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Study of the Public Sphere. Bernhard Peters' Interest and Contribution

This volume collects Bernhard Peters' writings addressed to the concept and phenomenon of the public sphere. Ever since his book on the integration of modern societies (1993) the normative foundation and empirical study of the democratic public domain (and public discourse in general) was central to his thinking. Since that time Peters' distinctive conceptions and original insights have been a constant inspiration for the study of the public sphere. He had wanted to elaborate his theory of the public sphere in a monograph. His premature and unexpected death in June 2005 hindered realisation of this plan. Of course, the essays collected here cannot substitute for a fully developed monograph. But they can illuminate sections of the overall project, already realised in published essays as well as in the drafts and sketches of unpublished and inaccessible working papers. Hence the attempt to reconstruct the intentions and contours of this planned work out of these writings, and from remaining draft chapters.

This introduction has two aims. First of all, we seek to shed light upon the intellectual and biographical roots of his reflections on the public sphere, building in part on our personal knowledge. Second, using the structure and draft sections of his planned monograph, we will seek to sketch out the substantive connections between the individual studies presented in this volume.

Intellectual and Biographical Roots of Bernhard Peters' Reflection on the Public Sphere

'Genealogies (family trees) have the same function in science as they had in pre-modern society: they create, among other things, a reputation' (Peters 1985: 79). One should recall this mildly sceptical observation

when seeking the intellectual roots of Bernhard Peters, theorist of the public sphere. That does not alter, however, the fact that Peters' studies on the public sphere owed a great deal to the well-known and well-received work of Jürgen Habermas. What remaining sources of legitimation are there for public, legalised power if the Pope has been banished to the nave, the emperor has been dethroned and the Central Committee is buried under the rubble of the Palace of the Republic? Only the assent of the ruled to the laws which rule over them, and to the public presentation of draft laws to be argued over – that is, the forum of a discursive public sphere!

For all differences in the detail of their reasoning, this response unites social-rationalist theorists of social order within the Kantian tradition, from John Rawls to Jürgen Habermas. Bernhard Peters held firm to this response, even if he constantly asked: what might one think of this response in the light of those real-existing public spheres of OECD states? Does this response to the question concerning the sources of legitimacy for collectively binding decisions express a noble ideal, to be adhered to on moral grounds, defying politics? Or does it rather reflect what really happens in actual political decision-making processes, a communicative element that cannot be replaced and which therefore remains without a functional equivalent? Peters did not exclude a third possibility, although he never accepted it: that agreement arrived at discursively, through public deliberation, and serving as a legitimate foundation for validity and rule is no more than a pure illusion.

His adherence to the possibility of a legitimating, discursive public sphere was fed from another source, one that linked Peters to the tradition of Western Marxism. For Marx, as well as for Critical Theory, social order was not necessarily something that naturally waxed and waned, offering mankind a fate written in stone – in the way that today a globalised market for capital is thought of as a natural force, coercing everyone. Social status, and the prospects for men and women living in a particular social order to have access to particular goods and rights (for example, income, medical services or rights to social and cultural inclusion) remain clearly linked to political decisions. That is the Marxist thesis of *political sociation*. If decisions attributable to particular political instances play a part in the formation of social orders, and if the legitimacy of these constitutive instances is connected to a discursive public sphere, then the concept of a discursive public sphere is not only the counter-concept of secrecy, but also of an inscribed social fate.

Bernhard Peters came from the Rhineland, but he had always kept his distance from the buoyancy of Cologne. An exalting sense of optimism,

whether it be his own or that of another, was alien to him. Normative exuberance was not part of his intellectual constitution. But because of this – and also on account of his lengthy and painful experience of sectarian Marxist party politics during his time as a student – he was as a social scientist always keen to weigh arguments and present them in a scrupulously balanced account. The Marxist thesis of political sociation was for Peters bound up with the theoretical, and politically fatal, danger of being carried away by a Promethean belief that anything was possible. For him, social orders and societies were not natural, given creations. But neither were they for him just so much material to be shaped and formed by the ‘right people’ – yesterday the revolutionary avant garde, today the elite of technocratic experts – to be shaped in a planned and deliberate manner. Hence sociological principles such as those of unintended or latent consequences and inescapable side effects are part of Peters’ arsenal; he clearly rejected the idea of conscious sociation.³ Because of this rejection the concept of a discursive public sphere is not burdened with the task of determining a new agency for the intentional guidance of society.

