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The Changing Nature of the Public Sphere

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Abstract

Can the public sphere be conceptualized in a manner that is non-reductive and inclusive? In this article, we survey the main literature on the public sphere and demonstrate that, despite apparent diversity, the dominant approaches to its conceptualization share the same 'matter and form' or hylomorphic assumptions. In challenging these assumptions, our aim is to demonstrate that it is the hylomorphic model of the public sphere that prevents non-reductive conceptualization of its essentially changing nature. Hylomorphic models of the public sphere, we argue, will never yield this result because they perpetuate established identities over emergent differences. We conclude that progress toward non-reductive and inclusive accounts of the public sphere would be best served by foregoing hylomorphic models in favour of ontogenetic ones, when thinking about the changing nature of the public sphere.

Keywords

Public sphere, counterpublics, Asen, Fraser, Warner, Simondon, poststructuralism

Changes within the public sphere have recently attracted a good deal of scholarly attention. Key themes under discussion include the continuing effects of digital forms of communication on public discourse and democratic deliberation (Chambers and Gastil, 2021), the prominence of right wing populist rhetoric (Kaiser and Rauchfleisch, 2019), the emergence of post-truth politics and fake-news (Conrad et al, 2023; Van Dyck, 2022), the role of globalisation in shifting the terms of debate within nation-states (Nash, 2014) and, in summary, the possibility that these and related shifts in public discourse add up to a new structural transformation of the public sphere (Seeliger and Sevignani, 2022). With respect to this latter claim, Martin Seeliger and Sebastian Sevignani begin their reflections in this way: ‘the political public sphere is important for democracy, and it is changing – this is how the quintessence of Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*...could be summarised in simple words’ (2022: 3). However, it is evident from these discussions that the quintessentially changeable public sphere is to be understood in a particular way: as changes in the modalities and content of public discourses. No consideration is given to the idea that we should reconceive how we think about the public sphere itself to understand the transformations to which it is continually subject. In other words, the assumptions that underpin the idea of the public sphere are not themselves the subject of discussion. In what follows, we aim to initiate a discussion about these assumptions by drawing out what we take to be latent within the idea of ‘the public sphere as a sphere mediating between the state and civil society’ (Seeliger and Sevignani, 2022: 3). As we will show, these latent assumptions come into focus if we consider the problems that have arisen continually with respect to how we understand the simple claim that the public sphere has, since its emergence, always been changing.

Since Habermas’ conceptualization of the public sphere (principally, 1991; 1992a; 1992b; 1996) it has faced two significant and related challenges; that it is exclusionary and reductive. On the one hand, the normative claims embedded within Habermas’ original conception, based on the idea of the public sphere as a reservoir of rational deliberation, have been challenged both by difference-oriented democratic theorists largely sympathetic to Habermas’ original project (notably, Young, 1987; Fraser, 1990; Benhabib, 1992; Baynes,

1994); and by, what we shall call, agon-oriented poststructuralists unconvinced of the emancipatory potential of deliberation (notably, Villa, 1992; Mouffe, 1996; Dean, 1996; Markell, 1997). Albeit on different grounds, these criticisms agree that his account is insufficiently sensitive to the risk of normalising dominant public discourse, thereby *excluding* marginal, oppositional and subordinate voices. On the other hand, a variety of social and political theorists, especially from within communication studies, have argued that even his recent work presents a misleading unitary image of 'the public' that *reduces* a complex, diverse and mediated public sphere into an overly simplified model; one that is, moreover, increasingly too remote from reality to be helpful in understanding contemporary forms of public discourse (notably, Asen, 2000; Warner, 2002; 2005). We take it that these challenges have shaped many of the discussions about the public sphere that have followed in Habermas' wake. Indeed, it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the overarching question that has guided the literature is this: *can the public sphere be conceptualized in a manner that is non-reductive and inclusive?* In the following discussion, we shall also take this question as our guide.

