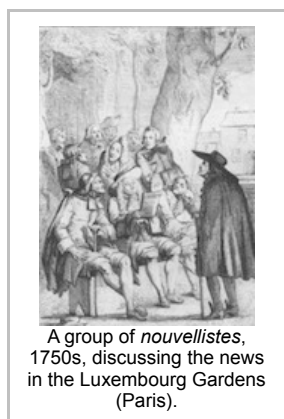# The Public and the Private

A New Meaning of Public

"Public" has a long history. In Roman antiquity the adjective *publicus* could refer to a collective body of citizens or subjects (as in *res publica*) and its property. The Romans also contrasted *publicus* with the domain of the private household to denote public spaces like streets, squares, or theaters. *Publicum*, the noun form, had a more specifically political meaning and referred to the area, property, or income of the state. This association of public with the state gained renewed currency in early modern Europe, the classic age of dynastic state-building) and this link persists today: candidates run for public office, state agencies are housed in public buildings, state parks are public property.

Hôtel de Ville, Paris

A group of *nouvellistes*, 1750s, discussing the news in the Luxembourg Gardens (Paris).

Yet there is another, more recent meaning of *public*. We use it in the sense of audience, as in speaking of the public for a book, a concert, a play, or an art exhibition. Reading public, music public, theater public — such usages began to appear in the seventeenth century and had become common by the eighteenth. Unlike earlier meanings, these were unrelated to the exercise of state authority. They referred rather to publics whose members were private individuals rendering judgment on what they read, observed, or otherwise experienced. A burgeoning print culture provided one medium through which these publics made their opinions known; new or expanding arenas of sociability like coffeehouses, salons, and Masonic

The Café le Procope, showing Voltaire and Diderot in Debate (from a watercolor)

lodges were another. These publics arose in the context of an expanding culture of consumption where cultural products were available to those who could pay for them, regardless of formal rank. The commodification of literature wrought by the popularity of the eighteenth-century novel, the cultural amenities available to patrons of fashionable resorts like Bath in England or Bad Pyrmont in Germany, the evolution of theaters from courtly into commercial institutions, the entertainment districts lining the boulevards of Paris or clustered in the pleasure gardens of London's Ranelagh and Vienna's Prater, all exemplified the expanding networks of print and sociability characteristic of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. They heralded the arrival of "the public" as a cultural and political arbiter, an entity to which contemporaries increasingly came to refer as a sovereign tribunal. Friedrich Schiller wrote in l782 that "the public is everything to me, my school, my sovereign, my trusted friend. I shall submit to this and to no other tribunal," London's *Theatrical Guardian* affirmed the public's sovereignty over the stage when it declared in 1791 that...

> "the public is the only jury before the merits of an actor or an actress are to be tried, and when the endeavors of a performer are stampt by them with the seal of sanction and applause, from that there should be no appeal."

In 1747 the French art critic La Font de Saint-Yenne, the first to call for the establishment of a public museum in the Louvre, justified his proposal on the grounds that "it is only in the mouths of those firm and equitable men who compose the public ... that we can find the language of truth." In the political realm "public opinion" acquired agency and legitimacy, even in the eyes of a theoretically absolute sovereign like Louis XVI, who wrote that "I must always consult public opinion; it is never wrong."

[Excerpt from James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), 1-2]

The Bourgeois Public Sphere

By "the public sphere" we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public

body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion — that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions — about matters of general interest. In a large public body this kind of communication requires specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Today newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere. We speak of the political public sphere in contrast, for instance, to the literary one, when public discussion deals with objects connected to the activity of the state. Although state authority is so to speak the executor of the political public sphere, it is not a part of it. […]

Discussing the Franco-Prussian war in a Paris Cafe (*Illustrated London News*, Sept. 17, 1870)

It is no coincidence that these concepts of the public sphere and public opinion arose for the first time only in the eighteenth century. They acquire their specific meaning from a concrete historical situation. It was at that time that the distinction of "opinion" from "*opinion publique*" and "public opinion" came about. Though mere opinions (cultural assumptions, normative attitudes, collective prejudices and values) seem to persist unchanged in their natural form as a kind of sediment of history, public opinion can by definition only come into existence when a reasoning public is presupposed. Public discussions about the exercise of political power which are both critical in intent and institutionally guaranteed have not always existed — they grew out of a specific phase of bourgeois society and could enter into the order of the bourgeois constitutional state only as a result of a particular constellation of interests.

There is no indication European society of the high middle ages possessed a public sphere as a unique realm distinct from the private sphere. […]

[From Jürgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)," transl. by Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, *New German Critique*, 3 (1974): 49-50.]

