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Saggi

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Groups and publics

by Walter Privitera

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In line with the current trend in other scientific environments, we have been witnessing a clear move towards specialization in the social sciences for a long time now. One consequence of this is the generally recognized problem hinging on the translatability of fields of knowledge. When different terminologies are employed in scientific writing, it becomes much more difficult to shift from one branch to another or even just from one area of specialization to another within the same discipline. The number of authors prepared to develop such past examples as G.H. Mead's synthesis of sociology and psychology, the interdisciplinary materialism in the early writings of Horkheimer or the blend of history, social theory and political theory produced by M. Foucault, are steadily dwindling.

With their study on tiny publics, Fine, Harrington e Segre provide us with a contribution at least two aspects of which move in the opposite direction: in the first place, their theoretical proposal seeks to utilize some tools drawn from social psychology in the sphere of sociology and political theory with an intent that is clearly interdisciplinary; moreover, this proposal makes explicit reference to the great tradition of sociological classics (often neglected these days) in search of ideas which would still be useable today in the obstacle-strewn attempt to relate contributions deriving from different fields of knowledge.

The sociological miniaturism on which their work is based, which stresses the great importance of face to face relationships and implicitly criticizes functionalistic or structuralistic types of approach, can be set within a trend lasting over twenty years now, which is moving towards a general revalorization of the subjective phase in the social sciences [Touraine 1988]. Here, the return to subjectivity takes on the

shape of a reconsideration of the study of small group dynamics, especially from a social psychology stance, with the aim of providing innovative contributions to various aspects of social theory, for example, wherever it may help us to comprehend political processes, in all their complexity.

As in all interdisciplinary approaches, the greatest difficulty consists in utilizing different concepts and languages successfully without sacrificing the level of abstraction and conceptual precision reached within each individual field of knowledge made to intercommunicate. In the case of this theoretical proposal, the aforementioned risk seems to crop up mainly in connection with the definition of the phenomena it attempts to comprehend approaching from the tiny group perspective.

In the beginning, the authors really succeed in bringing out the fact that small groups, with their dynamic consisting of interaction between individuals, have often been crucial to the expression of critical orientations, with significant consequences, especially on the political plane. The shutting down of the coffee houses – one of the matters discussed – is a significant example, and others could be added to it. The general theory that can be drawn from these observations is that the fabric of micro-arenas in civil society is one of the most important elements ensuring the democratic quality of political life. It is not only the widespread presence of political groups that makes the difference; it is the density of civil society, in all its expressions, political and otherwise, which makes it a bulwark of democracy.

Up to this point, the arguments of our authors follow a linear path, which may be considered as a useful contribution within the framework of a revival of the reflection on civil society that has occurred over the last twenty years [Cohen and Arato 1992]. The way in which a consideration of the phenomenon of public sphere is added to this is more problematic.

In the text, groups, organized expressions of civil society and publics contribute to the formation of a thematic unity defined within the framework of the more general distinction between the micro and the macro dimensions of social theory. It is certainly undeniable that a relationship between these spheres exists. Civil society could be defined as the infrastructure of the public sphere; it is hard to imagine any well-developed public sphere that does not benefit from a spontaneous network of micro-arenas set within civil society. Moreover, the arenas, in their turn, can be analyzed in terms of tiny groups. However, in creating these connections, the concept of public sphere should be better defined. The concept is already, per se, hard to define, because of the vast number of senses in which it is used in daily life. However, the problem obviously poses itself in an even more explicit fashion in a sphere that is more specifically sociological.

For our purposes, it may be useful to make a distinction between two conceptions of political public sphere: the first is the one obtainable from the theoretical approach of J. Habermas [1996], while the second was formulated by E. Noelle-Neumann [1993]. In the case of the political public sphere as Habermas conceives of it, the theoretical construction of the concept is guided by a clear-cut analytical distinction between the group dynamics that occur in the discursive arenas of civil society and the communicative processes that unfold out of them. While it is possible to approach the phenomenon of civil society interpreting it on the basis of the group dynamics (affiliation or common interests) produced within it, in the case of Habermas' public sphere, what we are dealing with is an underlying phenomenon – communication – which cannot be reduced to the specific dynamics of a group, nor to the model the authors favor, consisting in a line leading from individuals to groups and on to society. Naturally, communication too is a phenomenon rooted in the microcontexts of face to face meetings, and this does not change, even when much larger publics are being addressed. Speakers on television addressing millions of people have a very powerful tool for dissemination of their own words at their disposal, but the way in which they are expressed remains essentially the same as that used in tiny groups. However, this highlights a basic difference between the two phenomena: a group is defined in the first place by its size; beyond a certain number of members, its nature changes. Instead, the public of a public sphere is, in theory, unlimited in number. Moreover, it should be remembered that the public sphere in Habermas' version is a phenomenon connected purely with modern society. It is not only the exchange of arguments that defines it; one important aspect is that degree of social differentiation which makes the phenomenon possible. The informal public spheres that began to be formed starting from the Nineteenth century in Europe were closely connected with the creation of tools for creating representative democracy, which made a new functional differentiation possible within society: on the one hand, decisional organisms, legitimized by their proxy from the sovereign people, on the other, spontaneous occurrences of problematization, checking and discursive criticism of the decisions of the delegates. Public spheres in the modern sense of the term reflect this division of tasks: institutional environments specialize in producing decisions, public spheres specialize in criticism, and this specialization is possible because they are relieved of the obligation to take decisions. However, at the same time, every political public sphere lives on its references to the broader political context in which it is set. Even in the most informal of discussions, in the most restricted and intimate discursive arena, the exchange of ideas is ideally related to a broader political context; it is this context which defines the discursive situation and, ultimately, constitutes it. Here lies the real difference between interaction and

argumentation: whereas interaction begins and ends within its own field of action, an argument claims to be universally valid thus, in theory, equally so for any public of listeners, whether micro or macro.

Given these particular characteristics, the public sphere considered at a communicative level is therefore a phenomenon that is, by its very nature, rather unsuited to being explained using the categories of a theory of group dynamics.

In the case of the public sphere as it is seen by E. Noelle Neumann, matters are different. In her famous study on the spiral of silence, the author studies the behavior of the electors in connection with the basic desire to be accepted by others. This desire translates into specific dynamics in smaller public spheres: those who side with majority parties or parties on the way up tend to be particularly active in group dynamics. Instead, those who feel they belong to parties perceived to be in decline prefer silence.

This approach, which is supported by numerous observations on the behavior of small groups, forms the basis for very sophisticated demoscopic research on electoral behavior. The psychological foundation of these behavior varieties is very interesting, although it is not discussed in depth, at least in the classic text by Noelle-Neumann. In this conception of public sphere, in which it is not the cognitive processes of communication which are in the foreground, but the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, a contribution from group psychology can prove particularly promising. The tendency to dramatize political contrasts that can be found in many democracies these days now requires greater efforts to gain more insight into the emotional dimension involved in political processes, and this is one field in which the contribution in question might prove helpful.

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Comment on Fine, Harrington, and Segre/2

Groups and publics

Abstract: The central question of this comment is how to conceptualize public sphere with reference to tiny publics. I suggest that a political sociology grounded in small groups dynamics needs a notion of public sphere close to that conceptualized by E. Noelle-Neumann.

Keywords: politics, groups, public sphere, civil society, social miniaturism.

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