FROM EXCESS TO ACCESS: FEMINIST POLITICAL AGENCY IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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As a concept, the public sphere[1] is both a vital tool for criticism of existing conditions and practices and a social imaginary to aspire to in reshaping our lives and the world through praxis. It is a concept, however, which risks infirmity when it is unmoored from the collection of historically specific sites from which public opinion emerges as a location of power. Only in locating the public sphere within specific sites for public expression can we begin to envision a representative space for the differences, constitutive of an embattled public sphere, that cut across the specific objectives and interests of social movements in order to provide a location for the formation of cross-movement coalitions. The mass media that made possible the bourgeois public sphere and its transformation cannot be forgotten within this collection of sites.

For those who are familiar with Habermas's scholarship on the public sphere, this assertion may seem unremarkable. From the beginning of *The Structural Transformation* (1989a), the role of media within the development of the eighteenth-century bourgeois public sphere attains prominence. The rational-critical debate, or publicity, which characterises the discursive interaction of a new, bourgeois public within coffee houses, salons, clubs and philosophical societies, is sparked by news, opinion pieces and intellectually based articles, made available through the early capitalist development of an independent, market-based press: "a traffic in commodities and news created by early capitalist long-distance trade" (1989a, 15). The institutionalisation of rational-critical discourse through a literary public sphere eventually carried over into the political arena, as daily political newspapers assumed an important role in the second half of the eighteenth century. The press took on the role of an institution of the public itself (Habermas 1989; 1974).

With the decline of the liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere, under the economic and political pressures of late capitalism, mediated forms of communication continue to play a central role in the structural transformation of the public sphere, as a culture-debating public becomes a culture-consuming public and the media

of public opinion become a media of public relations. The public sphere becomes irrational, as the lower classes intrude into the public realm and the state intrudes into the private realm. With these joint intrusions comes another—mass culture. Society becomes characterised by the promotion of special interests through the mass media and a mass-consumption mentality that subsumes all class levels, particularly those where amount of wealth has outstripped education (Habermas 1989a, 194; Calhoun 1992, 25). Habermas (1989a, 175) denounces the media as the primary site for the support of private interests and the degeneration of critically-reasoned public discourse to passive cultural consumption and apolitical sociability.

In subsequent work, Habermas retains an attraction to the normative presuppositions of Kant and the Critical Theory and socio-cultural analysis of the Frankfurt School, but concedes to the power of the mass media as the primary means available for the transmission of public opinion about matters of common interest in a mass society. This is a deeply pessimistic assertion, suggesting that, although they may be inadequate and corrupted by public relations, the media are the only means we have to transmit information and influence opinion within a large public body.

Mass-mediated forms of communication are also central to Habermas's conceptualisation of a contemporary public sphere in which discourses must be disseminated within a large public body. In fact, a public sphere without publicity—the necessary externalisation of its concerns and interests—is no public sphere at all. In registering appreciation for the feminist movement, Habermas (1989b, 297) suggests that its successful offensiveness as a social movement is dependent upon its ability to compete for cultural hegemony in an arena where conflicts are not directly for power or money but for definitions. While these conflicts are often latent, taking place in the micro-sphere of everyday communication, they occasionally "consolidate into public discourses and higher-level forms of intersubjectivity" (Habermas 1989b, 297). Sites of conflict become autonomous public spheres once they achieve some degree of unity through public discourse; at this point, they develop a potential for self-organisation and collective action and enter into interpublic relations through media communications (Habermas 1989b, 298).

What is apparent in this conception is that contests over definition occur in both intra- and interpublic relations as part of the struggle essential to social movement activity. In its most "public" sense, however, this struggle is waged through the mass media, where, in late capitalism, struggles for definition occur in the same place as those for money and power, something that Habermas appears to recognise in the Frankfurt School-style critique that concludes *The Structural Transformation* (1989a).

Disappointingly, Habermas's response, subsequent to *The Structural Transformation*, is to abandon the critique of a pseudo-public sphere fashioned by the mass media, and to search instead for procedures aimed at recovering the normative ideal of formal democracy. In *The Theory of Communication Action*, Volume 1, he turns to speech-act theory as the basis for development of the category of communicative action, to be applied to the interpersonal relations of the lifeworld in order to ensure their distance from the systemic resources of monetary and administrative power. The dehumanising tendencies of the "culture of integration" propagated by the mass media (Habermas 1989a, 175), if they are dealt with at all, become that from which the lifeworld and "rationalised" institutional discourse must be shielded. In evacuating the historical grounds for his analysis, Habermas begins to draw more tightly the sphere of influence enjoined by the concept of publicity, in the sense of critically-reasoned debate, by developing normative mechanisms for insulating the public sphere's representational politics from their corruption as propagandistic tools for political and economic interests.

