Private, the Public, and the Published

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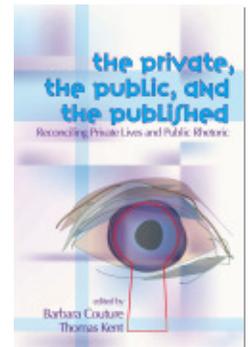Published by Utah State University Press

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16

PUBLIC WRITING AND RHETORIC
A New Place for Composition

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> *Public spheres are not only arenas for the formation of discursive opinion; in addition, they are arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities. This means that participation is not simply a matter of being able to state propositional contents that are neutral with respect to form of expression. Rather . . . participation means being able to speak in one's own voice, and thereby simultaneously to construct and express one's own cultural identity through idiom and style.*
>
> Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere"

Due to a number of internal and external forces, the field of composition has begun to embrace courses, pedagogies, and theories that engage in discourse with and about the public—and rightly so. (For a fuller explication of the recent move in rhetoric and composition toward public writing, see Weisser; Dobrin and Weisser.) A focus on public writing—which might loosely be defined as written discourse that attempts to engage an audience of local, regional, or national groups or individuals in order to bring about progressive societal change—offers much more than the relatively "arhetorical" approaches to writing instruction that ask students to write to no one for no particular purpose. (For practical purposes, I offer this definition, which is limiting yet necessary for the task at hand. The distinction between "public" and "private" that seems implicit here is itself problematic and worthy of more attention than space permits.) Instead, courses focusing on public writing have the potential to give student writing real significance; they allow students to produce meaningful discourse that has the potential to change their lives and the lives of others. In this respect, students see public writing as more "real" than, for example, an essay about what they did last summer or an analysis of a particular piece of literature. Public

writing can help students to see the value of adopting a particular rhetorical stance, since public writing is often directed toward a particular audience that might be influenced by a student's writing. Students often come away from a course or assignment that focuses on public writing with a better understanding of the importance of shaping the style, form, and tone of their written work in ways that might be most persuasive and convincing. In addition, public writing more easily allows students to see that language is a powerful tool for swaying opinions and actions. When a student's writing generates further public discussion or leads to some political or social change, he or she comes to see how discourse is deeply implicated in the structures of power in a society. It is easy to understand, then, why Gary A. Olson suggests that "public writing is clearly emerging as a powerful expression of some of the field's most cherished values" (ix).

This is not to say, though, that public-writing assignments are a panacea for national or even local ills. Helping students find avenues and situations for public discourse demands an enormous amount of time, and even when they are found, public discursive spheres are often difficult to enter. Public forums usually work on a different schedule than that of a university course, and grading students for their "participation" in such forums creates new problems for both student and instructor. Even when students successfully enter and participate in public discourse, there is no guarantee that their opinions will be listened to and acted upon. In fact, the odds are against them.

So, many writing instructors see the value of courses and assignments that focus on public writing and rhetoric, but they just as wisely anticipate the pedagogical difficulties and risks associated with them. As a result, some advocates of public writing rely upon established, conventional pedagogical assignments for addressing the public, such as letters to the editor of the local newspaper on a current topic. The occasional student letter that is published in the local newspaper is very often a rewarding experience for that student and may encourage him or her to write and speak in other public forums and situations. Now and then, these letters compel others to write in response, and once in a while (though rarely), student letters elicit response and discussion in other public forums. However, while these assignments have some potential merit, they are more often than not an exercise in frustration and discouragement for most student authors. Letters to the editor are usually

one-way assignments; students put effort into writing them but get little response. As a result, these types of assignments are often counterproductive. Perhaps more significantly, such exercises do little to cultivate the students' facility with public writing. In many instances, the students' letters are very often generated just to fulfill the assignment. I don't wish to imply that the newspaper editorial column should be overlooked as an appropriate forum for student-generated discourse. Occasionally, students may come across a public issue that they are genuinely interested in, but more often than not, the issues students write about in their letters have little bearing on their lives outside of the classroom. Unfortunately, students often come to feel that participating in public discourse, if letters to the editor are indeed public discourse, has little effect on what happens in their world. They surmise that the public sphere is a realm where nothing actually gets accomplished—at least not by them.

