physics, novelty, plurality, and morality are connected in today's mass media and mass culture. Is it only literature, and especially the novel, which is useful in the attempt to establish an utterly dedivinized and pluralistic culture? Or are there other kinds of media which can be of use if one seeks to develop a (Rortyan) postmetaphysical scenario? These are important questions that will hopefully lead to further discussions.

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ASTRID FRANKE

Dismantling the Public Sphere: The Poetics of Apathy

This article presents a pessimistic take on the commonplace assumption that the public sphere has always been thoroughly shaped by the media. I will investigate the thesis that while newspapers, TV shows, or poetry on the Internet may indeed provide a forum where people discuss what they care about and what they can do about their concerns, the media may also subvert and dismantle the possibility of a public. This may sound surprising: most current publications in cultural studies suggest that publics are thriving and multiplying; instead of one somber Habermasian public sphere of dutiful deliberation there are now several *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), as the title of a book by Michael Warner proclaims. I will discuss this book as a typical example of current theory and juxtapose it with an empirical study by Nina Eliasoph. For two and a half years, this sociologist participated in and observed a number of volunteer and activist groups as well as a country and western dance club, all near a small town in California where she also worked for the local press. Her observations are presented in *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (1998), and they can be used to assess the value and purpose of Warner's theorizing as well as the poetics of selected poems and a TV show.

Warner's book sets out to expose what he considers an illusionary idea of the public sphere that stretches from the eighteenth century through Habermas to current versions in dominant ideology, summarized as follows:

> In dominant ideology [...] the public sphere is simply people making public use of their reason. Citizens, in this commonsense view, form opinions in dialogue with each other, and that is where public opinion comes from. Any address to a public tends to be understood as imitating face-to-face argumentative dialogue or, rather, an idealized version of such dialogue. [...] A vibrant scene of public-spirited discussion is the motor of democratic culture. One of the basic points of this book is that publics do not in fact work that way. (143)

Warner instead suggests an idea of the public based on forms of address in texts and on infinite intertextual relations that create a world of their own. There is no point where this communication ever stops leading to a

decision or even action[1]; it produces a self-contained realm that does not reflect on social conditions but only recreates those important to its own existence: "The discourse of a public is a linguistic form from which the social conditions of its own possibility are in large part derived" (105).

Warner's examples of publics such as "pornographic cinema, phone sex, 'adult' markets for print, lap dancing," or "the public of *Field & Stream,*" a magazine addressed to people interested in hunting and fishing, suggest similarities between publics and what experts in advertising call target groups (187, 117). They can easily co-exist because they do not make any claims beyond their group and are not tied to social action. A static picture of society arises: publics neither respond to changing conditions, nor are they part of a political process aimed at social change. Following Habermas and Kant, Warner wants to keep his publics in a realm apart from the state. Since collective agency in a democracy establishes a relation to the state, Warner considers any kind of collective political practice a sign of something other than a public, such as a social movement. According to him, to see the public as an agent of social change is an "extraordinary fiction" (123).

In a vague allusion to critical theory, Warner claims that mass publics and counterpublics "are both damaged forms of publicness" (63). Two passages put forward an underlying political diagnosis. One describes the isolation of intellectuals as a result of an American strain of anti-intellectualism, combined with the commercialization of mass media. A crucial development in the past decades has been "the extreme segregation of journalistic and intellectual publics in the United States." The commercialization of the former means that "media that matter are those whose scale and scarcity of access are most forbidding" (147). Academic publishing, on the other hand, has become a distinct field of production on its own; the decentralization of the American university system and its saturation by commercial and state interests leaves intellectuals "either marginalized or functionally incorporated into the management culture of expertise" (147; cf. 151-58).

Warner's second observation is indebted to Nina Eliasoph and concerns Americans' systematic inhibition of public-spirited discussion even in contexts such as civic groups. In Warner's view, Eliasoph adheres to an illusory idea of the public as based on critical discussion. But since her approach is apparently fruitful enough to yield observations that Warner cites extensively, it is worthwhile to describe her findings and then discuss her assumptions in comparison with Warner's.

[1] "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" (Warner 97).

