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Publication Details

Ashbolt, A, Private Desires, Public Pleasures: Community and Identity in a Postmodern World, in Vasta, E (ed), *Citizenship and Social Justice*, Macmillan, 2000, 129-140.

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Private Desires, Public Pleasures: Community and Identity in a Postmodern World

Anthony Ashbolt

As George Orwell, Herbert Marcuse and, more recently, John Ralston Saul have argued, language can be a key mechanism whereby social reality is blurred, camouflaged or distorted (Orwell 1957: 143–57; Marcuse 1972: 78–103; Saul 1997: 41–75). Slogans, buzzwords and words blatantly misused permeate contemporary discourse. Just as the advertising industry can take a word like ‘freedom’ and render it a commodity, so too politicians and journalists can take a word like ‘reform’ and strip it of meaning. We are told, for example, of the reforms of the Kennett government in Victoria. Closing hospitals and schools and wrecking the industrial relations system somehow count as ‘reforms’. If something is about to undergo a reform process, as likely as not this means it will be gutted financially. And it is always the institutions of our public sphere being ‘reformed’, because the public sphere is painted as full of waste and sloth, draining the taxpayers’ money. The private—whether private industry or private schools—are by contrast efficient operating machines always giving value. This is the language of the New Right but it has become commonsense discourse today trotted out by journalists, politicians and denizens of pubs alike. The problem some revitalized radical movement in Australia faces is in part a problem of finding a language which gives recognition to the strengths of the public sphere and, indeed, positively elevates the public over the private. Here a paradox emerges—large sections of the Left, particularly those bound up with identity politics, have focused on the virtues of the private sphere. Now while the meaning they attach to this is, of course, different from the New Right, it does reinforce aspects of New-Right ideology. What Christopher Lasch called ‘the culture of

narcissism' has a strange way of drawing the Right and Left together to celebrate a world devoid of public responsibilities, a world in which the private and privacy are virtuous and liberating (Lasch 1978; Saul 1977: 162–3). The campaign against the Australia Card on the grounds of the protection of privacy is but one example of this. So, too, is the campaign against Tasmania's former draconian sexual laws (no more draconian than many American states but you would have thought otherwise given the tenor of the protests). It was left up to a few moral conservatives to point out that the push for absolute privacy rights in this instance could lead to the denial of the rights of women and children.

Swimming against the tide, Stanley Fish has proclaimed that 'there is no such thing as free speech' (Fish 1994). Speech always takes place under specific social conditions and circumstances which limit it intrinsically to some degree. In the same way, there is no such thing as an absolute right to privacy. Instead, rights are circumscribed by other rights, by social conventions, by public morality. The idea of public morality seems almost censorious and is surely guaranteed to take the life out of every jolly (if not gay) event. What is it and how can one determine its boundaries, and, perhaps more importantly, who defines its nature? These are important questions but too often the ground is taken away from so-called Left and progressive forces because the New Right and moral fundamentalists address the issue clearly. For them the answer is simple, indeed total. The Left, meanwhile and perhaps understandably, goes off in all directions, defending free expression one moment and seeking to protect children the next, proclaiming absolute freedom while circumscribing certain behaviour; upholding free speech at the same time as defending racial vilification laws. This is not necessarily contradictory but nor is it worked out carefully. Rights invariably come into conflict and a delicate balancing act is required if we are to simultaneously avoid the private absolutism of American first amendment protections and the public absolutism of moral fundamentalists. Public morality is not synonymous with public absolutism. Rather, it refers to that complex web of values, ethics, behaviour and sentiment which gives strength to a public realm, and which bolsters it against the onslaught of private profit and individual greed. It signals collective beliefs which transcend but do not necessarily destroy private desires. And the world of the public is not simply one of austere adherence to a rigid set of doctrines, of behavioural codes which strait-jacket individual expression. Instead, it can and should be seen as a potential site of resistance to authoritarianism, the foundation of social good, the wellspring of human contentment (Habermas 1974: 49–56). This is a very different view of 'public' from that being propagated today. There is such a thing as society and there are such things as public

pleasures. The task is to fight against an increasingly privatized world in which all sense of collective endeavour, social cohesion and public satisfaction is increasingly dissipated.

