Article

Subaltern Counterpublics in Global Politics

Benjamin Herborth

Department of International Relations and International Organization, University of Groningen, The Netherlands;
b.a.herborth@rug.nl

Abstract
Publics have traditionally been conceived as sites of social integration. While discord, controversy, and contestation may be acknowledged, theorising publics and especially public spheres are characteristically geared toward the production of consensus and/or the conditions of the possibility of unified decision-making. On this view, publics beyond the nation-state are reduced to conceptual extensions of the nation-state—The move to a higher level of aggregation, imagined as global or international, seems to make no conceptual difference. Against this, I propose to conceptualize publics as sites of the constitution of social struggles. To this end, I introduce Nancy Fraser's concept of "subaltern counterpublics," previously applied exclusively to national contexts, to the study of global politics. With a view to future empirical application, I discuss three promising sites for the further study of subaltern counterpublics in global politics: colonial public spheres, transnational social activism, and the circulation of extreme right-wing conspiracy tropes. Taken together, I conclude, these three sites of inquiry provide an important corrective to a statist concept of the public in which the place, purpose, and direction of publics are always already taken for granted.

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Publics in Global Politics" edited by Janne Mende (Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law) and Thomas Müller (Bielefeld University).

1. Introduction

Publics have traditionally been conceived as sites of social integration. While discord, controversy, and contestation may be acknowledged, theorising publics and especially public spheres is characteristically geared toward the production of consensus and/or the conditions of the possibility of unified decision-making (Castells, 2008). On this view, publics beyond the nation-state are reduced to conceptual extensions of the nation-state—The move to a higher level of aggregation, imagined as global or international, seems to make no conceptual difference. Against this, I propose to conceptualise publics as sites of the constitution of social struggles. Doing so, I contend, enables both an understanding of politics that avoids the narrow prescriptions of a pre-stabilised concept of political order (thus tying publics conceptually to the nation-state) and a reconceptualisation of social struggles and social forces which does not presuppose a fixed arrangement of actors, structures, and processes among which then only limited confrontation on ready-made stages can be imagined. With Dewey (1927/2004), I suggest that publics can be understood in terms of the performative constitution of politics by means of reflexive self-intervention. Beyond Dewey and building on Fraser's (1990) concept of subaltern counterpublics, I suggest that the struggle over the terms of such performative constitution prefigures what is possible in terms of discord, controversy, and contestation. Going beyond Fraser, who develops and applies the idea of subaltern counterpublics with reference to a "Westphalian frame" of nationally and territorially bounded communities (see the self-critical discussion in Fraser, 2007, pp. 12–13), I introduce the concept of subaltern counterpublics into the study of global politics.

The argument proceeds in three steps. In a first step, I demonstrate how the concept of the public is used,

predominantly in the literature on global governance, to restore and reproduce a vision of order characteristic of the modern nation-state. In this view, politicisation, questions of legitimacy, and public contestation figure as a corrective to emerging forms of political authority beyond the nation-state. Mobilising questions of legitimacy and public contestation as a corrective afterthought, however, reduces publicness to an optional (if desirable) feature of political authority. In a second step, I provide an alternative view which considers publics as constitutive of political authority in the first place. Analytics of subaltern counterpublics, I suggest, allows us to think of publics in more explicitly political terms, in particular with a view to the vertical distribution of positions of power. In a third step, I discuss three promising sites for the further study of subaltern counterpublics in global politics: colonial public spheres, transnational social activism, and the circulation of extreme right-wing conspiracy tropes. Taken together, I conclude, these three sites of inquiry provide an important corrective to a statist concept of the public in which the place, purpose, and direction of publics are always already taken for granted.

2. Global Governance and the Restorative View of the Public

In this section, I discuss the classical, statist conception of the public to which the idea of subaltern counterpublics seeks to provide an alternative. In a critical discussion of the literature on global governance, I demonstrate that many of the attempts to make use of the concept of the public for the study of global politics simply extrapolate this statist conception onto the global scale in an effort to restore a vision of political order characteristic of an idealised account of the modern nation-state (for an example of a non-statist use of the global governance literature, see Mende, 2023). This, I suggest, is a problematic move because it presupposes that non-public forms of political authority have emerged at a global scale thus foregoing the potential of the concept of the public to critically interrogate the very constitution of political authority. On this restored statist view, the concept of the public can then only be mobilised in order to address problems of legitimacy—or rather the lack thereof—in what is already constituted as a global context of political authority. Bringing in the publics to the rescue after the fact, however, tends to problematically downplay their power dimension.

