Article
Forms of Life and Public Space

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Abstract: New words have found their way into the public sphere: we now commonly talk about "confinement", "barrier-gesture" or "distancing". The very idea of public space has been transformed: with restrictions on movement and interaction in public; with the reintegration of lives (certain lives) into the home (if there is one) and private space; with the publicization of private space through internet relationships; with the cities' space occupied, during confinement, by so-called "essential" workers; with the restriction of gatherings and political demonstrations in public space. With these and other recent changes, it is imperative to revisit the concept of public space, which continues to be used as if it were self-evident, despite its profound transformation over the past few decades, in a process of realization and "literalization". No longer just a comfortable metaphor for reasonable debates, public space has become a concrete reality in the 21th century. This transformation in the various phenomena, such as the occupation of squares and public spaces; the demand for spaces of conversation and expression for those without a voice; the transition of private matters into the public realm through verbal expression; and the expression and circulation of public issues within popular cultures. As a result, the question of public space is increasingly intertwined with that of private spaces, such as the home or individual subjectivities, forming an internal, logical relationship.

Keywords: public space; Wittgenstein; Habermas; Dewey; ordinary language

1. Conversation in the Public Space

The question of the public has undergone a profound transformation in recent decades. The concept of public space, as outlined by Habermas in his habilitation thesis in the twentieth century, defined an ideal of communication. Habermas' classic work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [1], published in 1962, introduced the notion of public space as a discourse that governs all relationships between individuals, whether in the political, cultural, educational, or familial spheres. This discursive and metaphorical understanding of space continues to shape contemporary political thought well into the twenty-first century.

The public sphere is thus akin to an agora, where open and pluralistic collective deliberation constitutes and sustains the life of society. Hannah Arendt [2] viewed it as the milieu in which politics emerges, drawing inspiration from the model of the Greek *polis*. According to her, an individual becomes a citizen through participation in the public space, even though she rightfully criticized its functioning in the United States. In contrast, Habermas traces the genealogy for the notion of public space differently. For him, it refers to the process of forming an enlightened, rational, and universalist opinion within the circles of the European bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century, where the governing mechanisms of liberal democracy were invented.

Public space has thus become an *imaginary* in the sense described by Cornelius Castoriadis, endowed with a normativity that is both instituting and instituted [3]. For Castoriadis, the effects of this imaginary are *real*, challenging the idea of public space as merely a sociological or political fiction. However, it is evident that contemporary academic thinking has predominantly oriented conceptions of public space toward a deliberative, abstract, and rationalist politics. It was only with the concrete emergence of democratic demands

that this discursive conception of public space was shaken. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas theorized the notion of the public sphere as a deliberative ideal, constantly called upon as a guarantee by political actors and embedded in ordinary political discourse. Deliberation has undoubtedly been the most widely discussed and esteemed concept in political philosophy throughout the twentieth century, to the point that it has, until recently, absorbed the concept of public space itself.

However, the significance of Habermas's conception lies in his *linguistic* vision of politics, explicitly emerging in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, where the philosopher idealizes language as a requisite for engaging in argumentation. According to Habermas, participants in a discussion must mutually assume that the conditions of an "ideal speech situation" taking place in a "public space open to all participants, all themes and all contributions" [4], with no other motive than that of a common search for truth, are fulfilled. This linguistic turn by Habermas does not stem from naiveté or ignorance of the potential violence within discussions. It would be erroneous to assume that Habermas believes that conversation is shielded from the violence and inequalities of speech. Nevertheless, public space is indeed the realm of linguistic exchange.

This is the strength of the concept of democracy as conversation, which departs from the notion of public opinion as an actor or tribunal, and instead focuses on judgment, the outcome, the collective result. Public space emerges from its own realizations, transforming into a *social* space, where the functions of language are *made explicit* (a theme effectively addressed by Robert Brandom). Notably, *Between Facts and Norms* defines rational discussion as "any attempt to reach agreement on problematic claims to validity, insofar as it is carried out in processes of communication which allow, *within a public space constituted by illocutionary obligations*, for themes and contributions, information and reasons, to be freely argued and presented" [5]. The language-based public space is thus founded on the constitutive rules of pragmatics. Public space is firmly anchored in illocutionary conventions, which establish the conditions of validity for speech acts. It is evident how crucial an understanding of pragmatics derived from Austin is for Habermasian political conversation. *The Theory of Communicative Action (Théorie de l'agir communicationnel)* posits that the pursuit of agreement is inherently intertwined with the practice of language. Universal pragmatics, described as a normative logic of speech acts, implies that a speech act binds the speaker to the addressee. In discourse, interlocutors make claims to validity, with speech acts presupposing a pragmatic commitment. This is Austin's contribution to Habermas' work: an (illocutionary) sentence not only describes the world, but also shapes and *creates* it. A speech act is said to be acceptable if it fulfills the conditions necessary for a listener to be able, by yes or no, to take a position in relation to the claim the speaker raises. The notion of illocutionary is thus reduced to language producing its own norms, making the performative act "reflexive".

From the outset, the concept of public space becomes a vehicle for the normativity of discourse. Engaging in conversation assumes and even *accomplishes* the act of accepting the rules of discussion. This approach was criticized as "conformist" by Stanley Cavell, for whom the very fact of positing agreement on rules serves to exclude forms of radical disagreement [6]. Nonetheless, it is clear that for Habermas, despite his astute analysis of divergences in discussion, the latter cannot lead to active political questioning. Habermas's public spaces are not intended for conquering or participating in any form of power. He explicitly states, with regard to what he calls "communicative power", that it "influences the premises of judgment and decision making in the political system without intending to conquer the system itself" [7]. Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, seeks to "revitalize the political public space", so that citizens "can (re)appropriate the power of the state". However, for Habermas, public space is not a realm of decision-making or power. It represents what Nancy Fraser refers to as "weak publics" [8], which are intended to produce only *opinions* and not decisions (as opposed to "strong publics", whose practice encompasses both dimensions). In *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas even goes so far as to state that "This weak public is the subject of public opinion" [5]. The anchoring of

public space in communicative action, despite being a theory of speech acts, diminishes its agency, as if resorting to speech acts reduces them to socially and morally normative meanings. Consequently, it is not surprising that alternative conceptions of public space have equipped citizens to take ownership of it and act on and through language.