London Coffee-Houses

The largest coffee-house franchise in the world (founded in 1971, with 17,133 stores world-wide)

I went to a coffee house this morning. I had a 'grande' latte. It cost me $3.20. Sometimes I carry the coffee with me to work in a cardboard cup; this time I sat in the coffee house and drank it while reading the newspaper. I went by myself and did not have a conversation with any of the other customers – several of whom I vaguely recognised but most of whom were strangers. Almost all of them were talking to someone they had come with, reading their own papers, or doing something on the internet, as this coffee house is a wireless hot spot.

Here are some other things I didn't do at the coffee house: I did not hear a philosophical or scientific lecture, though I inadvertently picked up fragments of talk about accountancy reform and recent appointments to the Supreme Court – this coffee house is adjacent to Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and across the Charles River from the Business School. I did not take part in a political cabal, or think that one was being plotted around me, unless the normal conversation of Harvard elites counts as such. It did not occur to me that any of the discussions taking place might be reported to George W. Bush or the FBI – though one can never be too sure of that these days. If there had been an attempt by the Bush regime to ban this coffee house as a hotbed of sedition, or to send agents to spy on its clientele, I had not heard of it. I did not witness the dissection of a dolphin, the display of an elephant or a rhinoceros, or an exhibition of a child with three penises and a woman with three breasts. I did not hear customers sing an eight-part canon; I did not take a bath, gamble with dice or secure the services of a prostitute. A fellow customer did not offer to sell me shares in a publicly traded company or insurance on my life or property, and I did not buy books, paintings or whale oil at a candle auction. The clientele was fairly specific to the neighbourhood and so not very heterogeneous, and, if the neighbourhood did not make it socially pretty samey, then the outrageous price of the latte did. No one was smoking – it's banned – and many of the customers were women.

All of this makes the coffee house I go to a very different sort of place from those that proliferated in London from the middle of the 17th century; but despite these marked dissimilarities, social and cultural

A London Coffee-House (17th Century)

theorists have placed a heavy bet on early coffee houses as crucibles of modernity. It started with Habermas, who in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) argued for their importance in the rise of the 'bourgeois public sphere'. What was said to be pertinent about the hundreds of coffee houses jostling for customers in late 17th and early 18th-century London was, first, the social diversity of their customers; second, the temporary setting aside of distinctions of social rank; third, the common conversation in which their customers were swept up; fourth, the circulation of print, and especially of printed news, in the place where this jumble of people were talking about it; and, fifth, the occasional closing of the circle through the embodying of coffee-house talk in new forms of print which could then become the objects of still more coffee-house talk.
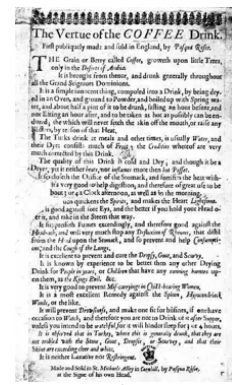
Handbill from 1652 advertising the first coffee-house in London [British Museum, London]

[Excerpt from Steven Shapin, "At the Amsterdam," in *The London Review of Books* (20 April 2006), pp. 12-13.]

[The woodcut and handbill are reproduced from William H. Ukers, *All About Coffee* (New York: The Tea and Coffee Trade Journal Company, 1922), pp. 55, 62]

Social Mixing at the Palais Royal

Near the Louvre in Paris stands a rather grand building known as the Palais Royal. It was built on the site of the Hotel de Mercoeur and Hotel Rambouillet for Cardinal Richelieu in 1629 and originally named the Palais-Cardinal. After Richelieu's death, the Palais was left to Louis XIII who left it in turn to Anne of Austria and her son, later Louis XIV. After several other changes of residency, the Palais was sold to the Orléans family, cousins to the Kings of France. it was inherited by Louis-Philippe, the Duc de Chartres, who, on his father's death, became the Duc d'Orléans in 1785. He was later to renounce that title and become famous during the French Revolution as Philippe Egalité. [2]
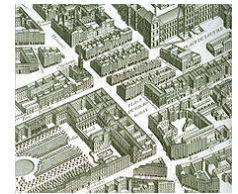

The Palais-Royal, Paris

Louis-Philippe II, Duc de Orléans (1747-1793)
Porcelain, Musée Carnavalet, Paris

In the early 1780s, Louis-Philippe made a number of substantial changes to the Palais Royal, giving it a more commercial orientation, in order that he might offset the costs of his lavish expenditure on high living and boost his dwindling financial resources. Not least, he had built, originally in wood but later in iron, galleries or arcades filled with shops and boutiques selling all manner of consumer goods and services. These galleries were the forerunners of the famous Parisian arcades of the early nineteenth century, which in turn became the inspiration for the later department stores and shopping malls.

