

## **Rethinking the Public Sphere for a Global Age**

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I am very pleased to lead off our colloquium, although it is quite daunting to try to address a group such as this one, with its multiple cultures and traditions and areas of expertise! Coming into the collaboration between Warwick University and JNU, and trying to think about how to clear some ground for mutual interchange, I realized I can only speak about what I know. It seemed best to select and investigate an area which might be pertinent to our discipline across the board—no matter to what place in the world we might turn.

I have decided to focus here on the concept of the public sphere. For performance scholars, the necessity of developing an international comparative analysis of the concept of the public sphere seems important because performance often claims to play an important role in such a sphere, especially in a context of globalization. However, the problems of understanding what the key components are and what constitutes the relationship between global, national, and local versions of a/the public raise considerable challenges for my inquiry.

Of course, the very choice of topic already threw up considerable problems: One of the key research questions we formulated for our collaboration has been stated as follows in our original partnership documents:

- How to engage comparatively East/West without ignoring, on the one hand, or reifying, on the other, the colonial/postcolonial histories of our nations?

I became immediately aware that even the choice of concept, 'the Public Sphere' conjured up a European term, clearly associated with a theorization of the rise of civic

culture and bourgeois behavior during the Enlightenment period. This term came to scholarly prominence through the work of Jürgen Habermas, whose influential study, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* appeared in German in 1962, and in English in 1989. If considered as a historical study rather than a philosophical treatise, this book gives an account of new forms of communicative deliberation that emerged in England in the 1700s, and on the European continent over the next century, with the French Revolution seen as the culmination of the emergence of the public sphere. But as a philosophical treatise, Habermas generalizes this western European history into a universal theory of the public sphere which performs the customary imposition of a European interpretation on a much larger and heterogeneous field. However, some Indian scholars also cite Habermas as a point of departure for their discussions, and the ramifications of global changes for the transformation of the Indian public sphere concern those scholars as much as they do someone like me, an American citizen living 'abroad', for whom United States global behavior has given rise to such phrases as the Disneyfication or McDonaldization of culture.

So in order not to go around in circles for fear of reifying or merely repeating the East/West binary, I will start with Habermas but hopefully with an eye to moving beyond his early analyses. (And it must be said that Habermas himself in the years since this first theorization has significantly revised and reformulated his ideas to take account of more diverse histories and circumstances, developing a theory of communicative action as the basis for the kind of discourse he would like to see constitute the public sphere. While I ultimately disagree even with Habermas's later theories, I have no wish to set

him up as a straw man, but rather to build on and improve upon his ideas for use in our current historical conjuncture.)

In this talk, I will first outline what Habermas understood as the public sphere; second, critique the shortcomings of his theory and offer some alternative theoretical models which might suit better an international contemporary perspective; third, ask about the relationship of theatre and performance to that sphere; and finally, comment on some current events.

### What is the Public Sphere

The public sphere is the leading term in a grouping of several cognates — *the* or a public (as a noun), or, as an adjective whose antonym is 'private', and of course the noun publicity.

When Habermas wrote about the Public Sphere as a concept, he intended to designate a zone of mediation between the state and individuals

where individuals could come together to engage in reasoned argument over key issues of mutual interest and concern, creating a space in which new ideas and the practice and discipline of rational public debate were cultivated. These sites were the new associational spaces such as coffee houses, clubs, newspapers, theatre and arts, and art criticism. In a section of his book called 'The Basic Blueprint', he writes:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this

- ▶ European 'moment' of emergence of the public sphere:
- ▶ 18<sup>th</sup>/early 19<sup>th</sup> c. (trade, market, colonies, print culture, coffee houses, theatre criticism)
- ▶ 'bourgeois public sphere': a zone of mediation between the state and the individual where 'men' came together to engage in reasoned argument.

political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason.<sup>1</sup>

In this view, Habermas sought to describe not only the historical reality of the post-absolutist societies of fledgling modernity, but also a transhistorical normative state of affairs. Thus an emancipated public sphere was a goal, that would only be achieved when social relations were organized 'according to the principle that the validity of every norm of political consequence be made dependent on a consensus arrived at in communication free from domination'(13). This idea became the guiding thread of Habermas's vision of the public sphere, but it is also where the serious problems begin as well.

