

# COUNTER PUBLIC SPHERES AND GLOBAL MODERNITY

NATALIE FENTON

JOHN DOWNEY

## Abstract

This article explores the concept of counter public spheres and their relationship to the dominant public sphere. We argue that counter public spheres are increasingly relevant due to particular social and political configurations that mark out a distinct stage of modernity. We suggest that this stage is characterised in particular by the intensification of globalisation, the rise of neo-liberalism and a decline of trust and social democracy resulting in instability in the dominant public sphere. This, along with the ability to forge solidarity between disparate groups and the technological potential to link geographical distances, political causes and to organise translocal protests opens up the possibility of symbolic contest in the dominant public sphere, increased participation in civil society and as a consequence, the extension of democracy. However, this depends on two main factors: (1) the nature of participation – does it simply build on associations of interest that may have arisen out of the individualisation of lifestyles organised around consumption in the market place or is it based on something more than enlightened self-interest? (2) The relative power and ability of counter publicity to break through the increasingly privatised dominant public sphere monopolised by transnational corporations.

Natalie Fenton is Senior Lecturer in Communication and Media Studies in the Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, email: [N.Fenton@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:N.Fenton@lboro.ac.uk).

John Downey is a Lecturer in Communication and Media Studies in the Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, email: [J.W.Downey@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:J.W.Downey@lboro.ac.uk).

## Introduction

In the last thirty years capitalism has undergone a major restructuring that has seen the intensification of globalisation, the rise of neo-liberalism and the New Right, the decline of trust and of social democracy, a process of de-traditionalisation, rapid development of information and communication technologies and the rise of new social movements. These changes have profound implications for the nature and functioning of the public sphere (Habermas 1989). We argue that the public sphere has been shaken and this has opened up increasing possibilities for counter public spheres to become established and flourish. We trace Habermas' development of the concept of the public sphere after 1989 that includes crucial and often ignored revisions to the original thesis. We argue that counter public spheres become established in periods of instability in the dominant public sphere. While several factors are indicative of this instability and dynamic process, in this essay we focus in particular on the demise of trust in advanced capitalist societies. Decreasing levels of trust have been commonly associated with declining levels of social participation and are seen to signal the ill health of civil society. In contrast, however, we suggest that decreasing levels of trust in established institutions and parties has been accompanied by increasing levels of trust in groups engaging in counter-publicity.

Civil society is widely accepted as a concept that will inform and uphold democracy. Although exactly how and by what mechanisms civil society is to be invoked is often unclear. The concept of civil society itself is double edged: one that can be and has been conceived of as an individualistic concept representing no more than the human face of capitalism serving ultimately to support the dominant public sphere or as a space that allows a critical intervention in the public sphere that has the potential to result in progressive social change. We argue that counter-public spheres offer the best prospects for encouraging democratisation at local, national and international level. To make sense of this assertion we draw on the work of Manuel Castells (1996; 1997; 1998) and Ulrich Beck (2000) to contend that the crisis of the public sphere and the rise of counter-publicity should be understood as elements in the emergence of a new stage of modernity.

## The Public Sphere in Flux

At the conference to mark the English translation of Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989, Craig Calhoun argued against Habermas' Adornian-inspired pessimistic position of the early 1960s, maintaining that the consequences of mass media were not "uniformly negative" and that there is a certain amount of room for manoeuvre for "alternative democratic media strategies" (1992, 33). Calhoun (1992, 37) is referring here to the possibility of groups in civil society exerting influence upon the mass media, on the one hand, and of establishing discursively connected counter public spheres, on the other. Habermas has himself revised his public sphere thesis in the last ten years to take account of such phenomena.

We wish to chart the transformation in Habermas' own work over the past decade, partly as a result of the critique of his original thesis and partly as a result of Habermas' own reflections on the contemporary relationship between media and

politics. As such, our account differs from the standard that first lays out Habermas' original thesis and then summarises critiques of the thesis, emphasising the exclusions of the male bourgeois public sphere. We contend that one of the keys to understanding the contemporary world is to grasp the dynamic relationship between dominant and counter public spheres.

Habermas' focus in his *Habilitationschrift* was on the bourgeois public sphere. His intention was to show the rise and fall of the public sphere, the rise of a critical public and its decay. He argues that the increasing complexity and rationalisation of societies over the course of the twentieth century together with the growth of the mass media have transformed the public sphere: "the public sphere becomes the court before which public prestige can be displayed – rather than in which critical debate is carried on" (Habermas 1989, 201). In other words, horizontal communication between citizens is increasingly replaced by vertical communication between mass media, greatly influenced by both the state and capital, and consumers. The space for participatory communication is severely constricted. This interpretation of the trajectory of the public sphere owed a great deal to Adorno and Horkheimer's (1973) work on the culture industries and the prognosis of a move towards an increasingly administered society. However, Habermas' intention was not only critical but also redemptive. He wished to rescue the rational kernel from the ideological concept. The ethical impulse lying behind the creation of the public sphere, of inventing a space where citizens may meet and discuss as equals, needs to be separated out from the exclusions that characterised the actual bourgeois male public sphere. The rational kernel needs to be preserved and then built upon in order to establish the conditions for living in a truly democratic society. While the dominant public sphere retains some traces of democratic discourse, we suggest that the impulse for greater democratisation comes not from within the dominant public sphere but from the formation of counter publics.

