

Virtual Communities?: Public Spheres and Public Intellectuals on the Internet

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A RIPOSTE TO: Michael Bérubé -<

Many of us who first heard Michael Bérubé's essay on EBR BOND internal link Cultural Criticism and the Politics of Selling Out outbound link when it was presented as the keynote address at a conference on "Western Humanities, Pedagogy, and the Public Sphere" welcomed his impatience with the unwillingness of so many academics who consider themselves progressive or even "left" intellectuals to enter into the discourse of the "public sphere," a term we often use so as to differentiate it from the more private sphere of the academy. Participants in the conference had been asked by its organizers to examine "the relationship of humanities teaching to the production of a democratic public sphere;" Bérubé clearly wanted us to understand teaching as a practice of critical cultural analysis that we should be willing to take beyond the parameters of the university classroom and the cultural studies journal. "Teaching and writing," he argues, "are two important ways of being public...but what I want to call for is a practice of cultural studies that articulates the theoretical and critical work of the so-called public intellectual to the movements of public policy" (12).

Bérubé is right to criticize "cultural studies theorists of the left [who] often express outright disdain for the policy implications of their work" (11), and to locate the source of this disdain in our tendency to value most in our intellectual work and indeed in ourselves whatever we assume is so unconventional, transgressive, or "cutting edge" that it can be used to justify our exemption from the demands of "common" discourse. Fortunately for those who want to claim such exempt status, the academy has institutionalized this attitude in that it both encourages and rewards behaviors that isolate us from communities more broadly defined; we often get grants and tenure and promotion precisely by convincing those making decisions on such matters that our work on whatever topic, be it modernist poetry or television sit-coms or hypertextuality, is more complex and, with this, more intelligent than conventional or commonplace readings. Anyone like myself who is in the first years of a tenure-track job has been told more times than she wants to recall by well-meaning senior colleagues that the kind of writing Bérubé is suggesting we try to get out into more public contexts not only "won't count," but might in fact be read as evidence of insufficient "intellectual commitment." The implication is that writing (as Bérubé has done) an article on the experiential implications of the

social construction of Down Syndrome without referring explicitly to the work of Foucault is equivalent to a disavowal of the importance of that work; never mind that more people may understand and be convinced by a compellingly articulated Foucauldian argument than they would be by reading Foucault himself.

When Bérubé's colleague accuses him of "selling out" (7), he is expressing the same anxiety of contamination discussed by Michael Eric Dyson when he spoke to last year's meeting of the Marxist Literary Group's Summer Institute. Dyson had appeared on ABC's "Nightline" to counter Bob Dole's condemnation of black rap lyrics, and had then been scolded by colleagues and some of his fellow black intellectuals for "lowering" himself (not to mention "selling out") by thus appearing on a popular television program opposite Bob Dole. His contention was that it was his responsibility as a black American public intellectual advocating for his community to provide a counterargument to Dole or anyone else in any context who was contributing to the further negative stereotyping of this community, whether that context was mainstream television or his pulpit in Harlem or a Marxist Literary Group meeting at Carnegie Mellon. If you want to confront racism, Dyson argued, you can't do it selectively. You hit it with everything you've got, whenever and wherever the opportunity presents itself.

But while I applaud the willingness of both Bérubé and Dyson to risk sullyng their "theoretical purity" (Bérubé 33) for the sake of intervening intelligently in the public debates that are so often defined and then dominated by the interests of the right, I want to focus on how to intervene in public discourse from another perspective. What I want to do here is examine more closely and more skeptically one particular context which many of us have chosen to understand as a potential "public sphere." This context is the internet.

As innumerable mainstream and academic essays and books have suggested, the internet has been heralded as offering the ideal medium within which to build alternatives to the conventional and decidedly non-public paradigms of the classroom or the specialized academic conference. Both of these have traditionally been fairly rigid in delineating who can take part in them and who cannot, and on what terms; conferences generally restrict participants to 20-minute increments within which to present work which will be discussed only if time allows before the room is turned over to the next panel. Discussion groups on the internet supposedly abolish the restrictions of the traditional conference in that anyone can subscribe to a group, present and respond to work on it, and enter into conversations with others interested in the same questions.

