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Making a Fragile Public: A Talk-Centered Study of Citizenship and Power*

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Understanding how citizens create contexts for open-ended political conversation in everyday life is an important task for social research. The lack of theoretical attention to political conversation in the current renaissance of studies of "civil society" and "the public sphere" precludes a thoroughly social understanding of civic life. Participant-observation in U.S. recreational, volunteer, and activist groups shows how the very act of speaking itself comes to mean different things in different civic contexts. It shows dramatic contextual shifts—the more public the context, the less public-spirited the discourse. Institutions encouraged groups to avoid public, political conversation. One group challenged the dominant etiquette for citizenship; the others considered talking politics "out of place" almost everywhere. The ways groups relate to public speech itself are themselves meaningful; the concept of "civic practices" highlights how groups develop not just the power to make a particular political program public, but the power to make the public itself.

From Aristotle on, democratic theorists have said that without lively public life, democracy is impossible. They say that moral and political understanding are not inert objects that people carry around inside their own heads; people are not born good citizens, but learn how to understand the wider world by interacting and talking about social issues, in groups of fellow citizens, in open-ended, voluntary, and equal exchange. Alexis de Tocqueville, for example, wrote that face-to-face organizations are the basic schools for learning democratic principles and social responsibility:

> Feeling and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another . . . in democratic societies . . . only associations can do that." ([1831] 1969:515–516)

Valuing the intersubjective nature of politics means taking interaction seriously, as a social fact that is patterned, real, and important, and that matters not just because it produces a quantifiable opinion. As Terry Eagleton's study of the eighteenth-century public sphere (1985) shows, open political conversation in British coffeehouses could not have occurred without *manners* that demanded that participants entertain free-ranging debate (see also Cmiel 1990; Herbst 1994). Such studies make it clear that a healthy democracy requires a range of places where citizens can cultivate broad-minded political conversation.

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Many scholars have called for studies of the public sphere (e.g., Thompson 1984, 1990; Fraser 1987, 1992) or have argued theoretically for its importance (Barber 1985; Dewey 1927; Habermas 1985). Some fascinating historical studies of the public sphere exist (Calhoun 1992; Habermas 1989, among others). Others have simulated public space, through focus groups (e.g., Gamson 1992), but none have analyzed actual political conversations as they unfold in real time, within existing groups, circulating across a range of everyday life spaces.[1]

When we think about why people are politically disengaged, common sense tells us to focus on the beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and ideas that people carry with them. But I found that people expressed very different beliefs from one context to the next; at each step in the broadening circulation of political ideas, the ideas narrowed. In a patterned shift in discourse, what was announced aloud was less empathetic, less questioning, less open to debate, less openly public-spirited than what was hidden, whispered. Conversations that affirmed connection to the wider world—what I call "public-spirited talk"—evaporated; the more public the context, the less public-spirited the talk. This political evaporation challenges the idea that individuals' beliefs are the heart of citizenship. It also presents a paradox for democratic theorists, who say that the beauty of the ideal public sphere is precisely that it invites the widest possible range of ideas into public circulation.

This strange pattern of political evaporation is not universal, not even among the groups I studied. But the fact that it was a common pattern among them reveals the need for a new conceptual lens for studying apathy and engagement. Herbert Blumer used the term "sensitizing concept" to describe an idea that "suggests directions along which to look . . . providing clues and suggestions," forcing us to notice something important about a situation that our previous concepts might let us overlook (Blumer [1954] 1986:148–149). Thus, instead of offering a causal explanation of American political apathy, I develop here a "sensitizing concept": "civic practices."

"Civic practices" helps us notice and theorize the etiquette that so often undermines the free-wheeling conversation ideal in everyday life. Civic practices are *the fundamentally sociable processes by which citizens create contexts for political conversation in the potential public sphere, by jointly creating a relationship to speech itself. In creating these contexts, citizens develop meaning-making powers together.*

People deem freewheeling, open-ended political conversation appropriate for some contexts but not others. In practice, they answer the implicit question "what does the very act of talking itself mean in this context?" Civic practices have the potential to unleash a creative, meaning-making, magical source of power that "springs up between men and vanishes the moment they disperse," as Hannah Arendt puts it (1958:200). This is the power to create the public itself. It is "not just a dependent variable" (Alexander 1995), not just a response to power or powerlessness, but a kind of power in itself. Arendt grandly states that "to be deprived of it means to be deprived of reality" (1958:199). But this meaning-making, public-making power is not just an end in itself; it can also be a means to more instrumental kinds of power, since it opens up some aspects of life for public questioning and closes off others. The two levels of power are inextricable: Civic practices make

[1] Jane Mansbridge (1980) and Paul Lichterman (1996) both scrutinize civic groups' varied ways of enacting membership in practice, but they ask theoretical questions different from mine, and neither focuses on a group's changes in talk from one context to the next. Katz and Lazarsfeld's classic (1956) traces the circulation of political ideas in a community, but does not record citizens' actual conversations in context. David Halle (1984) uses informal question-and-answer sessions between subjects and the researcher to gain fascinating insights into American workers' beliefs about class. Although his study very clearly shows that context matters, he does not address how speakers create a speech context; nearly all the conversations he portrays depend on his initiating questions.

meanings that inevitably draw into play, and thus empower or challenge, institutions that the groups implicitly see as powerful.[2]

In describing the norms that circumscribe citizens' conversations, I explore how civic groups embody, create, diminish, and transform their own meaning-making powers. I discuss two common ways of understanding apathy and engagement, the "inner" and "outer" approaches, to show what they miss about life in the public sphere, and two compelling concepts of hegemony that begin to, but do not completely, get beyond "inner" and "outer." Next, drawing on work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, James Scott, Erving Goffman, Pierre Bourdieu, and others, I outline the concept of civic practices, illustrating it with examples from fieldwork. I show how the idea of civic practices deepens and differs from the "tools" or "languages" or "vocabularies" approaches of Robert Bellah, Ann Swidler, Robert Wuthnow, and others as well as the "framing" approach of William Gamson and others. Finally, I argue for a theory of power that keeps interaction at its center.

The portraits of civic life presented here are a segment of a larger participant-observation and interview study (Eliasoph, forthcoming), which examines how Americans produce political disengagement in interaction. I spent two and a half years as a participant-observer in a range of groups: two recreational groups, organized around a country-western dance club and a fraternal organization; a set of volunteer groups, including an antidrugs group and a PTA-style organization; and two activist groups—an antitoxics group and a disarmament group. In each group, I participated as a member, attending meetings, hearings, demonstrations, raffles, track meets, fairs, parades, fashion shows, rodeos, theme parks, and parties. I listened to participants interacting with each other in a wide range of contexts, and with the institutions that surrounded their groups. I was also a participant-observer among reporters, and analyzed their stories.[3]

All the groups were in a sprawling suburb, a "multinucleated metropolitan region"[4] (Gottdeiner and Kephart 1991), that hosted a nuclear battleship base containing a thirty-acre toxic pit that the Environmental Protection Agency said was "dangerous"; an Air Force Superfund site that shipped arms all over the world and was rumored to contain nuclear weapons; two military toxic cleanup sites; and a planned toxic waste incinerator. Several other plants emitted cancer-causing or ozone-destroying materials just upstream. The area had six chemical plants—just one of those plants alone had had four major fires or spills in my two and a half years of fieldwork. Clearly, this area had political, military, and environmental issues worth at least discussing.

VALUES, BELIEFS, FEELINGS

Examinations of beliefs focus on the seemingly "inner," subjective world of feelings and meanings; examinations of structural forces typically focus on the seemingly "outer," objective, automatic systems of money and power. What is missing in this dichotomy between "ideology" and "structures," "micro" and "macro," "subjective" and "objective" is interaction, intersubjectivity, patterns of civility in everyday life.

[2] The question of how they intertwine is the subject of exciting recent debate (see Alexander and Giesen 1988; Blau 1993; Sahlins 1976; Sewell 1992; Somers 1995). Arendt famously separates the two kinds of power, imagining a sterile, innocent public sphere, untouched by any instrumental power. Habermas (1977) argues that her "communications concept of power" ignores how communicative power is impaired by, and props up, structural forces. While I would seriously amend his distinction between "communicative" and "structural" power" (or what he usually calls "system" and "lifeworld"), I share his goal of hunting for systematic distortions. As Calhoun suggests, "This break [between 'system' and 'lifeworld'] 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" (1988:223).

[3] The larger study uses, but modifies, the "extended case method" (Burawoy 1991).

[4] Identifying features—names of people, cities, corporations—have been changed to protect subjects' anonymity.

On the first side of that dichotomy is the idea that if people do not care about the wider world, they must not have the right values and beliefs. The commonsense version preaches that inner values are all that matter: "If only people *cared more* about their communities, the world would be a better place." Another rendition of the idea mourns that people have accepted a dominant ideology and think the world is fine as it is. Other "inner" approaches focus on "denial" and "psychic numbing" (Lifton 1967) or "cognitive dissonance" (e.g., Festinger, Riecken, and Schacter 1956; Lerner 1980) or "democratic values" (Almond and Verba 1961;[5] Lane 1962).

In this view, what matters is inside people's heads. Collectively, the individual heads add up to a polity. Such research would more aptly be called "private opinion research," because it attempts to bypass the indelibly social nature of opinions, trying to pry the personally embodied, sociable display of opinions away from the opinions themselves.[6] These psychological factors certainly could account for part of what I found, but something is still missing. The people portrayed in this article did sound as if they cared about politics—but only in some contexts, not in others. They did not think everything was fine, but found too few contexts in which they could openly discuss their discontent. Most of the time, intimate, late-night, moonlit conversations were the only places other than interviews where that kind of discussion could happen.