Habermas has recently introduced refinements to his original concept of the public sphere both in response to the vigorous debate in the Anglophone world after the translation of his public sphere work in 1989 and perceived changes in the relationship between the public sphere and social change. These refinements relate in particular to instances of intentional political mobilisation that seek to make an intervention in the mass media public sphere or develop a counter-public sphere. Habermas' sole attention on the bourgeois public sphere aroused considerable criticism both at the time of the student movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s and at the time of translation (Negt and Kluge 1972; Calhoun 1992). Habermas saw proletarian public spheres, for example, as derivative of the bourgeois public sphere and as not worthy of too much attention. In stark contrast, Negt and Kluge (1972) believed in the productive possibilities of counter publics. For Negt and Kluge alternative media practice was contemporaneous with and a response to dominant capitalist communications. They saw the formation of counter publics as offering forms of solidarity and reciprocity grounded in a collective experience of marginalisation and expropriation. To enable changes in relations of production they argued that counter publics must form alliances and make connections with other publics and other types of publicity. Once this is achieved they can then take advantage of the uneven organisational structures of dominant publicity which contain potential for instability, accidental collisions and opportuni-

ties in which alternative formations and collective interests can gain a momentum of their own.

In his response to the conference in 1989 Habermas recognises the exclusion of counter public spheres as a problem with the book. He admits that

*only after reading Mikhail Bakhtin's great book Rabelais and his World have my eyes become really opened to the inner dynamics of a plebeian culture. The culture of the common people apparently was by no means only a backdrop, that is, a passive echo of the dominant culture; it was also the periodically recurring violent revolt of a counter project to the hierarchical world of domination, with its official celebrations and everyday disciplines (Habermas 1992, 427).*

Here Habermas recognises not only the existence of counter public spheres but also their capacity for challenging domination. While Habermas maintains that his analysis of the infrastructure of the public sphere still pertains with the mass media largely subordinate to the interests of capital, on the one hand, and the state, on the other, he has in the meantime revised his pessimistic opinion of the public. Rather than see the public as cultural dupes in the manner of Adorno and Horkheimer he now emphasises the “pluralistic, internally much differentiated mass public” (Habermas 1992, 438) that are able to resist mass mediated representations of society and create their own political interventions.

What this points to is a revision of the public sphere thesis in the light of the “revolutions” in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 and the developments in civil society through the emergence of new social movements in advanced capitalist societies (for example, the green movement in Germany). In addition, in recent years there have also been many attempts with modest degrees of success to decentralise the media and make them more accessible and responsive to citizens. Many countries have experienced a growth in non-mass, localised forms of media such as community radio, television and newspapers (for example, the use of Restricted Service Licenses (RSLs) for cable television and community radio in the UK). There has also been a considerable growth in NGOs (the number of registered charities in the UK is now in excess of 185,000) most of which, seek to use mass and/or small media as part of their work. A central question for Habermas is whether these groups in civil society can intervene in the mass media public sphere and change the agenda through setting off a critical process of communication. This can be exceedingly difficult to do in a market-led, mass mediated system enveloped in its own professional ideologies about what is and what is not newsworthy, about who is a credible source of opinion and information and who is not. It is important neither to romanticise the ability of alternative forms of communication to encourage progressive social change in the context of global, multi-media conglomerates nor to dismiss the growth of counter-publicity and the socio-economic context of its emergence.

Dahlgren (1994) manages to steer between these positions by making an explicit analytic distinction between the common domain of the public sphere and the advocacy domain. In this functional differentiation, the common domain is the arena that strives for universalism by appealing to a general public. It is here that we find for the most part the dominant media, which ideally provide information, debate and opinion for all members of society. This is done through a variety of

media, formats and representational modes, taking into account the socio-cultural segmentation of society. The advocacy domain consists partly of time and space made available by the dominant media and partly of a plurality of smaller civic media from political parties, interest groups, movements, organisations and networks. This distinction allows us to consider not only the official public sphere of the dominating, but also the counter public sphere of the dominated. While there are similarities between Dahlgren's approach and our own, there is a key difference in emphasis. We stress the competitive relationship between dominant and counter public spheres. Whereas the common and advocacy domains may exist side-by-side in a liberal polity and contribute to the resolution of competing interests, counter publicity should be thought of as *challenging* the legitimacy of the dominant public sphere, as presenting an alternative way of ordering society as recognised in the work of Negt and Kluge (1972). This competitive relationship can only be understood in the context of broader socio-economic change and the crisis of the dominant public sphere.

