

American Counter/Publics

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The “public sphere”—an idea with deep roots in the European enlightenment—has always been a contested concept in American culture and society. Almost by default, American intellectuals, artists, politicians, and activists have stressed the non-unitary, diversified, and oppositional dynamics of all things public. In this manner, already the US Constitution, while based on enlightened principles of free debate and rational deliberation, eschewed a philosophy of consensus building in favor of a philosophy of multi-interested checks and balances. Not the expressiveness of Rousseau’s *volonté générale* but the proceduralism of Madison’s *extended republic* stood at the beginning of American notions of democratic governance. As a consequence, “public opinion” in the United States could never easily be identified with the “public good,” but was always open to multiple sub- and non-public (private, corporate, technological, etc.) influences.

Thus, from the early days of the American republic, competing interest groups and commercial mass media (first newspapers, novels, and the theater, then radio, television and the internet) have worked to pluralize public speech and public action—and ultimately the notion of “publicness” itself. Numerous social, political, and aesthetic developments throughout American history can be (re)described against this background as struggles for publicity, waged against the occupation of a national agenda by political, economic, and media elites. Two of the most important American contributions to the theory of the public sphere—Walter Lippmann’s *The Phantom Public* (1925) and John Dewey’s rejoinder *The Public and Its Problems* (1927)—despite their ideological differences concur that in the United States, the public sphere is not a realm of unbiased exchange and unanimous agreement. Rather, in the United States, the public sphere becomes visible, also to itself, as a

multi-agential, commercially embattled, highly mediated, and eventually trans-nationalized aggregate of publics and counterpublics. Numerous later discussions of American counter/publics—from Nancy Fraser, Seyla Benhabib, and Michael Warner to Robert Darnton, Michael Hardt, and Catherine R. Squires—have further refined this self-conceptualization of democratic speech under the conditions of capitalist mass media, with recent accounts frequently stressing the deterritorialized—though regularly Anglophone—nature of counter/public communication in global digital networks. In particular, the communication of public trust, in political and discursive contexts naturally inclined to distrust, has been a central topic in and for American culture.

The 2018 Convention of the German Association of American Studies (DGfA) will deal with questions of publics, counterpublics, publicity, and public (dis)trust in US-American politics, society, history, and culture, examined through the lenses of literary and cultural studies, political science, sociology, historiography, media studies, economics, and didactics.

Exemplary thematic fields for workshops include but are not limited to:

- Citizen Activism, Social Networking, Whistleblowing: Political Documentation and the Public Good
- Ideas and Ideologies of Public Participation (Copyrights, Open Source Initiatives, Media Commons, Digital Humanities, etc.)
- Public Opinion and the Use of Military Force
- The Public and the Arcane: Secrecy, Surveillance, and National Security
- Free Speech? Practices of Censorship, Hate Speech, etc.
- Early American Counter/Publics
- Public Poetry, Poetic Publics
- The Politics of Publishing and the Literary Market
- Public, Private, and Domestic Spaces: Cultural Practices of Zoning
- Publicity as Visibility and Audibility
- Public Trust: The Communication and Construction of Political, Economic, or Institutional Credibility (e.g., How Social Media Change the Public Sphere)
- Public Persons: From the Star System to Self-Profiling
- Public Diplomacy and the Issues of Trust and Distrust
- Public History Projects as American Self-Descriptions

- Public Economics: Commonwealth vs. Special Interests; Public-Private Partnerships as a Technique of Governance
- Public Enemy: The Mobilization of “Silent Majorities”
- Trans-Nationalizing American Counter/Publics: Communication and Power in Global Politics
- An American Genre: Jeremiads about the Decline of the Public Sphere
- Wealth Inequality and the Quality of the Public Sphere (e.g., Superpacs and elections)
- Police Work and the Idea of Public Order
- Granularity and the Transparent Consumer: The Public Implications of Individual Choice
- "Elitist" vs. "Sub-cultural" Counter/Publics
- Religion and Counter/Publics
- Education and Counter/Publics