Indeed, some fascinating studies show that being interviewed can make interviewees *into* thoughtful citizens: The interviews opened up free, nonjudgmental contexts, maybe for the first time in the interviewees' lives, for talking through vague political ideas; interviewees then could notice inconsistencies and begin to reconcile them (Reinarman 1987; Croteau 1995[7]; J. Hochschild 1980; Hart 1992; Lane 1962). People are fully capable of *becoming* good citizens, if a social researcher who prods them with good questions should happen along. These studies clearly show individuals' remarkable, however latent, abilities to grasp abstract political principles and juggle clashing or contradictory traditions and beliefs.

The potential is latent because usually interviewees have different contexts in mind when voicing contradictory beliefs; they "contextualize" in ways that allow them not to notice the contradictions. For example, Jennifer Hochschild and Stephen Hart both demonstrate beautifully that people arrive at different opinions, using different logics, depending on whether they assume they are speaking as consumer, churchgoer, worker, parent, or citizen, or wearing some other "hat," as Hart puts it.[8] Celeste Condit (1990) notices, but does not theorize, a similar, remarkable pattern: In her study of abortion rhetoric, she heard women using the "choice" and "freedom" rhetoric when speaking about the *general* political issue of abortion in interviews, but rarely using that discourse when talking about their *particular* cases. When speaking personally, they discussed responsibilities to the people close to them; as in the pattern I found, her interviewees' political rhetoric was more individualistic than

[5] Almond and Verba's classic cross-national study is the exemplar of the type of research that focussed on beliefs, despite the authors' claim to be studying "culture," which they define as the link between psychology and social structure (1961:33). The way they study culture effectively reduces it to shared values and beliefs. To their psychological approach they add that it is functional for the democratic system for some citizens to be politically engaged and others totally apathetic (see also Schumpeter 1943). For critiques, see Carole Pateman (1973, 1980) and Barber (1984), who emphasize the educative process of political participation.

[6] Thus, a steady stream of articles in such journals as *Public Opinion Quarterly* note what is called the "noise" caused by interviewees' bravely answering survey questions about fictitious issues ("What do you think about the Metallic Metals Act?") or responding to researchers' race, gender, or status (even on questions that are not about race, gender, or status).

[7] Croteau's book has a vivid and funny five-page (1995:184–187) portrait of conversation among workers in the factory he studied. The rest of the book is not about interaction per se; the other interactions he describes are question-and-answer sessions between him and workers.

[8] Given this finding, the next step is the one Hart proposes (1994): to examine citizens' "meaning-making" practices in everyday spaces.

their personal rhetoric. This insight about interviewees' imagined "hats" is one key to understanding how contextual political opinions are.

The problem with any "inside" approach is that what matters for the democratic process goes beyond what individuals may privately hold inside their brains but never express. What matters for democracy are also the ways that citizens mingle and interact—civic practices that enable citizens to engage in freewheeling political conversation in everyday contexts.[9]

OVERT POWER AND HEGEMONY

The second side of the dichotomy holds that structural powerlessness discourages political participation—that ordinary citizens know that on a pitched playing field, organized, powerful classes or elites usually win. Certainly, political battles systematically favor elites, but, as much research demonstrates, citizens do not always explicitly acknowledge their own troubles, much less try to publicize or act upon them; sometimes, they never even get near the playing field. Sometimes, power works more indirectly.

The concept of "hegemony" begins to get beyond the dichotomy between inner and outer, but as currently used, it is still not tied clearly enough to interaction.[10] This concept tells us that dominated people learn to take injustice for granted, to experience it as "natural" and "commonsense" (Giddens 1977; Williams 1977:110), or, in a feat of moral alchemy, to learn to love their fate (Bourdieu 1990). For example, John Gaventa's study of hegemony (1980) shows that residents of a polluted Appalachian mining valley learned, over the course of decades, that they could not win political struggles against mine owners, so they avoided talking about politics altogether.

Following Steven Lukes (1974), Gaventa names this silence the "third dimension of power." The first is coercion—A's ability to make B do something against B's will. The second dimension is A's power to set the public agenda, to prevent some groups from arguing for their interests at the public bargaining table. The third dimension is the power to prevent subordinate people from even recognizing their own grievances. This deep alienation from political life is usually ignored by researchers and other observers because a crushed political will is as quiet as acquiescence, says Gaventa. He convincingly shows that it is not just acquiescence: Even though the miners' hardships went unperceived, their problems had not disappeared. Gaventa's analysis sensitively unveils impaired communicative power—and it starts to get beyond the dichotomy between "outer" power and "inner" consciousness.

But the concept of hegemony still lies squarely within the Marxist tradition that offers the back-to-back assumptions that class *interest* is the most important of all and that *consciousness* of interests is the most important political accomplishment. What glues these two assumptions together is the lack of attention to the "in-between," the "'web' of human relationships" that literally is "between," as Arendt says: "'inter-est,' which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together" (1958:182). Is it in a nuclear battleship worker's "self-interest" to have a healthy workplace? a future planet? a job? social support from day care and schools? low taxes? military power that "keeps America first"? If the answer is not obvious, that is because there is no bottom-line interest that trumps all

[9] Even Habermas and Arato and Cohen (1992), who put language at the center of their analyses, rely on abstract psychological and philosophical linguistic theories (see Alexander 1993), instead of examining how language actually works in actual, socially grounded relationships.

[10] The idea comes from Antonio Gramsci (1971), who did tie it to interaction in public life, but Gramsci's original connection between everyday interaction and hegemony has been lost in recent research (see Eley 1992:332). He used the term "civil society." Of course, there are differences between "civil society" and "the public sphere"; just the term "civil society" alone has been taken up in numerous, contradictory ways (Alexander 1994; Walzer 1992; Taylor 1989; Calhoun 1994).

others. Public discussion helps us negotiate or transform these overlapping, contradictory, fluid "interests."

Once we recognize the importance of the "in-between," it becomes clear that "interest" is not the only important question in politics—people create, in practice, a sense of what are appropriately political questions and what is out of bounds. The point is not that once we figure out our real interests, we can stop talking and go home, but that being able to talk can be a good in itself: People are always creating selves and communities and interests in interaction, one way or another, actively or inadvertently. Being able to create the public is itself a kind of power.

Gaventa's image of power thus still focuses too much on consciousness and not enough on interaction.[11] How did valley residents learn not to talk politics? How did children learn that residents could not win struggles against the mining company? Were there any contexts in which political conversation was possible? Gaventa does not say. "Hegemony" seems to float everywhere and nowhere; it seems simply to work the same way for all dominated persons, in all situations.

Abandoning that image of bottom-line interest, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (1985) go further in drawing attention to the fluid nature of interests. They overhaul the hegemony concept, defining it as a kind of common sense that is in perpetual motion, that creates, in practice, "family resemblances" (Wittgenstein 1953, cited in Mouffe and Laclau 1985:179), so that people assume that disparate political ideas, social groups, or social struggles obviously fit together. These definitions are defined and created only in practice, as ideas, social movements, and other groups create themselves, talk about themselves, talk about each other, talk to each other, group together, coalescing and disintegrating, forming and transforming. What distinguishes one kind of hegemony from another, Mouffe and Laclau argue, is not just the contents of ideas and policies, but the process of "hegemonizing," linking ideas or movements together. But even this concept of hegemony focuses on people's definitions of themselves and their groups, not specifically on the "in-between" of interaction (Lichterman 1996).

One next question might ask how people actually interact, in contexts where they could conceivably develop and change their ideas. Indeed, Mouffe's recent work (1992, 1993) makes a similar point.[12] The questions then become: How do (or don't) groups create contexts in which members can try out a *variety* of relationships to the wider world, self-interested as well as others? And do these contexts work in ways that systematically amplify some meanings and silence others? Lukes, Gaventa, and even Mouffe and Laclau do not take these grass-roots interactions seriously enough—the organizations of civil society are missing from their accounts of power. Given this talk-centered approach to hegemony, we must ask not just what people think, but where and how they create openings for conversation.

HEGEMONY: WHERE?

James Scott asks part of this question in his wonderful book on peasant societies and other nondemocracies (1990). In contrasting "hidden" and "public" transcripts, Scott adds the crucial element of place to the idea of hegemony. He says that if we listen carefully, we will hear subordinates' "hidden transcripts": fierce, rebellious, often funny protests whis-

[11] Gaventa has since rethought his study, along the lines suggested by James Scott's work described below (personal communication, 1994).

[12] The contexts she has in mind—those of feminists, gays and lesbians, environmentalists, for example—would be more politicized than most of the ones I discuss. Though I examine less overtly politicized situations, I hope to clarify here how one might go about observing democratic practices of the sort she describes.

pered behind their public bowing and scraping to elites. Subordinates know they are dominated, and do not like it, but because they cannot realistically protest in public, they joke behind the emperor's back: "When the great lord passes the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts," says the book's epigraph, quoting from an Ethiopian proverb.[13]

Scott rightly honors the importance of people's ability to control what is publicly sayable. He says that the serfs and slaves know perfectly well what they want, but cannot speak straightforwardly about their desires in public. They want more than just satisfaction of "interests": They desperately need to speak and be heard, and sometimes that drive to create meaning, a public transcript, overcomes other drives (1990:111–112). That control is not reduceable to access to something, is not valuable just because it lets the possessor control resources (though it usually does go along with that). Scott theorizes control of the public transcript as a power in itself.

