and Cushman 1973). A well-functioning public sphere of this sort recognizes that revolution is unfeasible and therefore embraces a course of action that secures a space of open exchange apart from system imperatives. Its tendency to under-

stand and evaluate social action requires the type of socio-political hermeneutic that is dialogically enacted by rhetorical constructions of meaning. Its tendency toward community based on solidarity is always in tension with political and economic relations that emphasize instrumental values and that derive their action imperatives from strategic necessity rather than from principles. Its rhetorical prototype is the self-limiting mode of self-regulation sought by Poland's Solidarity movement.

Within difference there is always the tension between accommodation and insistence on a partisan view. Citizens are not necessarily philosophers; neither are they necessarily unreasonable. The Enlightenment ideal of the impartial spectator committed reasonable men and women neither to unanimity on that spectator's approbation or disapprobation nor to abandonment of their personal interests in the wake of recognizing the legitimacy of those that differed from theirs. Rather, they endorsed the idea that social relations could accommodate difference through the self-regulating process of discourse that tested ideas and produced a public opinion. Unlike the rhetoric of rational justification, civil society's norm of tolerance offers a world of cooperation based on judgments that, despite their suboptimality from differing partisan perspectives, are sufficiently acceptable to a coalition of public actors who can embrace them with sufficient voice to give them weight in arenas of official action.

The rhetorical characteristics of civic conversation suggest that although public conversation is tethered to interests and fraught with partisan appeals, a difference exists between partisan urgings, in which responsiveness to the other side and the possibility of being persuaded are assumed, and the manipulation of propaganda, in which those who are vested become closed to persuasion. Public opinion requires public dialogue. An exchange of views is essential to arriving at a balanced judgment on competing interests. The partisan nature of political discourse would never escape personal prejudice without open exchanges of informed and compelling expressions of preferences and reasons that could contribute to achieving a common mind. As public spheres become preoccupied with influencing others by manipulation and propaganda, rather than with arriving at a balanced judgment through informed deliberation that exhibits the calls to consciousness elaborated in Johnstone's theory, they get distorted. By the same measure, when civil judgment captures the experience of a shared world, it expresses a genuinely public opinion: the evolving judgment of a public on issues and concerns that have been the subject of diffused conversation permeating the Public Sphere. Without a public sphere, we could not have social actors, nor society as we now

know it. For this reason it lies at the very heart of public life.

The nature of the public sphere has been disputed for some time. These controversies have focused on the role the public sphere supposedly plays in the political process as this is conceived within liberal democratic theory: on its identity in terms of bourgeois interests and on the apparent dissolution of the public sphere under conditions of mass society and mass communication. Surely these are legitimate indictments. They graphically expose an idealization of the political process at odds with the realities of actually existing democracies. If my analysis has any merit, it is in shifting focus away from the political role of a unitary public sphere and toward the communicative and epistemological functions of a multiplicity of spheres, in shifting focus away from the bourgeois public sphere and toward the rhetorical conditions of "publicness" that underwrite the latticed and reticulate nature of public spheres. Publics may be repressed, distorted, or responsible, but any evaluation of their actual state requires that we inspect the rhetorical environment as well as the rhetorical acts out of which they evolved, for these are the conditions that constitute their individual character. Such analysis of publics begins with an understanding of the Public Sphere's plurality of discursive arenas in which civil judgment is formed and upon which all publics depend. The civil society model of multiple spheres in which vernacular and official rhetoric carry comparable weight provides a framework for conceptualizing and examining the discursive arenas and rhetorical practices of "actually existing democracy" in which public opinion is formed.⁸

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Notes

1. In *Laws* 7 Plato advances the view that the state should assume responsibility for the education of children, which included taking them from the home so as to minimize the parents' influence. Whether Athens had actually conformed to his doctrine is unknown, but we do know that Plato's views were prevalent in Sparta.

2. In this vein, de Coulanges (1956, 219) recounts the story of Nicias, who was celebrated as a brave and crafty general, but whose fleet was destroyed by the army of Syracuse after he failed to retreat on the advice of his diviner. Retreat by land also was impossible and neither he nor any of his soldiers was able to escape. When Athenians heard news of the disaster, they did not blame Nicias for cowardice, knowing his bravery, nor for following the dictates of his religion in abiding by the advice of his diviner. They reproached him only for having taken with him an ignorant diviner who misread the eclipse of the moon and what it meant for military action. Their reading of this event is in keeping with their cultural belief in signs and the value they placed on acting with constancy based on their interpretation.

3. The concept of *civil society* has a rich and complex literature, whose scope is beyond the purposes of this paper. The interested reader may find a convenient introduction to the recent discussion in Cohen and Arato (1992), Hall (1995), Seligman (1992), and Splichal et al. (1994).

4. For a discussion of the political and moral implications of the economic thinking at the inception of Enlightenment theorizing of civil society, see Hirschman (1997).

5. Arendt's normative political analysis is the most prominent contemporary case based on ideals advanced in the Athenian conception of the *bios politikos*, of public life. Drawing on the ancient linkage of public life to visible performance of words and deeds, she valorized the public realm as the space for communal values and models of virtue to appear before an audience of peers. Her contribution has already been acknowledged by others who have addressed the possibility for the public sphere to capture the socio-political dynamic and problematic at the heart of the late-modernity/postmodernity debate (Benhabib 1992; Bernstein 1983; Habermas 1977; Landes 1992). Typically these discussions emphasize Arendt's pre-modern insistence on a distinction between the political and the social. Her resulting exclusion from the public realm of concerns over the necessities of life and their accompanying activities of labor and work has been criticized for what it excludes from the public agenda. Its apparent blindness to the nature of the struggles that accompany both domains is captured by Seyla Benhabib when she concludes (1992, 79). "The distinction between the social and the political makes no sense in the modern world, not because all politics has become administration and because the economy has become the quintessential public, as Hannah Arendt thought, but primarily because the struggle to make something public is the struggle for justice."

6. In this regard, see Arendt's discussion of representational thinking (1958, 1977) and Habermas's exploration of discourse ethics (1990).

7. This characterization was called to my attention by Kathleen Domenig, and she discusses it further in her doctoral dissertation (1995).

8. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the AFA/NCA 10th Conference on Argumentation, Alta Utah, 1997.

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