Potential discussants don't have to be "authorized" in advance to take part; they don't even need to prove academic affiliation or expertise. The discussions are public in that they are easily accessible rather than exclusive and private.

Likewise, while classroom situations traditionally place the teacher as an authority figure who exercises exclusive control over class format and student evaluation, the internet classroom has been welcomed as one in which conventional patterns of authority break down, especially those that assume an active teacher who dominates passive students. In typical models for such classrooms, the emphasis is on student empowerment; rather than being understood as a site for the enactment of a tortuous "rite of passage" involving a necessarily intimidating apprenticeship and evaluation, this classroom is seen as a utopian space capable of providing a democratic public sphere that will give students a context within which to collaborate with each other and their teacher, seen here as a kind of benevolent facilitator, to define and then pursue their own interests and concerns.

These models consistently invoke a rhetoric of what John Stallabrass terms "empowering technology" and, thus defined, the internet classroom would seem to provide a streamlined, late twentieth-century equivalent of the bourgeois public sphere suggested two centuries ago by Kant when he proposed the self-generation of community by discussants who saw themselves as equals collaborating in the formation of a democratic alternative to the rigidly hierarchized authoritarian institutions of church and state. What I want to rather contentiously suggest in what follows is that the democratizing project of such internet utilization, at least as it has been practiced thus far, is radically flawed in ways that fatally hinder its potential as an effective tool in facilitating the "production of a democratic sphere," in part because it is unwittingly based on the same restrictive and finally exclusionary presumptions as the classical bourgeois public sphere. In order to do so, I will need first to point to the flaws in the traditional concept of "the public sphere" as suggested by Kant and elaborated by Jürgen Habermas, as they have been analyzed in an important critique of the concept by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge.

Negt and Kluge's *Public Sphere and Experience* was first published in 1972 and appeared in English translation in 1993; it was written in response to the death of Theodor Adorno, to whom it is dedicated, and to questions of the interrelatedness of class and agency that were emerging within the context of the German student movement. It was also a polemical response to Jürgen Habermas's influential *The Structural Trans-*

formation of the Public Sphere, which had been published a decade earlier. During the interim, Negt had been Habermas's assistant, and Kluge had worked in a variety of capacities with Adorno. Habermas's text is subtitled "An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society," Negt and Kluge's "Toward an Analysis of the Organization of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Spheres." Clearly, the plural here indicates what they want to contend from the outset: that there is more than one public sphere, and that the category is not the exclusive property of the bourgeoisie. They contend rather that there are at any one time a range of public spheres that exist simultaneously, formed by different and often competing constituencies, often constituting themselves in contexts that are not usually recognized as legitimate public spheres. These include phenomena such as labor strikes, football matches, the routines of family life, the public sphere of children, etc. These officially unrecognized public spheres exist and operate outside the usual parameters of institutional legitimation, responding to the contingent needs of all of those groups whose self-expression is excluded or, as Negt and Kluge put it, "blocked" from the usual arenas of public discourse.

Habermas argues that the classical bourgeois public sphere certainly did not see itself as limited or exclusive in this way. Like some contemporary claims for the potential for public exchange on the internet, this public sphere was understood as the mechanism that would wrench intellectual and political exchange out from the limiting private confines of the academy and allow it to actively impact on public policy:

[A]lthough its center was the academy, the public sphere within which philosophers pursued their critical craft was not merely academic. Just as the discussion of the philosophers took place in full view of the government, to instruct it and give it things to consider, so too did it occur before the public of the "people," to encourage it in the use of its own reason.

Access to the bourgeois public sphere was supposedly open to "anyone who understood how to use his reason in public," the only prerequisite being the demand that these potential discussants "emerge from the confines of their private spheres as if they were scholars..." (105).

But even Habermas realizes that this was not the case; the public sphere through which public policy could be shaped was only theoretically open to "anyone who could use his reason"; in practice, "only property-owning people were admitted to a public engaged in critical political debate." The justification for this re-

striction, as Kant explains it through a logic that would be the envy of any contemporary Republican domestic policy-maker or presidential candidate, is grounded in the assumption that the reasoning capacities of property-owning people are somehow less likely to be burdened with special interests and agendas because they are "their own masters" in a way that propertyless wage-earners are not.