Tracing a genealogy that led back to the Greek polis and the idea that citizens discussed topical issues in the agora where they interacted as 'equals with equals', Habermas emphasized a continuity between the Greek and modern public spheres as well as the differences arising from capitalism, the new economic system that came to triangulate the relations between the state, the economy, and the individuals trying to go public with their issues and desires.

Based on this basic version of Habermas, I would make the following observations about access:

1. Starting with Greek society based on slavery and a concept of citizenship that was far from inclusive, through to a similar exclusivity in the bourgeois public sphere of modernity which in most cases did not include women or those with no property,

- Lack of actual access
- No monolithic sphere
- Public and Private = relative terms in historical flux
- Notion of 'rational argument' is narrow and limited

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 27.

the invocation of an idealized equality has not and does not now manifest in the composition of the historical western public sphere. As political philosopher Nancy Frazer has written on this point, 'The relation between publicity and status is more complex than Habermas intimates', and 'declaring a deliberative arena to be a space where extant status distinctions are bracketed and neutralized is not sufficient to make it so'.<sup>2</sup>

2. Those excluded from the 'official' public sphere nevertheless have historically found their own spaces of discourse and intersubjective exchange in public, and have through a variety of means provided counterweight to the dominant public sphere. Therefore, the governing geometry of this sphere needs to be envisioned not as a unified field, but rather as a network or a rhizome with a plurality of entry points, and indeed, of publics. There is no monolithic sphere.
3. Habermas specified the content of the public sphere as 'the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor'. This describes the moment of his focus in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, but It also covers over an historically differentiated struggle over the very terms private and public, what they mean and the degree of opposition between them in any given period or context. Ideas of what constitutes appropriate topics for the public sphere need to be constantly interrogated and reformulated, as well as the relations between the terms public and private in local, national, or global situations. (In addition, this characterization seems much too restrictive in our

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<sup>2</sup> Nancy Frazer, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 115.

current age of internet social networking and identity theft, where very little of everyday life is privatized at all.)

4. Habermas's emphasis on rational argument and consensus as the major mode of public sphere activity is uncomfortable from several points of view: It sets up certain communicative codes that are themselves exclusionary when class, gender or caste expressions don't conform to the legitimized ways of contributing. He also idealizes the hoped-for outcome of public participation—not always is consensus desired, but sometimes, rather, actual dissensus, the registration of a lack of consensus or insistence on polyvocal fragmentation, even disintegration of a univocal public voice. There is also a presumption that this discourse can lead to influence and decision-making at the point of consensus, and this, too, fails to characterize kinds of public discourse that may not be tied to political efficacy through recognized channels, or what are sometimes called 'weak publics' because they don't have the power to take decisions that influence the state directly.

In addition to these points, Habermas's initial theory suffers from a number of blind spots. There is the tendency to predicate the bourgeois public sphere on print culture. In the historical analysis of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, it is certainly true that print culture advanced circulation of ideas and opinions in an exponential transformation of what had been previously possible. But print culture was not the only medium of publicity, and is not the only vehicle for public sphere formation. This is especially important for our discipline as it elides the role of orality and visuality, or alternatively does not recognize the co-presence of multiple channels of communication circulation. In a discussion of

► Print does not, in fact, eclipse older media; the evidence suggests the opposite.

Habermas in connection to Benedict Anderson's link of the national imagination to print capitalism,

media scholar Arvind Rajagopal points out that 'print does not, in fact, eclipse older media; the evidence suggests the opposite. In colonial contexts, the attempt to discredit native modes of communication as lacking credibility, for example, rumor, only confirmed them as favoured means of mobilization. 'Old' media could, in this way, experience a reinvigoration with the entry of print media, especially where literates were in a minority, and mass movements occurred'.<sup>3</sup> Print culture also operates differently in the context of a multi-lingual society such as India than in a nation unified by one language alone.

