

What's so 'Public' about Public Space? Unpacking the Depth of the Concept

The term 'public' is one of seeming ordinariness in everyday usage. Yet the category of public is central to conceptualizations of politics, broadly construed. Despite this centrality, the depth of meaning inherent in 'public' is largely overlooked. Moreover, the usage of 'public' vacillates across theory, which complicates a clear and full appreciation of the meaning of the concept. For example, the public character of Jürgen Habermas's 'public sphere' (1996a) is often equated with its 'general accessibility' and 'openness', as if designating an open field or assembly without walls or doors to prohibit access. On the contrary, Habermas writes that the *salons* took place "in secret, as a public sphere still existing largely behind closed doors" (1996a: 35). In another example, Zygmunt Bauman's *In Search of Politics* (1999) seeks modern forms of 'public space', but argues for a renewal of the *agora*, as a space that is simultaneously private and public. What of the openness, generality, accessibility of 'public'? What specifically makes the 'public use of one's reason', public? And, then, on what basis is public space, 'public'? This paper attempts to unpack the depth of the meaning of 'public' by delving through the concept's opacity to reveal an added significance for conceptualizations of politics. It does so by bringing the respective political theories of Hannah Arendt and Habermas into dialogue with Klaus Held's political phenomenology, and a broad phenomenological understanding of the world. In toto, these theories highlight the worldhood of 'public', with a twofold characterisation of worldliness and appearances. This motif is – by and large – underdeveloped and unsystematically presented in both Arendt and Habermas's work, and the secondary literature surrounding their oeuvres. As such, this paper introduces a novel understanding of public as that imbued with worldhood, which expands theorisations of politics, political community and activity.

The paper begins by briefly demarcating theoretical definitions of ‘public’ and its association with democratic conceptions of politics. This frames the paper’s discussion within its theoretical and political context. Next, the paper introduces a twofold conceptualization of ‘public’, in its worldhood and appearances, which is drawn from the work of Hannah Arendt. In these two sections, Arendt and Habermas’ theory is brought into dialogue with the phenomenological understanding of world and Klaus Held’s recent political phenomenology. This reveals interesting shades to Arendt and Habermas’s theories, otherwise neglected in the field. To close, the phenomenologically-grounded explication of ‘public’ is reflected upon with the conceptions of ‘public’ outlined at the opening of the paper.

Preliminary Demarcations

To begin, some preliminary demarcations of ‘public’ and politics are warranted to frame the discussion of the paper. Brief definitions of ‘public’ are difficult because the term is loaded with political, sociological, theoretical, and colloquial distinctions. Habermas delimits ‘public’ to be phenomena that are “open to all, in contrast to closed or exclusive affairs” (1996a: 1). To this he adds that ‘the public’ is the “carrier of public opinion”, whose function is that of a “critical judge” of the publically accessible phenomena (1996a: 2). Following this, Ari Adut denotes ‘public space’ as any domain whose contents can be subject to publicity, that is, garnering “attention on a focus by a public – a collectivity of strangers who realize each other as spectators of the same thing” (2012: 244). This ‘collectivity of strangers’ gather in the space of the public sphere/public space as ‘the public’. The public sphere was “committed to rational-critical public discourse about matters of the public good” where “the resulting public opinion would be a productive resource for guiding society” (Calhoun, 2010: 302, 303). As such, this ideal of public space and involvement by the public underpins deliberative and participatory conceptions of democracy. The short definition of public demarcated here leaves much to be said of the depth of the meaning of ‘public’. While

openness and ‘the public’ dominate, the depth of their meaning remains unclear. Thus, the remainder of this paper attempts to clarify this conceptual opacity.