Only property-owning private people were admitted to a public engaged in critical political debate, for their autonomy was rooted in the sphere of commodity exchange...[for] while the wage laborers were forced to exchange their labor power as their sole commodity, the property-owning private people related to each other as owners of commodities through an exchange of goods. Only the latter were their own masters; only they should be enfranchised to vote - admitted to the public use of reason... (Habermas 109-110)

The assumption is that propertyless people couldn't be trusted to take part in a democratic process of forming rational consensus because they were in competition with one another for buyers of "their sole commodity," while property-owners could "relate" to each other as owners of commodities unencumbered by any "special," i.e. "private", interests:

Consequently the propertyless were excluded from the public of private people engaged in critical political debate... In this sense, they were not citizens at all, but persons who with talent, industry and luck might someday be able to attain that status; until then they merely had the same claim to protection under the law as others, without being allowed to participate in legislation themselves. (III, my emphases)

In this way, Negt and Kluge argue, "Kant excludes from politics and the public sphere all those sections of the population that do not participate in bourgeois politics because they cannot afford to" (10). The bourgeois public sphere is thus from the onset a "mechanism of exclusion" (11) that understands itself as precisely the opposite, a forum for democratic inclusion. Like the classical Kantian bourgeois public sphere discussed by Habermas, the contemporary bourgeois public sphere - which is made up of and dominated by an interdependent network of multi-national conglomerates, media cartels, and government vested interests - must always appear to be democratic; thus, "anyone who can use his reason" can supposedly access the internet and take part in the public forum it makes

available, as long as this anyone has enough money to purchase the p.c. and necessary software, not to mention an on-line account and, often most crucially, a telephone line. As was the case in Kant's late eighteenth-century, by default, "money...determine[s] the level of access" (Owen 29) to the contemporary public sphere of the internet.

But is money the only obstacle to making the internet publicly accessible in any meaningful way? Is it merely a matter of finding a way to facilitate material access by the contemporary equivalents of Kant's "propertyless" non-citizens to the internet public sphere? After all, a homeless person in Chicago can, if he or she so chooses, read Michael Bérubé's essay on Down Syndrome in Harper's by walking into the Harold Washington Library, or any other public library. In fact, the homeless may be more likely than the rest of us to keep up on the essays in Harper's, since public libraries and their reading rooms are often among the only public places they can go to find warmth, shelter, and washrooms in which to clean up. Hypothetically, then, can't we envision an internet equivalent of the public library, in which Kant's hypothetical "anyone" can access the internet and communicate with anyone else with access to an address or website? The argument is often made on university campuses, for example, that disadvantaged students have as much access to the internet and thus to computerized classrooms as students with personal computers - they can simply sign up for time in the library computer lab. Or, in an equally hypothetical scenario, let's say Newt Gingrich makes good on a suggestion he once made and uses all that money he's taken away from teenage mothers to buy a computer for each and every homeless person in America...

Obviously, I'm trying rather crassly to make a point here about the potential of the internet to fulfill its utopian promise as a "technology of empowerment." To whom, we need to ask, is this empowering technology available? And in what contexts? Likewise, we need to ask what other prerequisites, beyond the several thousand dollars necessary for the equipment, software, and phone line, are necessary before anyone can enter into the public sphere of cyberspace. In their discussion of how the bourgeois public sphere blocks both access to it and the legitimization of other, counter-public spheres, Negt and Kluge contend, in a section on education, that it accomplishes this blocking surreptitiously through, for example, the requirement that those requesting access to it first adapt their mode of self-expression to conform to its own standards.

All bourgeois forms of the public sphere presuppose special training, both linguistic and mimetic. In public court proceedings, in deal-

ings with officials [and, we might add, in university classrooms, whether traditional and electronic], it is expected of all parties involved that they be concise and present their interests within forms of expression fitting to the official context... As a rule, they must be grammatically correct [and meet the expectation for] economy of thought and abstract flexibility... This is one of the most important exclusionary mechanisms of the bourgeois public sphere. (45-46)

Their discussion here focuses on what is required of working-class people trying to enter into public discourse as it is carried out in public school systems or on television. Negt and Kluge conclude, in a formulation in which their indebtedness to Adorno is immediately apparent, that "the bourgeois public sphere's mechanisms for excluding and destroying experience are situated in those very areas [such as public schools] where it believes it is operating according to idealistic and humanistic principles" (47).