The internet now also operates across languages with major emphasis on images and graphics. In this contemporary moment, cell phone technology rather than computers may be leading the way in internet distribution for multi-lingual societies since it can trade in voice recognition and images rather than mono-lingual print-based text. Writing about the Indian context, computer science scholar K. Gopinath thinks that while Internet is still prohibitive as an effective democratic-access technology in India due to cost, text, and language, 'a low-cost cellular Internet . . . with good support infrastructure for voice applications and for Indian languages will change the landscape in ways that cannot be predicted'.<sup>4</sup> (311). Of course, the value of internet access to all is also a topic for examination and debate, but for now, I'll push that back toward the end of the discussion.

For all these problems, Habermas still offers important insights. As Rajagopal

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<sup>3</sup> Arvind Rajagopal, ed., 'Introduction', *The Indian Public Sphere: Readings in Media History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>4</sup> K. Gopinath, 'Internet in India', in Rajagopal, 311.

reformulates Habermas's questions, he asks, 'what is the relation between a communicational form such as print and its socio- political context? What kinds of popular participation are made possible in a given context of publicity, and whose interests are best represented in a particular public sphere?' (2-3). Questions asked this way are less dependent on the limitations of Habermas's historical or normative ideas. They open to more contemporary analyses and can be comparatively situated to reach a description of the public sphere that might be useful for our time. It would need to take into account these issues of power and access, and position national and global interests in relation to this sphere. A number of thinkers have reworked this material, but I am going to combine Michael Warner's theory coming out of American identity political struggles and Partha Chatterjee's theory of the relationship of nationalism to globalization in an attempt to reformulate a workable notion of public sphere operations.

Michael Warner identifies 'counterpublics' as alternative publics that come into being creating an alternative or rival public culture:

Counterpublics are defined by their tension with a larger public. Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general. Discussion within such a public is understood to contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large, being structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying. . . . A counterpublic, against the background of the public sphere, enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power; its extent is in principle indefinite, because it is not based on a precise demography but mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like'.<sup>5</sup> (56-57.)

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 56-7.



- ▶ Warner makes an important distinction between 'the'public and 'a' public when meaning a kind of social totality

Warner explicitly mentions theater as one of the vehicles available to such counterpublics, and in other features too, he calls attention to a wider

range of behaviours and interventions than are normally thought of in the bourgeois public sphere. Not only need it *not* be bourgeois, but expressive speech, embodied styles of interaction, code switching, and linguistic polyphony are just some of the ways the emphasis can be shifted from a limited understanding of reason to what he calls 'poetic world making', which has more room for sociability, affect, and play than a narrowly defined sphere of rational-critical dialogue which is actually coded for conventions of bourgeois style and already legitimated public deportment. The formation of a counter public may be of varying strengths relative to its socioeconomic position and its interests but is in principle open—it is a call to an imaginary addressee who may variously take up the offer.

One of the problems with this theorization, however, is that it sounds like voluntarism—publics come into being by virtue of individual will. However, in an age of state administration, global media and limitless commodification, this voluntarism is certainly not credible, and Warner, in fact, draws attention to the mediation by commerce of some relations between counterpublics and the dominant, if imaginary, public. At this point, I wanted help understanding why the public sphere seems in turns to be hegemonic, in league with the state and with global capital on the one hand, and on the other seems truly a space of democratic practice or even resistance.

Turning to Partha Chatterjee, distinguished historian and political scholar, I found help in a book of the Leonard Hastings Scoff Memorial Lectures from 2002.

Chatterjee gets at this problematic through his theorization of three separate arenas in public life made up of the state, civil society, and political society. His ideas are a part of his investigation of nationalism and the workings of the nation-state in a global time of the supposed post-nation (an idea he contests). The new term in these contexts is 'political society.' The distinction he wishes to make between civil and political society is initially an historical one—a key claim is, 'The most significant site of transformations in the colonial period is that of civil society; the most significant transformations occurring in the postcolonial period are in political society'.<sup>6</sup>