2. An Agreement in Language

At the core of the issue of public space lies the question of modalities of conversation and linguistic usage. Turning to Wittgenstein's perspective in the *Philosophical Investigations*, we observe that recourse to ordinary language and its usage present a novel challenge of agreement in language, extensively studied by Cavell, who drew political implications from it. When examining language, we are not concerned with a particular language (its vocabulary, structure) but with its usages and norms. Cavell refers to them as *criteria*, signifying our collective agreement on, or rather, to translate Wittgenstein more accurately, *in* language, and more precisely the *we* that is at stake in "what we say". Our agreement lies not in meanings, but in uses. The "meaning of a word" (given) is determined by its uses. The pursuit of "agreement in language" has no connection to intersubjective agreement, convention, actual agreements among rational speakers, or an illocutionary dimension that establishes the rules of discussion.

But what is this agreement? This question forms the crux of Cavell's exploration in *The Claim of Reason*, where the Wittgensteinian inquiry into language intertwines with the concept of public space. For Cavell, the radical unfoundedness of the claim to "say what we say" is the source of skepticism. This skepticism differs from the classical philosophical doubt concerning knowledge (of the world, or of oneself). Instead, it embodies the true essence of what Wittgenstein says about "our" agreement in judgments, and language—it is grounded solely within itself. *The Claim of Reason* expands on a perceptive remark from one of Cavell's early essays, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy":

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), (...) It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying [9].

Here, we can discern Cavell's shift from the question of shared language to that of the community of forms of life—a community that encompasses not only the sharing of social structures, but everything that constitutes the fabric of human existence and activity. The dilemma lies in how to link the *I* to the *we* without subjecting one to the other, whether through a myth of the self-assured subject or in a myth of the conformist and inevitable adherence to socially instituted rules.

It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not an agreement in opinions, but in form of life [10].

Crucially, Wittgenstein asserts that we agree *in* and not *about* language, and that language is something that is *said*. This means that speakers are not the agents of agreement, and language precedes this agreement as much as it is produced by it. This circularity constitutes an irreducible element of skepticism. Agreeing *in* language signifies that language generates our agreement while also being the product of agreement. However, this does not mean that this agreement in language, as a form of life, corresponds to an agreement *on the rules of conversation*.

Wittgenstein defines ordinary usage as an agreement that is *neither* psychological nor intersubjective, but solely based on the validity of an individual voice: "my" individual voice that claims to be, is a "universal voice". To claim is what an individual voice does when it relies solely on itself to establish assent. In chapter 3 of *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cavell frames the question of language use in Kantian terms as the "universal voice", revealing the proximity between Wittgenstein's and Austin's approaches and an inherent paradox in aesthetic judgment: to rely on *myself* to say what *we* say. The normativity of usage leads us back to Kant's *Critique of the Faculty of Judgment*. Through aesthetic judgment,

Kant introduces us to "a property of our faculty of cognition that without this analysis would have remained unknown": the "claim to universality" inherent in the judgment of taste, which makes us "ascribe the satisfaction in an object to everyone" [11]. How, then, can a judgment that has all the characteristics of the *private* claim to be *public*, to apply to everyone? Kant himself acknowledged the "disconcerting" nature of this fact. The judgment of taste requires universal assent, "and in fact everyone supposes this assent (agreement, *Einstimmung*)". What supports such a claim is what Kant calls the universal voice (*allgemeine Stimme*). This is the voice—the *stimmen*—that expresses our agreement, our ability to speak with and for others, and thus our "publicness". This claim (*Anspruch*) is what defines agreement, and community is therefore, by definition, claimed, not instituted. Finding my voice therefore consists not in reaching agreement with *everyone*, but in making a claim in public, in giving my private voice a public scope[1] [12,13].

It can thus be said that, for Cavell, as well as for Kant and Wittgenstein, community can only exist in its constitution through individual claim and recognizing the claim of others. Consequently, it cannot be assumed as a given, and it is senseless to resolve moral disagreements or political conflicts by appealing to it. This approach does not provide a solution to the problem of political discussion; rather, it shifts the problem and the foundation of communal agreement to self-knowledge and self-assertion. In both moral agreement and political claims, I am brought back to myself, in search of my position and my voice.

Wittgenstein, therefore, pioneers a politics of the ordinary that does not rely on agreement or conventionalism. We act as if resorting to the ordinary, to our forms of life (which Wittgenstein calls a "given") resolves skepticism: as if forms of life were social institutions, to be accepted as a framework for discussion. However, being part of an institution, including language, does not imply accepting everything about it. To speak is to create room for maneuvering or discussing the framework.

This brings to mind the well-known question of what it means to "follow a rule". In §224 of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein points out the kinship (as "cousins") between the terms "rule" and "agreement". Agreement in language is not agreement on rules of operation. Our ordinary practices are not exhausted by the idea of rule; on the contrary, one thing Wittgenstein aims to show is that we have not said much about a practice (like language, or a game) when we have said that it is governed by rules. This challenges the notion, prevalent in many liberal political doctrines, that certain claims are impossible or misplaced, that they make no *sense* in society, because they stand outside its rules and negate the initial agreement upon which it was founded.

The underlying notion in the concept of community or institution is that we must somehow learn to asset our claims properly; that we must somehow consent to certain rules to be able to stake a claim. However, as Cavell rightfully reminds us, there is no rule that tells us *how* to *stake a claim* or (how) to follow the rules. As Descombes concludes in his great book *Le complément de sujet*: "there are many practical reasons why we may decide not to follow a certain well-established custom, not to conform to a certain rule of etiquette, not to recognize a certain acquired right. So we do not have to search for a single reason for all human conventions" [14].