If we wish to create assignments, courses, and pedagogies that enable students to interact more effectively with other groups and individuals in public arenas, we could begin by considering where and to whom meaningful and productive public writing might be delivered. Luckily, when it comes to thinking about the location for public discourse—the public sphere—we need not reinvent the wheel; a number of social and cultural theorists have already written extensively and usefully about this notion from a variety of perspectives. By drawing principally upon the work of Jürgen Habermas—and perhaps more fruitfully upon critiques of his work as offered by Nancy Fraser, Oscar Negt, and Alexander Kluge—it is possible to develop a richer, more nuanced conceptualization of the public sphere than that which seems to underlie some traditional public-writing assignments. There are many parallels between the conversations of the public sphere in social and cultural theory and the more recent conversations in composition regarding public writing, and these similarities have allowed me to dispel several of my own initial misconceptions about the locations of public discourse. While it is impossible to fully address all of these parallels in this chapter, it may be useful to examine just a few of them to extend our current understanding of where and how public writing exists.

A PLACE IN TIME

A good place to begin this investigation is to examine the historical and contextual conditions that give rise to public discourse. One could

assume that public writing is an activity that takes place in a relatively stationary sphere and that it requires little knowledge about the conditions that gave rise to the activity of public discourse or the conditions corresponding to each particular topic in the public sphere. Public writing may seem to be a comparatively ahistorical activity that calls for little prior knowledge of prior conversations or modes of conduct. However, effective public-writing assignments must account for the degree to which public discourse exists in a historically textured sphere that is the product of innumerable social and political forces. These forces have long histories and are in a constant state of flux. If we are to fully and cogently theorize public writing, we must begin by establishing it as a complex historical category.

Perhaps the best way to conceptualize this notion is to examine where public writing is thought to occur. The location of public discourse—labeled "the public sphere" by many theorists—has been seen primarily as a historical concept. Efforts to understand the history, foundations, and internal processes of public discourse have been central to the conversations about the public sphere in social and cultural theory. The debate on the public sphere has been influenced most deeply by Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, a work that is, as Susan Wells writes, "both deeply problematic and astoundingly fruitful" ("Rogue Cops" 327). Essentially, the book builds its theoretical argument through an analysis of the historical growth of capitalism and democracy in Britain, France, and Germany in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thomas McCarthy argues that the book is "a historical-sociological account of the emergence, transformation, and disintegration of the . . . liberal public sphere that took shape in the specific historical circumstances of a developing market economy" ("Introduction" xi). The book envisions the public sphere as an *institutional location* where practical reason and debate arise out of material circumstances in order to promote more democratic ideals. That is, one of the most significant aspects of *Structural Transformation* is that it sees public discourse as occurring only as a *result* of a particular cultural climate. Habermas asserts that the public sphere "is a category that is typical of an epoch" and that "we treat public sphere in general as a historical category" (xvii). Similarly, Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man* suggests the importance of a historical understanding of the concept of the public sphere. Sennett argues that his book attempts to "create a theory of expression in public by a process of interplay between history and theory" and that to have a

clear understanding of the subject, it is necessary to examine "the social and political dimensions of the public problem as it has developed in modern society" (6). Both of these conceptions of the public sphere, and the many conversations that they have generated in social and cultural theory, see public discourse as arising from the distinct cultural conditions of capitalist and postcapitalist societies. They both suggest that public discourse occurs in the context of a particular cultural milieu.