All this is not to suggest that the public sphere invariably succeeds at its tasks, nor is it to imply that there is nothing of worth in the private sphere (whether we take that to mean our individual worlds or the realm of private corporations). Rather, it is to acknowledge the necessity of the public sphere as a buffer against the worst excesses of the private, as an arena to some degree protected from deregulated private behaviour whether it be that in the marketplace or in the home. The paradox of market deregulation is that far from leading to a break-out of private competition, it invariably strengthens oligopoly. Deregulating behaviour in the bedroom is by no means a bad thing (between consenting adults), but let us not see it as deregulation nor as private rights but rather as public rights to be pursued in a private domain. The central question today, however, does not concern rights in the bedroom (which might not, in particular places and at particular times, be peripheral). The crux of the matter concerns people's rights to public institutions like schools and universities, and broadcasting media which are not subject to the dictates of some imaginary market manipulated by moguls millions of miles away.

We do live in confusing times and that confusion is highlighted in sometimes mysterious ways. Film reviewer Margaret Pomerantz recently had this to say: 'I'm thinking of moving to New Zealand. I don't like the way this country is going. Everything is regulated. I hate rules. Where are the rebels? What are the university students doing about it? They're protesting about higher fees for godsakes' (Pomerantz 1996). Well, no ... they're also protesting about the privatization and deregulation of our universities. And they know that deregulation and authoritarian (as well as banal) managerial administrative practice go hand in hand. So there is a paradox and perhaps it's this which so befuddles Pomerantz—deregulation only removes certain rules; other rules, even more rigid and inflexible, take their place. But, of course, Pomerantz can hardly be accused of knowing anything about politics. British socialist feminist Beatrix Campbell, reflecting the despairing tone of the British Left, reveals a different kind of confusion. Railing against pro-family and pro-community rhetoric, she appears to seek final solace in Princess Di's 'struggle' against Charles: '... the daughters of the royal family are now calling its men to account and exposing the patriarchal behaviour of princes' (Campbell 1996: 26). So, fooled by the patriarchal logic of appeals to family, neighbourhood and community, perhaps the Left lost sight of the fact that the class struggle has shifted ground so dramatically it is now an aristocratic parlour game. But possibly that's

not what Campbell means—possibly, quite possibly, it is all utterly meaningless. And that again is the problem with language and with words today. Signifier and signified have parted ways; but I would argue that this reflects the success of capital which always, as Marx so brilliantly explained, functions almost magically, abstractly, until we finally realize that '[u]nder the ideal measure of values there lurks the hard cash' (Marx 1906: 116).

Words come easily to Eric Hobsbawm and he ushers back 'the nation' in his call for a change in Left direction (Hobsbawm 1996: 45). And why not? Nothing else seems to be working, so what harm could a good old dose of patriotism do? And in a truly obsequious piece about the Australian Prime Minister, Michelle Grattan reveals that John Howard has just started Christopher Lasch's last book *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (Grattan 1996: 66–73; Lasch 1995). No doubt he will find in that book an endorsement of his policies, a critique of government and social-welfare liberalism, a defence of family and community, a dismissal of the new social movements as products of the professional-managerial class. The Left has rarely understood Lasch, so why would we expect the Right to? There is much conservatism in Lasch's analysis, much populism which runs the risk of being seen as patriarchal and authoritarian. But there is also much good sense. Take the following passage:

To an alarming extent the privileged classes—by an expansive definition, the top 20 percent—have made themselves independent not only of crumbling industrial cities but of public services in general. They send their children to private schools, insure themselves against medical emergencies by enrolling in company-supported plans, and hire private security guards to protect themselves against the mounting violence against them. In effect, they have removed themselves from the common life (Lasch 1995: 45).