As I will argue in this essay, critics and activists in the public sphere risk following a similar path. The predominant use of the concept of the public sphere cannot seem to accommodate an analysis of the cultural, social, political, economic and technological impact of mass media developments, which is a necessary move if we are to both expand the notion of what constitutes representational politics and concretise strategies for interventions into the public sphere.

As I will suggest, the inadequacies of the Habermasian public sphere correspond with those of the feminist counterpublic sphere. Scholars including Nancy Fraser, Mary Ryan, Joan Landes, Carole Pateman, Seyla Benhabib, and Iris Young have made important contributions to democratic political theory by documenting and redressing the exclusions constitutive of the normative and historical dimensions of the public sphere. Despite their intentions, however, feminist scholars of the public sphere retain much of Habermas's idealism by focusing on procedural norms operating within discourse models and defining the counterpublic sphere as an offensive discursive arena while overlooking the material investments and hegemonic, exclusionary mechanisms operating within and among counterpublics. The power of counterpublics to generate both shared oppositional identity and publicity within the present social, economic and political context is thus overestimated, while the range and possibilities of "politics" are limited to the cultural, the discursive and the theoretical, to the exclusion of the material and the practical (see Wicke 1992). As Stabile (1994, 49) suggests, the privileging of discourse as "prior to materiality and/or absolutely productive of materiality," results not so much in a reworking of the cultural dimensions of experience as in an obliteration of the global economic and social structures that are foundational for discourse (Stabile 1994, 49).

Moreover, the privileging of the discursive constitution of the public sphere over the material relations invested within it leads to defining counterpublic spheres as autonomous, oppositional spheres occupying a location external to the bourgeois or official public sphere. Idealised counterpublics take on aspects of a public sphere **diaspora**, the excess humanity searching elsewhere for a home, when in fact they help to constitute the "official" public sphere through their presence and struggle.

Nancy Fraser's reconceptualisation of Habermas's model of the public sphere, upon which I will focus, provides a powerful, conflicted example of the discursive, if not material, minefield constituting the feminist counterpublic sphere, its aims, and its "subject." For Fraser, the cost of paying homage to Habermas's early work is a similar vacillation between the public sphere as a normative ideal and a historical description, resulting in a modified version of Habermas's conception of lifeworld spaces that are free from encroachment by dominant systems. A detailed focus on the internal, oppositional function of shared identity is achieved at the expense of considering channels through which oppositional claims are directed outward and expressed in the dominant form of the public sphere through the mass media.

Fraser's reconceptualisation leaves a number of open-ended questions for oppositional social movements, among them: when put into practice, can a post-modern theory of particularism pave the way for systemic social equality as a necessary condition for participatory parity in the public sphere? If the presence and struggle of counterpublics are not outside of, but integral to, the composition of a "ruling" public sphere, can Habermas's neglect be remedied by reconceptualising them as "outsiders" that contest definitions from a sovereign position as one of many, competing public spheres? Is public sphere contestation possible without a strategic engagement directed toward accessing the structures of production underlying representational politics?

Internal Strife: Disunity in the Public Sphere

The public sphere described by Habermas (1989a) designates a discursive space where private citizens debate issues of common concern in an environment whose relations of power consist in citizens' exercising leverage against the state through rational-critical discourse. In the normative sense, this critical debate transcends the particular interests of the interlocutors, whose participation within the public sphere is dependent upon bracketing status differentials. Not surprisingly, this conception appears hopelessly idealistic to many of Habermas's critics, and perplexingly so, since Habermas draws the normative principle of the public sphere from a description of a historically constituted category: the discursive practices of the eighteenth-century European bourgeoisie.

