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# KANT AND THE MODERNITY OF THE ABSENT PUBLIC

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In his famous passages in *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant, the so-called father of modern liberalism, outlines the three maxims of how a society moves toward Enlightenment: one, think for oneself; two, think in the mindset of others; and three, think consistently.<sup>1</sup> The longer one considers these propositions, the stranger they sound. For example, if we take maxim two seriously, we could become so busy connecting with others—and, of course, they with us—that there is little room for that special someone, who presumably would get most of our empathetic energy. Friends, lovers, spouses and even relatives have no particular place in Kant's world. Hegel stated it perhaps all too bluntly; marriage for Kant "is degraded to a bargain for mutual use."<sup>2</sup>

Now this might seem like a strange way to begin a conversation about Kant, but one must remember that Jean-Jacques Rousseau made a big deal about the family; its importance both historically in mankind's development and symbolically in each of our lives. According to Rousseau, "The most ancient of all societies, and the only one that is natural, is the family."<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that Kant is against 'the family.' Only that unlike Rousseau, who consciously tries to match his philosophy with a real world principle, Kant does not. For him, it is not our family that is the source of our 'naturalness,' but rather an innate and placeless sense of "sociability." In Paragraph 41 of the *Critique of Judgment*, just a few sentences after outlining his famous maxims, Kant points out that "sociability" is "requisite for man as a being destined for society, and so as a property (*Eigenschaft*) belonging to humanity."<sup>4</sup> Kant phases it as a "*Trieb zur Gesellschaft*," in other words, as an innate drive or compulsion toward the social. But what is this compulsion? Perhaps one can answer it in the negative, for it is most certainly not the same as wanting to be "public." Whereas Rousseau discussed the idea of 'the public' in his *Social Contract*, differentiating the public person for the private individual, Kant shuns this distinction and, indeed, tries his best to avoid that classic duality. Instead, he implies a distinction between public and sociability, with the philosophical weight clearly on the latter.

I start on this note in order to rethink the question of modernity and its theorizations of 'the public,' and to remind ourselves that this concept is hardly as stable as we might suppose. Kant is challenging us to link the social neither to the private (i.e. the family) nor to the public (i.e. a political or economic entity). In the Kantian world, we (and that means me and all the other billions of 'I's the world over) are both

motivated by our independence and individuality, and yet, at the same time, we are uniquely oriented to the social through the unstoppable energy of a *Trieb*. Imagine that you are not married, sitting on a beach talking to your friends on Facebook with your iPad. That would be a perfect Kantian situation. With that image in mind we can see that Kant's "sociability" is fully modern, more modern than anyone could have imagined in the late eighteenth century.

Let's look more closely at maxim two, where Kant asks us "to put ourselves in thought in the place of every one else" (*An der Stelle jedes anderen denken*). It is obvious that putting yourself in someone else's shoes is not the same as engaging in a public discourse. It means instead that I am not just sitting down at a table and talking to the person, but, for a while at least, trying to 'be' that person, in my mind. Kant does not say how one goes about doing this, but clearly one can ask, what does that person eat? Is he grumpy in the morning? How does he have friends? It would be impossible to answer these questions without talking to that person, and I would be expected, I presume, to do this with both men and women.

Naturally, in the late-eighteenth century, Kant would have imagined a restrained interest in each other's lives. But he did open the door and nowhere does he warn against 'going too far.' Today we might use the word empathy to describe such an engagement. I have indeed used that word in my discussion above, but it is not exactly correct. When we think of empathy, a late-nineteenth century concept, we associate it with emotional contact or with sympathy. It is a psychological attitude. Maxim two, however, is not about emotions. On the contrary! It is where Kant locates the empirical. The process is purely fact-finding. It does not involve judgment, which happens later.

Now Kant wants the person that I am having this exchange with to do the same with me. He also wants all of us to do this with everyone else over the extended period of our lives. That is his maxim three, the cumulative result of which produces what he calls "*sensus communis*"—the sense of the communality. This concept is sometimes discussed as if it were equivalent with 'the public' and sometimes discussed in relationship to the so-called 'Public Sphere.' In both cases this is a mistake. If the *sensus communis* is a public, it is only because we have produced it inside out and that means, for Kant, that it has no external, potentially alienated Will separate from our personal lives. In replacing the concept 'the public,' which does not appear at all in *The Critique of Judgment*, with *sensus communis*, Kant changes the terms of the discussion, thereby producing a whole new architecture of thought. If we want to coin a term it would be 'Sphere of Sociability.'