But then he beats a retreat into middle-class nationalism because it supposedly provided 'a common ground, a common frame of reference' (Lasch 1995: 48–9). And one can see Howard's head nodding vigorously. Our Prime Minister will, no doubt, ignore the fact that much of the book is a passionate defence of the public sphere over the private sphere, of democracy over finance capital, of community and neighbourhood over increasingly privatized living. Howard will get from it what he wants to get from it—a defence of ordinary people and their values (ordinary people defined by their non-membership of the policy elite), a defence of the common folk and their way of life moulded by family, church and safe neighbourhoods. Just as Robert Hughes, Arthur Schlesinger Jnr

and even Todd Gitlin tend to exaggerate the once common thread underpinning American life so, too, Lasch's ordinary person and common folk are idealized mythologies (Hughes 1993; Schlesinger Jnr; 1992; Gitlin 1995; Ashbolt 1994). Yet, to some degree, they are indispensable mythologies precisely because we must identify the ties that bind. The public sphere cannot be reduced to a factional battleground (Lasch 1995: 49). Yet neither can difference be obliterated. The point is to create a public sphere in which both difference and commonality can flourish.

Mckenzie Wark, like so many erstwhile Leftist inverse snobs, invokes ordinary people to attack the pretensions of the intellectual elite. He waxes lyrical about the talk-show genre (Donahue, Winfrey et al.) because they 'do deal with serious social and political issues, but they do so in ways that most ordinary people can understand' (Wark 1996: 43). There is something very ordinary about this sort of argument. This, after all, is the genre which Watergate reporter Carl Bernstein called 'the idiot culture': 'Today ordinary people are being stuffed with garbage: by freak shows, by Hard Copy, by newscasts that do special segments devoted to hyping hype' (Bernstein 1992). What contempt for ordinary people Bernstein possesses. Perhaps, instead, we should listen to Wark's words of wisdom: '... regular TV watchers are often smarter TV viewers than arrogant intellectuals' (Wark 1996: 44). This proposition reeks of arrogance itself. Many intellectuals, so the story goes, simply have not adjusted to the post-literate age. Wark himself has adjusted quite well and may, indeed, be a virtual television set. He believes in public broadcasting but also has faith in what ordinary people want and that, of course, is the schlock of commercial television. The problem he is trying to identify is how to build a culture of resistance to cuts in arts and public broadcasting. His answer is to inhabit the world of mass culture, to absorb its signs and messages, to comprehend 'the contemporary matrix of media vectors and the kinds of publics that can form there and form their views there' (Wark 1996: 45). This is not simply confusion but utter nonsense. It is a defence of the private sphere disguised, almost cleverly, as a defence of the public sphere. Similarly, the championing of the ordinary person ends up in barracking for advertisers.

In its search for a new language, new modes of communication, the Left cannot simply adopt the framework of the New Right as that framework itself has been erected to serve the interests of capital. Even the term 'social capital', used continually by Eva Cox in her passionate defence of the public sphere, is too bound up with market logic, too much within the frames of bourgeois discourse, too easily be appropriated by private-sphere apologists (Cox 1995). That, of course,

can be a problem for any term used by the Left. So much of what the New Right has done and is doing is dressed up in the language of community or local power. Just as Reagan stole the 'No more Vietnam' slogan from the peace movement and New-Right ideologues stole the once ironic term 'political correctness' from the Left, they have managed to appropriate the language of community power for the purposes of dismantling the public sphere. Concepts of choice and parental control are at the centre of New-Right attempts to further privatize the school system; giving back to people a power which the evil state bureaucracy and teachers' unions had taken away. It all sounds like benign populism and pluralism but it is designed to reinforce market dictates and private desires. Once again, language has intervened to disguise what constitutes a savage attack on the public sphere. This is truly a postmodern politics where the signifier and signified bear absolutely no relation to one another. Democratic choice, so it seems, has prevailed. Yet, in reality, the rapid erosion of both meaning and substantive democracy proceeds apace.

