Publics and Counterpublics

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This essay has a public. If you are reading (or hearing) this, you are part of its public. So first let me say: welcome. Of course, you might stop reading (or leave the room), and someone else might start (or enter). Would the public of this essay therefore be different? Would it ever be possible to know anything about the public to which, I hope, you still belong? What is a public? It is a curiously obscure question, considering that few things have been more important in the development of modernity. Publics have become an essential fact of the social landscape; yet it would tax our understanding to say exactly what they are.

Several senses of the noun "public" tend to be intermixed in usage. People do not always distinguish even between *the* public and *a* public, though in certain contexts the difference can matter a great deal. *The* public is a kind of social totality. Its most common sense is that of the people in general. It might be the people organized as the nation, the commonwealth, the city, the state, or some other community. It might be very general, as in Christendom or humanity. But in each case, the public, as a people, is thought to include everyone within the field in question. This sense of totality is brought out by speaking of *the* public, even though to speak of a national public implies that others exist;

there must be as many publics as polities, but whenever one is addressed as *the* public, the others are assumed not to matter.

A public can also be a second thing: a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space, as with a theatrical public. Such a public also has a sense of totality, bounded by the event or by the shared physical space. A performer onstage knows where her public is, how big it is, where its boundaries are, and what the time of its common existence is. A crowd at a sports event, a concert, or a riot might be a bit blurrier around the edges but still knows itself by knowing where and when it is assembled in common visibility and common action.

I will return to both of these senses of the term public, but what I mainly want to clarify in this essay is a third sense: the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation—like the public of this essay. (Nice to have you with us, still.)

The distinctions among these three senses are not always sharp and are not simply the difference between oral and written contexts. A text public can be based in speech as well as writing. When an essay is read aloud as a lecture at a university, for example, the concrete audience of hearers understands itself as standing in for a more indefinite audience of readers. And often, when a form of discourse is not addressing an institutional or subcultural audience like a profession, its audience can understand itself not just as *a* public but as *the* public. In such cases, different senses of audience and circulation are in play at once. They suggest that it is worth understanding the distinctions better, if only because the transpositions among them can have important social effects.

The idea of *a* public, as distinct from both *the* public and any bounded totality of audience, has become part of the common repertoire of modern culture. Everyone intuitively understands

how it works. On reflection, however, its rules can seem rather odd. I would like to bring some of our intuitive understanding into the open in order to speculate about the history of the form and the role it plays in constructing our social world.

1. *A public is self-organized.*

A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists *by virtue of being addressed.*

A kind of chicken-and-egg circularity confronts us in the idea of a public. Could anyone speak publicly without addressing a public? But how can this public exist before being addressed? What would a public be if no one were addressing it? Can a public really exist apart from the rhetoric through which it is imagined? If you were to put down this essay and turn on the television, would my public be different? How can the existence of a public depend, from one point of view, on the rhetorical address and, from another point of view, on the real context of reception?

These questions cannot be resolved on one side or the other. The circularity is essential to the phenomenon. A public might be real and efficacious, but its reality lies in just this reflexivity by which an addressable object is conjured into being in order to enable the very discourse that gives it existence.

A public in this sense is as much notional as empirical. It is also partial, since there could be an infinite number of publics within the social totality. This sense of the term is completely modern; it is the only kind of public for which there is no other term. Neither "crowd" nor "audience" nor "people" nor "group" will capture the same sense. The difference shows us that the idea of a public, unlike a concrete audience or the public of a polity, is text-based—even though publics are increasingly organized around

visual or audio texts. Without the idea of texts that can be picked up at different times and in different places by otherwise unrelated people, we would not imagine a public as an entity that embraces all the users of that text, whoever they might be. Often the texts themselves are not even recognized as texts — as, for example, with visual advertising or the chattering of a DJ — but the publics they bring into being are still discursive in the same way.

The strangeness of this kind of public is often hidden from view because the assumptions that enable the bourgeois public sphere allow us to think of a discourse public as a people and therefore as a really existing set of potentially numerable humans. A public, in practice, appears as *the* public. It is easy to be misled by this appearance. Even in the blurred usage of the public sphere, a public is never just a congeries of people, never just the sum of persons who happen to exist. It must first of all have some way of organizing itself as a body and of being addressed in discourse. And not just any way of defining the totality will do. It must be organized by something other than the state.

Here we see how the autotelic circularity of the discourse public is not just a puzzle for analysis but also the crucial factor in the social importance of the form. A public organizes itself independently of state institutions, laws, formal frameworks of citizenship, or preexisting institutions such as the church. If it were not possible to think of the public as organized independently of the state or other frameworks, the public could not be sovereign with respect to the state. So the modern sense of the public as the social totality in fact derives much of its character from the way we understand the partial publics of discourse, like the public of this essay, as self-organized. The way *the* public functions in the public sphere (as the people) is only possible because it is really *a* public of discourse. The peculiar character of *a* public is that it is a space of discourse organized by discourse. It is self-creating

and self-organized; and herein lies its power, as well as its elusive strangeness.

In the kind of modern society that the idea of publics has enabled, the self-organization of discourse publics has immense resonance from the point of view of individuals. Speaking, writing, and thinking involve us — actively and immediately — in a public, and thus in the being of the sovereign. Imagine how powerless people would feel if their commonality and participation were simply defined by pre-given frameworks, by institutions and laws, as in other social contexts they are through kinship. What would the world look like if all ways of being public were more like applying for a driver's license or subscribing to a professional group — if, that is, formally organized mediations replaced the self-organized public as the image of belonging and common activity? Such is the image of totalitarianism: non-kin society organized by bureaucracy and law. Everyone's position, function, and capacity for action are specified for her by administration. The powerlessness of the person in such a world haunts modern capitalism as well. Our lives are minutely administered and recorded, to a degree unprecedented in history; we navigate a world of corporate agents that do not respond or act as people do. Our personal capacities, such as credit, turn out on reflection to be expressions of corporate agency. Without a faith, justified or not, in self-organized publics, organically linked to our activity in their very existence, capable of being addressed, and capable of action, we would be nothing but the peasants of capital — which, of course, we might be, and some of us more than others.

In the idea of a public, political confidence is committed to a strange and uncertain destination. Sometimes it can seem too strange. Often one cannot imagine addressing a public capable of comprehension or action. This is especially true for people in minor or marginal positions or people distributed across political

systems. The result can be a kind of political depressiveness, a blockage in activity and optimism, a disintegration of politics toward isolation, frustration, anomie, forgetfulness. This possibility, never far out of the picture, reveals by contrast how much ordinary belonging requires confidence in a public. Confidence in the possibility of a public is not simply the professional habit of the powerful, of the pundits and wonks and reaction-shot secondary celebrities who try to perform our publicness for us; the same confidence remains vital for people whose place in public media is one of consuming, witnessing, griping, or gossiping rather than one of full participation or fame. Whether faith is justified or partly ideological, a public can only produce a sense of belonging and activity if it is self-organized through discourse rather than through an external framework. This is why any distortion or blockage in access to a public can be so grave, leading people to feel powerless and frustrated. Externally organized frameworks of activity, such as voting, are and are perceived to be poor substitutes.

Yet perhaps just because it does seem so important to belong to a public, or to be able to know something about the public to which one belongs, such substitutes have been produced in abundance. People have tried hard to find, or make, some external way of identifying the public, of resolving its circularity into either chicken or egg. The idea that the public might be as changeable, and as unknowable, as the public of this essay (are you still with me?) seems to weaken the very political optimism that the accessibility of the public allows.

Pollsters and some social scientists think that their method is a way of defining a public as a group that could be studied empirically, independently of its own discourse about itself. Early in the history of research in communications theory and public relations, it was recognized that such research was going to be difficult, since multiple publics exist and one can belong to many different publics simultaneously. Public-opinion researchers have a long history of unsatisfying debate about this problem in method. What determines whether one belongs to a public or not? Space and physical presence do not make much difference; a public is understood to be different from a crowd, an audience, or any other group that requires co-presence. Personal identity does not in itself make one part of a public. Publics differ from nations, races, professions, and any other groups that, though not requiring co-presence, saturate identity. Belonging to a public seems to require at least minimal participation, even if it is patient or notional, rather than a permanent state of being. Merely paying attention can be enough to make you a member. How, then, could a public be quantified?[1]

Some have tried to define a public in terms of a common interest, speaking, for example, of a foreign-policy public or a sports public. But this way of speaking only pretends to escape the conundrum of the self-creating public. It is like explaining the popularity of films or novels as a response to market demand; the claim is circular, because market "demand" is entirely inferred from the popularity of the works themselves. The idea of a common interest, like that of a market demand, appears to identify the social base of public discourse; but the base is in fact projected from the public discourse itself rather than external to it.

Of all the contrivances designed to escape this circularity, the most powerful by far has been the invention of polling. Polling, together with related forms of market research, tries to tell us what the interests, desires, and demands of a public are, without simply inferring them from public discourse. It is an elaborate apparatus designed to characterize a public as social fact independent of any discursive address or circulation. As Pierre Bourdieu pointed out, however, this method proceeds by denying the constitutive role of

polling itself as a mediating form.[2] Habermas and others have further stressed that the device now systematically distorts the public sphere, producing something that passes as public opinion when in fact it results from a form that has none of the open-endedness, reflexive framing, or accessibility of public discourse. I would add that it lacks the embodied creativity and world making of publicness. Publics have to be understood as mediated by cultural forms, even though some of those forms, such as polling, work by denying their own constitutive role as cultural forms. Publics do not exist apart from the discourse that addresses them.

Are they therefore internal to discourse? Literary studies has often imagined a public as a rhetorical addressee, implied within texts. But the term is generally understood to name something about the text's worldliness, its actual destination, which may or may not resemble its addressee. Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, to take a famous example, remained addressed to his son even after Franklin severed relations with that son and decided to publish the text; the public of the autobiography was crucially nonidentical with its addressee. Of course, one can distinguish in such a case between the nominal addressee and the implied addressee, but it is equally possible to distinguish between an implied addressee of rhetoric and a targeted public of circulation. That these are not identical is what allows people to shape the public by addressing it in a certain way. It also allows people to fail if a rhetorical addressee is not picked up as the reflection of a public.

The sense that a public is a worldly constraint on speech, and not just a free creation of speech, gives plausibility to the opposite approach of the social sciences. The self-organized nature of the public does not mean that it is always spontaneous or organically expressive of individuals' wishes. In fact, although the premise of self-organizing discourse is necessary to the peculiar cultural artifact that we call a public, it is contradicted both by material limits — means of production and distribution, the physical textual objects, social conditions of access — and by internal ones, including the need to presuppose forms of intelligibility already in place, as well as the social closure entailed by any selection of genre, idiolect, style, address, and so on. I will return to these constraints of circulation. For the moment, I want to emphasize that they are made to seem arbitrary because of the performativity of public address and the self-organization implied by the idea of a public.

