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POPULIST POLITICS, COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA AND LARGE SCALE SOCIETAL INTEGRATION

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Faced with a minimally participatory democracy, a variety of populists have sought to revitalize popular political participation by strengthening local community mobilizations. Others have called for reliance on frequent referenda. Assessing the limits of these proposals requires theoretical attention to two key issues. The first is the growing importance of very large scale patterns of societal integration which depend on indirect social relationships achieved through communications media, markets and bureaucracies. This split of system world from lifeworld, in Habermas's terms, poses a challenge to democratic theories which assume that the lessons of local social life and political participation are directly translatable into the necessary knowledge for state level (let alone international) activity. Secondly, changes in patterns of community formation and communications media have transformed the basis for democracy. In particular, socio-spatial segmentation by life-style choice, market position and other factors limits direct relationships increasingly to similar individuals. Mass media become increasingly predominant sources of information about people different from oneself, and indirect social relationships form the structural basis for the social integration of most politics. The present paper revised and adapts Habermas's conceptualization of system world and lifeworld in order to address the transformation of patterns of societal integration. This forms the basis for a critical analysis of the implications of changing community form and especially communications media for populist political proposals.

Observations of public apathy in today's electoral democracies are commonplace (Neumann, 1986).¹ For many social scientists, low voter turnout and similar indicators are simply reasons for believing that liberal democracies will always be governed by elites, though these may shift over time.² Recently, a number of authors have argued against this view, and indeed against the presumption that

representative institutions are the only form of participation workable in modern, large-scale polities. Characterizing representation as a form of "thin democracy," for example, Barber (1984) has called for a move towards a "strong democracy" based on new or revitalized forms of popular participation. His proposals stress two dimensions of such participation: the renewal of community level institutions of self-rule and the development of more frequent national referenda.

Often grouped together under the label "direct democracy," such communitarian and plebiscitarian ideas are common not only to published programs and theoretical statements, but to practical organizing efforts. Enthusiasts for new technology have joined political thinkers in advocating widespread use of referenda as a newly feasible form of direct democracy (Naisbitt, 1982; Toffler, 1980; Deaken, 1981). A variety of "populist" social movements and political arguments have seen a renewal of local community politics as the central, or even the sufficient, way of accomplishing this revitalization (Boyte and Riessman, eds., 1986; Bellah, *et al.*, 1985). Common to both groups is a distrust of political parties and other "indirect" means of political participation. But it is noteworthy that appeals to referenda are

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¹ Unless otherwise noted, the empirical reference of this paper is primarily to the United States, though I would argue that similar tendencies are at work in most of the other Western democracies, especially those of fairly large scale.

² Dahl (1956, 1961; see also Dahl and Tufte, 1973) is perhaps the most important modern advocate of this position. It has classical precursors including Pareto (1916), Mosca (1896), Michels (1915), Schumpeter (1943) and Weber (1922), though the last is less often included in this political lineage; see discussion in Held (1987:ch. 5). Arguments for the necessity of elites are reviewed and criticized in Barber (1984:ch. 1).

usually voiced by a different set of writers and movements from appeals to community.³ Referenda are associated more with libertarian values and with an adversary conception of politics than with community building (Mansbridge, 1980).

Both sorts of proposals are “populist” responses to elite domination and to the distance of central political institutions from local communities and individual citizens. They seek as great and as direct a role as possible for “the people” of a country. As such, they continue a populist form of political opposition which has been endemic to modern and modernizing societies. This populism is a response to the growth of the state and the extension of capitalism. It is shaped by the apparent distance of centers of power from most people’s everyday lives. A crucial aspect of this is the simple scale of modern politics, their geographical reach and the size of their populations. Many theorists contend that very large societal scale makes direct democracy an impossible basis for modern states (Bobbio, 1987; Burnheim, 1985; Dahl and Tufte, 1973; Mansbridge, 1980).

But scale, while a central variable, does not adequately grasp the transformation in social organization wrought during the modern era. We need to address contrasting forms of social integration as well sizes of population or land area. I shall adapt Habermas’s (1984) distinction of system world/system integration from lifeworld/social integration for this purpose. This conceptual distinction seems to me seriously flawed as Habermas employs it, but also social theory’s best available starting point for confronting changes in the relationship of everyday experience to patterns of large scale social integration. I will argue that the current efflorescence of populist politics (of both left and right) simultaneously (a) is a response to the split between system world and lifeworld, and (b) is limited in an often poorly recognized way by the implications of large scale system integration.

Academic discussion of representative vs. direct democracy has tended to focus on mechanisms of decision-making at the expense of attention both to public discourse and the educational functions of politics and

to non-electoral social movements. Yet participation through social movements in political agenda setting may be the most viable form of direct popular political participation in large modern democracies. Nurturing a sphere of politically oriented public discourse is equally a crucial issue that goes beyond electoral politics. Communitarian populists (though generally not plebiscitarians) are sensitive to this, and offer proposals for improved settings for local discourse and political language less prejudicial to the values of community and tradition (Barber, 1984; Bellah, *et al.*, 1985; Evans and Boyte, 1986). Most, however, approach this predominantly in cultural rather than social structural terms, and underestimate the limits imposed by large scale system integration. Above all, both communitarian and plebiscitarian visions tend to neglect the structural difficulties which social change has put in the way of public discourse among people significantly different from each other.⁴

Such political visions tend to minimize the significance of class, race, gender and other basic categorical differences among people. But recognition of this does not entail either a rejection of communitarian or populist politics or a claim that there can be no democracy until all such social divisions are overcome. Democratic public discourse does not depend on pre-existing harmony or similarity among citizens, I contend, but rather on the ability to create meaningful discourse across lines of difference. However, changes in cities and community patterns on the one hand, and in communications systems on the other, make it likely that no extension of community level discourse or mobilization will constitute a public discourse at the level of the state. This is a limit to communitarian politics, though not an argument against them.

I shall first introduce, critique and reformu-

³ Barber (1984) is an exception, striving to save referenda from likely objections precisely by embedding them in communitarian institutions.

⁴ By “public discourse” I do not mean simply partaking of a common set of communications, as in hearing the same radio or television broadcasts, but dialogue and argument about public issues which has the capacity not simply to reveal private opinions but to form public opinion in Habermas’s (1962, 1964) sense. In the public sphere, citizens can “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” (Habermas, 1964:49). But the constitution of a public sphere requires more than simply these freedoms; it requires also the social conditions for actual dialogue in the manifold possible directions among the members of the public.

late Habermas's opposition of system to life world. My focus is on how such a distinction enables us to grasp the extraordinary transformation in the scale of societal integration during the modern era. Secondly, I shall suggest very briefly how the nature of cities and residential communities has changed as part of this transformation, undermining the historically most important setting for public discourse. Third, I shall offer an account of changes in communications media which have both made possible a dramatic extension of societal integration and defined the public arena of modern societies in such a way that public discourse is minimized and citizens are relatively passive. Lastly, I shall evaluate in this light the two major sorts of contemporary proposals for increasing popular political participation: community activism and referenda. I will argue that communitarian and populist movements are important means for democratic participation in modern societies, but that they are fundamentally limited by the mismatch between their local bases and large scale system integration. This mismatch, together with a tendency to misrecognize the implications of the split between lifeworld and large scale system integration, means that they cannot be substitutes for representative political institutions and mediated public discourse; they *can* be crucial complements. Most proposals for referenda and plebiscites, by contrast, further neither communitarian popular politics nor public discourse.

INDIRECT SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND LARGE SCALE SOCIAL INTEGRATION

One of the basic facts of modern social life is the divergence between the experience of direct interpersonal relationships and that of large scale apparently autonomous social systems. Weber (1921) grasped this as a part of the general process of rationalization in which communal social action (*gemeinschaftshandeln*) was replaced by rationally regulated action (*gesellschaftshandeln*). Habermas (1984, 1987) has suggested a further split within the realm of rational action into "action oriented to reaching understanding and action oriented to successes" (1984: 341). It is on this basis that he attempts to rescue the Enlightenment project of rationalization as progress from the Weberian iron

cage of domination through rational, bureaucratic (system world) means.

Habermas opposes the system world to a lifeworld in which people's primary orientation is towards mutuality with each other and in which communication is full, free and undistorted. It is not the lifeworld in general which he wishes to defend, but an idealized, purified form of communicative action aimed at interpersonal understanding. He conceptualizes this through the notion of an idealized speech situation, in which certain validity claims (to comprehensibility, truth, appropriateness, and sincerity) which are always implicit in speech are universalized. All real historical societies fall short of this ideal, but they may be compared to it and evaluated in terms of an evolutionary scale of undistorted communication (Habermas, 1978). Thus something closer to the ideal emerges from the lifeworld through a process of rationalization:

Correspondingly, a lifeworld can be regarded as rationalized to the extent that it permits interactions that are not guided by normatively ascribed agreement but—directly or indirectly—by communicatively *achieved* understanding. (1984:340)

A key challenge for Habermas's critical theory is to find a way to maintain the momentum of communicative rationality in the face of systemic, instrumental rationality on the one hand and recidivistic calls for a return to some premodern form of community and traditional authority on the other. But Habermas runs into four difficulties.