When the New Right has appropriated terms which might once have had Left-liberal connotations, how then can we revive a spirited public sphere without obliterating notions of choice, difference, identity, and flexibility? 'The twilight of common dreams', to use Todd Gitlin's phrase, is a matter of great concern (Gitlin 1995). Nonetheless, the point is not to bury or obliterate difference but to accommodate it within an overall framework of solidarity, collective thought and action, over-arching goals rather than particular concessions (even though these can be important). As Gitlin argues, 'the cultivation of separate identities is myopic for the Left above all' (Gitlin 1995: 231). But he fails to locate the origins of this cultivation within the dynamic of contemporary capitalism and its simultaneous dependence upon conformity and difference. This, after all, is what identity politics is all about—difference within conformity.

Admittedly, the prospects of a collective consciousness which embraces disparate groupings and sensibilities are remote. As postmodernity propels the fragmentation of life, so, too, it assists the fragmentation of social protest. Rights collide with each other, fracturing whatever unity might have been possible. Fixation upon identity breeds a self-conscious solipsism. Issues multiply and a clear focus gets lost. The battle is over fragments, never the whole. Such is the dynamic of postmodernist thought which perceives totalitarianism lurking behind any concept of 'the whole'. Postmodernism is, after all, just another variety of pluralism dressed up in identity-kit garments. Paradoxically, this has not meant the transcendence of correct-lineism. On the contrary, correct lines multiply along with issues and it becomes difficult to keep up with the latest ideological fashions. Identity brand names

claim doting allegiance—one moment gay, the next queer, the next post-feminist and so on, until the labels themselves, stripped of authenticity, are attached to simulated lifestyles. And it might well be argued that a simulated lifestyle is better than none at all in a postmodern world, and who is Left (as it were) who could disagree with that?

Despite the weaknesses which flow from identity politics, it can also be a source of great strength, a moment of resistance to a culture of conformity which still claims much allegiance. While the marketplace of contemporary capitalism reverberates with postmodern choices, there is still a residual bland authoritarian cultural predisposition which reasserts itself from time to time. It is not, after all, as if the Left (multicultural or otherwise) has won any but the most marginal of battles, and even where it has emerged victorious over affirmative action or quotas or speech codes on campus, the significance of the victories is exaggerated. Moreover, such 'gains' tend to serve the interests of bureaucratic elites more than those of the downtrodden and excluded. There is a tension within identity politics—a pull between the desire for a certain type of community and a retreat into self. Jenny Bourne has referred to 'the homelands of the mind' characterizing Zionist feminism and this phrase seems appropriate for identity politics in general, wherein community takes on an increasingly imaginary role displaced from concrete social conditions (Bourne 1987). For instance, the gay community refers only sometimes to place and when it refers to something other than place it loses its resonance. One of the problems is that 'identity' is not the preserve of supposedly Leftist or progressive forces. Rather, contemporary capitalism has produced a crisis (for want of a better term) in subjectivity, and identity politics is a response to this crisis, or perhaps a retreat from this crisis into 'homelands of the mind'. One homeland increasingly apparent in America is 'whiteness' and so, too, within America and Australia the middle-class middle-aged male is emerging as a beleaguered, marginalized, downtrodden species in need of an identity by-pass (Bendersk 1995: 135–57). This would be funny if it was not so dangerous and it does tend to support Michael Lind's contention that the multicultural Left and sections of the Right could find common ground in the sphere of identity politics (Lind 1995: 254).