There are many ways of approaching the overall question.¹ Beginning our discussion with the difference-oriented democratic theorists who developed the notion of counterpublics within a critical theoretical framework, we will follow Michael Warner and then Robert Asen in asking what is meant by the 'counter' in counterpublics so as not to reify that framework. Coming as they do from the study of rhetoric and communication, Warner and Asen provide insight into the complexities of public discourse that culminate in the claim that a richly articulated account of the various and changing publics and counterpublics of the public sphere is necessary if the idea is to be non-reductive and inclusive.² On its own, though, this line of enquiry toward increasingly complex articulations of the public sphere is not sufficient. We argue that we should not only chart the 'movement toward multiplicity in public sphere studies' (Asen, 2000: 427) but also simultaneously investigate the conditions of possibility of such multiplicity. In taking this approach we agree with Lincoln Dahlberg (2014) who has sought to find ways 'to ground' increasingly complex conceptualisations of publics and counterpublics within the public sphere.³ As such, what

are the 'grounds' or 'conditions of possibility' (Dahlberg, 2014: 23) for the 'networks of publics and counterpublics arising asynchronously and exhibiting diverse and changing relationships [that] form the basis of contemporary models of publicity' (Asen, 2017: 329)? It is between Asen's insight into the multiplicitous nature of the public sphere and Dahlberg's search for a proper account of its conditions of possibility that we situate our own intervention focussing, as it does, upon *the changing nature of the public sphere*.

We mean this in two senses. First, that the publics and counterpublics that inhabit, so to speak, the public sphere—what we will call, its *constituents*—change over time. This is to acknowledge, following Gordy, that the constituents of the public sphere are 'historically and discursively contingent' (2015: 760). Secondly, we mean that change is a property of the public sphere itself (not simply an attribute of its constituents). It is in this sense that we will refer to its changeable *constitution*. The word 'nature', therefore, denotes both constituents and constitution. We acknowledge immediately that this guiding idea is an unusual one: if both the parts and the whole, so to speak, are changeable then how are we able to identify anything at all? What makes this idea seem unusual, however, is an underlying assumption that we aim to challenge: namely, that the constituents are the matter and the idea of a space between state and society serves as the constitutive form such that together the matter and form engender the identity of the public sphere. We will argue that this traditional image of a formal space that shapes and moulds publics and counterpublics into 'the public sphere' must be left behind if non-reductive and inclusive models are to be developed.

We will turn to the insights of, what we will call, difference-oriented poststructuralism; a variety of poststructuralism that has been notably absent from the extant literature on the public sphere, with a few exceptions (Patton, 2005; 2006; Stiegler, 2015; 2018). Whereas agon-oriented poststructuralists tend to focus on the irreducibility of contestation as a way of challenging the norm of consensus, difference-oriented poststructuralists are primarily concerned with articulating the priority of difference over identity (for further general discussion of difference-oriented poststructuralism see Dillet et al, 2013; Williams, 2014).

One of the basic presuppositions of Western philosophy that privileges identity over difference is *the principle of hylomorphism*. This is the classical Aristotelian claim that all identifiable entities are a combination of matter and form. While there are aspects of all the difference-oriented poststructuralists' philosophical projects that could be employed to challenge this approach to identity, key sources in this respect are the works of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, notably *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). The latter contains, for example, an important critique of both the principle of hylomorphism and the hierarchical politics that results from this metaphysical assumption that speaks to the problems of exclusion and reduction in conceptualisations of the public sphere. Importantly, though, their critique of hylomorphism is deeply indebted to their contemporary and compatriot, Gilbert Simondon (principally, in English, 1992; 2009; 2017).⁴ As such, and to borrow a phrase from Stiegler (2015), we will 'pass through' Simondon's alternative, non-hylomorphic, account of individuation on the grounds that it points toward a compelling way of conceptualizing the public sphere without reducing the complexity of its constituent elements and without presuming that its constitution is fixed in ways that will necessarily exclude certain counterpublics.⁵ It is hoped that a difference-oriented poststructuralist approach will breathe new life into conceptualisations of the public sphere that aim to be non-reductive and inclusive. Our aim, therefore, is to propose a new way of understanding the relationship between the constituents and constitution of the public sphere that will spur a new conversation about just how changeable it is and how best we might embrace this 'quintessential' feature, all the way down.

The Public Sphere: From Unity to Multiplicity

The image of a unified space of public discussion and debate that draws together the ideal features of the early bourgeois public sphere, found in Habermas' (1991) initial formulation, was the focus of the criticisms mounted by difference-oriented democratic theorists. Nancy Fraser's (1990) appeal to rethink the public sphere was agenda setting in this respect. For all that she was, and remains, convinced that 'the general idea of the public sphere is

indispensable to critical theory' she also argued that it 'needs to undergo some critical interrogation and reconstruction if it is to yield a category capable of theorising the limits of actually existing democracy' (Fraser, 1990: 57). A central feature of her critical reconstruction was her formulation of the idea of 'subaltern counterpublics'. Subaltern counterpublics do not fit the bourgeois (and, as she rightly points out, masculinist) features of the public sphere that Habermas idealises in his early work because they are 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs' (1990: 67). Two key features of this definition warrant attention. First, counterpublics are qualified as 'subaltern' because they are 'parallel discursive arenas' and excluded from the liberal and masculinist game of public deliberation. Secondly, Fraser formulates this exclusion as subordination such that the discursive strategies they invent are always in opposition to the dominant features of bourgeois society.