First, as McCarthy (1985) has indicated, he tends to appropriate systems-theory and sociological functionalism rather too completely for the sake of the critical edge of his theory and its relevance to action. Though indebted to the Marxist tradition he virtually abandons analysis of class and other fundamental social divisions.⁵ Power relations play little constitutive role in his conceptualization of society. Relatedly, he does not make conflictual collective action a significant part of his account of social change.

Second, the Enlightenment rationalism underlying Habermas's project leads him to reject too completely the importance of

⁵ Similarly, as Benhabib (1986) has noted, Habermas's general Enlightenment universalism leads him to deny that difference as such—e.g. on gender lines—could be a positive social or intellectual value.

tradition to intellectual life generally, and traditional communities as bases for progressive popular action. His accounts of human action and reason are always abstracted from cultural or social particularities. Sociologically and hermeneutically it is necessary to give greater weight to the unchosen foundations for action if we are to envision either a stable society or a deeply motivated radical challenge to established patterns and tendencies (Calhoun, 1983). If any form of lifeworld activity is to be defensible in the face of system world challenges, it will need to depend on strong social commitments, not simply contingent individual choices, however rational.

Third, Habermas's notion of pure communicative action, idealized in his account of the rationalized lifeworld, derives from institutional arenas which are hardly realms of perfect communication and freedom, including for example family relations that have generally been patriarchal (Fraser, 1985). While Habermas's conceptual opposition between action oriented to understanding and action oriented to success makes sense, in other words, the idea that the lifeworld and system world can be concretized as spheres of life (e.g. family and community vs. bureaucracies and markets) is seriously problematic. Two forms of understanding may be involved—one more concrete and phenomenological, the other more abstract—but neither constitutes a realm free of power relations. And power relations, however personal and direct, involve an instrumental or success orientation.

Fourth, Habermas's account of system world and lifeworld lacks an adequate social structural foundation.⁶ Not only does it not provide for an analysis of class conflict and power relations, it takes changing orientations to action as both the primary causes and the primary results of the large scale social changes of modernity. Little independent role is ascribed to demography, patterns in networks of concrete relationships or capitalism's relentless expansion. Rather than regarding changes in orientation to social action as primary, I would argue that these are dialectically related to such social structural factors as the transformation in scale of social

organization. It is in some part material changes in the scale and form of social relationships which necessitates adoption of instrumental or systematic orientations to action.

Habermas's theory posits two forms of societal integration, and indeed is important partly because it returns the issue of societal integration to the center of theoretical discussion. But Habermas is ambiguous about whether system world and lifeworld are to be understood as two spheres of life, or as two ways of looking at a social world which is always the result of constructive human action. The latter seems to me the more defensible view. There is no sharp demarcation between lifeworld and system world. Rather, our experience in modern society leads to divergent ways of trying to understand the social world, and to an experiential and intellectual split between lifeworld and system world (or such common sense analogs as 'the people' and 'the system,' 'everyday life' and 'the big picture,' etc.). This view is easier to maintain if we introduce a distinction between directly interpersonal social relationships (whether primary or secondary in Cooley's terms) and the indirect relationships which are formed when social action affects others only through the mediation of complex organizations, impersonal markets or communications technology. Indirect relationships permit a societal scale unimaginable on the basis of direct relationships, and simultaneously encourage objectification and reification of their origin in human action (Calhoun, forthcoming). They are much more likely to be approached solely with an orientation to instrumental success than are directly interpersonal relations (though the latter may be similarly degraded).

Rather than focusing on kinds of relationships as such, Habermas begins with a qualitative distinction in forms of rational action: instrumental (oriented to success in relation to objectified goals) and communicative (oriented to reflective understanding and the constitution of social relations).⁷ In his view, both of these develop naturally in the course of human history. They come into

⁶ Curiously, there was more attention to social structure in Habermas's early work on the public sphere (1962).

⁷ There is also an intermediate form of strategic social action which is hard to treat as entirely collapsible into the binary scheme; see McCarthy (1978) which remains the best secondary source in English on Habermas's theory.

conflict when they give rise to competing forms of societal integration: system and social (lifeworld):

Thus there is a competition *not between the types of action* oriented to understanding and success [which Habermas sees as complementary], *but between principles of societal integration*—between the mechanism of linguistic communication that is oriented to validity claims—a mechanism that emerges in increasing purity from the rationalization of the lifeworld—and those de-linguistified steering media through which systems of success-oriented action are differentiated out. (1984:342)

Money is the paradigmatic example of the “de-linguistified” steering media to which Habermas (following Parsons) refers, but a wide range of statistical indicators (e.g. of productivity, public opinion, etc.) share many relevant features. These media allow social systems to be ‘steered’ as though they were independent of human action. Through systems theory they may be understood in the same way. Indeed, the real complexity of very large scale social processes may dictate that they can be grasped better in cybernetic and other relatively abstract academic terms, than in terms of the ordinary discourse of the lifeworld. Accordingly, Habermas uses systems theory in his analysis of system integration even while he attacks the reifying (and anti-democratic) tendencies of systems theory. What is unclear is whether or how he maintains in his theory the ability to show that such large scale indirect phenomena remain nonetheless human social activity and relationships.

Habermas comes very close to losing the “unmasking” moment of a putatively critical theory and allowing the reifications of cybernetic theory—which actual social arrangements make convenient and predispose us to use—to be accepted as fully satisfactory accounts of the system world. It seems to me preferable to argue that very large scale social organization based on indirect relationships is difficult to understand without recourse to the kind of understanding Habermas describes as typical of the system world. This is a way of looking at social action well suited to large scale phenomena, but nonetheless it is an intellectual choice. In other words, when relationships are directly interpersonal we are unlikely to fail to recognize the extent to which they are human social creations. But when they are highly indirect, mediated by

technology and complex organizations, we are likely to need to approach their operation through aggregate statistics and cybernetic conceptions. These will tend to make it look as though the large scale systems were somehow autonomously functioning entities rather than creations of human social action.

We see this each time economists talk about the economy as though it were a natural system to be predicted and understood in the same manner as the weather (and indeed, economists are increasingly called upon to play a role similar to that of weather forecasters on the evening news). It is almost impossible to see the manifold ways in which human actions create large scale markets, for example, and certainly to understand complex economic processes on the basis simply of aggregation upward from those specific relationships of buying, selling, making, using, etc. A categorical break is intellectually necessary in order to look at these holistically, on a collective level of analysis. This break is not a break in reality, however, but in our approach to understanding it. A critical theorist needs continually to remind herself or himself that it is provisional; it must be unmasked recurrently to reveal the actual human activity creating the larger system. ‘System world’ is not, then, a sphere of life so much as it is a mode of understanding (one which is particularly relevant to certain spheres of activity). That mode of understanding is made convenient (if not necessary) for considering societal integration by the proliferation of indirect relationships on a very large scale.

SYSTEM WORLD, LIFEWORLD AND POPULIST POLITICS

For present purposes, the most relevant aspect of this is the extent to which the economy, the state and other very large scale institutions are likely to appear to most citizens as alien forces: bewildering, powerful beings rather than the abstractions critical thinkers may see them to be. They are reified, and the baffling way in which they confront us makes this reification not an easily escapable form of false consciousness but an almost unavoidable condition of practical thought in the modern world. Their functioning can be grasped well only through statistics, theories, cybernetic concepts and other intellectual tools which are both poorly distributed among the population,

and also at odds with the direct understanding which people gain of their immediate surroundings. The lifeworld, by contrast, can be understood intuitively; it is a “lived reality,” not an abstraction.

Many of people’s most basic values concern attachments within the lifeworld—family, home, standard of living, religious experience, etc. The fact that people have such deep commitments to lifeworld attachments is an important reason why they resist the encroachments of large scale institutions which seem to threaten them.⁸ Habermas does not confront this issue very directly because he focuses on an extremely rationalized ideal of communicative action when considering the lifeworld, rather than on anything approximating contemporary lived experience.

The same immediate understanding of and high value on much of the lifeworld which supports communitarian, populist resistance to encroachments of the system world is also a crucial source of the temptation to try to understand the system world through simple extension of lifeworld categories. As Castells puts it, “when people find themselves unable to control the world, they simply shrink the world to the size of their community” (1983: 331). This is the fundamental misrecognition built into the bulk of localist, populist politics today.

This temptation to misrecognize is played upon by many politicians who offer illusory accounts of and solutions to social problems—accounts which make sense only on the basis of the denial of an essential difference between large scale organization of social systems and everyday organization of directly interpersonal relationships. President Reagan, for example, told television viewers that balancing the federal budget was really no different from balancing a family’s checkbook. He capitalized on both the spurious intimacy of the television medium which made possible a jocular informality, and on the appeal of an account which falsely reassured his viewers that the workings of the

federal government and the national and international economies were not essentially complex and difficult to master, but potentially as manageable as a routine of everyday life. The apparent complexity, he implied, was only obscurantism on the part of elites; the danger people sensed, while real, was only the result of stubborn foolishness on the part of a few people with highly particular vested interests. Though this sort of catering to public desires for a reassuring misunderstanding of system-world affairs may be particularly typical of executive branch politics under what Lowi (1985) has recently called the “plebiscitary presidency,” a similar mode of thought is important to much oppositional, populist politics.⁹ It is because populist politics are in this sense a response to the divide between system world and lifeworld that they are endemic to modern and modernizing societies. In modern societies, state and economy require and continually extend indirect relationships. The most powerful determinants of the general shape of society and of the web of relationships within which individuals will operate thus can not be understood through extension of life-world ways of understanding to the system-world. Communal movements (and other social movements) respond to this by defending aspects of life which are not reducible to either state or economic organization. Fre-

⁸ Such threats may be perceived in a variety of ways, of course, and may be understood through the ideological categories of both left and right. The government may be feared and capitalism praised, for example, or corporate depredations seen as the major evil and government as a potential solution. Either way, people motivated by attachments within the lifeworld are led to embrace one of the major system world challenges to it, in order to resist the other.

