

Public space and political public sphere – the biographical roots of two motifs in my thought

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Allow me first to confess to my embarrassment at the request that I convey to you, in common language, something instructive about the path of my life. President Inamori has invited prize-winners to “please talk about yourself” – tell us “how you overcame hardships, what your guideline was when standing at the crossroads of your life.” I am addressed thereby as an author, teacher and intellectual who is accustomed to communicate with readers, students and listeners. So you might well ask, why should someone who leads a comparatively public life be at all disconcerted when expected to talk about himself. But that is to forget that in general the life of philosophers is rather poor in notable outside occurrences. And philosophers themselves prefer to move in the domain of the general. So please permit me to begin by explaining my inhibitions, when it comes to talking about the private sphere, by offering you a *general* remark on the relationship of the private to the public.

To this end, it helps to distinguish between two types of public and publicity. In today’s media society, the public sphere serves those who have gained prominence as a stage for self-presentation. Visibility is the real purpose of public appearance. The price that stars pay for this kind of presence in the mass media is to accept the conflation of their private and their public lives. By contrast, the intention behind participation in political, literary or scholarly debates, or any other contribution to public *discourse*, is quite different: reaching agreement on a particular subject or clarifying reasonable dissent takes priority over the self-presentation of the author. Here, the public is not a domain made up of viewers or listeners, but instead a space for the contributions of speakers and addressees, who confront one another with questions and answers. Rather than everyone else’s gaze being focused on the actor, there is an exchange of reasons and opinions. In discourses that focus on a shared subject, participants turn their backs on their private lives. They do not need to talk about themselves. The line between public and private spheres does not become blurred; the two complement each other instead.

This kind of objectivity may explain why we, in our historical lectures on Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas or Kant, usually limit ourselves to stating only bare biographical facts - when these thinkers were born, lived, and died. Even if there were stormy episodes in the lives of these philosophers, and one needs think only of Plato’s visits to Syracuse, such biographical events take a backseat to the person’s thoughts and arguments. The lives of philosophers do not provide the stuff of legends. What they leave behind is

a new, uniquely formulated and often enigmatic set of thoughts with which later generations will repeatedly tussle. In our field we are used to calling ‘classic’ thinkers those whose works have remained contemporary to this day. The thoughts of a classic thinker are like the molten core beneath a volcano around which the rings of that person’s life have hardened as scoria. It is this image that the great thinkers of the past create, those whose works have stood the test of time. By contrast, we, the many living philosophers – and we, who are only professors of philosophy – are simply the contemporaries of our contemporaries. And the less original our thoughts are, the more they remain entrenched in the context from which they emerged. At times, indeed, they are nothing more than an expression of the biography out of which they arise.

In other words, a biographical glance at ourselves may explain why in one constellation one thought took precedence, while in another constellation it was another thought. On the occasion of my 70th birthday, my students honored me with the gift of a *Festschrift* that bore the title “Öffentlichkeit der Vernunft und die Vernunft der Öffentlichkeit” or “the public space of reason and the reason of the public sphere”. The title is certainly not a bad choice, because the public sphere as the space for reasoned communicative exchange is the issue that has concerned me all my life. The conceptual triad of “public space”, “discourse” and “reason” has, in fact, dominated my work as a scholar and my political life. Any such obsession has biographical roots. And I assume that the following four experiences have some bearing on this theoretical interest: After birth and during early infancy I was firstly (1) exposed to the traumatic experience of surgery – you find, by the way, an experience of illness or physical handicap in the biographies of many philosopher; secondly (2), I remember from the time when I was just starting school how I experienced failures in communicating; thirdly (3) during my adolescence I was strongly influenced by my generation’s experience of the historical caesura of the year 1945 in world politics; and finally (4) in the course of my adult life I have been troubled by the political experience of a slow and repeatedly endangered liberalization of German post-War society and culture. Allow me then to speculate about the links between theory and biography.