In this respect, as she acknowledges, Fraser adopts Rita Felski's understanding of the 'counter' in counterpublic (Felski, 1989). Together, these two key features introduce much needed complexity into the unitary model in Habermas' account, albeit in a constructive manner. Just as Felski argued that 'the logic of the feminist counterpublic must...be understood as ultimately rational, in a Habermasian sense' (1989: 12) so it is that Fraser, true to her original intent, conceptualizes subaltern counterpublics with a view to enriching Habermas' defence of public deliberation as the basis for a thriving democracy. Both Felski and Fraser, in other words, introduce complexity at the level of discursive content rather than at the level of discursive form. The formal ideal of a public space that, in principle, can serve as a reservoir of deliberative challenges to arbitrary forms of power and that, therefore, defines what counts as legitimate discursive contributions to public reason, remains in place.

A range of social theorists, especially from within communication studies (for example, Asen (2000); Asen and Brouwer (2001); Gardiner (2004); and Warner (2005)) have questioned Habermas' unitary model in line with Felski and Fraser. However, disagreement

comes to the fore when two questions are asked; 'what is the nature of the counter in counterpublic?' and 'how do they [counterpublics] relate to the norms embedded within the bourgeois public sphere as an ideal (in principle) of rational public deliberation?'. Warner (2002; 2005) captures the concerns raised by these questions well: while Fraser is to be congratulated for introducing the concept of 'counterpublics' she remains too closely wedded to the Habermasian approach in her construction of the idea. As he puts it: 'Fraser's description of what counterpublics do...sounds like the classical Habermasian description of rational-critical publics, with the word "oppositional" inserted' (Warner, 2002: 118). What she misses, according to Warner, is that counterpublics do not interact with public space as rational actors seeking recognition of their identity claims but as actors with 'different dispositions or protocols from those that obtain elsewhere in the culture' (2005: 119). The same point is put forcefully when he says that the conflict between publics and counterpublics 'extends not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public and to the hierarchy among media' (Warner, 2002: 85). These counterpublics, as Warner sums up, do not aim to 'adapt themselves to the performatives of rational-critical discourse...as to do so is to cede the original hope of transforming not just policy but the space of public life itself' (2005: 124). In this sense, Warner decisively, and rightly in our view, moves away from the image of counterpublics as subordinate groups looking to join the game of public reason to one in which the public sphere is a space of many different discursive regimes not necessarily vying for the same end. It is, in short, a matter of taking seriously Fraser's 'parallel discursive arenas,' as truly parallel arenas will never converge. Fraser's (and Felski's) pluralisation of Habermas' unitary image becomes the basis for an *irreducible* plurality, in Warner's conception.

Concurrently, this theme was being developed by Robert Asen (2000) as part of a project emphasizing, even more explicitly, the *multiple* nature of the public sphere. According to Asen, the public sphere is a multiple and dynamic space of interaction. He takes Fraser (in particular) to task for focusing too readily on one particular component of that dynamism – discourse – at the cost of a more 'intimate' sense of 'the fluidity of counter' in the idea of counterpublics (2000: 430). Although such singular focus has the benefit of allowing for an

examination of counterpublics' 'emancipatory potential,' (2000: 431), the problem is that it establishes a creeping reductionism in the study of the public sphere. Asen expands the scope of this claim further, arguing that the problem of reductionism emerges whenever the study of the public sphere is reduced to any singular focus. In particular, he is suspicious of any approaches that might reduce the nature of the counter in counterpublics to being an expression of 'persons, places or topics' (2000: 430-37). Whilst he does acknowledge that the study of these three 'forums' is important for recognising both the 'changing historical conditions that invite the expression of alternative perspectives' and identifying the potential social rules that might disadvantage some public participants over others, he nevertheless argues that focusing upon any particular aspect on its own risks carrying assumptions that undermine the 'intimate' dynamic processes that constitute counterpublics, as well as how we understand their engagements with the public sphere: 'what is missing in each [single focus approach]...is recognition of *process*' (2000: 437, emphasis added).