To read these distinctions in a very simplified way for our purposes, Chatterjee sees the Indian colonial project of the independent-minded elites as based on models of civil society associated with Modernity, including a desire for the virtues of the Enlightenment and of bourgeois freedom, whose known cultural forms were those of secularized Western Christianity. With the rise of mass movements and the establishment of actually existing Indian democracy, Chatterjee thinks that popular nationalism strained the associational forms of civic society which were based on elite and bourgeois notions of modernity, and in order to achieve a new independent state order, other kinds of political activity and institutions grew up alongside those of so-called civil society. He concludes this part of his argument with this observation:

This arena of nationalist politics, in other words, became a site of strategic manoeuvres, resistance, and appropriation by different groups and classes, many of those contests remaining unresolved even in the present phase of the postcolonial state. The point is that the practices that activate the forms and methods of mobilization and participation in political society are not always consistent with the principles of association in civil society'(64).

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<sup>6</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 65.

Thus this political society becomes important for the project of democracy, and cannot be accommodated by the structures of civil society alone with which it is sometimes in tension. In Chatterjee's analysis of present-day globalization, moreover, outside agents of economic liberalism often make common cause with so-called civic values such as humanitarianism or human rights or environmentalism to work through the civil institutions in ways that lead to neo-colonial penetration of ostensibly national interests, and retardation of the larger project of establishing really existing democracy. In Chatterjee's examples, political solutions are sometimes improvised outside of the law or formal legitimate processes, but through informal public negotiations with governmentality.

Chatterjee's conclusions apply beyond the Indian example:

What these tendencies in many countries around the world reveal are the glaring inadequacies of the old forms of democratic representation, not only in the less modernized countries of the non-Western world but in Western democracies themselves. There is much contestation over new claims and entitlements, those that were not part of the earlier liberal consensus on state-civil society relations. In many cases, the new claims directly contradict and violate universal 'modern' conventions of civil society. The historical task . . . is to work out new forms of democratic institutions and practices in the mediating field of political society that lies between civil society and the nation-state' (68).

► Political Society = An arena where 'the practices that activate the forms and methods of mobilization and participation in political society are not always consistent with the principles of association in civil society'.

This critique explains why in theorizing the public sphere it is important to see various sectors or publics as differentially connected to the state, civil society, and political society. I believe this distinction has utility not only for India and other post-colonial nations, but also in the West where, as Chatterjee observes, institutions of civil society have also been found to be inadequate and even counter-democratic. This

critique will take a different shape certainly in the West, but I believe it helps us understand in the UK what has gone wrong at the BBC or in the US why the tea party movement is suddenly virulently popular and growing at this moment. In particular, it also helps approach several typical stalemates in the thinking of scholars in our field about the public sphere and democratic practices.

### **Arts in the Public Sphere**

If we recognize that most of the arts institutions, including theatre and other performing arts, belong to the strata of civil society, we might better understand the growing impression in our discipline that direct political efficacy is practically impossible within state-supported and subsidized theatres as well as within international art events, festivals, or privately financed intercultural projects backed by transnational sponsors. Some scholars feel artists should opt out of these institutions altogether and seek other venues for their creative production. Others argue that there are possible collateral effects in some of these cases when counterpublics may recognize themselves in relation to these vehicles and circulate additional texts among themselves, eventually strengthening their power and ability to be politically effective as a counterpublic. This argument is important given the low opinion that educated elites often have of popular culture, especially television and reality shows or talk radio. I am wanting to suggest that it is easy to underestimate the impact of this cultural sector. From our vantage point within what Chatterjee calls civic society, we may not fully grasp the organizational potential of these practices for the formation and recognition of a dissident set of counterpublics. It is much harder for some of us (and I include myself, thus the we/us language here) to grapple with cultural forms we hold in contempt and

that seem to be pushing out of the public sphere performances we would find more worthy. Public opinion and market demand seem especially suspect, but perhaps too it is our own class positions and cultural capital that we are protecting with our judgment that bourgeois taste should prevail over consumption patterns of a democratic popular public.