In order to understand the statist concept of the public it is important to remember that, while often universal in aspiration, it emerges at a particular time and in a particular place. It is a European concept articulated in response to the emerging differentiation between state and society and in relation to a new type of autonomy claim which pits free citizens against what is now framed as the old aristocratic order. Hence the subtitle of Habermas' (1962/1990) *Structural Transformation of the*

Public Sphere announces "an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society" (cf. Fraser, 1990, p. 58). From this vantage point, it may seem plausible to think of *the* public in the singular and in relation to a pre-existing type of political authority; and as the language of the public is mobilised against an old order with the promise of conferring legitimacy upon a new one its normative grammar becomes inherently *progressive*. This particular constellation leaves us with a concept of the public that is firmly settled in terms of place, purpose, and direction.

While such an account is historically contested for its neglect of simultaneous patterns of exclusion in terms of gender, class, and race (Black Public Sphere Collective, 1995; Eley, 1991; Landes, 1988; Ryan, 1990), it remains at the centre of the self-description of the modern nation-state. Peters (2007) demonstrates in a careful reconstruction of the broader semantic field of the public that variations on the theme of publicness—including the public sphere, public opinion, and different possible antonyms such as privacy and secrecy—are:

> Core concepts which are embedded in conceptions of social and political order. These are in part theoretically systematized, in part articulated implicitly in constitutional documents, laws and court rulings, and influential political statements. (Peters, 2007, p. 55, translation by the author)

While the ensuing variety of interpretations by a variety of social actors makes for a "dynamic semantic field," Peters (2007, p. 55; see also Herborth & Kessler, 2010; Liebetrau & Monsees, 2023; Strydom, 1999) highlights that all of these are informed by general conceptual structures which "have emerged since the 18th century in the political culture of Western societies and in essence have remained stable until today."

The concept of the public is thus marked by a dual constellation: A particular historical context of origin contrasts with a long and powerful legacy of stabilisation and routinisation in which the former is easily forgotten. Consider the following definition of the public sphere, taken from Fraser's (1990, p. 57) discussion of Habermas:

> The idea of the "public sphere"…designates a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction. This arena is conceptually distinct from the state; it is not an arena of market relations but rather one of the discursive relations, a theater for debating and deliberating rather than for buying and selling. Thus, this concept of the public sphere permits us to keep in view the distinctions between state apparatuses, economic markets, and democratic associations, distinctions that are essential to democratic theory.

From this vantage point, presupposing a theatre within which public political action can take place, it is not surprising to see any consideration of global publics—or publics beyond the nation-state—is confronted with prima facie scepticism. Absent the communicative infrastructure and the lived experience of critical engagement enabled by a combination of mass media, linguistic transparency, and narrative constructions of shared fate, attempts to simply transpose the concept of the public beyond its particular European (and bourgeois) context of origin would seem highly questionable (see the critical discussion in Zürn, 2021). This constellation leads to an unfortunate theoretical impasse where publics can only be conceived in binary terms—as either present or absent. However, as the introduction to this thematic issue aptly demonstrates, the binary presence/absence works effectively as a conceptual blinder; it obfuscates a wider and diverse array of manifestations and dynamics of global publics and their political effects (Mende & Müller, 2023).

The literature on global governance stands in an ambivalent relation to this observation. Against the conceptual (and at times political) conservatism of the defenders of the nation-state as the static container of all things politically well-ordered, the global governance literature has pointed to a variety of forms of global publicness (Best & Gheciu, 2014a). At the core of the argument stands a reading of global governance as an emerging political system (e.g., Zürn, 2018). The existence of an emerging polity then figures as the functional equivalent of the territorial state in classical conceptions of the publics sphere (Zürn, 2021, p. 161). Absent a "normatively sophisticated" public to mediate conflict and contestation, however, global governance faces a legitimation crisis. Zürn's (2021) argument is both an empirical-sociological and a normative-political one. Sociologically, he observes the absence of a global public that could effectively mediate "between world society and the authoritative instances of global governance." Normatively, he underlines that a global political system calls for a "normatively sophisticated" public capable of such mediation. And combining sociological and normative perspectives he insists that the emergence of such a public is, in principle, a counterfactual possibility the actualisation of which is hindered not by a nationally minded citizenry but rather by the "specific institutional structure of the global political system" (Zürn, 2021, p. 164). Driven by a concern with the de-democratising and legitimacy-crisis-inducing effects of global governance, Zürn (2021) thus explores the possibility of restoring at the global level a series of mechanisms for the control and contestation of political authority that are tried and tested in national contexts.