One common criticism of Habermas's *The Structural Transformation* is that its premise is founded upon an inadequate normative model derived from an incomplete historical description (Negt 1980; Thompson 1990; Holub 1991; Calhoun 1992). By focusing only on Northern European middle-classes and describing plebeian forms as repressed versions of this bourgeois public sphere, Habermas adheres too closely to the ideas and self-image of early defenders of public life and idealises the public sphere as internally coherent and homogenous (Keane 1991, 36). Negt contends that Habermas's overall account is reductionistic, in large part because his argument is dependent on the object of his analysis—the bourgeois public sphere. In comparison to the "the compact and refined force" of the description of this sphere, counterpublic forms "appear mainly as repressed variations of the dominant form, cropping up occasionally and disappearing again" (Negt 1980, 71).[2]

The normative basis of the public sphere appears founded upon a grand fiction of unifying identity, a spell under which Habermas himself falls. Against Habermas's description of eighteenth-century property-owning, literate citizens who understood the unity of their interests as universal, feminist critics have problematised the notion of the homogenous civil public by arguing that it attains its unity by banishing its own particularity. In the numerous reconstructive contributions to Habermas's description of the liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere, critics argue that the very meaning of "civil society" was constructed through the significant exclusion of women, the proletariat, and popular culture (Landes 1988; Pateman 1988; Fraser 1990; Eley 1992; Ryan 1992). They propose a feminist counterpublic sphere, premised upon specificity, and departing from Habermas's project in that the emancipatory project is directed toward an affirmation of the importance of issues such as gender, race, ethnicity, age and sexual preference.

Although Habermas is disapproving of the feminist movement's tendency to retreat into identities and communities organised around biological sex and issues ruled private in the bourgeois public sphere (Fraser 1989; Habermas 1992), the personal is political in his own object of description: the liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere, where the equation of "human being" with "man," "property-owner," and "citizen" becomes the ideological guarantee for universal accessibility while exposing the particularity of interlocutors. The Habermasian description of a body of "private" persons assembled to discuss matters of public or common concern might be rewritten as a body of public men with private property assembled together to discuss matters of private concern, in the sense that private property and social status depended on access to the state as a way of ensuring their validity through the state's authority. As Warner (1992) suggests, the bourgeois citizen's claim to represent the rest of humanity derived from the power to self-abstract without risking social, political and economic stature.

Moreover, the persistent presence of counterpublics within the public sphere suggests that the liberal model always held within it the adversarial conditions for its "structural

transformation." In response to Habermas, Negt and Kluge (1988) have identified the specifically ideological and contestatory nature of the bourgeois public sphere. They point to the discursive construction of a "proletarian public sphere" a term that, according to Hansen, "epitomizes the historical subject of alienated labor and experience. (...) The proletarian, or oppositional, public sphere "could be derived from its negation—from hegemonic efforts to suppress, destroy, isolate, split, or assimilate any public formation that suggests an alternative organization of experience" (Hansen 1991, 12). Proletariat public spheres, they suggest, have never been antithetical to the public sphere but, in fact, have helped to constitute it through their presence and struggle:

> If the masses try to fight a ruling class reinforced by the power of the public sphere, their fight is hopeless; they are always simultaneously fighting against themselves, for it is by them that the public sphere is constituted (Negt and Kluge 1988, 64).

The primary attribute of proletarian life is not social cohesion but rather "a blocking of any genuine coherence," which is reinforced by the obstructive tendencies of that horizon of social experience called the bourgeois public sphere (Negt and Kluge 1988, 62-63).

Despite this criticism, many of Habermas's staunchest contemporary critics consider his description of the rise and transformation of a bourgeois public sphere to be "indispensable to critical social theory and to democratic political practice" (Fraser 1990, 57). In embracing the concept, is contemporary critical scholarship merely reincarnating a "child of the eighteenth century" (Habermas 1989a) and thus mobilising a curiously idealistic, abstract, and outdated concept? One response is indicated in the conclusion of *The Structural Transformation*: "the public sphere" appears an alien notion in a world where consumption displaces the production of public life, public communication exists as the representation of special and narrow interests, and the needs and interests of citizens fail to cohere into a set of common concerns.

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to dismiss the idea of the public sphere as camouflage for the oppressive conditions characterising actually existing democracy. The public sphere is no "mere specter, behind which one could come into direct contact with capitalist interests" (Negt and Kluge 1988, 65). On the contrary, the public sphere is a historically specific concept that both describes an amalgamation of institutions and practices and designates a "social imaginary" that functions generally as the articulation of a fundamental social need to unite through common experiences and interests. This utopian dimension of the public sphere is attractive to a growing number of critical scholars who believe that, with the fostering of alienation and anomie through capitalism, we are far from a time where we can afford to exile idea(l)s like the public sphere from our thinking. On the contrary, many of those who have appropriated the public sphere concept believe that narratives of emancipation through democratic association are more necessary today than ever before. This has been especially evident in the work of feminist scholars, who engage the concept by rejecting its modernist, masculinist basis in "rationality," while attempting to recuperate its more idealistic, emancipatory impulses.