The Palais-Royal (1739)

Before the Revolution in 1789, the Palais Royal was one of the places in Paris for people of quality, and those who aspired to be part of the cultured elite, to be seen. […] It was here also that men and women would come to buy the books of the Enlightenment philosophers and to read the latest journals and newspapers. […] It boasted cafés and restaurants, a stock exchange, and pavilions were constructed to contain the variety of commercial enterprises and entertainments that were open to the public. In addition to being a leading site in the consumer culture of eighteenth-century Paris, the appearance of the Palais Royal, therefore, would seem to be in keeping with the idea of a public sphere of Enlightenment: it was a site of openness, tolerance and civility as well as a space for rational and enlightened debate that played a significant part in the emerging civil society of the bourgeoisie. […]

[14] […] During the late eighteenth century, the Palais Royal was in some ways like Covent Garden in London, perhaps combined with elements of Hyde Park. Like Covent Garden, the Palais Royal was the site of many coffee-houses that were fashionable at the time. […]

The coffee-house, taken as an idea by travelers to Egypt and Turkey and brought first to England and then to France in the middle of the seventeenth century, suited the puritan culture of England especially well. It was a space associated with the drinks of coffee and chocolate that, unlike alcohol, were seen to promote a convivial and open atmosphere of intelligent discourse and debate. Coffee-houses were places open to all men although not women in England. Women were, however, admitted to the cafés in the Palais Royal. On payment of a penny and recognition of the house rules, people were invited to mix with strangers of all social ranks and engage in discussions with them. During the late seventeenth century, the coffee-house became a site in which business transactions took place.

A covered walkway at the Palais-Royal

The London stock exchange originated in a coffee-house, as did some of the major insurance companies like Lloyds. Coffee-houses were also places where auctions took place where business was conducted. They became places of trust, places in which the conditions of capitalism were encouraged and allowed to develop in a regulated way. […] [15] […]

Although coffee-houses had opened in Paris in 1643, it was not until the eighteenth century that their popularity began to grow. By 1716, Paris had 600 coffee-houses, a number which had doubled by 1788 on the eve of the Revolution. The cafés were popular with the bourgeoisie, the nobility, and members of the literary elite. Rousseau and Diderot, in their younger days, were often to be found in the Café de la Régence in the Palais Royal.

[Excerpt from Kevin Hetherington, *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering* (New York: Routledge, 1997), ch. 1]

Pubs and Taverns

People in the eighteenth century did much of their drinking in public. At a time when most lived in dwellings that were small, cramped, and poorly heated in the winter, taverns, wineshops, and cafes offered a warm fire and refuge from crowded and uncomfortable quarters. But taverns and coffeehouses were more than simply an escape from the discomforts of home. People frequented taverns and coffeehouses to find jobs, conduct business, exchange information, or celebrate important events of their lives. These were places where baptisms and marriages were celebrated, newspapers circulated, stock traded, crimes plotted, votes solicited, ministers attacked, laborers employed, wars debated, freemasons initiated.

David Teniers the Younger, "Backgammon Players" (c.1640-45, oil on oak) [National Gallery, London]
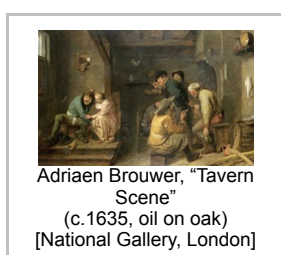
Adriaen Brouwer, "Tavern Scene" (c.1635, oil on oak) [National Gallery, London]

Taverns and coffeehouses were in principle public space, open to anyone who could pay for their drink. This side of taverns continues to find expression in the British term "pub" (after public house), which entered common usage in the eighteenth century. The openness and accessibility associated with public-drinking establishments date back to the Middle Ages, when local statutes or custom sometimes prescribed sanctions against tavern keepers who refused to serve a patron without good cause. Such provisions were rooted in medieval traditions of hospitality, which under specific conditions obliged communities and lordships to offer food, drink, or accommodations to travelers and pilgrims. The publicness of drinking establishments in early modern Europe found expression in the often picturesque signs that beckoned those on the street to come within. The public status of taverns and coffeehouses was also reflected in their function as urban landmarks at a time when it was not yet common for buildings to bear numbers. Street addresses in eighteenth-century cities were often designated by reference to a tavern or coffeehouse. One resided "opposite the Sun Tavern"; a street crime occurred "near the Café du Rendez-vous"; a journeyman newcomer was told he could find his employer "in the shop behind the Grenadier Arms."

[Excerpt from ch. 7 ("Drinking in Public: taverns and coffee houses") of James van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 226.]