Habermas initially worked out his idea of a discursive public sphere in the 1970s and early 1980s with a view to answering a question for moral philosophy: how can a transcultural, even universal, validity be claimed for moral pronouncements and evaluations without resorting to transcendental authority in the form of God, transcendental reason or holy scriptures? For Habermas, a public judgement made with respect to all who understand it and are affected by it, supported with reasons formed under specific communicative conditions, fulfils the conditions of universal validity. Behind this there stands a *proceduralism of validity*. The ‘how’ of the process in which judgements are formed trumps the ‘what’ of the judgement’s content. How people can come to common agreement on something binding, itself restricts what can be binding. The ‘how’ in the formation of want is to be understood as discursive, and it limits the ‘what’ of the want with respect to that which is legitimate and worthy of recognition, and what is not.

Peters always had certain reservations about this proceduralism of rationalist discourse theory. He, for example, doubted that participation in the process through which judgements were reached and political will was formed necessarily enhanced the readiness with which the outcomes of such processes were accepted (see Chapter 4 in this volume). Participation does not lead directly to an increased readiness to agree on something. His objection was also aimed at the kind of proceduralism of inescapability to be found in Luhmann’s 1969 book

Procedural Legitimation according to which results have to be accepted if effected through a particular procedure. Another reservation with respect to Habermas stemmed from Peters' strong sense for the value of a variety of classifications, a reservation that was rooted in a reaction against youthful orthodoxies, as well as in his admiration for Max Weber. Peters contended that, in discourse, it was not only moral arguments that counted. In discursive disagreement substantial arguments and vigorous evaluations often supplant those arguments with which procedural rules, or prior agreement of how one might deal with opponents, are brought to bear. So, for instance, a bitterly contested electoral dispute might terminate in a slender majority for one party. If the beaten party accepts defeat, they do so out of respect for the prevailing majority principle. But Peters would add that loyalty, identification with the community or even the ethos of being a good loser can sustain or supplement the persuasive force of majority rule as a procedural argument. Peters always measured the legitimating power of procedure against the quality of their results. Here he was closer to Hobbes than to Rousseau.

Habermas is no less pluralistic than Peters. From the end of the 1980s onwards Habermas differentiated the discursive aspect of his writings on ethics and legal philosophy into a range of argumentative types – pragmatic, moral and ethic (see Habermas 1991, 1996). As will be plain from Chapters 3 and 5 in this volume, Peters followed along with this pluralisation of discursive types. But one should not ignore the fact that influence here did not solely run from Habermas to Peters. There was at this time a mutual exchange between the two, in which thoughts became argued text.

The Discovery of Public Culture

Whoever equates the public sphere with the discursive public sphere runs the risk of taking the part for the whole. Beyond this, there is the danger of being mocked for a rationalistic overestimation of public reason in the era of *Fox News* and hate radio, of infotainment and the Murdoch empire, of canvassers as spies for editors, of TV celebrities as definitive authorities. '*Bild* and the gogglebox are all you need to rule', as Gerhard Schröder, former Chancellor and subsequently Gazprom manager, said a few years ago. The last word has not yet been said on the brute realism of such newly fashionable cynicism, especially if one reads the studies collected together in this book. But Peters never lost track of that which is so pithily formulated in Schröder's comment: taken as a

whole, the public sphere is not characterised by calm and measured argument between minds well trained in disputation. Or even like a serious parliamentary debate between specialist politicians in free debate. Peter's distinction between discursive public sphere or public deliberation on the one hand, and public culture on the other, makes the difference clear enough (see Chapter 3).