The Twofold Character of ‘Public’ and its Relation to the World

Drawn from Arendt, this paper argues that the two shades of ‘public’ demarcated above are bolstered via a phenomenological understanding of the world. ‘The public’ does not simply refer to the ‘general will’ of the public en masse vis-à-vis Jean-Jacques Rousseau; rather, it refers to the public as members of a common, public world. Second, the openness and accessibility of the public sphere refers to the public character of the ‘appearances’ of phenomena in the world. This section brings Arendt and Habermas’s political theory into dialogue with Held and the phenomenological canon of the world.

I. Public and The World

Arendt contends in *The Human Condition* that ‘public’ “signifies the world itself, insofar as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it... It is related to [the] affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together” (1998 [1958]: 52). Members of the public are members of *the world*, as people sharing and involved in a common horizon of meaning. Arendt’s conception here is arguably rooted in the phenomenological tradition. The breadth of debates pertaining to the phenomenological understanding of the world far outreach the scope of this paper, yet a brief introduction suffices to buttress the discussion here. Broadly construed, the world is the horizon of meaning in which we as human beings are immersed and involved from birth (Arendt, 1998; Heidegger, 1996 [1927]; Husserl, 1970 [1954]; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). It is the ground from which all interpretation, understanding, and action make sense (Gadamer, 1977 [1960]; Ricoeur, 1981). It is a constellation of meaning largely beyond one’s immediate awareness, though in constant involvement with one’s activity. The world is trans-subjective as a social-

cultural-historical frame of meaning, yet intersubjectively shared in one's immediate context of action.

This worldly characteristic of commonality underlies both Arendt and Habermas's respective conceptions of public space/the public sphere. However, this worldhood of 'public' has been overlooked in discussions of Arendt and Habermas's work. This is unsurprising given the somewhat abstruse language used by Arendt and Habermas, and their use of concrete historical examples to buttress their arguments; namely, Arendt's discussion of the ancient Greek *polis*, and Habermas of the bourgeois *salons*, coffee houses and *Tischgesellschaften*. It may be argued that the *polis* and the *salons* in fact act as institutional locales for the debate of the public, apropos the common public world. These are the locales – the public spaces – in which political deliberation and action pertaining to the affairs of the common world took place. These locales were not, as general considerations in the literature assert, what constituted 'the public sphere' in its totality. This topographical account gives limited depth to the public character of these locales, as were spaces for the discussion of the affairs of the public world by those members of it. What the discussions referred to thus transcends these topical, physical locales to "knit together a plurality of such spaces into one larger space of nonassembly" (Taylor, 1997: 263). The level of the public world, then, is 'meta-topical', constituted by commonly-held socio-cultural-political meanings and the actions of those whom live within the world (Arendt, 1998; Habermas, 1996a; Taylor, 1997). Politics arises in and through this space – both topical and meta-topical – in the speech and action of the individuals, gathered as a public collective, directed toward a world shared in common.

The world, in this way, acts as the common ground of meaning shared between members of the public. Following this view, 'public opinion' is similarly grounded in the opinions of members of the public concerning the world shared in common. It is

concerned with the matters of the world of things in which men move, which physically lies between them and out of which arise their specific, objective, worldly interests. These interests constitute... something which inter-est, which lie between people and therefore can relate and bind them together (Arendt, 1998: 182, emphasis in original).

The debate of opinions in public space is made meaningful because of the public *qua* worldly character of their mutual interests. The shared world provides the context of meaning for political debates and the contest of opinions. In this way, this conception of public opinion and public interest transcends the particularities of ‘private’ (as in personal or economic) interests, towards the collective, common interest of the world. A form of worldly solidarity is then promoted. This conceptualization of public opinion counters the modern, ‘manipulated’ and staged publicity engendered by modern mass media, opinion polls, and party politics (Habermas, 1996a). Rather, the common world acts as the ground *of and for* public opinion; put another way, the opinions developed by the public about the public world. The objective of ‘public’, then, is to provide a meaningful frame for the debate of the shared world by the public, in public space.