If we agree that public discourse arises from a culture, and that social, political, and historical forces have constructed, shaped, and otherwise affected the locations, topics, and methods of public discourse, we are, in a sense, arguing that it is *ideologically interested.* (Of course, all discourse is ideologically interested. I mention the role of ideology here to emphasize it, not to suggest that public discourse is somehow different from other discursive situations in this respect.) In short, any understanding of public discourse as a product of a particular cultural climate must take into account the ways that ideology shapes and structures nearly every aspect of what, where, and how public discourse occurs as well as who gets to speak in public settings. While both Habermas and Sennett devote a great deal of attention to the historical emergence of the public sphere, they also (as their critics note) fail to recognize the degree to which ideology shapes public discourse. For example, in their analyses of the bourgeois public sphere of that time, both Habermas and Sennett overlook the degree to which dominant ideology shaped public debates, and, as a result, they both fail to account for the degree to which the discourse that occurred in this forum was controlled and manipulated by white property-owning males. Commonly, in public discourse, ideology naturalizes certain authority regimes—those of class, race, and gender, for example—and renders alternatives all but unthinkable. As James Berlin writes, ideology always brings with it "strong social and cultural reinforcement, so that what we take to exist, to have value, and to be possible seems necessary, normal, and inevitable—in the nature of things" (*Rhetorics* 78). Therefore, it is imperative that we recognize that public writing, and the spheres in which it occurs, is ideologically constructed. In short, recognizing that public discourse is historical, contextual, and ideologically influenced is an inherently rhetorical move, since it allows an author to better conceptualize his or her audience and the discourse that will suit it best.

Seeing public writing as a political move allows us to pay particular attention to both our audience and our subject. We recognize that the

groups or individuals that we hope to persuade and possibly call to action are influenced by particular rhetorical modes and devices, and their reactions are often shaped by their prior experiences with public discourse. They may consider our public discourse more or less closely as a result of where we speak from and the style and type of discourse that we use. Furthermore, we can better conceptualize our subject if we see it as discursively constructed through a variety of previous public discussions. That is, our own conceptions of a particular topic are shaped by all of our previous encounters with it, and many of these encounters transpired in public spheres. Envisioning public writing in this way situates each public discursive moment as ideologically situated, itself an intervention in the political process. Public writing cannot deny its inescapable ideological predispositions. It cannot claim to be above ideology, a transcendent discourse that exists outside of history or culture. Like Berlin's social-epistemic rhetoric, public writing, when seen from a historical/cultural perspective, contains "within it a utopian moment, a conception of the good democratic society and the good life for all of its members" (*Rhetorics* 81). Public writing must be aware of its historical contingency and of its limitations and incompleteness.

I'm certainly not suggesting that we have our undergraduates read Habermas, Sennett, or any other historical investigation of the public sphere. Nor am I suggesting that they read Berlin to learn more about the relationships between ideology and discourse. What I am suggesting is that we should help them to recognize that culture, politics, and ideology shape public conversations. We should highlight the ways in which material forces shape what gets said, who gets heard, and how these forces have structured public discourse throughout history. This can be accomplished by choosing particular cultural issues that have been discussed in the public sphere, examining which voices have been heard and acknowledged, which voices have been marginalized, silenced, or excluded, and how discourse on particular issues has changed or developed as a result of the larger political and social climates in which they have been generated. Students are able to easily transfer these heuristics and skills to their own areas of interest, and, as a result, they are more capable of generating effective public writing. By looking at public writing in context, we allow students to see how to use the tools of language to their best interests and in the process discover how textual production—such as public writing—helps to shape and construct knowledge rather than simply reproduce it. Such an approach will necessitate that

writers research the histories of the issues they choose to address to find out how the conversations surrounding them have been shaped, altered, and constructed. At the same time, they will need to consider what is *not* said, whose voices have been excluded from the conversation, and how ideology has normalized certain features of the public discussion they are entering.

A course or assignment focusing on public writing would need to consider how a particular issue—school vouchers, for example—has been shaped by the long history of educational debate in this country. Writers would need to consider how legislative programs such as school segregation, bussing, and standardized testing have been used in the past to justify the ideological perspectives of those in power. In addition, writers would need to consider what sorts of rhetoric might open up or foreclose further discussion from various groups in the public sphere. Regardless of the form or topic of the assignment or course, effective public writing necessitates a thorough investigation of the political, social, economic, cultural, and ideological forces that have influenced any public issue.

