Publics and Counterpublics
by Michael Warner
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Reviewed By Granville Ganter

Michael Warner's recent collection of essays, *Publics and Counterpublics*, is a thoughtful and yet fragmented meditation about the various ways that ideals of *publicity* and *publicness* intersect with art and politics. One of its strongest emphases is that the assertion that making oneself public is not the same as making oneself political. As a result, Warner explores the agency of culture (art, the media, personal performance, public speaking), rather than politics (elections, laws, lobbying). Warner, a well known queer theorist, is clearly a advocate for improved rights and living conditions for homosexuals, but this is not a book about how to achieve those goals with political machinery. Rather, Warner attempts to provide a description of the ways that people create a social, theatrical space to frame their conduct. What appears to be generally at stake for Warner is an attempt to understand non-political performance (aka, culture) as a corollary, if not an alternative, to changing the world through politics. In particular, Warner seeks to contribute to the ongoing project of understanding the cultural work of performance in gender studies.

The potential strength of Warner's arguments are hamstrung by their fragmented organization, and his questions are more interesting than his answers. Aside from two chapters that lay out Warner's taxonomy of what a public is, Warner has not written a strongly thesis-driven argument. In the end, Warner's definition of "public" is derived from his study of the writing practices of the eighteenth-century magazine, *The Spectator*. As a result, Warner's explicit refusal to examine contemporary manifestations of a "public"—such as those posed by the internet—undermine the formidable scope of his project.

The background of Warner's project derives from the work of Jurgen Habermas. Habermas's 1963 book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, examined the rise of public opinion and print culture in the eighteenth century. Habermas recognized that the explosion of the print industry—newspapers, pamphlets, and books—began to exert a powerful influence on political life separate from the traditional ruling agency exerted by the king, the aristocracy, and the parliament. For Habermas, it was not simply the growth of publishing that created the public sphere—it was the simultaneous dawn of a kind of *consciousness* that the public could be systematically addressed through a pamphlet as if a group of strangers were gathered together in a giant auditorium. Habermas saw this imaginary "public sphere" as a potential democratic utopia where individuals could discuss national issues and come to common consent in public. His book tells a sad story, however, because it also chronicles the loss of that utopian potential during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when publishing media became consolidated in the hands of a few. Less and less the voice of a democratic public (if it ever was one), press media became largely the instrument of industrial magnates and the ruling class. In the United States, individuals like Randolph Hearst bought up newspapers and controlled public opinion. Presently, when Tom Brokaw addresses the U.S. "public" on the evening news, that news is filtered and arranged by the megacorporations that own the television stations that bang the drum for war on Iraq's oil. For Habermas, the challenge of the twentieth century is to reclaim the promise of the public sphere for genuine democratic debate.

Warner's 1990 book, *The Letters of the Republic*, was a remarkable exploration of Habermas's theories on eighteenth-century colonial U.S. culture, offering polymath Ben Franklin as its centerpiece. An inventor, writer, and politician, Franklin (at least as a literary figure) excelled at writing practices that hid his own agency behind a mask of public-spiritedness (We can make this claim as readers of his *Autobiography*, but many of Franklin's peers knew what was up to and greatly distrusted him as a result). Breaking down traditional distinctions between political theory, mass media, and belle-letters, Warner demonstrated a reciprocal influence of styles of writing and publicity in republican civic conduct, the U.S. Constitution, and early U.S. literature. Warner's goal was to show the various ways that *fictions of a public* shaped each of these writing venues in unique but related ways.

Whereas Warner's earlier work focused on the eighteenth century, *Publics and Counterpublics* seeks to explore the different ways a public is constructed today. The key to Warner's definition of a public is the idea of reflexiveness. People rhetorically hail a group of strangers in a certain way ("Hey, you!", or "my fellow Americans"), which in turn, frames and proscribes the expressive and behavioral possibilities of that interaction (11-12). The performative culture thus created depends crucially on the imaginative projection of the participants, which is why public sphere theory is so attractive to scholars of narrative and aesthetics. Warner's goal is not to explain the origin of a public, but rather to provide a working taxonomy of different styles of reflexive behavior that characterize different kinds of publics, ranging from racial and sexual discourse of the early nineteenth-century, to Whitman's poetry, and to contemporary drag performance. Warner makes seven claims about publics, the most important being his last three: 1) a public is self organized; 2) A public is a relation among strangers; 3) The address of public speech is both personal and impersonal; 4) A public is constituted through mere attention; 5) A public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse; 6) Publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation; 7) A public is poetic world making (67-118).

Claims 5 and 6 form the core of Warner's project. By emphasizing reflexivity, circulation, and time, Warner defines a public as an "ongoing space of encounter" (90). One writes a pamphlet with the expectation that it will be answered, but Warner insists that the exchange it is far more socially complex than a simple conversation between two people. It is an attempt to speak to many others whose potential differences shape the discourse. Furthermore, Warner asserts that a public has to be constituted through regular, if not daily, intervals of publication. Warner believes that one is no longer addressing a public if there is not a sense of timely and punctual response.

Both the strengths and weaknesses of Warner's approach come from his reliance on Addison and Steele's magazine, *The Spectator*, as an illustration of what he means by the creation of a public (98-114). As students of the eighteenth century know, *The Spectator* inaugurated a remarkable fusion of middling prose style and apparently non-polemical point-of-view. *The Spectator* encouraged the sense that its writers and readers shared a common culture, a narrative tone that we take for granted in much journalism today. The magazine's genteel but playful ethos, its balanced sense of judgement, and phrases such as "As we observed last issue," materialized "the voice of civil society" (99).

