Beyond the Po-Faced Public Sphere

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Willie Whitelaw, who served as deputy prime minister under Margaret Thatcher, once accused his political opponents of ‘stirring up apathy’. This was, to be sure, an infelicitous construction: apathy – from the Greek *a-pathos*; *without feeling* – implies that something is absent – and to stir up an absence of feeling would seem to be an absurd enterprise. But there is a second sense in which Whitelaw’s accusation should interest us, for it belongs to that tradition of thought which regards emotions as smouldering liabilities, constantly in danger of being kindled, inflamed, stirred up. Just as you ‘stir up apathy’, you ignite pathos – which then disrupts and disables its Aristotelian antithesis, logos. Politics, according to this discourse, entails quiet appeals to reason. The political becomes a project to protect logos from contamination by pathos.

My concern in this chapter is the damage that is done to democratic politics when the animating force of affect is regarded as a distraction – when there is a conscious effort to create a disjuncture between the diffuse energies and porous spaces of popular culture and the instrumental work of making decisions that affect the public. Democracy, I want to argue, suffers when it becomes encased within the well-managed boundaries of self-referential institutions and can only flourish when decision-makers breathe the same air and speak the same language as the people they claim to represent. This is not an argument against the existence of a division of political labour; otherwise, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, democratic citizenship would take up too many evenings. My argument is that at the most common point of entry to democratic politics – the public sphere in which we share, discuss, challenge and act upon ideas about the common good – the repudiation of pathos should be rejected and an unapologetic reconciliation between logos and the terms of popular communication realised.
The chapter proceeds through three stages. Firstly, I reflect upon the normative claims of the democratic public sphere and suggest that these are largely unrealised, even in the most advanced and sophisticated national versions of democracy. Secondly, I outline a number of ways in which citizens have migrated from the official public sphere – or, more accurately, have found themselves faced with new conditions of publicness that refuse to be delimited by the aesthetic continence of rationalist discourse. Finally, I argue that while successful political communication in these new conditions increasingly depends upon who can attach credible symbols to pervasive feelings, there is still a resistance in significant quarters to the intrusion of pathos into the hallowed halls of logos.

Public aversion to the public sphere

For all of its normative significance as an inclusive ‘sounding board for problems that must be processed by the political system’ (Habermas, 1996, p. 444), the limited appeal of the political public sphere as a popular cultural space has proved to be problematic. Public indifference to its sombre allure has become a taken-for-granted feature of contemporary politics, making a mockery of its multivocal, democratic credentials. The vibrant chatter of competing testimonies, each proclaiming their warrant as public reason, is conspicuous by its absence. The contemporary political public sphere is too commonly conceived as a monument to dispassionate reason: a space in which members of the public are expected to be on their best behaviour, an arena of politely repressed performance. Historically shaped (or perhaps deformed) by an ascetic avoidance of animated and haptic distractions from unadulterated rationality, the late-modern public sphere has come to be characterized by a relentless search for sound sense and casual inattention to deep sensibility.

Why is it that the political public sphere, which is normatively rooted in principles of popular inclusion, has in practice become so exclusive and uninviting? How did places of public debate – from political parties to television studios – become so averse to the intrusive danger of the unscripted voice? What is it that has made the public seem like such strangers on their increasingly rare forays into the public sphere? While neither joking nor ranting are explicitly against the rules of the public sphere, they – and other visceral outbursts – have come to be frowned upon with the tacit force by which giggling in church or clapping at the wrong moment in a classical concert are deprecated by po-faced cultural guardians. Governed by an ethos of instrumental rationality that celebrates the analytical and eschews the pre-cognitive, ‘proper conduct’ in