BRACKETING DIFFERENCE

It is easy to assume that a writer's identity can be put aside or "bracketed" in public discursive situations. The assumption goes that such writing, if done clearly and logically, frees the individual of his or her particular ethnic, gender, or class distinctions. Public writing, when examined as a category, is often assumed to be evaluated for its merits alone, disengaged and independent from the features and characteristics of its author. Furthermore, the audience for public writing is often assumed to be neutral, open-minded individuals who evaluate public discourse entirely on the merits of its argument. If writers would only express themselves with complete clarity and grammatical and mechanical correctness, some might argue, their positions would be accepted magnanimously, or at least evaluated honestly. The social inequalities that exist in the rest of society are often assumed to be set aside in the arenas of public discourse. In other words, it might be assumed that the differences and inequalities between the author of a piece of public writing and his or her audience can be overlooked. In addition, it is often supposed that all individuals— regardless of their race, class, gender, sexual inclination, or other distinguishing features—are as capable and authorized to produce public

writing as anyone else. In short, the avenues of public discourse are often presumed to be open and accessible to all, free of any of the social inequalities that pervade other discursive situations.

Once again, it is useful to examine the discussions of the public sphere in social and cultural theory in order to most effectively theorize this aspect of public writing. Habermas's account of the bourgeois public sphere, which stresses the claim of open access to all, runs parallel with the assumptions outlined above. For Habermas, the idea of open access and participatory parity is one of the central aspects of public discourse. Habermas's interpretation of the bourgeois public sphere posits it to have been an arena where individuals would set aside "such characteristics as differences in birth and fortune and speak to one another as if they were social and economic peers" (Fraser, *Rethinking* 118). That is, Habermas assumed that a "social leveling" of all participants was an integral part of the liberal public sphere in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe. He argues that "they preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether. The tendency replaced the celebration of rank with a tact befitting equals" (*Structural* 36).

Nancy Fraser questions the assumption that it is possible for interlocutors in any public debate to actually bracket status differentials and to participate in discourse as if all of the members of a public sphere were social equals. She suggests that when analyzing the bourgeois public sphere, or any other public sphere for that matter, it has been impossible to effectively bracket social differences among interlocutors.

> But were they [the differences between interlocutors] really effectively bracketed? The revisionist historiography suggests that they were not. Rather, discursive interaction within the bourgeois public sphere was governed by protocols of style and decorum that were themselves correlates and markers of status inequality. These functioned informally to marginalize women and members of the plebeian classes and to prevent them from participating as peers. ("Rethinking" 119)

In this respect, Fraser is talking about informal impediments to participatory parity that can persist even after everyone is formally and legally licensed to participate. Certainly, there are no legal restrictions on public writing in the United States today, regardless of the circumstances. Such restrictions are not allowable by law. This fact has, unfortunately,

created a situation that makes public discourse *appear* to be equally open to all, existing in arenas that *seem* to have overcome all social exclusions and marginalizations. However, public discourse is influenced by forces that cannot be easily disposed of through legislation. Fraser notes a number of these informal impediments to participatory parity in public discourse. She cites, for example, a familiar contemporary example drawn from feminist research. It has been documented that in mixed-sex deliberations, men tend to interrupt women more than women interrupt men, men also tend to speak more than women, and women's interventions are more often ignored or not responded to than men's. Deliberation and the appearance of participatory parity can serve as a mask for domination. These feminist insights into the ways that discourse is used to mask domination and imbalances of power can be applied to other kinds of unequal relations, like those based on class or ethnicity. They alert us to the ways in which "social inequalities can infect deliberation, even in the absence of any formal exclusions" (Fraser, "Rethinking" 119). In this respect, the bracketing of differences and social inequalities in public discourse cannot actually be enacted, and assuming that it can actually works to the advantage of dominant groups in a public sphere and to the disadvantage of subordinates. In most cases, it would be more appropriate to *unbracket* these inequalities by foregrounding and thematizing them. Doing this would help to eliminate some of the more pernicious uses of discourse in public deliberation. The assumption that public writing occurs in an arena that can overlook, bracket, or disregard social and cultural differences is counterfactual.

There is no reason to think that these conversational dynamics are somehow miraculously absent from the particular discursive situation of public writing. Since public discourse often brings together individuals from radically different perspectives and positions, and since these individuals often have no prior bonds or other incentives that would urge them to work toward participatory parity, it stands to reason that these status differentials are perhaps even more apparent and significant in public settings. For communicative situations such as public writing, gender-specific power differences cannot be disregarded. In fact, any course or assignment focusing on public writing must recognize the degree to which a number of other social forces—among them race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, occupation, class—influence the idealized statusfree public spheres envisioned by some writing instructors.