In an accompanying footnote, Kant admits the process by which the *sensus communis* develops is easy to state theoretically, but is, in fact, "difficult and slow of accomplishment."<sup>5</sup> And as Kant writes in *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*

(1784), "Daher kann ein Publikum nur langsam zur Aufklärung gelangen." A public can reach Enlightenment only very slowly.<sup>6</sup> In the process, it changes from being merely "ein Publikum" to being the more important *sensus communis*.

The change does not require a vote. It does not necessarily need a democracy. There is remarkably little politics in the Kantian Enlightenment. Public spaces are not necessary nor even a parliament building. People do need, of course, the status of freedom and the space to meet and talk. These needs, however, could be served just as effectively on a public bus as in a private room. In this, Kant's philosophy is strikingly different from the conventions of what we might think when it comes to liberalism. The revolution in Egypt could be considered a good example of Kantian politics in the way that it unified Facebook with events in the street, but it is not fully Kantian. Kant would want the Egyptians to connect with the Israelis, and vice versa, and this is most certainly not going to happen. The reason we have to do maxim two is precisely because we are different, so different that we have to strip away the natural overdeterminism of our ontology to engage the ontology of the Other. It is rather astonishing that in Kant's world, we may be neighbors, but we are yet completely unknown to each other—and to ourselves!—until we begin the laborious process of interaction.

The splitting of the Self into a Self and a not-Self, which is the requirement of maxim two where the not-Self takes precedent, is Kant's most radical proposition, and the one that Hegel would later most vehemently disparage. For Hegel, this proposition breaks the Self into incompatible parts: philosophy, precisely because it is philosophy and not social sciences, must talk about the Self as a unit.

Among the philosophers against whom Kant was arguing was (of course) John Locke, who gave us the first modern, theorized distinction between public and private, or more specifically between public good and private possession. Locke-like Kant for that matter—was not interested in private thoughts, private feelings or anything that we might include in the general discussion of 'personal privacy.' His primary concern was the relationship between you and what you own. It was a thoroughly mercantile perspective. Owning a sack of coffee beans, for example, requires a distinctive set of legal protections, such as a contract, that guarantees the legitimacy of that private ownership and that allows the beans to be sold or marketed without corruption.

Kant gets rid of the issue of possessions in that standard sense. In fact, his entire perspective is mildly anti-capitalist if not outright anti-legalistic. What I 'possess' is not a thing, but my sociability. But as we have seen, Kant also gets rid of 'the private,' for a good Kantian would have to give up the boundary of privacy whenever a stranger walks up and wants to go fishing around in his or her ontology. To do this, everyone needs to be on their best behavior. In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant writes that the one thing in the world that is unambiguously good is the "good will."

He opens the book with the following words: "Nothing in the world—or *out of it!*—can possibly be conceived that could be called 'good' without qualification except a Good Will." In fact, so he continues, "power, riches, honor, even health, and happiness" are for naught "if there isn't a good will to correct their influence on the mind."<sup>7</sup>

Kant, in a sense critiques the Enlightenment legalism that became the foundation of a certain stream of modern thinking. Though legalism remained an important strand of what it means to be modern, so too did the 'missing' nature of the public. The consequences were profound: once removed as a philosophical project, it was never really reinstated. Hegel, for example, puts the public back into play, but he limits it by equating it with the nation-state. The situation gets no better with Edmund Husserl, whose idea of the Life-World, for example, is diametrically opposed to the idea that there is a metaphysics of 'public' or even of 'the nation' that stands outside our individual existential spheres. In fact, Husserl is so anti-public that there is almost no glue holding society together. If you wanted to throw your grandmother under the bus, that might be perfectly fine from a Husserlian point of view if the deed was part of your Life-World and you consequently engaged it in the protocols of phenomenological self-research. Kant at least believed in the power of moral teaching and the principle of duty: concepts that provided the 'glue' in the face of the absent public. For Hegel, the 'glue' was the Spirit and its dialectical and historical resonances, but these enlightenment abstractions are completely absent in Husserl. If Kant's world—supposing it had ever been really achieved—was strange, Husserl's would have been a nightmare.