In this perspective, the question of public space inevitably intertwines with that of consent. Speaking a language or engaging in a discussion does not imply consent to norms. In Habermas's pragmatic approach, it appears as if entering into a discussion involves minimal consent to conversational norms, allowing even disagreement to be reasonably formulated within this framework. However, what kind of consent have been given?

Ultimately, it revolves around reformulating the concept of democratic *conversation*, where everyone must have, or find, a voice. Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson grounded the democratic spirit by challenging a central tenet of modern liberalism: the notion that, if I am here, I must agree (with the rules of my society, which can thus speak for me), I have given my consent. This aligns with Rawls' perspective. The idea of the original position implies a common discussion of the principles of justice. In the

introduction to *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls argues that the principles of justice are such that individuals engaged in institutions that satisfy them "can *say to one another* that they are cooperating on terms to which they would agree if they were free and equal persons whose relations with respect to one another were fair" [15]. Here too, in terms quite different from those of Habermas, a normativity exists prior to entry into the public space.

According to Cavell, these principles of justice exclude the idea of radical injustice, the sense "of having from the start been left out" [6]. When Rawls says that "those who express resentment must be prepared to show why certain institutions are unjust or how others have injured them" [15], he excludes from this conversation of justice the idea of a class deprived of a voice, unable to precisely "show" that the institution is unjust towards them. For the liberal thinker, democracy entails a discussion that leads to the justification of inequalities when they are deemed as indispensable or at least "justified in the eyes of the less privileged". However, for those excluded from the conversation, how can they discuss their unjust circumstances and make a claim in a society that adamantly asserts its own justice?

As Jean-Pierre Dupuy noted,

Rawls may have sensed what he was unable to articulate philosophically. It is precisely *because* his good society publicly proclaims itself to be just that those who find themselves in a position of inferiority cannot help but feel resentful [16].

The issue lies in knowing what we have consented to. Rawls' proposes that "men are to decide in advance how they are to regulate their claims against one another and what is to be foundation charter of their society" [15]. This implies an original agreement made in advance regarding the permissible scope and nature of claims, as well as the rules that will arbitrate them. To think of public space is to think not only that there are no predetermined rules of social functioning (an idea accepted by many liberals, including Habermas), but more importantly, that there are no rules limiting the acceptability and form of claims. What Cavell wants to challenge, by appealing to Emerson and Thoreau, is the idea that certain claims are impossible or misplaced because they fall outside the established rules and defy the initial agreement that underpins social and linguistic exchange.

The critique of the conception of public space as rational "deliberation" is not simply a question of consent to society. It pertains not only to those who do not or cannot speak, due to structural reasons (who have no voice in the conversation of justice), but also to those who *could speak*, but come up against the inadequacy of speech as it is given to them, highlighting fundamental injustices.

This is why Cavell's political and ethical interest lies in the unique community of the couple [17]—a private entity defined by a contractual agreement that legally and politically establishes two individuals as equals. However, within this equality granted by the contract, there remains an inherent inequality of speech that needs to be overcome. The ideal of political conversation should not solely revolve around rational discussions based on agreement on principles, but rather a circulation of speech where no one is marginalized or voiceless. It is through this notion that we find equality as a primary political requirement. The paradox lies in the fact that this public demand is intertwined with private demands.

3. Self-Reliance, the Foundation of a Public

It is here that Emerson finds his relevance: in the potential he offers us for reconstructing the public in the subjective voice. Voice represents our capacity to speak on behalf of others. This is why Cavell emphasizes the significance of ordinary language, the fact that language is *said*, and must be spoken to signify thought. The tone of philosophy, as Emerson defines it at the outset of his essay *Self-Reliance*, embodies the assertion inherent to self-confidence. Cavell refers to this as the arrogance of philosophy (*arrogation*), a mark not so much of certainty, but of profound ambivalence: I claim to speak for all, yet I can only base myself in myself: "Who beside myself could give me the authority to speak for us?"[2] [18] (p. 9). This claim of speaking for others lies at the heart of the philosophy of ordinary language, which looks at how we use language, what *we* say, starting with *one's*

own use of it. It serves as the foundation for self-assurance: knowing how to *use* oneself in thought. It is not solely a matter of performativity, but rather of anchoring oneself in oneself as a condition for conversation. Indeed, the question at hand revolves around the *we* and the ability to articulate it from the perspective of the *I*, which inherently constitutes public speaking in the truest sense. It delves into the intricate workings of ordinary language, of a shared language, yet one whose conditions of adequacy can only be define be *me*, at any given moment. While, we are not far from Habermasian universal pragmatics, illocution is not a matter of agreeing with norms, but of asserting oneself. The right to speak is grounded solely in *the ordinary*, in the search for the right words and tone, rather than in rational agreement. The work of language is the work of self-expression. From the outset, it is inherently political: the quest to find one's voice and to feel expressed by the collective voice. The justification for civil disobedience rests upon this principle: I can refuse to allow others—such as my government or my country—to speak and act in my name, thereby withdrawing my consent. However, voice is inherently fragile.

Unlike certain literary tones, the tone of philosophy is *public*. Indeed, Emerson's writing constantly bears this dimension of address. Yet, this address to the public remains uncertain. Cavell states, "Philosophy is essentially uncertain whom in a given moment it seeks to interest" [18] (pp. 5, 11). To whom is it addressed, if not to all, and with means available to all? Hence the special significance of ordinary language: "What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (*PI*, §116). But who is this *we*? What does this constant first-person plural refer to in our speech? Cavell reminds us that "we" is a first person. It does not imply that we expect to meet with the agreement of others, but rather that we somehow feel we have their agreement through the sharing of language. For "who beside myself could give me the authority to speak for us?" This status of speech, described in a skeptical mode by Cavell, is depicted in a more "hermeneutic" mode by Charles Taylor, with both leading to a social and political examination of self-expression in the public space:

In order to recognize reciprocally the disposition to communicate, we have to be able to 'read' each other, our dispositions and feelings have to be potentially open, in public space. Our desires have to be manifest to others, to the potential community.