Asen makes two key moves that help frame his response to the issue of creeping reductionism. On the one hand, he argues that a non-reductive account of counterpublics requires treating them as discursive formations intertwined with persons, places and topics in ways that cannot simply be presumed in advance. He coins the term 'emergent collectives' (2000: 427-30) to express this non-reductive approach to the complexity of counterpublics. On the other hand, he appeals to agon-oriented poststructuralists to establish the theoretical framing of these 'emergent collectives' within a multiple public sphere. From the outset of his agenda-setting writings he made appeals to constitutive antagonisms and irremovable exclusions (2000: 437) and more recently this has become explicitly associated with, principally, the political theory of Chantal Mouffe (Asen, 2017; citing Mouffe 2000, 2013). Both elements of Asen's approach indicate a strong sense of the need to match the complex multiplicity of the public sphere with an account of the processes that condition the emergence of publics and counterpublics as well as a sensitivity to forms of relationality that extend beyond the bounds of communicative rationality. At which point, we can summarise Asen's contribution in the terms of our discussion: his

subtle appreciation of 'the counter in counterpublics' injects an irreducible dynamism of complicated processes of emergence and antagonism (not just those fostered by subordination, though those remain important) into Warner's image of a public sphere with plural and parallel constituents. Whilst Warner brought complexity into the discussion of the public sphere by removing the ideal of a unitary space of public reason, Asen has moved even further away from the Fraser/Felski account of plural constituents ultimately aiming to gain access to one ideal space of rational interaction. But how decisive is this move to multiplicity?

Hylomorphic Models of the Public Sphere

We have noted that Warner and Asen make a compelling case (against Habermas, Felski and Fraser) in support of the idea that a non-reductive account of the public sphere cannot be guided by the ideal of a single space of rational deliberation. For the public sphere to be conceptualized in non-reductive and inclusive ways, the irreducibly complex constituents of which it is composed must not be subject to a unifying ideal, even in principle. But, if the task is to avoid forms of creeping reductionism, then is it enough simply to complicate the constituents of the public sphere and their interrelations in the manner of Warner and, even more so, Asen, without paying attention to the dynamics of its constitution? Are dangers other than a lurking normative ideal at work in ways that may also surreptitiously undermine the drive to complexity, all the way down? Our claim is that Asen remains in the theoretical orbit set by Habermas in ways that prevent him achieving his declared aim of a fully-fledged process-oriented account of emergent collectives in a multiple public sphere. We can see this most clearly in his recent work in which he 'considers the challenges that neoliberalism raises for conceptual models and practices of a multiple public sphere' (Asen, 2017: 329).

Asen begins with a restatement of his primary contribution to public sphere debates: 'multiplicity constitutes a key quality of contemporary scholarship on the public sphere. Networks of publics and counterpublics arising asynchronously and exhibiting diverse and

changing relationships form the basis of contemporary models of publicity' (2017: 329). It is an approach usefully summarized as 'the conceptual model of a multiple public sphere' (2017: 330). His argument against neoliberal forms of interaction in the public sphere is that they reduce this networked complexity, flattening difference and obscuring inequality. Neoliberalism poses 'threats to critical publicity by undermining multiple modes of publicity' (2017: 330). In particular, 'a networked public sphere may enable the productive power of difference and create opportunities for addressing inequalities' that are being undermined by the neoliberal focus on 'a narrow individualism' (2017: 330). It is, in many respects, a compelling argument.

However, in order to reject the claims of narrow individualism, Asen mobilizes the idea of the 'public good'. According to Asen, the 'public good' is 'a practice that draws on relationships within and among publics and counterpublics to connect people in different ways' (2017: 332). Interestingly, this looks very close to Fraser's version of the Habermasian image of a multifaceted, but ultimately bounded and unitary public sphere. To borrow our phrasing from Warner: Asen's idea of the public good looks a lot like Fraser's version, with the ideal of consensus removed. What is crucial for the current argument is that Asen's 'conceptual model of a multiple public sphere' begins to look less complex and dynamic when it is mobilized directly against 'atomistic' accounts of human interaction in public life, such as neoliberalism.

This is no coincidence, from our point of view. Hylomorphism was and remains a rejoinder to substantialism in physics, metaphysics and politics (see, for example, Bardin, 2015). The idea that individual entities are *either* basic and given *or* complex but the result of the contingent interaction of the basic 'atoms,' is challenged by proponents of hylomorphism because neither account of substantialism can account for the continuity of identity during periods of significant change. Change, on the hylomorphic view, requires that something persist through the change: namely, the 'form' of the thing.⁶ The old Socrates may be substantially different from the young Socrates, but the identity of Socrates can be said to persist through this change in that his life expresses form/telos. It is no coincidence,

therefore, that in the search for a model to challenge neoliberal individualism, Asen makes the same gesture; he proclaims the persistent form of the public sphere that 'neoliberalism seeks to deny' (2017: 329). In other words, he discusses the 'distortions' that neoliberalism brings to the public sphere, and then accounts for what nonetheless remains through this period of change such that, on the basis of his model of relationality in public life, 'it is difficult to imagine a democratically oriented critical publicity as a process of isolated individual activity' (2017: 344).

