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# Counterpublic

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Counterpublics are a subset of publics that stand in conscientious opposition to a dominant ideology and strategically subvert that ideology's construction in public discourse. The term "counterpublics" emerged from debates about the public sphere following the belated translation of Jürgen Habermas's *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962) into *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989. Critics pointed out that Habermas's theory of the public sphere had focused on bourgeois society at the expense of other sectors of civil society, such as the working class, women, and people of color.

The literary critic and social theorist Michael Warner expanded on this line of critique by arguing that *the* public sphere, a singular public often presumed to represent a social totality (a presumption shared by techniques such as public opinion polling), is really composed of an infinite number of publics. Warner argued that the multiplicity of publics that constitute the public sphere are organized by the production, circulation, and consumption of texts (print as well as other media forms). This multiplicity of publics, argued Warner, is thoroughly relational. In his 2002 article, "Publics and Counterpublics," he wrote: "Publics are essentially intertextual, frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts, all interwoven" (Warner [2002] 2005, 16).

At what point the oppositional relationship between publics qualifies an alternative public as a *counterpublic* has been a point of debate. Nancy Fraser, another critic of Habermas's theorization of the public sphere, suggests that subordinated groups who assert counterdiscourses are "subaltern counterpublics" (1990, 67). Warner has taken issue with this framing, arguing that in order for a public to be a counterpublic it must not only oppose a dominant discourse but also display reflexivity about their opposition by intentionally reconfiguring "speech genres," "modes of address," and "the hierarchy among media" ([2002] 2005, 86).

Charles Hirschkind, the first anthropologist to use the term, has been partial to Warner's definition of counterpublics. Hirschkind's ethnographic writing about cassette recordings of Islamic sermons, *da'wah*, in Egypt at the turn of the millennium builds upon Warner's critique of Habermas's notion of the public sphere. Hirschkind has highlighted how Habermasian conceptions of public engagement privilege deliberative over affective, expressive, and pragmatic modes of discourse (Hirschkind 2006, 106–8). In the Egyptian context, Hirschkind shows how these two registers, the deliberative and the affective, are deeply intertwined and how they have played a role in the Islamic revival movement (a prescient analysis in many ways).

Counterpublics, as a subcategory of publics, has become a term frequently used in various subfields of anthropology, such as the anthropology of gender and sexuality,

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the anthropology of race and ethnicity, and especially media anthropology. Considering that hallmarks of the contemporary moment include marketers' segmentation of the population, the rapid growth of online communities, and a burgeoning awareness of technologies of representation, it would be reasonable to expect that "publics" and "counterpublics" will continue to be salient and contested analytic terms.

SEE ALSO: Democracy; Domestic/Public Distinction; Gender and Sexuality: Contested Relations; Global Governance; Media Anthropology

#### REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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