⁹ Indeed, it appears even in the work of knowledgeable social scientists seeking to reach a broad public audience, as for example in *Habits of the Heart*, a recent best selling book by Robert Bellah and several associates (1985). *Habits* calls for a renewal of communitarian commitments and a reigning in of American individualism, without seriously considering the political, economic or social structural features of American society which fundamentally differentiate today’s community life from that which supported New England town meetings. The problems of scale, of the vulnerability of local communities to corporate and government decisions over which they have little control (or even potential for control), and the essential distance between most people and their political representatives are side-stepped in favor of an implication that getting involved in local organizations and community activities is sufficient to a major resocialization of American life. (Part of the basis for their notion of the sufficiency of such involvements is their focus on the satisfaction which they believe individuals will reap from such commitments, as distinct from the practical efficacy of those commitments). Despite the perceptiveness and readability of the book, one concludes that its avoidance of these hard issues raised by the tension between system-world and lifeworld was a condition of its reaching the extraordinarily broad audience it did.

quently, however, their approach to this struggle does not in itself provide a defense of one of the most central of those aspects, the public sphere, understood as a free space of public discourse, neither state nor market. This results in a limitation on the capacity of a directly communal movement to deal with the most powerful nexus of social organization.

Community life can be understood as the life people live in dense, multiplex, relatively autonomous networks of social relationships (Calhoun, 1980, 1986). Community, thus, is not a place, or simply a small scale population aggregate, but a mode of relating, variable in extent. Though communities may be larger than the immediate personal networks of individuals, they can in principle be understood by an extension of the same lifeworld terms.¹⁰ These terms become intuitive precisely within communities (including especially the family and other primarily relationships). Within a community, as within a kinship-based social organization, an unmet person need not be completely a stranger, for he or she can always be placed within an intuitive field, identified by a readily recognizable kind of relationship (a distant cousin, someone related by marriage to a friend, etc.) This is not equally true of people met from outside the communal field. While some direct relationships extend far afield, this happens usually with minimal density of network formation. Most understandings of strangers will be based not on ideas of the nature of their relationship to one, but on categorical identifies: they are blacks, whites, rich, poor, Baptists, Jews, etc. These categories may imply certain modes of relating to people, but the abstract category takes precedence. Where no direct relationship is established, the abstract category dominates completely, often as a stereotype. In modern societies, most of the information we have about members of other communities, and in general about people different from ourselves, comes not through any direct relationships, even the casual ones formed constantly in urban streets and shops. Rather, it comes through print and electronic media.

¹⁰ Communities need not be limited to spatially concentrated populations, as Webber (1967) observed years ago. Nonetheless, it is rare for any "community without propinquity" to exhibit a comparable multiplexity of relationships to a local community, even where its members are densely and systematically linked to one another, as in an academic field.

Changing patterns of mediated communication thus combine with the increasing compartmentalization of community to produce a deterioration in public discourse. We are aware of others (a notable accomplishment of mass media, as classically of cities), but we are not in discourse with them. Not only do large scale phenomena of modern markets, capitalist production organization, and the state all appear baffling when seen in terms of the ethical and sociological categories of the lifeworld. These systemic organizations, based on indirect social relationships, also minimize the frequency of public interaction among people different from one another. Intergroup relations are managed by formal organizations and mediated communications, not by direct personal contacts. The classic Frankfurt school point about how impoverished our cultural categories become, how poorly suited they are to critical recognition of basic social processes and alternatives, needs to be complemented by realization that reinvigoration of public culture would require a new set of social foundations for public discourse.

COMMUNITARIAN POLITICS, SYSTEM INTEGRATION AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

The great cities of the late 18th to early 20th centuries were the *locus classicus* of modern democratic public life, continuing even in the era of the nation-state a more than 2000 year old tradition holding the city to be the most proper unit for democratic government (Dahl and Tufte, 1973). The ideal of the polis was not abandoned as the shape and economic basis of cities changed. In 1905, for example, Frederick Howe described the city of commerce and industry as "the hope of democracy." Such cities brought together people of different backgrounds, occupations, and classes. They provided public spaces for communication across these differences. They allowed for word of mouth to spread political information quickly. They supported a wide range of newspapers and other publications. Political organization and mobilization were encouraged not only by the existence of closely knit neighborhoods but by proximity to centers of government and other foci for action.¹¹

¹¹ Of course such cities were different from the classical polis and from late medieval and early modern cities in a number of ways. Crucially, perhaps, they were

Urban public life is challenged by the growth of cities (or more precisely urban areas) to a size, and in a socio-spatial pattern, which allows members of different constituent urban communities successfully to avoid direct relations with each other. While cities have always been fractionated by class, ethnicity, occupation and other divisions, large scale has combined with urban sprawl and explicit development plans to allow much urban diversity to be masked. Elites are shielded from the poor, particularly, but a variety of middle and working class groups are able to go about their urban lives in an almost complete lack of urbane contact with and awareness of each other. Moreover, various traditional solidarities have been weakened, so that these groups are less and less frequently reproduced by the socialization of new members from within, as in ethnic ghettos. Increasingly they are enclaves of people who have made similar life-style choices. These life-style enclaves—especially suburban and exurban ones—are characterized by an extraordinary homophilia (primarily in non-sexual senses). They are also the most rapidly growing (and economically thriving) communities in America.¹²

The very demographic growth of cities accompanied a decline in their centrality to patterns of integration of large scale social systems. Where cities of less than 100,000 had anchored economic and power relations of the largest existing scale in early modern Europe, cities of 10 million are today almost fully absorbed into vastly larger scale international economic systems and domestic political systems. This mismatch between the urban scale of classical public life and the much larger scale of system integration in a world of indirect relationships and space-

much less salient as “power-containers” (Giddens, 1985) than their predecessors. The extension of modern state apparatuses meant that power was no longer as geographically localized.

¹² This makes such enclaves as different from traditional small towns as from cities organized so as to promote contact among members of heterogeneous groups. Relatively homogeneous enclaves are particularly prevalent on the rapidly growing fringes of central cities. The total percentage of the population living in such fringe communities grew by more than 32% in the decade ending in 1980. Such fringe developments now house well over a third of the U.S. population, though they sheltered less than 27% in 1970; 43.9% of the U.S. population lives inside metropolitan statistical areas, but outside central cities (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1986).

transcending technology is a central reason for the deterioration of urban public life. The city of Phoenix, for example, has grown rapidly, but it has not become correspondingly urbane. An important reason is that its population is spread over a large terrain which the city (unlike its Eastern U.S. counterparts) has easily annexed. Within this large field, a variety of residential and commercial developments function in decentralized ways, supporting a privatized, air-conditioned, automobile and media based style of life.¹³ The city is in many ways like a cluster of suburbs (see Jackson, 1985). Increasingly city living has become a consumer option, rather than a dictate of economic necessity. In America particularly, the population remains highly mobile and employment is often not in the community of residence, so social bonds in most urban (and fringe) communities are relatively weak.¹⁴

Cities are still the scene of a variety of social movements and political struggles. These include efforts to defend particular cultural groups and lifestyles and to achieve satisfactory levels of public services and amenities. Castells (1983) has offered perhaps the most comprehensive general assessment. But Castells is forced to conclude that these movements

are not agents of structural social change, but symptoms of resistance to the social domination even if, in their effort to resist, they do have major effects on cities and societies.

The reason for this defensive role is that they are unable to put forward any historically feasible project of economic production, communication, or government. (1983:329)

Behind this incapacity lies, primarily, the mismatch of local scale to state and international level system integration.

There is strength in local urban communi-

¹³ We should not forget, of course, that the vast majority of New York City's population lives outside of the Manhattan which forms our image of its urbanity; many go months or years at a time without visiting Manhattan.

¹⁴ It has long been possible for residence to be a consumer choice separable from location of employment, especially in the U.S. (Katznelson, 1986). Improved communication technology and recent trends in population redistribution allow community-life to be even more easily compartmentalized so that cross-cutting ties are few, as each local group relates to the government and national markets, but not to others (Kasarda, 1980; Calhoun, 1986).

ties, including those which people have built self-consciously as well as those in which they have found themselves for other reasons. The triumph of *gesellschaft* over *gemeinschaft* has not been the complete destruction of the latter so much as its compartmentalization as one of a variety of lifestyle choices. But this, of course, fundamentally changes its significance. In Habermas's terms, social integration (based on the life-world) is unable to cope with the issues of system-integration. The lifeworld may not be so fully colonized that it ceases to exist in meaningful ways, but though it holds out an ideal for a better quality of social relations it cannot constitute a viable alternative to system integration. Andre Gorz has put the matter in another, perhaps pithier, way in responding to the Marxist utopia of a society directly and voluntarily willed by its members in accord with their true natures:

Everything now indicates that it is impossible to create a highly industrialized society (and hence a world order) which presents itself to each individual as the desired outcome of his or her free social cooperation with other individuals. There is a difference in both scale and nature between communal work or life and the social totality. Although it may be possible to build highly conscious community through total personal involvement in cooperative activity, conflicts and affective relations, so that everyone assures the cohesion of what they feel to be "their" community, society as a whole will still remain a system of relations embodied in and governed by institutional organizations, infrastructures of communication and production, and a geographical and social division of labor whose inertia is its guarantee of continuity and efficacy. (1982:76)

Community strength and local involvement, though powerful bases for mobilization, do not constitute adequate bases for democracy. Democracy must depend also on the kind of public life which flourished in cities, not as the direct extension of communal bonds, but as the outgrowth of social practices which continually brought different sorts of people into contact with each other, and which gave them adequate bases for understanding each other and managing boundary crossing relations.¹⁵ As important

¹⁵ A key to this, Sennett (1977) has argued, is the cultural availability of a differentiated panoply of social roles. One of the transformations of the modern era has been the destruction of our acceptance of roles in favor of a demand for intimacy and immediacy in nearly all

as community-based mobilizations are, they must be complemented by some sort of revival of public discourse, and larger scale organizations like political parties to support it.¹⁶ This is in part a cultural issue, but one with crucial social structural foundations, and one linked directly to information technology.

COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA, POLITICAL POWER AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Ginsberg (1986) has argued recently that one of the key bases for the growth and intensification of "democratic" governments has been their sensitivity to public opinion. Public opinion in this sense, however, is really the sum of private opinions. Putatively democratic governments attend to such opinion through an elaborate technology of polling and other forms of communication. They ascertain what the aggregate of dispersed individuals and small special interest groups want, but do not nurture a public discourse in which these various groups and individuals may consider their respective and collective wants and possibly modify them. But it is only because government does attend to their expressed wants and desires that people are willing to grant it—often without resistance—so many powers. Nonetheless, such a responsive government gains a considerable measure of autonomy from its very ability to manage responses to public opinion, to mold that opinion, and on occasion to conjure it up to order. At least partially lost to both theory and practical reality, under such circumstances, is a conception of public sphere as interactively constituted by citizens

relationships. As a result, we are uneasy in any relationships with people basically different from us which cannot plausibly be handled on intimate or at least familiar terms, and choose to avoid them or reduce their contents to mere banalities. We are apparently unable to endure significant differences of opinion with people not knit to us by strong social bonds. Public life must collapse under such circumstances.

¹⁶ Not all advocates of the various new populisms neglect this by any means. Some of the German Greens have given it considerable thought, and in the U.S. Harry Boyte's Project on a New Public Philosophy exemplifies the effort to combine communal resurgence with public discourse (see Boyte, 1984, and Evans, and Boyte, 1985.) See also Barber (1984), whose practical suggestions in the second half of his book are designed to complement the liberal democratic institutions he subjects to hostile criticism in the first half.

and distinct from both state and economy (Habermas, 1962, 1964; Garnham, 1986; Held, 1980:260–67). The public life on which democracy depends must be more than simply the ability of governments to spread messages widely, and to receive messages from dispersed individuals. The dispersal of citizens into spatially deconcentrated and internally homogeneous communities reduces avenues for such discourse.

As de Tocqueville (1840) long ago observed, state power may easily grow in the apparent service of an individualistic mass. Strong intermediate associations of various kinds are essential both to the protection of minority viewpoints form a tyranny of the majority and to creating the occasion for a diverse participation in public discourse. Though various voluntary organizations still thrive, cities have declined as bases for public discourse at an intermediate level, and government has abdicated the role of encouraging it. Likewise, modern mass communication media, especially broadcast media, tend not to nurture a role for such intermediate associations. They in many ways undermine political parties—for example by focusing on the personalities of a few leaders rather than the program of the party as a whole, and by insisting that public statements be made on a grab-bag of specific issues as opposed to development of a coherent statement of a party's overall position (Garnham, 1986:50). Rather than creating spatially concentrated publics, they link individuals directly into a very large “super-public”. Within this large arena, individuals can feel a sense of intimacy with public figures they have never seen in person, let alone met, but whose faces appear nightly in their living rooms and whose voices are as soothingly familiar as those of close friends. The broadcast media audience is extremely diverse, but these media do little to link members of the audience to one another. The situation is, thus, different from that of urban newspapers in their heyday.¹⁷ Where urban newspapers once informed and sometimes galvanized heterogeneous but spatially concentrated urban publics, broadcast media

¹⁷ Habermas describes the creation of the public sphere in terms of the promotion of many newspapers each expressing specific interpretive orientations: “news-papers changed from mere institutions for the publication of news into bearers and leaders of public opinion—weapons of party politics” (1964:53, quoting Karl Bucher).

neither create nor serve particular publics in which directly interpersonal discourse readily shapes the social appropriation of news or other information. They are in too large a degree one-way means of communication; they reach people for the most part in spatially and socially dispersed, privatized settings. They provide an informational environment, but do not foster public discourse.

The gradual growth of newspapers was a major advance over word of mouth, and an important response to the rising scale of social integration. Literacy was the key condition of access to print media. It was not simply offered by elites to the masses, but was gained in a long struggle of both self-education and campaigns for state-supported schooling.¹⁸ This struggle was fought, in part, because people began to recognize themselves as members of large scale, interlocking, constantly shifting and expanding social systems. What went on in capital cities and great international markets was able—because of the integration of these economic and political systems—to have an almost immediate impact at home in a provincial town. Not only were members of local communities able to overcome their intellectual isolation, in other words, they were *unable* to escape incorporation into emerging national and world systems. Literacy and eager pursuit of the news was a way to cope and a means for trying to maintain some capacity for socially effective action in the face of the enormous vulnerability to distant forces this transformation brought.¹⁹ As Thompson (1968:791) has

¹⁸ British workers struggled remarkably in the late 18th and 19th centuries to educate themselves, to read widely, and to follow the news (Webb, 1955; Harrison, 1961; Thompson, 1968; Laqueur, 1976). In the U.S., widespread, ultimately universal public education (for whites) was gained with less political struggle (especially less carried out in class terms) and was organized primarily on local foundations which allowed broader participation in policy-making (Katznelson and Weir, 1985). Nonetheless, many American workers, especially immigrants, struggled to achieve literacy and labored in continuing self-education.

¹⁹ Similarly, voting was a formal mechanism to allow influence over a representative government by those subject to its actions. Voting rights were hard won in some cases, but often governments realized that elections gave popular groups a chance to voice their wants in ways elites could control (which, in turn, posed a problem for oppositional socialist or working class organizations which were likely either to be drawn into a moderate government centered orbit, or weakened by strict refusal to participate (see Katznelson and Zolberg,

noted, this struggle and the struggle over freedom of the press were waged in large part to build and maintain a *public*.²⁰

This form of public grew as an older one waned in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century cities. The older form of public was based on face to face communications, and necessarily was more limited in scale (and thereby often more elitist). Such face to face publics formed amongst theatre audiences, in coffee houses and pubs, and at various sorts of events from speeches to hangings.²¹ The newspaper public was not, especially in its earlier years, in any way at odds with face-to-face communication. On the contrary, newspapers were often read aloud in pubs and formed the basis for political and other discussions in a variety of settings. Alexis de Tocqueville saw newspapers as the necessary means of coordinating action in large scale democracies.

In order that an association amongst a democratic people should have any power, it must be a numerous body. The persons of whom it is composed are therefore scattered over a wide extent, and each of them is detained in the place of his domicile by the narrowness of his income, or by the small unremitting exertions by which he earns it. Means then must be found to converse every day without seeing each other, and to take steps in common without having met. Thus hardly any democratic association can do without newspapers (1840:135).

But of course newspapers, like other media, may serve entertainment or other goals instead of or in addition to political informa-

tion and mobilization. In the mid-nineteenth century lurid crime stories and other forms of apolitical news-as-entertainment began to predominate over politics in the popular press.²²

The telegraph and later the telephone brought quicker news without undermining the centrality of the newspaper. The latter remained the means of getting information from any specific and hence relatively narrow source to the broader public. The heyday of modern print journalism—including its more lurid tabloid and banner headline forms—coincided with these technologies. Nonethe-

²² And in the present day U.S., apolitical tabloid newspapers like the *National Inquirer* reach a much larger audience than the *New York Times*. In his critique of the way in which an entertainment ethos destroys public discourse, Neil Postman (1986) exaggerates the extent to which the core issue is one of print culture vs. visual and oral culture. Theatrical entertainments often occasioned public discourse in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, while newspapers could degenerate into the most debased forms of mere entertainment without public discourse (as a quick review of the tabloids at any American supermarket checkout counter will confirm today). In exaggerating the influence of medium as such, Postman, whose critique otherwise largely hits the mark, underestimates the importance of societal scale and organization.

On the other hand, there is danger in looking at changes from too limited a historical perspective. Anthony Smith suggests a plausible scenario for the future of journalism based on a radical split within the profession as it comes to serve two different sorts of audiences:

The new journalist will be either a technician of entertainment-news or a specialist with a loyalty to his subject matter resembling that of an academic rather than a spot-news reporter. A great division seems inevitable between these two groups: the one catering to a kind of information helotry, for whom the right to know has been subtly transmuted into the right to be entertained; the other catering to an enlarged class of well-informed people who have themselves acquired the ability to evaluate and handle sources and compare different versions of the same event. (1980:206)

Computer-assisted information media do indeed allow users to make their own selections among information without relying on editors to the degree contemporary newspaper readers must do. But on the other hand, we need to ask just how new other aspects of Smith's scenario really are. Is this not rather like late Victorian and Edwardian England with its proliferation of penny dreadfuls and sensationalistic crime reporting for one part of the population and its nurturance not only of several great newspapers but of a number of the world's oldest surviving intellectual weeklies? Are we perhaps simply coming full circle? Is Max Headroom's Channel 23 completely unlike the *London Evening Standard* in the era of Disraeli's "two nations"? Are there not echoes of the Victorian in the putatively post-modern?

