Publicity and Secrecy
Variations on Intertwining Use

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In the modern era, publicity is often depicted as the leading principle of political and social representation, in which there is no longer any room for secrecy. This is a myth, according to the Viennese philosopher Stefan Nowontny. Publicity and secrecy are – through the production of affects – more entangled than ever in an inextricable knot.

One of the central myths of modernism is the narrative that the power of the secret has been replaced by publicity in this era. According to this narrative, the secret, previously a 'thoroughly acknowledged and necessary dimension of political agency',[1] was crucially discredited with the development of modernism. Whereas the *secretarii* of the European princes and kings still administered a *secretum*, which derived its legitimacy from political power absolved from public concerns, it became the task of modern 'secretaries of state' to serve the public interest. And while the former were still agents of an instance of domination, which sought to present itself in the public eye, but was not responsible to the public in the modern sense, the modern approach was to prove the legitimacy of political agency specifically by carrying it out in a sphere of negotiation ideally accessible to all and actually co-determined by many.

This narrative can be regarded as a myth to the extent that it claims to provide information about the modern world from its origins – as it sometimes functions as part of what is a veritable cosmogony of modernism. Yet it is no less recognizable as a myth (or rather it is the coupling of these two moments that first justifies comprehending it as such) in that it can be understood as a kind of 'screen-narrative', which veils the origins it touches upon in the movement of its own revelation. It specifically represents those origins in a very particular way, the suggestive power of which can be explained also by the way it has established constant narrative elements, but still provides a place for all 'unsuitable' elements in a dark prehistory or somewhere else completely different. The expression 'screen-narrative' is clearly to be taken here as an allusion to Freud's concept of 'screen memories' (*Deckerinnerungen*): in emerging psychoanalytical theory, this referred to memories that 'represent' (and cover up at the same time) a whole complex of early experiences, of which large portions are subject to 'infantile amnesia', not least of all due to the effects of these kinds of superimposed representations, and which specifically cannot be recalled and made present. What is notable about these 'unrepresentable' memories here, is that despite their lack of realization, they sometimes lose nothing of their penetrating significance, so that they do not cease to exercise their recurrent influence. [2]

In this way, it is possible to consider that the narrative of publicity as a constitutive principle of the modern world overwrites a 'childhood', which has not been overcome by this world to the extent that the narrative claims, but which has instead simply become inaccessible to it, living on in it from this inaccessible place, all the more repressed in unpredictable turns and garbs. Let us consider the strange consequences of an

assumption of this kind: it would mean that, rather than having overcome the secret, the power of publicity simply remains fraught with the power of the secret. Its most intrinsic secret is covered over in this way. And the task of an appropriate analysis would then be to trace the fates and reanimations of the secret in the midst of publicity, as well as that which publicity absolutely does not want to know of itself and therefore replaces with tendentious realizations.

Yet I do not want to take the analogy derived from psychoanalytical theory too far. What interests me here, first of all, is solely the position and the historical-epistemic configuration of a certain narrative, or more specifically: a certain *representation of publicity, which asserts publicity as the crucial principle of political and social representation and allows no more room within the organization of the modern world for the 'secret' – and yet without this world ever having left the secret behind*. In other words, I am interested in what Freud called, in reference to the covering power of certain realizations, the 'substitution in reproduction', [3] a substitution that specifically excludes 'other truly meaningful' elements of what there could be to realize from the capability of reproduction.

Publicity, Secrecy, Modernity

On previous occasions, I have already discussed [4] several variations of these kinds of representations of public. One of them is to be found in Jürgen Habermas's depiction of the history of secret societies of the Enlightenment, the significance of which is that it was possible in them to 'practice the norms of political equality of a future society'. [5] According to Habermas, in the milieu of absolutist authoritarian states in the eighteenth century, that circle still needed 'itself protection from becoming public … Its sphere of publicity still had to rely on secrecy', in order to be able to constitute itself at all on the basis of principles like freedom of discussion and egalitarian forms of exchange. As the bourgeois public sphere progressively prevailed, however, this circle saw itself confronted with an alternative: either to remain secret, but factiously falling 'prey to its own ideology', even inimical to the public, or to open up, to ensure 'relatively easy access', thus integrating into what they had basically always already anticipated, namely bourgeois society. [6] In short: where there was secrecy, sooner or later there had to be publicity – if one did not want to miss joining the modern world.