(1) I shall begin with my early childhood, with an operation performed on me directly after I was born. I do not believe that this surgery enduringly shattered my trust in the world around me. However, that intervention may well have strengthened my sense of dependence and vulnerability, not to mention my awareness of the relevance of our interaction *with others*. At any rate, the very *social nature* of human beings became the starting point for my philosophical reflections. There are many species of animals that live socially. Indeed, the primates, our closest relatives, live in hordes and families – albeit without the complex kinship systems that *homo sapiens* first invented by means of symbolizing statuses. It is not forms of social existence in general that distinguish the mankind from other species. To put our finger

on what is special about the social nature of humans we need to translate Aristotle's famous description of man as a *zoon politikón*, quite literally: Man is a political animal, in other words an animal that exists *in a polity, a public space*. To put it more precisely: Man is an animal, that by virtue of being from the very outset embedded in a public network of social relationships, first develops the competences that make a person of him. If we compare the biological features of new-born mammals, we soon see that no other species enters the world as immature and as helpless as do we, nor is any other dependent for so long a period of socialization on the protection of the family and a public culture shared intersubjectively with all fellow members. We humans learn *from one another*. And that is only possible in the public space of a culturally stimulating milieu.

Needless to say, I can no longer remember that first operation on my cleft palate. But when I was forced to repeat the same experience at the age of five - in other words at a point when I had a clear memory - my awareness of how one person always depends on others undoubtedly became more acute. At any rate, this keen eye for the social nature of man led me to those philosophical approaches that emphasize the intersubjective structure of the human mind – to the hermeneutic tradition, which dates back to Wilhelm von Humboldt, to the American pragmatism of a Charles Sander Peirce and George Herbert Mead, to Ernst Cassirer's theory of symbolic forms, and to Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. At this point I do not want to bore you with the details here, but merely to paint in broad strokes a background picture that may be of more general interest. This image of man's position in the world expresses the intuitive sense of the deep-rooted reciprocal dependence of the one person on the other.

Such paradigms define our everyday self-understanding, but sometimes they also define the conceptual frames for entire scientific disciplines. What I am getting at here is an image of subjectivity which you may imagine as a glove turned inside out to discern the structure of its fabric, a glove woven from the strands of intersubjectivity. Inside each individual person we find a reflection of the outside social world. For the mind of the subject is imbued with meaning content by locking into the 'objective' mind of what is intersubjectively shared by socialized individuals. The individual does not encounter his social environment in the same way that the bare organism comes up against his natural environment – as an interior that osmotically sets itself off from the outer world. The abstract juxtaposition of subject and object, of inside and outside is misleading here, as the organism of the new-born infant first starts to form into a person when it enters into social interaction. And that infant first becomes a person by entering the public space of a social world which awaits him with open arms. The public character of the jointly inhabited interior of our lifeworld is both inside and outside at once.

In the process of growing up, the child is able to form the *interior* of a consciously experienced life only through simultaneous externalization vis-a-vis other participants in communication and interaction. Even in expressions of the most personal feelings and most intimate excitations, an ostensibly *private* consciousness thrives on the electricity with which it is charged by the cultural network of *public*, symbolically expressed and intersubjectively shared categories, thoughts, and meanings. Surprisingly, though, in the cognitive sciences today we are seeing a renaissance of the misleading Cartesian image of the monadic consciousness, which, recursively locked into itself, maintains an opaque relationship to the organic substrate of its brain and its genome.

It never made sense to me that self-consciousness should be the original source for everything else. Do we not first become aware of ourselves under the gaze of another person? It is the gaze of the You, of the second person, who speaks to me as a first person – when in his or her eyes I first become aware not only of myself as a conscious *subject* but also as a unique *individual*. From the subjectifying gaze of the other there springs an individuating force.

(2) So much for the paradigm within which my research moves. There may have been two experiences during my days as a schoolboy that inspired me to pursue the philosophy of language and the kind of moral theory that I developed in this framework. There was firstly (a) the experience that other people did not understand me very well and, secondly (b,) that they responded with annoyance or rejection.

(a) I remember the difficulties I encountered when trying to make myself understood in class or during break time. I had left the haven of family life and familiar surroundings behind me and had to get along with what I encountered as an anonymous domain. Failures of communication direct attention to the reality of an interstitial world of symbols that otherwise remains unobtrusive - symbols that cannot be touched like physical objects. Only in a failing performance does the medium of linguistic communication emerge as a shared stratum without which we could not exist as individuals, either. We always find ourselves existing in the element of language. Only those who talk can be silent. Only because we are by our nature linked to one another can we feel lonely or isolated.