The complex and dynamic relations between publics and counterpublics that Asen has done so much to establish, when faced with the challenge of atomistic neoliberalism, are ultimately then reduced to a singular notion of relationality stylized as the 'public good' that persists in the face of the neoliberal challenge. Asen's response to neoliberal modes of interaction has revealed what was there all along in his 'conceptual model of a multiple public sphere': the *form* of the public sphere is ultimately unchanging. Although its constituents change over time, he assumes that the formal characteristics that constitute it remain unchanging such that it still conforms to the underlying logic at work in all other extant models, including those that his work has done the most to challenge, such as Habermas' and Fraser's.

We noted above, with Fraser, that the idea of the public sphere 'needs to undergo some critical interrogation and reconstruction' if the image of a unified space of public discussion is to be overcome in the name of a non-reductive and inclusive account of 'actually existing democracy'. This insight set scholars on a journey toward ever more complex articulations of the public sphere: some maintaining Fraser's normative commitments, others jettisoning them. Asen's 'conceptual model of a multiple public sphere' is, in our view, the most complex of these (and, therefore, the most compelling) because it engenders dynamism into the construction of publics and counterpublics by conceiving of their networked modes of interaction in ways that are not limited by an ideal of consensus. It is, to this extent, the model of the public sphere most likely to accord to 'actually existing democracy'. At least it was until relatively recently. We have shown that it still presumes the same underlying

idea of how the constituents and the constitution of the public sphere are related. To this extent, it remains trapped by the same problem: it evaluates possible constituents based on an already formed idea of the public sphere that constitutes their modes of interaction as legitimate constituents or not. For all that the 'conceptual model of a multiple public sphere' is aimed at diversifying our understanding of the modes of publicity operative within 'actually existing democracies,' the scope for integrating new discourses, rhetorical strategies and modes of being remains limited. Asen's formal model of the public sphere may have long since left the unitary model behind, but his account of its constitution invokes the same underlying principle: hylomorphism.

Passing Through Simondon

Although he is now widely known for his work on technology, Simondon's oeuvre is best understood as a philosophical inquiry into the process of individuation: 'to know the individual through the individuation rather than to know the individuation through the individual' (2009: 4). As Elizabeth Grosz has put it, he was concerned with the 'question of how to think the coming into existence of individuals without presupposing the identity on which such individuality is based' (Grosz, 2012: 38). This project led Simondon to a sustained critique of hylomorphism across his major philosophical works (sections available in English as 1992; 2009; 2017).⁷

As mentioned above, it is important to start any discussion of hylomorphism with Aristotle. In consideration of how things can change, in many cases quite substantially, and yet remain the same individual thing (whether it is an acorn into a tree, or the young Socrates into an old man), Aristotle accounts for the nature of all individual entities (for example, objects, subjects and collectives) in terms of their composition of form and matter. Initially, this is a claim developed in the *Physics*, but it becomes a general principle applied throughout his oeuvre, including the *Politics*. Although there is a lively scholarly dispute about exactly what Aristotle meant by hylomorphism (for a recent survey and contribution see Henry, 2019) one can establish the broad outlines. In short, an individual is a compound

of both matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*). For Aristotle, the form may be a shape but, more fundamentally, the form of something relates to its essence, its *telos*. In his discussion of Athenian politics, we see these different aspects clearly: the citizens are the matter, and the form is both 'the shape' of the constitution that brings them together and the *telos*, which expresses the nature of the polis (Aristotle, 1905, I.7).

Simondon's concern with such hylomorphic accounts is that they always begin with the individual (object, subject or collective) and only then seek to account for why it has the matter and form that it does, thereby examining the individuation through the individual rather than the individual through the preceding individuation. What hylomorphic accounts do not do, therefore, is give an ontogenetic account of why we have the individual (objects, subjects, and collectives) that we have. But why is this the case? Whether we start with the individual or the individuation, should we not come up with the same way of defining the nature of the entity?