Habermas pursues a complementary line of thinking in *Between Facts and Norms* (1996). Here, Habermas has moved away considerably from the *Structural Transformation* work and wishes to maintain that counter public spheres can acquire influence in the mass media public sphere under certain circumstances. Habermas' earlier position outlined in *The Structural Transformation* saw the public sphere at rest rather than in flux. When one looks at the public sphere at rest one tends to note the mixed economy of capitalist owned and state regulated public sphere that is exclusive. However, when one introduces the notion that the public sphere, in a manner consistent with the rest of society, is subject to periodic crises then one can observe gaps opening up in the public sphere: "in periods of mobilisation, the structures that actually support the authority of a critically engaged public begin to vibrate. The balance of power between civil society and the political systems then shifts" (Habermas 1996, 379). The presentation of the issue is important, for Habermas, as "only through their controversial presentation in the media do such topics reach the larger public and subsequently gain a place on the 'public agenda'" (1996, 381). However, counter publics may only be permitted access to the institutions of the dominant public sphere at times of economic, political or ideological crisis. A crisis situation, according to Habermas, both reveals the inadequacy of previous ways of thinking and raises questions concerning the normative foundations of society. Here the endogenous mobilisation in civil society can exploit the "latent dependency" and "normative self-understanding" (1996, 382) of the mass media public sphere in order to make its voice heard. The self-understanding of the mass media in liberal democracies as servants of the people means that the advent of crises heralds the possibility of counter publicity penetrating the mass media. This resonates with the thinking of Negt and Kluge (1972) and puts the notion of counter publics firmly in an historical, social and economic context, but makes it none the easier to identify the moments when the contradictions of capitalism can be exploited. We argue that the dominant public spheres in advanced capitalist societies are undergoing a period of crisis and this presents opportunities for the formation of counter public spheres that serve to destabilise further the dominant public sphere. But what do we mean by "the public sphere in crisis"?

## Crisis? What Crisis? Trust and Social Participation

Putnam (1995), writing about US society, argues that there has been a widespread loss of the sense of community that Tocqueville (1946) believed was central to American culture. Put simply, according to Putnam, people do not trust each other as much as they used to – this is linked to a recoil from civic life and social ties. In the UK, similarly, people belong to fewer organisations than they used to, vote less often, volunteer less and give less money to charity (Knight and Stokes 1996; Passey and Hems 1998). At the same time, it is claimed that people who have retained a sense of trust are more likely to participate in almost all of these activities, establishing a link between a decline of trust and the fall in civic engagement (Putnam 1995; Brehm and Rahn 1997). In contrast to Putnam, we contend that as trust declines in the dominant public sphere, new social bonds emerge in the formation of counter-publics. We do not wish to deny that a process of individualisation is occurring in advanced capitalist societies and that this may lead in the majority of cases to the breakdown of social bonds (“to bowling alone” to use Putnam’s phrase). This breakdown, however, is also occurring because of a crisis of legitimacy, a loss of faith in the established institutions of the public sphere. Such a crisis may be expressed by the growth of apathy and cynicism but also by a growth of grassroots activism that situates itself as counter to the dominant public sphere.

A number of commentators suggest that the “skill” of trusting is developed in part through citizens associating in voluntary organisations, self-help groups, and mutual aid societies. Putnam (1995) for example, has argued that a decline in participation erodes the kind of intermediary institution that Tocqueville saw as essential to the structure of civil society. In this instance civil society is construed in general terms and does not distinguish between the likes of a common domain and an advocacy domain (Dahlgren 1994). A conflation of the various organisational forms of civil society does not allow for differing public responses to very different and often divergent sections of civil society. Trust may be flouted in some and transferred to others, as Putnam has noted elsewhere (Putnam 1995a). The importance of trust in these civil contexts is heightened because of concern over the rapid decrease of trust in government and formal institutions constitutive of the dominant public sphere. The British Social Attitudes Survey 1996, for example, indicated that the public had experienced a profound loss of faith in the institutions of the state. Its efficiency and morality have been questioned. This claim is not restricted to Britain. A large-scale comparative analysis based on national surveys points to declining public trust in politicians in a range of “mature” democracies, with the exception of The Netherlands (Putnam and Pharr 2000). A similar pattern emerges in terms of public confidence in political institutions, including the armed forces, legal systems, police, parliaments and state bureaucracies.

These kinds of disengagement are particularly acute amongst the young (Gaskin, Vlaeminke and Fenton 1996). British studies speak of extensive alienation of young people from society’s central institutions and warn of the long-term dangers this may have (Wilkinson and Mulgan 1995). More than one third of people between the ages of 18 and 25 did not vote in the General Election in 1992 or 1997. Some reports on young people and citizen service claim that this lack of engagement with social values and activities has created a host of social problems including

crime and drug abuse (Briscoe 1995). With the state in retreat – not simply in the neo-liberal sense but more broadly in terms of public support – civil society, or certain parts of it, become foregrounded as alternative arenas of public trust, information and representation. Young people in Britain appear to be both disaffected from the party political process and attracted by alternative forms of political activism that work at the margins of the dominant public sphere.

The defining characteristics which mark out some voluntary organisations and campaigning movements from the state and market sectors – non-profit, responding to localised need, oriented to certain values and so on – become paramount in building relations of trust with members and with the wider public. The relationship between organisational form, in particular the encouragement of active participation, democracy and inclusivity and the potential for trust to develop is crucial to contemporary society and its practices. When the dominant public sphere is felt to betray or is no longer capable of allowing for critical rational engagement then trust is diminished allowing counter public spheres the opportunity to flourish. One example of this is the revival of certain forms of grassroots collectivism. In the UK there has been a recent growth in local struggles over road building, animal rights, ethnic or cultural identities that suggest the development of new forms of cultural resistance. While much of this activity is parochial the localisation of political struggle is paralleled by a fragmentation of political culture. Party allegiances and class alliances increasingly give way to more fluid and informal networks of action that are based in but spread beyond localities. Such networks are often staunchly anti-bureaucratic and anti-centralist, suspicious of large organised, formal and institutional politics. In turn, the fragmentation of political culture is fuelled by the rise of identity politics in which modern logics of incorporation and representation are challenged on the bases of their rigidity and exclusiveness. In contrast, the recognition of local diversity allows for differentiated notions of citizenship among diverse counter public spheres.