Compositionists should recognize that social differences shape public writing in significant ways. We also need to continue efforts to establish new theories of public writing that acknowledge differences in thinking and writing. At the same time, we need to assure that new theories identify the origins of many of these differences as ideologically constructed. For instance, new theories should acknowledge that the label "difference" can be used to reinforce and justify marginal or dominant status.

In composition courses focusing on public writing, it is important that instructors highlight for students the degree to which their social status and differences from others will affect how their writing is evaluated. Instructors will also need to examine with their students how differences themselves are often labels that are used to justify the dominance or subordination of certain classes or groups in public settings. Students will need to question whether it is possible, even in principle, for individuals to deliberate through public discourse as if they were social peers. If public discourse is situated in a larger societal context that is marked by structural relations of dominance and subordination—and students will often be the first to note these societal differences—it must follow that public writing will not be evaluated free of these systemic factors. In addition, it is also important to enable student writers to examine the ways that they themselves often evaluate the public discourse of others in biased and unproductive ways. Students need to understand that social inequalities are very real and significant factors affecting the reception and production of public writing. Such a recognition allows them to become more discerning users of the discourse they consume and produce. One task of an effective public-writing assignment is to render visible the ways that societal inequality infects formally inclusive existing public spheres and taints discursive interaction within them.

MULTIPLE SPHERES

Perhaps one reason why the letter to the editor is such a common public-writing assignment is that its forum—the local newspaper—appears to be the primary site available for students to reach a wide audience of diverse individuals who might be interested in what they have to say. It seems natural to think that student public discourse is only worthwhile if it reaches a large segment of the population that is able to act upon it in some way. In other words, students and teachers often assume that

public writing must address the "general public," and the term *public* is often taken to encompass all members of a society, or at least a representative microcosm of them. However, it is incorrect to assume that newspapers are the only significant medium for reaching others through public writing, just as it is incorrect to assume that public writing must reach large segments of the population in order to be useful and constructive. Habermas, Negt, Kluge, and Fraser provide useful explanations as to why these assumptions are faulty and how we might more productively envision the full scope of public writing.

The belief that a large audience is mandatory for public writing, and that this audience must represent all or many individuals in a society, runs parallel to Habermas's conceptions of the public sphere. Habermas stresses the singularity of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere, its claim to be *the* public arena, in the singular, asserting that the bourgeois in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe conceived of "the public sphere as something properly theirs" (*Structural* 24). On the whole, Habermas agrees with this bourgeois conception, as he casts "the emergence of additional publics as a late development signaling fragmentation and decline" (Fraser, "Rethinking" 122). That is, Habermas seems to suggest that any departure from this conception of a singular public sphere is a departure from the ideal. Like the conceptions of public writing I've just mentioned, Habermas's view is based upon an underlying assumption: that confining public discourse to a single, overarching public sphere is a desirable and positive move, whereas the proliferation of discourse in a multiplicity of public spaces represents a departure from, rather than an advance toward, democracy.

In contrast to Habermas, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge insist on the need to understand postbourgeois public formations in terms other than those of disintegration and decline. In *Public Sphere and Experience*, they assert that no singular form of the public did or ever could exist. They understand public discourse as existing in numerous sites that have "no homogenous substance whatsoever" (13). In their attempt to debunk the myth of a single, overarching public sphere, Negt and Kluge suggest that there are at least two other significant arenas of public discourse: the "public sphere of production," which is more directly rooted in spheres of capitalism, such as factory communities and labor unions, and the "proletarian public sphere," which is "substantively meshed with the history of the emancipation of the working class" (xliv). Moreover,

Negt and Kluge make the point that these other sites for public discourse cannot be viewed in isolation from one another; these public spheres must be seen as "mutually imbricated," overlapping, cohabitational, and often contradictory. In contrast to the conception that there must be one singular site of public discourse, and that it must embrace a diverse public, Negt and Kluge suggest that there are multiple arenas for public discourse, and these might best serve the needs of particular groups rather than a general public.