To simplify a bit, one can say Hegel took away maxim two and asked us to go from maxim one to maxim three, which in his philosophy focuses on the nation-state. Husserl then took away the nation-state as just another metaphysical falsity, leaving, in a sense, a variation of maxim one. And so the damage was done. As liberating as it is, Husserl's world is a potentially dangerous place to be.

This raises the question, How did the 'public' survive this assault against it? The answer has a lot to do, ironically, with the rise of the nation-state in the nineteenth century and thus in a sense the victory of the Hegelian world view. It was in the interest of the emerging nation states, after all, to have 'a public,' if only because it needed to stabilize its increasingly bureaucratic and militarized hold on life. The rise of the bourgeoisie, of global colonialism, and of professional societies in the Victorian era, especially in the 1880s, played another critical part. The 'public' was put back into the philosophical system really only with Karl Marx, who demanded the abolition of property in the name of "public purposes." In other words, for Marx, 'the public' was the new super structure that was bigger than the defunct bourgeois word. Therein lies at least one of the sources of the modern confusion about 'the public' as a type of enemy of individualism. But that is a different story and takes me out of philosophy and into history and politics. I want to remain focused on the post-Kantian,

Figure 1 Mark Jarzombek, The Kantian City.



Rendering by Jonathan Crisman.

philosophical resistance to 'the public,' for I am not convinced that the return of 'the public'—often associated with a liberal rejection of self-interest—matches with the anti-public philosophy of liberal thinking.

Let me take as a small example the case of Richard Sennett who sees himself as a champion of the "public realm." According to Sennett,

*The most important fact about the public realm is what happens in it. Gathering together strangers enables certain kinds of activities which cannot happen, or do not happen as well, in the intimate private realm. In public, people can access unfamiliar knowledge, expanding the horizons of their information. Markets depend on these expanding horizons of information. In public, people can discuss and debate with people who may not share the same assumptions or the same interests. Democratic government depends on such exchanges between strangers. The public realm offers people a chance to lighten the pressures for conformity, of fitting into a fixed role in the social order; anonymity and impersonality provide a milieu for more individual development. This promise of turning a fresh personal page among strangers has lured many migrants to cities. [This takes place in] squares, major streets, theatres, cafes, lecture hall, government assemblies, or stock exchanges.<sup>8</sup>*

Strangers meeting, talking and sharing experiences in the real and metaphorical openness of public space, as Sennett describes it here, is very Kantian and is based on the core principles of Kant's liberalism. But Kant never says that this has to take place in a public space. This means that Sennett, by inserting "public space" back into the system, winds up adopting an anti-public position. Let me explain. He claims that he is part of a "performative school" of thinking, which, "stripped of the jargon," means simply that we focus "on how people express themselves to strangers." It is an interesting ambition. Sennett does not say that people should go and live like these strangers for a while "in thought and place," as Kant wanted. Rather, I am expected to *express* myself and it is up to the stranger to try to figure it out. But Kant wants us to do much more than just "express ourselves." It is, in fact, precisely because of the stresses in the expressive exchange that Sennett then needs the public space to be real, where it serves not as a 'public space,' but as a space of temperance and surveillance. Expressing myself in a "public space" is presumably different than expressing myself in a "private space." Kant's modernity does not operate with that distinction and needs no such space.

Sennett, of course, is being reasonable, for Kant's position is, in truth, almost nonsense. It is impossible to imagine a true Kantian modernity; but I am more interested in his nonsense than the liberalist repair job that tries to insert— all too quickly I argue—'the public' back into the machine.

