

Book: *New Publics without Democracy*

Editors: Henrik Bang and Anders Esmark

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New Publics without Democracy, as the title implies, is both a theoretical and empirical attempt to probe the nature of contemporary public spheres regardless of their potential for emancipation or empowerment. At the centre of a critical theory approach to the public sphere has been a preoccupation with identifying the social and institutional conditions that will empower the public to participate in a deliberative democracy in pursuit of universal truth and common good. Ideally, the public sphere is an open space where rational public opinion can be established outside of the structures of corporate and state control. This Habermasian idealism has been amply critiqued on diverse grounds among them its normative expectation of rationality, its elitist focus on a bourgeois public, its automatic belief in social equality among interlocutors, and its unrestricted faith in the efficacy of discursive democracy. Habermas himself wrote about the erosion of the public sphere into a space of mass consumption dominated by corporate interests and political elites. This intense critique, however – the editors of *New Publics without Democracy* argue – has only modified the bourgeois public sphere by accounting for new forms of publics, spaces and practices, and by doing so it has simply reified a critical theory conceptualization of the public sphere as necessarily a fixed democratic ideal.

Instead of evaluating the public sphere based strictly on its potential for fulfilling this democratic vision, *New Publics without Democracy* argues that research in this area should become more interested in “the development of various publics based on the proposition that they ought to be regarded as contingent and particular formations in a chain of different historical publics” (p. 16). So writing against a normative approach, contributors to this volume seek to understand better the specificities of contemporary public spheres in comparison to their old bourgeois counterpart, and eventually devise a new conceptual model of the public sphere that fits better the structural changes brought to an increasingly mediated political system in the network era.

Substituting critical theory for critical attitude, the book hopes to displace the emphasis of the former on a utopian democratic standard and replace it with a careful focus on the structures of power and domination that regulate and shape the public sphere and its practices at any given historical period. Drawing from Nancy Fraser’s two-track model of strong and weak publics, the authors suggest a reframing of this distinction of publics by introducing the concepts of ‘regime anchorage’ and ‘culture anchorage.’ “We would hold, however, that the pivotal attributes of public spheres is exactly that they never fall clearly inside or outside the regime or the institutions of a political system. Clearly, some public spheres enjoy stronger regime anchorage than others; nonetheless, all public spheres extend beyond regimes and institutions and relate to culture. Conversely, public spheres are never limited to culture, always falling between regime and culture. Thus, we instead perceive of the distinction as a means for analyzing public spheres from the perspective of the regime and from the perspective of culture, respectively.” (p. 42)

The value of this book is that it seeks to develop a general model of the public sphere that is neither merely defined by its democratic potential, nor determined by its reliance on communicative rationality. The chapters in this book are organized around three major concepts: regime anchorage, culture anchorage, and how journalism and the media deal with new trends in both regime and culture. Through fascinating empirical studies of the changing political communication of such institutions as the British New Labour Party, the Danish public services, and the European Union, the section on ‘regime anchorage’ examines how institutionalized public spheres are becoming less rigid spaces where output politics from weak publics with deliberative power and no decision-making discretion can also be a strong factor in opinion and policy formation. The democratic deficit between these regime structures and laypeople, these chapters argue, is far from being resolved, but the terms of discursive politics no longer draw a distinct line between politicians and their constituencies.

The section on ‘culture anchorage’ further develops this dialectic between political authorities and non-authorities by looking at the new discursive spaces and practices of laypeople and their impact on policy making. The image of the public as a fragmented and ineffectual group permanently relegated to the private sphere, the authors of this section argue, fails to account for a different breed of citizen-as-expert public spheres where active citizens gain substantial visibility through their use of old and new media to eventually become dependable sources of influence on variety of policy concerns. The rise of an ‘ad-hoc’ public sphere in Denmark during the Mohammad Cartoon crisis, the section’s opening chapter argues, came not only as a citizen response to a perceived lack in political action

but also as a reaction against older forms of political mobilization by civil society. Far from ensuring a seamless deliberative forum among free and equal actors, this and other new forms of the public sphere afforded by new interactive technologies may, however, recreate the elite system that was problematic with older and hierarchical public spheres.

New Publics without Democracy, is a useful multidisciplinary endeavor to map new trends in the political field and the public sphere in a network era. The chapters summarize the findings of a four-year research program in Denmark during which scholars from media studies and the social sciences examined the diffusion of the public sphere in an “increasingly globalized, regionalized and localized network society” (p. 9). This collection of empirical studies rightly points to a new direction urgently warranted in public sphere and opinion formation research, and while some readers might find fault with the book’s lingering optimism, even if at times tempered by statements of caution, that new and interactive information technologies can lead to complex and even empowering discursive spaces, the argument of the project that our theoretical concepts are old and insufficient to explain the intricate structures and practices of contemporary public spheres is cogent and worthy of careful reading.

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