The political power of popular culture could be seen in the early days of television when serialized programs—‘specials’—appeared: programs such as *Roots* in the US which put African American slave histories on Prime Time (1977), or the first showings of *Shoah* on German television (1986), or the first epic television broadcasts of the *Ramayan* on Indian television (1987).<sup>7</sup> In these instances, certain formations of counterpublics and ways of doing oppositional politics were enabled even by state controlled or partially controlled media. Of course, these counterpublic formations need not be progressive—in fact they can as easily be reactionary since that the process can be set underway by any group that recognizes itself as a public.

*Clarification: In the course of the colloquium in Delhi, I came to recognize that my comments above had been taken to mean that I conflated the examples from the three countries. I therefore want to add this statement: While the new mass consciousness of black history in the case of *Roots* and of the Holocaust in the case of *Shoa* were important progressive expansions of democratic culture in the first two cases, in the case of the *Ramayan* on Indian television (Doordarshan), owned and operated by the state, the reactionary Hindu elements of the ruling party were able to capitalize on the huge new audiences for television to break away from the secular ideology of the earlier*

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<sup>7</sup> Television expanded rapidly in the 1980s so that by 1985 80% of the urban population and half of the rural population were within range of a TV signal. Robin Jeffrey, ‘The Mahatma Didn’t Like the Movies and Why it Matters’, in Rajagopal, 182.

era and attempt to call into being a unified Hindu public. This accelerated the rise in Hindu nationalism but did not succeed in covering over the deep differences within the Indian polity. Rajagopal describes the effect of the *Ramayan* broadcasts and their consequences:

The avowal that it [the Indian public] was indeed a single entity was never before granted so much attention by so many people since the time of independence as in the wake of the *Ramayan* broadcasts. Even this immense convergence of attention was not sufficient to render a deeply divided public whole. What was eventually accomplished, amidst attempts to redefine the Indian public as a unified Hindu public, was a spectacular fragmentation into its several parts, as caste assertion broke the Hindu vote apart. The spectre of Hindu unity remained as a politically potent weapon, even though it came to be acknowledged as an unrealizable goal. In the process, the contours of Indian politics were permanently changed.<sup>8</sup>

Thus what is true of all three examples is that counterpublics were formed as a result of these programmes—in concert with other political factors as well of course—which changed the face of the socio-political self-representation of the nation and its citizens, and therefore created new sites for democratic struggle within each.

Theatre as an institution has a difficult time showing up within this level of discussion of mass transmission through television, and the role of theatre in the macro-dynamics of society is difficult to assess. Most distribution of performance is pretty local, or alternatively is exclusively distributed through circuits that are definitely part of the civil society in so far as they are major state supported arts institutions, international festivals, or similar bourgeois institutions. On the other hand, when a particularly effective performance, let us say a devised performance by a community-based group makes a performance of critical importance to the local audience that views it, it most

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<sup>8</sup> Arvind Rajagopal, 'A "Split Public" in the Ram Janmabhumi Campaign', in Rajagopal, 208.

often falls below the radar of the official archive. It is not that it cannot be documented, but that it will likely still escape wide attention since it will be considered parochial. Yet what we need is a way of understanding the relationship of various forms of performance to the formation of counterpublics and their ultimate relations to the macrosphere of power and influence where governmentality controls populations or within global media distribution, where certain images and characterizations prevail over others. This analysis is needed across the global/national divide.

Perhaps one way of circling back to the theatre is by way of another older technology, print culture. I have been reading about the history of Indian news papers and news reporting more generally, and I know that regional language presses and general reading of newspapers went up dramatically around the same time that cable television and transnational media became available (late 80s), showing that televisual media do not necessarily impede print journalism, and that, as we noted earlier, older form can coexist alongside newer media. Friedlander, Jeffrey, and Seth report 'Unprecedented in history, India's newspaper revolution since the 1980s, which has happened in a dozen major languages and eleven different scripts, lets us observe the sudden creation of a "public sphere" for millions of people'.<sup>9</sup>(188).

