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Public Spheres and Civilizing Processes

Andrew Linklater

What changes is the way in which people are bonded to each other. (Norbert Elias)

Recent developments in the social sciences have combined the analysis of the impact of global forces on political structures and everyday life with reflections on how the emancipatory project can respond to unprecedented levels of human interconnectedness. Nancy Fraser contributes to this inquiry by advancing a powerful case for post-national constellations which protect all human beings from the adverse effects of globalization. A parallel contribution is the argument that critical social theory faces the challenge of reflecting on how the public sphere can be liberated from the traditional preoccupation with democratizing ‘the Westphalian nation-state’ (p. 5).

Her approach addresses a key question in Eliasian sociology which is whether the human species may yet witness a global civilizing process which promotes the collective control of largely unregulated forces. Eliasian sociology has made little direct reference to the rise of the modern public sphere, but one need only consult Peter Burke’s writings to appreciate how it was connected with the civilizing process. In The Art of Conversation, he explains that the ‘courtesy books’ in England and France in the 17th and 18th centuries advised on how the new rules of ‘civility’ should govern conversation (Burke, 1993: ch. 4). Guides to ‘civil conversation’ were responses to heightened interdependence, which meant that ‘more people were compelled to meet more often and more regularly and to control more strictly all sorts of primary impulses’ (Van Vree, 1999: 154). In The Germans, Elias (1996: 293) comments on how these self-restraints underpinned the uncommon conventions that bind governments and oppositions together in
stable parliamentary systems. Such an approach to long-term patterns of change in the West is significant for contemporary reflections on transnational public spheres. Not the least of its merits is its claim that it is necessary to analyse the relationships between social-structural change and shifts in personality systems to understand the civilizing process.

This dimension of figurational sociology draws attention to how the modern public sphere was influenced by the reduction of the gradient between 'the established' and the 'outsiders', or by the widening of the scope of emotional identification between members of the same society. Attempts to democratize the public sphere within 'the Westphalian frame of reference' had the paradoxical consequence of intensifying the divisions between citizens and aliens. Although it did not stop at the water's edge, the civilizing process was largely a feature of social interaction within bounded political communities. Sharper 'insider–outsider dualisms', which tolerated levels of force in international relations that had been largely banished from domestic communities, revealed there was a deep contradiction at the heart of the civilizing process. Modern public spheres emerged in circumstances that engendered doubts that a global civilizing process would ever shape the world of international relations. Fraser responds to this standpoint by arguing for the possibility (and necessity) of a global civilizing process which links citizens and aliens as co-legislators in a transnational public sphere.

Her argument is that traditional debates about how citizens should be related to one another neglected the deeper question of who had rights of participation in the first place. 'With the Westphalian frame securely in place', Fraser notes, 'it went without saying' that 'the national citizenry' was the constituency with rights to shape the social world through membership in a public sphere (p. 15). She adds that the West's subjugation of other peoples was the occasion for qualifying the belief that citizens had a monopoly of rights against the state (p. 15). But moral opposition to colonial rule was not the only source of doubts about the legitimacy of confining rights of participation to citizens. Because of the influence of Stoic-Christian cosmopolitanism, questions about the right relationship between obligations to citizens and duties to the rest of the human race have long dominated theories of international relations. Of particular relevance to Fraser's argument is the Stoic claim that every human being has a duty not to cause unnecessary harm to any other person. Similar concerns underly Fraser's thesis that a commitment to the 'affected-by principle' requires movement towards a transnational public sphere. The principle, *quod omnes tangit, omnibus tractari et approbari debet* ('all those affected should be heard and agree'), underpins her argument that all persons have the right to be consulted about decisions that affect them. Where decisions are made is immaterial.

Fraser's defence of the globalization of the 'affected-by principle' echoes Kant's cosmopolitan thesis that all persons have a duty to enter into a civil condition with anyone they are in a position to injure. Reflecting Stoic influences, he maintained that this obligation is not restricted to those who
happen to share certain national affinities or wish to pursue common objectives as members of a sovereign form of life. Applying the ‘affected-by principle’ to world politics, Kant argued that heads of state have a special responsibility to address the moral and political problems which are the result of increased interconnectedness. To borrow from Van Vree’s approach to the civilizing process, the emphasis was on the need for new ‘meeting regimes and meeting behaviour at continental and global levels’ (Van Vree, 1999: 303).