As a concrete example of this "excluding and destroying [of] experience" in the name of a supposedly humanist project, they cite surveys in which sociologists interview assembly-line workers so as to "allow" them to voice their opinions about the routine work assigned to them. When asked in such a context whether or not they are "really satisfied" with their jobs, most workers will respond in the affirmative, not necessarily because they are satisfied, but because of the class bias they rightly perceive underlying the question. For when such a question is posed by a well-educated middle-class man in a suit and tie holding a microphone, it is understood to mean, "don't you feel like you are being exploited, you poor slob?" A negative answer would in effect require the worker to admit to someone who has never had to do this kind of work that he is indeed a passive dupe who allows himself to be exploited. Negt and Kluge conclude that it is "obviously impossible for him, in responding to the situation that burdens him psychically and physically, to thereby confess that he is...consciously reinforcing this situation; he must compensate in his consciousness for the alienation that originates in his job situation" (29). He thus has to answer "yes" to the question in order to compensate himself both for the alienation that he is well aware of having to accept as part of his job, and for the condescending assumptions behind the researcher's question. He can't express himself honestly or in his own terms, in the language that arises from and is inextricably bound up with his own experience, by responding to the sociologist's question when it is posed this way; he can respond to the question of whether he is "really satisfied" with his job in his own terms only by going out on strike and thereby forming a belligerently pub-

lic and oppositional counter-public sphere, however temporary it may be, constituted through behaviors considered inappropriate in the bourgeois public sphere. Clearly, in contrasting a legitimated bourgeois public sphere with the marginalized proletarian public sphere as just one example of a counter-public sphere grounded in differing behaviors, Negt and Kluge understand the term "public sphere" to refer to far more than merely a public forum or arena wherein we rationally form consensus. In a 1988 interview, Kluge explained that an organic public sphere should be something "filled with experience;" it is a "substantive" context for living that "has a conscience" (Liebman 41). Importantly, it operates in its own vernacular (whether gestural, verbal, etc.) in accordance with the needs of its constituents. The German *Öffentlichkeit* is a more inclusive term, in that it resonates with both literal openness and the idea of "publicness." As Kluge emphasizes, the definition he and Negt suggest isn't opposed to Habermas's so much as it proceeds from a different set of assumptions. Habermas's definition is derived from the emergence of the middle class and its Enlightenment philosophy, which emphasized a separation of its supposedly separable public and private spheres; Negt and Kluge's rejects the notion that public and private interests have ever been really split like this in the first place, and certainly not for working people. They thus reject the assumption that the public sphere does or should transcend the private - Kant's assumption that we can achieve rational consensus only by entering into a public arena that is seen to temporarily transcend private differences attributable to differing "contexts of living."

As even this brief description should suggest, Public Sphere and Experience is important because it reminds us of the class-blindness of the assumption that only the bourgeoisie has formed a public sphere or that other public spheres would have to constitute themselves following the bourgeois model in order to be worthy of "empowerment." When Negt and Kluge announce in their introductory chapter that the book will insist on using the seemingly anachronistic term proletarian "because...we believe that what is at issue here is not a variant of the bourgeois public sphere, but rather an entirely separate conceptualization of the overall social context, which has been established in history but not included within the parameters of the term public sphere" (xiv), an alternative conception that has never been a "ruling public sphere," they certainly sound like precursors of models of "alternative pedagogy" who see the internet classroom as a site that may accommodate our attention to modes of articulation that may consciously or unconsciously resist being understood in the usual intellectual or academic terms. Viewed in this way, couldn't the internet classroom be conceptualized as a counter-public sphere in

which, to quote Henry Giroux, "different histories, languages, experiences and voices" would be able to "intermingle amidst diverse relations of power and privilege" (34ff.) in the classless utopia of internet space? Couldn't Public Sphere and Experience thus be used as a paradigmatic model for what Giroux promotes, in a metaphor that lends itself to cyberspace, as "intellectual border crossing," since its analysis moves back and forth so fluidly between the bourgeois and proletarian public sphere?