Philosophers have never been especially interested in this – the power language has to forge something held in common. Ever since Plato and Aristotle, Western philosophers have preferred to analyze language as a medium of representation, not of communication. They studied the logical form of propositions with which we refer to objects and express facts. But that is to forget that language is first and foremost there to enable one person to *reach agreement* with another person about something in the

world, in which process each can take a 'yes' or a 'no' position to the validity claims of the other. We make use of language more for communicative than for *purely* cognitive purposes. Language is not the mirror of the world, but offers us access to the world. In so doing, it has always directed how a community of language users see the world in a particular way. Language comes inscribed, as it were, with a worldview. Fortunately, this prior knowledge that we acquire with a specific language is not fixed once and for all. Otherwise, we could never learn something really new in our dealings with the world and when talking with others about it. And what applies to theoretical languages also applies in everyday life: We can revise the meaning of predicates or concepts in light of experiences we have only with their help.

My speech impediment may incidentally also explain why I have always been convinced of the superiority of the written word over the spoken. The written form disguises the stigma of the spoken. I have tended to judge my students less by their contributions to discussions during seminars - irrespective of how intelligent their observations were - and more by the essays and papers they have written. And as you see, to this very day and to the disadvantage of my listeners, I still shy away from speaking off the cuff in public. This recourse to the precision, afforded by expressing myself in the written form, may also have encouraged me to draw a distinction of some importance for my theory. In *communicative action* we proceed, as it were, naively, while in a *discourse* we exchange reasons in order to assess validity claims that have become problematic. Rational discourse borrows this reflexivity from the written word, that is to say, from the published article or the scholarly treatise, because discourse is designed to include every one concerned and create a platform on which all pertinent contributions are heard. It is meant to ensure without compulsion that the better argument wins the day.

(b) This view of things helped me process another biographical experience in terms of theory – those more or less harmless acts of discrimination which many children suffer in the schoolyard or street if they appear somehow different from the others. Today, globalization, mass tourism, world-wide migration, in fact the growing pluralism of world views and cultural life forms have familiarized us all with the experiences of exclusion and marginalization of outsiders and minorities. Each of us can now imagine what it means to be a foreigner in a foreign country, to be an other to others or different from them. Such situations kindle our moral susceptibilities. For morality is a device woven with the threads of communication to shield the peculiar vulnerability of socialized individuals.

The more the process of individuation expands the inner life of a person, the deeper she becomes entangled on the outside, as it were, in an ever denser and more fragile network of relationships of reciprocal recognition. At the same time, she exposes herself to the risks of denied reciprocity. The morality

of equal respect for all and for each one is intended to absorb such risks and is designed for the inclusion of the marginalized in the network of reciprocal recognition. Norms of action that are to found such a universal solidarity among strangers depend on general, if you like, worldwide approval. In order to develop fair practices of that kind we must participate precisely in discourse. For moral discourse allows all those concerned and affected an equal say and expects each participant to adopt the perspectives of the others when deliberating what is in the equal interest of all. In this way, the parties to the discourse learn to mutually incorporate the interpretations others have of their self and of their world into their own, expanded self- and world-understanding.

(3) Thus far I have talked about personal motifs deriving from my childhood. They may have opened my eyes to the intersubjective constitution of the human mind and the social core of our subjectivity, as well as to the fragility of communicative life forms and the fact that socialized individuals are in need of peculiar protection. Yet it was the caesura of 1945 that first led to an eye-opening experience for my generation, one without which I would hardly have ended up in philosophy and social theory. Overnight, as it were, the society in which we had led what had seemed to be a halfway normal everyday life, and the regime governing it, were exposed as pathological and criminal. In this way, the confrontation with the heritage of the Nazi past became a fundamental theme of my adult political life. My interest in political progress became focused on conditions of life that escape the false alternative of ‘Gemeinschaft’ oder ‘Gesellschaft’, “community” or “society”. What I have in mind are, as Brecht puts it, “friendly” forms of coexistence that neither forfeit the gains in differentiation of modern societies nor deny the dependence of upright individuals on one another - and their reciprocal reliance on one another.

A few months before my 16th birthday, the Second World War came to an end. And after four years of an adolescence spent with open eyes and ears, what followed was the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany, and for me the beginning of university. I had the “good fortune to be born late” – the German phrase “Gnade der späten Geburt” means that I was old enough to have witnessed the fundamental changes the end of the Third Reich brought with it at a morally impressionable age, and yet young enough not to not have participated in the dubious practices of the Nazipast. We, by which I mean my generation, had not even been old enough to be drafted by the Wehrmacht. So we did not have to answer for siding with the wrong party and for political errors with all their dire consequences. After the revelations concerning Auschwitz there seemed to be two sides to everything. What we had experienced as a more or less normal childhood and adolescence now transpired to be everyday life in the shadows of a rupture in civilization. We, quite without having to do anything to deserve it, suddenly had the opportunity to learn without being blinkered from the Nuremberg war crime trials, which we followed on the radio. We made Karl Jaspers’ distinction between collective guilt and collec-

tive liability our own and took very seriously the responsibility for the consequences of a regime that had been supported by the mass of the population.