In line with pragmatist political theory, such as John Dewey's, Eliasoph assumes that a public arises from people's interaction; it is a way of creating a wide circle of concern that goes beyond those immediately affected. Appealing to a common ground, such as social justice, people create that ground by inviting reflection about who "we" are and why "we" care. Theoretically, then, volunteer groups, activists, and dance clubs are associations that could create a public—a realm where citizens can carry on free and egalitarian conversations about issues of common concern, where participation is optional and potentially open to all. What Eliasoph finds, however, is that in volunteer groups, in the country club, and even amongst environmental activists, Americans try very hard to avoid such public-spirited conversation.

The volunteers of an anti-drug group emphasized repeatedly that what they do is "personal, close by, in my neighborhood," and "for the children." Issues of nuclear power and toxic waste, on the other hand, are not "close to home," even though the volunteers all live within a 20-minute drive from a nuclear battle ship base containing a toxic pit, three military cleanup sites, a number of chemical plants, and a planned toxic waste incinerator (Eliasoph 1). Environmental issues were literally in people's backyard, and in face-to-face conversations people worried about them. As a group, however, the volunteers developed a kind of etiquette to speak only for themselves and present their work in terms of self-interest. They prefer doable, hands-on tasks and discussions on practical questions to issues of social justice or anything considered "large" and "political." This avoidance, Eliasoph finds, is the volunteers' way to combat the threat of futility. They silence conversation about problems that cannot be immediately solved in order to show to themselves that the world makes sense, that good citizenship is possible and "you" can make a difference. They present themselves as selfish because they can thus feel empowered within a small circle of concern and simultaneously tell themselves that they do not care about problems they feel powerless to fix.

That the members of the country and western dance club—the Buffalo—avoid political talk may not surprise anyone. But like everybody else, they have worries and concerns; in fact, since they have little experience in talking about their fears or analyzing them together, many of these fears are strong, far-flung, and eccentric, such as the fear of radiation from light-bulbs, for instance. Here, too, avoidance requires explanation. The Buffaloes want to create a place where they can leave the constraints of the world behind and just be themselves. Their ideal of togetherness, provided and made possible by the commercial culture of country music, rests on an anti-institutional, anti-conventional notion that anything beyond a hidden, hardly expressible inner self is unreal and probably tainted. To demonstrate their self-understanding as non-conformist, they have

developed an etiquette of irreverence by averting presumed 'good manners.' Their verbal interaction consists mainly of teasing and racist, sexist, and scatological jokes. Their sense of politics is that of a distant realm best left to experts who know all the facts; politics is all about finding technical solutions to problems, hence talk can accomplish nothing and ordinary people who think they can have an effect on politics are fools.

Amongst the Buffaloes, there is one peculiar group that seems different: the group Eliasoph calls "cynics" is well-informed and educated and constantly talks and jokes about politics. Like the rest of the Buffaloes, the cynics want to appear irreverent and impious, but in their case, this is achieved by taking nothing too seriously, including the group itself. They lovingly memorize the words of country songs while finding the sentiments expressed utterly absurd—they display an aestheticizing attitude towards them. Their constant joking about politics reveals how much they know, but it is meant to demonstrate to themselves and to each other that they, unlike others, are not being fooled—they simultaneously display and push away the ideals they see violated. Arguably, this is the group that works hardest to produce disengagement and disconnection.

In her final study on political activists, Eliasoph shows how much the etiquette of avoiding politics shapes even their interaction and presents obstacles difficult to overcome. In their initial meetings they, too, struggle against the assumption that open-ended discussions are rude, discouraging, and a waste of time. They also combat the fears that perhaps the so-called radicals are right and the wider public might indeed be unable to distinguish between a good argument and a bad one. In meetings with officials, they struggle against the assumption of officials that the purpose of the meeting is to distribute technical facts to a befuddled citizenry, the implication being that if citizens only had more information, they would agree. In order to stand up to officials who invoke expertise, some activists learn all they can about the legal, technical, and scientific processes involved, but this only reinforces the notion that their criticism is technical and not political. Journalists never pick up on these informed citizens and the arcane discussions they get into, even if they can prove officials wrong. Instead, as Warner summarizes Eliasoph's findings, journalists

> solicit people to regard their public spirit as good feeling, compassionate volunteerism, or anything else that is pre-political and can be divorced from the conflict of views. The predominant form of statements in the news is that of testimonies or expressions of private passion rather than opinions. (145)

The discourse that inevitably makes it to the paper or the radio is the one where activists sound like volunteers, especially mothers presenting their case as one sparked by concern for their children.

