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LTCO287 - POLI 213: Political Theory and Culture

The Public Sphere. Politics, Economy, and Culture

In the tradition of Western thought the very idea of democracy is inseparable from the idea of a public sphere, that is, a disposition to open and contradictory debate meant to make possible a reasoned understanding among citizens with respect to the definition of institutions, the formulation of laws, and their enforcement. From this point of view public means at one and the same time: open to all, well-known by all, and acknowledged by all. The public sphere-- also called public space--is the citizen/civic realm of the common good in contrast to the private sphere of special interests.

Actually, this issue involves several problems: 1) the problem of the transparency (vs. the secrecy and opacity) of political decisions; it involves the visibility and exposure of the rulers to the judgment of all; 2) the problem of access to the debates and of participation in the public conversation; this is the question of free information and of the power of the media; 3) the problem of access to the means of decision: this is the very question of the democratic institutions and of their power; 4) the problem of the formation of a public space in a literal sense: public buildings; shared environment; urbanism; public security and circulation; 5) the problem of the necessary separation between the common good on one side and private interests and profits on the other; this involves primarily the influence exerted by financial power over political life.

We will not be able to consider in detail all of those questions in the seminar. We will attempt to organize them into three themes: politics, the economy, and culture. We will start with an attempt at defining a rigorous theoretical framework based on the philosophies of the public sphere developed by H. Arendt and J. Habermas. This will bring us to seminal writings by Aristotle, Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel. We will also call on anthropology and history (especially of Greece, Rome, and China) to help us identify the genealogy of the very idea of public sphere—an idea that is not found exclusively in western thought; this will require a comparative inquiry : what is the public realm in societies without a state (P. Clastres)? How does the advent of the state transform any society? This comparative inquiry will also involve public space, and in particular the question of the city (Max Weber, Simmel, and the sociological school of Chicago will provide us with precious guidance). This will introduce the question of culture--including critical culture or counterculture--as public fact; what is the power of the new media? What constitutes the public sphere as *network* ? What is the role of knowledge in this conversation ? This question is inseparable from that of education as a public good and as a right associated with citizenship (J.Rawls, M. Walzer, Ph. Pettit). This brings us directly to the problem of the conflict between the public sphere and private economic interests, and more precisely to a radical questioning of the claim of the marketplace to control and absorb social life and political institutions. We are witness to that attempt and to the systematic destruction of the public sphere that results from it. The concepts we need to resist it are not merely concepts: they are weapons in our struggle.

Note:

- A detailed syllabus will be handed out at the beginning of the seminar.
- All the texts discussed in the seminar will be available in electronic reserve.