This is a kind of manifestation which is foundational for genuine expression, in that it is presupposed by it (...). But there would be nothing to take up, if our desires weren't embodied in public space, in what we do and try to do, in the natural background of self-revelation, which human expression endlessly elaborates [19].

This defines the public space of expression as an ongoing process of self-revelation. Skepticism, is not a matter of difficulty in knowing (or the problem of knowledge, as insisted on by Wittgenstein), but a reluctance or even fear of self-expression, of gaining access, and of *exposing oneself* to the outside world. Consequently, we are seduced by the idea of privacy, which leads to a preference for privacy and secrecy over self-expression and self-disclosure. Such is the nature of the private/public relationship: the public space is the domain of expression. Paradoxically, accepting to speak in the first person is the means of achieving representativeness, exemplarity, and self-expression. Indeed, the theme of representativeness is an obsession in Emerson's work, tied to public expression, since as Cavell states, "the human is representative, say, imitative, that each life is exemplary of all, a parable of each" [18] (pp. 5, 11). The enigma of representativeness is then that of the validity of self-knowledge for access to *self's* society, as indicated by Cavell's reading of Rousseau at the beginning of *The Claim of Reason*:

Rousseau's discovery is less a discovery of new knowledge than a discovery of a mode of knowledge, a way to use the self as access to the self's society [20].

In other words, how to move from the private to the public[3] [21].

Making the private voice public: this is the political translation of Wittgenstein's critique of private language. The question of public space mirrors the philosophical, logical, and even metaphysical inquiry into the relationship between inside and outside. In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell notes that "the correct relation between inner and outer, between

the soul and its society, is the theme of the *Investigations* as a whole" [20]. From this point of view, the public sphere is the place or setting for a search to bring the public voice into line with the private.

Consider Emerson's words: "the deeper [the scholar] dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true"[4] [22]. My private voice will be "the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost" [23].

The community simultaneously grants me a political *voice* and has the potential to strip it away from me or disappoint me, betraying me to the point where I no longer want to speak for it, or let it speak for me, on my behalf. For Emerson and Cavell, then, self-confidence is a political issue: the objective is to rehabilitate a political discourse and an individualistic way of thinking about democracy that have been stifled by the political conformism that took hold in the United States in the wake of analytic philosophy in the twentieth century. This entails replacing the consensual, liberal conception of democracy that has gradually taken hold in the field of political philosophy with a radical democracy. This requires us to rethink public space in terms other than those of rational agreement, and thus to *realize* it.

It is through the disruption of societal norms within public space that an essential transformation occurs. When Emerson implores us to trust ourselves, he draws upon perfectionism, the search for the best—private—self. However, this philosophical conversion, called for by perfectionism (in the ancient tradition of spiritual exercise), is realized in everyday life and in the public sphere. Such a conversion is at work, according to Cavell, in Hollywood remarriage comedies, which stage and present to the public a discussion on democracy and union, in the form of an argument and reconciliation [17,24]. The invention of talking pictures is not just a stage in the history of culture or technology: it is the creation of a concrete public space, reappropriated by ordinary humans and a public sharing of emotions and values. Making the private public, making the private voice public: this is the anticipated problem of contemporary democracy.

In reclaiming the ordinary, Emerson calls for a revolution: a critique that anticipates and subverts Habermas by asserting the necessity of an ordinary culture, built from the scattered materials of real life and not from the principles of the educated bourgeoisie.

This revolution is to be wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture. The main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of a man. Here are the materials strewn along the ground (see note 4 above) [22].

Culture becomes the construction (*building/Bildung*) of a new human and a new culture. The domesticated human is the one who will be able to reconcile his interior and exterior, his private and his public. This is the starting point for a political philosophy [25] rooted in the *public future* of subjectivity and popular culture.

Thus, the ordinary conversation within the couple (represented in the series of films Cavell analyzes) is an allegory for political conversation. What's at stake in the comedy of remarriage (which focuses on overcoming divorce) is the fate of democracy. Hence the political role of marriage, and the constitution of the couple as a paradigm of equality, a scaled-down model of an ideal society, where everyone has a voice and claims it in an egalitarian manner from a private structure that is nonetheless unequal.

It remains to be seen how to think of the conjugal relationship as a model of the political relationship and establish private space as a figure of public space. It is in his works *In Pursuits of Happiness* and then in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* that Cavell most explicitly sets out to give substance to the concept of the comedy of remarriage. The fact that this genre has become an obsession in American cinema, following Cavell's analysis of seven films, highlights the significance of the theme of remarriage. In these films, couples demonstrate the possibility of starting anew, finding each other again, and accepting and overcoming a separation through conversation as equals. The goal is to foster a conversational relationship based on equality, rather than a fake agreement (which amounts often to kind of submission, in the patriarchal society). The basis of true

conversation is in argument and fight. In the disagreement, the idea of a social conversation finds its source, or rather its paradigm. The film *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934), particularly in its relationship to nature and equality, serves as an exemplary film that defines the very genre of remarriage for Cavell, who calls it the "comedy of equality". This concept of disagreement is intrinsic to that of conversation and it is through these means that remarriage comedies illustrate or materialize a *democracy of dissent*:

More important, the films in question recapture the full weight of the concept of conversation, demonstrating why *our* word conversation means what it does, what talk means. In those films talking together is fully and plainly being together, a mode of association, a form of life, and I would like to say that in these films the central pair are *learning to speak the same language* [17].