1986, esp. Zolberg's summary essay). And by catering to those known wants at least to some extent, they could make strong government palatable and pacify large populations. It was much more important to keep civil peace when strikes or riots could unsettle a carefully integrated national or international system than it had been in the middle ages when most unrest had only local consequences (Ginsberg, 1986:Ch. 1).

²⁰ Habermas (1962, 1964) also sees newspapers as central to the constitution of the classical bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Habermas's attention is focused, however, on the tension between the essentially bourgeois nature of liberal notions of the public sphere such as were incorporated in the first modern constitutions and the growth of capitalism which undermined those institutions. He neglects the extent to which artisans and workers were able to develop significant capacities for public discourse.

²¹ See the splendid evocation of this sort of public in Sennett (1977); on hangings as public events, see D. Hay, *et al* (1975).

less, newspapers still addressed and helped to constitute specific spatially concentrated publics. Major cities had several papers, which competed not just in how fast they got the news out, but in what they made of it. They were organs of opinion and commentary, representing direct political viewpoints and sometimes organized groups.²³

Gradually, though, the ethic of journalistic objectivity took hold. For one thing, editors had found that their political stands offended too many readers. In catering to the lowest common denominator of their readers, they began a trend which has continued and enormously magnified by broadcast media. More importantly, the number of newspapers shrank. Sales in each city came to be dominated by one or a few. The consolidation of papers furthered the need for each to attempt to speak neutrally to the broadest possible audience. As papers moved closer to monopoly, they moved away from their stress on "divisive" political stands.²⁴ Headlines became much less important, partly because of subscription delivery, but also because the new technologies of radio and later television became people's source for the first news of an event. Newspapers became a means of following up stories of which readers were often already aware.²⁵ Depth and balance became more important standards in coverage.

Contrary to widespread opinion, television has not killed the newspaper. First off, newspapers are surviving, though not without severe trials and tribulations. But though TV helped to change newspapers, it did not eliminate a demand for detailed news reporting. If anyone or anything is to be blamed for the passing of the old-fashioned newspaper, Anthony Smith suggests,

it should be the city itself, whose medium the newspaper was—the city that has disappeared as

²³ Even when wire services began to provide the bulk of the contents to the lesser papers, the proportion of local editorial content was often high and local editors played a major role in shaping the presentation of wire service information.

²⁴ They also moved towards cost-cutting technologies as a means of increasing profit margins. On these and other aspects of newspapers in this transition see A. Smith (1980); M. Schudson (1979).

²⁵ Or of getting news the other media overlooked—but then, the stories which aren't "hot" enough for radio and TV are generally not those which would have sold papers through headlines and vendors' cries in an earlier era.

a basic unit of residence. . . . Since the end of World War II, the American city has become an interlinked network of town and suburb, its streets turned into islands by the truck routes along which cars rush their passengers into distant suburbs, which only empty wilderness or small towns. The new total megalopolitan construct has broken down the social habits on which newspaper circulation depended. (1980: 31)

The key competition for the old urban newspapers has come from the new suburban dailies. The established newspapers have met this competition primarily by creating specialized editions for their different (mostly geographically defined) readerships.

None of the great newspapers, thus, represents (or helps define) a common, spatially compact public as much as it once did. This function is increasingly being taken over by more limited circulation local papers and specialized local editions, to the extent that it occurs at all. But in fact, the master trend of urban change has undone much of the function of local public life itself. Few important activities are contained within a local realm; even major cities have much less autonomy of action with regard to economic affairs than they had two generations ago. For all but the strongest urban centers, the bulk of important economic decisions will be taken by corporate actors removed from the locality in question. And as recent patterns of capital mobility have shown, even cities which house corporate headquarters cannot expect to exert much control over firms or they will simply move their business elsewhere (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982). Even with regard to their own finances and operations—schools, police, etc—cities are highly dependent on national governments. Few classic small towns remain, let alone preserve a high level of autonomy.²⁶ Intermediate bodies continue to decline in favor of media and organizations relating individuals to the state without relating them first to each other.

There are some newspapers in every setting which function as general information re-

²⁶ By a 'classic small town' I refer to one in which population is not only small but complete for potential reproduction—including thus a full range of ages, and a sufficient economic diversity of production to carry on its affairs with a minimum of external dependence for everyday life. A town which, like many suburbs, cannot provide its own service people for basic household maintenance could not qualify by this criterion.

sources. If you want to know more about what the U.S. President said yesterday, you can look it up in one of the major dailies. In the U.S., the *New York Times*' has long billed itself as such a "newspaper of record;" it is increasingly used in that way nationally, and others are beginning to assume a similar national role. Conversely, papers not attempting to play this role tend often to cut down on depth and breadth of national and international coverage in order to concentrate on matters of local interest. Not only specialized readership but the high cost of printing additional pages leads papers to cut back on their contents. Even more dramatically, magazine readership has become specialized. There are still general purpose newsweeklies, but there are also a plethora of magazines for circumscribed groups from runners and sailors to art collectors, computer buffs, dissident intellectuals of several brands and church people of various denominations. Cable television provides a more specialized alternative to broadcast media; it offers a much wider range of channels more cheaply than the conventional networks can maintain their more "general purpose" (or lowest common denominator) programming. Its impact has not been as great or as rapid as was commonly forecast, however. New communications and computer technologies may have a similar (and similarly gradual) impact.

Despite the changes cable television is producing, television remains different from print media in some crucial ways. Though it is common for elites (including pro-democratic elites) to focus primarily on criticisms of television, it is worth noting that it has some advantages from a democratic point of view. By comparison with print media, access to television is extremely easy (Meyrowitz, 1985:74–81). It requires none of the arduous learning of literacy and has few special access codes. Moreover, broadcast media are actually fairly inexpensive from the individual viewer/listener's point of view. The vast majority of costs are borne by advertisers; in effect, the media are financed by selling viewers or listeners to advertisers, something obscured by terming viewers or listeners the consumers of TV or radio. Of course advertising costs are passed on to consumers, but nonetheless they do not appear as direct charges and thus inhibit access to the flow of information. Perhaps most importantly, television is in two senses a

highly general medium by comparison to print. First, it reaches a much larger audience, and one much more heterogeneous than readers of newspapers (let alone books, a highly specialized information medium). In the United States, 115,000 hardcover sales are generally enough to make a book one of the top twenty-five sellers of a year. A successful prime-time TV show, by contrast is expected routinely to attract 25 to 40 million viewers to each of its episodes (Meyrowitz, 1985:85, 348). This audience contains an enormous variety of people:

Because of differences in coding, electronic media have led to a breakdown of the specialized and segregated information-systems shaped by print. There is now much greater sharing of information among different sections of the population. What many people learn and experience through electronic media have relatively little to do with their age, traditional education, and social position. In terms of what and how much people watch on television, for example, the similarities among various age groups, races, sexes, and classes are much more striking than the differences. (Meyrowitz, 1985: 79).²⁷

The second sense in which broadcast media are more 'general' than print media is that people are much broader in their selection of topics to watch on television than they are topics to read about in newspapers or books. There are a variety of reasons for this ranging from the simple difficulty of reading as opposed to TV watching, the public nature of purchasing a book on a topic by comparison to the private decision to watch a TV show on the same topic, and the tendency for people simply to leave the TV on throughout blocks of unstructured time, watching whatever is available (or at least, making their choice from among the limited range of offerings during a time period when they have decided to watch). Cable TV may change this

²⁷ Indeed, Meyrowitz reports studies showing that households with incomes under \$10,000 a year watch an average of 47 hours and 3 minutes of television per week; those with incomes over \$30,000 watch 47 hours and 50 minutes a week. Similarly, college graduates watch 90% as much TV as the overall population. Because of easy access, it is less common for any particular channel to be as much restricted to communication amongst elites as many print channels are: e.g. professional journals, "intellectual" magazines and other publications which have elaborate access codes consisting of complex jargon, frequent references to specialist literature, etc.

somewhat, but not to the point where television viewership resembles print media:

New technologies, therefore, are certain to break up the monolithic power of network television, but they are unlikely to divide the audience into clear and traditional categories of age, sex, religion, class, and education. The increase in electronic sources of information will not return us to the segregated systems of print because almost every person will be able to attend easily to almost any source. New subgroups may develop, but they will be less distinct, less stable, and less recognizable. (Meyrowitz, 1985: 88–89)

Here we see one of the features of broadcast media which is more mixed in its implications for democratic politics. While TV (and to a lesser extent radio) knit very large populations into a common informational environment, they do not facilitate the formation of spatially concentrated publics. Spatial concentration is generally a prerequisite for dense, multiplex networks of social relationships—the sorts which most readily form the bases for participatory democratic political movements. TV addresses an audience remarkably removed from any spatial identity:

Although oral and print cultures differ greatly, the bond between physical place and social place was common to both of them. Print, like all new media, changed the patterns of information flow *to* and *from* places. As a result, it also changed the relative status and power of those in different places. Changes in media in the past have always affected the relationship *among* places. They have affected the information that people *bring* to places and the information that people have *in* places. But the relationship between place and social situation was still quite strong. Electronic media go one step further: They lead to a nearly total dissociation of physical place and social “place.” When we communicate through telephone, radio, television, or computer, where we are physically no longer determines where and who we are socially. (Meyrowitz, 1985:115).²⁸

²⁸ While Meyrowitz's general point is on-target, the last part of this passage needs qualification. The *experience* of electronically mediated communication tends to be spaceless, and to require no particular proximity to the recipient of a message. Space is transcended more completely than with print media where some physical transportation of objects was necessary to long-distance communication, and much more completely than with oral communication which required actual co-presence of speaker and listener.