A decline in trust has been linked to the increase in non-traditional collective protest often described as Non-Violent Direct Action (NVDA). As *Criminalising Diversity and Dissent*, a report by the civil rights pressure group Liberty, puts it:

*Public support for Non-Violent Direct Action continues to grow. A Gallup poll reported in the Daily Telegraph showed that 68 percent of people believe there are times when protestors are justified in breaking the law, suggesting that there is a growing disillusionment with the response of politicians and governments to public opinion. ... [T]he belief that it is sometimes right to break the law as a protest has spread from the traditionally more anarchic classes – to embrace all sections of opinion including those who used to know better (cited in Brass and Koziell 1997, 14).*

In the UK NVDA became popular in the 1990s as part of a new type of eco-politics outside of traditional party political structures. The protests were diverse – ranging from campaigns to stop the live export of sheep and veal calves, road protestors and anti-capitalism marches to the right to hold raves. All were bound by a common basis in what has been termed DIY (Do It Yourself) Culture (Mackay 1998; Brass and Koziell 1997).

*The whole business of DIY culture is that you get together and say “This is an issue that affects us, the people in this room, and we want to do something about it”.... We are not MPs, we are not elected representatives – the popular mandate is ourselves (George Monbiot, one of the founders of the Land is Ours land rights movement and a researcher at the Centre for Environmental Policy and Understanding at Green College, Oxford, cited in Brass and Koziell 1997, 8).*

DIY culture is youth-centred and converges around green radicalism, direct action politics and new musical sounds and experiences. The notion of DIY culture being located in single-issue politics does not take account of the diverse range of interests, projects and people involved – from ramblers to travellers, trade unionists to squatters. Although it is built on a long heritage of grassroots protest what marks DIY culture out as different to what has gone before is its attention to issues of consumption rather than production. It is about people wanting to take responsibility for their own lifestyles and realising that how they live is a political action. Although, as noted above, many of the struggles are localised there is constant acknowledgement of the links to globalisation and many protestors move freely between resistance to the building of a local road and marches against global capitalism:

*The more that corporations globalize and lose touch with the concerns of ordinary people, the more that the seeds of grass-roots revolt are sown; equally, the more that governments hand responsibility to remote supranational powers the more they lose their democratic legitimacy and alienate people (Vidal cited in Brass and Koziell 1997, 277).*

Counter public spheres may provide vital sources of information and experience that are contrary to, or at least in addition to, the dominant public sphere thereby offering a vital impulse to democracy. Because of the disparate and often underground nature the extent of this practice is unknown, its role in a democracy unexplored (Atton 2002). However, it is our contention that the activity of counter public spheres has indeed increased in recent years largely in response to a dominant public sphere that is coming under increasing strain. One key indicator of particular significance is the vast increase in international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) paving the way for transnational activist networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998): in 1953 there were 102 international NGOs; in 1993 there were 569, in 2002 there are more than 5,000 international NGOs. In this period environmental groups have increased 45 fold; development groups 10 fold; groups concerned with human rights, the environment and women’s rights together comprise more than 50% of all international NGOs. Many of these groups use information and communication technologies as tools of advocacy and organisation. In the UK the more established (for example, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Oxfam) are experiencing increased legitimacy with the “liberal” press and broadcasting.

In making a distinction between key aspects of the public sphere, whether we term them dominant and counter or common and advocacy, that shrink or swell according to particular circumstances, we must also disaggregate the various components of civil society. The possibility of a renewal of civil society through the expansion of civil associations, especially voluntary organisations (which in the

broadest sense would include DIY culture), is problematic principally because such organisations do not necessarily increase democratic inclusion. Taken as a homogeneous concept civil society can be seen as providing the foundations for general social solidarity and moral community. When this occurs it is not clear whether this thing called civil society simply builds on an association of interest that may have arisen out of the individualisation of lifestyles organised around consumption in the market-place, or whether it is based on something more than enlightened self-interest. This is important because civil society that operates as no more than an outlet for neo-liberal sensibilities and remains centred on the individual and their interests rather than on mutuality or reciprocity, is likely to uphold the status quo rather than actively challenge it through collective identity and critical solidarity.

### Self-Interested Individualism or Collective Progressive Politics?

Neo-liberalism, based on an ideology of economically centred individualism, consumerism and citizenship, held sway in a range of advanced capitalist societies throughout the 1980s and 1990s - most notably in the United Kingdom and the United States. In the UK, Thatcherism was described as the only “political and moral force that has been in the business of eating away at the cement of social reciprocity” (Hall 1993, 14). Commentators have remarked that the rise of individualism, especially in the 1980s, has been at the expense of sociability and civic-mindedness. Such arguments are based on the assumption that if individual self-interest is allowed to develop unhindered, conflicts of interests will override relations of trust. These ideas are not exactly new. Durkheim (1957; 1964) argued that a society composed of isolated individuals pursuing their own narrow objectives was untenable. According to Durkheim, calculating individuals pursuing their own self-interest undermined social solidarity. To overcome this danger society required a morality of co-operation and a network of secondary institutions which bound people together – these would help to mediate the pursuit of self interest by creating social bonds (Furedi 1997).