During the period of the Enlightenment itself, there are equally unequivocal attempts to get rid of the dimension of secrecy. Here we encounter, so to speak, the work on its repression *in actu* – and at the same time the proposal of an *ideal* public, of which the characteristics could later be regarded as an actual principle of organization of bourgeois society. One relevant text in this context is the Appendix II of Kant's *Perpetual Peace*, where Kant argues that politics and morality can only be reconciled on the basis of the 'principle of publicity'. According to this principle, all maxims affecting the 'rights of other human beings' must be both *capable* of being made public and *in need* of being made public. The first demand, that they must be 'compatible with being made public', [7] is nothing other than a discrediting of the secret: for a maxim, which 'must at all costs be *kept secret*, if it is to succeed', can only be unjust, according to Kant, especially since the inevitable 'resistance of everyone', in the case of it becoming public, by itself may be the reason for secrecy. Kant places this first demand, which is ultimately a purely negative one because it aims at eliminating secrecy, alongside the demand for a requirement of publicity as the positive formulation of what he regards as the 'particular task of politics': to remain in harmony with the 'universal aim of the public (which is happiness)'. [8]

Politics is consequently to be conducted not only in public, but – as rational, moral, just politics – absolutely must harmonize with the public. It is noticeable, however, that the limitations of this kind of conception of political public already begin to emerge with Kant himself. This is the case where the same 'principle of publicity', which should actually

ensure justice, obviously does the exact opposite and becomes a pillar of existing injustice. Kant touches on this kind of inversion of the moral-political function of publicity in the passages, in which he discusses the question of the lawfulness of overthrowing a tyrant[9] and describes the initial situation expressly: 'The rights of the people have been violated, and there can be no doubt that the tyrant would not be receiving unjust treatment if he were dethroned …' Yet as clear as this position is, the turn that follows it is all the more surprising. Despite the obvious injustice of the despotic rule, Kant sees every 'rebellion' against it as being in the wrong. This is specifically because a rebellion of this kind cannot fulfil the condition of 'making public' its maxims – unlike the sovereign, who may threaten with punishment of the 'ringleaders', for instance – without thwarting its own intentions: 'We are obliged to keep them [the maxims of rebellion] secret.'

Although no injustice is done to the unjust tyrant when he is dethroned, according to Kant's own statement, it is none other than the consistent application of the principle of publicity that leads to a condemnation of the concrete action that could result in the dethroning – and consequently to paradoxically siding with the ruler. The same formalism to which this taking sides is due, will subsequently move Kant to also declare every 'counter-insurrection' illegitimate, should a tyrant actually be dethroned. Nevertheless, the impression arises that the entire construction entrusting the reconciliation of politics and morality to the 'principle of publicity' rests on its own silent assumption, namely that injustice, which is to be eliminated with the help of publicity, is basically only a hypothetical injustice, not an actual one. As long as it has not yet been carried out, injustice may indeed be limited by the demand to make public the maxims on which it is based. In the case of an actual injustice, however, as the example of the tyrant shows, the relevant maxims no longer absolutely need to be kept secret, because it is specifically the inequalities stamped into publicity itself, which allow the despot, more than his adversaries, to publicly defend his regime of injustice.

Hannah Arendt attempted to find a way out of the dead end that the Kantian argumentation led into in this respect, by pointing out a political categorical error on Kant's part: '… the alternative to established government is, for him [Kant], not revolution but a coup d'état. And a coup d'état, in contradistinction to a revolution, must indeed be prepared in secrecy, whereas revolutionary groups or parties have always been eager to make their goals public and to rally important sections of the population to their cause.'[10] This observation has the advantage of locating the nexus between publicity and power, mentioned by Kant only incidentally and one-sidedly, on the side of a revolutionary counter-power as well; in fact, it highlights an important difference in this nexus, namely that between a use of publicity that secures domination and one that empowers. Nevertheless, Arendt still remains true to the modern screen-narrative of the primacy of publicity over secrecy, of the repulsion of the latter by the former, as she identifies the – modern [11] – political option of revolution for her part solely with an agency oriented to the public sphere.

Super-Addressing and the Specter of Conspiration

These re-readings might be considered unusable and hardly up to date in a time when it has become conventional to conduct critical debates on publicity (at least in the 'West' or 'global North') in the midst of liberal democratic conditions, additionally oriented to the transformation that the organization of publicity has undergone and is undergoing due to new media and their forms of use. Are we seriously concerned today primarily with the question of overthrowing a tyrant? And are not the starting conditions today completely different, as a result of the increasingly densely interwoven possibilities of social networks, mobile communication and mobile audiovisual recording, than in the days of emerging press publicity and secret societies of the Enlightenment?