Eliasoph could have analyzed further who controls the spaces from which public spirit evaporates. We only get glimpses of the constraints and pressures on the journalists, who are by and large sympathetic to the activists' cause. We are told about powerful political and religious discourses presenting school and drug problems as moral ones, beginning with values and the family, and we see how volunteers are often embedded in communal agencies for whose under-funding they compensate. But we can only guess how these circumstances prevent people from talking about the larger forces that keep producing the problems they try to alleviate. Clearly, the media help to hold the etiquette of avoiding politics in place, but how this is done and how it developed historically is not explained. The material she has gathered, however, is rich enough to warrant further examination and may help us interpret texts circulated by different media.

Among the hundreds of poems published on the Internet after September 11, 2001, Alicia Ostriker's "the window, at the moment of flame" stands out because its artful construction goes beyond an immediate expression of shock or mourning. It focuses on a moment of self-awareness, an epiphany that reveals the speaker's relation to millions of other people, whom we usually perceive only in generic images on TV. It also captures a state of wonder and perhaps anger at discovering that reality is not what it was thought to be. Suddenly, as after the discovery of one's partner's secret love affair, the past is corrupted by the realization that something else had been going on all along:

> And all this while I have been playing with toys
> a toy superhighway a toy automobile a house of blocks
>
> and all this while far off in other lands
> thousands and thousands, millions and millions
>
> you know – you see the pictures
> women carrying bony infants
>
> men sobbing over graves
> buildings sculpted by explosion –
>
> earth wasted bare and rotten
> and all this while I have been shopping, I have
>
> been let us say free
> and do they hate me for it
> do they hate *me*

By 'artful construction' I refer to the way in which the form of the list connects the commodities with the pictures, the way in which "shopping" echoes "sobbing," and the way in which the seemingly harmless, colloquial

"you know" establishes a complicity with the reader; I also refer to the way in which the poem visually converges on the ambivalent last two lines, which may be statements or questions. This leads to the ambiguity of the poem at large: Does it capture a moment of political awakening that realizes how, being part of the Western world, we are inextricably connected with, even responsible for the hunger, war, and destruction we see in the news? Or does it rather capture a feeling of being personally offended by global politics impinging on one's life and express the desire to reduce the level of abstraction to a question of personal hatred? The assumption that "they" hate individual Americans is, of course, unreasonable: just as *we* see only an undifferentiated mass and images without agents, "they," in turn, hate us, not *me*, for if there is hatred it is, like power and suffering, dispersed and multiple, not personal. There is no escape from the complicity with global power struggles, yet to understand the political emotions of people elsewhere as a personal attack may be precisely what the poem is yearning for.

Ostriker's poem is not the only one moving from a concern about global politics to personal concerns. The epigraph "*Beirut. Baghdad. Sarajevo. Bethlehem. Kabul. Not of course here*" of Adrienne Rich's poem "The School Among the Ruins" also evokes far away places known to us through the media (22). The poem describes a school left standing after a bombing and registers the increasing lack of food and drink, missing parents, the onset of diarrhea and then, in the voice of a teacher, the attempt to continue "teaching responsibility," care, and sympathy: "Don't let your faces turn to stone / Don't stop asking me why / Let's pay attention to our cat she needs us" (25; original spacing). Attention to the needs of other creatures is a last defense against emotional hardening, and the poem itself merges with the teacher as a figure of care fending off the breakdown of civilized life. I have previously interpreted this poem as reminding us of the resources of affect that lie beneath the political and are yet crucial to all forms of commitment to the social.[2] And I have read Ostriker's poem as an attempt to raise the question of our complicity with forms of global injustice. But considering Eliasoph's book and the strikingly similar trajectory from the political sphere to personal feelings in both poems, I cannot help noting that they, too, suggest that one can hardly talk about politics outside the paradigms of testimony and care. Culturally and historically, these paradigms have been associated with women, and one may well debate how effective they are.[3] Still, in a socio-political climate in

[2] See my article "The Powerless Power of Poets: Experimenting with the Self-in-Relation," *Another Language*, ed. Kornelia Freitag, to be published.