Nancy Fraser's analysis of this misconception is equally compelling. Counter to Habermas's confidence in an all-encompassing site for public discourse that is comprised of a cross-section of society, Fraser contends that in stratified societies, "arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public" ("Rethinking" 122). As I explained earlier, she suggests that in societies whose basic structure generates unequal social groups in relations of dominance and subordination (as is the case in the United States), full parity of participation in public discourse is not feasible. Despite the fact that all members of a society may be *allowed* to participate in public discourse, it is impossible to insulate special discursive arenas from the effects of societal inequality. This being the case, she goes on to assert that the disadvantages marginalized groups face are only exacerbated where there is just one single arena for public discourse. If there were only one site for public discourse, members of subordinate groups would have no arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives, and strategies. They would have no "venues in which to undertake communicative processes that were not, as it were, under the supervision of dominant groups" (123). In other words, if there were only a single public sphere, subaltern groups would have no discursive spaces in which to deliberate free of oppression.

Fraser suggests that it is advantageous for subordinated groups to constitute alternative sites of public discourse—what she calls *subaltern counterpublics*. She envisions these sites as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (123). Perhaps the most striking example of a subaltern counterpublic in contemporary history is the late-twentieth-century U.S. feminist subaltern counterpublic, with its diverse

array of journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places (123). While subaltern counterpublics are not always inherently democratic or progressive, they do emerge in response to exclusions and omissions within dominant publics, and, as such, they help expand discursive space. In general, the proliferation of subaltern counterpublics means a widening of discursive contestation, and "that is a good thing in stratified societies" (124). Subaltern counterpublics can serve at least two functions. On the one hand, they function as spaces where oppressed others can withdraw, regroup, and heal; on the other hand, they function as "training grounds" and bases for the development of discourse or action that might agitate or disrupt wider publics.

Several scholars in composition have noted the usefulness of employing alternative or subaltern arenas for public writing. Susan Wells argues that compositionists "need to build, or take part in building, such a public sphere that . . . cannot, in our society, be unitary" ("Rogue Cops" 326) She goes on to suggest that given the intractable fragmentation of modern society, the representations of the public we offer students "beyond the classroom will be provisional; we will look for alternate publics and counter publics" (335). Wells offers a number of possible alternative publics that students might engage with through public-writing assignments that pair writing classes at different institutions, involve the collection of oral histories, and bring together computer-networked classes. Similarly, Irene Ward explores the potential for the Internet to become an alternative public sphere. While she rightly addresses the many problems with employing the Internet for public writing, she suggests at the same time that "some forms of the Internet . . . can potentially function in ways that print media functioned in the eighteenth century by delivering information, points of view, and extended argument to a growing sector of the public" (375).

Obviously, public writing need not be limited to a single discursive arena like the readership of a newspaper. Writing teachers should help students discover the various counterpublics where their public writing might have a receptive audience and, consequently, might result in significant outcomes. Public discourse is often difficult to generate and even more difficult to disseminate to large audiences—particularly when students have had little or no prior contact with these audiences.

Compositionists should work to create spaces for public writing if they don't exist or aren't readily entered by students. Public writing exists in a wide array of locations. Often, students feel most comfortable joining in conversation in Internet chat rooms, volunteer organizations, community outreach programs, or other smaller venues that target more specific issues and strive for and generate significant local results. Rather than feeling that they are just insignificant individuals who are unable to bring about sweeping changes—as is usually the case with letters to a newspaper with a wide circulation—students working with smaller, more specific groups often see tangible results from their public discourse. Enabling students to connect with counterpublics comprised of like-minded individuals is an important component of a successful public-writing assignment or course. In specific counterpublics, students often find that they can generate effective public discourse in a climate that is supportive and nurturing, which prepares them to enter larger public debates in the future. Also, these counterpublics allow them to see that they don't necessarily stand alone in their views and opinions; they learn from others with similar experiences and perspectives and often come away from such interactions with more complex and sophisticated views on public topics. Entering into discourse with specific counterpublics is often the most effective way for students to enter public space, and this move can encourage students to feel that public discourse is worth pursuing in the future.