The work of political philosopher Nancy Fraser has been instrumental in expanding the notion of politics by shifting the emphasis from symbolic struggles to struggles for discursive resources. She does so by, first, locating public contests over definition within a setting structured, not only by cultural differences, but also by political-economic inequities, and, second, foregrounding the necessary link between public discourses and the institutions and arenas which produce, reproduce and inhibit them.

Fraser's "Rethinking the Public Sphere" (1990) has become one of the most influential efforts to extend inquiry into the hegemonic workings of contemporary public sphere

activities. The "post-bourgeois" reconceptualisation that is the centrepiece of the essay adopts the Habermasian public sphere concept as the basis for a critique of democracy informed by the experiences and needs articulated by twentieth-century social movements and the feminist movement in particular. In reconceptualising the public sphere, Fraser attempts to preserve the liberatory possibilities of the public sphere even as the concept is severed from its bourgeois liberal form. While making an effort to avoid "throwing out the baby with the bath water," she reverses the terms of Habermas's analysis so that the object becomes the activity of participants in counterpublics rather than that of participants in an official public sphere. In doing so, she exposes the social inequalities which taint the public deliberations within late capitalist societies, as well as in the object of Habermas's analysis. With the revisionist historiographies whose arguments she extends (notably Landes 1988 and Eley 1992), Fraser's analysis reveals many of the procedural norms and social mechanisms that enclave and subordinate some publics and advance the agendas of others.

Four counterassumptions—that social inequalities must be eliminated, that multiple public spheres are desirable and necessary, that private interests and issues must not be off-limits for discussion, and that a strict separation between associational civil society and the state is adequate for contemporary critical social theory—provide the vehicle for Fraser's ambitious conceptual goal of retaining the emancipatory aspects of the liberal model of the public sphere while rejecting its Enlightenment basis in civil society and rationality. Although Habermas leaves us with the importance of developing a political agenda directed toward transforming institutions through an internal democratisation process that does not pre-empt the intra-associational democratic arrangements that enable critical publicity. Fraser takes this a step further to suggest that the internal democratisation of self-managing institutions might be a prototypical site for the proliferation of strong (opinion-forming and decision-making) publics. Publics should not be content in taking on an extra-governmental role that limits them to the habitually benign opinion-formation documented by Habermas. Instead, strong publics might seek to channel their deliberations into both opinion formation and the authoritative decision-making usually left to the state.

In the end, Fraser (1990, 76) concedes that her conception is not adequate to the task of providing mechanisms to ensure co-ordination among institutions and publics and accountability of strong, democratic decision-making bodies to their weak or external publics. Candidly and realistically, she acknowledges not knowing the answers to questions regarding the places where direct democracy arrangements or representative forms might be more appropriate. Accordingly, I do not presume to know the answers, but rather, to suggest that her concluding remarks allude less to an unfinished project than to a failure to achieve a break with Habermas's most troublesome tendencies. Despite Fraser's departure from Habermas, both provide a more developed, if idealised, account of intrapublic relations and their normative possibilities than of the messiness of interpublic relations and the concrete mechanisms for achieving parity in communication that must be figured into these relations if we are to understand publics as more than obstacles to one another's full realisation. Both conceptions are inadequate to the contemporary task of understanding and negotiating the rough terrain of "representation" and all that it implies for the consideration of a public sphere, most notably, regarding the mass media's role in publicity.

Fraser's "post-bourgeois reconceptualisation" maps some of the sites along the roadway to an egalitarian world. These are sites that have been accessed by the feminist counterpublic sphere, the social movement activity of which serves as empirical support for her four counterassumptions. The feminist counterpublic sphere can only support

this set of normative presuppositions, however, if its internal strife is overlooked. In doing so, Fraser casts the feminist social movement **in terms** of her reconceptualisation, one which invokes the possibility of re-structuring the framework of society from a stratified one to a multi-cultural and egalitarian one, but, in fact, **requires** this re-structuring as its own prerequisite, resting as it does on internal assumptions of systemic social equality and democratic parity. In the absence of systemic change, Fraser attempts to assimilate the feminist counterpublic to her reconceptualisation, and, in the process, valorises the unity achieved through shared oppositional identity while extending little analysis to the political antagonisms and material, racial, and gender inequalities that are characteristic of intrapublic, as well as interpublic, relations (McLaughlin 1993). If this rings familiar, perhaps it is because Habermas encountered a similar problem in attempting to draw a normative ideal from a historically constituted category.