[3] Significantly, one form of opposition to the war in Iraq, effectively portrayed by the media, was that of a mother, Cindy Sheehan, mourning the death of her son. Since no other protest was broadcast as widely, hers seemed strong though her demands were rather modest.

which it has become difficult for citizens to make claims beyond personal concerns, poems submitting to the same pattern renounce a chance to renew public-minded discourse. While they try to create a global public by widening the circle of concern beyond national borders, they inadvertently testify to the difficulties of public-spirited communication.

My final example concerns the Simpsons, the yellow-skinned cartoon family from Springfield, whose unsafe nuclear reactor and tire-burning place make it seem like a town in Eliasoph's 20-minute radius. Critics of the series are split over the question of subversion: one group holds that *The Simpsons* flaunts a liberal agenda that subverts that of its broadcasting channel, Fox.[4] Others point to the basic structure of the family sitcom and its subsequent conservatism, especially with regard to the representation of gender.[5] A third opinion is that the series is so deeply ironic that all political positions are ridiculed.[6] The following scene may be used to assess the plausibility of these positions: Bart and Lisa are surprised by an educational cartoon. It features an animated piece of paper that dances on the steps of the Capitol and introduces itself as a potential Amendment:

> Amendment: I'm an Amendment to be
> Yes, I'm hoping that they ratify me
> There's a lot of flag burners
> Who have got too much freedom
> I wanna make it legal
> For policemen
> To beat them
> 'Cause there's limits to our liberties
> 'Least I hope and pray that there are
> 'Cause those liberal freaks go too far.
> Boy: But why can't we just make a law against flag burning?
> Amendment: Because that law would be unconstitutional. But if we *changed* the Constitution…
> Boy: Then we could make all sorts of crazy laws!
> Amendment: Now you're catching on!
>
> *Bart and Lisa have a short conversation*:
> Bart: What the hell is this?
> Lisa: It's one of those campy seventies throwbacks that appeals to Generation Xers.

[4] This is maintained by John Alberti, Robert Sloane, and Matthew Henry in their essays in Alberti, *Leaving Springfield.*

[5] See the essays by Paul Cantor, Dale E. Snow and James J. Snow in Irwin, Conrad, and Skoble; see also Hißnauer; Weilunn.

[6] This is argued by Carl Matheson and James M. Wallace in their essays in *The Simpsons and Philosophy* and by Kevin J. H. Dettmar's essay in Alberti, *Leaving Springfield.*

> Bart: We need another Vietnam to thin out *their* ranks a little!
> ("The Day the Violence Died")

The cartoon in the cartoon ridicules an undemocratic position masked as patriotism. On another level, the scene emphasizes that educational cartoons do not impress today's kids. On yet another level, Lisa's comment prompts an intertextual investigation: the song is a parody of *Schoolhouse Rock*, a series from the 1970s which may amuse the media-savvy producers and some of the audience—but not Bart and Lisa. The explicit political opinions, embedded in different layers of self-referentiality, intertextuality, and sheer witticisms are typical of the series, which is characterized by an intelligence and craft far in excess of what would be commercially necessary. But the attitude it embodies and helps to support is that of the cynic Buffaloes who need to prove to themselves that they are not being fooled and do so by aestheticizing the sentiments with which they are confronted. Here, laughter is based on the release from needing to take something seriously (which is why one feels slightly foolish analyzing it), but as Eliasoph has shown, this attitude fits perfectly—is indeed complementary to—a commercial environment. The irony suggests one has not been 'taken in' when, in fact, one has: The seeming irreverence contributes to an avoidance of political engagement by suggesting, falsely, that there is already enough of political discussion and that smart people maintain an ironic distance to it.[7] As the media itself contribute to the decline of public debates by showcasing people with personal reasons for political standpoints, the cynical and the personalizing positions work hand in hand.

Here I want to come back to Warner's and Eliasoph's conceptualizations of the public. Both agree that an alliance of corporate, commercial, and political interests in America has succeeded in forming a de-politicized style of 'debate' as an exchange of personal views without the need for deliberating between them. An audience reared on human-interest stories finds it harder and harder to follow arguments claiming general relevance; these arguments seem 'abstract' and, given the wide spread of anti-intellectualism, can easily be denounced as elitist. As people unlearn public-spirited discussion, their conformity to manners continues to silence it and creates "a circle of political evaporation" (Eliasoph 255).