II. The Public Character of Appearances, in Public Space

The second attribute of ‘public’ lies in its publicity of appearances in the world. Arendt writes in *The Human Condition* that ‘public’ refers to the extensive publicity of appearances in the world, “that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity” (1998: 50). It is the public or open character of things known, seen and heard by all, as something made publically available. Indeed, this echoes the definitions of public by Habermas and Adut stated previously. Let us unpack this second characteristic through Held’s political phenomenology, to then return to Arendt and Habermas’s theories.

Held (2012) contends that the public character of the world stems from its roots in the classical *res publica*. In contradistinction to modern correlations of the *res publica* to the ‘state’, Held proclaims that “‘*res publica*’ means most properly a ‘public affair’” (2012: 445). He continues, that “what concerns all members of a people and therefore must be handed down before their eyes is called *publicus*” (Held, 2012: 445). The political, then, is what constitutes the public affairs and activity of citizens; in sum, the *res publica* (Held, 2012: 445). Returning to appearances, the ‘public’ world exists “only insofar as it presents itself” or comes into appearance “in being spoken by... the people of the citizenry” (Held, 2012: 454). In this way ‘public’ has the character of openness, as the disclosure of opinions by members of the world brings the shared meanings of the world forth into appearance. Moreover, appearances in the world – public events, et cetera – only make sense in our collective interpretations of them, with reference to the horizon of meaning that is the common world.

In this, we can better appreciate what Arendt refers to in her commonly-cited term ‘the space of appearances’. Indeed, she frequently uses ‘public space’, ‘common world’, ‘public realm’, and the ‘space of appearances’ interchangeably across her oeuvre. Public space is that in which “I appear before others as others appear to me”, where actors disclose their views of the appearances of the world, and themselves in the process, to each other in a shared milieu. She adds, “being seen and heard by others derive[s] their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position” (Arendt, 1998: 198, 57). This difference of position indicates the plurality of opinions present in the world, all directed to the shared phenomenon and worldly context. Public space thence provides a site “through which the many opinions are possible” and made meaningful (Held, 2012: 454).

The manifold perspectives of the world reveal the root of Arendt’s theory of politics: that there is a plurality of peoples and perspectives on the world signals the political contest over common affairs and the conflict of interpretations, to borrow from Paul Ricoeur (1974).

Arendt writes, “at the centre of politics”, Arendt writes, “lies concern for the world” (Arendt, 2007: 76). She continues in stating that politics, furthermore, “deals with the coexistence and association of *different men*” (Arendt, 2007: 93; emphasis in original). It is the fact of sharing a world in common between diverse and different people that makes the world specifically political for Arendt. We as individuals are not only different in terms of our life story and trajectory, but in our personalities, potential opinions, and views of the world. That this difference is the case is why politics is necessary: to enable the coexistence of plural people and their potential opinions and world-interpretations within a common world.

The crux of the notion of public *qua* appearance is further demonstrated by way of Habermas’s argument vis-à-vis the role of the press in the bourgeois public sphere. In Habermas’s view, the press acts as an ‘organ of the public’, by publicising information of collective concern for public deliberation (1996a: 2). In this way, the press brings into appearance – to borrow a Heideggerian and Arendtian turn of phrase – the activity of parliament or others in the world, into the ‘eye’ of the public. The emergence of the press in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe and its role as the Fourth Estate gave rise to the bourgeois public sphere; in so doing, it transformed social and political relations between civil society and the state, and the role of the public as a source of political legitimacy (Habermas, 1996a; Thompson, 2011).¹ Herein lies the impetus behind Kant’s famous locution in *An Answer to the Question, What is Enlightenment?*: “making *public use* of his own reason... which anyone may make of it ... addressing the entire *reading public*” (1991: 57, 55, emphasis in original). ‘Public use’ here refers to the expression of reason in and toward the public, in making one’s view of the world visible to all within it. That things are publically visible in their appearances in the world thence facilitates public debate and discourse. Moreover, that which appears in public is endowed with some form of public significance, as that of shared concern to and of the public world. The relevance and meaning

of what appears before the public is ascertained by and large via the meta-horizon of significance that is the public world.