In a direct departure from Habermas, Fraser's proposes the desirability of multiple public spheres, regardless of whether society is stratified or egalitarian, thus rejecting a singular category of the public sphere as an arena for the debate of common concerns through rational-critical discourse. And, yet, the notion of the desirability of multiple and autonomous public spheres, by definition, places constraints on the types of discourses circulating within and among publics and thus contradicts Fraser's (1990) claim that no strictures should be placed upon the admissibility of topics, interests, and views within deliberations. Similar to Habermas, Fraser begins to draw the sphere of influence occupied by the public perpetually more tight.

As Fraser is aware, a public sphere is always constituted through the presence and contestation of multiple publics. Any public sphere is a socially organised field, characterised by lines of division and relationships of force and constituted by argumentative discourse (Calhoun 1992, 37; Hohendahl 1992, 107). Debate among diverse **publics** is necessary, not for creating a consensus, but for comparing needs and interests in order to negotiate compromises (Hohendahl 1992, 107). This recognition is at the very heart of Fraser's advancement of the notion of a heterogeneous public. The idea of a public, she notes, accommodates internal differences, antagonisms and debates better than does the idea of a community. The concept of community "suggests a bounded and fairly homogenous group," while a public "emphasizes discursive interaction that is in principle unbounded and open-ended" and thus implies a plurality of perspectives (Hohendahl 1992, 80, n.29). In arguing for such a heterogeneous public, however, feminists cannot avoid struggling over the very basis of feminism: gender politics. And, in according primacy to gender oppression, the feminist movement risks cutting ties with its own heterogeneity, not to mention other movements and subcultures basing struggles on race, class, and sexual practices.

The positing of autonomous public spheres as the solution to our need to coexist ultimately founders as publics risk fragmenting into factions, their political efforts directed toward forming coalitions of identities. As many feminists would argue, however, it is the foregrounded and ongoing struggle over identity within the feminist counterpublic sphere that potentially empowers it over the liberal bourgeois public sphere in reversing the terms of the threat to its self-concept. The threat to the feminist counterpublic sphere cannot be the recognition of differences but the restriction of claims to stable identity and general interest. From a theoretical standpoint, a radically destabilised notion of identity provides an effective basis for a heterogeneous public. Yet, this notion also poses a problem: an identity politics based on instability, difference, and fragmentation does not lend itself to developing the collective action and solidarity which are necessary preconditions for oppositional social movements to emerge, thrive and survive. The notion of a unifying identity has not only a utopian dimension, but also a practical one: it is a strategy for

mobilisation. Although the ideal of shared identity can be viewed negatively, as an ideology that fails to account for the material realities of class and race, it can also be viewed positively, as a rallying point for social movements seeking political, economic and cultural transformation.

The problem with this idea is that, while identities are socially-constructed, they are not collectively shared. Although female identities will be marked by gender, "each person's identity is unique—the history and meaning she makes and develops from her dealings with other people, her communicative interactions through media, and her manner of taking up the particular serialised structures whose prior history position her . . . how gender marks her life is her own" (Young 1995, 120). And, yet, it is possible for women, in their everyday lives, to find motivation for acting collectively in pursuit of goals that they cannot individually attain (Kaplan 1995, 147). The identity of interests which forms the basis for this feminist consciousness is necessary for the attainment of access to the institutions of the public sphere.

A feminist counterpublic sphere represents an intersection of discourses around "femaleness" and "femininity," and is based on a set of representational strategies directed toward politicising identity. Public spheres, according to Fraser (1990, 68), are "not only arenas for the formation of discursive opinion; in addition, they are arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities":

> This means that participation is not simply a matter of being able to state propositional contents that are neutral with respect to form of expression. Rather, participation means being able to speak "in one's own voice," thereby simultaneously constructing and expressing one's cultural identity through idiom and style (Fraser 1990, 68-69).

The problem with this, as Segal (1991, 279) points out, is that social identities are neither necessarily nor even desirably political identities. The recognition of social identities is important, but so also is that point beyond recognition, wherein lies the question of how differences and resistances formed as a result of the subordination of social identities can be channelled into relations of power, thus activating political agency. The formation of coalitions around social identity may temporarily help overcome the alienation and paranoia visited by capital, but ultimately fragments struggle by sending groups "off in search of their sectional identities, leaving the system of relations upon which they rely itself unscathed" (Hennessy 1993, 136).