Identity is not unimportant. Personal life should be a concern of the Left. But when a politics of subjectivity (to use Russel Jacoby's phrase) fuels the project of social transformation, this necessarily truncates the vision of the Left (Jacoby 1975: 101–18). Indeed, as L.A. Kaufman has suggested, that vision (and the struggle towards it itself) becomes bound up with a list (Kauffman 1995: 159): a list of the disaffected and marginalized (a sometimes spectacularly colourful

rainbow coalition) or a list of grievances which do not cohere in any fundamental sense (unless racist sexist ageist homophobic—the list could and does go on—form a united bloc). Yet this list does speak to our times. Perhaps there is no real sense in getting all teary-eyed and nostalgic, as Eric Hobsbawm has done recently, about the demise of a universalist Left for which there is, arguably, no real structural foundation (Hobsbawm 1996: 38–47). This is not to say that universalism or the possibility of universalism has disappeared but rather that fractured identity politics reflects a fractured social life. Unless something dramatic happens to heal the fractures in social life, then a Leftist universalism becomes increasingly difficult to achieve. When real community, community founded upon a vibrant sense of place, is effectively shattered by suburbanization, superhighways and capital flight, when work and residence are not only separate but increasingly out of the reach of many people, when the fast pace of social change generates racist phobias more than worker resistance, particular issues and identities come to the fore politically and universalist visions and solutions recede. No amount of appealing to people's solidarity or good sense can overcome this dynamic. And the real problem is that, despite various attempts to establish rainbow coalitions, there is no automatic unity between the range (or list) of marginalized, disaffected and oppressed groups. Their agendas, necessarily, differ but their visions of a good society (if they have one) might be somewhat similar. And this is where universal visions and particular identities could coalesce—around a utopian vision. But so much of the project of the Left or progressive forces has dissipated into specific demands achievable under equal opportunity capitalism that a broader vision becomes difficult to imagine.

So the particular and the universal remain divided—perhaps not permanently but until such times as the disparate threads of postmodern politics go beyond immediate demands and point towards the good society. Or, as Ernesto Laclau has put it: 'The assertion of one's own particularity requires the appeal of something transcending it' (Laclau 1995: 147). That is, for self-determination to be realized fully, it can only take place in a context which recognizes and gives legitimacy to others—this necessarily places some limits on the content of self-determination. While Hobsbawm has a point in asserting that 'the nationalist claim that they are for *everyone's* right to self-determination is bogus', it is nonetheless possible for different and, indeed, competing identities to inhabit the same terrain and extend tolerance (Hobsbawm 1996: 43). And this is precisely where some general concept of community (something at least which transcends specific identity-based communities) needs to become central to Left

discourse. Just because the term has been appropriated by the Right and stripped of meaning, this does not automatically imply that it should be jettisoned. On the contrary, it must be rescued and injected with new meaning.

Community these days seems conceptually quaint. Many years have gone by since sociologists and historians battled about its precise definition, its location (as postmodernists might have it) in various theoretical schemata. Some abandoned the concept entirely, seeing it as fundamentally useless because of its lack of precision. Others, led by Craig Calhoun, defended its status, arguing that multiple definitions did not strip the term of legitimacy (Macfarlane 1977: 633; Calhoun 1980: 105–29). If such debates seem arcane today it is because community is viewed either as a relic of New-Left struggles or a piece of populist nostalgia. The early New-Left focus on community over class has become hopelessly dated in a world of apparently free-floating identities. And populism also missed the boat, being overloaded with an 'unproblematized' notion of the people. Yet, arguably, the New Left still has something to offer and it is a peculiar form of amnesia which suggests otherwise. Moreover, some form of contemporary populism might provide the way to bring together particular and universal claims. The real danger with a Left populism is that it can end up repeating the New Right's allegations about big government. To that extent, it becomes but another episode in *The X-Files* (a suitably postmodern politics, after all). Or populist rhetoric can seek to overwhelm any claims to particularity, thus eliding race, gender and sexuality as specific concerns. According to Hobsbawm, of course, this would be all to the good and, as already mentioned, his version of universality ends up with an appeal to the nation or what he calls 'citizen nationalism' (Hobsbawm 1996: 45). Clearly distraught as a consequence of recent woeful performances by England's cricket team, he retreats into the world of the nation, celebrating the 'common identity' to be found there. But a nation is not a community and jingoism, it seems to me, is the very worst sort of identity politics. Hobsbawm's Marxism has come adrift on the shoals of nationalism like so much Marxism beforehand. The universality of class no longer has resonance, so why not seek commonality elsewhere, in that which really transcends the individual, the group and the neighbourhood? But it must be stressed again that community is something more than commonality. It at least hints at (something which the nation does not do) the good society. And it can, as Laclau has suggested, uphold a universality which embraces particularities. Distinguishing between politics today and the politics of modernity with its commitment to universality, Laclau notes:

[t]he starting point of contemporary social and political struggles is, on the contrary, the strong assertion of their particularity, the conviction that none of them is capable, on its own, of bringing about the fullness of community. But precisely because of that, as we have seen, this particularity cannot be constructed through a pure 'politics of difference' but has to appeal, as the very condition of its own assertion, to universal principles (Laclau 1995: 150).

In other words, identity politics can either wallow in the limited certainties of its internal politics (specifically gay, feminist or black demands, for instance) or can embrace some notion of the common good. To the extent that the common good is pursued, identity becomes less central but not necessarily marginal. The good society, after all, does not require the obliteration of particular subcultures but, on the contrary, may thrive because of them.

The common good can be perceived in a number of ways. It can refer to the accumulation of private interests and thus be a philosophical support for bourgeois society. Yet, as Marcus Raskin has pointed out, this is a severely truncated concept of common good (Raskin 1986: 23–56). Only a concept which transcends class or group or regional allegiances can point towards democratic social change—because democracy, as Rousseau understood, was not the sum total of individual desires or wills but rather was propelled by a general desire or will. To some, this resonates with the ideology of fascism or totalitarianism. Yet it need not, if it is accepted that the general will is not predicated upon the destruction of individual desires or wills, that the public sphere is not reliant upon the destruction of the private sphere. On the contrary, a vibrant public sphere will interact dialectically with a dynamic private sphere. Perhaps, to borrow an idea from Raskin, the whole delineation of public and private in capitalist society needs to be rethought. Feminist theory, in particular, has made at least some of the divisions between public and private appear increasingly artificial. At the moment, however, it is vital for radicals to resist the valorization of the private (which is both the current dominant ideology and is also reflected by sections of the Left) and to defend the public sphere and public institutions from attack. In the long run, of course, we may want to reconstitute these public institutions, ensuring their responsiveness to democratic desires. But in the long run we may also be left without any effective public institutions to defend. As the public sphere comes increasingly under pressure and attack, the whole question of ethics and social justice, public responsibility and the common good becomes ever more urgent.

Within America, the identity of homelessness has failed to generate massive social resistance or even minimal civil disobedience. In the

array of postmodern capitalist choices, life without a home has little cultural capital. Yet David Harvey has suggested that

[t]he identity of a homeless person is vital to their sense of selfhood ... A political programme that successfully combats homelessness (or racism) has to face up to the real difficulty of a loss of identity on the part of those who have become victims of such forms of oppression (Harvey 1993: 64).

He has a point, but so does Clinton in taking a leaf out of Charles Murray's work and moving to abolish welfare. Oppression and discrimination do facilitate the development of particular sorts of identities. Specific forms of oppression, however, are more likely to strip people of identity, personality, self-respect, clothes and shelter. Under certain conditions, we can confidently ignore the therapeutic babble which urges us to respect each and every identity and celebrate all difference. Harvey is on surer ground when he suggests not all 'others' are equal—some are more other than others—and this requires critical assessment, some acceptance that one group's otherness may be a marginal concern in the overall political and economic context (Harvey 1993: 63–4). Harvey, like Laclau, sees the need for universality and particularity to be in dynamic association. And this requires a fluid rather than static concept of community, one open to the pressures of a pluralist politics but not beholden to the machinations of interest groups. To the extent that identity politics conflicts with political citizenship, as Todd Gitlin argues, it will have to be transcended (Gitlin 1995: 237). To the extent that community and social justice need to be pursued in creative and participatory ways, identities must be willing to be refashioned. The end of identity politics may mark the beginning of a politics of identity *and* community.

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