Another way of saying the same thing is that any empirical extension of the public will seem arbitrarily limited because the addressee of public discourse is always yet to be realized. In some contexts of speech and writing, both the rhetorical addressee and the public have a fairly clear empirical referent: in correspondence and most e-mail, in the reports and memos that are passed up and down bureaucracies, in love notes and valentines and Dear John letters, the object of address is understood to be an identifiable person or office. Even if that addressee is already a generalized role — for example, a personnel committee, or Congress, or a church congregation — it is definite, known, nameable, and numerable. The interaction is framed by a social relationship.

But for another class of writing contexts — including literary criticism, journalism, theory, advertising, fiction, drama, most poetry — the available addressees are essentially imaginary, which is not to say unreal: the people, scholarship, the republic of letters, posterity, the younger generation, the nation, the left, the movement, the world, the vanguard, the enlightened few, right-thinking people everywhere, public opinion, the brotherhood of all believers, humanity, my fellow queers. These are all publics. They are in principle open-ended. They exist by virtue of their address.

Although such publics are imaginary, writing to a public is not imaginary in the same way as writing to Pinocchio. All public

addressees have some social basis. Their imaginary character is never merely a matter of private fantasy. (By the same token, all addressees are to some extent imaginary – even that of a journal, especially if one writes to one's ideal self, one's posthumous biographers, and so on.) They fail if they have no reception in the world, but the exact composition of their addressed publics cannot entirely be known in advance. A public is always in excess of its known social basis. It must be more than a list of one's friends. It must include strangers.

Let me call this a second defining premise of the modern idea of a public:

2. *A public is a relation among strangers.*

Other kinds of writing – writing that has a definite addressee who can be known in advance – can, of course, go astray. Writing to a public incorporates that tendency of writing or speech as a condition of possibility. It cannot in the same way go astray, because reaching strangers is its primary orientation. In modernity, this understanding of the public is best illustrated by uses of print or electronic media, but it can also be extended to scenes of audible speech, if that speech is oriented to indefinite strangers, once the crucial background horizon of "public opinion" and its social imaginary has been made available. We've become capable of recognizing ourselves as strangers even when we know each other. Declaiming this essay to a group of intimates, I could still be heard as addressing a public.

The orientation to strangers is in one sense implied by a public's self-organization through discourse. A public sets its boundaries and its organization by its own discourse rather than by external frameworks only if it openly addresses people who are identified primarily through their participation in the discourse and who therefore cannot be known in advance.

A public might almost be said to be stranger-relationality in a pure form, because other ways of organizing strangers – nations, religions, races, guilds – have manifest positive content. They select strangers by criteria of territory or identity or belief or some other test of membership. One can address strangers in such contexts because a common identity has been established through independent means or institutions (creeds, armies, parties, and the like). A public, however, unites strangers through participation alone, at least in theory. Strangers come into relationship by its means, though the resulting social relationship might be peculiarly indirect and unspecifiable.

Once this kind of public is in place as a social imaginary, I might add, stranger sociability inevitably takes on a different character. In modern society, a stranger is not as marvelously exotic as the wandering outsider would have been to an ancient, medieval, or early-modern town. In that earlier social order, or in contemporary analogues, a stranger is mysterious, a disturbing presence requiring resolution.[3] In the context of a public, however, strangers can be treated as already belonging to our world. More: they *must* be. We are routinely oriented to them in common life. They are a normal feature of the social.

Strangers in the ancient sense – foreign, alien, misplaced – might of course be placed to a degree by Christendom, the *ummah*, a guild, or an army, affiliations one might share with strangers, making them a bit less strange. Strangers placed by means of these affiliations are on a path to commonality. Publics orient us to strangers in a different way. They are no longer merely people whom one does not yet know; rather, an environment of strangerhood is the necessary premise of some of our most prized ways of being. Where otherwise strangers need to be on a path to commonality, in modern forms strangerhood is the necessary medium of commonality. The modern social imaginary does not make

sense without strangers. A nation or public or market in which everyone could be known personally would be no nation or public or market at all. This constitutive and normative environment of strangerhood is more, too, than an objectively describable *Gesellschaft*; it requires our constant imagining.

The expansive force of these cultural forms cannot be understood apart from the way they make stranger relationality normative, reshaping the most intimate dimensions of subjectivity around co-membership with indefinite persons in a context of routine action. The development of forms that mediate the intimate theater of stranger relationality must surely be one of the most significant dimensions of modern history, though the story of this transformation in the meaning of strangers has been told only in fragments. It is hard to imagine such abstract modes of being as rights-bearing personhood, species being, and sexuality, for example, without forms that give concrete shape to the interactivity of those who have no idea with whom they interact. This dependence on the co-presence of strangers in our innermost activity, when we continue to think of strangerhood and intimacy as opposites, has at least some latent contradictions, many of which come to the fore, as we shall see, in counterpublic forms that make expressive corporeality the material for the elaboration of intimate life among publics of strangers.

The oddness of this orientation to strangers in public discourse can be understood better if we consider a third defining feature of discourse that addresses publics, one that follows from the address to strangers but is very difficult to describe:

3. *The address of public speech is both personal and impersonal.* Public speech can have great urgency and intimate import. Yet we know that it was addressed not exactly to us but to the stranger we were until the moment we happened to be addressed by it. (I

am thinking here of any genre addressed to a public, including novels and lyrics as well as criticism, other nonfictional prose, and almost all genres of radio, television, film, and Web discourse.) To inhabit public discourse is to perform this transition continually, and to some extent it remains present to consciousness. Public speech must be taken in two ways: as addressed to us and as addressed to strangers. The benefit in this practice is that it gives a general social relevance to private thought and life. Our subjectivity is understood as having resonance with others, and immediately so. But this is only true to the extent that the trace of our strangerhood remains present in our understanding of ourselves as the addressee.

This necessary element of impersonality in public address is one of the things missed from view in the Althusserian notion of interpellation, at least as it is currently understood. Louis Althusser's famous example is speech addressed to a stranger: a policeman says, "Hey, you!" In the moment of recognizing oneself as the person addressed, the moment of turning around, one is interpellated as the subject of state discourse.[4] Althusser's analysis had the virtues of showing the importance of imaginary identification and locating it not in the coercive or punitive force of the state but in the subjective practice of understanding. When the model of interpellation is extracted from his example to account for public culture generally, the analysis will be skewed because the case Althusser gives is not an example of public discourse. A policeman who says "Hey, you!" will be understood to be addressing a particular person, not a public. When one turns around, it is partly to see whether one is that person. If not, one goes on. If so, then all the others who might be standing on the street are bystanders, not addressees. With public speech, by contrast, we might recognize ourselves as addressees, but it is equally important that we remember that the speech was addressed to indefinite others, that in singling us out it does so not

on the basis of our concrete identity but by virtue of our participation in the discourse alone and therefore in common with strangers. It isn't just that we are addressed in public as certain kinds of persons or that we might not want to identify as that person (though this is often enough the case, as when the public is addressed as heterosexual, or white, or sports-minded, or American). We haven't been misidentified, exactly. It seems more to the point to say that publics are different from persons, that the address of public rhetoric is never going to be the same as address to actual persons, and that our partial nonidentity with the object of address in public speech seems to be part of what it means to regard something as public speech.

It might be helpful to think of public address in contrast to the modes of address that have come to be associated with the genres of gossip, lyric poetry, and sermons. Each of these three genres can be treated as part of public discourse under certain conditions; but each is organized by conventions – of interactive relationship, reading, and hearing – that ordinarily prevent the reflexivity of circulation from being salient in rhetorical address.

Gossip might seem to be a perfect instance of public discourse. It circulates widely among a social network, beyond the control of private individuals. It sets norms of membership in a diffuse way that cannot be controlled by a central authority. For these reasons, a number of scholars have celebrated its potential for popular sociability and for the weak-group politics of women, peasants, and others.[5] But gossip is never a relation among strangers. You gossip about particular people and to particular people. What you can get away with saying depends very much on whom you are talking to and what your status is in that person's eyes. Speak ill of someone when you are not thought to have earned the privilege, and you will be taken as slandering rather than gossiping. Gossip circulates without the awareness of some people, and it must be

prevented from reaching them in the wrong way. Intensely personal measurements of group membership, relative standing, and trust are the constant and unavoidable pragmatic work of gossip.[6]

An apparent exception is gossip about public figures who do not belong to the social network made by gossiping, especially when official or unofficial censorship makes scandal unreportable by more legitimate means. About such people it is possible to gossip among strangers, and the gossip often has both reflexivity ("People are saying..."; "Everybody knows that...") and timeliness (hot gossip versus stale news). A public seems to have come about by such means in eighteenth-century Paris. (Did you hear what the queen did with the dauphin? Guess what Mme de Pompadour has said now!) In the Philippines, to take a more recent example, cell-phone text messaging has become the principal medium by which a public reflexively circulates gossip about corruption scandals involving President Joseph Estrada. (The volume of text messaging there is said to exceed that of the European Union sevenfold.) Of course, in such a case, there might still be some of the risk and thrill of ordinary gossip's gamble of trust, since the conditions that make for public gossip also tend to interest police. To tell someone a juicy tidbit or a joke is to show that you trust him not to be an informer. In contemporary mass culture, too, gossip-based genres have proliferated, to the point of creating new professionals (gossip columnists) who can be celebrities and subjects of gossip in their own right. These kinds of talk might be better described as scandal rather than gossip, precisely to the degree that they circulate among strangers. Gossip in the usual sense, by creating bonds of shared secrecy and calibrating highly particularized relations of trust, dissolves the strangerhood essential to public address.

Lyric poetry is in a way the opposite. It appears to take no cognizance of its addressee whatsoever. "Shall I compare thee to a

summer's day?" does not exactly address *thee*. (Even the Hollywood version in *Shakespeare in Love*, which tried to construe "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" as literally addressed to Gwyneth Paltrow, was forced to show the nominal addressee holding the paper and simpering while reading the text aloud — to her maid!) Lyric conventions, which are automatically in place whenever we read a text as lyric poetry, allow for very special interpretations of things like mode of address and circulation; our misrecognition of the text seems to be necessary for producing some of lyric's most valued attributes of deep subjectivity. Virginia Jackson shows that many of the features of lyric utterance are ambiguously taken to be indexical to both an (imaginary) speaking event and to the (actual) reading event. As Jackson puts it:

> This structure is one in which saying "I" can stand for saying "you," in which the poet's solitude stands in for the solitude of the individual reader — a self-address so absolute every self can identify it as his own.... The "intersubjective confirmation of the self" performed by a reading of lyric based upon the identity between poet and reader must be achieved by denying to the poem any intersubjective economy of its own. On this view, in order to have an audience the lyric must not have one.[7]

Of course, lyric poems are in fact produced by particular persons and addressed to others, and they circulate in public media (even if only in manuscript). But to read them as lyric, we ignore those facts and reinterpret both the speaking event, the boundaries of the text, and all the figures of apostrophe in the text (even, or especially, in love lyrics, which have a special vocabulary of love that allows us to do this). The rhetoric of lyric, including its affects, scenes, and temporality, exploits this reading convention. In reading something as lyric, rather than regard the speaking voice as

wholly alienated to the text, we regard it as transcendent. Though it could only be produced through the displacement of writing, we read it with cultivated disregard of its circumstance of circulation, understanding it as an image of absolute privacy.