But I have also read that Indian elites have been very critical of much of the new journalism for partisan political involvement in place of objectivity, as well as the domination of local news over national and international news, and the lack of credibility of 'objective reporting' in much of this press coverage. Perhaps this is

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<sup>9</sup> Peter G Friedlander, Robin Jeffrey, and Sanjay Seth, "Subliminal Charge": How Hindi-Language Newspaper Expansion Affects India', in Rajagopal, 188. See a similar account of this growth in Sevanti Ninan, *Headlines from the Heartland: Reinventing the Hindi Public Sphere* (Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007).

another example of what Chatterjee is addressing when he says that methods of mobilization and participation in political society are not always consistent with the principles of association in civil society. So political values might be counterposed between the growth of local print-based publics and the homogenization of the globalized media sphere, where the values and blemishes of each are difficult to reconcile. The value of the circulation of the local news is not its literary or even informational value in this case; it is as an organizing tool calling certain publics into being and offering a competing image of 'public' to the global surround.

This alternative possibility may also play out in relation to performing arts. I was particularly struck by an account by Arvind Rajagopal of the tension between Indian cinema and what he terms 'neglected folk arts'. Because this involves gender, it was especially interesting to me. A Kolhati, member of a Rajasthani nomadic community, participates in *tamasha* performances, dancing and singing by women before an audience of men. Rajagopal explains that participating in this hereditary art, 'tamasha earns the women money but brands them amoral at the same time, effectively ostracizing them from respectable society'. He then quotes his informant: 'Dancing is our business and our art. But, these days all kinds of women indulge in blatant prostitution under the guise of dancing. If our *pallu* slips even a few inches off our chest it causes a commotion. But heroines in movies dance with bodies exposed, with a different hero each time, and it is called art. They go to Delhi and win awards for it. It is all a joke played on us by shameless people (quoted in Rajagopal 26)'. What might we say here about the public sphere and the various counter publics and dominant public, and especially about how to understand this tension politically? To the



extent that this is an injustice, the informant is making a criticism of a lack of democratic extension to participate equally as a citizen and as a woman in the Indian public sphere. On the other hand, the commercialization of sexuality in the popular cinema may not seem so liberatory in terms of really existing national values; on the contrary, it seems patently neoliberal and global in its freedoms. So what would be a democratic solution? To find all actresses who dance with men, whether on screen or in tamasha immoral? Or is it so much better to think that commodification of sexuality should 'free' this woman to express her gender and sexuality within the codes of transnational cinema exports? I think you will understand that I do not like the choices, nor am I sure what the appropriate response to this dilemma should be. What would constitute democratic struggle for validation/formation of a counterpublic on behalf of this local performance tradition? Is there a way to mobilize the local performance tradition in critique of the global circulation of commercial material? Who would be hailed as this counterpublic?

'It is all a joke played on us by shameless people'.

In closing, I'll return to my own nation of birth, where I continue to struggle to see how best to understand the tensions in the public sphere between populism and elitism, the state, the civil society, and the political society. The US as you well know, has its own forms of censorship and social injustice. When I was back just now on research leave for a few months, I witnessed the elaborate health care debates in which the richest country in the world voiced intense opposition to guaranteeing health care for all its citizens.

This is a situation in which the state and its civil institutions have definitely not lived up to the ideals of liberal democracy as millions of Americans have not had access

to health insurance. President Obama has made his most important policy commitment to reform health care and obtain health insurance coverage for every American, but this has been an uphill fight. At the present time, many emergency rooms in hospitals will not turn away critically ill people, whether or not they are insured, whether or not they are citizens or undocumented workers, for example, from Mexico. But beyond this emergency treatment, any further treatments or course of treatment may be denied them, and even being treated at all falls within Chatterjee's notion of the political society rather than civil, because these actions occur only on an ad hoc basis and are not protected or provided for under the law. They are improvised accommodations to an unjust situation, leaving these patients outside the law and outside the protections of citizenship.

The bill that finally passed in late March 2010 provides only a small amount of health care reform; it was a very weak piece of legislation. Nevertheless, it was heavily contested and barely passed without a single Republican vote. More troubling, 60% of the US population were against the bill, afraid of what the opposition called 'socialized medicine' and the takeover of big government, and of having to share tax dollars with the 'undeserving poor'.

