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Comment on Fine, Harrington, and Segre/4. Cultural Systems, Distant Publics and the Mass Media

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Comment on Fine, Harrington, and Segre/4

Cultural Systems, Distant Publics, and the Mass Media

by Philip Smith

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The paper you have just read opens up a number of productive avenues for our thinking about how politics plays out on the ground. The authors usefully introduce the concept of the “tiny public” and argue with some validity that face-to-face encounters play a role in the construction of a civil society. Given the bold quality of this near-Tocquevillian thesis a little cold water might be in order.

We might begin by noting the familiar tropes and priors of symbolic interactionism. Namely: *i*) The belief that bodies and situations are somehow more “real” than unobservables such as discourses or cultural codes or even class systems. *ii*) A good causal explanation requires a defined mechanism at the level of the interpersonal encounter – the rest is metaphysics. *iii*) Social order is built from the ground up. Hence we find statements such as, *a*) In “the writings of some political scientists, the construct of the public sphere seems abstracted from individuals. But this elision only begs a further question: How are ideology and social order formulated?” *b*) “A public sphere requires a set of known others, focused attention, shared knowledge (...) and a space in which regular interaction can occur;” or *c*) “the role performances and frames that emerge within interactional units can be magnified until they attain the status of ‘public opinion’.”

This is all well and good, but I note without irony or jest that social theory has moved on since 1930s Chicago. A few readers might remember the structuralist and poststructuralist turns, which instead of taking the human subject as the starting point for analysis looked instead at the construction and invention of the category of the human. Some might very well retort that the question that is being begged is not “how are ideology and social order formulated?” but rather *a*) “how are hu-

man subjects formulated and naturalized such that they feel compelled to engage in democratic politics or can become the unproblematic Euclidian centre for theory building activity?” Further, we might argue that the defining characteristic of a public sphere is precisely that it does not require “known others,” “shared knowledge,” or “a space.” To the contrary a true public sphere might be defined as *b*) a purely imagined space where talk is projected to an anonymous, overhearing and generalized other in an effort to share knowledge that is not already shared. Finally we might counter that *c*) role performances and frames are generally provided by overarching cultural systems. These have weight and inertia. Local performances might be more accurately described as attempting to map onto such legitimating culture-structures. Rarely, very rarely, do new templates emerge from the level of the interaction order.

Let’s make this discussion concrete. The authors cite Aldon Morris’s study of the Black Southern Church. To my reading his work directly illustrates the limitations of the interactionist perspective. The civil rights movement had roots in Black churches, true enough, but it became really consequential only with the involvement and opinion of distant, liberal, largely armchair- and campus-dwelling northern whites who comprised a wider civil sphere of strangers [Alexander 2006]. Further these involvements and opinions were triggered not by direct personal experience in Black churches but by media reporting in newspapers and on television. This narrated the struggle in terms of a wider American myth complex about equality, justice and freedom. The existence of a world of stories, imagery and generalized communicative exchange in a mass mediated social system; the ability of films and books to move individuals and shape their political and social identifications; the possibility that social life is imagined more than embodied; this seems to simply pass by the world of symbolic interactionism. Everything, it would seem, has to be about groups and spatial proximity. When the authors quote Hillary Clinton on a “vast, right-wing conspiracy” they do so to anchor such claims. Yet the sound bite makes more sense to this sociologist as an illustration of the power of the “discourse of civil society” – a complex, enduring and deeply meaningful cultural code to which she was appealing in the search for public sympathy [Alexander and Smith 1993]. Another example: The Reverend Jeremiah Wright was talking to a black church (a real, physically co-present group) of the Aldon Morris type when in 2008 he railed against the “rich white men” who ruled America. In so doing he nearly derailed Barack Obama’s Presidential bid. The event became important *precisely because* it transcended this narrow group setting, precisely because it was replayed on the evening news and was re-coded by many spatially distant and non-black others into a prior existing script of black irrationality and rancour.

The visit to the classics we find in this paper is intriguing but like swimming against the tide it is hard work for the authors. Simmel would appear to be the strongest candidate for a social psychological re-reading. The problem here is that I struggle to find any reference to the civil sphere or civil society in the presentation in this paper. The authors might have done better to have turned to his contributions to the study of fleeting civility in cities and drawing rooms. Weber is shown to have had things to say about groups and politics. Again the relevance of this to the civil sphere rather than to politics writ large is rather oblique. We know from Randall Collins [2004] that Durkheim can be plausibly reconfigured as a theorist of micro-ritual encounters, many of these indeed generating groups (and I note in passing that the distinction of face-to-face encounter and purposive group is not as transparent as it could be in this paper – see for example the final sentence). Yet even Collins draws upon *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and insists that an ideal realm of symbols and totems, the sacred and emotional energy plays a role in sustaining the kind of vitality that might lead to group participation in a civil sphere. The account presented here does not come to terms with the possibility for a deeply meaningful cultural system that drives group life. Instead we have a rather dry and overly rational Division of Labor-style account of coordinated institutions and organizations.

Are small groups important in the public sphere? Absolutely. Are they the most important thing? Probably not. Are embodied interpersonal encounters becoming more important? Perhaps our answer should be negative again. Real face-to-face social life is arguably less important than ever before in the era of You Tube, Second Life, and MySpace where subjectivities collide only after filtering through icons, images, texts and avatars. So where does all this leave us? Fine, Harrington, and Segre argue for a bottom up, concrete micro-sociology of the public sphere. Like many other public sphere theorists I would press for a more abstract, mass mediated and symbolically inflected realm of discourse. Is there a middle ground? One profitable avenue is to look at the role of both groups and casual encounters in the reception of political messages. One thinks of the water cooler-, bar room-, bus ride- and barber-shop-conversation where politics are chewed over. There is a pressing need for ethnographic and conversation analytic studies of how wider, mass-mediated political debate is converted downwards into local political opinion through such commonplace talk that is only locally and situationally accountable. The pioneering work of Lazarsfeld on the “two-step flow” was prescient in this regard, even if hermeneutically thin. Another approach would be to look more dialectically at small groups and culture, exploring the process through which cultural systems inspire and mobilize small groups and how these go on in turn to reproduce and propagate myth complexes. It is unfortunate that the best such study to date by Nina Eliasoph [1998] has

a contrary spin due to its research findings. It tells us more about apathy and weak suburban political faith than ardent belief.

The image of the public sphere as an accumulation of group-driven activities holds some truths. Clearly symbolic interactionism has much to teach us about agency and everyday life and it serves well as a pragmatist corrective to grandiose theory. Fine, Harrington, and Segre should be congratulated in making a connection with the current literature on the public sphere. But to remain relevant even more needs to be done by this venerable tradition to keep pace with a changing theoretical and social environment.

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Abstract: While useful in some settings, the symbolic interactionist approach to social life is limited by a number of theoretical presuppositions. It sees meanings emerging from the ground up and relentlessly insists on physical co-presence as the motor of social life. Any realistic understanding of the public sphere requires a different logic, one that can capture the power of speech acts relayed through mass communications to a more abstract, distant and general audience. These speech acts are constrained by overarching codes, narratives and myths. There is a pressing need for research agendas that connect situated face-to-face contexts of meaning production and reception with such a systemic and discursive understanding of the civil sphere.

Keywords: civil sphere, mass media, symbolic interactionism, cultural theory, cultural codes.

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