Broadcast media have other faults when it comes to fostering democratic public life. Though they present their information widely, it is a very thin amount of information. The script of an average television evening news broadcast, for example, amounts to less than two columns of text on a page of *The New York Times*. Among other things this induces an extreme selectivity (Hallin, 1986), though selection biases may not be as apparent to viewers as analytic biases in print media. Moreover, television is a relatively weak medium for flow of abstract information or analysis, though it is a strong one for conveying impressions, emotional force and unconscious expressions of feeling tone. This is one reason, perhaps, why people have such a high level of trust in television news personalities—they feel that they know them and that they could see the signs of any deception or dissembling in a way they could not if they were dependent on print media.²⁹ Partly as a result of this, television tends to lead people to substitute their personal impressions and affections for rational or abstract analysis.³⁰ This is the source of a

Nonetheless, it seems unlikely that physical place and social place will be totally dissociated. The electronic media extend the contribution of transportation infrastructures to allowing people to make choices of residence, for example, in which they maximize certain social criteria about those with whom they want to live, increasingly free from economic dictates about spatial concentration near places of work (which in turn had to be near energy, raw material or information sources). This may result in a closer matching of spatial identity to social identity, even while it is based on space-transcending technology (Calhoun, 1986).

²⁹ Roper surveys indicate that television has been viewed as the most believable source of news by the majority of the American people since 1961; since 1968 it has held close to a two-to-one advantage in trust over the next most believable source, newspapers. In 1978, 47% of Americans polled by The Roper Organization identified television as the most believable news source compared to 28% for newspapers. 67% said they got most of their news from TV (Sanders, 1986:21). Overall confidence in TV as an institution has declined somewhat since the 1970s, however (Gallup Report #253, p. 3, Oct. 1986). See Meyrowitz (1985:106) for further discussion.

³⁰ It needs to be remembered, though, that in pre-electronic eras, the majority of the people were not necessarily heavy readers using print material and conversation in the course of formulating rational, abstract evaluations of political issues or candidates. Even in eras of high democratic political mobilization, like the late 19th Century U.S., voters were swayed by demagogues, favors from political machines and other less than perfect influences.

feature of the Reagan presidency which has continually baffled print-oriented commentators: the man attracts strong affection and loyalty, even from people who disapprove of his policies. In February 1982, only 47% of the national population approved of “the way Ronald Reagan is handling his job as President,” while 70% approved of him “as a person” (*The Gallup Report* #199, April 1982, pp. 21, 31). During the early 1987 controversy over the sale of arms to Iran and the gift of the proceeds to “contra” forces fighting against the Nicaraguan government, the majority of Americans thought Ronald Reagan was lying to the American people, but a large percentage of these same Americans expressed approval of him as president (Harris, 1987). This seems unlikely to indicate a general position in favor of lying presidents. Rather, it seems an example of a prominent feature of political judgment under the influence of broadcast media:

In an electronic age . . . it is quite possible that many people will vote for candidates with whom they largely disagree, or vote against candidates who share their political philosophy. Such voting behavior would be unthinkable if the voters had access to transcripts of the candidates’ speeches and policy statements; it only makes sense when the voters feel they “know” the candidates personally. (Meyrowitz, 1985: 103)³¹

In one respect, Meyrowitz’ point should be stated more strongly. Many, perhaps most, American voters *do* have access to transcripts of candidates’ and office holders’ speeches and policy statements. They choose to ignore these in favor of the more persuasive, easier and apparently personal medium of

television.³² In this and other ways, television is less important as a channel for conveying specific bits of information than as a general informational environment which establishes the frame of reference of much of our thought. As Meyrowitz sums up:

Although television and radio may not markedly increase people’s true understanding of many issues, they provide large segments of the population with at least surface familiarity with a broad range of topics and with people in very different life situations. This familiarity helps to decrease the strangeness and “otherness” of others. (Meyrowitz, 1985:85)

Television greatly increases our sense of belonging to a particular population—say citizens of the United States—but it does not give us direct or individually recognizable relationships with the members of that population (except for the partly spurious sense of familiarity we may have with politicians, newscasters and soap opera stars). Rather, it relates us diffusely and indirectly to everyone else, and especially to the centralized institutions which determine and produce what goes on the air. Television also gives us a pervasive sense of belonging to a category—Americans—and to a variety of constituent categories—whites, Christians, Republicans, the middle class, etc. But these categories are not constructed out of relationships among their members—as are ethnic neighborhoods, churches and political parties. To belong to one of them may be a basis for deciding opinions, or even a motivation for individual action, but is not a basis for concerted collective action.³³

³¹ As King and Schudson (1987) and others have emphasized, this is not a feature unique to the Reagan presidency. Despite his reputation as “the Great Communicator,” poll data do not indicate that Reagan’s personal popularity is remarkably high for an incumbent president, or that the gap between personal approval and approval of his policies was substantially greater than for other recent presidents for whose administrations comparable data exists. In fact, Reagan’s approval rating was lower than Carter’s after two months in office, after one year and after two years. According to King and Schudson, “the press consistently assumed a degree of popularity that was not reflected in the polls” (1987, p. 37). Television is certainly not the only factor contributing to a disparity between personal approval and policy approval; it may well be that Americans simply want to like their president.

³² In this respect also we can see television as extending a rhetoric characteristic of the modern age, a “jargon of authenticity” in Adorno’s (1964) phrase. This is the emphasis on the sincerity of a speaker over and above other criteria of evaluation of what he or she says. It can be traced in some ways to a Rousseauian belief in the inherent goodness of our deepest natures, individualistically combined with the notion that our truest selves lie buried beneath social masks (and hence a distrust of too manifestly carefully prepared exterior presentations of self). It is an anti-intellectual impulse in many ways, but one with a proud intellectual pedigree. See Sennett’s interesting discussion of “J’accuse,” Emile Zola’s intervention into the Dreyfus affair (1977:240–51).

³³ Of course, belonging to a recognizable category may make it easier for strangers to begin to develop social bonds and to undertake collective action. Similarly, various organizations may appeal to members of a category to undertake certain actions. A television ministry, for example, may ask its viewers for money, or to write letters to political leaders calling for prayer in

Complementing the generalizing nature of television is the substantial resegmentation of communication fostered by many uses of computer technology. Computer-assisted direct mail campaigns, for example, may be a means for a politician to subvert public discourse by tailoring messages to different mailing lists, thus effectively saying different things to different groups of voters or potential donors.³⁴ Computer-assisted public opinion polling is a way for politicians (and others) to keep abreast of how effective various messages are among different categories of the population. It can thus be an effective part of the "plebiscitarian presidency" (Lowi, 1985), enabling political figures to be attentive to public opinion without encouraging public discourse. Once again, this means reliance on indirect, mediated relationships between centralized actors and dispersed individuals classified into various categories. It is fundamentally different from having political candidates get information about public opinion from the leaders of activist organizations or other representatives (Ginsberg, 1986:73). These may or may not be democratically chosen, but sometimes, at least, represent groups formed out of interpersonal relationships.

Changes in how well the media support democratic public life are due not only to shifting technologies, but to changes in the social, economic and governmental conditions of their use. For example, the general trend seems to be towards reinforcement of market criteria in administration of broadcast media. Not only has there been a reduction in the proportionate role of state owned channels, even these channels have been called upon to determine their offerings increasingly by similar market evaluations to those of private stations, rejecting other definitions of the public service mission. Their programming is increasingly contingent on ability to

schools, or to go to a demonstration against abortion. In these ways it may help to produce collective action. It remains nonetheless fundamentally different from a local church or even a national denomination built out of local churches, though the people it mobilizes may also belong to such a relationally-formed group as well as to the media-identified category.

