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FOLLOWING PAPER:**

The Scandal of publicity

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1). Tracing security

Ben Anderson, Anne-Marie D’Aoust, Matthew Hannah, Jessica Pykett, William Walters and David Murakami Wood identify some unresolved issues in my essay ‘On the milieu of security’ (Barnett 2015a), and also draw into focus a series of recurrent topics that discussions of these matters often provokes. I will pick up three broad themes: how to go about theorising publicness; the potential of the idea of attention for this task; and images of critique.

David Murakami Wood suggests that I depend on “a rather unproblematic liberal humanist conception of the public that seems to posit it as an identifiable and singular entity” (Wood 2015, xx). Apparently, such a notion obscures more fundamental axes of class and racial differentiation, and conceals the ‘structural violence’ attendant on claims about false unity. My first observation is that I did not invoke a notion of ‘the public’ at all. I prefer to use terms like public sphere, or public space, or even publicity. These are all more awkward sounding than ‘the public’, to be sure, but they are more faithful to the core issue at stake in discussions of publicness, which is my favourite term but also the most unwieldy of the lot. The point of using such awkward phrases is to try to do justice to the de-substantialization of ‘the public’ upon which both the descriptive and normative value of the idea depends (see Barnett 2004).

Even if I did like the idea of ‘the public’, the knockdown argument that it obscures other forms of differentiation does not hold up. One might reverse the argument, and suggest that it is only a functioning public sphere that enables forms of differentiation, division, exploitation and inequality to become discernible in the first place.

Publicness is not the name for any old form of social interaction. It is the name for forms of interaction that depend on particular conditions of inclusivity, namely the possibility of anonymous and indeterminate participation in shared concerns. This is inclusion of an odd sort, to be sure, of a sort that is all to do with contingent practices of address and response. Michael Warner’s (2002) account of publics and counter-publics remains the essential reference point for grasping publicness as a *style* of action. The publics and counter-publics he refers to should not be too quickly assumed to be names for groups of people acting together. Ben Anderson’s (2015) discussion of the indeterminate circulation of affects suggests a further refinement of our understanding of the conditions for the distinctive style of public action.

Wood suggests that an analytics of visibility is more useful for thinking about the spatialities of security than the theme of publicness. The activities that Wood places under this description – activities of differentiating, enumerating, rating, and sorting populations – are not quite the same as making visible. Nor is surveillance best thought of as being a practice of seeing, watching, or being looked. One finds the manifestations of a particular sort of power not in technologies of visibility so much as in what one might call the general conditions of *trace-ability* of acts. The power lies in the capacity to store and record information, to recall it, and to make sense of it in ways that enable new actions. For example, the power of the algorithm, is not best described or assessed by reference to a vocabulary of scopic regimes. It is an example of generalized *iterability*, or perhaps even *documentality*. Call it what you will, and refer to Anthony Giddens, or Max Weber, or Maurizio Ferraris, or Bernard Stiegler, and others too. Being able to see something as the thing it is seen as (to be moved by a scene of horror, or to be able to spot a suspicious move) depends upon these not-quite-material conditions of retention and anticipation. In short, the conceptual

vocabularies of visibility do not really capture the degree to which the practices of security share the same medium as the practices of publicness that are the implicit norm driving much of the critique of security. *Writing*, one poisonous figure for the shared conditions of both securitization and publicness, is the medium of both sinister practices of secrecy and for democratic practices of public power (Derrida 1981). And therein lies the scandal of publicity: the possibility of scandal that inheres in any attempt to wield power out of the public eye, and the scandal of exposing the exercise of power to the rationalities of everyone and anyone.

William Walters' (2015) helpfully that suggests the theme of secrecy might move us along from an analytics of visibility and invisibility, towards a more complex field of relations of knowing and the unknown. I can only endorse the suggestion. I would add that secrecy is a model for a distinctive kind of enclosed, intensely solidaristic sociability (sharing is an essential aspect of the value of secrecy). Publicness refers to a fundamentally different type of sharing, a type of sharing structured by not knowing just whom you are sharing things with. My point is simply to underline the importance of thinking of publicness as a quite distinctive modality of collective life.