Throughout his writings, Simondon uses the image of a craftsman moulding a brick to show what is at stake. If we start with the question 'what is the nature of the individual brick?' then we will rightly focus on the mould and the clay as the brick is simply the matter formed into a certain shape. However, Simondon argues that the possibility of constructing the individual brick already presupposes several rather complicated processes that, when addressed, give a different picture of the nature of the individual brick. With respect to the clay, Simondon points out that it is already pre-formed. That clay is a 'stiff, sticky fine-grained earth' (according to standard definitions) makes it clear that it has already been through substantial processes of *formation* to get into a mouldable condition. When we think about the mould, moreover, we quickly recognize that it is already *materialized* in a certain way. We will not get the same brick if the same molecules that constitute the mould are arranged in a different way, as a gas for example. As Michael O'Hara explains, using his background as a trained and practical mould-maker, 'the intimate relationship between clay slip and plaster mould is critical to the rendering of form' (2019: 227). This intimate relationship, this already mediated situation, means that the form must be materialized in

a specific way (moulds of certain material will simply not enclose the clay) and the matter must already have a certain form to it (if there is too much water in the clay it will never become a brick, for example). Simondon further postulates that there must be an 'obscure zone' (Simondon, 2017: 250; Read, 2015) where the real processes of individuation take place, obscure because it cannot be defined in terms of pure form or matter but an indefinable mixture of both. In this zone, the relationship between form and matter is already *mediated* such that, in the case of the brick, there is a preformed matter and a pre-materialised form that serve as the condition of possibility for the brick to be individuated. That this intimate relationship must be mediated implies that the form/matter of the mould and the matter/form of the clay are not of the same 'orders of magnitude,' as Simondon puts it. Simply, one can get the mould right and the clay wrong, and vice versa, when shaping bricks. Simondon refers to these necessary but different orders of magnitude, in general terms, as *disparities*. As such, that which is mediated in the obscure zone can be said to be disparate problems that do not in and of themselves form a unity; the problems of how to make the right mould and how to make the right clay must both be solved if one wants to make a brick. These two disparities when they are primed for, but prior to, the mediation process constitute what Simondon calls a *metastability*. Simondon borrows this term from physics where it refers to the excited state of a system (large and small) that lasts longer than other excited states of the system. The emergence of an individual within the pre-individual, metastable system can be conceived as the 'resolution of a tension between potentials belonging to previously separated orders of magnitude' – in this case the right mould and the right clay – and it is energetic because something has already happened in order to introduce energy into the system, which then flows throughout it (Simondon, 1995: 39-50; see also Coombes, 2012: 4).

Perhaps a keen apprentice nervously shakes under the demanding eye of the master. Here, the clay might be kneaded too much which spoils the brick, or perhaps the clay is pressed too little, so that the final product is deformed. In either case, the resolution produces a faulty brick that unsuccessfully resolves the tensions between previously separate orders of

magnitude in relation to the demand for a particular shape and strength of brick. Simondon's key point about is that matter and moulds are 'continuously varying' and are only successfully combined in accordance with certain conditions (Simondon, 2005: 31).⁸ One such condition is the two disparities in a metastable situation must come into 'communication' to become a *singularity*. He writes that a 'singularity' is 'the stone that begins the dune, the gravel which is the seed for an island in a river carrying sediment,' (Simondon, 2005: 44, n. 5). Deleuze (2001) summarized these key components in his review of Simondon's *L'individu et sa genese physico-biologique*. In it, he explains that we must reject *reflective* accounts like hylomorphism in favour of the *genetic* principle of individuation outlined by Simondon, if we want to give a proper account of the nature of individuals. The former simply reflect the individual in the process of individuation. Genetic accounts, in contrast, do not presuppose the individual object in question: we look at the 'metastable' system, including its potentials and singularities and ask, 'what individual brick, if any, will result?'. But what does this have to do with the public sphere?

A Difference-Oriented Public Sphere

As a first gesture, we can redescribe the relationship between the constituents and the constitution of the public sphere. Rather than think of these in a matter/form relationship we can conceive of the constituents (the discourses, rhetorical styles, publics and counterpublics) as already formed and the constitution (the space between state and society) as already materialised. This simple gesture already motivates a much less reductive model of the emergent constituents of the public sphere. It is less reductive because it presupposes an 'obscure zone' from which these orders of magnitude or disparities, held in a metastable condition, engender a singularity that spurs the process of individuating publics and the public sphere at the same time. Such redescription will direct our attention to the 'politics of transindividuality' (Read, 2015) engendering ever more productive debates across Spinozist and Marxist traditions without which conceptualisations of public life will be immeasurably poorer. While such projects are still in their infancy, however,

we can get a good sense of how they will help our grasp of the public sphere by proposing dynamic ontogenetic processes as the condition of possibility for Asen's 'conceptual model of multiple public sphere' (2017: 330); a grounded model that captures the complicated interactions of public life but that does not surreptitiously reintroduce hylomorphic assumptions in the face of atomistic individualism by appeal to 'the public good'.