But he does not apply this idea of contextual hegemony to Western democracies, where we have "the luxury of relatively safe, open political opposition" and can openly declare our political resistance (1990:199); can potentially move up the hierarchy, to become the oppressors ourselves; and, I would add, where any person might be on the top of some hierarchies and on the bottom of others. The people I met believed that they *were* free to speak their minds in public; still, I found enormous differences in public and private talk. Place must matter, but the relation between hidden and public displays works differently here than it does in the feudal or slave societies Scott describes. Here, open bowing and scraping toward public power is not legitimate. Citizens' public poses can display opposition, anger, earnestness, calm independence, bemused observation, mild questioning, distance from politics and power—almost anything but the grateful, unquestioning dependence, adoration, and servitude that the serf or slave must display toward public figures.

CIVIC PRACTICES: CREATING THE PUBLIC

In a democracy it is less obvious what must be hidden from whom, or why—or where is "hidden" or "public." This is not to say that there is no larger field of power here, just that authorities almost never enforce their power through overt censorship. Here, citizens can help create the contexts for conversation in civil society, so the irreduceable, magical power to control public speech is potentially even greater here than in the societies Scott studied. In a society that calls itself a democracy, implicit understandings of "what citizens' public talk *is*" define the public sphere, in action. Whereas Scott wants to know how people create the "public transcript," I want to know how people create the "public."

Erving Goffman (1979) points out that in any interaction, we have to share assumptions about *what talk itself is for* in a situation. He calls this implicit understanding of a situation "a footing." When walking on rocks, ice, sand, pavement, we do not explicitly notice what is underfoot but do register our understanding in our every step. Similarly, when interacting, we tacitly understand what we are doing together. These implicit understandings bring into play, and create, an unspoken sense of how our face-to-face interaction matters and how it fits into a wider world. I call footings in the public sphere "civic practices" to make it clear that such interactions both register and create the everyday settings of public life.

Considering power in terms of footing means looking at "practices." As Pierre Bourdieu

[13] Writing during the last days of the Cold War, Vaclav Havel (1989) made a similar point, describing how Eastern Europeans had to hide their criticisms of the government for fear of imprisonment, loss of employment, or worse. Novels and films describe the lively, secret cultural enclaves that developed in such societies, showing a clear boundary between the very hidden, compressed, exciting, clandestine underground and the official world. This raises an interesting question for the study of civic practices: When can backstage talk overtake front?

puts it, following George Herbert Mead, the way to get beyond the "usual obligatory choice between the language of consciousness and the language of the mechanical model"—what I called "inner" and "outer" approaches—is to move the analysis into "the language of tact, skill, dexterity, delicacy or *savoir-faire,* all names for practical sense" (1990:80). These practices defy the logic of systematic thinking. By examining practices in the potential contexts of the public sphere, we can understand how citizens relentlessly make fine, implicit, but firm distinctions between one situation and another, thus sculpting the public sphere itself.[14] These distinctions are not just about what to say, but about how to display oneself as a member of the small group and as a citizen of the larger polity.

Examining a civic practice is different from examining the appeals that people can make within that practice, though the two are intertwined. Many observers note that when Americans try to explain their action, the closest, most accessible "cultural tool" (Swidler 1985) or "language" (Bellah, Madsen, Tipton, Swidler, Sullivan 1985; Wuthnow 1990) or "vocabulary of motive" (Mills 1940) is the language of self-interest. These authors suggest that this traditional "language" impoverishes American political debate; one typical American portrayed in *Habits of the Heart,* for example, "lacks a language to explain what seem to be the real commitments that define his life, and to that extent the commitments themselves are precarious" (Bellah et al. 1985:8). This kind of analysis takes us quite a distance away from the dichotomy between inner and outer, by arguing that shared communication makes some sentiments easier to feel, discuss, and act upon.

But because such studies are based mostly on interviews, they do not take the citizens' *production of the context itself*—the civic practice—as meaningful. The meaning-making these theorists can discuss is the "transcript," not the meaning-making that happens when citizens create the "public" itself. Yet, as Mead puts it, "meaning is . . . not a psychical addition to [the] act and it is not an 'idea' as traditionally conceived" (Mead 1964:163). The context is itself meaningful, too.

Examining both the "language" and the practice together would mean listening for meaning not just in discourses like "the language of self-interest," but also in the ways people create a footing together and the ways the footings themselves express a *relation to* politics. What makes a conversation public-spirited is not only the discourse, but also speakers' relation to the public forum itself.

"THE PUBLIC SPIRIT": A DEFINITION

Appealing to common ground would force speakers to *create* common ground, "making the path by walking it." It would, as Hanna Pitkin eloquently puts it,

> force us to transform "I want" into "I am entitled to," a claim that becomes negotiable by public standards. In the process [of making such claims] we learn to think about the standards themselves, about our stake in the existence of standards, of justice, of our community, even of our opponents and enemies in the community; so that afterwards we are changed. (1981:347)

This means not that people will always come to the *right* decisions when speaking in a public-spirited way, but that such discussion forces a discussion of who "we" are and why

[14] What I add to Bourdieu is that we need to look at these practices as properties of contexts, as well as ensconced in the biographical "habitus" that the individual carries around from one context to another. His "habitus" is to biography what my "civic practices" is to collectivity in the public sphere. We could even call civic practices a "collective habitus," to highlight that they are wholly contextual.

"we" care. Without it, people have no place to form a collective will, a community, or a vision of the wider world.[15]

Pitkin rightly emphasizes a process, not a topic ("politics" or "interests").[16] No one set of topics is "political"; a topic we might consider "political" could be treated in a way that was not public-spirited, and vice versa. Race and sex are potentially "political topics," but in the recreation group I studied, women believed that the men brought up those topics in the group context to get attention—a playful slap or squeal—not to spark debate or to affirm a sense of connection to the wider world. The men's implicit referent was always the speaker, not the polity. In making these constant, implicit distinctions between public and private, participants simultaneously create a context for interaction and a relationship to the wider world.

THREE ILLUSTRATIONS

The following portraits of civic practices show how three groups in the potential contexts of the public sphere shift their ways of talking from one context to another. Following Goffman, I call the main group interaction "frontstage"; peripheral interactions that participants deem beside the point are "backstage." While hidden "backstage," people can relax and stop paying so much attention to the impression they are making: Salespeople off the floor can make fun of their product and customers; teachers in the lounge can swear and smoke (Goffman 1959). As many theorists point out (Weintraub 1990; Weintraub and Kumar, forthcoming; Fraser 1992; Gamarnikow, Morgan, Purvis, and Taylorson 1983), the term "public" is used in so many contradictory ways, it is almost meaningless; my point is to show how people construct a definition of it in practice. I use "public" to mean what Goffman calls "frontstage"; what is frontstage to one situation might be backstage to another (for example, an activist group meeting might be "frontstage" in relation to members' behind-the-scenes conversation but "backstage" in relation to a press conference). The remarkable consistency of the discourse-shifting I heard may tell us what the groups consider "front" within such contexts. Of course, these three groups certainly do not exhaust all of the possibilities for civic practices; but they do show how the concept can help us think about power in civic life.

Case #1: Buffaloes—Trying Really Hard to Avoid Appearing Constrained by the Group

This example, a the recreational group, describes a country-western dance team whose participants usually met at a fraternal organization (such as the Moose or Lions); I call them "the Buffalo Club." The public sphere includes more than formal political parties or volunteer and activist groups; it also includes the free-form, sociable public life that happens in cafes, informal gatherings, bars, coffeehouses, theaters, salons, dances, poetry readings, even soccer teams.[17] These often physically vigorous gatherings embroiled members in each others' lives not just as brains engaged in calm, rational debate but also as laughing, dancing

[15] Drawing out this "public-spirited" face of politics is a theoretical move with a long lineage (e.g., Arendt 1958; Barber 1984; Blau, 1993; Etzioni 1993; Wolin 1960). But the way I define "public spirit" differs somewhat, since like Pitkin, I do not exclude expressions of self-interest, and focus on the form of expression as much as the content.

[16] She attributes the transformation of "I want" into "I am entitled to" to citizens' speaking in terms of "justice." But I think other linking concepts might work as well, depending on the context: justice, mercy, loving kindness, empathy, respect.

[17] See Oldenberg (1989) for a fun, if nostalgic, review of that sort of public life. Also see Goldfarb (1980); Arato (1981); Eagleton (1985); Rosenzweig (1983); Ryan (1992); Sennett (1977); Tucker (1992); Young (1987), for more scholarly treatments of the relation between this informal public and the more official public sphere.

bodies with tastes, passions, and manners. Thus, public-spirited conversation can take the form of joking, teasing, art, or song.

Buffaloes wanted no organizational restraint of their behavior in their free time. They wanted to appreciate each other as human beings, not as bearers of any particular role or status. They tried to create this free-floating "community" by leaving any sense of positive attachment to the wider world at the door. Participants assumed that a group "self" is not really real and that group contexts are not places in which people are "themselves" unless the group is totally unconstrained. So they tried hard to appear unconstrained; but, in fact maintaining this impression of casualness took disciplined effort. Seriousness bubbled out around the tightly casual impression management, but only outside of the group's main interactions. This civic practice made expressions of public-mindedness out of place. The group tried not to acknowledge any connection to the wider world.