Today, many view this stance of a generation influenced by the liberation of 1945 critically and do not consider it to have been to our credit. There is something typical, almost compulsory, in the pattern of responses to be found among persons of my age, whether on the right, the middle, or the left of the political spectrum. The shift in mentality, gained free of charge as it were, was accompanied by our cultural opening westwards. During the Third Reich, we, who had not known the Weimar Republic, had grown up in a mind-dulling enclave of home-fire kitsch, monumentalism, and a death cult that were all drenched in resentment. Now, suddenly, the doors to the art of Expressionism opened for us, as did those to Kafka, Thomas Mann, and Hermann Hesse, to world literature written in English, to the contemporary philosophy of Sartre and the French left-wing Catholics, to Freud and to Marx, and likewise to the pragmatism of a John Dewey, whose former students so decisively influenced the reeducation effort in Germany. Contemporary film also offered us many an exciting message. The liberating, revolutionary spirit of Modernism was most convincingly visualized by the constructivism of a Mondrian, the cool geometric shapes of Bauhaus architecture and an uncompromisingly no-frills form of industrial design.

The cultural opening westwards went hand in hand with a political opening in the same direction. For me, it was democracy and not exactly liberalism that was the magic word. The political constructions of social contract theory, in the more popular version I was acquainted with, combined with the pioneering spirit and the emancipatory promise of Modernism. All the more reason why we felt ourselves isolated in the unchanged authoritarian setting of a post-War society that was quite unimpressed by the emergence of the new. The continuity of social elites and cultural prejudices was paralyzing. There had been no break with the past, no new beginning in terms of personnel, no change in mentality – there had been neither moral renewal nor a visible reversal in political mindset. I shared my deep political disappointment with my wife, whom I first met during my student days. As late as the 1950s we came up against the elitist, and at the same time apolitical, way that German universities saw themselves. We still encountered the ill-fated fusion of nationalism and anti-Semitism that in 1933 had disarmed our academic teachers and disposed them to fall prey to the Nazis.

In such a climate my leftist political convictions did not overlap with what I learned in philosophy classes. Politics and philosophy, these two intellectual universes, remained separate domains for a long time. They first collided one weekend in the summer semester in 1953, when my friend Karl-Otto Apel placed in my hands a copy of Heidegger's "An Introduction to Metaphysics" fresh from the presses. Up

until then, Heidegger had been my most influential teacher, if not in person then certainly from a distance. The fame he had acquired since the 1920s was still untarnished. I had read "Being and Time" through Kierkegaard's eyes. Heidegger's fundamental ontology contained an ethics which, or so I thought, appealed to the individual's conscience, to the individual's existential sincerity. And now the selfsame Heidegger had published his lectures from 1935 without any revisions or commentary. The vocabulary of the lectures reflected the idolatry of a nationalist spirit, the defiance of the First World War trenches, the collectivism of solemn yea-saying. Unsuspected by me, the "existence of the Volk" had taken the place of the "existence" of the individual person.

"Thinking with Heidegger against Heidegger" was the title of the newspaper essay that I then wrote, still the devoted Heidegger disciple. My choice of quotations back then reveals what it was about Heidegger's text that irritated me so much. It was above all four things: the fatal linking of a heroic call to "creative violence" with a cult of sacrifice – the "most profound and broadest Yes to decline". I was incensed by the Platonist prejudices of the German mandarin, who devalued "intelligence" in favor of "spirit", degraded "analysis" as opposed to "authentic thought", and wished to keep the esoteric truth the preserve of "the few". And I was also irritated by the anti-Christian and anti-Western emotions directed against the egalitarian universalism of the Enlightenment. But the real cause for putting pen to paper was the Nazi philosopher's denial of moral-political responsibility for the consequences of mass criminality, something which almost no one talked about any longer, eight years after the end of the War. In the controversy that ensued we lost from sight Heidegger's interpretation, in which he stylized Fascism as a "destiny of Being" that exonerated any particular individual from personal culpability. He simply shrugged off his disastrous political error as a mere reflex of a higher destiny that had led him astray.