We are left with some lingering questions, the most important of which is how can the dialectic between the internal, oppositional and external, publicist functions of the public sphere be activated in order to explore its emancipatory potential?. The question that remains at the conclusion of *The Structural Transformation* lingers into the present: How might the political force of civil society be activated within information society?

Access to the Media of the Public Sphere

There is no question that asserting the uniqueness of the specifically political threatens the primacy of social identity as the basis for a public spheres. There is also no question that challenging the internal coherence of public spheres formed around social identity threatens the concept of a counterpublic sphere. But, if political struggle is that in which we are engaging, the status of "outsider-within"—one who works against existing structures, from an unavoidable place within them—is strategically more valuable than seeking exile from the status quo with which we must engage.[3]

The transformative potential of the feminist counterpublic sphere is dependent upon political agency, the subjective relationships of individuals to political participation and their roles in forming, reforming and overturning practices and institutions (Mische 1993, 243). Political agency functions to extend influence beyond the immediate sphere of everyday life and the privatised activities of popular culture consumption. Activating political agency requires that mass media be transformed from the purveyors of mass commodities to a primary and necessary site for the strategic distribution of public issues and interests, the mobilisation of representational politics, and the struggle for alternatives to existing hegemony. In short, mass media constitute critical resources for ensuring that a public sphere acts as a public sphere and not an enclave.

It is precisely the experience of mediation that distinguishes a public sphere from a community. As Hansen suggests, the notion of a counterpublic differs from that of community as a reference to a specifically modern phenomenon which coexists with and responds to bourgeois and industrial-capitalist publicity:

> *It offers forms of solidarity and reciprocity that are grounded in a collective experience of marginalisation and expropriation, but these forms are inevitably experienced as mediated, no longer rooted in face-to-face relations, and subject to discursive conflict and negotiation (Hansen 1993, xxxvi).*

While the language of community provides a powerful matrix of identification and may function as a mobilising force for transformative politics, the counterpublic status and effectiveness of this language depends upon two factors: the extent to which it recognises itself as rhetoric, "as a trope of impossible authenticity, reinventing the promise of community through synthetic and syncretistic images;" and the extent to which it is responsive to difference and differentiation within its own borders and is capable of accepting multiply determined sexual-social identities and identifications (Hansen 1993, xxxvi).

On one hand, counterpublics are defined by their exclusion from dominant publicity. On the other hand, however, their exclusion is neither complete nor desirable. The publicist orientation of counterpublics depends on their efficacy in disseminating discourse beyond the group into wider arenas occupied by other publics disseminating other types of publicity. In the United States, as elsewhere, the drawback is that the more mainstream that women's media and organisations become, the more prone they are to collaboration with existing hegemonic tendencies. Ms. magazine, for example, while popularly considered "alternative," has found a place in the context of liberal feminism which has dominated public information disseminated through mainstream media organisations and practices. Meanwhile, at a time when public sphere discourse is increasingly mediated by spectacle, "celebrity feminism" has become both conventional and marketable. Wicke (1994, 757) suggests that the discourse of feminist media stars—including feminist/ adversary Camille Paglia, health guru Susan Powter, popular author Naomi Wolfe, actress/ producer Barbra Streisand, **The Nation** writer Katha Pollitt, and critical legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon—represents "the public sphere where feminism is negotiated, where it is now in most active cultural play" (Wicke 1994, 757). This appears the price for having traffic with mainstream popular culture.

Accordingly, "alternative" women's media and organisations that fall outside the mainstream are far less likely to affiliate with existing hegemonic practices; that is, after all, what defines the "alternative" in a progressive sense. Publications including *Off Our Backs, On Our Backs, Midlife Woman, Hysteria* and *Inner Bitch* are more oriented to the development of associations within community boundaries than they are to a more comprehensive notion of a public sphere comprised of many inter-associational publics. To achieve the latter, the concept of "access" must be broadened beyond small-scale, intra-

associational publications and practices.

Is it prejudicial for me to foreground feminist discourses within mainstream popular culture, when, in fact, the external function of the feminist counterpublic sphere is expressed through the publication of claims through the alternative locations constituted by women's groups, feminist publications, films and videos, academic programs and conferences, festivals and health centres? In response, it is worth questioning whether these activities belong to the external function of the feminist counterpublic sphere at all, or whether, instead, they are attenuations of the internal, oppositional function of the counterpublic which do not extend beyond the formation of community associations.