Walters also raises the uncomfortable thought that the institutionalization of practices of security in a register of secrecy generates certain affective qualities that attract scholarly attention, as Matt Hannah (2015) puts it. It is an uncomfortable thought because it raises the possibility that the critique of security might be caught in a circle of mimetic desire and rivalry with its object of analysis. On the other hand, it is a slightly consoling thought because it suggests that all the energy directed at exposing the sinister qualities of securitization might well distract attention from fields of action worthy of more concern.

2). Economies of attention

Another alternative to thinking of the relationship between security and publicness in terms of visibility is to follow Matt Hannah's suggestion to develop 'a political economy of attention'. Hannah provides a rather grudging acknowledgement that people's capacities for rationality and reason should be taken seriously, on the grounds that we should not "burn conceptual bridges" to the understandings of lay actors, or lose our connection with notions of responsibility. My worry about the gesture of affirming in practice something that one presumes to know is false in theory is connected to Jessica Pykett's (2015) disappointment that I did not say more about the "processes of subjectification" at work in some of the work I cited. Anne-Marie D'Aoust (2015) echoes this in her interpretation of my paper as calling for more attention to the subjects of public action. Well, yes and no. I think it is possible to say lots about subjectivity without remaining in thrall to the strange afterlife of poststructuralist theories of 'subjectification'. The fixation on the aporias and paradoxes of sociologized versions of a philosophical concept of The Subject is the least defensible legacy of this tradition of thought.

Hannah thinks that it is not at all reassuring to acknowledge the role of public reason in securitization, because it helps us understand people's own "acquiescence" in heightened security and the diminution of solidarity. He suggests that there has been a "semantic shift" away from more public notions of social security towards ideas of security focussed on war, terror, disease, and crime. Of course, the solidaristic models of social security developed in the twentieth-century had a rather intimate relationship

with militarism, warfare, imperialism and racism. The contemporary unravelling of welfare systems in multi-cultural Europe suggests that perhaps these systems of social security were a little *too* dependent on assumptions about cultural solidarity, assumptions that it seems can be easily mobilised to undermine more inclusive models of public life. But any reconfiguration of welfare systems that has taken place is not due to semantic shifts. One reason to suggest that public action might be approached in terms of emergent problems is to take seriously the enduring forms of ‘ontological insecurity’ that shape whether and how certain rhetorical appeals begin to resonate as issues worthy of public attention. Anderson’s succinct description of the circulation of indeterminate affects suggests that affect theory might well have something to contribute to such an analysis. Anderson is surely right to insist that affect is not always conceptualised as an ‘object-target’ available for manipulation. He does not really need to convince me that ideas about the affective dimensions of public life should lead us to think more about uncertainty and indeterminacy. Some of us have known this for a long time. His point is indicative of an internal divide within the burgeoning field of affect theory.

Hannah suggests that means of distraction have been functionally deployed to steer people’s attention away from neoliberal restructuring and securitization. The speedy move from the question of attention to a strong claim about distraction should be resisted. Hannah invokes the idea attention in relation to the idea that there is a stable field of things available to be noticed by people, so that the shift to security must entail a distraction from other things going on. You can certainly think of attention as a finite resource, which is therefore necessarily selective. This idea lends itself easily to the idea that attention can be distracted from one (important) thing to another (less important) thing. A second way of thinking about attention and distraction would see them as two opposed modes of apprehending phenomena: one focussed, engaged, responsive, that is, *attentive*; and the other fleeting, superficial, shallow, *distracted*. Somewhere between these two interpretations of attention and distraction there might well be resources for thinking more seriously about the inevitably *partial* modes of engagement through which public life is sustained.

Despite my reservations about Hannah’s specific interpretation of security practices as a distraction, his centring of the issue of attention in the conceptualisation of public action is certainly worth developing. Attention is a rather long-standing concern in various strands of social science. It is an unnamed concept in Dallas Smythe’s account of audience commodities, and also in Marshall McLuhan’s notions of hot and cold media. It is a central concept in the economics of information, and is going through something of a renaissance in fields closer to human geography too (see Crogan and Kinsley 2012). One of the recurring themes across this work is that the economy of attention is not just a matter of scarce resources. It is a matter of appreciating just how difficult it is to get people to pay attention in the first place, and then to maintain their attention once you have got it. Which is another way of reiterating the point that Anderson raises, namely the importance of thinking about the indeterminate and uncertain forms of mediated forms of action.