The publics involved in this political battle went beyond what happened in the traditional public sphere on the floor of the House of Representatives. Together with the news coverage on major media outlets and in the *New York Times*, the last days leading up to the final vote were extensively covered within what Chatterjee would consider the civil institutions and formal democratic channels of government. But the battle for public opinion also took place on talk shows and comedy shows on cable radio

and TV, and also on U-Tube, Facebook, Twitter, and many political blogs and chat groups. The insurance corporations and other groups including the political parties themselves poured extensive money into these 'new media'. Politicians, including President Obama, crisscrossed the country



speaking at town hall meetings and in school and university assemblies, trying to win the heartland of America, as the slogan goes. In this instance, new counterpublics with reactionary political agendas emerged overnight –these are the Tea Party patriots I spoke of earlier, and they have made an unlikely coalition of people of all ages, classes, and ethnicities opposing the health care bill for a wide variety of reasons, but mostly because they have felt disenfranchised by party politics and charges of Washington elite's back-door deals. While I can despise and oppose their political position as reactionary, I think I can see how manipulation of the major public sphere spaces by national and transnational interests such as the insurance companies has provided the arguments or frameworks for this new counterpublics' ascendancy, and I cannot help but understand that people who have felt excluded from the democratic process are taking up the call to be a public in order to engage in what they see as democratic struggle. This set of contradictory and interlaced registers of the public sphere can be understood and critiqued through a combination of Warner and Chatterjee's insights.

As a performance  
observations as well:  
vote, I watched the  
House of  
cable network, CNN. It



scholar, I have my own  
The night before the  
proceedings in the  
Representatives on the  
is worth noting that none

of the other broadcast networks provided live coverage—there were too many important sports events on television that would draw more viewers. So let's call CNN the elite news channel for this event, even though it started out in the 1980s as an alternative to the three major networks. As the vote approached, Democrat and Republican members of Congress alternated in delivering two minute speeches for and against the bill. At this point, of course, they were a complete formality as everyone had made up their mind. They were 'going on record' for the last time in a sum-up of their positions, but they also knew few people were watching. While their fellow House members moved around, spoke to each other, in effect ignored these speeches, Members of the House gave impassioned two minute pleas to their non-listening colleagues to pass or reject the bill. These speeches were being video-recorded as they were being given, and most would appear on the personal websites of the representatives, and would also be used in the upcoming elections this November as campaign advertisements for their position. The irony of watching these emotional performances to an uninterested House reminded me that the affective gestures and speech of performances would do as much work in public debate as the evidence and arguments would do, and that from the civil institutions of power, these performances would fan out to small towns and coffee shops in America through informal accounts, campaign speeches, web users, and other

unexpected channels of communication. The public sphere in democratic society was not really unified on the floor of the House; it was dispersed and fragmented, to be relayed later through public imaginations that might zero in on the personality of the speaker, the style of their representative's wardrobe, or the folksiness of the message. For some, the statistics and arguments might be the most important aspects, but for others, personal testimony would carry more weight. This dispersal of taped speeches from the centre to the periphery demonstrated clearly the orchestration and mediation of political power which is an ongoing feature of the political equation in the US.

There is a popular television series called *Mercy*—a hospital drama featuring three female nurses, one of whom served as a military nurse in the Iraq War, In the week just before the vote, the program centred on an African American patient with no health insurance who needed heart surgery, and on the decision of the nurse and doctor to go against hospital policy and perform an illegal operation in order to save his life.

Meanwhile, the second nurse figure was being questioned by police for aiding a patient in termination of her life in the face of incurable and degenerative illness. Both episodes were about acting through civil institutions, but really outside the law, and the politics of the drama were clearly in favour of these procedures. The juxtaposition of this program to the political debates I has been witnessing about health care reform made me aware once again that simply negating major media entertainment performances is too simple a judgment in trying to understand how the public sphere operates and how counterpublics can make use of various forms of appeal and



deliberation. It appears to me that many different forms of public discourse and public performances shape the public sphere, and resistance can sometimes be found in unlikely places. And on this somewhat inconclusive note, I'll leave it there.