The underlying turn to "politicisation" in global governance research thus reacts powerfully to its initial depoliticising tendencies. Conceptually, however, questions of legitimacy and public contestation are introduced as an afterthought. First, there is a structure of

political authority beyond the nation-state. Then, we need to ask questions of legitimacy which are necessarily inflected through some form of publicness (e.g., public contestation, public justification). Zürn et al. (2012, p. 71) thus "define politicization of international institutions operationally as growing public awareness of international institutions and increased public mobilization of competing political preferences regarding institutions' policies or procedures," i.e., as a reaction to the emergence of new forms of political authority. Hence, they contend that the "politicization of international institutions is a consequence of their new authority. The more political authority international institutions exercise or are expected to exercise, the more they attract public attention and demands. In this way, they become publicly contested" (Zürn et al., 2012, p. 71). As politicisation and public contestation are introduced as being merely reactive to new forms of political authority they cannot be thought of as constitutive elements bringing about political authority in the first place.

What is more, the attempt to conceptually restore the congruence of a politicised public with the scope of administrative decision-making forces us to think of publics in the singular, i.e., to reproduce the characteristic constellation of the modern nation-state at the international and global level. The transposition of singular publics from the national to the global level, however, runs into a conceptual problem. As Eriksen and Sending (2013) have argued, the concept of the public becomes politically meaningful in domestic settings mainly through its distinction from the private. While the private represents the particular, the public represents the universal (at least in the form of a claim to universality). At the international level, however, states represent the particular interests of their domestic constituencies. Designating the state as belonging by default to the public rests on the presumption that moving from the domestic to an international or global setting makes no conceptual difference. This creates a problem for a restorative view of the global publics. For, if the argument by Eriksen and Sending holds, mechanisms of holding political authority accountable which are tried and tested at the nation-state level cannot simply be scaled up precisely because the scaling up involves a shift in political semantics rather than empirical aggregation. Moving beyond the binary of (desirable) presence and (undesirable) absence, this invites consideration of how global publics are qualitatively different. In doing so, Eriksen and Sending point to the paradoxical effects of performing publicness beyond the state:

> Because of the lack of a global public actor and the exclusive and particularistic character of the global public sphere, existing forms of global governance may in fact contribute to making institutions *less public*, even if the policies and justifications of these institutions' practices may be based on moral values about autonomy and freedom as in the case of human

rights. Therefore, paradoxically, the emergence of a global public sphere, which would appear to improve the possibility of global accountability may have the opposite effect….It serves to legitimize particularistic policies and practices by presenting them as universal. (Eriksen & Sending, 2013, pp. 232–233)

In a similar vein, Bartelson (2006) has discussed the concept of global civil society as travelling uneasily from the domestic to the global level. While Eriksen and Sending make a systematic argument about the qualitative difference between publics in domestic and international settings, Bartelson makes a historical argument about the function of civil society as a category of legitimation. Hence, he notes that:

Despite the otherwise sharp discontinuities between the domestic and global forms of civil society, the basic function of the concept of civil society has remained largely the same across those contexts. It has been and still is a matter of defining the scope of the governable by distinguishing it from governmental authority proper, as well as from the uncivil outside beyond its limits. (Bartelson, 2006, p. 390)

In other words, what is being constituted through the normative grammar of accountability, control, and contestation is not a counterpoint to a pre-existing site of political authority but rather the possibility of political authority itself. This is not to say that the normative language of accountability and control must inevitably work as a legitimatory fig leave. It is to say, however, that without consideration of how the normative grammar of the public is imbricated in the production of the sites of authority to which it counterposes itself, we limit our understanding of the political effects of global publics.