The contrast between lyric and public speech was underscored by John Stuart Mill in a classic 1833 essay. "Eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*," according to Mill. "Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude."[8] There is, as Northrop Frye puts it, "no word for the audience of the lyric."[9] We could, however, refine this contrast. Poetry is not actually overheard; it is read as overheard. And similarly, public speech is not just heard; it is heard (or read) *as* heard, not just by oneself but by others. The contrast may be carried through point by point. Public speech is no more addressed to a particular person than is lyric. Both require a very special apprehension of apostrophe. In the case of lyric, we regard the event not as communication but as our silent insertion in the self-communion of the speaker, constructing both an ideal self-presence for the speaking voice and an ideal intimacy between that voice and ourselves. In public speech, we incorporate an awareness of the distribution of the speech or text itself as essential to its addressee, which we nevertheless take to be in some measure ourselves. Lyric speech has no time: we read the scene of speech as identical with the moment of reading. Public speech, by contrast, requires the temporality of its own circulation — a point to which I will return in a moment.

So closely related are the textualizing practices of these two generic conventions of reading that one seems to be formed by negation of the other. Publics and lyrics both have long histories, in each case reaching to Antiquity.[10] It is an interesting subject for speculation that both come to have a different and much more

important role in modernity and that the period in which publics have acquired the full significance of popular sovereignty and the bourgeois public sphere also happens, perhaps not by coincidence, to be the period in which the lyric – now understood as timeless overheard self-communion – displaces all other poetic genres (epic, poems on affairs of state, georgic, elegy, satire). It is now thought of simply as poetry. Where other poetic genres had circulated among courtly circles, in manuscript coteries, or in print media endowed with public relevance, by the end of the eighteenth century such forms had become rare and archaic. Mill and Hegel, of course, delivered their influential characterizations of the genre at the end of this long process of the lyricization of the poetic, a process that also measures the polarization of poetic genres from the prosaic modes of public address.[11] Both the public sphere and the lyric mode found their ascendancy with print; both show signs of stress under the dominance of massified electronic media.

It is very difficult to hybridize these modes without compromising lyric transcendence, though I argue in the final essay of this book that some of Walt Whitman's more problematic texts seem to make such a compromise.[12] Poetry slams also sometimes create a counterpublic hybrid discourse, where poetry is pressured into embracing its scene of address (with, however, a corresponding loss of lyric transcendence).

A final contrast with sermons might be useful in understanding the reading practice necessary to the public. The sermon, after all, is an instance of public eloquence, and in the American tradition at least its cultural importance can hardly be overestimated. But is a sermon preached to a public? Sometimes, certainly: the political sermon has a long history, and in the Anglican tradition especially the sermon has often been understood as a genre of polite discourse. But there is also a long tradition in which political or literary sermons are not really preaching at all. In the

dissenting Protestant tradition that has made the form most powerful, sermonic eloquence and the preacherly role require that the consciousness of audience be blocked from consciousness in order for the rhetoric to work.

In "Of Ineffectual Hearing the Word," a 1641 sermon on listening to sermons, Thomas Shepard distinguishes between "external hearing," which anyone can have in ordinary discourse, and "internal hearing," which marks right listening to sermons. "When a man heares things generally delivered," he uses external hearing so long as he "never thinks the Lord is now speaking, and means me." But if there is internal hearing, "the word is like an exact picture, it looks every man in the face that looks on it, if God speaks in it.... When the Lord speaks, a man thinks now I have to do with God, if I resist I oppose a God." A historian might recognize here Shepard's interest in the Puritan psychology of conversion, or the influence of Thomas Hooker and John Cotton. But the point is the effect sermonic language tries to produce. "Hence it is one man is wrought on in a Sermon, another not," Shepard continues. "God hath singled out one, not the other that day.... At last he heares his secret thoughts and sins discovered, all his life is made known, and thinks 'tis the Lord verily that hath done this; now God speaks."[13]

As a standard of performance, this is a heavy burden for mortal speakers. It is very different from the controversialist's aim of persuasion; indeed, it resembles shamanistic performance, however much scholarly exposition and clerical debate might also mark American sermons in their early development. The preacher tries to meet this criterion of eloquence, striving to speak with something other than his individual voice, and to address the intimate hearer, creating a scene of hearing markedly different from the speech of one person to others in ordinary time. When it works, the hearer hears a voice that is more than the preacher's

and hears it as addressed to him or her in a way that excludes other congregants, even if they, too, turn out to be having moments of inner revelation. One Puritan sermon-goer of the early eighteenth century, Sarah Osborn, wrote in her memoirs, "Mr. Clap . . . told me the very secrets of my heart in his sermon, as plain as I could have told them to him, and indeed more so. His sermon was very terrible to me. . . . I saw the depravity of my nature; and how I was exposed to the infinite justice of an angry God."[14] The incomparable intensity of this effect is achieved by *not* recognizing sermons as public speech.

Public speech differs from both lyric and sermonic eloquence by construing its addressee as its circulation, not its private apprehension. The most private, inward, intimate act of reading can be converted by the category of the public into a form of stranger relationality. This can even happen with sermons, of course, though when it does the publicness of sermons is in tension with its performance of spiritualized truth. Such a hybridization of the sermon form seems to have become conspicuous, in the American context, in the course of the Great Awakening. In the earlier colonial setting, preaching had been understood within the web of hierarchical and intimate pastoral relationships between clergy and congregation. In the words of one historian, "Speaker and audience were steadily reminded of their *personal* place in the community; in no context were they strangers to one another, for no public gatherings took place outside of traditional associations based upon personal acquaintance and social rank."[15] The rise of itinerant preachers in revivals — which were also public-sphere mediated events, as several recent scholars have emphasized — changed the speaking relationship in preaching.[16] Suddenly men, even women, were preaching to strangers. The revival context and itinerant preaching made the publicness of the sermon much more salient, in a way that was perceived at the time to be scandalous. By the end of the century, as something like a modern sense of denominational confession became current in the United States, all congregations could be understood implicitly as belonging to a churchgoing public of strangers. A profound shift underlies this history. Scholars often emphasize the oral performance essential to revivalism, thinking that revival preaching is therefore a more popular or folk idiom than that of the learned, lettered clergy; in doing so, they miss the way even the most passionately oral preaching, when it addresses strangers as an indefinite audience of ongoing discourse, relies on a text-based sense of its public.[17] Responses like Sarah Osborn's, however, become rarer in the process. The shamanistic intensity of sermonic eloquence also begins to solicit a more public response in revivalism — not the silent inward meditation of Osborn, but responses that will be audible or visible to other members of the congregation. The so-called Second Great Awakening created a proliferation of these markedly public reception devices: weeping, barking, moaning, coming to the altar, and so on.[18] The intensity of revival affect owes much to the fact that intimate emotion is being performed in the presence of strangers, people who come and go in an indefinite ambit of a revival-going world. Yet for all the changes brought about in the revival context, sermonic eloquence continued to be recognized as a product of particular address by deity to sinner and not as an essentially *circulating* form.

The appeal to strangers in the circulating forms of public address thus helps us to distinguish public discourse from forms that address particular persons in their singularity. It remains less clear how a public could be translated into an image of *the* public, a social entity. Who is the public? Does it include my neighbors? The doorman in my building? My students? The people who show up in the gay bars and clubs? The bodega owners down the street from me? Someone who calls me on the phone or sends me an e-mail?

You? We encounter people in such disparate contexts that the idea of a body to which they all belong, and in which they could be addressed in speech, seems to have something wishful about it. To address a public, we don't go around saying the same thing to all these people. We say it in a venue of indefinite address and hope that people will find themselves in it. The difference can be a source of frustration, but it is also a direct implication of the self-organization of the public as a body of strangers united through the circulation of their discourse, without which public address would have none of its special importance to modernity.

Walter Lippmann in a way picked up on the odd nature of public address when he complained that no one could possibly be the sort of creature that is routinely addressed as the public of politics: the fully informed, universally interested and attentive, vigilant, potent, and decisive citizen. "I have not happened to meet anybody, from a President of the United States to a professor of political science, who came anywhere near to embodying the accepted ideal of the sovereign and omnicompetent citizen."[19] But it doesn't follow that politicians and journalists should be more realistic in their address. To think so is to mistake the addressee of public speech for an actual person. Lippmann thought the appropriate response was an honest assessment of the actual reception of public discourse, and therefore a more frankly elite administration:

> We must assume as a theoretically fixed premise of popular government that normally men as members of a public will not be well informed, continuously interested, nonpartisan, creative or executive. We must assume that a public is inexpert in its curiosity, intermittent, that it discerns only gross distinctions, is slow to be aroused and quickly diverted; that, since it acts by aligning itself, it personalizes whatever it considers, and is interested only when events have been melodramatized as a conflict.[20]

Interestingly, Lippmann cannot observe his own advice. Even in writing this passage, he writes to an alert and thoughtful public ("we," he calls it) with an assumption of activity. Public discourse itself has a kind of personality different from that of the people who make up a public.

In this passage, Lippmann stumbles across another of the principal differences between a public and any already-existing social group. A public is thought to be active, curious, alert. But actual people, he notices, are intermittent in their attention, only occasionally aroused, fitfully involved. He thinks this is a sad fact about the general character, comparing unfavorably with the greater energies of concentration that elites maintain in their engagement with public questions. But between ideally alert publics and really distracted people there will always be a gap, no matter what the social class or kind of public. This is because publics are only realized through active uptake.

4. *A public is constituted through mere attention.*

Most social classes and groups are understood to encompass their members all the time, no matter what. A nation, for example, includes its members whether they are awake or asleep, sober or drunk, sane or deranged, alert or comatose. Publics are different. Because a public exists only by virtue of address, it must predicate some degree of attention, however notional, from its members.