Relations between individuals are increasingly governed by economic forces. Public support for charities, for example, often assumed to be an altruistic act, has not escaped the individualisation of the market. The social response to charitable giving relies frequently on assessments of deservedness of the beneficiary. Perceptions of who receives charity and who should receive charity are linked to the willingness of people to support charities through time and money. Public attitudes on the seeming excess of voluntary and charitable organisations operating in the same field and the high administrative costs such organisations incur are common. But more than this, the recipients of charity are often viewed with nothing more than contempt, malign distrust or corrosive pity (Golding and Middleton 1982). Thomas Harding argues that the new level of local, DIY activism is based on an individualisation of protest and the privatisation of activism (Harding 1997). DIY privileges the notion of self-empowerment. It is worthwhile noting that many of the new protest groups do not see class as an issue and are led largely by the young generation of the middle classes (Mackay 1998). A society so firmly entrenched in an ethic of competition and reward finds it difficult to escape the values it espouses.

However, public attitudes do not always obediently follow the wholesale promotion of the market. The public are aware of the dangers of individualism and consumerism even if warnings have mostly gone unheeded. For example, voluntary organisations are perceived as offering an opportunity to somehow defy the market and act on principles other than profit and power. They are felt to offer an alternative to the dominant public sphere. In the UK, research has shown that the ability of voluntary organisations to represent something other than the market is vital to their future public support (Gaskin and Fenton 1997).

Putnam argues that forms of voluntary association are distinctive in their capacity to function as repositories for all sources of social capital – obligations and expectations, information potential and norms and sanctions (Putnam 1993, 89). As such they are characterised as incubators of civic virtue. He contends that democratic, non-exclusionary voluntary associations characterised by a high level of face-to-face interaction are involved in a virtuous circle in terms of trust, because they instill habits of co-operation, solidarity and public spiritedness; develop skills required for political activity; and prevent factionalism through inclusive membership. It is problematic, however, simply to assume that voluntary associations will be democratic and non-exclusionary – as Putnam has noted (Putnam 1995a). Many commentators on the organised voluntary sector would debate whether it is quite so virtuous. A misplaced nostalgia for the civic life of the 1950s, as Putnam cautions – let alone for Tocqueville’s America of the 1830s – ignores the factors that shape and constrain association in an era of advanced modernity.

Misztal (1996) suggests that interest in the link between the concept of trust and that of civil society has emerged as a result of evidence suggesting that legal formulas of citizenship do not of themselves secure solidarity, participation and the expansion of the public sphere. With many symptoms of the decline of solidarity (the decrease in popularity of solidaristic parties, the decline in class solidarity, the collapse of communism as a viable alternative to capitalism), the renewal of civic institutions and the emergence of new social movements have been put forward as ways of constructing new identities and social bonds, and teaching new responsibilities and obligations. We would argue that this is evidence of an increase in counter public spheres and that this process is better understood not in terms of civil society supporting the crumbling institutions of the dominant public sphere as in the relationship between common and advocacy domains but in terms of their attempt to reconstitute society or at least their piece of it. Misztal points to the growing evidence of privatisation, marketisation and a politics based on rights rather than duties, as evidence of a shrinking dominant public sphere. The task of protecting and promoting solidarity falls to the institutions of civil society which might offset the formalism, proceduralism and commodification of the state and market spheres.

Such an account places a distinctive emphasis on a politics and ethics of solidarity within civil society. Within more conventional theories of civil society, the concept of solidarity is frequently missing or sidelined. Wolfe (1989), for example, sees the role of civil society as maintaining a social fabric that tempers the operation of the market and the state and anchors them in a normative framework by creating “realms of intimacy, trust, caring and autonomy that are different from the larger world of politics and economics” (Wolfe 1989, 38). But solidarity is not mentioned.

Indeed, the notion that politics and economics represent a “larger world,” together with a normative emphasis on values of “intimacy, trust and caring” within civil society, appears to reinstate rather traditional distinctions between the public and private spheres. The civil realm is seen to exercise a civilising influence on market and state, rather than providing a sphere where alternative forms of social solidarity and political agency might be articulated. Solidarity, it appears, is a critical characteristic in differentiating between self-interested individualism and a collective counter politics.

Habermas (1992) defines solidarity as

*the ability of individuals to respond to and identify with one another on the basis of mutuality and reciprocity without calculating individual advantages and above all without compulsion. Solidarity involves a willingness to share the fate of the other, not as the exemplar of a category to which the self belongs but as a unique and different person (Habermas 1992, 47).*

Thus solidarity infers both a private and a public sense of trust. To insist on solidarity as a crucial element in the likely success of counter-public spheres to influence rational-critical discourse resists the definition of civil society in simply individualistic or private terms. The potential of counter public-spheres as sites of solidarity and collective agency is realised by new social movements. These movements are held to engage in a kind of “double politics”; aiming both to influence policy in a formal sense, and to construct new kinds of solidarity and collective identity through informal political association – a bringing together of public and private responses. The dissolution of the public/private dichotomy in the operation of contemporary counter public spheres also avoids the feminist concerns with Habermas’ concept of the public sphere that through focusing on public life denies women’s actual and potential contribution to civil society (Fraser 1992).