For Peters, 'public culture' is the culture of a community, a *res publica* demarcated clearly from an expert culture, from corporate culture, or youth culture. It is made up from the spoken language of the majority, from familiar images, verses, films, songs and hymns, plays and monuments, from current stories and comparisons, well-known ceremonies, heroes and villains, observed days of memory and so on. All of these components of a public culture lend the statements of political actors and publics, as well as decisions, events and circumstances, and general developments, their meaning and allow them to be weighed, and be both understood and misunderstood (but not to remain unintelligible). They are rendered communicable or kept secret; they are explicable, justifiable and open to evaluation. The elements of a public culture make up the connective tissue of chains of association, the vanishing points of justifications, the selectivities of attentiveness, the basis for understanding and communication. And they influence assent to and acceptance of collectively binding decisions and non-decisions, the importance of and attention to circumstances and events, the appreciation of the time span for developments and consequences of decisions. Public culture is the quintessence of facilitative and restrictive conditions of communication within a community. Public culture works like a sluice, opening and closing communicative opportunity. It plays a significant role in determining the path along which political disputes unravel and, according to Peters, is nationally diverse (see Chapters 7 and 8).

For Bernhard Peters public culture is certainly a lock without a lock keeper. It is not discursive, since one cannot represent its components as a list of statements. This naturally creates methodological problems in registering its existence in a systematic manner. Peters already knew about this problem thanks to his thorough study of the structural anthropologists Claude Lévi-Strauss and Edmund Leach. The elements of a public culture are not simply expressible symbolic entities, for they are made up of shareable or shared inclination, sensibility, indifference, habitual reactions, habitual views, taboos, blind spots and so forth. One might therefore think of public culture as the *subtext* of a set of political rules (a polity), of the interaction in the processes in which opinion and

will be formed (politics) and of legally articulated programmes and measures (polices). Ever since completing his graduate dissertation on 'The Influence of Linguistic and Psychological Theories in the Social Sciences' (1985), Peters had a deep understanding of those implicit dimensions of a culture that cannot be reduced to statements, theses, or arguments. Unlike many others he had an exact knowledge of the structuralism that post-structuralists thought they had superseded. He had, therefore, no reason to fear the accusation that his understanding of culture, public and communication was too rationalist. His regular daily conversations with Clifford Geertz while he was in Princeton (1991–2) conserved his sensibility for the non-discursive elements of cultures.

In 198–97, during his time at the University of California at Berkeley, Peters became aware of the fact that symbolic theory might contribute to political science via the idea of public culture. He there quickly befriended Aaron Wildavsky, at the time studying the relation between technology policy and culture. Wildavsky's conception of a risk culture was of relevance to political analysis and was a significant source of inspiration for Peters. This was made easier because of the connection between Wildavsky and Mary Douglas (see Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). Peters was already familiar with some of Mary Douglas's work and thought highly of it, so that he was able to link Wildavsky's new ideas to things that he already knew. While perhaps not the sources of Peter's work, these were streams that sustained its elaboration.

The Plan for His Monograph on the Public Sphere

Peters had planned a mighty tree with a broad trunk and strong branches: a monograph in which his theory of the public sphere might be systematically developed together with its empirical ramifications. He was not able to realise this plan. The draft structure (see below), which hung both in his study at home in Amsterdam and in his office in Bremen, reveals how he saw the public sphere, and how he wished to analyse it.

The planned monograph fell into three broad parts. The first three sections would present conceptual definitions and clarify basic normative and theoretical questions. Peters here sought (in part new and original) definitions for core concepts of political theory from the perspective of his theory of the public sphere: the public sphere, public discourse and deliberation, public culture, rationality and (democratic) legitimacy. Sections 4–9 would then present a multilayered empirical investigation of his conception of the public sphere. Section 4 would