I close with a thought experiment about the 'real' architecture of a Kantian world. First, it would be a city without houses. A house would be the symbolic locus of 'family' and there are no 'families,' so no houses. So what then would a Kantian city look like? One could envision any number of scenarios from linear cities to field cities to even a quasi-medieval town (but without the looming presence of cathedrals). Furthermore, at regular frequencies in the city, there would have to be meeting and seminar rooms, and other places where people can visit and talk. A university as such would be too top-heavy for Kant, but perhaps a loose infrastructure of exchange-and-learning centers might work. The city would also have a good deal of glass, both transparent and reflective, for in the Kantian world there is no mandate for private intimacy, as it is conventionally understood today, namely as an area outside the jurisdictional gaze of the State. 'Private space' as it conventionally might be called would be needed for sleep and rest, etc., but also as places to get away and think about things. To "think for yourself"—i.e. maxim one—you have to go to a place where one can shut down the interfering voices of all the thousands of people one knows. But this could happen just as easily on a bus or in a library as in one's bedroom. So, imagine a city of streets and no freestanding houses, then imagine that the street facades and many of the interior walls are made of glass. But like Swiss cheese, there are dark boxes of space where individuals can spend time alone, perhaps reading a book or listening to music. Some of these places may be 'owned' by individuals, but most would be open to anyone. Next, imagine Encounter Buses that drive around the city and allow one to meet with people for short exchanges. Perhaps there could be Exchange Pods, where such meetings could be stretched out for hours or even days.

There would also be no professions in the modern sense. And that means there would be no architect professionals. As to how the city would get built, the closest model today that might work for Kant would be 'design-build' where clients and architects work together to solve problems. If everything were design-build, there would be no progress, no conceptual jump into a better world that is so critical to the Kantian Enlightenment project. We would, instead, have a continual repetition of the same. The *genius*, or several of them, would be required, meaning that the city would have an occasional building by Frank Gehry and Le Corbusier. We would study these buildings and appreciate them just like the other great works of art that make up the history of civilization. The city would even have an assortment of memorial statues dedicated to these geniuses as potential inspiration for those who think that they can be the next genius.

This Kantian city would be a relatively serious place. It is hard to imagine ballrooms or circuses in a Kantian city. Nor would there be major public buildings like courthouses and parliament buildings, since Kant wants us to work together to come up with our own laws, from the bottom up, so to speak, and not just swallow whatever comes down from above. Political parties would not exist, but there would be associ-

ations of people who would come together to define a particular common interest. Courthouses would not be banned, of course, but they would only exist in a small-scale way, distributed throughout the urban landscape as places that stabilize and re-affirm the thinking of the *sensus communis*. They would need to be 'blended in' and not freestanding edifices. In the Kantian city, there is no principle of citizenship, no police force, no army and even the sciences would be barely autonomous from the imprint of communal humanism. A place like MIT? Impossible. The city would have to be more like a village or town, networked across the landscape with other villages, but most certainly not cut-off or isolated. There would have to be places where foreigners could come and meet and indeed, most inhabitants themselves would have travelled widely in the great coming and going of cultural exchange. In the Kantian town there would be a wide range of hostels and hotels clustered around the Encounter zones. Residents would have to be accustomed to signs reading "Not currently in my office. Work will resume in two weeks."

These quick and purposefully reductive ruminations on Kant are meant to show that, despite Kant's wide influence in our thinking, we never created a fully Kantian modernity—perhaps thankfully. If we agree, this means that we live in a world of multiple modernities, which are largely modernities of practice. Kant's modernity, if we can call it that, never became realized as such, even though pieces of it—in negation—became the basis for modernities of Hegel, Husserl and others. The point I am trying to make is that we have to recognize the productive strangeness of the Kantian world and the fact that its strategy of calculated impossibility pointed in some way to the very heart of modernity's more invisible multiples.

1 See "§40: Of Taste as a Kind of Sensus Communis," in Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (London: Macmillan, 1914 [1892]), 169-173.

2 G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. S.W. Dyde (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 140, accessed 12 June 2012, [http://libcom.org/files/Philosophy\\_of\\_Right.pdf](http://libcom.org/files/Philosophy_of_Right.pdf).

3 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Book I," *The Social Contract*, accessed 12 June 2012, [http://www.constitution.org/iir/socon\\_01.htm](http://www.constitution.org/iir/socon_01.htm).

4 Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, 174.

5 Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, 171.

6 Kant, "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" in *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (December; 1784), 483.

7 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. Jonathan Bennett, (2010-15), 5, accessed 12 June 2012,

<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdf/kantgrou.pdf>.

8 Richard Sennett, "The Public Realm," accessed 12 June 2012, <http://www.richardsennett.com/site/SENN/Templates/General2.aspx?pageid=16>.