The country-western clubs provided back- and frontstages of the sort Goffman described, but with a striking twist: The *group* context, "frontstage," demanded the "profanity, open sexual remarks, shouting, playful aggressivity and 'kidding' . . . humming, whistling, chewing, nibbling, belching and flatulence" that Goffman attributed to backstage (1959:128). This echoes Scott's farting peasant, only in reverse: At the Buffalo, it was only in scarce *backstage* moments that members could squeeze in a few moments of less aggressive, less profane talk, and stop working so hard to appear casual; these backstage interactions were urgently whispered, conducted in the dark parking lot or in the Ladies Room. Frontstage, members could not discuss relationships, work, family, health, or the wider world, except to make fun of such attachments. The meaning of these interactions was not just in the "transcripts" of participants' speech (or bodily emissions), but in the civic practice, the way the group created the back- and frontstages to express total irreverence for the frontstage.

Part of the disciplined effort to throw off constraint entailed finding topics that appeared irreverent; again, the topic was less important than the attitude fostered toward talk itself. Talk about race lends itself especially well to the trumpeting of irreverence. In polite company, white Americans feel nervous talking about race at all; they suspect they might have said the wrong thing, and usually consider any talk about it taboo (Van Dijk 1987:102). Joking about race openly in an all-white group was a way for whites to seem carefree, harmless violators of a sanctimonious taboo. The same would go for talk about gender differences and sex.

Thus, the group atmosphere came to be more racist and sexist than most of its individual members were in other contexts. In its zeal to appear unstuffy, the group allowed more tolerant voices to evaporate. Often, the group conversation would disgust, annoy, or antagonize almost everyone, but none would complain (except "backstage"). Thus, the group *did* exert a public, political force on members and onlookers, but not a force with which most members agreed.

For example, at a barbeque one afternoon, almost every participant was chagrined at the frontstage group interaction, but none complained until they were whispering, backstage. First, Chuck and Charlene kept up a steady stream of rowdy jokes: about an Indian chief and his "squaws" as well as lots of antigay jokes, ethnic slurs, bathroom humor, and sex jokes. Next, Chuck took a picture of Charlene with her nine-year-old daughter Suzanne cuddling into her lap, which led to jokes about Suzanne's underwear showing. After a while, Suzanne began to cry, saying Chuck was making fun of her. But the joking continued.

Always agreeable George laughed, to be friendly, but the nine others at the table stretched their lips across their faces horizontally. Were they slightly smiling? Or were they squinting at the bright sunlight glinting off the white plastic table? They did not laugh, but did not make a point of not laughing either. Were they unexpressive, shy, or quiet, or did they think

the jokes were not funny? I could not guess, nor could the others; frontstage, they did not make it clear whether or not they objected to the jokes.

Finally, Chuck said something so offensive that the proceedings momentarily stopped. Suzanne had sat on his lap again, asking him to do a split. He made a joke, saying "I'm not gonna spread my legs for you! I hardly even know you!" Charlene put on a serious face, saying "Chuck, it's innocent. She's taking aerobics at school and they're teaching them splits, I guess." Chuck persisted in his jokes, till Carla said, "Chuck, that's not funny." Suzanne's mother agreed, and I added, "Then I guess we all agree."

They laughed, though I did not mean it as a joke. Chuck insisted, "After four beers, having a little girl sit on your lap, you never know what might happen!" Despite the reprimand, Chuck teased Suzanne this way until all but Chuck, George, and Jim got bored and meandered indoors, and women began clearing dishes, signalling the end of the session.

Then something remarkable happened. After staging that long session of joking, the trio of men found themselves alone, "backstage," waiting for the next scene to happen. I had come back out momentarily to clear some dishes off the table, and overheard a quick change of topic—suddenly the joking was no longer necessary, and they discovered that they were all carpenters. George asked, "What hall? Er—are you union, are you a union carpenter?" They discovered they were in the same hall and complained about the quality of some workers and about the slowness of the lottery for work. Since they had known each other at the Buffalo Club for almost a year, it was remarkable that they had not already discovered this commonality. Backstage, members conveyed everyday complaints, wishes, encumbrances, and attachments, and pride in their craftwork.[18] Backstage, participants could voice meaningful concerns, whereas frontstage, no one could voice positive concern or claim membership in anything.

In the kitchen was another tête-à-tête, also "backstage." "All Chuck and Charlene can talk about is 'locker room,'" Jody and Betsy were whispering to each other. Jan said Chuck was "sexist." Later, someone else commented indirectly on Chuck's offensiveness, by making a face when she mentioned his name among those who were going dancing together later. Before this, Betsy and I had had a whispering conversation: She was worried about her dog, who was sick, but could not talk about it aloud in the group. Her worry could not easily be shaped into a joking expression of irreverent antipathy, so it would not have fit into the interactional context the group created.

Backstage, on both sides of the kitchen wall, members could talk about everyday life concerns, and discover what they had in common besides apparent shared antipathies. They could have made their complaints about Chuck's "sexism" frontstage without offending him had they made them into a joke, but since even public-spirited teasing was not part of frontstage, they could not. The practice made some ideas hard to express; further, if anyone had dared to voice a public-spirited joke frontstage, it would have been taken as a commentary on the speaker, not a message about the wider world.

This incident was typical. Backstage, I often heard women saying it was a shame that blacks could not come to the dance clubs or that one member's black son-in-law was uncomfortable the one time he did come. But these women never made these objections frontstage because to do so would have reinforced the jokers' desire to seem irreverent and encouraged them to continue the jokes. Within this civic practice, there was no easy way to object to the jokes.

This is not to say that backstage conversations were usually politically charged or earnestly public-spirited. But they were less violently racist and less effortfully offensive,

[18] I wonder if Alisdair MacIntyre (1981) would consider this equivalent to the high-culture craft standards that he says form the basis of moral community.

less vehemently aimed at displaying a lack of connection—even anticonnection—to the group itself and to the wider world. The members had no group contexts in which to be public-spirited, even though interviews showed that participants were worried about the world in a vague, anxious way, and even though, as the "backstage" examples show, members did *not* simply hold the rest of the world at arm's length in all situations. They could, in other contexts, communicate a sense of attachment. Even in a group that so obviously came together for very private purposes, it was impossible to avoid, implying a relationship to the wider world. The effortful denial of connection was itself a form of connection to the wider world; it created a thin feeling of togetherness, by joining with the others to shove the wider world away. With this vehemently antipublic footing, any public spirit withered; an antipublic spirit, on the other hand, flourished.

Case #2: Activists—First Speaking for Themselves in Public, Then Challenging the Officially Approved Civic Practices

The second example, an activist setting, also shows patterned discourse-shifting between contexts, in which citizens sounded less public-spirited in frontstage settings. In every meeting of the group, which had organized to oppose a toxic incinerator, someone raised the question of where toxic waste *should* go, saying explicitly that members were not involved just for their own families' safety. Every one of the six core members raised the question, some quite often. Typical was Maryellen:

> If it's not our kids, it'll be someone else's kids. People always ask, "Well, yeah, but what are you gonna do with all that toxic waste?" That's something we should talk about, since it's not just a local issue. We shouldn't just fight off the thing to have some other community that's less organized get stuck with it!

In these meetings and in casual conversations, broad political questions were foremost. In fact, activists were not simply "defending themselves," as reporters and officials assumed. Many members of the group were long-time activists who got involved because they thought this issue illustrated a general principle to the rest of the community: that grass-roots political participation is a better way to run the government than behind-the-scenes corporate control. Of course, they may *also* have been worried about their families, but in casual conversations, that was not salient.

In front of the press, though, group members spoke differently. Suddenly, the activists presented themselves as panicked "moms" and self-interested property owners. Introducing a petition drive to a bank of reporters, Eleanor presented her motives:

> I care about the people living here, and I especially care about the children that are growing up in this unique and wonderful place [she herself had no children but cared about everyone else's children as if they were her own]. I'm also a concerned property owner. The only thing I own of any substantial economic value is the home I own in downtown Evergreen City. And what's gonna happen to this investment when I have to sell it to support myself for my older years, older than I am even now? Nobody's gonna come banging on my door to buy a lovely home, with a lovely view, with some lovely toxic pollutants. . . .

But the very moment the cameras and mikes went off, she turned to me and a fellow activist to say, "This is getting to be more than a concern to *me;* it's getting to be a matter of the lives of the future generations here." Suddenly, she had shifted from talking about her own

self-interest to talking about the common good. Instead of assuming the official civic practice that calls upon citizens to speak only for themselves, she assumed she was on different footing "backstage," and could give voice to her usual broad concerns.

Later, Eleanor told me, "My mind goes blank when I get in front of an audience like that. I just sit there and forget what to say." What exactly "blanked out" of her mind? In the context of speaking to the press, she "forgot" what she said about "the future generations." She also "forgot" what she and others had been saying in meetings for over a year—that the government and corporations should invest in research to prevent the production of toxic waste and that the local group was part of a loose national network whose project was to change industrial policies. "Backstage," Eleanor was eloquent about her broad political commitments, so the group often begged her to make public speeches, but since she worried about "blanking out" in public, she usually said no. All the activists who spoke at demonstrations and to the press made similar speeches, emphasizing their seemingly natural, "unpolitical" motives, and silencing their public-spirited motives and policy suggestions. They treated the public forum as a place for plaintive individuals to expose their side of the story, to speak only for themselves.

When these activists did publicly present themselves as more than self-interested property owners and panicked moms, however, institutional pressures pushed them back into these roles. A week after an explosion at Plastico, the group picketed with signs advocating recycling, better regulation of toxic production, and nontoxic alternatives to current toxic production processes, and specifically advocating two laws for the government to pass toward these ends. Their other signs detailed the accident-prone plant's safety record. The reporters, even those sympathetic to the group's cause, ignored them.