The Public Sphere: Draft Book Plan

1. **Public Sphere and Public Discourse – Conceptual Definitions**
 2. **Public Deliberation; Normative Positions, Empirical Preconditions and Expectations**
 3. **Public Discourse, Rationality and Legitimacy: Theoretical Questions**
 4. **Structures and Functions of the Public Sphere: Empirical Questions.**
What are the questions? What kind of description and explanation?
 5. **Structures of the Public Sphere I: Symbolic Structures**
 - 5.1 Discursive and Non-Discursive Communication
 - 5.2 Types and Genres of Discourse
 - 5.3 Cultural Background
 - 5.4 Levels of Rationality?
 6. **Structures of the Public Sphere II: Social Structures**
 - 6.1 Participant Categories: who deliberates?
 - 6.2 Production Structures
 - 6.3 Segmentation and Stratification
 7. **Dynamic Aspects**
 - 7.1 Selection Mechanisms for Topics and Contributions
 - 7.2 Issue-attention Cycles and other Discursive Dynamics
 8. **Some Significant Variations in National Publics: Germany, France, UK, USA (and the Netherlands?)**
 9. **National and Transnational Public Spheres**
 10. **Functions, Capacities, Levels of Rationality**
 - 10.1 Cultural Reproduction
 - 10.2 Learning Processes
 - 10.3 Integration and Legitimation
 11. **Résumé**
-

map the project's terrain. The planned sections 5–7 would systematically elaborate the symbolic and social structures in public spheres together with their dynamic aspects according to substantive, social and temporal perspective. Sections 8 and 9 were conceived on the model of national public spheres, presenting comparative and transnational aspects on the basis of his own recent work. The closing theoretical sections 10 and 11 were intended to return to the original definition of public sphere and public discourse. Here the implications of the processes subjected to empirical study would be examined with respect to cultural reproduction, innovation (learning), for social integration (the topic of his 1993 Habilitation dissertation) and for democratic legitimacy. This plan reveals an extraordinarily complex, original but

also well-structured design. The present volume allows one to judge the complexity and originality of this plan, but it cannot of course reproduce the consistency that its author would have imposed upon its execution. The following comments provide some guidance in reading the pieces collected here, outlining the central elements of Peters' conception and sketching some of his key insights.

Conceptual Definitions and Core Theoretical Statements

Peters thoroughly elaborates the specific sense he gave to the concepts 'discursive public' and 'public discourse' in his programmatic essay of 1994 ('The Meaning of the Public Sphere' – Chapter 2 in this volume) and his no less programmatic working paper of 1997 ('On Public Deliberation and Public Culture' – Chapter 3 in this volume). This definition of public discourse is marked out distinctly along several axes: first, differentiated with respect to communication that is not public; second, with respect to public communication that is merely descriptive, entertaining or for the purposes of advertising; and, third, communication that is not intended literally, i.e. 'presentative', playful, poetic or phatic. He did not, however, limit the concept of public discourse to political communication in its strictest sense, but also included general cultural processes of self-understanding taking place in public.⁴

The public sphere is on the one hand a social sphere in which public discourse (together with all of the other forms of communication) circulates; on the other also a collective that, in Peters' understanding, includes not only the audience (*Publikum*) but also those who speak. This dual characteristic of the public sphere is seen most clearly in the two variants taken by the terms in English: 'public sphere' as a social sphere and the 'public' as a collective including speakers and listeners.

The broad understanding of public discourse as cultural self-understanding is reflected in the central meaning given by Bernhard Peters to the above concept of *public culture*. Public culture is a 'reservoir of symbols, meanings, knowledge and values' accessible for and of interest to a particular public collective – for instance, a national public – but which circulates without being internalised and accepted on the part of all members (Chapter 9, p. 219). Public discourse only functions against the background of such a public culture, contributing to its reproduction and renewal. A central purpose of Peters' analyses of the public is to determine exactly the specific contribution to cultural reproduction and renewal made by public discourse, distinguishing it from the influence

of other factors – such as social agencies like family, peer group and education; private communication; or non-discursive forms of public communication such as public rituals, literature and art, popular culture and entertainment, monuments and museums.

Of central importance for Peters' conception of the public sphere are two final aspects. First of all, the public realm is not only constituted as a collective through the binding of its members into the same communicative context, being subject for instance to the same media products. A particular public realm has also to identify itself as such, create a *collective public identity*. It is only in this way that the context of meaning emerges that is required for the reciprocity of address and understanding in public discourse (see this already argued in Peters 1993: 117, 168). This definitional link to collective (self)identification would later, in the essays on the transnationalisation of the public realm (Chapters 8 and 9) become a characteristic feature of Peters' approach (see also Peters 2002b; Sackmann *et al.* 2005).