Certainly, these questions apply to principally important points. 'Public', as much as it may

suggest the singular, is not to be considered as a uniform substance with constant essential properties, but rather always to be queried in terms of its institutional framework conditions and the technical, economic and social means of production that they engender. Nevertheless, idealized notions of the public as the sphere of a complete transparency, providing a kind of setting for negotiating political-social conflicts and thus for establishing just or at least less unjust conditions, seem to be deeply anchored in our political imaginary up to the present. If we do not wish to trust in the attempts to positively ground this idealization (for instance through its foundations in an expanded capacity of rationality), then publicity could be understood in this sense as a specifically modern ideological expression of a common 'super-addressee' of manifold articulation, or as Michail Bachtin says: as an instance simultaneously presupposed and staged by these articulations, which is supposed to vouch for an unclouded understanding and perfect responsivity. [12]

Moreover, the authoritarian 'tyrant' as the counterpart of these kinds of idealizations and ideologizations of publicity is still far from obsolete as well, specifically in the sense of a force that is based on secrecy, as well as in the sense of a force that has at its disposal an increased power of production and control in relation to articulations circulating in society. A more recent document for the construction of this kind of tyrannical counterpart is the Wikileaks Manifesto by Julian Assange from 2006, which provides little information about the positive reason for his own practice of publicizing, which has meanwhile attracted much attention, but instead portrays the opponents of this practice right at the beginning as 'authoritarian regimes', whose 'inner workings' are defined by 'conspiratorial interactions among the political elite'. [13] Here the conspiracy unmistakably designates the wolf in sheep's clothing, the tyrant in liberal democratic garb, which is further presented as the perfect correlate to the conspirative networks, of which it has itself the greatest horror: 'terrorist conspiracies'.

It is still attempted to banish the tyranny of the secret, yet still it returns, not infrequently as the spectre of conspiration. Experiences with the *real* history of 'publicity' have undoubtedly shown that much is hushed up or distorted in its name, and many are also hindered in their articulation. But the *ideal* of publicity is still upheld, and what falls short of this ideal is attributed to what this ideal has always sought to rid itself of: the secret. So attempts are undertaken to newly implement this ideal, whether by keeping – like the secret societies of the Enlightenment – one's own operations to this end secret, or by forming 'anonymous' networks to support these operations. Regardless of how the concrete actions of Wikileaks are judged, the result is an impulse for reflection on the relationship between publicity and secret that was already formulated by Negt and Kluge: 'Alternating between an idealizing and a critical view of the public sphere leads … only to an ambivalent result: the public sphere sometimes appears as something that can be used, another time as something that cannot be used.' [14]

Can the Revolution Be Internetized?

Against this background, let us consider in more detail an episode that occurred, far less spectacularly, shortly after the Wikileaks publications at the end of the last year – specifically in the course of events that actually overthrew a tyrant (even if not necessarily the power structures that supported him). On 27 January 2011, bilingual (Arabic/English) excerpts from a '26-page pamphlet' were published in the Internet edition of *The Atlantic*, which had been circulated among Egyptian rebels. Under the heading 'Egyptian Activists' Action Plan: Translated', [15] it was announced with a certain pride: 'Egyptian activists have been circulating a kind of primer to Friday's planned protest. We were sent the plan by two separate sources and have decided to publish excerpts here, with translations into English. Over Twitter, we connected with a translator, who translated the document with exceptional speed.'

One might perhaps conjecture that this involved the 'Arendtian' case of a revolution 'eager to make its goals public and to rally important sections of the population to its cause'. And in fact, on the second page of the material published by *The Atlantic*, the goals are expressly named, under the heading 'The Demands of the Egyptian People', of what was already clearly recognizable as the attempt of a revolution: from overthrowing the Mubarak regime through general formulas like freedom and justice, all the way to the constructive tasks of forming a new government devoted to the interests of the Egyptians and setting up a corresponding administration. But a single page was sufficient for this. As soon as it was a matter of the question of *how* further sections of the population were to be included, the relevant calls – 'shout slogans in the name of Egypt and the people's freedom', 'positive slogans', 'positive language', etc. – were embedded in *tactical* instructions, such as 'assemble with your friends and neighbors in residential streets far away from where the security forces are', or 'go out into the major streets in very large groups in order to form the biggest possible assembly'. The maxims that were circulated here were obviously not exhausted in publicizing the *goals* of action, but rather related more to a *prudence* of action, which was closely connected to the goals (a coup d'état ultimately does not necessarily need to include large sections of the population), but by no means equated with them. And this prudence includes, not least of all, the attempt of a differentiated way of dealing with publics and distribution media – which *The Atlantic* also did not fail to mention: 'As you'll read, the creators of the pamphlet explicitly asked that the pamphlet not be distributed on Twitter or Facebook, only through email or other contacts. We're publishing this piece of ephemera because we think it's a fascinating part of the historical record of what may end up becoming a very historic day for Egypt.'