The cognitive quality of that attention is less important than the mere fact of active uptake. Attention is the principal sorting category by which members and nonmembers are discriminated. If you are reading this, or hearing it or seeing it or present for it, you are part of this public. You might be multitasking at the computer; the television might be on while you are vacuuming the carpet; or you might have wandered into hearing range of the speaker's podium in a convention hall only because it was on your

way to the bathroom. No matter: by coming into range, you fulfill the only entry condition demanded of a public. It is even possible for us to understand someone sleeping through a ballet performance as a member of that ballet's public, because most contemporary ballet performances are organized as voluntary events, open to anyone willing to attend or, in most cases, to pay to attend. The act of attention involved in showing up is enough to create an addressable public. Some kind of active uptake, however somnolent, is indispensable.

The existence of a public is contingent on its members' activity, however notional or compromised, and not on its members' categorical classification, objectively determined position in the social structure, or material existence. In the self-understanding that makes them work, publics thus resemble the model of voluntary association that is so important to civil society. Since the early-modern period, more and more institutions have come to conform to this model. The old idea of an established national church, for example, allowed the church to address itself to parish members literate or illiterate, virtuous or vicious, competent or idiotic. Increasingly, churches in a multidenominational world must think of themselves instead as contingent on their members; they welcome newcomers, keep membership rolls, and solicit attention. Some doctrinal emphases, like those on faith or conversion, make it possible for churches to orient themselves to that active uptake on which they are increasingly dependent.

Still, one can join a church and then stop going. In some cases, one can even be born into one. Publics, by contrast, lacking any institutional being, commence with the moment of attention, must continually predicate renewed attention, and cease to exist when attention is no longer predicated. They are virtual entities, not voluntary associations. Because their threshold of belonging is an active uptake, however, they can be understood within the

conceptual framework of civil society; that is, as having a free, voluntary, and active membership. Wherever a liberal conception of personality obtains, the moment of uptake that constitutes a public can be seen as an expression of volition on the part of its members. And this fact has enormous consequences. It allows us to understand publics as scenes of self-activity, of historical rather than timeless belonging, and of active participation rather than ascriptive belonging. Under the right conditions, it even allows us to attribute agency to a public, even though that public has no institutional being or concrete manifestation. (More on this later.)

Public discourse craves attention like a child. Texts clamor at us. Images solicit our gaze. Look here! Listen! Hey! In doing so, they by no means render us passive. Quite the contrary. The modern system of publics creates a demanding social phenomenology. Our willingness to process a passing appeal determines which publics we belong to and performs their extension. The experience of social reality in modernity feels quite unlike that in societies organized by kinship, hereditary status, local affiliation, mediated political access, parochial nativity, or ritual. In those settings, one's place in the common order is what it is regardless of one's inner thoughts, however intense their affective charge might sometimes be. The appellative energy of publics puts a different burden on us: it makes us believe our consciousness to be decisive. The direction of our glance can constitute our social world.

The themes I've discussed so far — the self-organization of publics through discourse, their orientation to strangers, the resulting ambiguity of personal and impersonal address, membership by mere attention — can be clarified if we remember their common assumption, which goes a long way toward explaining the historical development of the other four:

5. *A public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse.*

This dimension is easy to forget if we think only about a speech event involving speaker and addressee. In that localized exchange, circulation may seem irrelevant, extraneous. That is one reason why sender/receiver or author/reader models of public communication are so misleading. No single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, even a single medium. All are insufficient to create the kind of reflexivity that we call a public, since a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse. Not texts themselves create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time. Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and when a responding discourse can be postulated, can a text address a public.

Between the discourse that comes before and the discourse that comes after one must postulate some kind of link. And the link has a social character; it is not mere consecutiveness in time but an interaction. The usual way of imagining the interactive character of public discourse is through metaphors of conversation, answering, talking back. Argument and polemic, as manifestly dialogic genres, continue to have a privileged role in the self-understanding of publics. Indeed, it is remarkable how little work in even the most sophisticated forms of theory has been able to disentangle public discourse from its self-understanding as conversation.[21] In addressing a public, however, even texts of the most rigorously argumentative and dialogic genres also addresses onlookers, not just parties to argument. They try to characterize the field of possible interplay. When appearing in a public field, genres of argument and polemic must accommodate themselves to the special conditions of public address; the agonistic interlocutor is coupled with passive interlocutors, known enemies with indifferent strangers, parties present to a dialogue situation

with parties whose textual location might be in other genres or scenes of circulation entirely. The meaning of any utterance depends on what is known and anticipated from all these different quarters. In public argument or polemic, the principal act is that of projecting the field of argument itself—its genre, its range of circulation, its stakes, its idiom, its repertoire of agencies. Any position is reflexive, not only asserting itself but characterizing its relation to other positions up to limits that are the imagined scene of circulation. The interactive relation postulated in public discourse, in other words, goes far beyond the scale of conversation or discussion to encompass a multigeneric lifeworld organized not just by a relational axis of utterance and response but by potentially infinite axes of citation and characterization.

Anything that addresses a public is meant to undergo circulation. This helps us to understand why print, and the organization of markets for print, were historically so central in the development of the public sphere. But print is neither necessary nor sufficient for publication in the modern sense; not every genre of print can organize the space of circulation. The particularly addressed genres I listed earlier—correspondence, memos, valentines, bills—are not expected to circulate (indeed, circulating them can be not just strange but highly unethical), and that is why they are not oriented to a public.

Circulation also accounts for the way a public seems both internal and external to discourse, both notional and material. From the concrete experience of a world in which available forms circulate, one projects a public. And both the known and the unknown are essential to the process. The known element in the addressee enables a scene of practical possibility; the unknown, a hope of transformation. Writing to a public helps to make a world insofar as the object of address is brought into being partly by postulating and characterizing it. This performative ability

depends, however, on that object's being not entirely fictitious—not postulated merely, but recognized as a real path for the circulation of discourse. That path is then treated as a social entity.

The ability to address the world made up by the circulation of cross-referencing discourse seems to have developed over a long period, at least from the late sixteenth century to the late eighteenth. In the English case, for example, many of the promotional tracts for colonization of the New World address potential investors or supporters who are understood to have been addressed by competing representations. (That is why so many are called "A True Discourse," "A True Report," and so on.) Yet these same tracts tend to regard this as an unnatural and unfortunate condition that could be righted by properly authoritative and true testimony. Eventually it became possible to thematize circulation, to regard it as an essential fact of common life, and to organize a social imaginary in which it would be regarded as normative.

It is possible to see this cultural formation emerging in England in the seventeenth century. Let me offer a curious example: a 1670 report from the reign of Charles II of the activities in two Whig booksellers' shops. It is an interesting example because the (presumably) royalist author of the report regards those activities with suspicion, to say the least. He describes public discourse without any of the normative self-understanding of public discourse. "Every afternoon," the report says, the shops receive from all over the city accounts of news ("all novells and occurrents so penned as to make for the disadvantage of the King and his affairs"), written reports of resolutions and speeches in Parliament, and speeches on topics of public business. These reports are made available to the booksellers' regular clients, who, according to the report, include young lawyers ("who here generally receive their tincture and corruption"), "ill-affected citizens of all sorts," "ill-affected gentry," and "emissaries and agents of the severall

parties and factions about town." The reports and speeches available for these readers were all registered in a central catalog and could be ordered individually from the copyists:

> Against the time of their coming the Masters of those Shops have a grand book or books, wherein are registred ready for them, all or most of the forenamed particulars; which they dayly produce to those sorts of people to be read, and then, if they please, they either carry away copies, or bespeak them against another day.

The circulation of the scribal reports went beyond London, too. "They take care to communicate them by Letter all over the kingdome, and by conversation throughout the City and suburbs. The like industry is used by the masters of those shops, who together with their servants are every afternoon and night busied in transcribing copies, with which they drive a trade all over the kingdome."[22]

The two booksellers of the account were producing a market, in what sounds like a very busy entrepreneurial scene. Some of the elements in the account suggest the norms of the emergent public sphere: the scribal trade promotes private discussion of common concerns; it stands in opposition to power (though here that is regarded as disaffection rather than as a normative role for criticism); and it occupies metatopical secular space.[23] It is not clear from this account whether the participants understood their relation to each other as a relation to a public. (It is somewhat unlikely that they did; one scholar, claiming that "there was as yet no 'public,'" notes that "Dryden always uses the word 'people' where we should now say 'public.'"[24]) The genres circulated in this report are themselves mostly familiar ones of correspondence and speeches, both of which have specific addressees. What is striking, though, is the clarity with which we can see in this

account the scene of circulation that is presupposed by the idea of a public. And curiously, it is not simply a scene of print but of scribal copying. That may be one reason why the scene is so scandalous to the informer. The circulatory practices are thought to be illegitimate uses of their genres and modes of address.

In a study published ten years ago, I argued that the consciousness of the public in public address developed as a new way of understanding print, in the context of a republican political language that served as a metalanguage for print, though this consciousness of public address could then be extended to scenes of speech such as political sermons. Reading printed texts in this context, we incorporate an awareness of the indefinite others to whom they are addressed as part of the meaning of their printedness.[25] I now see that in making this argument, I missed a crucial element in the perception of publicness. In order for a text to be public, we must recognize it not simply as a diffusion to strangers but also as a temporality of circulation.

The informer's report makes this clear, calling attention not just to the (possibly seditious) connections forged among strangers but to the punctual circulation that makes those connections a regular scene. Reports are said to come in "every afternoon" and to be indexed promptly. Customers come or send their agents daily for copies, according to rhythms that are widely known and relied on. We are not seeing simply a bookseller distributing copies far and wide; rather, it is a regular flow of discourse in and out, punctuated by daily rhythms and oriented to that punctuality as to news ("novells and occurrents"). Circulation organizes time and vice versa. Public discourse is contemporary, and it is oriented to the future; the contemporaneity and the futurity in question are those of its own circulation.

The key development in the emergence of modern publics was the appearance of newsletters and other temporally structured

forms oriented to their own circulation: not just controversial pamphlets, but regular and dated papers, magazines, almanacs, annuals, and essay serials. They developed reflexivity about their circulation through reviews, reprintings, citations, controversies. These forms single out circulation both through their sense of temporality and through the way they allow discourse to move in different directions. I don't just speak to you; I speak to the public in a way that enters a cross-citational field of many other people speaking to the public.