OF COMMON CONCERN

An additional significant misconception of public writing must be debunked if we are to theorize and teach public writing more competently and productively: the misunderstanding that public writing must be confined to matters of "common concern" to all of the members in a society. Similar to the last misconception that I addressed, those who support this fallacy assume that the topic of public discourse must affect all (or at least many) members of society. By definition, such thinking limits public writing to public issues in general, to the exclusion of matters of specific or particular interest. This limitation reflects dualistic thinking that juxtaposes "public" with its apparent opposite, "private." It is easy to see how discursive topics might be placed into either of these two categories. If a topic does not seem to affect a large segment of the public, it is easily relegated to the realm of the private, and as such it is

not seen as an appropriate topic for public writing. Students who choose to write about issues that do not appear to concern large segments of the population might be chastised for myopic thinking and encouraged to address topics that have wider implications and audiences. However, as I shall show, the myth that matters must be of "common concern" to be considered viable topics for public writing is based upon an ideologically interested notion of what counts as public matter.

Habermas envisions the bourgeois public sphere as a discursive arena in which private persons deliberate about public matters. He argues that discussion within this public sphere is grounded on the idea that areas that had previously been off-limits were to be problematized and questioned. Historically, public discourse first took the form of bourgeois discussions of the merits of art, music, and literature—subjects that had previously been confined to aristocrats and noblemen. Gradually, the commodification of cultural products made them more accessible to the public, taking them out of the control of the church and state. Habermas writes:

> [D]iscussion within such a public presupposed the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned. The domain of "common concern" which was the object of public critical attention remained a preserve in which church and state authorities had the monopoly of interpretation not just from the pulpit but in philosophy, literature, and art, even at a time when, for specific social categories, the development of capitalism already demanded a behavior whose rational orientation required ever more information. (*Structural* 36)

Over time, public discussions of common concerns came to include not just art, literature, and philosophy, but economics and politics as well. In short, Habermas suggests that while the subjects of public discourse were quite diverse, they fulfilled an important criteria: they dealt with matters of common concern to all or nearly all members of a society.

Habermas limits his conception of the public sphere to sites where private persons deliberate about "public issues," and he suggests that the appearance of private issues and interests is always undesirable. However, this conception fails to recognize that the term *public* is ambiguous and open to interpretation. Fraser argues that there are several usages of the term beyond the sense of "of concern to everyone." She suggests that only participants can decide what is of common concern,

and there is no guarantee that all of them will agree. Fraser suggests that the term *public* is "ambiguous between what objectively affects or has an impact on everyone as seen from an outsider's perspective, and what is recognized as a matter of common concern by participants" ("Rethinking" 128–29). Only participants can decide what is of common concern to them. However, there is no guarantee that they will all agree, and what will actually count as a matter of common concern will be decided through discursive contestation. Any consensus reached through such contestation will have been achieved "through deliberative processes tainted by the effects of dominance and subordination" (131). In other words, those who are in power get to decide what is a public issue and what is not.

Fraser asserts that the terms *public* and *private* are not simply straightforward designations of societal spheres; they are "cultural classifications and rhetorical labels" (131). As such, they function ideologically to delimit the boundaries of public discourse to the disadvantage of subordinate groups and individuals. For example, the issue of domestic violence was, until quite recently, considered to be a private matter between what was assumed to be a fairly small number of heterosexual couples. Feminists were in the minority in thinking that "domestic violence against women was a matter of common concern and thus a legitimate topic of public discourse" (Fraser, "Rethinking" 129). The feminist counterpublic, however, was instrumental in disseminating a view of domestic violence as a widespread systemic feature of male-dominated societies. Only through their sustained discursive contestation were they able to make it a matter of common concern.

A useful classroom heuristic is to ask students to talk about which issues are labeled "public" and which become "private." Such conversations often reveal the ideological mystification of these two categories. Matters that have heretofore been labeled private—such as sexual orientation, spousal and acquaintance abuse, and other matters of domestic or personal life—become important subjects for student writing. Students should feel free to address all of the issues that affect their lives—not just those that have been delegated "of common concern." In general, composition needs to take a more critical look at what we have determined are matters of public or private interest, and we must be willing to address issues that are often disturbing and unpleasant. We might begin by considering how the notions of public and private can

be vehicles through which race, class, and gender disadvantages operate subtextually and informally, even after formal restrictions have been removed.