Eliasoph has no historical perspective on this phenomenon and therefore cannot formulate what may have been different in the past and why. The lack of a perspective that would explain how people developed an etiquette also leads to questionable suggestions meant to counter the evaporation of public spirit:

[7] Cf. Matheson: "*The Simpsons* does not promote anything" (120).

> What if newspapers opened up spaces for grassroots groups to write columns explaining their positions, called public meetings, reported more actively on grassroots efforts, and did other "civic journalism" projects? What if social service workers avoided the temptation to enlist volunteers one at a time to treat each problem one at a time? What if political organizers learned how to listen to their constituents more acutely? (Eliasoph 162)

The idea that good-natured individuals could make all the difference comes dangerously close to the deluding "You can do something" with which volunteers protect themselves against a sense of futility. While individuals act according to a "civic etiquette" and thus uphold it, they cannot single-handedly change it (236). What Eliasoph describes as etiquette is an interface between an objective social pattern that developed over time and subjective instances of making sense of this pattern in particular contexts—contexts that are in turn shaped by people's behavioral and perceptional habits. Bourdieu's *habitus* would be a concept to explain how individuals collectively embody, respond to, and reproduce social conditions.[8] Because various forces within the "journalistic field" endorse such habitus as a "system of generative dispositions" that helps in negotiating precarious jobs and time pressure, no explicit censorship is needed to produce depoliticizing reports on protests (*Logic* 290, fn. 1).[9]

Responding to Eliasoph, who uses the concept of the public to investigate people's interaction, Warner claims that the public has never corresponded to "the idealized self-understanding that makes it work" and that this discovery, made also by Walter Lippmann, John Dewey, Jürgen

[8] Bourdieu defines habitus as a "system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them" (*Logic* 53). Eliasoph's reading of Bourdieu would warrant further discussion; suffice it to say that in her view, Bourdieu "lacks attention to context," or is only interested in who controls the context, and that she does not use Bourdieu's concepts because they are tied to class, which she considers inadequate to her findings. The groups she chose "instead of [...] explicitly class-based groups" are marked by "some aspect of identity, consumer tastes, or tradition (parenthood, neighborhood, musical tastes)" (297 fn. 8; 266). Ironically, this corresponds to Bourdieu's concept of social distinctions, which is not solely based on economic capital but also on cultural and symbolic capital; taste and manners, as embodied in habitus, thus play a crucial role. See Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

[9] To resist the temptation to hold individuals responsible—an attitude that falls behind her own findings of a collective behavioral pattern—Eliasoph could have drawn on Bourdieu's concept of the field. The journalistic field in particular is characterized by an increasing degree of heteronomy, and it is "more and more imposing its constraints on all other fields, particularly the fields øf cultural production such as the field of the social sciences, philosophy, etc., and on the political field" ("Political Field" 41).

Habermas, and Michel Foucault, has never forced politics into conformity with the ideal (146). Warner does not elaborate on the implied notion that formulating an ideal is a superfluous intellectual effort. His list of names, however, suggests that the concept of the public has long served a critical function for social observers: it has allowed them to describe transformations in the ways democracy works—or does not work. It is this critical function Warner gives up as he redefines the public in such a way that it can encompass his own kind of academic discourse as well as current media practice—texts that by sheer repetition and self-referentiality produce a reality of their own, which becomes more and more resilient to empirical scrutiny. This notion of the public blurs the distinction between associations for purposes such as the enjoyment of fishing, on the one hand, and that of protesting a planned toxic incinerator, on the other.

The ideal of critical discussion may be necessary but not sufficient for the formation of a public. My discussion of Eliasoph's work also suggests that we need to be concerned with the conditions that allow for a certain autonomy of journalism, especially with regard to economic and political pressure, so that political opinions can be openly voiced and discussed. The possibility that discourse could lead to changes of those conditions that prompted complaints in the first place may also be necessary. And the belief in that possibility may be a crucial factor for people to engage politically at all. But through proposing depoliticized forms of publics, Warner prevents himself from formulating what else may be needed besides the ideal. His theory continues the work of de-politicization and collaborates in the production of apathy by discarding the conceptual tools we have to measure and describe the disappearances of the public under the guise of its multiplication.

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