The temporality of circulation is not continuous or indefinite; it is punctual. There are distinct moments and rhythms, from which distance in time can be measured. Papers and magazines are dated and when they first appear are news. Reviews appear with a sense of timeliness. At a longer pace, there are now publishing seasons with their cycles of catalogs and marketing campaigns. The exception might seem to be televisual media, given the enormous significance they attribute to their liveness and "flow" — formally salient features of so much broadcasting, whereby televisual forms are understood to have a greater immediacy than codex or other text formats. Yet even in televisual media, punctual rhythms of daily and weekly emission are still observed; think of all their serial forms and marked rhythms such as prime time and the news hour.[26]

Reflexive circulation might come about in any number of ways. In France, as in England, it appeared first in print serial forms. *Le Mercure galant*, a newspaper edited by Jean Donneau de Visé, seems to have pioneered many of the devices of reflexive circulation in the late 1670s, including reader letters and a rhetoric of readerly judgment.[27] In this case, the idea that readers participated in the circulation of judgments, thought at the time by Jean de La Bruyère and others to have been a solecism, gradually drew the sense of the term "public" away from the image of a passive

theatrical audience.[28] For Abbé du Bos in 1719, "The word *public* is used here to mean those persons who have acquired enlightenment, either through reading or through life in society [*le commerce du monde*]. They are the only ones who can determine the value of poems or paintings."[29] In France, this sense of a critical public did not easily transfer to politics, since legitimate printed news was almost nonexistent under the ancien régime. Yet as Robert Darnton has shown, eighteenth-century Paris gave rise to countless other forms of reflexive circulation. Many of them were known by names that "are unknown today and cannot be translated into English equivalents": *nouvelliste de bouche, mauvais propos, bruit public, on-dit, pasquinade, Pont Neuf, canard, feuille volante, factum, libelle, chronique scandaleuse.* More familiar genres, such as popular songs, seem to have circulated in uniquely Parisian ways.[30] The differences between these genres and their Anglo-American counterparts say much about the difference between the corresponding senses of public life, its legitimacy, and the conditions under which agency might be attributed to a public. Nevertheless, they were forms for giving reflexivity to a field of circulation among strangers in punctual rhythms.

6. *Publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation.*

The punctual time of circulation is crucial to the sense that discussion is currently unfolding in a sphere of activity. It is not timeless, like meditation; nor is it without issue, like speculative philosophy. Not all circulation happens at the same rate, of course, and this accounts for the dramatic differences among publics in their relation to possible scenes of activity. A public can only act in the temporality of the circulation that gives it existence. The more punctual and abbreviated the circulation, and the more discourse indexes the punctuality of its own circulation, the closer a

public stands to politics. At longer rhythms or more continuous flows, action becomes harder to imagine. This is the fate of academic publics, a fact very little understood when academics claim by intention or proclamation to be doing politics. In modernity, politics takes much of its character from the temporality of the headline, not the archive.

Publics have an ongoing life: one doesn't publish to them once for all (as one does, say, to a scholarly archive). It's the way texts circulate, and become the basis for further representations, that convinces us that publics have activity and duration. A text, to have a public, must continue to circulate through time, and because this can only be confirmed through an intertextual environment of citation and implication, all publics are intertextual, even intergeneric. This is often missed from view because the activity and duration of publics are commonly stylized as conversation or decision making. I have already suggested that these are misleading ideologizations. Now we can see why they are durable illusions: because they confer agency on publics. There is no moment at which the conversation stops and a decision ensues, outside of elections, and those are given only by legal frameworks, not by publics themselves. Yet the ideologization is crucial to the sense that publics act in secular time. To sustain this sense, public discourse indexes itself temporally with respect to moments of publication and a common calendar of circulation.

One way the Internet and other new media may be profoundly changing the public sphere is through the change they imply in temporality. Highly mediated and highly capitalized forms of circulation are increasingly organized as continuous ("24/7 instant access") rather than punctual.[31] At the time of this writing, Web discourse has very little of the citational field that would allow us to speak of it as discourse unfolding through time. Once a Web site is up, it can be hard to tell how recently it was

posted or revised or how long it will continue to be posted. Most sites are not archived. For the most part, they are not centrally indexed. The reflexive apparatus of Web discourse consists mostly of hypertext links and search engines, and these are not punctual. So although there are exceptions, including the migration of some print serials to electronic format and the successful use of the Web by some social movements, it remains unclear to what extent the changing technology will be assimilable to the temporal framework of public discourse.[32] If the change of infrastructure continues at this pace, and if modes of apprehension change accordingly, the absence of punctual rhythms may make it very difficult to connect localized acts of reading to the modes of agency in the social imaginary of modernity. It may even be necessary to abandon "circulation" as an analytic category. But here I merely offer this topic for speculation.

Until recently at least, public discourse has presupposed daily and weekly rhythms of circulation. It has also presupposed an ability — natural to us now, but rather peculiar if one thinks about it — to address this scene of circulation as a social entity. The clearest example, or at any rate the most eloquent, is the *Spectator*, some forty years after the report of the Whig booksellers. Like the booksellers' newsletters, the *Spectator* was a daily form, widely and industriously circulated.[33] "To be Continued every Day," declares the first number, which was designed to look like the newspapers of the day even though, as no. 262 declares, the paper "has not in it a single Word of News." The *Spectator* followed a model worked out by John Dunton, whose *Athenian Mercury* (1691) first began printing regular correspondence from readers, whom it allowed to remain anonymous.[34] The *Spectator* developed a rhetoric that gave a new normative force to Dunton's methods. It ostentatiously avoided political polemic. Unlike the output of the Whig booksellers in the 1670 report, it could not be described

as seditious; yet it describes its readers as an active public, a critical tribunal. Readers are called on to pass informed and reflective judgment on fashion, taste, manners, and gender relations. The procedure of impersonal discussion gives private matters full public relevance, while allowing the participants in that discussion to have the kind of generality that had formerly been the privilege of the state or the church. The *Spectator* claims to be general, addressing everyone, merely on the basis of humanity. It is the voice of civil society.[35]

Like Dunton's *Athenian Mercury*, but with a much richer formal vocabulary, the *Spectator* developed a reflexivity about its own circulation, coordinating its readers' relations to other readers. It does not merely assert the fact of public circulation, though it does frequently allude to its own popularity; it includes feedback loops, both in the letters from readers real and imagined and in the members of the club and other devices. Essays refer to previous essays and to the reception of those essays; installments end with, and are sometimes wholly given over to, letters that are or purport to be readers' responses. The fictional persona of the Spectator himself represents the embodiment of a private reader: an observant but perversely mute wanderer ("I am frequently seen in the most publick Places, tho' there are not above half a dozen of my select Friends that know me" [no. 1], the essential stranger, "Mr. *what-d'ye-call-him*" [no. 4], witnessing in dumb privacy the whole social field, combining "all the Advantages of Company with all the Privileges of Solitude" [no. 131]). His club represents a model of the male reception context (constantly in need of supplementation by accounts of and letters from female readers). One is constantly reminded of "this great City inquiring Day by Day after these my Papers."[36] A repertoire of highly temporalized affects and interests — scandal, fascination, fashion, news addiction, mania, curiosity — are projected as the properties not

just of individuals but of the scene of circulation itself, without which such affects would lack resonance. This rhetoric represents the subjective mode of being attributed to the public. It describes private and individual acts of reading, but in such a way as to make temporally indexed circulation among strangers the immanent meaning and emotional resonance of those reading acts.

The *Spectator* first perfected the representation of its own circulation. It marks what can now be taken for granted: that public discourse must be circulated, not just emitted in one direction. Even mass media, which because of their heavy capitalization are conspicuously asymmetrical, take care to fake a reciprocity that they must overcome in order to succeed. Contemporary mass media have even more elaborate devices of the kind that Addison and Steele developed: viewer mail, call-in shows, 900-number polling, home-video shows, game-show contestants, town meetings, studio audiences, man-on-the-street interviews, and so on. These genres create feedback loops to characterize their own space of consumption. As with the *Spectator*, too, reflexivity is managed through affect and idiom as well; the *Spectator* essays comment on slang (for example, "jilts") in a way that attributes to folk usage the same historical present tense as the essays' circulation.[37] Mass culture laces its speech with catchphrases that suture it to informal speech, even though those catchphrases are often common in informal speech only because they were picked up from mass texts in the first place. In the United States, sports metaphors are obvious examples, as when politicians describe their speeches or proposals as slam dunks or home runs.

Sometimes the layering of reflexive postures toward circulation can be dizzyingly complex, as happened in 2001 when Budweiser advertisements turned the black street greeting "Whassup?" into a slogan. This "signature catch phrase," as the *New York Times* called it, once broadcast, could subsequently be "joked about on

talk shows, parodied on Web sites and mimicked in other commercials." Ironically, all this repetition of "Whassup?" was understood not as new instances of the street greeting itself but as references to the commercial. A relation to the mass circulation of the phrase came to be part of the meaning of the phrase. That this should happen, moreover, was the deliberate design of the advertising firm that produced the commercial – one DDB Worldwide, part of what is called Omnicom Group:

> The team uses sophisticated research and old-fashioned legwork – like checking out new art forms or going to underground film festivals – to anticipate what is about to become hip to its target audience of mostly men in their 20's and 30's. The language, styles and attitudes it finds are then packaged in ad campaigns that are broadcast so often that they become part of the public consciousness.[38]

The company sells this circulatory effect to its clients as "talk value." When office workers use catchphrases to joke around the coffee machine, they unwittingly realize the talk value that has already been sold to the corporation whose products were advertised. Indeed, DDB Worldwide has registered the phrase "talk value" as a trademark. As the phrase suggests, talk value allows a structured but mobile interplay between the reflexivity of publics (the talk) and the reflexivity of capital (the value). Neither is reducible to the other, and the DDB strategy only works if the relation between the popular idiom and the sale of beer is indirect, a process of mutual feedback experienced by individuals as a medium for improvisation.

Public reflexivity and market reflexivity have been interarticulated in a variety of ways from the beginning. In the case of the Whig booksellers, consciousness of a public created a new and expansive circulation for text commodities. In the *Spectator*, a

greater range of dialectical stances opened up as the reflex consciousness of a public turned its critical attention on the reflex consumption of commodities in such forms as fashion. In contemporary mass culture, the play between these different ways of rendering the field of circulation reflexive has created countless nuances for the performance of subjectivity. To take only the most obvious examples, we speak of a "mainstream," of "alternative" culture, of "crossover" trends, naming and evaluating stylistic affinities by characterizing the field in which they circulate.

Talk value has an affective quality. You don't just mechanically repeat signature catchphrases. You perform through them your social placement. Different social styles can be created through different levels of reflexivity in this performance. Too obvious parroting of catchphrases — if, for example, you walk into the office on the morning after Budweiser runs its commercial and grab the first opportunity to say "Whassup?" — can mark you in some contexts as square, unhip, a passive relay in the circulation. In other contexts, it could certify you as one of the gang, showing that you, too, were watching the show with everyone else. Stylistic affinities can perform many functions, of course, but in mass culture they always involve adopting a differential stance toward the field of their circulation. Characterizations of that field are the stuff of performed stances that can range from immersion to irony or aggressivity, in a way that always has some affective charge: hipness, normalcy, hilarity, currency, quaintness, freakishness, and so on. What is called "vernacular" performance is therefore in reality structured by a continually shifting field of artfulness in managing the reflexivity of mass circulation. (Many American critics, seeing only one side of this process, like to interpret such artfulness as evidence of a folk or popular style in the "appropriation" of mass culture; for them, this counts as evidence against the Frankfurt School analysis of mass culture.)