What may force the question of access to the media for feminists are policy decisions which seek to diminish access, as telecommunications-owned cable companies are no longer mandated to offer public and government access channels as part of their "community package," and with the imminent withdrawal of funds from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the National Endowment of the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Because access has always been a question for counterpublics, however, we need not be forced to confront it, but rather, to ground the concept in the democratisation of the mass media as a whole. This forces an engagement with the industrial-commercial publicity dominated by what Negt and Kluge call "the media cartel": the macro-commodity constituted by large-scale media conglomerates, which taps the needs and consciousness of people as raw material for its products and fuses a diverse group of media into a collective publicity block. For counterpublics to have a transformative role, they have little choice but to engage with the "soiled" world of popular culture.

If the liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere is fragile as a normative basis for democratic association, it is particularly frail in a context in which mass media have transformed modern society beyond the circulation of print materials and discussions of them in salons and coffee-houses. Television and personal computers have undermined and elasticised traditional distinctions between private and public by bringing the outside world into the home and the home into the outside world, bypassing the requirement that people share the same physical space in order to communicate and that communications need occur in "real time." Public communication now takes place in the thick of an advanced, industrialised climate in which information processing and dissemination is dominated by large corporations, political communication takes the form of relations between seller and consumer, and the right to democracy has metamorphosed into the right to protect existing structures of private ownership and production relations in order to maximise profit.

Today, the question of access to the public sphere must foreground the complex and adversarial relationship between information society and civil society, the first of which refers to a global economic society based on advanced procedures for the production and exchange of information, and the second of which describes a political society that, in principle, requires the free flow of information in order to secure the state's accountability to its people. Informatisation undercuts the very basis for the public sphere as the political and social freedoms of individual citizens come under threat by corporations, governments and state institutions whose power is multiplied by increased efficiency and professionalism in information gathering, production and dissemination (Splichal 1994). Civil society would seem to be negated by an information society that reproduces a passive, uninformed society and subordinates public information to the interests of governments, state institutions, and owners and producers.

Public sphere activity of all kinds is overlaid by what Negt and Kluge (1988, 63) refer to as "public spheres of production," which "derive their force directly from capitalist

production." These production realms, which are most accurately described as "pseudo-public spheres," given that they produce public spectacles originating in the privatised corporate sector, include all of the forms taken by the media of consumer culture which seek direct access to the private sphere of the individual: advertising, corporate public relations, mass media conglomerates, along with the administrative apparatuses of industrial capitalism.

Counterpublics cannot afford to be enclaved against or outside of production public spheres, but instead, must challenge them:

> *It is essential that proletarian counterpublicity confront these public spheres permeated by the interests of capital, and does not merely regard itself as the antithesis of the classical bourgeois public sphere (Negt and Kluge 1988, 63).*

Clearly, it is politically hazardous to underestimate the political-economic stakes involved in struggling for representative space as a means to a radical alternative to actually existing late capitalist democracy. But, there is perhaps no political hazard more escapable than the evacuation of the very ground over which is struggled.

To view communication as a fundamentally discursive resource is to overlook its material locations, material effects, and reinforcement of material conditions. As a discursive practice, communication does not possess the materiality of other public goods, such as children or the environment, or of other social rights, such as adequate food, housing, healthcare, and reproductive options. To my knowledge, no one, in any direct sense, has ever died of dysentery, exposure or a botched illegal abortion due to a poverty of communication. As a social right or a public good, democratic communication cannot be conceived as an end in itself. In this respect, we should not limit ourselves to a view of communication as a social right, since, as with the principled dimensions of other citizen rights, it is all too easy for the promises of citizenship to remain empty. This form of "access," tied as it is to classic liberal political rhetoric, and suggesting that individuals should have access to the information that they need to participate as citizens, is less objectionable in principle than in practice, which finds the ubiquitous, paternalistic, and liberal-pluralist rhetoric of "public interest" and "free speech" existing comfortably within a corporate-liberal environment guided by interests for whom a semblance of fairness, responsiveness and accountability, promoted through public relations, translates into increased power and financial gain.

Instead, communication might best be understood as a social right whose force is realised once it becomes a collective social practice, as a foundation for the sharing of experience, the enactment of citizenship and the existence of a public sphere. The possession and control of information has always been one of the requisite components of power and the expansion of power. Indeed, the hegemonic expansion of norms within the liberal model of the public sphere has less to do with the specific identities of its bourgeois citizens than with their possession of resources: money, property, education, and information. Communication is a powerful resource that can be used for or against the public expression of social rights. Our task should be to ensure that communications of all kinds become instruments of society that aid in overcoming the sense of powerlessness and isolation felt by citizens and, ultimately, foster a more participative and intervention-oriented citizenry. The most critical question in this regard is "access for whom" or "access to what," but "access for what purpose?"