It is particularly important that this redefinition of the couple is possible only within the framework of reflection on divorce and separation. What in tragedy is fatal avoidance of the idea of separateness in comedy is neither forgotten nor repressed, but rather accepted as inevitable. It is indeed separateness that defines marriage, for the marriage relation can only be defined on the basis of the possibility of a split, just as my natural relation to the world is defined by accepting the possibility of its loss. We may thus define the couple on the basis of the need to overcome separateness every day and to resolve or express the conflict that the couple relationship creates. This relationship is in theory a relationship of equality, but there is an inequality of words that must be constantly overcome. That is why equality cannot be not given but must be claimed. It is for this reason that Cavell calls comedies of remarriage "equality comedies" and sees in them the emergence of the woman "as an autonomous human". We see the feminist stakes of the question of marriage very clearly in *It Happened One Night*, which, although it does not include an actual remarriage, is a foundational work of the genre. The film can be said to be a remarriage comedy because it shifts the stakes of comedy from the usual question "will this young couple marry?" to discussions of the *nature* of marriage and the equilibrium to be achieved within the couple (who is going to educate whom?). The marriage between Gable and Colbert is a remarriage because they have already established a relationship of conjugality during their trip and have created a familiarity that appears in a scene when, at their first campsite, their breakfast is interrupted by private investigators looking for them, and they pretend to be a real couple, proving their status by arguing violently: "As if there may be a bickering that is itself a mark, not of bliss exactly, but say of caring. As if a willingness for marriage entails a certain willingness for bickering" ([17] p. 86). Bickering is essential to the remarriage genre and to representations of the couple. The concepts of argument and conflict are thus internal to that of conversation: a true conversation is one in which claims are made and in which one therefore learns to speak the same language as the other. This mutual education through language learning is essential to the couple: "to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life" (§178). Learning a common language requires conflict. "In those films talking together is fully and plainly being together, a mode of association, a form of life, and I would like to say that in these films the central pair are learning to speak the same language" ([17], p. 88).

In movies, conversation is the tool of acknowledgment and forgiveness as well as the space in which a relation of equality within the couple is created. Remarriage comedies explore the same themes as tragedy or skepticism—adultery, jealousy, fear of feminine sexuality, denial of acknowledgement—but by turning them around. In these comedies, a wall (between humans and the world, or between a man and a woman) sometimes represents an initial skepticism: the blanket held by Clark Gable ("the Walls of Jericho") in the motel room in *It Happened One Night*, or the swinging door that separates the couple, or the two separate doors by which the cuckoos on a cuckoo clock enter and exit in *The Awful Truth*. These two films end with a wall coming down: the blanket falls at the sound of the trumpet in *It Happened One Night*, and the two cuckoos go back through the same door at the end of *The Awful Truth*. Remarriage comedies do not deny the separateness of beings or their difference: reconciliation is acceptance of the state of separateness through a

new problematic, that of equality, which makes it possible to be both near and far, different. Acknowledging the other means accepting being their equal, their fellow, both the same and other, and opening oneself to the intimate and explosive mixture of friendship and amusement on the one hand and romance and sexuality on the other hand that define the conversation of marriage.

For Cavell, this ideal of marriage as conversation constitutes a "yes" to marriage, reversing the tragic or skeptical "no." This "yes," itself the reiteration of an original event, is also an acceptance of repetition (the "re-" in "remarriage" and "reunion"), acceptance of *the ordinary*. This is demonstrated by scenes in these comedies that show couples sharing prosaic moments together, for example when Clark Gable and Colette Colbert act out a domestic dispute in *It Happened One Night*, or when Katherine Hepburn, in *The Woman of the Year*, decides to make breakfast for her husband, creating a disaster in the kitchen. In this staging of the ordinary, which is found only in movies, what may be called a *domestication*— in every sense of the term—of skepticism by the ordinary is accomplished. Thus American comedy brings to light the capacity of the ordinary to reinvent the couple.

The conversation within marriage constitutes it as a linguistic affair, one that is both private and *public*. The comedy of remarriage is ultimately concerned with democracy and the nation founded in Philadelphia. Towards the end of the film, the theme of conversation reappears in a dialogue between Tracy and Dexter, wherein she breaks down after a restless night, confessing "Oh, Dext, I'm a total loser". To this, Dexter responds with a historic phrase: "Hey, that's lame, that's not even conversation". This exchange marks the beginning of reconciliation.

However, how does the acceptance of individual desire and self-confidence matter to the nation? Cavell states:

I claim for *It Happened One Night* that the conversation invokes the fantasy of the perfected human community, proposes marriage as our best emblem of this eventual community—not marriage as it is but as it may be (. . .). For *The Philadelphia Story*, I am about to claim that its conversation more narrowly focuses such questions on the question of America, on whether America has achieved its new human being, its more perfect union and its domestic tranquility, its new birth of freedom, whether it has been successful in securing the pursuit of happiness, whether it is earning the conversation it demands [17].

We can see that there is a major difference between what is proposed by the perfectionist tradition (for instance, Emerson, Thoreau, Dewey, Cavell) and contemporary liberal political theories. In this context, the private realm is not viewed as a separate sphere detached from the public. Instead, it is within the private domain that the stakes of the public are defined, with the two spheres representing two aspects of the form of life[5] [26]. By raising the question of political justice within the private sphere, the films examined by Cavell establish the parallel between egalitarian conversation and justice. In doing so, they create a public space that embodies democracy.

4. Dewey, Public Space as a "Community of Adventure"

Reflection on democracy gains nothing from the moralizing quest for "shared values", rational consensus, or prior agreement on rules. Its construction can only be achieved by redefining the political in terms of self-confidence and a way of life. While there is a tendency to distinguish between Emerson's perfectionist democracy and Dewey's democracy as inquiry, they are, in reality, similar in their conception of public space as elaborated by the community of citizens. Their perfectionism serves as the first step towards the *realization of* public space, far removed from the conventions of deliberation.

Dewey envisions the public sphere through the lens of deliberation, which makes him somewhat less of a "maverick" than Emerson, a critique Cavell has aptly expressed. Nonetheless, Dewey consistently raises the question of how citizens organize themselves to resolve the issues that concern them. His "public" is indeed the search for new coordinates of public space. Notably, Dewey's *The Public and its Problems* was a direct response to Walter Lippman's *Phantom Public*, which questions the ability of ordinary people to form relevant

political judgments. For Dewey, the public sphere as a deliberative space is the cognitive medium through which society experimentally seeks to explore, process, and solve its own problems. Hence the establishment of the *coordinates* of the public at the intersection of the issues of the existence of a problem, a cognitive issue, and a community.

