



Workshop 08

Alternative Publics in the Middle East and North Africa

directed by

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Workshop abstract

Early work on civil society and the public sphere took as its point of departure recent European history. Habermas's reformulation of the theory of the public sphere built on Arendt's work, but substituted a theory of publicity connected by the news media for the face-to-face contact that formed the locus for discourse in Arendt's Greek agora. Contrary to Habermas's idea of one singular all-inclusive public sphere, recent work on civil society, by Fraser and others, has suggested that the idea of a monolithic media-driven public sphere tends to undermine, rather than promote, access by minority groups to state decision-making apparatus.

In this session, we propose to examine actual cases of alternative public spheres and of minority identity formation in the Middle East and North Africa. Drawing on research in the United Arab Emirates, Al-Qasimi examines the construction of alternate narratives of queer identities amongst the national youth. Drawing on models of the public sphere, Gray examines the ways in which theories of the public sphere have been misunderstood in Afghanistan, and how problems in the formation of public identities arise from traditional social arrangements. Other papers in the session will examine the creation of public identities and minority public spheres in the region.

Workshop description

The classic conception of the public sphere – as seen in the writings of thinkers like Hannah Arendt – draws on the Greek agora: the place where we can, as citizens, come together face-to-face in an arena outside both the family and the economy, to discuss matters of public interest. In doing so, Arendt draws on the Aristotelian distinction between matters of private household affairs (the *oikos*) and matters of public interest (the *polis*). While Arendt was undoubtedly concerned about the expansion of economics into the public sphere, and was pessimistic about the prospects for a liberated public, her work provides the first modern account of the public sphere.

Jürgen Habermas takes the Arendtian conception and, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, expands it in light of the growth of the publishing industry in early capitalist society. Habermas argues that in the 17th and 18th centuries, there was a growth in the scope of the public sphere wherein face to face contact was partially replaced with the exchange of information through long distance commerce and the growth of the capitalist state.

In contemporary political theory, the standard model of the public sphere sees it as the most important way in which civil society relates to the economy and the government (Cohen and Arato 1992, 411). A well-grounded civil society, stabilized through the appropriate structural mechanisms, is essential to all forms of political theory – from secular natural law theories to discourse ethics. Identities, in turn, of participants in civil society, are seen as partially constructed through interaction in public spheres.

However, Habermas's account – and thus Cohen and Arato's – was immediately challenged as being exclusionary. In Kant's political theory, for instance, only land-holding men qualified as eligible participations in civil society. In Habermas's, the public sphere was essentially a bourgeoisie public sphere and, with the exception of very limited gender parity in the coffee houses in Britain, was a largely masculine affair.

Writers such as Mary P. Ryan have argued that the strictures of gender were typically the tightest and oldest restrictions on public access (Ryan, 259). Nancy Fraser, building on Ryan's work, argues that emphasis on the singularity of the public sphere is problematic, and thus that "the ideal of participatory parity is better achieved by a multiplicity of publics than by a single public" (Fraser, 127). On Fraser's view, to rely on Habermas's monolithic public sphere is to exclude minority groups from participation.

Much of the recent literature on public spheres in the Middle East and North Africa has continued to challenge the Habermasian model of the public sphere. In some cases, that research has tended to focus on the emergence of local public spheres that are structurally different from Cohen and Arato's model; for example, Lisa Wedeen argues that Qat chews in Yemen qualify as public spheres (Wedeen 2007).

In other cases, writers have built on Fraser's criticism of the implicit nationalism of Habermas's work and her discussion of post-Westphalian public spheres (Fraser 2004), and have argued that in some cases transnational public spheres already exist. Armando Salvatore, focussing particularly on the Egyptian case, has argued for the existence of a transnational Islamic public sphere (Salvatore 2007a & 2007b).

In Kevin W. Gray's recent work, he argues that the theorizing of transnational or indigenous public spheres misunderstands the dialogical structure of public identity construction. Drawing on the protests of 1968, he argues that the role of capitalism has been insufficiently theorized in attempts to transnationalize the public sphere (Gray, 2009a). Following on his research in Afghanistan, he argues that attempts to ground civil society in a strong public sphere fail to take into account institutionalize traditional modes of dialogue that are, at their core, incompatible with dialogical models of civil society (Gray, 2009b).

In her recent work, Noor Al-Qasimi examines the ways in which alternative public spheres are constructed inside discourses of national identity. Using a textual and ethnographic analytical framework, Al-Qasimi combines the analysis of visual and textual material with structured and unstructured interviews conducted in the United Arab Emirates. Taking as her subject what she terms the national "post-oil generation," she shows how members of that generation produce multiple discourses that challenge the national identity, and focuses on this generation's use of space to engage in the exploration of alternative narratives of queerness.

To complete the session, we hope to solicit a variety of papers that examine the construction of alternate public spheres in the Middle East and North Africa, and how the construction of these spheres challenges traditional ideas of publicness and identity. Ideally, we will be able to invite other researchers from the region, including those mentioned below, to provide a variety of national and pan-national examples from the Mediterranean region.

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