³⁴ Meyrowitz correctly notes that this is harder to do with television than in face-to-face communication, but tends to see this as a general characteristic of electronic media rather than stressing the difference between broadcast and other media such as computerized telecommunications (1985:5).

attract corporate and foundation sponsorship. Markets have been increasingly internationalized, as programming is sold from producers in one country to broadcasters in another. The divide between information-rich and information-poor remains tied to economic class. Not only are there different sorts of publications and broadcast programming for elites and "masses," there is an increasing trend towards pay-TV and pay-as-you-go computerized information access. Many libraries, for example, are moving at least partially away from the principle of free and open access towards access to proprietary data on a payment by usage basis (Garnham, 1986:38–39).³⁵

The issue is not only one of whether the media adequately gather and circulate information, thus making for an informed citizenry. The media are also called upon to provide a forum for public discourse, making for a participatory citizenry. Such participation is all the more at issue when selectivity among myriad bits of information must be severe, and especially when considering system world phenomena which are only understandable through theories and interpre-

³⁵ In this paper, I do not propose to go into the particulars of teletext, text-retrieval, information utilities, interactive video and other new technological systems. The general trend can be summed up rather easily. Such systems are (a) technologically possible, (b) still rather expensive, and (c) not very popular in the limited versions which are presently available. Widespread usage will depend on both a qualitative transformation in richness of source material and efficiency of access, and a vast increase in the percentage of people using computers. If such systems proliferate, they will make more information readily accessible to those who can afford access to them. They may also lead to less "accidental" readership of general news. Especially if people are charged by the unit of information or the hour of access to a data base, they will restrict their reading to those materials in which they are already interested (at least until the cost is greatly reduced from present levels—and current FCC policy is to increase connect time charges). And of course many people's access could be severely curtailed simply by the cost, regardless of their interests. This could be unfortunately stultifying to public discourse. In the first place, despite the apparent growth in quantity of information gathered by the media, and despite improved efficiency of access for some, the overall effect could be to reduce the normal availability of general information among the population. It will not be equally possible to assume a common frame of reference for discussion across small group boundaries. Contemporary television may provide only a thin and extremely selective basis for common awareness, but at least it offers some.

tative apparatuses which may be highly skewed or at the very least contestable.

PLEBISCITES AND PARTICIPATION

Despite these concerns, a number of technological enthusiasts and populist activities of both left and right have called for going the next step beyond public opinion polling to a radically plebiscitarian democracy. Reliance on frequent referenda, assisted by computers and cable television, is often touted as a viable form of direct democracy for large scale societies in the "information age." Unfortunately, most such ideas neglect the importance of public discourse and intermediate associations to democratic politics. They also overestimate the ease with which every citizen could be equipped with both a computer and a combination of necessary technical and political skills.

John Naisbitt, for example, is among the most popular of the authors who have held forth computers and new communications systems as technologies which will bring a "more truly democratic" political system based on nearly universal plebiscites. With unreflective enthusiasm, Naisbitt declares that:

Initiatives and referenda are the tools for the new democracy. These devices furnish direct access to political decision making, which is what informed, educated citizens want. . . . These new devices, the key instrumentalities in the new participatory democracy, enable the people to leapfrog traditional representative processes and mold the political system with their own hands. (1982:164–5).

Naisbitt is eager for "the death of representative democracy and the two-party system":

. . . along came the communications revolution and with it an extremely well-educated electorate. Today, with instantaneously shared information, we know as much about what's going on as our representatives and we know it just as quickly . . . (1982:160).

But is this image of an instantaneously informed electorate accurate? First, it applies much better to the business executives Naisbitt is primarily addressing than to most poor people or ordinary workers. This is not only because the business people have received superior formal educations, but also because most working people remain doubly deprived in current knowledge. Firstly, while

executives (at least in the upper reaches of large corporations) enjoy occupations which help to keep them intellectually active and abreast of current affairs, most ordinary employees do not.³⁶ Secondly, executives have excellent access—often at company expense—to information resources. The fact that they—but not most workers—can spend company time and use company equipment in information gathering means that the present organization of work gives enormous political privileges to senior managers. Party politics and the use of formal organizations in choosing and pressuring representatives helps to offset this advantage; reliance on plebiscites exacerbates it.³⁷ Norberto Bobbio's comment is salutary:

The hypothesis that the future 'computerocracy', as it has been called, might make direct democracy possible, by giving all citizens the possibility of transmitting their votes to an electronic brain, is puerile. . . . As for the referendum, which is the only mechanism of direct democracy which can be applied concretely and effectively in most advanced democracies, this is an extraordinary expedient suited only for extraordinary circumstances. No one can imagine a state that can be governed via continuous appeals to the people: taking into account the approximate number of laws which are drafted in Italy every year, we would have to call a referendum on average once a day. (1987: 312, 54)

Referenda suffer from three major faults common to plebiscitarian politics in general. They depend on the votes of individuals who have widely varying and often inadequate degrees of information about an issue (as well as limited time and energy). They are extremely vulnerable to manipulation, espe-

³⁶ Indeed, executives must share in responsibility for a de-skilling and de-intellectualizing of most nonmanagerial work which effectively restricts the attention many working people give to either politics or education.

³⁷ Naisbitt thinks unions as useless as political parties, and holds out only the hope that employers will rely more on "participatory management." But the skewed vision is similar in both cases. Workers need collective formal organizations precisely because the existing organizational apparatus of the employing company does not empower them as individuals the way it empowers senior managers. To use an individualistic rhetoric to challenge party politics is as willfully to deny the social nature of political processes as the use of the same rhetoric against unions is to refuse to see the obvious facts of organizational and economic power structures. On possibilities for strengthening political parties, see Price (1983) and Goldman (1986).

cially by costly advertising campaigns which are of course disproportionately available to those with the most money.³⁸ And thirdly, they are based exclusively on the votes of individuals who are, and are likely to see themselves as, relatively weak actors in the larger electoral event.³⁹ In other words, since each individual is likely to have only a tiny voice in the ultimate outcome, he or she may choose, quite reasonably, not to vote. This weakness of individuals acts not only to lower the percentage voting, but to skew the distribution towards those who have affiliations to organizations taking a stand on the issue, or other reasons to believe that they are voting from a position of numerical strength.⁴⁰

Writers like Naisbitt misunderstand the political party. A party is not—or at least should not be—just a convenient label to clue citizens in to candidates' stands. An effective party is, among other things, (a) a disciplined organization which balances divergent interests to achieve a unified platform and legislative program, and (b) a means of providing some consistency over time and attention to long-term policies and issues. Referenda and initiatives can accomplish neither end.

In large internally diverse societies, no one's immediate (lifeworld) experience prepares them adequately for political participation. Without public discourse, they will be both parochial and vulnerable to manipulation by mass media, advertisers and other large scale collective actors.⁴¹ Though political

parties are also large organizations, they can work to counterbalance the vulnerabilities of individuals to other large organizations. The idea of doing without such organizations is an illusion based on denial of the reality of systemic complexity and scale. One might as well propose to run the U.S. without its communications infrastructure.

Of course political parties are bureaucratic organizations whose managers have their own varied interests. The increase in prominence of TV spot advertising, direct mail campaigns and other aspects of image and single-issue politics have certainly minimized the extent to which campaigns can be said to be exercises in public discourse (Salmore and Salmore, 1985). Habermas describes this as a

kind of 'refeudalization' of the public sphere. Large organizations strive for a kind of political compromise with the state and with one another, excluding the public whenever possible. But at the same time they must secure at least a plebiscitary support among the mass of the population through the development of demonstrative publicity. [1964:54; Held's (1980:262) translation].

Without more attention to public discourse and the social foundations of collective action, proposals for referenda amount to calls for just such plebiscitary support. Reliance on referenda may bypass political parties, but this is not an escape from the

lead people to prefer one brand over another of a product they will already buy. Similarly, Naisbitt scoffs at the worry that plebiscites will be vulnerable to manipulation by advertising:

When people really care about an issue, it doesn't matter how much is spent to influence their vote; they will go with their beliefs. When an issue is inconsequential to the voters, buying their vote is a snap. (1982:173)

There are a number of problems with this defense. It ignores the difficulty voters would have figuring out which of a huge range of choices before them were consequential and which not. It fails to consider how unappealing it would be for a majority to be "bought" among voters who do not feel strongly, in opposition to a committed minority. Most advertising, moreover, works not by trying to persuade people by any rational argument what values they should hold, but by getting people to associate values they already hold (health, beauty, happiness, security) with a particular product—or issue or candidate. Last but not least, the record shows the best-funded candidate winning an overwhelming majority of elections—and in presidential primaries often driving out competitors simply by raising the costs of campaigning to such a high level.

³⁸ Both the nuclear power and the tobacco industries have spent millions of dollars to defeat citizen initiatives; see Sabato (1981:135–8)

³⁹ Toffler suggests adapting sampling techniques to the plebiscitarian model in order to address both the sense of powerlessness and the deficiencies of time and information:

By using computers, advanced telecommunications, and polling methods, it has become simple not only to select a random sample of the public but to keep updating that sample from day to day and to provide it with up-to-the-minute information on the issues at hand. (1980:426)

See also the somewhat similar suggestion worked out in more sophisticated terms in Burnheim (1985:110–113).

⁴⁰ On the general issue of voter apathy, which of course affects all elections, see Neumann (1986). On the other hand, of course, a majority with little commitment could outvote an intensely committed minority, producing one of democracy's central paradoxes.

⁴¹ Advertisers bristle at the notion that their work should be seen as anything more than simply furnishing consumers with information; at most, they assert, they

power of large organizations and system world constraints.

While direct democratic self-rule may be impossible at the state level, various sorts of oppositional movements nonetheless have a role to play in democracy (which Bobbio tends to dismiss along with plebiscites), and an enlargement of the sphere of direct self-government at the local level may be possible. If we want to move away from a politics of specialists, we will do better to empower communities and other intermediate associations than to rely on unorganized individuals.⁴² As Gorz suggests, commenting specifically on the United States:

If parties cut themselves off from autonomous movements, they become no more than electoral machines singing the praises of their respective candidates for technocratic power . . . fundamental debates over the production and the transformation of society have shifted to clubs, churches, universities, associations and movements whose aim is not to exercise state power over society, but to extricate the latter from the former in order to enlarge the area of autonomy and self-determination, which is also the sphere of ethical relations. (1982:118).⁴³

Grassroots political organizing, the strengthening of local community self-government, reforms which make most people's work less anti-intellectual—these are much better candi-

dates for the label “participatory” than are referenda. Each of them would help to extend one of the (threatened) virtues of free elections. Each would help to promote a kind of politics which was itself educational.