(4) This episode from my early days as a student marked the beginning of a critical inquiry into the burdensome political heritage that persisted even in German philosophy. In the years that followed, I discerned more and more clearly the mind-set of men such as Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Ernst Jünger or Arnold Gehlen. They all joined in despising the masses and the average, on the one hand, and in celebrating the peremptory individual, the chosen one, the extraordinary person, on the other - with a concomitant rejection of idle talk, the public sphere and what they termed the inauthentic. They emphasized silence instead of conversation, the chain of commands and obedience instead of equality and self-determination. It was in these terms that young conservative thought defined itself, setting itself off sharply from the democratic impulse that had driven us forward since 1945. For me, this "Weimar syndrome" became a negative point of reference when, after graduation, I worked through my disappointment with the difficult process of democratization in post-War Germany, which was constantly endan-

gered by temporary setbacks. Right through into the 1980s the fear of a political relapse continued to spur my scholarly work, while I had begun in the late 1950s with my study of the “Structural Change of the Public Sphere”.

At that time, I was working as Theodor W. Adorno’s research assistant in the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Critical social theory offered me a new perspective from which I could embed the emergence of American, French and English democracy, and the repeated failure of attempts to establish democracy in Germany, in the larger context of social modernization. In the late 50’s the political culture in Germany had by no means taken firm roots. It was not certain that the principles of a democratic order that had been imposed from without, as it were, would become firmly lodged in the hearts and minds of German citizens. And it was evidently the case that such a change in political mentality could not occur in isolation or be controlled by the administration. Only a vibrant and, wherever possible, discursive type of public opinion-formation could function as the engine of such a process.

As a consequence, my theoretical attention focused on the political public sphere. In of the mysterious power of intersubjectivity, its ability to unite the disparate without eliminating the differences between one and the other, I had always been interested in the general phenomenon of a “public space” that already arises with simple interactions. The forms of social integration become manifest in the structures of public spaces. Does the specific type of integration in a particular society correspond to the degree of its complexity? Or do public spaces betray the pathological traits of either anomie or repression? In modern societies, one particular social space, namely the political public sphere of a democratic community, plays an especially important role in the integration of citizens. For complex societies can be normatively held together solely by civic solidarity - the abstract, legally mediated form of solidarity among citizens. And among citizens who can no longer know one another face to face, only the process of public opinion and will formation can function to reproduce a brittle form of collective identity. For this reason, the critical state of a democracy can be measured by taking the pulse of the life of its political public sphere.

Professors are, of course, not only scholars who are concerned with issues in the political public sphere from the viewpoint of an academic observer. They, too, are *participating* citizens. And on occasion they also take active part in political life as intellectuals. In the 1950s, I happened to participate in the “Easter Marches”, pacifist protests against nuclear weapons. In the later 1960s I could not but take a public stance on the student protest movement. In the 1980’s and 1990’s, I joined public debates on our coming to terms with the Nazi past, on the mode of Germany’s unification, on the first Gulf War, on political asylum, and so forth. Over the last ten years I have expressed opinions on problems of

European unification and on bioethical issues. And since the invasion of Iraq - an action contrary to international law - I have been concerned more generally with the post-national constellation and the future of the Kantian project of establishing a cosmopolitan order. Now, I mention these activities only because I wish, in conclusion, to report briefly on what I believe I have learned about the role of the public intellectual in our times – from my own mistakes and those of others.

Intellectuals should make public use of the professional knowledge that they possess - for example, as a writer or a physicist, a social scientist or a philosopher - and should do so of their own initiative, in other words without being commissioned to do so by anyone else. They need not be neutral and eschew partisanship, but they should make a statement only in full awareness of their own fallibility; they should limit themselves to relevant issues, contributing information and good arguments; in other words, they should endeavor to improve the deplorable discursive level of public debates. Intellectuals must tread a difficult tightrope in other regards as well. For they betray their own authority if they do not carefully separate their professional from their public roles. They should not use the influence they have by dint of words as a means to acquire power, thus confusing “influence” with “political power”, that is with authority tied to positions in a party organization or a government. Intellectuals cease to be intellectuals when they are in public office.

It will come as no surprise that we usually fail to match up to these standards; but that should not devalue the standards themselves. For if there is one thing that intellectuals - a species that has so often attacked their own kind and declared the intellectual dead - cannot allow themselves, then it is to be cynical.