I would suggest that it most decidedly does not provide such a model, and that, on the contrary, Public Sphere and Experience serves to caution us about prematurely figuring the electronic classroom as a site within which it might be possible to produce a "democratic public sphere." For while Negt and Kluge are adamant in their acknowledgment that the proletarian and other counter-public spheres can and do exist, they are equally adamant in examining the contradictions in advanced capitalist societies such as ours that prevent, and, as they argue it, must for their very survival continue to prevent, these counter-public spheres from developing the autonomy and thus the power they would need to be decisively oppositional. The proletarian public sphere may be outside of the dominant bourgeois public sphere, but it is not independent of it; the difference in its perspective lies not in its relationship to democratic consensus, but in its relationship to production, the key category in that the proletariat both understands what the bourgeois public sphere masks about itself even to itself (its control of and dependence on production - the internet doesn't exist if no one is producing the computers and the software) and realizes that it cannot control it. Negt and Kluge's analysis of co-existing and competing public spheres explicitly emphasizes that none of the counter public spheres will ever supersede or overcome the dominant, the one that confers legitimacy and the privileges that accompany it, as long as they do not have access to the means of production and thus to economic and/or political power. Following this logic, acknowledging and even celebrating counter-public spheres as, in Giroux's terms, "different histories, languages, experiences and voices" is only the first step toward legitimating their participation in public discourse; what needs to be done to change this situation isn't a "democratizing" of the arena in which this discourse takes place, i.e., getting more people access to the net and then teaching them to modify their behavior in such a way as to join it as a discussant, but rather a radical engagement with the economic and political structures which produced and legitimated these rules for discourse in the first place--including, as difficult as it will be to rethink this within the institution, the requirement that students or other people wanting to converse in this space express themselves "properly," that they truncate their experi-

ence to submit to what Lyotard famously termed "the tyranny of good form." In terms of the humanities classroom, this would necessitate, in addition, the acknowledgment and rethinking of the process of production that resulted in the product that is the liberal arts education as we now conceive of it, which, after all, didn't fall out of a tree, but is the product of, among other things, the nationalist agenda of the bourgeois public sphere that was built on British imperialism. Rather than wondering whether we can or should or dare change the authority hierarchy, or the racial- or gender- or class-markings of the "product," we would have to acknowledge the extent to which the entire structure of the English literature department reflects the agenda of what Negt and Kluge nicely term, playing off Marx, the cultural "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie."

Thus, as attractive as the internet may be as an alternative public sphere, it nonetheless remains fixated and fixed at the level of changing the final product rather than the process of production. Merely allowing "diverse relations of power and privilege" to intermingle in cyberspace does not magically render those constituencies equal, given their various histories of deprivation or exploitation. This inability to confront the bigger, less easily manipulable world outside the electronic classroom is, it seems to me, symptomatic of a key flaw in the premature celebration of the internet as a potential counter-public sphere, for no matter how you de- or reconstruct the hierarchy of authority, no matter how many voices you allow or encourage to intermingle, you still can't make a democratic classroom, or a democratic culture, in a society based on a system that remains fundamentally anti-democratic.

So I would return to Michael Bérubé's contention that "teaching and writing are two important ways of being public," and add that both of these can be even more important if we are attentive to and critical of the assumptions that underlie how and where they take place. Cyberspace isn't yet public space; public space these days is often littered with unavoidable reminders of increasingly extreme social inequality, such as homeless people and their non-wired shopping carts. Rather than devoting our energies to constructing democratic models in cyberspace, would-be public intellectuals might instead ask whether "[c]omputer technology, rather than empowering people, may actually end up contributing to rising social inequality" (Owens 30), in part by widening the gap between people forced to inhabit public spaces like libraries and street corners, and those who are able to spend even more time enjoying the benefits of the private space of their studies because they are able to work, converse with students, grade papers, attend department meetings and do their banking, all without ever having to

open the front door and risk being confronted by one of the disenfranchised. John Stallabrass has characterized cyberspace as

an electronic agora in which isolated, anemic but presumably rather well-informed individuals may once more come together, without risk of violence or infection, to engage in debate, exchange information, or merely chew the fat... Cyberspace seems to offer simultaneously the advantage of privacy and cultural wealth, self-sufficiency and opportunities for self-sufficiency. (5)

This is hardly a space within which to effectively "impact on the movements of public policy."

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Notes