According to Dewey, the public emerges from the regulated process of exploring the consequences of a phenomenon in the context of attempting to resolve a *private* problem, and from the exploration of the consequences of this attempt. It presupposes a collective form of inquiry. The public is *formed* around a problematic situation rooted in the private sphere. The effectiveness of the solutions derived from the investigation then depends on the quality of cooperation, communication, and conversation. It is through the *methods* of public debate that individual trust can take on an *institutional* form.

Discussing public space, Dewey emphasizes the eminently public nature of inquiry and the idea that democracy is its horizon. Democracy is not the point of departure, but the arrival of inquiry. The public space is the producer of the public and of democracy: "Democracy as compared with other ways of life is the sole way of living which believes wholeheartedly in the process of experience as end and as means" [27].

As Louis Quéré states, Dewey's public space takes on the form of a "community of adventure" [28]. It is the shared realm that is continuously discovered together, and for Dewey, always invented. The difference between Dewey's propositions and those of Habermas lies in the involvement of *all* citizens' capacities in this creation, without precondition of accepting norms.

While "classical" political philosophy assumes the existence of a common interest, Dewey's public good arises from multiple converging movements among those affected. It represents the ongoing "work of self-realization of the public" (E. Ferrarese). Joëlle Zask and Albert Ogien underscore the presence of a distinctly political and moral moment in Dewey's conception of the public [29]. According to Dewey, "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" [30]. To consider democracy as a form of life involves studying how the members of a society collectively construct a living space through the work of inquiry. Dewey's analyses of what he calls the "constitution of the Public" recognize that all members of society share equal responsibility and competence in the collective endeavor to address questions of public interest that arise and must be resolved. The singularity of Dewey's theses (and therefore their incompatibility with those of Rawls and Habermas) lies in the fact that he does not consider equality as an attribute of individuals, but as a property of *collective action unfolding within the democratic public sphere.*

This is combined with the importance given to education and the school, which imbue public education an intrinsically moral purpose: its objective is to cultivate an interest in the public good, so that everyone finds happiness in improving the condition of others. Democracy thus takes the form of moral perfectionism for Dewey, much like Emerson, to whom he pays homage. It appears that, for Dewey, "the public is not the exact counterpoint of the community, but rather a *method* of working towards it" [31]. In Dewey's perspective, individual autonomy is fostered through early education and throughout life. Given that living in society demands, on the part of each individual and on an ongoing basis, the implementation of this experimental approach, the citizens collectively tackle questions of general interest—whether political or not—that arise in the ordinary flow of existence. This approach can be described as "inquiry". Dewey's theory of inquiry is not concerned with the origin of categories of reasoning, the phenomenon of "socialization", or the potential arbitrariness and false judgments that may accompany the acquisition of ways of doing and speaking. Instead, it apprehends the members of a society as they are when they must engage in collective research and adhere to its logical framework. It recognizes that the inherently public nature of this inquiry establishes a framework in which arguments harmonize with one another in a manner acceptable to all.

In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey applies this conception of inquiry to the realm of politics, leading him to draw the following conclusion:

What is needed to direct and make fruitful social inquiry is a method which proceeds on the basis of the interrelations of observable acts and their results. Such is the gist of the method we propose to follow [32].

Dewey refers to this method simply as democracy. For him, the term does not denote a political regime characterized by a specific system of institutions, but rather a method of collective inquiry. He fully acknowledges the intelligence of citizens, stating "Until secrecy, prejudice, bias, misrepresentation, and propaganda as well as sheer ignorance are replaced by inquiry and publicity, we have no way of telling how apt for judgement of social policies the existing intelligence of the masses may be" [32]. What Dewey presents as "*the* problem of the public" is the improvement of the conditions of public debate through "the freeing and perfecting the processes of inquiry and of dissemination of their conclusions" [32]. According to Dewey, the intelligence of individual actors matters less than the "collective intelligence" exhibited by a community of investigators utilizing the method of democracy.

Unlike Habermas, Dewey shows little interest in individual's mastery of the principles of rationality necessary to conduct collective inquiry and to agree through deliberation on the best solution to the problem that gave rise to the inquiry. For Dewey, individuals already possess this mastery. He fundamentally rejects the idea that a single normative system, even that of rationality, exists and imposes, externally, its conduct on individuals who have internalized it prior to discussion. Norms and values, according to Dewey, do not constitute an order of principles, but rather serve as guides for action. Individuals engage in building a public space discover the appropriate utilization of norms and values, as they express "what they value"[6] [33]. This perspective lies at the heart of ethics and politics.

Dewey's theory of inquiry allows for a comprehensive reconsideration of the public sphere, distancing politics from debates solely centered on institutions. In line with political anthropology and sociology, Dewey, like Emerson, envisages the political from its most elementary expression: the *claim* to a right that is elaborated in the course of its formulation at the heart of the process of constituting a public. The public space is no longer a kind of prerequisite for deliberation, but is invented through inquiry, conceived as a method of collective exploration of *what matters*. This is indeed a pragmatist conception of public space, but also of public space as form of life.

Dewey's analyses simply serve as a reminder of the advantages of using the method of democracy, and the fact that ordinary citizens always have a stake in public affairs administration. The appeal of inquiry theory today, recognizing that ordinary people are not politically powerless [34], arises from this reimagining of public space.

Of course, this stems from the desire for participation and public debate that initially motivated us: the widely-acknowledged need in democratic countries to establish mechanisms for participation and consultation, aiming to align the actions of those in power with the demands of the governed. However, empirical analysis of these participation mechanisms indicates that they still fall short of granting citizens real power to act and decide. Thus, there exists a disparity between conventional political thinking on democracy and participation, and the demand for the realization of public space. As Loïc Blondiaux and Yves Sintomer state, "A 'deliberative imperative' has affected both local and European institutions, leading to the establishment of a variety of mechanisms: local public consultation commissions, neighborhood councils, partnership bodies within urban policy" [35].