All five reporters flocked instead to a bystander who was not even a member of the group. Sobbing, she described her panic when she heard the boom at Plastico, how she grabbed up her kids as fast as she could and tried to get away, but didn't know where to go. She presented herself as a Mom, wildly frightened for her kids; if she had any public commitments or was connected to any grass-roots group, it was irrelevant.

Government officials and company representatives addressed activists *as if* the activists were concerned only for the safety of their own particular families, leaving no public space for citizens to debate issues and speak in a public-spirited way. There was enough air time in the public sphere for a toxic waste management firm to describe the proposed plant's one-way valves; the presentation included six slides of the valves, with each part of each valve described aloud, but there was not enough time for activists to voice their more public-spirited objections to what they called "dumping-for-profit." But even if company and government officials had demonstrated that incineration would not cause Evergreen City residents any personal harm, the activists would have retorted that this technology would be unsafe, possibly unnecessary, and bad for the common good, in this political context.

Activists sometimes bristled about officials' assumption that they cared only about their own families. Maryellen, for example, was frustrated after the official Risk Assessment Report came out. The officials who prepared the report were supposed to address health questions, yet, Maryellen angrily said, they did not take into account the fact that people (not members of the group, but poor immigrants) ate fish from the river next to the proposed incinerator site.

> And the other thing that pissed me off was the way these guys talked about the wind patterns. "Oh, the way the wind goes, it just takes the stuff high up and scatters it." So great, it'll be all over *everyone* instead of just here. What do those guys think—all we care about is Evergreen City?

The officials left no public opening for her to voice disgust at being treated as if she cared only about herself and her family. Citizens were supposed to appear in the public forum only to speak for themselves.

For the first year of their group's existence, antitoxics activists took the officials' technocratic approach for granted. When the group first began, members followed the bureaucratic process, meeting only when the state called a hearing or issued a report, and then limiting their public participation to technical questions: "If you're gonna criticize at a hearing, you have to point to page 278, paragraph 3, line 7 if you want them to listen," as one activist put it.

But later, they began a tentative rebellion against the construction of the footing itself. They began regularly holding open meetings, but Neil would chair them all, using a microphone, and the "audience" would sit in rows. After a while, the meetings changed shape: The microphone went away, and the rows became a circle. Activists realized that they could assuage their political curiosity, have debates, and openly worry about other people's kids in meetings, *even if* nobody important would listen to that kind of talk. The group decided to *value* meetings, not only to get predetermined tasks done, but also to create contexts for developing new thoughts. For example, in a discussion about when to make signs for a picket, one member suggested that individuals could just make their own, on their own time, if the group could find an easily accessible place to stow the markers and posterboard. Another member argued that group activity would be valuable: "The poster committee might get together and think up stuff we'd have never thought of!" The group also decided to start a newsletter, hold public video viewings and discussions, and write leaflets—discussion-oriented activities that members never would have done when the group was just tagging behind the bureaucratic process.

Still, the group remained unsure of what was an appropriate topic or method for discussion for meetings. Activists wanted to have freewheeling public-minded debate, but also felt they should "get things done," yet again were not sure what that would entail *other* than passing out literature, holding debates, writing—talking. Members sounded guilty, but also pleased, when they talked about the "tangents" that threatened to overwhelm every meeting. It would take any group quite a while to develop a civic practice that could allow such discussion, when it was so out of place everyplace else.

Further backstage, in informal gatherings at members' houses, outside of public, open meetings, activists engaged in public-spirited debate more than they did at meetings, and much more than they did in front of the press, at hearings and demonstrations. In these relatively backstage settings, they nimbly transformed seemingly private topics of conversation into public ones and back again. For example, over breakfast before a parade in which the group had a float, there was a long debate about unions, after which one member exclaimed with surprise that he had changed his mind. Then they talked about the local newspaper owner's relationship to suburban growth and his relation to unions, and puzzled over the relationship between grass-roots activism and a citizens' committee that Plastico wanted to form. A conversation at another gathering, about home decor, led to a debate about the political pros and cons of buying Navajo rugs on reservations—whether it was good to spend money on reservations and support Native Americans that way, or whether it ultimately harmed reservations to depend on tourists; then a conversation about buying a new car led to discussion of freon, air conditioning, and ozone depletion. And in nearly every informal get-together, the question arose of what should be done in general about toxic waste.

Activists' relations to talk itself differed in different contexts. Exchanging public-spirited analyses was a form of entertainment in these informal gatherings; yet activists were still unsure how much of that rich debate should enter public meetings. In open meetings, such

discussion and questioning would usually go on only for a moment before being labelled a "tangent." It arose even more rarely in official public events, and was never reported in news stories. Most of the activists' casual public-spirited ways of conceiving politics evaporated before reaching public circulation. The more public the context, the more the public's meaning-making powers shrank.

Case #3: Volunteers—"We Accomplish A Lot" (and try to avoid talking about whatever we might not be able to accomplish)

A volunteer group also illustrates how people can create a sense of "the public" that paradoxically shrinks their own meaning-making powers. Within the contrasting back- and frontstage talk, again, there were striking patterns to this discourse-shifting. Like the second, this third example shows a paradoxical situation, in which committed, concerned citizens tried to do good precisely by hushing public-spirited conversation in public.

The Parent League was a PTA-style, local volunteer group for parents of high schoolers. One evening, a new member, Charles, inadvertantly violated the group's civic practice by implying that the group should talk more, to more people—that the group's quiet way of encouraging community involvement was misdirected. Charles, an African-American parent, reported that some parents had phoned him about a teacher who said "racially disparaging things" to a student, "suggesting that blacks were not intelligent and such." Some kids in the teacher's class had tried complaining to the "appropriate authorities," but the authorities all claimed to be "too busy" to deal with it. The kids then told their parents and the parents told Charles, who was the local NAACP representative. Charles noted parenthetically that he was proud of the kids for trying so diligently to report the incident; he added that the school had hired this teacher despite a written record of having made similar remarks at another school, and that Nazi skinheads often recruited at lunchtime outside the schoolyard. Since race riots had recently erupted in the school and at a nearby movie theater, and since the White Aryan Resistance was scheduled to hold a concert in town, Charles's testimony could have seemed especially noteworthy to the Parent League.

Instead, the group's response to Charles's speech was startlingly bland. None asked what the teacher actually had said. First Sherry minimized the problem of the lack of "proper channels," making the problem an interpersonal one, reminiscing about how hard it used to be for her own mother to talk to teachers.

Mild-mannered Geoffrey cut in with a slightly cross edge to his voice: "And what do you want of this group. Do you want us to do something"—not as a question, but with a dropping tone at the end.

Charles said, "I just thought more people would be at the meeting and it would just be something parents should know." He said parents should be more involved in general, not just to accomplish things, but to talk. Of course, members thought involvement was important, too—but Charles's urging the parents to get more people involved seemed simply an insult, since they assumed that they were doing all they could to invite involvement.

In defense of the group, another parent, Ron, exclaimed, "Don't underestimate us—we make efficient use of small numbers of people! We get a lot done!"

Charles slowly started restating the problem, but now Ron was impatient. He interrupted, "It's not up to us to do anything about the incident. That should go through the proper channels." Turning to Charles, as if it were purely Charles's problem, he conceded, "It *is* unfortunate that the incident occurred-happened," using that special bureaucrat-ese that marked their discourse on "touchy" issues. "But it should go through the proper authorities," he repeated, even though Charles had already reported that the "proper authorities" were not doing their jobs.

Again, Charles made a pitch for the group to grow, "because it's better for the kids if the parents are involved." Again, Charles inadvertently violated the group's civic practice, by implying that the group was not completely effective—that if they really cared, they would hold more debate even if it made them feel a little uncomfortable.

Geoffrey's minutes for that meeting reported:

> Charles Jones relayed an incident *for information* [my emphasis—he had not presented any plan of action other than talk itself]. He is investigating on behalf of some parents who requested help from the NAACP. He is in charge of such investigations by the NAACP. The event involved a substitute teacher [notice that he highlights the teacher's impermanence] who made a racially derogatory statement in class.

Other minutes from that meeting included details of a discussion of what kind of fundraiser to hold:

> Someone said that Bill McDowell [the principal] said we should have bingo games. An extensive discussion on bingo operations ensued. Pam had idea that we have one big fundraiser each year so that we would not have to work year round. . . . Victoria suggested we have an auction as a fundraiser. Trudy suggested a crabfeed. Bob suggested a spaghetti feed. Joan suggested simply ask parents for $5 donations towards a specific project. . . .

This continued for half a single-spaced page, clearly indicating which topic of discussion was central to the group's purpose.

The moment the meeting adjourned, Ron wanted to make sure that I, a newcomer, did not get the wrong impression:

> Were you surprised at how much money we made at our raffle? You were surprised that we got that much, weren't you? But it was just small amounts over the course of the six weeks [spent raffling an old Cadillac]. That's what I meant when I said to Charles, "Don't underestimate us." We may be small, but we're energetic! We can accomplish a lot more than you'd think!

Meetings focused on projects that volunteers considered "do-able": buying a new hot dog steamer for their sports events concession stand, buying soda for the yearly trip to a theme park for seniors, building the throne for the Homecoming Queen, fundraising. When outsiders or unusual volunteers sometimes tried to drum up debate, they were unsuccessful. For example, a teacher, who was worried that poor kids might turn to crime or neglect their studies in favor of making money, came to the group asking parents to discuss limiting the pressure to spend too much on the prom; various outsiders tried to raise the issue of school funding: All were given the same treatment Charles received. In a manner atypical for their highly focused meetings, members avoided discussion altogether, quickly changed the subject, doodled, or got sodas that loudly clonked out of a machine down the hallway.