Second, beyond an interest in what was publicly communicated, Peters was also interested in the *non-public structures of production* 'behind' the public realm. Among these are the mass media, as well as institutional forms for the production of ideas such as scientific institutes, think-tanks, foundations and so on; the structures of interest articulation and aggregation in parties, associations and social movements; looser networks and groups of public intellectuals, experts and journalists. Non-public structures of production that underlie the visible level of public communication create, together with a historically formed public identity, a mutually reinforcing structure. The principal insight here is that a synergetic structure of this kind is what lends a particular public realm its special nature and a certain historical durability.

Peters' interest in public discourse beyond the immediate political domain did not lead him to abandon the linkage between the analysis of the public realm and political theory outlined in his book on integration (see Chapter 1 in this volume). On the contrary: the relationship between public deliberation on the one hand and *political legitimacy* on the other played a prominent part right up to his final essay from 2005 (Chapter 9). But in contrast to other writers in this area, he approached this question with some degree of scepticism. He considered, for instance, the manner in which empirically observable processes of public deliberation related to the empirically observable readiness of citizens to assent to political orders or decisions. Do the processes of public deliberation have particular empirical effects or outcomes that strengthen the readiness for citizens to give such assent? Do they, for

instance, lead to a higher level of rational consensus in respect of political matters? Here Peters proves to be an empirically well-informed sceptic: 'A lively and vibrant discursive public sphere would initially seem to generate problems and promote dissent. If it produces innovative ideas and suggestions, it is quite probable that variations in opinion increase rather than decrease' (Chapter 4, p. 131). The triadic structure of public communication – different speakers dispute among themselves to convince a public, not to reach mutual agreement – means that in the public media any real effort at achieving consensus between speakers is rare. Moreover, the struggle for leadership in one's own corner also enhances incentives for speakers involved in public dispute to be externally inflexible while internally adhering to a party line.

This empirical scepticism in respect of the capacity of public discourse to augment directly consensus or legitimacy allows Peters to abandon a model of the public sphere predicated on the short-term resolution of specific political controversies. It is here that the implications of his broad understanding of the public domain are fully realised, reaching well beyond political communication. The impact of public discourse is to be found in more comprehensive but also more diffuse and gradual transitions in the cultural repertoire – above all to be viewed in the long term, and not on a daily basis. Peters always pointed to the way in which the German public had reached a reflective relationship with the National Socialist past as an example of this. This reorientation of the study of the public realm towards broadly conceived processes of cultural innovation and learning is so central to Peters' thinking that his planned monograph concludes with a thorough reconsideration of these issues. The basic ideas underlying this are, however, evident in Chapters 4 and 9 of this collection.

The Empirical Dimension of the Public Sphere

Peters wanted to open out the phenomenon of the public sphere in modern democratic states in five steps (see sections 5–9 of the draft book plan above).

The planned discussion of *symbolic structures* of the public realm are linked to Peters' earlier reflections on the theory of symbols and is deployed in the programmatic discussion of public discourse to be found in Chapter 3 and in the empirical tracing of symbolic differentiation to be found in Chapters 5 and 6. Especially important here are the different types of argumentation, reaching from the empirical and

pragmatic to ethical and moral, evaluative, aesthetic, legal and metacommunicational argument.

Consideration of the *social structures* of the public realm take up three features central to its sociological appraisal. First of all, Peters developed a typology of speakers that was later partially empirically validated (Peters, Schultz and Wimmel 2004; see also Neidhardt 1994a). Second, a more detailed consideration of non-public structures of production (for which there are, however, hardly any drafts). Third, the question of (horizontal) segmentation and (vertical) stratification of the public sphere. The sober revelation of the public domain as a strongly hierarchised system of social stratification has serious consequences for Peters' understanding of the public sphere as outlined above. It ultimately leads to the abandonment of the kind of strongly egalitarian demands for participation typical of some other conceptions of public deliberation, and puts forward an alternative based upon the greatest *equality of opportunity for topics, opinions and ideas* (and not actors, or types of actors).