Nevertheless, the demand for genuine democracy surpassed what these illusory or even manipulative citizen *empowerment* techniques (as seen in the case of "public debates", which are always hijacked) can produce. It posits a demand that is both radical and ordinary: every citizen in a society possesses a political knowledge that is sufficient to confer upon her the *unconditional* responsibility in making decisions that shape the destiny and adventure of a community. Therefore, the most crucial step in thinking about public space is not theoretical, but rather arises from action in the field and the occupation of space.

5. The Public Space of (In)Civil Society

The concept of civil society has sometimes been used to signify the democratization of the public sphere. This notion has become so pervasive in political discourse, and so misleading, that we need to clarify its contours, since the notion of civil society is directly linked to that of public space. For Arendt [2], it is the natural environment in which politics emerges.

Dewey, on the other hand, does not employ the notion of civil society; instead, he uses the term "public", which refers to a "community of inquirers" committed to finding a satisfactory answer to a question of general interest that concerns them. For Dewey, "inquiry" is a process through which collective intelligence is constituted in the resolution of a public problem. In short, the democratic public sphere can be seen as the place where citizens experience, together, the principles and rules of political action. Popular culture, such as political TV series, serves as a forum for the expression of public problems, providing an opportunity for a conversation on the democracy's practices or security challenges[7] [36].

The conversation of marriage makes marriage both a private and *public* affair; thus it is a political business. In *The Philadelphia Story*, which is set in one of the foundational sites of the American republic, we hear several times that the marriage announced (between the heroine, Tracy, played by Katherine Hepburn, and George, a businessman, which will end in the remarriage of Tracy and Dexter, her ex-husband played by Cary Grant) is "an affair of national importance". The film closely follows the remarriage structure, including the failure of conversation in the first marriage: when Tracy reproaches Dexter for his earlier fondness for drink, on which she blames the failure of their marriage, he replies: "Granted. But you took on that problem when you took me, Red. You were no helpmate there. You were a scold". The cause of divorce thus was not alcoholism but the unsatisfied need to find within marriage a "help meet", to use Milton's expression, a remedy to the solitude of all beings, and thereby, a conversation. The couple's conversation becomes allegorical or exemplary of the conversation of society in its entirety, whence the idea that something "of national importance" goes on within it. This is confirmed by the Cavell's choice of title, *Pursuits of Happiness*, which quotes the American constitution almost exactly. How can marriage, which is part of our personal, private existence, be "of national importance"? That is the whole question, and the massive presence of the issue of marriage in cinema constitutes an answer in itself. If it is a matter of deciding whether it is better to spend our lives together or alone, the question is not merely theoretical: it is political. Milton stated this clearly when in his *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, he wrote that:

As a whole people is in proportion to an ill government, so is one man to an ill marriage. If they, against any authority, covenant, or statute, may by the sovereign edict of charity save not only their lives but honest liberties from unworthy bondage, as well may he against any private covenant, which he never entered to his mischief, redeem himself from unsupportable disturbances to honest peace and just contentment (Milton, cited in Cavell [17] p. 150).

We see the political radicality of this statement: we are always right to revolt—against any government, or any marriage—if they do not guarantee "just contentment," for nobody seeks their own unhappiness (a useful reminder, since with regards to marriage it is easy to feel a certain…skepticism about that). This connects with Thoreau's idea of the right to disobey, to separate oneself from a state that one no longer recognizes as one's own. This is the "national" (or political) importance of marriage: if the marriage contract is a reduced-scale model or example (in the minimal, not moral, sense) of the nation's founding contract, then we owe the nation a relationship of "meet and happy conversation". Public and private duty thus come together in the demand that the relationship conform to an ideal of justice and equality. Remarriage comedies, in their pursuits of happiness, seek political conversation and demand that it be a true conversation: the circulation of words among equals. This is both a dream and a daily reality: ordinary life, the "domestic", is the potential site for the invention of this conversation. Making dream and reality live together

constitutes the whole question of the couple, just as it does (or should) the whole question of politics. My consent (to a society, to a marriage, to a form of life) is never given once and for all; it is constantly, *ordinarily*, in dispute.

The notion of civil society thus encompasses all those who, due to their inability to escape this experience, make use of their political capacity by expressing it outside the official institutions of representation [37]. This reminder is relevant at a time when there may be an impression that the space of "civil society" is limited to a category of citizens considered as "responsible" and recognized as such by these institutions. It is not a so-called elite group composed of society's "winners" proclaiming themselves as civil society without fully embracing its characteristic aspects: horizontal struggles for equality and justice.

This is why rethinking public space involves considering that space itself, insofar as it has been reclaimed by extra-institutional occupation movements that redefine space in concrete terms while imbuing it with the dimension of value (notably ecological) associated with the reappropriation of ground, or even land.

For Arendt, public space was immediately tied to a concrete space—a tangible, material reality, created by humans for human enjoyment—rather than being a bestowed gift or capacity; it was a *man-made public space* [38]. Public space is a "meeting" space, before being a political space born from collective intention, and a place for deliberation. Arendt's construction of a scene of encounter enables her to characterize public space as a space to be filled by *agency*, which is crucial in relation to "all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government" [39]. This process of demetaphorization and materialization of public space is crucial for Arendt in thinking about the distance between individuals, essential to their individuality: "the public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other" [39]. However, we can also envision that modern-day assemblies strive to facilitate citizens "falling" onto each other, enabling collective action through the physical presence of bodies gathered in the same place.

Numerous factors need to be taken into account to understand this shift towards the democratic materialization of the public, and it is not our intention to delve into them in details. Internet played a significant role, creating a new public space[8] with multiple entry points and enabling mutual encouragement through the dissemination of images during the occupations of the various "springs". In this way, civil society is challenging politicians on the terrain of legitimacy, demanding that the solutions it offers to public problems be taken into account and implemented. It is crucial to comprehend the depth of this change, which aligns with Dewey's call for a conception of inquiry, where all members of a society are practitioners and explorers of the political. From this point of view, this confirms that democracy cannot be reduced to a system centered around elections, parties competing for citizens' votes, but it thrives equally in the daily actualization of the principles of equality, in an egalitarian form of life.