With *The Spectator*, Warner has put his finger right on the sound of "going public," and he provides very plausible accounts of the way subordinated groups use the same tools to create counterpublics (in Warner's formulation, counterpublics are simply publics aware of their subordinate status). One of Warner's most provocative insights is his assertion that "All 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" (123).

As compelling a model as *The Spectator* is for describing the eighteenth-century's construction of a public, Warner retreats from problems posed by the internet because it does not usually have a temporal dimension (who knows *when* a webpage has materialized? Does its place in time matter anyway?) (98). Warner has little interest in talking about the way subordinated social groups—the political organization of graduate students comes to my mind—have used the internet to organize themselves as publics with agency. He admits that circulation may not be a viable analytic category for what a public "is," but he does not speculate about how devastating a blow that would be to his interpretive framework. Given the endless fragmentation of publics into counterpublics even in the eighteenth century, one wonders if "going public" is not merely a symptom of a kind of cultural activity that Warner is not interested in discussing, namely, *politics*. But it is to Warner's credit that these important kinds of questions appear in his work.

Beyond his discussion of publics, Warner's book continues his polemic against Normality, voiced in works such as *The Trouble with Normal* (2000), and *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993). Warner finds straight sex far less interesting than gay sex (206). More understandable is his discussion of the way that heteronormativity frames laws and social habits that discriminate against queer lifeways (194-205). He believes that straight, white, propertied, male America has historically framed the meaning of a public to refer solely to its own values. He parts ways with his gay/lesbian political allies, however, because he thinks they have tried to

normalize gay sex too much in their successful quest for better homosexual civil rights (16-19). In other words, Warner seems concerned that by striving to *normalize* gay relations with marriage, pro-gay groups might thus foreclose on the possibility of better political gains, such as obtaining health care for domestic partners who have not married.

The essays in his book attempt to show that once the genie of the "public" has been let out of its bottle, many subordinated groups have used it on their own behalf to expand the life-world of what is considered normal. Warner seems to imply that these cultural moves are the vanguard of political change. In an astonishing vignette, Warner concludes the essay "Sex in Public" with a scene from a West Village bar where a straight white boy is tied to a chair and force-fed milk and various foodstuffs as fast as he can swallow. His partner, a gay male, then stuffs fingers down the boy's throat until he vomits repeatedly. Warner offers this as an example of one of the "counterpublics" of queer life that will presumably rescue us from the tyranny of the normal (206-8).

Although he does not explicitly gloss what the scene means, Warner apparently proposes that it symbolizes the publicity struggles between queer culture and straight culture. Queer culture obliges straight culture to recognize its insatiable hunger for Polly-Purebred normality. The gay man, a synecdoche for queer culture, helps the straight boy to eat too much of his "wholesome" diet of milk, banality, and virtue, and then forces the boy to blow chunks, making straight culture into the abject spectacle usually played by subaltern peoples. That's a tough lesson to swallow, and Warner seems to hope many readers choke on it. It is a bang-up way to end an essay, but it's not an argument, and the vignette may be open to other interpretations.

Rather than assuming that the gates of the Normal have been recently stormed in a novel attack by queer theory, what if the Normal has been choking on its own hypocritical dogmas rammed down its throat by the obliging hands of various Barbarians since the beginning of time? What if the alleged monolith of the propertied, white, male, Normal "public" always had its cracks, breakages, political divisions, and funky paradoxes? What if the Barbarians (foreigners, the poor, gays, slaves, women, bohemians, and weirdos) have *always* made an impact on the Normal? From my vantage point, history is ceaseless political struggle where fourteenth-century labor uprisings, women's poetry, and Indian speeches actually *did* change history (in contrast to the belief that despite a few inconsequential exceptions, the Unified Straight White Patriarchy unequivocally dominated every aspect of cultural life on the planet Earth until, say, about 1958. Some of my students assure me that it wasn't until 1995 that the rule of the Unified Patriarchy began to buckle). I am sure that Warner is as interested in recovering the value of bygone historical struggles as am I, but it is unfortunate that his analyses employ such dubious identity categories as their whipping boy (terms like, "straight culture"). And while Warner seems highly sensitive to sexual and racial difference, he pays little attention to class difference in the maintenance of the Normal.

One of the richest essays in the collection is a study of a published fictional speech of an African chief spoken in the short-lived African Theater of New York City in 1821. Begun as a research project with his students at Rutgers in a seminar for advanced research methods, the essay suggests that the speech could have been written by a variety of likely candidates, both white and black, but in either case, the speech is a remarkable critique of racial theory. Warner and his students have done a fascinating job recovering the political agency of African-Americans during this period, noting their power as a voting block in New York's notoriously close elections. But elsewhere in Warner's book, one gets little sense of the turbulence of early U.S. "publics." Lacking a sociological awareness that the differences between U.S citizens during the early national period cast the very idea of the Normal into question, Warner seems surprised to find racial organization and public speaking he thought un-voiceable in 1821. As a result, Warner suggests that the African speech may be an early example of "counterpublicity" (262). It may also be eloquent testament to the fact that early U.S. politics were not as white and normal as Warner would have us believe.