The concept of solidarity also helps to explain the connection of the local, often individualised issue to the frequently simplified but nonetheless global economics and politics, central to many of the new protest groups. Mackay (1998) argues that this is why direct action campaigns have focused on export and overseas trade allowing a degree of unity and ambition of scale for otherwise disparate actions. For example, in the UK in 1995 animal rights activists protested at a range of sea-ports on the live export of animals; Reclaim the Streets activists organised a party and a protest action in collaboration with Liverpool dockers to show solidarity with trade unionists in 1996; ecotunnelers protested at the development of the second runway at Manchester airport in 1997. Solidarity in these instances is rather more than the human face of capitalism. However, solidarity alone does not make a political project. Organising for resistance across boundaries may be a move towards a new cultural politics but it is not a political project in itself.

The ability of voluntary organisations to make global connections and to inform the public about their work has been dramatically affected by instantaneous communications technologies. Together with patterns of mass migration and world trade new technologies increase awareness of, and dependence between, localities far away from each other. This can be seen as positive insofar as it can raise awareness of the politics of consumption – as Giddens notes (1990) the choices and actions of consumers in one locality can have an impact on the international division

of labour and planetary ecology. Large international voluntary organisations can and do inform the public of the impact of a global economy. But it is a function that often precludes participation and negates any degree of control on behalf of the giver. Such groups (for example, Greenpeace, Oxfam, and Red Cross) may have large memberships but the members rarely, if ever, see one another. People may be committed givers but the giving is organised at a distance, the act of participation is at arm's length. Solidarity is not required. Altruism is relegated to an act of consumption - a financial relationship. However, other groups such as those that organise around anti-globalisation and the World Trade Organisation are predicated on participation and public demonstration with a real, if rather confused sense, of popular idealism. Solidarity in these instances could be seen as rather more than the human face of capitalism. Whether it is a new critical political force is another question.

## Counter Publics in the Network Society

Up to this point, we have adopted a revised Habermasian framework to argue that the growth of counter public spheres should be understood in terms of a dynamic relationship with the dominant public sphere. A crisis in the dominant sphere encourages the growth of counter publics and this serves to destabilise further the dominant public sphere. We have illustrated this general argument through examining the changing contours of trust in advanced capitalist societies. Now we wish to place the growth of counter public spheres in the context of broader social change and to see the growth of counter publicity as part of an emerging new stage of modernity. To achieve this we will enlist the theoretical support of Manuel Castells and Ulrich Beck.

Manuel Castells argues that we are now experiencing a different kind of society, a network society, as a result of three factors: an information technology revolution in the early 1970s; a restructuring of capitalism that has heralded the creation of a post-Fordist global economy; and the rise of new social movements (for example, feminism, and ecology). The network society is characterised by: increasing levels of economic and social polarisation locally, nationally, internationally; the globalisation of finance and industrial capital; a relative decline in the power of nation-states vis-à-vis international capital; and the increasing importance of media in all aspects of contemporary life.

In the face of the increased mobility of capital, encouraged by developments in information and communication technologies, states have lost some of their power to determine their own destinies and this leads, Castells argues, to a crisis of democracy as citizens are less and less in control of their societies (1997, 243-353). To a certain extent in response to the rise of the network enterprise, states have grouped together as network states in an attempt to reassert their control over capital. The European Union is the best example of a network state (1998, 330-354) but there are also many other examples of more loosely networked states (United Nations, North American Free Trade Association, G8). However, such international co-operation is made less effective because of inter-state competition as sites of production, the so-called "beauty contest" for capital. This competition encourages state policies of low-wage and low corporate taxation, "the race to the bottom," that have implications for income inequality and the redistributive powers of the state.

The inter-state competition is also fuelled by the widespread acceptance of an ideology of consumer capitalism that, in turn, has implications for the ability of nation-states or even network states to address global environmental problems.

This logic has led to the adoption of a neo-liberal agenda in OECD states. Many states have seen a rightward shift in the policies of social democratic parties. While such a shift is often presented as an inevitable response to the globalisation of the economy it is unable to address inequality at either local or global level and environmental problems. The adoption of a neo-liberal agenda by social democratic parties and the acceptance of a de facto loss of sovereignty have led to a crisis in the public sphere. Traditional forms of politics are perceived as ineffectual. Consequently, we have witnessed the rise of new social movements (human rights, greens, and development) that are united in their resistance to neo-liberal globalisation but are disparate in terms of aims and beliefs. In a highly mediated society, a key strategy of new social movements is to generate counter-publicity with the intention of influencing a volatile public whose faith in parties and states is declining. Castells places much hope at the feet of these new social movements to work on an international level using information and communication technology to put pressure on states to address co-operatively questions of inequality and the environment. This is a politics of symbolic contestation fought out primarily in the mediatised public sphere:

*The reconstruction of society's institutions by cultural social movements, bringing technology under the control of people's needs and desires, seems to require a long march from the communes built around resistant identity to the height of new project identities.... Examples of such processes, as observed in contemporary social movements and politics, are the construction of new, egalitarian families; the widespread acceptance of the concept of sustainable development; and the universal mobilisation in defense of human rights wherever the defense has to be taken up. For the transition to be undertaken, from resistance identity to project identity, a new politics will have to emerge. This will be a cultural politics that starts from the premise that informational politics is predominantly enacted in the space of the media, and fights with symbols, yet connects to values and issues that spring from people's life experience in the information age (Castells 1998, 372-3).*

We are in agreement with Castells concerning the importance of symbolic contestation, or in our terms counter-publicity, of the dominant public sphere by new social movements. However, one important point of disagreement is the division that he draws between the new politics of social movements and the old, redundant politics of class.