PUBLIC WRITING, DECISION MAKING, AND ACTION

There is one final assumption about public writing that I would like to address: that its only purpose is to sway public opinion and that it does not encompass actual decision making and action. If we employ newspapers as the primary venue for public-writing assignments, we imply that student discourse can rarely lead to substantial changes in public policy and can at best only convince others to "think differently." This presumption is especially pernicious because it forecloses real results from student writing and often turns public-writing assignments into pointless and futile exercises. While I'm not suggesting that public writing must *always* lead to decision making, I do believe that in certain circumstances it can. Public writing can form opinions *and* translate them into authoritative decisions, but only if we reconsider the presumption that public discourse is necessarily separated from legislative action.

Interestingly, Habermas suggests that a fundamental aspect of a functioning democratic public sphere is the sharp separation between civil society (the public) and the state (the government). He stops short of recognizing the power manifested in the eighteenth-century bourgeois public sphere, in particular, and suggests that there was no immediate implementation of the opinions produced through this sphere's deliberations. He notes that the bourgeois public "*readied* themselves to *compel* public authority" (*Structural* 27). This definition delineates the public sphere not as a site for the compulsion itself, but only for readying oneself to compel. Even that compulsion, had it been realized, was only a compulsion for the authorities to engage in further dialogue. Habermas suggests that members of the bourgeois public were not (and could not be) state officials, and their participation in the public sphere was not undertaken in any official capacity. As Fraser notes, Habermas's conception of public discourse does not "eventuate in binding, sovereign decisions authorizing the use of state power; on the contrary, it eventuates in public opinion" ("Rethinking" 133). Seen from this perspective, the public sphere is the polar opposite of the state; it is the informal body of discursive opinion that can serve as a "counterweight" to the state. Formal decisions on public issues cannot be made in the

Habermasian public sphere, because its scope is limited to conjecture, speculation, and debate about public matters. It is precisely this aspect of the public sphere that confers an aura of legitimacy, impartiality, and independence on the "public opinion" formed within it. Habermas's conception of the public sphere in effect implies that a sharp separation between civil society and the state is always desirable.

Fraser disagrees with this limited conception of the public sphere, arguing that the force of public opinion is strengthened, not weakened, when a body representing it is empowered to translate opinion into authoritative decisions. For example, self-governing institutions such as child-care centers, self-managed workplaces, or residential communities can be arenas of both opinion formation and decision making. She suggests that in these *strong publics*, whose discourse encompasses both deliberation and action, the "force of public opinion is strengthened when a body representing it is empowered to translate such 'opinion' into authoritative decisions" (*Rethinking* 134–35). The formation of these strong publics would be "tantamount to constituting sites of direct or quasi-direct democracy, wherein all those engaged in a collective undertaking would participate in deliberations to determine its design and operation" (135). While these internal public spheres would still be accountable to a larger public in many respects, their mere existence is a step toward a more egalitarian society, since they disseminate authority and power to a greater number of publics and individuals.

Students' public writing can have significant, tangible, immediate results if it is directed toward publics where both debate *and* decision making are central goals. It is both useful and important to help students locate strong publics where their discourse can lead to action. Asking students to write in spheres where discourse does not often lead to direct action, such as the local newspaper, is often pointless and futile. There are many arenas where student discourse can lead to palpable changes for them and others, and students may very well be members of these publics already. Students are often involved and engaged in student governments, campus organizations, resident-life committees, and workplace unions before they enroll in composition courses, and these and others are certainly sites where their discourse can have substantial effects. We should encourage students to write for publics where their discourse can have real significance, and we should help them to develop the rhetorical skills they will need to sway opinion and bring about change.

I have highlighted here just a few parallels between conversations about the public sphere in social and cultural theory and the more recent conversations of composition scholars about public writing. There is much more to be learned about public spheres and public discourse by looking outside of our own discipline. By drawing upon insights from cultural and social theory, we might develop more specific theoretical and pedagogical approaches to public writing. As a result, we should become more adept at facilitating critical public discourse in the writing courses that we teach.