The only problem was that by publishing the material on their own website, *The Atlantic* obviously torpedoed the prudence of 'the creators', probably because, as the last sentence suggests, it was not possible to resist the temptation to document a history that had not yet really occurred. Obsessed with publishing, those responsible thus revealed a glaring illiteracy in relation to the differential *handling* of publicity structures and circulation media. As was to be expected, the protests very quickly followed – which is evident on the one hand in the posts published on the website, but on the other also in the following editorial 'Update', which appeared online only 41 minutes after the publication of the material: 'People have asked why these particular pages were chosen. We had limited resources, so we knew we'd only be able to translate an excerpt. My guiding principles were to stay away from the small amount of tactical information in the pamphlet. Instead, we ran the more general pages. There is nothing in these pages that goes beyond standard advice and broad political statements.'

'Stay away from the small amount of tactical information'? The 'more general pages' that were published still included guidelines for choosing demonstration routes, on questions of clothing and sign codes or even on accessories such as spray cans or pot lids (which were recommended for use as protective shields). The pamphlet was headed with the title 'How to protest intelligently', which quite unambiguously indicated its primarily tactical character, and the adjective 'intelligently' could mentally be added to the heading on the last page as well, specifically 'How to publish and disseminate this information'. This last page also included the sentence: 'Do not betray your fellow citizens and ensure that this not fall into the hands of anyone who works for the police.'

There is no need to speculate about whether the Egyptian security forces really needed *The Atlantic* to obtain this kind of material. It is certain, however, that *The Atlantic* made their job easier rather than harder, and that this was due to an astonishingly unintelligent reissue of the aforementioned imperative that where even just remainders of secrecy are to be found, they must be made public as quickly as possible.

‘What I Can Share with You Is Deeply Troubling’

Among the sometimes bizarre, but no less consequential reprises of the modern dramas involving publicity, the case of the infamous speech held by Colin Powell on 5 February 2003 before the United Nations Security Council is especially interesting. The point of this speech was to convince the ‘international public’ – both in the sense of an institutional representation in the form of UN bodies, and in the sense of ‘public opinion’ (as a social circulation phenomenon far more difficult to grasp) – of the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the unavoidableness of the war that had been long prepared. Here ‘facts’ were presented, based on intelligence material from various ‘sources’, intended to support the legality of a maxim, of which it could certainly be said that it relates to ‘the rights of other people’ (Kant). The precise character of these ‘sources’ was of course – especially since they were from secret services – only very vaguely revealed; it was consequently hardly possible to check these ‘facts’, which were expressly only incompletely presented: ‘The material I will present to you comes from a variety of sources. Some are U.S. sources. And some are those of other countries… I cannot tell you everything that we know. But what I can share with you, when combined with what all of us have learned over the years, is deeply troubling… My colleagues, every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources. These are not assertions. What we’re giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence. I will cite some examples, and these are from human sources… Ladies and gentlemen, these are not assertions. These are facts, corroborated by many sources, some of them sources of the intelligence services of other countries.’ **16**

Whereas Colin Powell’s appearance before the United Nations thus seems to uphold the demand for publicity in relation to one’s own maxim, the actual justification for this maxim remained entrusted to an area, of which the lack of publication capability did not even appear to be worth mentioning. For as a ‘thoroughly recognized and necessary dimension of political action’, the secret still applies, despite all publicity imperatives, at least where it involves the dimension of intelligence gathered by secret services. In other words, Powell’s speech was not really intended to make the maxim for action of the Bush administration public for discussion. Instead, it was more a matter of (re-)performing the modern ritual of publicity as credibly as possible – but at the same time shifting the aspects of this ritual that have to do with legitimation disputes from the maxim for action itself into a ‘secret’ area again that remains elusive to them.

In the case of Powell’s speech, this shift was drowned out by the mantra of ‘sources’, ‘facts’, even ‘conclusions’. It is as though these required no discussion, but were instead solidified simply through the tautological insistence that they actually existed. The three-part mantra roughly followed a certain pattern: (1) the facts are facts, not assertions; (2) they are facts because they are based on sources, which are real sources, even if they are not documented; and (3) the conclusions that we draw from them are, because of (1) and (2), real and unassailable conclusions. Naturally this kind of ‘argumentation’ can hardly hold up to critical epistemological requirements, and we have long known that it was simply false. Yet a capability for critique was never the point of this publicity spectacle, but rather it was to forestall every possible critique by withdrawing everything it could be founded upon into a ‘secret’ area. A suggestive audiovisual presentation spectacle took the place of a negotiable issue, and at the same time an incidental revelation of the – here also tactically defined – boundary between public and secret: ‘What I can share with you … is deeply troubling.’ One could also add: And *how* I will share it with you will give you the *feeling* that it is deeply troubling, because that is, first and foremost, what you have to know.