If this helps us start thinking about a non-reductive multiplicity what of the problem of exclusion. The difference-oriented poststructuralists take these problems to be inextricably linked. They claim that hylomorphic approaches to identity have survived for so long because they embody a social relation that serves the interests of some over others. This impoverished social relation is that of slave and master; the slave who moulds the brick and the master who gives order for the technical operation. According to Simondon, 'the distinction between form and matter, between soul and body, reflects a city that contains citizens in opposition to slaves' (2005: 51). It is a theme picked up and developed by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Referring to 'royal science' – that is, any form of knowledge that is generated in defence of the operations of the State – they say: 'the way in which a science, or a conception of science, participates in the organization of the social field, and in particular indices a division of labour, is part of that science itself. Royal science is inseparable from a 'hylomorphic' model implying both a form that organizes matter and a matter prepared for the form; it has often been shown that this schema derives less from technology or life than from a society divided into governors and governed, and later, intellectual and manual labourers' (1987: 368-9). If this is true of hylomorphic assumptions underpinning various models of the public sphere, then it makes sense to consider whether such models unwittingly rely upon hierarchical social relationships that inevitably lead to problems of exclusion; problems that have beset the idea of the public sphere since its inception. What is at stake with respect to our argument is whether the subordinate and oppositional voices that emerge from within civil society can enter public debate without first being squeezed into the pre-existing mould of the space between state and society.

Without delving into too much detail there are two recent examples that give us pause to think that new forms of public discourse will only be allowed into political discussion if they are first squeezed into the mould and the excess trimmed away. First, the prefigurative discourses created by 'emergent constituents' (to adopt and adapt from Asen) such as the Occupy movement, Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil tend not to rely upon appeal to the rules of public reason (though such claims are part of these movements) nor do they create their own rules within their counterpublic spaces (though they do this too). Rather, they invite the transformation of the space between civil society and the state in a total reconfiguration of what public debate in a democracy might mean. While democratic will is directed toward distilling the 'real claims' motivating such movements that can then be embraced within the public sphere, little attention is given to their activist appeals to political worlds (almost) unimaginable within the confines of contemporary democratic regimes. When the economic system or the environment is at stake, there will always be radical ideas trimmed off public discourses to fit within a pre-formed idea of the public sphere with its roots in masculinist and bourgeois liberal democracies. Secondly, and as we have broached in debate with Asen, the responses to the rise of atomistic individualism within the public sphere typically amount to a conservative defence of statist politics and social interaction, rather than an attempt to understand genuinely the dynamics of 'actually existing democracy'. Whilst Asen can no doubt account for a *complicated* public sphere, its *changing* nature cannot be fully appreciated whilst it is anchored to the concept of the 'public good'. With respect both to prefigurative movements and narrow individualism, debates that presume hylomorphic models of the public sphere, collaborate in integrating new political discourse under the rubric of representative politics that stifles spontaneous political eruptions as illegitimate if they threaten *real* change (Svirsky, 2010). Or, to put it another way, for such radical discourses of the left and right, of holism and individualism, to be integrated within debates without exclusions, there would need to be a model of the public sphere that embraces its intrinsic potential for *real* change, all the way down. To rise to this challenge, we must have non-exclusionary models that embrace new constituents within the public sphere without removing the challenge they pose to its

constitution. That is, we require a conception of the public sphere able to account, not only for the different individuals, groups and practices that continually emerge within it, but also how the constitution of the public sphere changes in relation to these new constituents. Only an ontogenetic model will enable such reflection.

If we are to embrace the idea that our models should be able to make sense of such phenomena without excluding them (or key parts of such public interventions) then we must equally embrace the idea that the 'space between civil society and the state' is already materialised, such that it can be materialised differently. We can see this if we make the simple point that both forms of contemporary intervention in public life – emergent collectives and neoliberal atomism – have been fostered in significant part by the rise of digitalisation. Indeed, in a recent review of the main themes animating his idea of the public sphere, Habermas (2022) has discussed the role played by social media platforms in constituting new modalities of public communication. Reflecting on the dangers of such forms of political communication, while focussing on the rise of individualism, he makes a claim that both recognises and resists the need for rethinking the space between civil society and the state. He states that 'the boundless communication networks that spontaneously take shape around certain topics or individuals can spread centrifugally while simultaneously condensing into communication circuits that dogmatically seal themselves off from each other' (2022: 160). What is striking in this remark, is the way that Habermas describes changes to the bounded public sphere brought about by boundless digitalisation resulting in illegitimately bounded 'communication circuits'. The dichotomy between the bounded and the boundless is clearly revealing of the continued persistence of hylomorphic assumptions in Habermas' latest reflections on the public sphere. Importantly, it is a dichotomy with little explanatory value when we wish to model the effects of digitalisation on the public sphere. A more productive account, we suggest, would look towards the technological metastable milieu and how technical developments after the industrial revolution far exceeded the capability of cultural groups to integrate them (Alombert, 2019: 318).