Kantian influences are evident in Fraser’s statement that public opinion can only be legitimate if it is the result of ‘a communicative process in which all potentially affected can participate as peers, regardless of political citizenship’ (p. 16; italics in original). The aim is to free the ‘affected-by principle’ from the confines of the Westphalian era and to embed it in ‘new, transnational public powers’ which are answerable to ‘new, transnational public spheres’ (p. 17). This is an attractive move but it is not without its difficulties.

Fraser recognizes that ‘everything depends . . . on how one interprets the all-affected principle’ (p. 17), and yet her article devotes little attention to its meaning. If it is an essentially contested ideal, then any future transnational public sphere may be exposed to the accusation that, far from advancing the project of emancipation, it merely gives expression to new relations of power. Debates about the so-called Danish cartoons in 2006 reopened questions about whether the ‘affected-by principle’ depends on an essentially liberal and contested distinction between offence and harm. In an important discussion of this theme, Feinberg (1985) has maintained that the criminal law in liberal societies punishes serious harms and generally tolerates conduct that offends. Claims that the Danish cartoons degraded Allah and harmed Islam have raised challenging questions about the moral principles that might underpin a future transnational public sphere which has the task of representing the rights of marginal or excluded groups. A public sphere which is constituted by dominant liberal understandings of the ‘affected-by principle’ might seem hostile and hegemonic to them. Religious rejections of the liberal distinction between harm and offence would restrict rights of free expression which are critical to modern conceptions of deliberative politics.

To be fair to Fraser, such differences about the constitution of the transnational public sphere might be resolved by Feinberg’s argument that the boundary between harm and offence is blurred by actors who cause offence in order to victimize vulnerable groups (Feinberg, 1985: 95–6). Moreover, public sphere analysis can proceed from the assumption that most human beings can agree on the desirability of avoiding many serious forms of harm (violent death, maiming, humiliation, ruthless exploitation and so forth), despite disagreements about where the line between harm and offence should be drawn. A commitment to the ‘do no harm’ principle which reflects such concerns might yet underpin a public sphere that has the task of protecting persons everywhere from violent and non-violent injury. An
ethic of this kind is essential for Fraser’s conception of a transnational public sphere which extends the application of the ‘affected-by principle’.

Normative issues aside, an important sociological question is whether human beings can agree that some version of the harm principle is needed to solve problems that result from unprecedented interconnectedness. This is a critical matter for the analysis of the prospects for a global civilizing process. Fraser does not say much about how a universal communication community can be created in the face of geopolitical tensions, ethnic hostilities and persistent national loyalties, but she has a powerful response to one criticism of the literature on post-Westphalian political arrangements. This is the criticism that a sense of shared nationality – of belonging to a demos – is absolutely essential for the survival of democratic political structures and welfare systems.

Fraser responds to this challenge by defending the Kantian theme that a condition of vulnerability can substitute for shared nationality as a foundation for social and political integration. It may well be that popular support for the ‘affected-by principle’ will provide the foundations for new patterns of ‘post-national’ integration – for novel ways of binding together human beings whose political identities cannot be reduced to national citizenship. Support for this view can be drawn from the evidence that allegiance to that principle often informs global environmental movements, campaigns against forms of unjust enrichment that profit from sweatshop and child labour, and movements to increase support for fair trade, ethical tourism, corporate responsibility and socially responsible investment. It may be that generalized attachments to the ‘affected-by principle’ hold the key to the future development of deliberative arrangements which make the politics of consent more central to the course of world politics. It is unclear whether this is the most likely source of powerful post-national social integration. However, Fraser is right that contemporary critical theory should defend visions of world political organization which require human beings to break the habit of conflating citizenship with affectedness (p. 15). It is possible to extend her argument by considering the part that moral and political emotions have played in binding human beings in national communities and which they might yet play in the generation of transnational solidarities.