This volunteer group *existed* to convince members and the community at large that good citizens *can be* effective. Speculative, freewheeling, public-spirited discussion would undermine one of their central reasons for being; they assumed that talking politics would discourage people, when their main purpose was to inspire good feelings and show that people can "accomplish a lot."

Outside of meetings, backstage, volunteers much more freely discussed controversial issues in a public-spirited way. For example, after one meeting, I went with one volunteer to visit her friend at work in in her tiny office. Cindy repeated to her friend a funny story

told by Parent League member Debbie: At a party the night before, Debbie said that her family had once hosted a family from a rural town for a big football game. Cindy repeated Debbie's story:

> When they got here, the [rural] parents said, "Oh, thank God." So Debbie said, "Thank God what?" They said, "Thank God you're not black. We were worried they'd house us with blacks." So Debbie said that she told her son to invite all his black friends over for a slumber party! Some of the kids from Auburn had never seen a black person before and they were asking them, "What clothes do you wear? What music do you listen to?" Debbie said it was quite a cultural experience.

In a closet-sized office, but never in the group context, they could tell this kind of story, with its public-spirited punch. In intimate settings and individual interviews, volunteers sounded concerned about broad political problems, hungry for discussion about justice and the common good, freely and emphatically pondering issues that they explicitly tied to political policy making and injustice, on the one hand, and their own private worries on the other, such as homelessness, school budget cuts, and war. In interviews, volunteers dwelt—obsessively sometimes—on the radioactive spills at the neighborhood nuclear weapons base or on pesticides and hormones in food, but then labeled such worries "not close to home," using phrases like "I care only about issues that affect me and my kids" or in which I "have a vested interest."[19] Volunteers preferred to blame themselves and their moods, or make themselves appear selfish or apathetic, rather than question the ability of regular citizens to make a difference.

Volunteers went out of their way to avoid appearing special. In one parent group meeting was a discussion planning the date for Career Night. Someone suggested April 20, so Joan, a sporadic participant in the group, looked in her date book.

> No, that's Passover.
> Sherry [laughing]: Joan [turning toward me and a new member]—she teaches our kids at Catholic Confirmation classes—Passover doesn't apply to you!
> Joan [in a mock hillbilly accent, so as not to sound too ponderous]: It's a matter of principle.
> Bob [slams his hand down on the table in mock fury, then smiles]: OK.
> Joan [apologizing]: It's just that last year I learned my lesson. I scheduled something for Rosh Hashanah and got *murdered.* And it was only two families—or three.

Inner beliefs mattered less than the form they took. Joan may have been *thinking* in terms of principles here, or in terms of avoiding conflict, or more likely, she was blending several forms of moral reasoning at once. She tried to offer principle first, but group pressure made her resort to the more normal reason, of avoiding trouble. What is important here is that she could give clear voice to only one type of reason. Crucial for volunteers was to show that anyone—a common person, not just a saint or a genius—can make a difference. Talking politics or principles would especially threaten volunteers' egalitarian method of building

[19] For more on their use of the concept "not close to home," see Eliasoph (forthcoming). This process of giving official, frontstage voice to one type of reason while informally voicing another backstage echoes a more specifically linguistic process noted by William Labov (1972). In one experiment, he asked department store cashiers where to find something, and then asked them to repeat their instructions, pretending that he had not heard the first time. The first time, the cashiers used their local, heavily accented vernacular. The second time, when attention had implicitly been drawn to their speech through the request for repetition, the cashiers spoke more self-consciously, trying to sound proper by using what they assumed was the "correct" pronunciation.

togetherness. It would require taking stands on issues, distinguishing oneself, making a scene, whereas volunteers preferred equality to distinction.

This distrust of rhetorical eloquence has a long history in American politics. Kenneth Cmiel writes that nineteenth-century Americans considered rhetorical eloquence aristocratic, exclusive, musty, and European; Americans proudly preferred plain, unadorned, familiar language, which they deemed more democratic and inclusive (Cmiel 1990; see also Rodgers 1987). Unlike these earlier Americans (as Cmiel describes them), the volunteers avoided political talk not only because they proudly, optimistically imagined themselves to be forging a new, egalitarian public sphere. They were *haunted* by an overwhelming sense of social inequality and political powerlessness, and they feared that talking politics would make those terrible suspicions feel more real. Even plain speech could leave average people feeling overwhelmed, so instead of speaking plainly, as earlier Americans did, volunteers tried to avoid political talk altogether. Volunteers (and recreation group members) worked hard to establish some relationship to the tenuous, unmapped, and scary wider world with one hand, while pushing it away with the other.

Thus, rejecting abstract, political, or principled talk was, paradoxically, volunteers' way of looking out for the common good. Volunteers assumed that if they want to show each other and their neighbors that regular citizens really can be effective, they should avoid issues that they considered "political." In their effort to be open and inclusive, to appeal to regular, unpretentious fellow citizens without discouraging them, they silenced public-spirited deliberation—which was just what someone like Charles thought the group needed to have in order to involve new members. This creation of "the public," this civic practice, itself dissipated the public spirit from public settings.

THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT FOR THE ANTIPUBLIC PUBLIC SPHERE

In creating their civic practices, groups drew upon and created implicit relationships to the wider political world. Institutional, official definitions of public political participation did not simply *cause* these footings, but certainly did make some civic practices easier to maintain. But there are a range of different institutions in the world, and not all agree on what public speech is for. In paying attention to certain institutions in certain ways, groups conferred a kind of meaning-making power onto those institutions.

The example of the activists shows how the official footing for participation in hearings, press conferences, and corporate-sponsored public meetings curtailed citizens' meaning-making powers. Officials routinely dominated the floor, and they and reporters called upon citizens only to *speak for themselves.* When activists tried to sound public-spirited, officials and reporters ignored them, did not report on them in the news, or condescendingly told them that their speculations might be interesting for some other forum but were not appropriate for *this* one.

This was not just a matter of officials' siphoning some political ideas out of public debate. Institutional pressures worked more subtly, by encouraging an *orientation toward speech itself.* Regular citizens were summoned to the public podium to speak only in the first person, to speak "for themselves," no matter what the issue, with strong, irreduceably personal feelings that were not considered matters of debate. There was no public place in which citizens could reasonably discuss their more general questions and concerns.

The activists had to create that kind of public context themselves. Early in the group's life, the official orientation toward public speech seeped into activists' own meetings—even when reporters and officials were not present. Nobody had commanded activists to avoid public-spirited debate in group meetings. The pressure was less blatant: In meetings, activists just tried to play along with the official definition of the public, speaking to *each*

other in sound bites, as if reporters' cynical, impatient ears (Rosen 1991) lingered long after the reporters were gone, or focusing only on technicalities. After a year, the group decided that this civic practice made the role of the citizen too small and uninviting, and they changed their practice.

For volunteers, the institutional pressure was even more subtle. As in the case of the activists, institutions' meaning-making power filtered into volunteer groups partly by inspiring the groups' orientation toward public speech itself. Local papers always reported favorably on groups that shared the volunteers' style: local people working on local issues doing hands-on work, not wasting time holding discussion-centered meetings. Officials encouraged the volunteers' task-focused citizenship by setting up programs into which volunteers could simply "plug in" without having to talk: driving meals to old people, watching first-graders at the playground from 6 A.M. till school started, or doing solitary activities that did not involve public discussion. When I was looking for a volunteer group to join, volunteers and officials alike all referred me to someone they considered "a real super volunteer," never to a "real super group."

What these activities had in common was not their nonpartisan appeal—some volunteer projects did indeed have opponents—but the lack of open-ended discussion. In one meeting of an antidrugs group composed of social service workers, city officials, police, and volunteers, a volunteer suggested more publicity for the group's activities to elicit more community involvement, and suggested that the group discuss its purpose. Officials spent much of that meeting discussing why discussion was unnecessary. The head of the recreation department said, "Things are happening anyway. Maybe there's not a lot of publicity, but there's been a lot of new programs put in place." A volunteer echoed that sentiment: "We've gotten a lot done and raised a lot of money, so we're doing just what we're supposed to be doing." A city official agreed, explaining why he thought more public discussion and publicity were unnecessary: "I say 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it.' We say, 'You're the professionals—we'll help in any way we can.' You could say we're a support group for professionals." Officials agreed that public discussion was irrelevant; a couple of volunteers gently suggested otherwise, but were gently dissuaded. In another meeting of the same antidrugs group, a volunteer came seeking help in collecting signatures for a ballot measure to raise the tax on alcohol; no one asked for debate about the measure, though most of us knew little or nothing about it at the time. The immediate response was simply to ask someone to volunteer to circulate the petition (in contrast, activists devoted several meetings and public video showings to an equally controversial environmental ballot measure).

Institutions' long shadows colored volunteers' conversations even in unpressured, voluntary situations, seemingly far removed from official settings. Volunteers held such institutions in their peripheral vision and implicitly conferred power onto those institutions by steering their attention toward problems that could be addressed without challenging the official approach to citizenship—that is, without talking too much in a way that was not directly, immediately instrumental. Again, it matters less that institutions propagated a particular political platform than that they deemed public-spirited speech dangerous and a waste of time.