Conclusion

It has been our aim to challenge the 'matter and form' approaches that condition standard accounts of the public sphere; where the constituents (discourses, rhetorical strategies, publics and counterpublics) are the matter and the idea of a space between state and society serves as the constituting form (regardless how complex this is thought to be). The reason for this challenge was the claim that all such hylomorphic models must be left behind if the debates are to progress toward their own often articulated and broadly shared goal: a non-reductive and inclusive model of the public sphere that will aid in understanding 'actually existing democracy'. We are now able to summarise why the standard 'matter and form' approaches will never yield this result. Analyses of the public sphere begin with the identification of publics and counterpublics and then look for their conditions of emergence such that the conditions will always *reflect* the conditioned. As such, the public sphere will inevitably be *reduced* in complexity, and it will always *exclude* existing counterpublics that challenge fundamentally the norms of public interaction. In our view, the lexicon of public sphere debates needs to shift away from concepts that contain latent hylomorphic assumptions toward those that express the dynamics of ontogenetic emergence. The construction of a new conceptual lexicon based on an ontogenetic model of the public sphere, however, must be guided by the quintessentially changeable nature of the public sphere, all the way down.

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¹ Perhaps most obviously, one could track the development of the idea of the public sphere in Habermas' writings and assess the extent to which the challenges do or do not reveal theoretical flaws in his early work, and/or the extent to which he has met these challenges in the discourse ethics and critical theory of the pragmatics of communication in his later work. Those that have followed this approach have made significant inroads in Habermas scholarship and contributed to the debates about the public sphere in numerous respects. A relatively recent overview of this approach can be found in Dahlberg (2013). However, for our purposes, it is a rather limiting approach as it does not address the fundamental assumptions animating the idea of the public sphere itself.

² Indeed, as Katherine Gordy has noted, this is especially important as debate shifts from the relation between publics and counterpublics to the 'experiences of subordination within subordinate groups' (2015: 764), a shift that adds an even greater layer of complexity in the drive to avoid reductionism.

³ He turns to in-depth comparisons between Habermasians and (some agon-oriented) poststructuralists to clarify the relationship between the various elements of the public sphere and the idea of the public sphere itself, as that which conditions the possibility of their existence. However, he does so by remaining committed to the idea that the aim of such comparison is to theorise 'the democratic role of communication' (2014: 21). To this extent he remains within, broadly speaking, Habermas' critical-theoretical framework that we believe should be suspended so as not to predetermine the outcome of the investigation.

⁴ In this discussion we will employ the outlines of his critique of hylomorphism in a straightforward way (mobilising his work under the umbrella term of difference-oriented poststructuralism because we read it through the lens provided by Deleuze and Guattari) without intending to offer an exhaustive or definitive account of this critique throughout his oeuvre.

⁵ It is not our intention to reflect upon how best to interpret Simondon's philosophical project. Rather, it is our intention to use a key aspect of his work to unsettle some unspoken assumptions in literature on the public sphere.

⁶ The individuating principle, according to Aristotle, can either be form or matter whilst, in the literature, it is also argued that both matter and form together are the principle of individuation. See, for example, Regis (1976).

⁷ It is a project that is also beginning to spawn a range of insightful commentaries across a wide range of disciplines (Chabot, 2013; Combes 2012; Bardin, 2015; Mills 2016 and, recently, the essays collected in Heaney, 2019).

⁸ Arguably, the more compelling example Simondon provides of a continuously varying mould is that of a triode (Simondon, 2017: 54). The primary distinction between a diode and a triode is that one can vary the voltage traversing the latter by varying the voltage across a command grid separating the cathode and the anode. Variation in the anodic current can then be achieved not only by varying the current supplied to the cathode, but also by varying the current supplied to the control grid, becoming what Simondon calls an 'individualized, free and defined property' (Simondon, 2017: 54). Further variation could be achieved by increasing or decreasing the space between the control grid elements, or the distance between it and the cathode.