The use of such pseudo vernaculars or metavernaculars helps create the impression of a vital feedback loop despite the immense asymmetry of production and reception that defines mass culture. It helps sustain the legitimating sense that mass texts move through a space that is, after all, an informal lifeworld. That the maintenance of this feedback circuit so often takes the form of humor suggests that, as with all joking, there is a lively current of unease powering the wit. Unease, perhaps, on both sides of the recurring dialectic: to be hip is to fear the mass circulation that feeds on hipness and that in turn makes it possible; while to be normal (in the "mainstream") is to have anxiety about the counterpublics that define themselves through such distinctively embodied performance that one cannot lasso them back into general circulation without risking the humiliating exposure of inauthenticity.

In the *Spectator*, Essay 34 neatly illustrates how these feedback provisions combine with the punctual temporality of the diurnal form and an emergent ideology of polite sociability to produce the understanding of a public structured by its own discourse:

> The Club of which I am a Member, is very luckily compos'd of such Persons as are engag'd in different Ways of Life, and deputed as it were out of the most conspicuous Classes of Mankind: By this Means I am furnish'd with the greatest Variety of Hints and Materials, and know every thing that passes in the different Quarters and Divisions, not only of this great City, but of the whole Kingdom. My Readers too have the Satisfaction to find, that there is no Rank or Degree among them who have not their Representative in this Club, and that there is always some Body present who will take Care of their respective Interests, that nothing may be written or publish'd to the Prejudice or Infringement of their just Rights and Privileges.

Mr. Spectator relates that the members of the club have been relaying to him "several Remarks which they and others had made upon these my Speculations, as also with the various Success which they had met with among their several Ranks and Degrees of Readers." They act as his field reporters, allowing the *Spectator* to reflect on its own reception.

What follows is a fable of reading. Will Honeycomb, the ladies' man, reports that some ladies of fashion have been offended by criticisms of their taste; Andrew Freeport, the merchant, responds that those criticisms were well deserved, unlike those against merchants; the Templar defends those but objects to satires of the Inns of Court; and so on. Every member of the club inflects his reception of the essays with the interests that define the social class of which he is a typification. In the aggregate, each cancels out the others. It is left to the clergyman – a character who scarcely appears anywhere else in the essay series – to explain "the Use this Paper might be of to the Publick" in challenging the interests of the orders and ranks. The result is a sense of a *general* public, by definition not embodied in any person or class but realized by the scene of circulation as the reception context of a common object.

"In short," concludes Mr. Spectator, "If I meet with any thing in City, Court, or Country, that shocks Modesty or good Manners, I shall use my utmost Endeavours to make an Example of it." He continues:

> I must however intreat every particular Person, who does me the Honour to be a Reader of this Paper, never to think himself, or any one of his Friends or Enemies, aimed at in what is said: For I promise him, never to draw a faulty Character which does not fit at least a Thousand People; or to publish a single Paper, that is not written in the Spirit of Benevolence and with a Love to Mankind.

Steele here coaches his readers in the personal/impersonal generic conventions of public address: I never speak to you without speaking to a thousand others. This form of address is tightly knit up with a social imaginary: any character or trait I depict typifies a whole social stratum. Individual readers who participate in this discourse learn to place themselves, as characterized types, in a world of urbane social knowledge, while also ethically detaching themselves from the particular interests that typify them, turning themselves by means of a "Spirit of Benevolence" and "Love to Mankind" into the reading subjects of a widely circulating form.

And not just reading subjects. The achievement of this cultural form is to allow participants in its discourse to understand themselves as directly and actively belonging to a social entity that exists historically in secular time and has consciousness of itself, though it has no existence apart from the activity of its own discursive circulation. In some contexts, it can even be understood to act in the world, to claim moral authority, to be sovereign. A great deal must be postulated for the form to work in the world: not only the material conditions of a circulating medium, but appropriate reading or consuming practices, as well as a social imaginary in which stranger sociability could become ordinary, valuable, and in some ways normative. Such a normative horizon was, by the point of the *Spectator*, well articulated. An ethical disposition, a social imaginary, an extremely specialized set of formal conventions, and a temporality – each could seem to imply and follow from the others.

The discourse of a public is a linguistic form from which the social conditions of its own possibility are in large part derived. The magic by which discourse conjures a public into being, however, remains imperfect because of how much it must presuppose. And because many of the defining elements in the self-understanding of publics are to some extent always contradicted by

practice, the sorcerer must continually cast spells against the darkness. A public seems to be self-organized by discourse but in fact requires preexisting forms and channels of circulation. It appears to be open to indefinite strangers but in fact selects participants by criteria of shared social space (though not necessarily territorial space), habitus, topical concerns, intergeneric references, and circulating intelligible forms (including idiolects or speech genres). These criteria inevitably have positive content. They enable confidence that the discourse will circulate along a real path, but they limit the extension of that path. Discourse addressed to a public seeks to extend its circulation – otherwise, the public dwindles to a group – yet the need to characterize the space of circulation means that it is simultaneously understood as having the content and differential belonging of a group, rather than simply being open to the infinite and unknowable potential of circulation among strangers. Reaching strangers is public discourse's primary orientation, but to make those unknown strangers into a public it must locate them as a social entity. Public discourse circulates, but it does so in struggle with its own conditions.

The *Spectator* is understood as circulating to indefinite strangers, but of course the choice of language and the organization of markets for print make it seem natural that those strangers will be English. The closing peroration of the essay coaches its readers in an ethical disposition of impartial publicness; but it is also the ethos of a social class. The essay's style – itself a landmark in the history of English prose – moderates all the interests and characters of its reception context, allowing a speech that can simultaneously address the merchant, the squire, the courtier, the servant, the lady; but it is also the marker of a social type (masculine bourgeois moral urbanity) itself. In these and similar ways, although the language addresses an impersonal, indefinite, and self-organized expanse of circulation, it also elaborates (and masks as unmarked humanity) a particular culture, its embodied way of life, its reading practices, its ethical conventions, its geography, its class and gender dispositions, and its economic organization (in which the serial essay circulates as it does because it is, after all, a commodity on a market).

The *Spectator* is not unusual in having these limitations. If anything, it is unusual in the degree of its social porousness, the range of voices that it makes audible, the number of contexts that it opens for transformation. Even in the best of cases, some friction inevitably obtains between public discourse and its environment, given the circularity in the conventions and postulates that make the social imaginary of the public work. To some degree, this friction is unavoidable because of the chicken-and-egg problem with which I began; the imaginary being of the public must be projected from already circulating discourse.

One result is a special kind of politics that is difficult to grasp in the usual framework of politics as a field of interest-bearing strategic actors in specific relations of power and subordination. In such a framework, the contradiction between the idea of a public and its realization might be said to be more or less ideological. Evidence will not be wanting for such a view. When, in Essay 34, the reading audience is characterized as "Mankind," we have a rather obvious example.[39] Because the positive identity of a public always remains partly covert – given the premises of self-organization through discourse, address to strangers, and membership through mere attention – the limitations imposed by its speech genres, medium, and presupposed social base are always in conflict with its own enabling postulates. When any public is taken to be *the* public, those limitations invisibly order the political world.

Many critiques of the idea of the public in modern thought rest on this covert content. It is one of the things people have in

mind when they say, for example, that the public is essentially white or essentially male.[40] It has become customary, in the wake of arguments over Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, to lament or protest the arbitrary closures of the publics that came into being with the public sphere as their background. The peculiar dynamic of postulation and address by which public speech projects the social world has mainly been understood as ideology, domination, exclusion. With reason: the history of the public sphere abounds with evidence of struggle for domination through this means and the resulting bad faith of the dominant public culture. What the critiques tend to miss, however, is that the tension inherent in the form goes well beyond any strategy of domination. The projection of a public is a new, creative, and distinctively modern mode of power.

One consequence of this tension in the laws of public discourse is a problem of style. In addressing indefinite strangers, public discourse puts a premium on accessibility. But there is no infinitely accessible language, and to imagine that there should be is to miss other equally important needs of publics: to concretize the world in which discourse circulates, to offer its members direct and active membership through language, to place strangers on a shared footing. For these purposes, language must be concrete, making use of the vernaculars of its circulatory space. So, in publics, a double movement is always at work. Styles are mobilized, but they are also framed as styles. Sometimes the framing is hierarchical, a relation of marked to unmarked. Sometimes the result can be more relativizing. Quite commonly the result can be a double-voiced hybrid. Differential deployment of style is essential to the way public discourse creates the consciousness of stranger sociability. In this, it closely resembles the kind of double-voicing of speech genres classically analyzed by Bakhtin: "For the speakers . . . generic languages and professional jargons are directly intentional – they denote and express directly and fully, and are capable of expressing themselves without mediation; but outside, that is, for those not participating in the given purview, these languages may be treated as objects, as typifactions, as local color."[41] Bakhtin calls this the "critical interanimation of languages."[42]

Perhaps for this reason, the *Spectator* obsessively represents scenes on the margin of its own public, places where its own language might circulate but that it cannot (or will not) capture as its addressee. One example is a hysterical moment in *Spectator* no. 217. Mr. Spectator has received a letter, signed "Kitty Termagant," which turns out to be another of the many letters describing clubs similar to the Spectator's – in this case, the Club of She-Romps. Its members meet once a week, at night, in a room hired for the purpose (in other words, a place that is significantly public, though also secluded from open view). "We are no sooner come together," writes Kitty, "than we throw off all that Modesty and Reservedness with which our Sex are obliged to disguise themselves in publick Places. I am not able to express the Pleasure we enjoy from ten at Night till four in the Morning, in being as rude as you Men can be, for your Lives. As our Play runs high the Room is immediately filled with broken Fans, torn Petticoats, lappets of Head-dresses, Flounces, Furbelows, Garters, and Working-Aprons."[43]

The She-Romps seem to be designed almost as an inverted image of the Spectator's own club. His is all male, theirs female. His is regulated by an ethic of bourgeois moral urbanity – differences of class and self-interest correct each other through the general discussion. Theirs throws off the restraints of decorum. Differences are not balanced through equable conversation but unleashed through raw physical play. It's a bitch fight. And although men might have their own pleasures in fantasizing such a scene, the Spectator more than hints at some antipathy. Kitty Termagant tells

us that the She-Romps refer to the rags and tatters of their discarded clothing as "*dead Men*."[44]

Women, of course, are hardly excluded directly from the public of the *Spectator*. Quite the contrary. In the fourth paper, Mr. Spectator announces: "I shall take it for the greatest Glory of my Work, if among reasonable Women this Paper may furnish *Tea-Table Talk*."[45] Women readers are crucial to the *Spectator*'s sense of its public, and gender relations are made the subject of critical reflection in a way that must have felt dramatic and transformative. The *Spectator* represents the Club of She-Romps to highlight, by contrast, the urbanity and restraint of its own social ethic. The Spectator neither excludes women outright nor frankly asserts male superiority. He does, however, display what he regards as the essentially unpublic character of the She-Romps' interaction. He uses an uneasy mix of mocking humor, male fear, and urbane scandal to remind the reader of the polite sociability required for his own confidence in a public composed of strangers.