Social structures depend for their survival on how far their compulsions are embedded in a second nature of almost instinctive dispositions. Emotions are key influences on human behaviour that bind agents and structures together (Barbalet, 2002: 1–9). Elias’s analysis of relations between the socio- and psycho-genetic dimensions of the civilizing process remains one of the most detailed discussions of this theme. A passing comment he makes on parliamentary systems is worth noting in this context. ‘Even under the most favourable conditions’, he wrote, ‘a chain of several generations is usually needed in the life of a people for completion of the transformation of personality structures which facilitates the secure functioning of a multi-party parliamentary regime’ (Elias, 1996: 294). It is almost certainly the
case that what was true of the European civilizing process will be true of any future global civilizing process that involves the development of a transnational public sphere. If it is to result in 'binding laws' that command legitimacy (p. 10), a future transnational public sphere will need to combine institutional innovation with major shifts in the emotional attitudes of millions of people. It will involve what many critics of the idea of cosmopolitan democracy and world citizenship regard as improbable – powerful forms of self-restraint anchored in emotional identification with 'distant strangers'.

The 'affected-by principle' may well come to play an important role in the gradual development of personality types which welcome widening the scope of moral concern beyond the 'Westphalian frame' of reference. As noted earlier, it is not hard to find examples of campaigns which revolve around cosmopolitan self-images that defend greater concern for, and accountability to, those who do not have rights of voice and representation in the forms of life that can disadvantage them. Such movements are more detached from national communities than are the majority of their fellow citizens, and they are more involved in loose coalitions or permanent organizations which bring together similarly disposed persons from different parts of the world. These alliances may be regarded as political actors who express Stoic ideas of world citizenship in three ways: (1) through their sense of global responsibility, (2) their commitment to the belief that all persons have certain global moral and legal rights in common, and (3) their quest to build 'post-national constellations' which recognize that all persons have equal rights of access and an equal right to influence public deliberation irrespective of citizenship or nationality. Movements of this kind occupy a moral and political space which is 'post-national' but they are deprived of the opportunities to participate in transnational public spheres that make the principle of democratic accountability central to modern social and political life. They reveal that serious commitments to 'the affected-by principle' may yet ground transnational solidarities and associated cosmopolitan emotions.

Fraser is right that a revolution in political structures and moral attachments is needed to deal with the moral deficits which result from widening global inequalities. As she argues, what there is in the way of 'transnational public opinion' cannot be 'remotely legitimate' while 'the world capitalist system operates to the massive detriment of the global poor'. The problem will persist as long as transnational arrangements empower global elites and prevent 'those affected by current policies' from 'debat[ing] their merits as peers' (p. 11). This theme can be linked with Horkheimer’s (1974) defence of a critical-theoretical ethic which maintains that shared vulnerabilities to suffering can underpin global relations of solidarity. Fraser extends these concerns by showing how the 'affected-by principle' might support forms of solidarity which have usually been limited to those who have identified with the same _demos_, faith tradition or other particularistic object of loyalty.
The question of cosmopolitanism is what is at stake in this discussion – a cosmopolitanism which does not seek to replace national with global loyalties but which seeks to suffuse particularistic identities with a sense of moral accountability to all other human beings. As Fraser argues, a new era in the development of the public sphere is necessary to address the problem that large numbers of the human population have no choice but to submit to processes beyond their control without the consolation of knowing that they are on the threshold of exercising the right of representation in the many global institutions that affect them. There is no reason to think that the transition to a post-Westphalian era, in which sharp divisions between the established and the outsiders in world politics are reduced, will take place in a matter of decades. It is perfectly possible it will not occur at all. Despite such indices of emergent ‘post-national constellations’ as the universal human rights culture and the expanding sphere of international criminal law, the dominant moral and political emotions of the age continue to belong to the ‘Westphalian era’. As noted earlier, it may be that the transition to a post-Westphalian world is more likely to occur if human societies can agree on the harms that should be avoided rather than pursue the fruitless quest for a consensus on some universalizable vision of the good life. A global agreement on impermissible harms and unacceptable forms of suffering would be no small achievement because strong moral attachments to bounded communities and concomitant ‘insider–outsider dualisms’ have governed human history for millennia.

One of the merits of Fraser’s defence of the ‘affected-by principle’ is that it shows how visions of collective control of global interconnectedness that secure political voice for the disenfranchised might yet become embedded in everyday life. It is necessary to ask if Fraser’s argument depends on the belief that moral commitments to the ‘affected-by principle’ are sufficient to persuade the affluent to surrender key privileges. Some may regard her argument for a transnational public sphere as utopian. Others may claim that realizable solutions to the problems that result from growing interconnectedness require precisely the developments that her argument has identified. All might agree that the combination of institutional innovation and cosmopolitan personality types which is essential for global public spheres to flourish would represent a remarkable new phase of the civilizing process.

References

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