Recreation groups also were subtly influenced by institutions: organizations constantly poised to sell them something—like the theme parks and bars they ambivalently attended, vigilantly trying not to be "ripped off"—and the country-western music industry, as well as institutions they rejected, such as the churches to which their more pious relatives belonged. Buffaloes *related to* the wider world by pushing it away constantly, holding it at arm's length. So, when the USO staged a "Welcome Home the Troops" party in the Buffalo Club parking lot, for example, it did not really matter what the texts of the speeches and music were; what mattered was that *nobody was paying attention* except to complain about how long the program was, make jokes about how the singers looked, and hold the whole

extravaganza at bay (but not simply doing something else instead).[20] The group's mission was to refuse to be sold a bill of goods; they treated all serious talk as an annoying attempt to sell something, to proselytize. As with the other two groups, it was the *relation to* speech that mattered, as much as the content of the speech itself.

In these three cases, the groups' meaning-making powers grew frail not just because the public "transcript" overtly declared self-interested ideas to be good and public-spirited ideas to be bad; not just because private interest was considered real, important, and trustworthy, and the public, common good considered unreal, irrelevant, and untrustworthy. Their meaning-making powers grew weak also because groups themselves considered private *talk* and the private *context* to be real, important, trustworthy; and public talk and the public context unreal, irrelevant, and untrustworthy. The transcript and the context are certainly connected—for example, when the "public transcript" reviles public life—but they are also two analytically separate steps in the groups' loss of meaning-making power.

This is part of how hegemony works, as people create footings, in practice, in the potential contexts of the public sphere. Political powerlessness can be defined, in part, as citizens' difficulty in establishing frontstage footing for open-ended, public-spirited conversation: footing upon which citizens can do more than just try to avoid taking group life seriously, as Buffaloes did; do more than try to avoid feeling powerless, as volunteers did; and do more than just speak for themselves, as activists were called upon to do. Until the activists mounted a challenge, all the groups' civic practices sapped, in various ways, the groups' own powers to "create reality," devalued political solutions to problems, and devalued political participation itself.

Not all institutions discouraged and devalued political debate. For the activists, alternative media and national environmental groups worked most effectively as *ears,* making it clear that it was all right to talk in a public-spirited way to a broad audience. To them, Eleanor could say that she was involved for reasons that went beyond her homeownership: To national environmental organizers who had come to a meeting to describe national toxics legislation, she said, "I applaud your coming here . . . [Having no policy] would make us fragmented; it would be community against community, only saying, 'Put it there,' and the other saying 'Put it there.' This gives us an answer: 'It shouldn't go anywhere.'" And the only time I heard volunteers engaged in free-wheeling public discussion in public was in a remarkable meeting in a black Baptist church. It was a diverse meeting, chaired by a range of ministers plus the usual set of nonpartisan government employees, devoted to "brainstorming" about how to spend a large private grant for preventing drug abuse. The culture of political avoidance comes not only from above, but also from citizens themselves: A group can solidify a footing that encourages explicitly public-spirited talk when it notices, and thereby helps empower, organizations that act as receptive audiences.

TWO ALTERNATE PERSPECTIVES

Two plausible explanations of this context-shifting present themselves. Both take the practice for granted, but the practice is precisely what I emphasize here.

[20] This is where I differ from theorists (such as Baudrillard [1983]), who cheer when people like the Buffaloes refuse to listen to the voices of domination. If the Buffaloes simply left to do something else instead, that would be worth cheering, but just doing nothing but "refusing" everything all the time seems, on the face of it, a perfect illustration of a point that early Habermas and Frankfurt School writings make: It seems to portray a world that is totally "colonized" by impersonal, automatic market relations, in which a pervasive, corrosive irony is the only defense. Consumer institutions offered an image of a nostalgic, "down home" community without participants' having to talk enough to establish one. But what Frankfurt School theorists miss is how much *interactional* work it took to maintain that sense of disconnectedness; citizens are monadic subjects of the market when they actively create interactional spaces that leave no room for members to express attachment to the world *other* than through the market.

The first would say that people naturally want to avoid disagreement, especially about issues that elicit strong feelings, such as politics and religion. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's famous "spiral of silence" experiments (1984), for example, show that subjects who are asked to imagine talking to a stranger on a train say that they would avoid voicing opinions that they perceive to be unpopular, for fear of being disagreeable.

But for volunteers, playful disagreement itself was not taboo—they had animated debates about fundraising options and about how to transport soda to the annual senior class picnic. And Buffaloes teased each other mercilessly, but "all in good fun," about fat, stupidity, bad cooking, clumsiness, ugliness, the ugliness of their dogs, sexuality. For them, disagreement was almost never out of place—unless it had a serious undertone that implied soft-hearted attachment to anything. Was the fear of public political discussion caused by the potentially inflammatory nature of passionately held opinions? Not for volunteers; most did not hold deep, passionate political opinions. Most interviews with volunteers were like winding mountain trails full of interesting switchbacks, with interviewees first voicing an opinion and then arguing against it, sometimes reversing themselves several times, remarking on the interesting vista from each new side and summing up by thanking me for the opportunity to think aloud, saying they had never talked about it before. And for Buffaloes, saying something inflammatory was usually the goal. In either case, deeply held beliefs did not get in anyone's way. What was silenced was not unpopular or deeply held opinion, but debate itself.

For activists in hearings and press interviews, trying to avoid appearing disagreeable may, for a while, have prevented their public-spirited speech from airing. But presenting ideas in a bland, palatable manner makes sense only upon certain floors: These activists wanted open debate, and they discovered, contrary to common sense, that open-ended conversation was more absorbing, less difficult, more fun, and more welcoming to new members, even if it meant asking each other questions that did not have easy answers. Their folk theory of language changed.

Avoidance of political disagreement is not a universal human trait. In some cultures, people relish political disagreement: Israelis, talking among casual acquaintances, for example, "use political talk the way Americans use talk about sports: to create common ground, with political disagreements only adding to the entertainment value" (Wyatt and Leibes 1995:21; see also Simmel 1971). In such situations, the fear of isolation that Noelle-Neumann claims is universal drives people toward disagreement, not away from it. Applying Noelle-Neumann's experimental data to everyday situations is a problem; as Elihu Katz argues (1988), people establish ongoing everyday contexts with friends, relatives, neighbors, and colleagues that are very different from the context of meeting a stranger on a train (or talking in an experiment about imagining a stranger on a train). Katz shows that people who know each other over time can create spaces in which disagreement is not perceived as a risk to solidarity, but can, as Wyatt and Liebes show, be a source of entertainment. And whether or not this culture of avoidance actually did deflect conflict and group disintegration, the fact that everyone thought it did is significant. The United States lacks the institutional containers for debate, such as genuinely differentiated political parties or an openly partisan press, that in other societies can make political debate feel less risky in other societies (Merelman 1991; Hallin and Mancini 1987; Varenne 1977).[21] This absence points us back to wondering how citizens maintain such institutions, by paying attention to

[21] M. Baumgartner (1988) would call volunteers' and Buffaloes' political reticence "moral minimalism." Such thin community makes some sense when suburban citizens just want not to have to interact with each other and to pay for whatever services they need. But in the cases portrayed here, it conflicted with groups' desires to establish a sense of belonging, in interaction.

them and thus legitimating them. Perhaps assuming that public speech is weak, unreal, and untrustworthy helps keep public institutions weak.

A second, similar explanation of this context-shifting would say that all people strategically size up their options and rationally employ strategies of speaking that help them get what they want and can realistically get. This possibility most obviously applies to the activist group. Much research makes it clear that powerful institutions trivialize activism and sift activists' intelligent statements out of public circulation. Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki (1993), for example, note that news reports about the U.S. antinuclear movement pitted emotional-seeming, colorful, flamboyant activists against rational-seeming experts, no matter how thoughtful and reasonable activists had actually sounded in person.[22] A study of British nuclear power plant hearings (Kemp 1985) shows a similar pattern of excluding citizens' political critiques from broader circulation, with officials letting citizens express only technical objections (cf. Habermas 1970). Reporters tend to personalize stories, particularly stories about activism—Gitlin (1980), Gans (1979), Entman (1989), and others say that most U.S. reporters and editors believe that readers want stories about individuals instead of institutions, victims instead of ongoing social problems, and events instead of conditions. Summoning maternal sentiments is almost universally a way of making potentially radical demands seem warm, sweet, and legitimate; as Linda Gordon (1993:17) puts it, activists can strategically hold "children in front of them, plump little legs and adorable wide eyes used to induce a suspicious gatekeeper to open a door to the public treasury." Given all of this, a researcher might describe the activists as "social movement entrepreneurs," who were consciously strategizing to "sell" their issues to the media and public (e.g., Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). Indeed, reporters did air the mom discourse and did ignore almost everything else activists said.

But activists were searching for a *process* for broader political participation, not merely an answer to a single problem; in trying to encourage people to care about the incinerator, they had hoped to spark a larger debate about corporate power and the state, to engage people in public questioning in general. Initially, their practical method of drawing attention to the issue made debate itself seem less important. And initially, they could not escape the cultural pressure to treat the public forum instrumentally, even when no officials or reporters were present to screen out ideas.[23] To give new meaning to citizens' participation, activists had to create not just a new frame to "sell" to media, officials, and public, but a new way of interacting (Lichterman 1995).