The She-Romps cannot afford that confidence. For this and other reasons, the Club of She-Romps cannot really be called a public at all. It is a finite club of members known to one another, who would not be able to secure the freedom to meet without the security of mutual knowledge. Like most gossip, which is strictly regulated by a sense of group membership and social position, it is not oriented to strangers. The She-Romps are unpublic not just in being a closed club; the Spectator's club, after all, is equally closed. Yet we are given to understand that it cannot open onto a public, the way the Spectator's club does within his essays. It expresses a style of sociability too embodied, too aggressional, and too sexualized to be imagined as the indefinite circulation of discourse among strangers. These women are not content to be "reasonable Women" whose highest mode of publicness is "*Tea-Table Talk*"; they want their publicness to be modeled on some-

thing other than mere private acts of reading. "We are no sooner come together," writes Kitty, "than we throw off all that Modesty and Reservedness with which our Sex are obliged to disguise themselves in publick Places." It is this refusal of any familiar norm for stranger sociability rather than simple femaleness that makes them a counterimage to the public.

The She-Romps, however, clearly want to alter the norms of "publick Places" so as to allow themselves the same physical freedoms as men, as well as an ability to meet with other women who share their history of frustration. They aspire to a public or quasi-public physicality. But dominant gender norms are such that this quasi-public physicality looks like intimacy out of place. It looks most antipublic when it looks like sexuality: "Once a month we *Demolish a Prude*, that is, we get some queer formal Creature in among us, and unrig her in an instant. Our last Month's Prude was so armed and fortified in Whale-bone and Buckram that we had much ado to come at her, but you would have died with laughing to have seen how the sober awkard [*sic*] thing looked, when she was forced out of her Intrenchments."[46] How exactly *did* the queer creature look? Thrilled? Appalled? Or simply speechless? Kitty says no more. The scene can be taken as representing the necessary involvement of strangers in the subjective life of any public, but with its tone raised first to an anxious pitch and then to muteness by the idea that such involvement might also be corporeal and intimate.

Interestingly, it is at just this moment that Kitty invites the Spectator to open her club's scenes to public discourse as he does with his own: "In short, Sir, 'tis impossible to give you a true Notion of our Sport, unless you would come one Night amongst us; and tho' it be directly against the Rules of our Society to admit a Male Visitant, we repose so much Confidence in your Silence and Taciturnity, that 'twas agreed by the whole Club, at our last

Meeting, to give you Entrance for one Night as a Spectator."[47] The women seek, in effect, to open the transformative intent of their coming together onto the critical estrangement of public discourse.

The Spectator refuses. "I do not at present find in my self any Inclination to venture my Person with her and her romping Companions . . . and should apprehend being *Demolished* as much as the *Prude*."[48] This is a bit of a joke, since Mr. Spectator has only a ghost's body to demolish; he is an allegorical form of the reading eye. But he has something to demolish nonetheless: his own enabling ideology of polite publicness, the norms that offer confidence in circulation among strangers.

The *Spectator* essays contain many odd and diverting moments like this one, but few that say more about its public. One has to read this passage only slightly against the grain to see it as a ghost image of a counterpublic: it is a scene where a dominated group aspires to re-create itself as a public and in doing so finds itself in conflict not only with the dominant social group but with the norms that constitute the dominant culture as a public. The *Spectator* goes so far as to represent the scene in order to clarify the norms that establish its own confidence. It takes the She-Romps as a joke because it considers its own norms of sociability to be obvious and unbreakable. The challenge it so comically imagines against those norms would soon enough find actual expression. Even in the years of the essays' appearance, the public places and stranger sociability of London were already giving rise to clubs of all kinds of she-romps, including the so-called molly houses where something like a modern homosexual culture was developing — though it was not until rather later that such scenes could really articulate themselves through discourse as a freely circulating public.[49]

Over the past three centuries, many such scenes have organized themselves as publics, and because they differ markedly in

one way or another from the premises that allow the dominant culture to understand itself as a public, they have come to be called counterpublics. Yet we cannot understand counterpublics very well if we fail to see that there are contradictions and perversities inherent in the organization of all publics that are not captured by critiques of the dominant public's exclusions or ideological limitations. Counterpublics are publics, too. They work by many of the same circular postulates. It might even be claimed that, like dominant publics, they are ideological in that they provide a sense of active belonging that masks or compensates for the real powerlessness of human agents in capitalist society — though I merely leave this question aside. What interests me here is the odd social imaginary established by the ethic of estrangement and social poesis in public address. The cultural form of the public transforms She-Romps and Spectators alike.

In a public, indefinite address and self-organized discourse disclose a lived world whose arbitrary closure both enables that discourse and is contradicted by it. Public discourse, in the nature of its address, abandons the security of its positive, given audience. It promises to address anybody. It commits itself in principle to the possible participation of any stranger. It therefore puts at risk the concrete world that is its given condition of possibility. This is its fruitful perversity. Public discourse postulates a circulatory field of estrangement that it must then struggle to capture as an addressable entity. No form with such a structure could be very stable. The projective character of public discourse, in which each characterization of the circulatory path becomes material for new estrangements and recharacterizations, is an engine for (not necessarily progressive) social mutation.

Public discourse, in other words, is poetic. By this I mean not just that it is self-organizing, a kind of entity created by its own discourse, or even that this space of circulation is taken to be a

social entity, but that in order for this to happen all discourse or performance addressed to a public must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate and it must attempt to realize that world through address.[50]

7. *A public is poetic world making.*

There is no speech or performance addressed to a public that does not try to specify in advance, in countless highly condensed ways, the lifeworld of its circulation: not just through its discursive claims — of the kind that can be said to be oriented to understanding — but through the pragmatics of its speech genres, idioms, stylistic markers, address, temporality, mise-en-scène, citational field, interlocutory protocols, lexicon, and so on. Its circulatory fate is the realization of that world. Public discourse says not only "Let a public exist" but "Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way." It then goes in search of confirmation that such a public exists, with greater or lesser success — success being further attempts to cite, circulate, and realize the world understanding it articulates. Run it up the flagpole and see who salutes. Put on a show and see who shows up.

This performative dimension of public discourse, however, is routinely misrecognized. Public speech lies under the necessity of addressing its public as already existing real persons. It cannot work by frankly declaring its subjunctive-creative project. Its success depends on the recognition of participants and their further circulatory activity, and people do not commonly recognize themselves as virtual projections. They recognize themselves only as being already the persons they are addressed as being and as already belonging to the world that is condensed in their discourse.

The poetic function of public discourse is misrecognized for a second reason as well, noted above in another context: in the dominant tradition of the public sphere, address to a public is ideologized as rational-critical dialogue. The circulation of public discourse is consistently imagined, both in folk theory and in sophisticated political philosophy, as dialogue or discussion among already co-present interlocutors — as within Mr. Spectator's club. The prevailing image is something like parliamentary forensics. I have already noted that this folk theory enables the constitutive circularity of publics to disappear from consciousness, because publics are thought to be real persons in dyadic author/reader interactions rather than multigeneric circulation. I have also noted that the same ideologization enables the idea that publics can have volitional agency: they exist to deliberate and then decide. Here the point is that the perception of public discourse as conversation obscures the importance of the poetic functions of both language and corporeal expressivity in giving a particular shape to publics. The public is thought to exist empirically and to require persuasion rather than poesis. Public circulation is understood as rational discussion writ large.

This constitutive misrecognition of publics relies on a particular language ideology. Discourse is understood to be propositionally summarizable; the poetic or textual qualities of any utterance are disregarded in favor of sense. Acts of reading, too, are understood to be replicable and uniform.[51] So are opinions, which is why private reading seems to be directly connected to the sovereign power of public opinion. Just as sense can be propositionally summarized, opinions can be held, transferred, restated indefinitely. (The essential role played by this kind of transposition in the modern social imaginary might help to explain why modern philosophy has been obsessed with referential semantics and fixity.) Other aspects of discourse, including affect and expressivity, are not thought to be fungible in the same way. Doubtless the development of such a language ideology helped to enable the confidence in the stranger sociability of public circulation. Strangers are less

strange if you can trust them to read as you read or if the sense of what they say can be fully abstracted from the way they say it.

I also suspect that the development of the social imaginary of publics, as a relation among strangers projected from private readings of circulating texts, has exerted for the past three centuries a powerful gravity on the conception of the human, elevating what are understood to be the faculties of the private reader as the essential (rational-critical) faculties of man. If you know and are intimately associated with strangers to whom you are directly related only through the means of reading, opining, arguing, and witnessing, then it might seem natural that other faculties recede from salience at the highest levels of social belonging. The modern hierarchy of faculties and its imagination of the social are mutually implying. The highly conventional understanding of readerly activity, moreover, has now been institutionalized. The critical discourse of the public corresponds as sovereign to the superintending power of the state. So the dimensions of language singled out in the ideology of rational-critical discussion acquire prestige and power. Publics more overtly oriented in their self-understandings to the poetic-expressive dimensions of language, including artistic publics and many counterpublics, lack the power to transpose themselves to the generality of the state. Along the entire chain of equations in the public sphere — from local acts of reading or scenes of speech to a general horizon of public opinion and its critical opposition to state power — the pragmatics of public discourse must be systematically blocked from view.

Publics have acquired their importance to modern life because of the ease of those transpositions upward to the level of the state. Once the background assumptions of public opinion are in place, all publics are part of *the* public. Though essentially imaginary projections from local exchanges or acts of reading and therefore infinite in number, they are often thought of as a unitary space.

This assumption gains force from the postulated relation between public opinion and the state. A critical opposition to the state, supervising both executive and legislative power, confers on countless acts of opining the unity of public opinion; those acts have both a common object and a common agency of supervision and legitimation.