Plebiscites, including referenda of the sort more commonly advocated, work like public opinion polls presuming discrete individual preferences. They are based on the Rousseauian notion that everyone has somewhere inside them a bunch of attitudes and opinions and that the essence of democratic process is to express these. This ignores the importance of political discussion, of learning from each other—recognizing, for example, that some people know more about one issue, and some about another. Communities and intermediate associations can provide the opportunity for different members to bring different skills and focuses of attention to the whole. This sort of exchange does in fact take place in church groups, neighborhoods, political parties and all sorts of other settings. When we do not have such a possibility to discuss issues with relative experts within our own immediate sets of relationships we are left much more at the mercy of the mass media.⁴⁴ Whatever the source of information, discussion is important to interpretation, especially to interpretations which challenge the biases of journalism, broadcasting or apparent political common sense. Such participatory processes can develop through direct lifeworld relationships. But for them to be effective in confronting large scale system integration, would require a high quality of public discourse amongst members of different communities. And such a public sphere cannot exist without large organizations any more than a large modern country can exist without systemic integration.

Barber (1984) has argued for a “strong democracy” which would incorporate communitarian language and institutions in the pursuit of enhanced discussion and citizen education, while making use of national initiatives and referenda as the major means of getting citizens involved beyond the local level. He is clearly sensitive to issues of scale:

Once it is understood that the problem of scale is susceptible to technological and institutional

⁴² This points up a key problem with conservative proposals—generally populist in tone—for a “New Federalism.” For such a program to increase democracy, it would have to strengthen existing community organizations and help develop new institutions for collective political participation. Just eliminating a federal role and “decentralizing government” will do little if corporations have as much central power as ever. Indeed, it is easier for corporations and other big, centralized actors to have influence at this local level. Unless ordinary people are organized in some form of effective intermediate associations, they will have less rather than more voice in how their affairs are run. The Reagan administration has either failed to consider this, or acted intentionally to limit democratic participation. Among the victims of its most extreme early funding cuts were programs which provide resources to community-level organizations—including a number of traditionally conservative groups! See Boyte (1982).

⁴³ Habermas has argued somewhat similarly that the public sphere could only be realized today on the basis of “a rational organization of social and political power under the mutual control of organizations committed to the public sphere in their internal structure as well as in their relations with the state” (1964:55). He believes, however, that the rise of technocratic consciousness and institutions make this revitalization of the public sphere unlikely.

⁴⁴ This is a key reason why Barber (1984:290) rejects home voting in his proposed referendum scheme, in favor of voting in public assemblies.

melioration and that political communities are human networks rooted in communication, scale becomes a tractable challenge rather than an insuperable barrier. Because strong democracy depends so crucially on direct communication, it is particularly vulnerable to corruptions of scale. However, it is also particularly suited to coping with them, through empathetic imagination, common talk, and common action. (1984:247)

Barber, however, apparently considers technologically mediated communication to be at least potentially direct in more or less the same sense as face-to-face communication:

What strong democracy requires is a form of town meeting in which participation is direct yet communication is regional or even national. Because scale is in part a function of communication, the electronic enhancement of communication offers possible solutions to the dilemmas of scale. (1984:273–4)

Electronic town meetings may be all to the good, but at best a tiny fraction of people could participate in them and those people would have an extremely low density of relationships with each other. Such affairs would resemble call-in radio talk shows more than New England town meetings—not necessarily bad, but not an effective form of collective action in managing systemic integration. Beyond this, there are the problems of attempting to address system level concerns on the basis of lifeworld experience, and especially of seeing to it that strong democratic links were forged across lines of socio-cultural and demographic differences, neither of which Barber addresses. Attentive to the concerns listed above about plebiscites, he hems in his proposals for national referenda with extensive requirements for discussion, second votes after a six month delay and other protections against majoritarian folly. Indeed, he explicitly rejects notions like Naisbitt's:

Instant votes of the kind envisioned by certain mindless plebiscitary democrats are as insidious as interactive discussion questions are useful. Soliciting votes on every conceivable issue from an otherwise uninformed audience that has neither deliberated nor debated an issue would be the death of democracy—which is concerned with public seeing rather than with the expression of preferences and which aspires to achieve common judgment rather than to aggregate private opinions. (Barber, 1984:289–90).

In Barber's proposal, in short, referenda would be only one mechanism in a basically

communitarian proposal, not the primary basis of direct democracy. Aside from wondering whether the cumbersome process he proposes would win much participation, we need to recognize that this is the only direct means of action on a national level which Barber is able to commend as a normal procedure. It would seem that he is still left with a mismatch between the scale at which he can envisage most of the workings of strong democracy and that of the modern nation state. As a result he can only advocate first, that more affairs be managed locally, and second, that strong democracy be built in a complementary relationship to the very electoral institutions he began by rejecting.

Statements like Naisbitt's presume that citizens' caring, their awareness, and the definition of issues, are all settled *before* the political process starts. But of course this is not so. Social life is not at a standstill waiting for a referendum to begin. Attitudes and opinions are formed through social action, political discussion and personal reflection. Money may not buy votes, but in contemporary capitalist societies, at least, it can go a long way toward controlling the flow of information. Indeed, it is most effective at controlling the flow of information through broadcast media—which, as we have seen, are not only those deemed most trustworthy by the general public but those which do most to set the agenda for politics and to establish the general informational environment which constitutes the arena of political contest today.

The referendum model is essentially plebiscitarian and only superficially participatory in large scale societies. It is geared, at best, to increasing speed and ease of popular reaction to centrally initiated policies. In the absence of other reforms, issues would still be defined primarily by elites and relatively centralized power structures. The appeal of referenda is based partly on the illusion that the system world is unreal, that what is wanting for direct democracy is only a mechanism for expressing life-world understanding and values on a large scale. This populist view criticizes political parties and conventional representative systems without giving due weight to the system level complexities and scale with which they are designed to cope. Unlike oppositional movements, institutionalized referenda might actually extend the de-politicizing effects Albert Hirschman (1982)

has pointed out for electoral democracy: the beliefs that (a) someone else is doing the political job, and (b) all we need to do is make a choice among the options offered us every few years. They thus sidestep the more basic question of how to ensure direct, active participation in the democratic process. This would seem plausible only on the basis of intermediate associations, whether communities or formal organizations. These seem the essential conditions of both sustained social movements and public discourse.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to make four main points. First, an extraordinary transformation in scale of social integration has been accomplished during the modern era, and especially over the last one hundred fifty years. This has not meant simply larger polities than the Western norm, but far more tightly integrated economies and social systems. These changes have been undertheorized in sociology, and they pose challenges to democratic theory and populist politics. Among the results of these changes are very large scale systems of societal integration which are only possible on the basis of sophisticated communications and transportation infrastructures which allow for the spread of indirect social relationships. This change in pattern of relationships is a crucial social structural foundation for Habermas's identification of a change in orientation to action, principle of social integration and mode of understanding social life.

Second, during this overall pattern of growth of large scale system integration, cities have undergone basic transformations. They have grown in size, but more importantly, even large cities have come to be dwarfed by the size of the social and economic systems in which they are embedded. They are no longer equally central as network nodes or power containers, and have lost autonomy accordingly. At the same time that cities have increasingly been absorbed into such large scale systems, they have internally been fragmented and compartmentalized. Different communities are increasingly isolated from each other; public spaces and occasions for meaningful contact among people different in important ways from each other have been reduced.

Third, communications media have themselves grown extraordinarily in power and

changed in nature. The increasing role of broadcast technology has made access much easier and broadened the flow of information, but simultaneously sifted it away from discourse and abstract argument towards impressionistic, imaginistic contents and a somewhat shallower flow of information. Broadcast media have become an essential information environment providing a widespread knowledge of other members of society, but as members of categories rather than through recognizable relationships. They have centralized control over information even while they have deconcentrated access to it. Broadcast media define the public arena in contemporary industrial societies, but they do so in a way which minimizes public discourse and renders most citizens relatively passive.

Fourth, a variety of communitarian and other populist political movements have brought a significant measure of participatory democracy to contemporary societies. They are particularly important in bringing otherwise neglected popular concerns onto the agenda of governments. They remain limited, however, by the mismatch between their local bases and large scale system integration, and also by a tendency to misrecognize the implications of the split between lifeworld and large scale system integration. These movements have appeared to some to be substitutes for political parties and for a larger scale public discourse. I have argued against such a view, suggesting that intermediate associations in general and formal organizations in particular are needed to address system level concerns, and also that public discourse requires an arena separate from particular lifestyle groupings and local communities in which people from various backgrounds can put forward their ideas. Though contemporary media do not foster this kind of public discourse, any plausible public arena for democratic discourse in large, complex societies will have to work within a largely mediated social world, not as an alternative to it. Unfortunately, I have not been able to give a recipe for successful creation and maintenance of such a public sphere, but then this paper is long enough without it.

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