Rather surprisingly given Castells' use of a Marxist sounding vocabulary and his emphasis on growing economic inequality, he consigns class struggle to the dustbin of history because the individualisation of work in the network society precludes the development of class consciousness. This seems somewhat premature bearing in mind the possibility of class politics being conducted inside the workplace (for example, against the relocation of a factory to a lower wage economy), outside the workplace (for example, struggles over housing) and the development of a global economy that is encouraging the development of an industrial working class and union growth in newly industrialising economies.

There is a good deal of agreement between Castells and Beck. Beck's development of the concept of "second modernity" in the late 1990s is supposed to emphasise a break, an epochal shift. "Second modernity" is meant to distinguish his conception of the present from that of postmodernists who see societal fragmentation, from that of evolutionary theorists who see no evidence of an epochal shift, and from his own earlier formulation of the concept of "reflexive modernisation" which has led to misunderstandings concerning the scale and scope of transitions in modernity: "Reference to a second age of modernity is intended to make it clear that there is a structural epochal break – a paradigm shift" (Beck 2000, 81).

Second modernity, according to Beck, may be characterised by a pervasive interconnectedness of the economic, the cultural and political. Globalisation is often conceived primarily in economic terms. The development of global capitalism, aided and abetted by technological advance, restricts the ability of nation-states to determine their own destinies. This precipitates a loss of faith in the political institutions of the nation-state and encourages the growth of citizens' initiatives. Beck is very supportive of such groups and holds out the hope that the development of transnational citizens' groups may lead to a reassertion of democratic control over capital in response to the de facto loss of sovereignty on the part of nation-states.

Beck argues that economic changes are accompanied by cultural and political changes that he wishes to signify through developing the concept of "cosmopolitanisation." Cosmopolitanisation provides a resource for the development of a transnational politics of citizens:

*As more processes show less regard for state boundaries – people shop internationally, work internationally, love internationally, marry internationally, research internationally, grow up and are educated internationally (that is, multi-lingually), live and think transnationally, that is, combine multiple loyalties and identities in their lives – the paradigm of societies organised within the framework of the nation-state inevitably loses contact with reality (Beck 2000, 80).*

Beck's development of the concept of cosmopolitanisation owes much to the work of David Held (1995) in bringing together political theory and international relations. For Held, however, although he can discern cosmopolitan trends in the contemporary world, the concept of "cosmopolitan democracy" is, first and foremost, a normative concept, an ideal that is to be worked towards rather than a currently existing reality. Held suggests (1995, 125), and we would agree, that Falk's notion of an emerging global civil society, for example, "seems somewhat premature."

For Beck (2000, 24), the work of groups in civil society and the public sphere needs to be fostered, as an answer to unemployment and the creation of what he terms a "neo-feudal service economy" and the crisis and decay of democratic institutions. In order to sustain "creative disobedience," the state should pay citizens to do precisely that. While this may be in principal an excellent idea it is hard to find trends in OECD societies that indicate the imminent realisation of this idea (Beck 2000, 46). While people are being encouraged to undertake voluntary work and to donate to support the work of voluntary groups by states, the unemployed in the UK, for example, are increasingly forced into seeking traditional forms of employment in order to reduce the state's social security bill. In other words, for Beck's idea to be realised there would have to be a shift away from neo-liberal economic

policy and there are few signs of this. In addition, it seems that states are becoming increasingly draconian in their response to acts of civil disobedience. If it is optimistic to suggest the advent of transnational citizens' movements, it is doubly optimistic to expect nation-states to fund them. However, the increasing mobility of capital and the consequent diminution of the power of nation-states does indeed require a new political subject. Beck's call to arms is both optimistic and yet perhaps represents the best prospects for the democratisation of world society: "translocal social movements and national-culturally rooted parties of world citizens. One hundred and fifty years after the *Communist Manifesto* it is time for the World Citizen Manifesto: world citizens of all countries unite!" (Beck 1998, 19).

## Conclusion

We have attempted to bring together some of the key sociological thinkers of our time to help explain and identify what we believe is an increase in counter publicity activity brought about through a combination of social and political configurations that mark out the current stage of modernity as distinct. In particular, we have drawn attention to the intensification of globalisation, the rise of neo-liberalism, the decline of trust and social democracy in the dominant public sphere, a forging of solidarity between disparate identities along with the technological potential to link geographical distances, political causes and organise translocal protests. The crisis of dominant public spheres and the rise of counter publicity are best understood as both a consequence of and a response to the globalisation of modernity.

There seems much agreement between Castells and Beck in the hope they place in the role of new social movements and their ability to contest mediated public spheres as progenitors of a global or cosmopolitan citizenship. In considering the nature of such counter publicity, the question of whether civil society simply builds on associations of interest that may have arisen out of the individualisation of lifestyles organised around consumption in the market place, or whether it is based on something more than enlightened self-interest, is crucial to answer in order to understand the extent of their democratic potential. Is a "strong civil society" something that will enhance and deepen democracy through increased participation in a revitalised public sphere, or is it rather a neo-liberal attempt at reconciling the demands of individual choice with the need for social cohesion? Hirst (1994) offers a vision of the future in which there is a substantial devolution of power down from the centralised state to a system of voluntary self-governing associations. But he also states that "the core ethical claim of associationism ... is justified on essentially individualistic terms" (Hirst 1994, 50).