The unity of the public, however, is also ideological. It depends on the stylization of the reading act as transparent and replicable; it depends on an arbitrary social closure (through language, idiolect, genre, medium, and address) to contain its potentially infinite extension; it depends on institutionalized forms of power to realize the agency attributed to the public; and it depends on a hierarchy of faculties that allows some activities to count as public or general and others to be merely personal, private, or particular. Some publics, for these reasons, are more likely than others to stand in for *the* public, to frame their address as the universal discussion of the people.

But what of the publics that make no attempt to present themselves this way? There are as many shades of difference among publics as there are in modes of address, style, and spaces of circulation. Many might be thought of as subpublics, or specialized publics, focused on particular interests, professions, or locales. The public of *Field & Stream*, for example, does not take itself to be the national people or humanity in general; the magazine addresses only those with an interest in hunting and fishing, who in varying degrees participate in a (male) subculture of hunters and fishermen. Yet nothing in the mode of address or in the projected horizon of this subculture requires its participants to cease for a moment to think of themselves as members of the general public; indeed, they might well consider themselves its most representative members.

Other publics mark themselves off unmistakably from any

general or dominant public. Their members are understood to be not merely a subset of the public but constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public. In an influential 1992 article, Nancy Fraser observed that when public discourse is understood only as "a single, comprehensive, overarching public," members of subordinated groups "have no arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives, and strategies." In fact, Fraser writes, "members of subordinated social groups — women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians — have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics."[52] She calls these "subaltern counterpublics," by which she means "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."[53]

Fraser here names an important phenomenon. But what makes such a public "counter" or "oppositional"? Is its oppositional character a function of its content alone; that is, its claim to be oppositional? In this case, we might simply call it a subpublic, like that of *Field & Stream*, with the difference that a thematic discussion of political opposition is more likely to be found in it. There would be no difference of kind, or of formal mediation, or of discourse pragmatics, between counterpublics and any other publics. Fraser's description of what counterpublics do — "formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" — sounds like the classically Habermasian description of rational-critical publics, with the word "oppositional" inserted. Fraser's principal example is "the late-twentieth-century U.S. feminist subaltern counterpublic, with its variegated array of journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places."[54] This description aptly suggests the way a public is a

multicontextual space of circulation, organized not by a place or an institution but by the circulation of discourse. This is true of any public, including counterpublics. Fraser writes that the feminist counterpublic is distinguished by a special idiom for social reality, including such terms as "sexism," "sexual harassment," and "marital, date, and acquaintance rape." This idiom can now be found anywhere — not always embodying a feminist intention but circulating as common terminology. Is the feminist counterpublic distinguished by anything other than its reform program?

Furthermore, why would counterpublics of this variety be limited to "subalterns"? How are they different from the publics of U.S. Christian fundamentalism, or youth culture, or artistic bohemianism? Each of these is a similarly complex metatopical space for the circulation of discourse; each is a scene for developing oppositional interpretations of its members' identities, interests, and needs. They are structured by different dispositions or protocols from those that obtain elsewhere in the culture, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying.

In the sense of the term I am advocating here, such publics are indeed counterpublics, and in a stronger sense than simply comprising subalterns with a reform program. A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public or to the hierarchy among media. The discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternative idiom but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness. (This is why the She-Romps seem to anticipate counterpublicness: "We throw off all that Modesty and Reservedness with which our Sex are obliged to disguise themselves in

publick Places.") Friction against the dominant public forces the poetic-expressive character of counterpublic discourse to become salient to consciousness.

Like all publics, a counterpublic comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers. (This is one significant difference between a counterpublic and a community or group.) But counterpublic discourse also addresses those strangers as being not just anybody. They are socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse; ordinary people are presumed not to want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene. Addressing indefinite strangers, in a magazine or a sermon, has a peculiar meaning when you know in advance that most people will be unwilling to read a gay magazine or go to a black church. In some contexts, the code-switching of bilingualism might do similar work of keeping the counterpublic horizon salient – just as the linguistic fragmentation of many postcolonial settings creates resistance to the idea of a sutured space of circulation.

Within a gay or queer counterpublic, for example, no one is in the closet: the presumptive heterosexuality that constitutes the closet for individuals in ordinary speech is suspended. But this circulatory space, freed from heteronormative speech protocols, is itself marked by that very suspension: speech that addresses any participant as queer will circulate up to a point, at which it is certain to meet intense resistance. It might therefore circulate in special, protected venues, in limited publications. The individual struggle with stigma is transposed, as it were, to the conflict between modes of publicness. The expansive nature of public address will seek to keep moving that frontier for a queer public, to seek more and more places to circulate where people will recognize themselves in its address; but no one is likely to be unaware of the risk and conflict involved.

In some cases, such as fundamentalism or certain kinds of youth culture, participants are not subalterns for any reason other than their participation in the counterpublic discourse. In others, a socially stigmatized identity might be predicated; but in such cases, a public of subalterns is only a counterpublic when its participants are addressed in a counterpublic way – as, for example, African-Americans willing to speak in what is regarded as a racially marked idiom. The subordinate status of a counterpublic does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public is one of the ways by which its members' identities are formed and transformed. A hierarchy or stigma is the assumed background of practice. One enters at one's own risk.

Counterpublic discourse is far more than the expression of subaltern culture and far more than what some Foucauldians like to call "reverse discourse." Fundamentally mediated by public forms, counterpublics incorporate the personal/impersonal address and expansive estrangement of public speech as conditions of their common world. Perhaps nothing demonstrates the importance of discursive publics in the modern social imaginary more than this – that even the counterpublics that challenge modernity's social hierarchy of faculties do so by projecting the space of discursive circulation among strangers as a social entity and in doing so fashion their own subjectivities around the requirements of public circulation and stranger sociability.[55]

If I address a queer public, or one of fellow She-Romps, I don't simply express the way my friends and I live. I commit myself, and the fate of my world-making project, to circulation among indefinite others. However much my address to them might be laden with intimate affect, it must also be extended impersonally, available for co-membership on the basis of mere attention. My world must be that of strangers. Counterpublics are "counter" to the extent that they try to supply different ways of imagining

stranger sociability and its reflexivity; as publics, they remain oriented to stranger circulation in a way that is not just strategic but constitutive of membership and its affects. As it happens, an understanding of queerness has been developing in recent decades that is suited to just this necessity; a culture is developing in which intimate relations and the sexual body can in fact be understood as projects for transformation among strangers. (At the same time, a lesbian and gay public has been reshaped so as to ignore or refuse the counterpublic character that has marked its history.)[56] So also in youth culture, coolness both mediates a difference from dominant publics and constitutes that difference as the subjective form of stranger sociability. Public discourse imposes a field of tensions within which any world-making project must articulate itself. To the extent I want that world to be one in which embodied sociability, affect, and play have a more defining role than they do in the opinion-transposing frame of rational-critical dialogue, those tensions will be acutely felt.

I cannot say in advance what romping will feel like in my public of She-Romps. Publicness is just this space of coming together that discloses itself in interaction. The world of strangers that public discourse makes must be made of further circulation and recharacterization over time; it cannot simply be aggregated from units that I can expect to be similar to mine. I risk its fate. This necessity of risked estrangement, though essential to all publics, becomes especially salient in counterpublic discourse and is registered in its ethical-political imagination. Dominant publics are by definition those that can take their discourse pragmatics and their lifeworlds for granted, misrecognizing the indefinite scope of their expansive address as universality or normalcy. Counterpublics are spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative, not replicative merely.

Counterpublics face another obstacle as well. One of the most

striking features of publics, in the modern public sphere, is that they can in some contexts acquire agency. Not only is participation understood as active, at the level of the individual whose uptake helps to constitute a public; it is possible sometimes to attribute agency to the virtual corporate entity created by the entire space of circulation. Publics act historically. They are said to rise up, to speak, to reject false promises, to demand answers, to change sovereigns, to support troops, to give mandates for change, to be satisfied, to scrutinize public conduct, to take role models, to deride counterfeits. It's difficult to imagine the modern world without the ability to attribute agency to publics, though doing so is an extraordinary fiction. It requires us, for example, to understand the ongoing circulatory time of public discourse as though it were discussion leading up to a decision.

The attribution of agency to publics works in most cases because of the direct transposition from private reading acts to the sovereignty of opinion. All of the verbs for public agency are verbs for private reading, transposed upward to the aggregate of readers. Readers may scrutinize, ask, reject, opine, decide, judge, and so on. Publics can do exactly these things. And nothing else. Publics — unlike mobs or crowds — are incapable of any activity that cannot be expressed through such a verb. Activities of reading that do not fit the ideology of reading as silent, private, replicable decoding — curling up, mumbling, fantasizing, gesticulating, ventriloquizing, writing marginalia, and so on — also find no counterparts in public agency.

Counterpublics tend to be those in which this ideology of reading does not have the same privilege. It might be that embodied sociability is too important to them; they might not be organized by the hierarchy of faculties that elevates rational-critical reflection as the self-image of humanity; they might depend more heavily on performance spaces than on print; it might be that they

cannot so easily suppress from consciousness their own creative-expressive function. How, then, will they imagine their agency? Can a public of She-Romps romp?

It is in fact possible to imagine that almost any characterization of discursive acts might be attributed to a public. A queer public might be one that throws shade, prances, disses, acts up, carries on, longs, fantasizes, throws fits, mourns, "reads." To take such attributions of public agency seriously, however, we would need to inhabit a culture with a different language ideology, a different social imaginary. It is difficult to say what such a world would be like. It might need to be one with a different role for state-based thinking, because it might be only through its imaginary coupling with the state that a public acts. This is one of the things that happens when alternative publics are said to be social movements: they acquire agency in relation to the state. They enter the temporality of politics and adapt themselves to the performatives of rational-critical discourse. For many counterpublics, to do so is to cede the original hope of transforming not just policy but the space of public life itself.

CHAPTER THREE

Styles of Intellectual Publics

In the opening scene of George Orwell's *1984*, the horror of totalitarianism is driven home to the reader by – of all things – the experience of writer's block. The main character, Winston Smith, has just sat down under the glare of the all-seeing telescreen, intending to begin a diary. He falters. A tremor goes "through his bowels." He feels helpless. "For whom, it suddenly occurred to him to wonder, was he writing this diary?"

Winston's choice of genre, the diary, is perversely apt to illustrate the problem of audience. Perversely, because the addressee of a diary is that unique individual about whom most is known and whose sympathetic response can be taken for granted: oneself. How could anyone, even in the most ruthlessly totalitarian regime, lack an audience for a diary? But even in a diary, one never writes simply to oneself in the present. At the very least, one addresses one's retrospective reading at some point in the future. One therefore addresses oneself as a partial stranger, one who will have forgotten or will have been caught up in a different phase of life and will have become, by consequence, different. And thus oneself comes to stand for posterity, and for a posterity partly brought into being by this act of writing.

It might be that a diary is addressed to others entirely, to an