There are two aspects in particular about the idea of attention that further recommend it as a concept around which to frame the analysis of public formation. First, attention might be an effective way of pursuing a concern with the materiality of public formation that Anne-Marie D’Aoust (2015) recommends. For example, it might be

much more difficult to build sustained attention around some issues than others because of the different aesthetic qualities of issues. Issues may or may not rise to public attention because of something about them that attracts or resists or repels attention. Or, to take another example, Bonnie Honig (2013) suggests thinking of *public things* in terms of those matters of common concern around which public attention can be mobilized, in the dual sense of something that they care about and can act in concert upon.

Second, attention might be a theme that can integrate fundamentally different approaches to contemporary academic work on public issues. In some disciplines, publicness is conceptualised primarily as a communicative practice. These fields have difficulty acknowledging that ‘public’ is also a name given to institutionalised, bureaucratic configurations: the public sector, public transport, and so on. Public agencies, charged with delivering material goods and services, can also be analysed in terms of the economies of attention, in so far as they are organised practices for sharing, distributing and providing care and attention. Giving attention, attending to the needs of members of ‘the public’, is what these agencies are meant to do. And, whisper it, it also a function that can be performed by private actors and market practices as well.

3). Geographies of judgement

Jessica Pykett worries that my suggestion that concepts like governmentality should be used in a more diagnostic way leaves no clear basis for critical social science. So, where *does* my original argument leave ‘critique’? Pykett ends her response with a series of worries about not being able to securely evaluate governmental interventions in education, well being and happiness policies, or border security. I have a couple of thoughts in response to this sort of challenge. First, governmental intervention is not always and everywhere a sinister process. In my original piece, I made a passing reference to the idea that the critique of security depends on a liberal ideal of freedom as non-intervention. It is an idea rooted in the idea that freedom and power are opposed principles, that the latter is a restriction of the former. I do not think that this conception is necessarily a bad one. I was just pointing out that it does a lot of unacknowledged work in the radical critique of security. In drawing attention to this conception, I was alluding to an alternative account of freedom as non-domination. The distinction is derived from Phillip Pettit’s reconstruction of a republican theory of agency. The idea of freedom as non-domination rests on a notion of domination as the arbitrary subjection to the will of others. This definition allows a very wide scope for interventions of all sorts as presumptively legitimate, in so far as they are not arbitrary (in the sense that the exercise of power is subjected to reasonable public scrutiny). Not all centralised, hierarchical, coercive action is a form of domination (paying taxes, driving on the correct side of the road, or sending your kids to school are not marks of being dominated). Nor is the state the only source of domination. All of which is to say that it is perfectly possible to imagine the exercise of power as necessary and justified to the expansion of freedom.

My second point is that the range of issues that Pykett names are very different issues, from education and border control, and thinking critically about them requires the capacity to make distinctions. Whether or not you think the argument I articulated in my original piece threatens to leave critical analysis unmoored depends on how you conceptualize the task of critique. The default model of critique in the intellectual

fields I inhabit is one of exposure and denaturalization. It depends on the idea that people are hoodwinked; that this hoodwinking is part of the constitution of the most intimate aspects of their subjectivity; and that it works by covering over the constructed qualities of social life with the appearance of naturalness and inevitability.

There is, of course, an alternative model of critique, one that turns on a distinction between facts and emergent norms. The two versions of critique depend on different forms of what we might call 'geographical reasoning', to use a suggestive phrase of David Harvey's. We can think of different fields of action, from welfare to education to border security to higher education to drone warfare, as so many instances of general processes best captured by general concepts such as neoliberalization, governmentality, or biopolitics. This is a particular temptation in field disciplines such as geography or anthropology, where there is often an anxious imperative to place immersive, place-based empirical findings under more general covering explanations. It is a mode of analysis that does not allow for the exercise of critical judgement precisely because it presumes that evaluation always depends on pre-existing criteria that are generally applicable.

Subsuming particular examples under general criteria is one style of geographical reasoning. Another holds that political judgement depends on the appreciation of the singular qualities of situations. 'Thinking in examples' is how Hannah Arendt described the challenge of critical judgement. Questions of critique only ever arise in relation to issues that matter to people. The analysis of problematizations is one step in a two-step analysis of what is going on, one more diagnostic and the other more normative. It is one part of an approach that would recognize that critique is not a special duty of professional academics, but an ordinary dimension of the way in which the world unfolds.

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