The *temporal structure* of public discourse, the ebb and flow of public attention for particular topics is indicative (a) of the selection mechanism for topics and contributions in the mass media (this mechanism has been quite well studied); and (b) of discursive dynamics, something that Peters dealt with much earlier in his distinction between the routinised mode of public communication and its capacity to switch from this into problem mode (Chapter 1). To characterise this problem mode he introduced the literature dealing with the public construction of social problems, on 'moral entrepreneurs', social movements and on agenda-setting. While the manner in which problems are raised in public seeks their solution, or at least that they be worked through, the overheated competition among those raising problems and diagnosing crises often results in the suppression or denial of other important problems – a dynamic process that Bernhard Peters, stubbornly opposed to each and every form of alarmism, always viewed with great suspicion.

His observations on the *differences between national publics* derived from his own periods in the United States, as well as his regular reading of the British, French, Dutch and American press. He saw one distinction, for instance, in the differing roles played in political life of the supreme courts in the USA and in Germany. There are some anecdotal references to the differences between national public realms in Chapter 7; Peters wanted to work these out more systematically.

Since the millennium Peters' interest had been directed especially to the transnationalisation of the public sphere (Chapters 7, 8 and 9 here; and Peters *et al.* 2005; Peters and Wessler 2006). Many of the earlier

argumentative threads are pulled together here: raising the question of whether public spheres were becoming transnationalised opened a perspective upon the synergistic combination of historically developed production structures and public identities. Public spheres are lethargic and sluggish, of this Peters was convinced. Their sociocultural preconditions cannot easily be duplicated at the international level. Public spheres do not belong to that class of public facticities than can be 'constructed' through conscious, or even strategic, action – even if the European Commission invested more heavily in public relations. This treatment of transnationalisation demonstrates the analytical power of Peters' broad, 'cultural' understanding of the public sphere. A short-term resolution of the European Union's lack of legitimacy will not follow from the expansion of Europeanised public discourse in national publics, nor from a rather stagnant level of 'migration of ideas' between them. For Bernhard Peters such Europeanising tendencies express instead long-term shifts in publicly accessible argumentative repertoires and hence, possibly, processes of cultural innovation and learning that relate more directly to accustomed criteria of legitimacy than to the degree of support for the EU (Chapter 9). It was in this complex sense that Bernhard Peters ultimately thought of himself as a 'Eurosceptic' – but also because he considered that nowhere were the democratic processes of opinion formation and decision-making realised so effectively as within the framework of the nation state.

Impact and Perspective

With this last subject Peters left his mark upon research. The study of transnationalisation among European publics, something that he had begun and stimulated, continues (see Sifft *et al.* 2007; Wessler *et al.* 2007; www.sf6597.uni-bremen.de/publicsphere). This research takes up the questions that Peters had formulated as hypotheses: how sluggish are national publics? How do production structures and discursive cultures fit together? Why do national media increasingly look to Brussels, without at the same time forming stronger horizontal links between themselves?

In 1994 Bernhard Peters wrote that social theory and empirical research had shown itself to be more or less indifferent to the public sphere, or rejected the idea as irrelevant (Chapter 2). Since then this situation has altered to some extent, thanks in part to Peters' own impact in Bremen. From the dissertations relating to the public sphere that he supervised we now know more about the condition for, and limits to, deliberative conceptions of democracy (Hüller 2005); the state of

European self-understanding in respect of the prospective entry of Turkey to the EU (Wimmel 2006); and about the deliberative qualities of political talk shows on television (Schultz 2006). But he also remains an important point of reference and stimulation across a broad range of research into the public sphere conducted in communications and the wider social sciences (see, for example, Habermas 2006; Neidhardt 1994a, 2006; Imhof 2003; Zerfaß 2004; Trenz 2005; Wessler 2002, 2007; Wessler and Schultz 2007). The absence of his planned monograph will be a lasting gap. For this reason it is important to continue posing the questions suggested by a normatively grounded, analytically clear and empirically rich theory of the public sphere as substantively developed by Bernhard Peters. It would be no bad thing if we cultivated the attitude that made scholarly debate with Bernhard Peters such an intellectual adventure – an attitude that often showed itself in his liberating and laconic questions: ‘Is that really true?’ And ‘Why should we believe that?’

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