Activists' earlier, instrumental practice conveyed a meaning itself: that public life is a means to something else, that debate is unimportant. Another discourse—any language that repelled debate—could have done that just as well. The painful irony of this instrumental understanding of public life was that nobody liked it: Activists were not called upon to show how they had arrived at opinions after serious debate, and resented having to hide

[22] Clearly, the question of how media influence public life is much too large to cover here. An explanation of personalized storytelling that I have not encountered bears mentioning: In this kind of suburb, there is no city or pre-existing region that forms a local market; the paper actively has to construct a sense of "local" (Kaniss 1991). Editors told reporters that *this particular* mom from this local suburb was "local," but that what she said about national toxics *policy* or her group's affilation with a national alliance was not. Reporters who wanted to squeeze their reports past their editors had to find this very narrowly defined "local" angle. Such reporting, in turn, reinforced activists' use of the "Mom" discourse.

[23] I could add a personal note here—I was an antinuclear activist in the early 1980s, when my group discovered the mom discourse. Discussions of our broader political analysis slowly evaporated *even in our own meetings.* We were bothered by the political economy of nuclear power and weapons—its centralization, profit making, the inseparable connection between nuclear power and nuclear weapons—but focused on the two-headed calves and emergency evacuation plans. Of course, two-headed calves are troubling, but we had been committed to a broader political field long before and after we discovered this particular issue. Like the antitoxics activists in their first year, we wanted to spark debate but practiced activism in a way that undermined that goal.

that they had. And reporters grimaced at having to write sensationalist stories—though they routinely ignored the less glittery events that activists staged. Uninvolved citizens who read those stories were not particularly convinced by, or enamored of, the image of the self-interested property owner or the flamboyant demonstrator or even the mom; they suspected, often rightly, that these tidy images hid a political agenda.

Volunteers' civic practices also would elude an observer who focused only on citizens' rational, strategic calculation. If volunteers had rationally *decided* to focus on the "do-able," they could not let themselves notice that they had made this decision, if their focus on the "do-able" were to help them maintain their belief in the power of regular citizens to make a difference (see Bourdieu 1990:46–49, making a similar argument). Noticing would have forced them to acknowledge that there were important problems that regular people could not solve simply by banding together locally.

These two folk and sociological theories—focusing on avoidance of argument and rational strategizing—both take the civic practice for granted. But that is precisely what I want to explore, just as Katz did in his studies that showed how the spiral of silence is not universal. Civic practices can be questioned by members themselves. Some volunteers like Charles, challenged them. Activists did, too: They did not want simply to "get the floor"; they wanted to *change* the floor (Edelsky 1981) for public speech.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND PRACTICES: POLITICAL LANGUAGES, GROUPS, AND CONTEXTS

My argument fits into a growing effort in social research to get beyond the dichotomy between "inner" and "outer" and move toward more interaction-based, cultural methods of understanding political involvement. Here, I want to point out what the idea of civic practices adds to two of these other approaches to political culture and the public sphere.

The broad family of approaches that focus on "cultural tools," "languages," or "vocabularies" is, as noted earlier, a major step beyond the focus on inner and outer, beliefs and structures. Such tools give form to floating, vague sentiments, organizing both perception and discussion in patterned ways; without the symbol, the sentiment has no real social existence. For example, in abortion politics, pro-choice activists' "language" emphasizes individual rights, justifying abortion as a private choice; their discourse emphasizes separateness instead of connection. But one could imagine another discourse, in which activists emphasized that only the woman herself is deeply enough *connected* to her family, social situation, and self to know what is right for them all (Kilroy, 1992). In this perspective, language is not just a transparent conveyor of inner beliefs, but helps shape debates, policies, laws, beliefs, and feelings about the issue.

Like work on languages or tools, studies that focus on framing also take an important step beyond the beliefs-and-structures duet. In *Talking Politics,* for example, William Gamson (1992) treats political ideas as not just a property of the individual's mind, but a property of the group interaction and/or the larger tradition.[24] He asks focus group interviewees to discuss a series of political cartoons, and analyzes their "frames": In group discussions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example, he heard the "feuding neighbors frame," "strategic interests frame," "Israeli expansion frame," and "Arab expansionism frame." Gamson cleverly shows how interviewees actively and cooperatively interact to define political issues in ways that draw on long-standing traditions in American politics, and often depart creatively and dramatically from the major media's prevalent frames. Both

[24] This is also called "frame analysis," though it departs quite a bit from the work to which I briefly referred earlier, which highlights social movement leaders' strategic and conscious efforts to attract members.

this and the "languages" approach clearly show that shared cultural traditions powerfully shape citizens' political thought and speech—and the possibilities for public debate.

But both miss the context-creating process, the civic practices. Neither would reveal what interviewees think the very contexts of the public sphere themselves are for, because in both, the researchers create the context: a research interview, in which people presume that their words are being taken abnormally seriously. Interview studies also cannot reveal any persistent, patterned shifts in language from one context to the next. Responding to the possible objection that focus group settings are "artificial," Gamson says that all settings are artificial: "work-based interactions do not occur either without some employer who contrives to bring people together to do a job" (1992:19). I agree that it is useless to hunt for some "natural" situation, but here, I am looking at the "contrived" settings that occur in the usual course of a person's life.

Paying attention to civic practices means keeping *three* intertwined elements in play at once: political languages, groups, and contextual footings. Studies of languages keep the first ball in play, and studies of framing juggle the first two balls. We need the third. I found that some languages were usable only in certain contexts and groups; the same language meant different things in different contexts or different groups; at times, members of all groups sounded remarkably like members of other groups in some contexts. And these three are not neatly separable; the meaning of the languages cannot be extricated from the meaning of the practices. Take the phrase "think globally, act locally." Activists used it in meetings, where it meant that the world would be better if everyone worked locally while keeping in close contact with other groups that are also acting locally. The phrase called for a great deal of talk, in coalitions, meetings, newsletters, even computer mail, about national and international commonalities. Volunteers used it tentatively and humbly in interviews, where it meant that everyone should be as active in their own communities as they were in theirs; the phrase called for concerted action about local issues among local people. It did not call for very much talk. Buffaloes used it to mean that everyone should "snip the rings on their six-packs," as Betsy put it in an interview; they used the phrase only in interviews, and it called for no talk at all.

No one in the groups I studied ever verbalized their beliefs about talk itself, so interview-based research would not reveal these differences. But even though citizens did not verbalize their ideas about how and where talk mattered, they enacted the ideas in practice, in everyday contexts. If some contexts seem more neutral and clear, less overflowing with meaning than others, less poised to devour the meanings that the explicit discourses offer—if, for example, a research interview or Senate debate seems not to twist the meanings of the languages as actively as the Buffalo Club did—that is simply because we, as observers, take those contexts more for granted. Perhaps we, as observers, share participants' own methods of deciphering the meaning so deeply that their "methods" are our "methods"; the methods thus seem transparent, but they are not (Garfinkel 1967:100–103).

By paying attention to contexts, we can understand what citizens take for granted about their own political participation. As Aaron Cicourel argues, "micro and macro levels are integrated in everyday settings as a routine feature of all cultural or social organization. The members of a group or society have created their own theories and methodologies for achieving this integration" (1981:65). Applying this idea to a study of the public sphere means examining how informal citizens groups "contextualize" (Gumperz 1989) their interactions in relation to institutions, including their own informal institutions in civil society, and how, in doing so, they help bring those institutions into being. In a seemingly rule-bound bureaucracy, as Harold Garfinkel demonstrates (1967), creating a normal routine involves constant negotiation, improvising rules that participants do not recognize as improvised, to patch together an unruly reality that participants do not recognize as unruly.

In the voluntary associations in the scattered, decentered suburb depicted here, members themselves often recognized that they did not know whether they had a shared "community of understandings" (Garfinkel 1967:27). So they even more obviously had to piece together a sense of context as they went along, drawing on and creating shared reference points and a public forum.

THE POWER TO MAKE THE PUBLIC

In the cases presented here, public talk itself was devalued in various ways. Nearly all public officials, social service providers, and others who worked with volunteer groups and activist groups valued the "real" work that happened behind the scenes much more than open-ended discussion. Many citizens felt the same way about the unimportance of public decision making and the importance of real, behind-the-scenes, hands-on work. In the recreational group, members also assumed that group conversation was less "real" and important than intimate, one-on-one conversation.

These official public footings forced explicit expressions of political engagement backstage, out of public circulation. The institutions in this study helped to establish this footing for political participation, in which the very act of public speaking was presumed to mean something: that the speakers speak for themselves and want something for themselves. Officials left almost no other openings for civic participation. In such a culture, genuinely publicly committed citizens would not talk, but would act: They would deliver blankets to the poor, watch the playground, and not worry about the bigger picture. Citizens themselves tried hard not to embrace that unappetizing public sphere; they actively tried to push it away. Public life included, at its very center, this "pushing away" as a patterned, predictable, repetitive feature of interaction. Everyone knew about the imperative to appear disengaged, even those who chose to violate that strong, implicit practice. A crucial moment of power is in citizens' careful, relentless, precise demarcating of boundaries (Friedland 1995; Lamont 1992; Schapiro 1981) between one context and the next.

The act of carving out space for open-ended public conversation could itself implicitly call into question seemingly natural and automatic relations of power and powerlessness; when citizens attribute meaning-making power to public life, public life becomes a potential source of power. But if groups assume that public speech itself is frivolous, dangerous, or useless, the public grows frail; the typical civic practices portrayed here impaired citizens groups' own meaning-making powers, leaving only cramped spaces for developing and circulating political ideas. The power this paper describes is the power to define what public life is, to give meaning to the very act of voluntarily gathering together. This is not only the power to make a particular political program public, but the power to make the public.

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