This phenomenologically-grounded understanding of public *qua* appearances in the world reveals further insights into Habermas's theory. He has commonly received criticism for his assertion of the 'institutional criteria' of the *salons*. Namely, in the supposition of equality of status, generality and accessibility of engagement, that "everyone had to *be able* to participate" (Habermas, 1996a: 37; emphasis in original). As many have pointed out, participation in the coffee houses was restricted to but a handful of the bourgeoisie – hence confined to white, educated, property-owning males (e.g.: Calhoun, 1992, 2010; Fraser, 1990; Ryan, 1992; Warner, 2002). However, given the arguments espoused above as per the public character of appearances and world, it may be considered that whilst these critiques are no doubt valid, they overlook the complexity latent beneath Habermas's category of public and its relation to engagement. He writes that "the issues discussed [in the *salons*] became 'general' not merely in their significance, but also in their accessibility... as its discussions did not need to remain internal to it [the *salons*] but could be directed at the outside world" (1996a: 37). Additionally,

However exclusive the public might be in any given instance, it could never close itself off entirely and become a clique; for it always understood and found itself immersed within a more inclusive public of private people ... The public of first generations, even when it constituted itself as a specific circle of persons, was conscious of being part of a larger public (Habermas, 1996a: 37).

The matters under discussion were of a concern which transcended the particularity, status and privacy of the individuals involved, to that of a collective general accessibility; specifically, shared socio-cultural meanings and appearances of the world. As such the topics discussed in the *salons* were generally accessible in their openness, as publically open in

shared significance, for debate. In this, the members considered themselves to be part of a larger, shared collectivity.

To close, let us return to the opening demarcations of ‘public’ in light of the more recent elaborations of the worldhood of the concept. The theory of the public sphere/public space holds a dominant presence in theorisations of the political, and understandings of collective involvement. Commonly, it is considered a site of critical debate of shared interests by citizens, to engender some form of public opinion, which in turn legitimates policy in light of the public interest. The consideration of public space extrapolated here, I argue, reveals an added, deeper meaning to ‘public’ and the activity in public space, which expands the more traditional conceptions of the theory. Both the classical and this more novel conception of public and its relation to public space are important for conceptualizing the political.

However, this phenomenologically-grounded conception signifies a deeper conception of commonality than traditional understandings of citizenly involvement in the public sphere. Via the world, we appreciate people in public space as members of a common world; as a mutual source of ‘inter-est’ which binds people together in a common relationship. Moreover, an understanding of public *qua* world and appearance highlights the depth of social-cultural-historical meanings that come into play within politics and the activities in public space; something which remains indistinct in classical conceptions. While the worldhood of public binds members of the public in a meaningful relationship, the relation of worldhood with appearances facilitate – and in fact thrives upon – difference. It does not collapse the public into a mass, but instead promotes equality in distinction. Difference of opinion, of varied interpretations of the appearances of the world, is what makes political life substantial.

Without the conflict of interpretations and the potential for novelty inherent in our individuality as unique human beings, the world would in effect remain static. The political contest of the world, in the collective interrogation of the shared meanings of the world,

renews the world constantly and brings it forth into newness. In this way, we can see how this broadened understanding of public buttresses socio-political change, in the collective critique and articulations of common or public meanings, by members of the public world in public space.

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¹ The relationship between the State, civil society, and the public sphere is a complex and contested one. Indeed a number of Habermas's works deal with this relationship and its shifts across modernity (e.g.: Habermas, 1975, 1996a, 1996b, 2004, 2006). Given the limited scope available in this paper, these debates could not be delved into. However the author notes the importance of this relationship for conceptualizations of 'public' and its importance for politics; yet again this facet of the debates was slightly extraneous to the question under consideration here.