The use value of publicity – or rather the specific intertwining of the use of publicity and secret – shows itself here closely linked with the production of affect-political effects,

which result from techniques of valorising or devaluing signs. And perhaps it is exactly in this that we find a crucial indication of how the question of the relation of publicity and secret should be posed today: as a question about the production of affects (certainties, anxieties, insecurities, feelings of solidarity, resentments, etcetera) through signs that are established on the unstable boundary between publicity and secret. For what the modern myth of publicity covers up is, among others, the circumstance that power (whether securing domination or even emancipatory) is developed by whoever controls the boundary between publicity and secret, indeed by whoever continually reinvents it.

Translator's note: on the use of the term 'publicity', cf. Stefan Nowotny, 'The Condition of Becoming Public', in ***transversal***, 09 2003, http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1203/nowotny/en: 'As familiar as the term "public" may seem to us as a central category of political modernism, reaching a precise understanding of it raises a number of difficulties. These difficulties already become apparent in the question of the translation of the German word "Öffentlichkeit", the characteristic political-social meaning of which was established in the late 18th century as a translation of the French "publicité": In English (and the case is similar for French), the German "Öffentlichkeit" is translated in certain contexts as "public" or "publicity"; however, where "Öffentlichkeit" stands for a general category of social organization, "public sphere" or "public space" is usually preferred. While this indicates a certain ambiguity in the German term, it also expresses a problem: translating "Öffentlichkeit" as "public sphere" causes a level of meaning to vanish that is nonetheless central to the modern idea of the public – specifically that "Öffentlichkeit" not only refers to a ***category*** in political modernism, but most of all a ***principle*** of social organization. This means that it is not simply a given "sphere" (or plurality of spheres) – regardless of how it is organized – of modern societies, but rather a central ***mode*** of their organization and constitution... It should be noted that this is not solely a matter of reconstructing the meaning of "publicity" as a principle of social organization, but rather also of calling attention to the conditions of a certain disappearance of this meaning of "publicity". This disappearance is also symptomatically evident in that the English word "publicity" (like the French "publicité"), to which the meaning of a principle of social organization is certainly attributed in contexts of political theory, has been largely overlaid in everyday language with meanings that refer to the areas of advertising, marketing or media attention industries.

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Footnotes

1. Lucian Hölscher, *Öffentlichkeit und Geheimnis. Eine begriffsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zur Entstehung der Öffentlichkeit in der frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1979), 7.
2. Cf. Sigmund Freud, 'Über Deckerinnerungen' [1899], in: idem, *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 1 (Frankfurt / M.: S. Fischer, 1964), 531–554; and the section 'Über die Deckerinnerungen', in: *Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens* (Berlin: S. Karger, 1904), 15 ff.; in English, see the entry 'Screen Memory' in the *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* : http://www.enotes.com/psychoanalysis-encyclopedia/screen-memory.
3. Freud, *Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens*, op. cit. (note 3), 15.
4. Cf. especially Stefan Nowotny, 'Clandestine Publics', trans. Aileen Derieg, in *transversal*, 03 / 2005, 'publicum': http://eipcp.net/transversal/0605/nowotny/en.
5. Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt / M.: Suhrkamp, 1990), 14.
6. Ibid., 96.
7. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace* (1795) (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2009), 58.
8. Cf. ibid., 65.
9. Cf. ibid., 60.
10. Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 60.
11. Cf. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), 12.
12. Cf. Michail Bachtin, 'The problem of the text in linguistics, philology, and the human sciences: An experiment in philosophical analysis', in: *Speech genres & other late essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 126.
13. Cf. http://www.thecommentfactory.com/exclusive-the-wikileaks-manifesto-by-julian-assange-3342/ (accessed 1 July 2011); especially the section 'Authoritarian power is maintained by conspiracy'.
14. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung. Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer* Öffentlichkeit (Frankfurt / M.: Suhrkamp, 1972), 20.
15. Cf. for the following quotations: http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/01/egyptian-activists-action-plan-translated/70388/.
16. Cf. 'Full text of Colin Powell's speech. US secretary of state's address to the United Nations security council', http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/feb/05/iraq.usa (accessed 1 July 2011).

Crosslinks

WikiLeaks: www.onlineopen.org/wikileaks

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