Genuine forms of access involve more than the right to market or choose one pre-packaged commodity over another. Successful practices toward access are dependent upon collective action, as a struggle over control of resources to achieve common ends. An expanded conception of access suggests that, in taking action toward change, we

must keep in mind the "doubleness" of the process of reorganising civil society,

> *attending to both the ethical reconstitution of citizenship (as the autonomous, reflective, and discursive participation with others in the public realm) and to the reconfiguration of social relations resulting in the differential distribution of power and resources within newly organised spheres of action (Mische 1993, 244).*

The relationship between the ethical-citizenship and social-redistributive sides becomes apparent once we attempt to conceive of equal opportunities for citizens' participation in public life in the absence of resources for the exercise of individual and collective rights.

The painstaking task is to acknowledge our own pedagogical and participative responsibilities in the public sphere with the goal of identifying and activating mechanisms by which people might take on their own. What is called for is not some nebulous form of social responsibility, but, rather the more demanding practice of accountability (Altschull 1995, 141). Although its proposals were perhaps too narrowly focused on press freedom, the 1947 Hutchins Commission proposal was essentially on target in suggesting that freedom, including the freedom of society, is endangered by the absence of mass media accountability to "conscience and the common good." What I would add is that an enlarged conception of access must necessarily involve an expanded sense of accountability among representatives and those whom they endeavour to represent: the state to its citizens, media workers to their publics, movement spokespersons to their people, and social groups to needs beyond those felt within their own daily lives.

Publics must begin to interrogate the wider relations of social and politic al power within which they are already embedded. But, the formulation of goals and ideas is not enough. Strategies "must be understood in terms of their materialization in specific organizations, forces, tactics, concessions, etc., with all that this implies for their structural determination and material underpinnings" (Jessop 1990, 266). As strong publics, groups must be able to represent their interests and needs within state apparatuses and influence the programmatic, institutional, and governmental conditions determining state policy. Bennett (1992, 32) has argued for "putting policy into cultural studies" as a way of concretely and immediately influencing the specific political agendas, calculations, and procedures of state apparatuses: it will mean talking to and working with what used to be called the ISAs rather than writing them off from the outset and then, in a self-fulfilling prophecy, criticising them again when they seem to affirm one's direst functionalist predictions.

The changes effected by state and cultural reform, in and of themselves, are not inconsequential, but they are not enough either. The greatest challenge presented by the contemporary democratic nation-state is its complicity with those seeking private ownership and control of the means of production. The conditioning of "good consumers" exacerbates people's resignation to a fate as the object of political decision-making. Democracy may require a process of "double democratisation"—the interdependent transformation of both state power and civil society (Held 1987, 283)—but each of these, in turn, requires work toward economic transformation. Our objective to re-form state power in such a manner as to increase access to the mass media and other institutions of the public sphere must begin with the mandate that decision-making power be free of the inequalities and constraints imposed by the private allocation of capital.

Feminist scholars of the public sphere have begun to realise that public sphere contestation is always for more than discursive resources, and it is now incumbent upon us to carry through with the promise implicit in the perception that challenging the construction of linguistic procedural norms is insufficient in and of itself. With little doubt,

this recognition provokes a challenge to the idea of a feminist counterpublic sphere, which can be held intact as an arena of oppositional symbolic struggle only when the hard facts of publics, institutions, politics and economics are ignored. Fortunately, however, this does not pose a challenge to the existence of a feminist counterpublic, which has always been far more than an idea or an arena of symbolic struggle. The idea of feminism surely informs feminist struggle, and yet, the latter—as a set of political practices issuing from the very real, however fractured, existence of a social movement—ultimately determines and reworks the boundaries around definitions, linguistic presuppositions, and material relations.

Notes:

1. The ideas and arguments in this essay are developed in considerably more detail in my forthcoming book, *Mass-Mediating Feminism: Representational Politics in the Public Sphere* (University of Minnesota Press).

2. As Habermas now concedes, this description is too simplistic (Habermas 1992, 438). Correspondingly, he acknowledges that his idealisation of a specifically bourgeois culture-debating public overlooked the exclusions perpetuated in regard to gender, ethnicity, class and popular culture (466).

3. I borrow the term "outsider-within" from Patricia Hill Collins (1991).

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