The spatial paradigm actualizes the relationships created by public space. As eloquently summarized by Louis Quéré, "public space appears to be the very product of the practices it arouses, makes possible and conditions; it structures the practices, attitudes and behaviors from which it itself emerges" [40]. Public space thus becomes a realm for the realization of equality and reveals itself as a veritable subversion of the prevailing rule in contemporary societies that dictates who have the *legitimate* right to take part in civic and political life. This restriction also curtails the right to participate in democratic conversations, creating a division between pronouncements that can be brought into the public arena and those that are less welcome or not taken into consideration at all.

Like any demarcation, this dividing line is bound to be contested and crossed by those aspiring to broaden public space and open it up to different voices. Feminist movements, exemplified by the *#MeToo* movement, and the voices of racialized minorities, as witnessed in the emergence of *Black Lives Matter*, are prime examples. These movements aim not only to claims rights, but also to assert their voices and presence in public space (while

there are also those who position themselves as guardians of maintaining the divide). The remarkable aspect of women's direct expression lies in the ability of each and every one of them to denounce instances of inequality, whether it be at work or in public and private spaces, regardless of their backgrounds or the type of abuse, crime, or harassment they have endured.

The #*MeToo* movement, and its repercussions everywhere, have brought a radical shift in the conception of the public sphere. It entails reclaiming private relationships as a public issue, a concept that has been a constant within second-wave feminism and aligns with the pragmatist conception of democracy. It also represents a new grammar of public space crafted by citizens, reminiscent of the massive demonstrations that followed the terrible assassination of George Floyd—beginning in Minneapolis and resonating around the world at the onset of the pandemic. This reawakening highlighted the structural issue of police violence against the black community, but with a renewed emphasis. Since the 1950s (and even the 1920s), the black community has had to fight alone and often in vain against the structural institutionalized racism, without being granted its rightful place in the public arena. The mapping of *I can't breathe/Black Lives Matter* demonstrations vividly illustrates the widespread mobilization. It encompasses a generation simply demanding that black people be allowed to "breathe", to have space, not just a surface on the ground, but above it, so to speak; their fair share of the planet's air, and a genuine context where their lives truly matter. The phrase "*I can't breathe*" intertwined with the *Black Lives Matter* movement will undoubtedly be remembered as a the rallying cry for de-idealization, the ultimate *realization* of public space, beyond the physical occupation of squares. The notion of space, once an abstract geometric concept awaiting "occupation" has transformed into the concrete space of human breathing.

6. The Public Space of the Pandemic

This concretization of public space quickly reveals itself as a form of disobedience, as evidenced by the repression of demonstrations that simply demand new spaces for expression. The notion of importance, of mattering, already present in the pragmatist definition of democracy, becomes essential to the concept of public space delimited by those who possess a "voice". Public space is no longer defined by linguistic rules or by institutions, but rather by the struggles to establish forms of life within it. Consequently, it resists being reduced to solely institutions, whether pertaining to language or politics. Examining the recent radical transformations of public space necessitates an exploration of the changing norms of cohabitation and communal interaction during the COVID crisis. The confinement measures implemented in many "Northern" countries were accompanied by the erasure from the physical public space of a large proportion of citizens, who were confined to their private lives, disconnected from connections beyond their immediate circle. Simultaneously, the crisis brought forth the visibility of *care* work and *care* providers, predominantly women, who were suddenly, and briefly, acknowledged, appreciated, and highlighted in the media as so-called "essential". Additionally, there was a literal redistribution of public space, with privileged individuals retreating to their homes or second residences, returned to their "privacy", reengaging in domestic tasks, while essential workers such as caregivers, cashiers, delivery personnel, etc., "freely" circulated as they supported the ordinary lives of others. Homeless individuals, too, circulated "freely" in the spaces finally available to them.

However, this unprecedented transformation of the public sphere has not translated into political action. The sudden visibility of care workers merely reaffirmed their invisibility and the undervaluation of their work that sustains society. It must be acknowledged that this occurred amidst unprecedented restrictions on "relations in public" (in Goffman's sense), exchanges in public space, including the brief and anonymous encounters that had contributed to recent transformations in public space. With a large proportion of citizens confined to domestic life, many have come to realize their constant need for *care*, as they now assumed some of this work (the housework, tidying up, child-rearing, etc.),

often "normally" delegated to others. The pandemic has also radicalized the relationship between the public and private as spheres. In public life, the work of *care* has been glorified, exemplified by the applause for caregivers that has since long subsided.

Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize the visibility of care, as it is intrinsically linked to its recognition in the public sphere. Thus, how do we bring care into the public arena? What are its possible representations, its private and public expressions? By proposing to valorize moral values traditionally associated with femininity, such as care, attentiveness to others, and solicitude, *care* has emerged in the public sphere as a tool for critical analysis. It stems from an examination of the historical conditions that have fostered a division of moral labor by virtue of which the activities of care, and therefore of *public good*, have been socially and morally devalued. The assignment of women to the domestic sphere reinforced the exclusion of these activities and concerns from the public sphere, reducing them to the rank of private feelings devoid of moral and political significance. The pandemic has brought to the forefront the question of the legitimacy and place for expressing concern for *care*, highlighting the need to make it a *public matter*, as was recently demanded in response to climate change. Conceptualizing democracy as a form of life means studying how members of a society construct a living space through a process of collective inquiry, including in the private sphere.

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Notes

1 For further discussion, see Sandra Laugier, Wittgenstein, *Les sens de l'usage,* Vrin, 2009 and *Wittgenstein, Politique de l'ordinaire*, Paris, Vrin, 2023 [12,13].
2 This is the question posed by [18].
3 This is an essential question in the work of [21].
4 Emerson, "The American Scholar", 74, cited in [22].
5 On democracy as a form of life, see [26].
6 Alexandra Bidet, Louis Quéré et Gérome Truc, Présentation de [33].
7 See S. Laugier, *Nos vies en séries* (Climats, Flammarion, 2019) and S. *Laugier, TV Philosophy* (Exeter University Press, 2023) [36].
8 See analyses by Dominique Cardon.

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