The increased potential for counter publicity to contest symbolically the dominant public sphere is one by-product of the current inability of traditional nation-state political parties to address worsening global problems such as inequality and the environment. It may indeed be that new social movements are the best hope we have to extend democracy at both local and global level and yet when one considers the vastly unequal resources that are at the disposal of NGOs and transnational corporations and the increasingly privatised character of dominant public spheres in advanced capitalist societies it is wise to remain sanguine about their prospects.

## References:

- Adorno, Theodor W. and Max Horkheimer. 1973. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London: Allen Lane.
- Atton, Chris. 2002. *Alternative Media*. London: Sage.
- Beck, Ulrich. 2000. *What is Globalisation?* P. Camiller, trans. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Billig, Michael. 1995. *Banal Nationalism*. London: Routledge.
- Brass, Elaine and Sophie Poklewski Koziell. 1997. *Gathering Force: DIY Culture – Radical Action for Those Tired of Waiting*. London: The Big Issue Writers.
- Brehm, John and Wendy Rahn. 1997. Individual Level Evidence for the Causes and Consequences of Social Capital. *American Journal of Political Science* 41, 3, 888-1023.
- Briscoe, Ian. 1995. *In Whose Service? Making Community Service Work for the Unemployed*. London: Demos.
- Calhoun, Craig, ed. 1992. *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Calhoun, Craig. 1993. Civil Society and the Public Sphere. *Public Culture* 5, 267-280.
- Castells, Manuel. 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Castells, Manuel. 1997. *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Volume II: The Power of Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Castells, Manuel. 1998. *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Volume III: End of Millenium*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Cohen, Jean and Andrew Arato. 1992. *Civil Society and Political Theory*. London: The MIT Press.
- Dahlgren, Peter. 1994. The Media, the Public Sphere and the Horizon of Civil Society. Paper presented to the European Film and Television Studies Conference on "Turbulent Europe: Conflict, Identity and Culture," London.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1957. *Professional Ethics and Civil Morals*. London: Routledge.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1964. *Essays on Sociology and Philosophy*. London: Harper and Row.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1992. Rethinking the Public Sphere. A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. In C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 109-142. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Furedi, Frank. 1997. *Culture of Fear: Risk Taking and the Morality of Low Expectation*. London: Cassell.
- Garnham, Nicholas. 2000. *Emancipation, the Media, and Modernity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gaskin, Kathy, Merial Vlaeminke, and Natalie Fenton. 1996. *Young People's Attitudes to the Voluntary Sector*. London: The Commission for the Future of the Voluntary Sector, National Council for Voluntary Organisations.
- Gaskin, Kathy and Natalie Fenton. 1997. *Blurred Vision: Public Trust in Charities*. London: National Council of Voluntary Organisations.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1990. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Golding, Peter and Sue Middleton. 1982. *Images of Welfare*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Golding, Peter. 1998. Worldwide Wedge: Division and Contradiction in the Global Information Infrastructure. In D. K. Thussu (ed.), *Electronic Empires: Global Media and Local Resistance*, 135-149. London: Arnold.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1992. Further Reflections on the Public Sphere. In C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 421-461. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1996. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Oxford: Polity.
- Hall, Stuart. 1993. Thatcherism Today. *New Statesman and Society*, 26 November, 14-16.
- Harding, Thomas. 1997. *The Video Activist's Handbook*. London: Pluto Press.
- Held, David. 1995. *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance*. Cambridge: Polity.

- Hirst, Paul. 1994. *Associative Democracy: New Forms of Economic and Social Governance*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Knight, Barry and Peter Stokes. 1996. The Deficit in Civil Society. The Foundation for Civil Society: Working Paper No. 1.
- Keck, Margaret and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. London: Cornell University Press.
- Mackay, George, ed. 1998. *DIY Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties Britain*. London: Sage.
- Misztal, Barbara. 1996. *Trust in Modern Societies: The Search for the Bases of Social Order*. Cambridge, MA: Polity.
- Negt, Oscar and Alexander Kluge. 1972. *Public Sphere and Experience: Towards an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Passey, Andrew and Les Hems. 1998. *Charitable Giving in Great Britain 1997*. London: National Council for Voluntary Organisations.
- Putnam, Robert with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Nanetti. 1993. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Putnam, Robert. 1995. Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital. *Journal of Democracy* 6, 65-78.
- Putnam, Robert. 1995a. Revitalising Trilateral Democracies: A Report to the Trilateral Commission. New York: The Commission.
- Putnam, Robert and Susan J. Pharr, eds. 2000. *Disaffected Democracies – What's Troubling Trilateral Countries*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. 1946. *Democracy in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Verstraeten, Hans. 1994. The Media and the Transformation of the Public Sphere. Paper presented to the European Sociological Association, Budapest, Hungary.
- Wilkinson, Helen and Geoff Mulgan. 1995. *Freedom's Children: Work, Relationships and Politics for 18-34 Year Olds in Britain Today*. London: Demos.
- Wolfe, Alan. 1989. *Whose Keepers? Social Science and Moral Obligation*, Berkeley: University of California Press.