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Book Review: The Public Sphere: An Introduction

Andrew Edgar

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Reviews

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Alan McKee, *The Public Sphere: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. £15.99. xi + 265 pp.

In *The Public Sphere: An Introduction*, McKee offers a wide-ranging introduction to contemporary debates over the health of the public sphere. He identifies five common criticisms that are made against the current structure and use of the public sphere, all of which suggest its decline. The public sphere, its critics argue, is becoming increasingly trivial, increasingly commercial, is being reduced to a mere spectacle and is being fragmented. In addition, its users are criticized for being increasingly divorced from 'real' politics. It is these criticisms that McKee is at pains to rebut.

The trivialization of the public sphere can be seen in the dominance of celebrity gossip in newspapers, magazines and much broadcast media. Commercialization is found in the pursuit of large audiences (and attendant revenues) and thus to the 'dumbing down' of content. Spectacle goes beyond mere dumbing down, to a rejection of rational argument in favour of rhetorical visual, musical and even verbal effects. Fragmentation occurs as repressed or marginal groups build their own public spheres, distinct from the official sphere of mainstream political discourse. Finally, the apathy of young people about that same mainstream politics is taken as indicative of a wider decline in political involvement.

In what is a clever and often fruitful structural move, McKee argues against these criticisms by highlighting the use that specific groups make of the public sphere. Thus, trivialization is linked to the manner in which women use the public sphere. The trivial thereby becomes associated with the private, and thus seemingly trivial subject-matter is revalued as the site of struggle over the public–private divide and the nature of a politics informed by feminism. Commercialization is similarly linked to working-class culture, and thus challenges cultural critics who would seek to exclude working-class experience from the public sphere. The spectacle is linked to questions of racial identity, and is explored through the political role of rap music (in a discussion that, to its great credit, makes as much of the music and visual presentation of rap, as of its lyrical content). Fragmentation is discussed in terms of the building of gay and lesbian public spheres, and finally apathy is challenged by examining the way in which youth groups are involved in political actions that fall outside traditional definitions of mainstream politics, by focusing on challenging perception and thought.

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McKee goes on to challenge his conservative interlocutors through a series of often stimulating examples, that open up the richness of the content and use of the modern mass media and their contribution to a complex and flourishing public sphere. A first reservation about this technique is that however stimulating it may be, occasionally it has the feel of a straitjacket, inhibiting the discussion of important usages and users of the public sphere, as well as sidelining important conceptual questions. In discussing the trivial, for example, celebrity culture tended to be presented as a single phenomenon. The important political differences that might have been articulated through carefully differentiating gossip about celebrity entertainers as opposed to that about politicians or even royalty, tended to get lost. The focus on youth with respect to the internet has neglected the important role that the internet and blogging have had in maintaining critical discussion, for example, in Iran and Iraq.

However, what is perhaps more problematic here is the way in which McKee situates his own arguments in relation to the critics of the public sphere. A key theme running throughout the book is an exploration of the tension between 'modernist' and 'postmodernist' positions. McKee places himself firmly in the postmodernist camp, which he associates with a commitment to constructivism (and he is at great pains to distance himself from any biological or other form of essentialism), relativism and perspectivism. McKee's flourishing public sphere is thus very much a postmodernist space, tolerant of diverse voices and identities, and blurring the binary oppositions beloved of modernists.

The problem with this lies, less in the core arguments, which often in outline are highly effective, but in the style with which McKee pursues his project. He admits that he has set himself the difficult task of embracing both academic and popular audiences. This entails, on the one hand, that he draws readily from academic and popular sources for his arguments, and on the other that he strives to present his work in as accessible a style as possible. Certainly his arguments are accessible, and this is one reason why the book will make a stimulating and effective student text. But, as he confesses in frequent footnotes, it also means that he has to simplify his position. At times, one comes to suspect that this process of simplification has led to McKee's opponents becoming little more than straw men. The reader cannot avoid asking whether anyone any longer actually thinks like McKee's modernists.

This is, I suspect, more than just a problem of presentational style. It lies rather in McKee's understanding of the postmodern, and of recent developments in philosophical and political thought. McKee presents modernism and postmodernism as 'attitudes'. In effect, they are two different perspectives on the world. McKee defends a form of emotivism, where the perspective one favours is partially a matter of subjective choice. A person will be attracted to one rather than the other due to matters of circumstance, such as upbringing and experiences. McKee concedes, and indeed discusses with some subtlety, the possibilities of people coming from different perspectives understanding each other, and the importance of dialogue within the apparent fragmentation of the public sphere. However, from McKee's position, dialogue stops short of rational debate. One may rhetorically persuade one's opponent of the effectiveness of one's position, but one cannot demonstrate rationally the falsehood of a position. McKee assumes, problematically, that just because no position can be proven to be true, no position is false either. In a move that quite deliberately

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challenges Habermas's conception of the public sphere, the sort of persuasion defended by the likes of Richard Rorty is championed over rational discussion.

The crucial point is not that McKee is wrong to do this, but that his whole approach appears a little old-fashioned. It oversimplifies both the modernist and postmodernist camps, who have recently embarked on very significant dialogue. Thus, Habermas's own position, as McKee acknowledges, has shifted significantly since he published *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in the early 1960s. But McKee seems uncomfortable with the complexities of the theory of communicative action (for example, misrepresenting the relationship between system and lifeworld as that between public and private), and Habermas's most recent engagements with the problems of multiculturalism, identity politics and the unavoidable substance that the lifeworld gives to the formal structures of public debate, are overlooked. But it is precisely in work like this that Habermas, as a modernist, shows how much he has learnt from his postmodernist opponents (and the debates that he initiated in *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*), and that these shifts represent not just a shift of perspective, the result of rhetorical persuasion, but rather a rational reflection on the strength of factual and normative arguments. On the other hand, McKee's presentation of the modernist position fails to engage with the complex cultural analyses that modernists offered, and that postmodernists have inherited, albeit critically. Terms such as 'ideology', 'hegemony', 'false consciousness' are not given the space and consideration necessary to make them any use in defending the modernist corner, and the whole approach of ideology critique, that underpinned Habermas's early work and gave it its force as a criticism of political imbalances, is wholly neglected.

Overall, this is a stimulating book. As perhaps befits a book on the public sphere, it encourages critical dialogue through thought-provoking examples and cases that will open up, especially for anyone new to these debates, an appreciation of the richness of the contemporary public sphere. But the book will also encourage debate through a feeling that certain key issues are, if not overlooked, at least in need of much more thorough examination.

Andrew Edgar
Cardiff University

Eric Louw, *The Media and Political Process*. Los Angeles, London, and New Delhi: Sage, 2005. £19.99. 311 pp.

The Media and Political Process examines the emergence of what the author terms 'media-ized' and 'PR-ized' politics in a number of 'Anglo-liberal' democracies. The central argument of the book is that in a range of Anglo-liberal nation-states, the dominant position and power of elites is maintained, during uncertain and changing times, by an emergent and powerful spin industry. The book, in the face of growing criticisms of the control paradigm (see, for example, McNair, 2003), seeks to demonstrate that such criticisms are misplaced and that elites still exercise definitional power. For the author, spin doctors aid the management of public attitudes in a world of increasing media outlets. These actors have become

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