To Keating (2009, p. 310), this is precisely the category mistake of posing normative questions of legitimacy and public contestation as an afterthought, something that could potentially be added on after the fact that new forms of political authority have emerged:

The governance debate…raises normative questions rather quickly (partly by exposing implicit normative assumptions that were not questioned in the world of government bounded by the nation-state) but, treating the concept as a neutral or positivist one, its advocates lack the concepts and vocabulary to address them. The suggestion that the next stage is to complete the concept by expanding it and then endowing it with a theory of legitimacy involves an inversion of theory (coining a concept and then trying to define it afterwards); normativity is something that is inherent in the design of concepts, not added on as afterthought.

I have argued in this section that, somewhat paradoxically, common uses of the public in the literature on global governance remain tied so closely to the conceptual presuppositions of the modern nation-state that the *global* in global publics makes no difference. It thus commits methodological nationalism not in the simple sense of privileging the nation-state as a site of empirical attention but in a more subtle, conceptual sense (e.g., Chernilo, 2011). Methodological nationalism is not a problem of an allegedly obsolete level of empirical aggregation. It is a problem of political semantics. This is to say, that methodological nationalism is not so much a question of where we look for political order, it is a question of how we look for it—And doing so in a way that remains faithful to the political vocabulary of the modern state imposes serious limitations on the possibility of "looking beyond."

The next section will thus introduce an alternative conceptualisation of global publics which reads publics less in terms of normative integration (ideal typically embodied by the nation-state, to be restored in global governance) but rather as sites of the production of social struggle and as such constitutive of political authority in the first place.

3. Global Publics and Their Politics: From Normative Integration to Subaltern Counterpublics

The very idea of normative integration presupposes a space that is to be integrated. That space must be always already there. It can be located in the past, not necessarily a historical past but an idealised notion of enlightened ambition that we may still aspire to. It may also be relegated into the future in such a manner that normative integration is the task of a public-to-come. On this view, publics exist notoriously in the modalities of "no longer" or "not yet." Hence, we can either discuss their eclipse and decline (e.g., Habermas, 1962/1990), or we can pose the question of publics in global politics as one of "return" (e.g., Best & Gheciu, 2014b). In any of these scenarios, however, we will be inclined to view the public in the singular and that singular vision of the public will be modelled on what I have discussed above as a statist conception. In this section, I discuss two powerful resources to challenge this statist conception. From Dewey (1927/2004) I take the idea that publics are constitutive of rather than reactive to political authority (see also the discussion of Arendt in Forough, 2015, Chapter 6.2). From Fraser (1990) I take the idea that the complexity of social struggles can be grasped more effectively if we consider publics in the plural and as expressions of social struggles rather than in the singular and as expressions of normative integration. At the same time, Dewey lacks explicit analytics of power, and Fraser remains thoroughly statist in her theorisation of subaltern counterpublics.

Dewey's (1927/2004) *The Public and Its Problems* can be read as a direct critique of attempts to singularise publics with reference to either an idealised past or a utopian future. Rather than stipulating a particular

macro-historical trajectory of decay or future emergence, Dewey outlines a performative view of political community formation that remains sensitive to historical reconfiguration. Dewey suggests conceiving the public (and the state) as a continuous experimental practice. He presents this as an explicit critique of literature that seeks causal origins in terms of individual motivations (Dewey, 1927/2004, p. 36; see also Abraham & Abramson, 2017; Cochran, 2002a, 2002b). Dewey (1927/2004, p. 12) thus proposes to replace the quest for causal origins with a focus on practical consequences.

> We take then our point of departure from the objective fact that human acts have consequences upon others, that some of these consequences are perceived, and that their perception leads to subsequent effort to control action so as to secure some consequences and avoid others.

To the extent that such consequences remain confined to those immediately involved, they can be dealt with in private, i.e., among the participants of a particular situation. However, to the extent that others are affected, dealing with consequences becomes a problem of the public, and the public, in turn, constitutes itself precisely by addressing these problems. Hence, the "quality presented is not authorship but authority, the authority of recognized consequences to control the behaviour which generates and averts extensive and enduring results of weal and woe" (Dewey, 1927/2004, p. 19). Importantly, the pragmatist focus on practical consequences must not be misunderstood as a mere affirmation of a given status quo. From a pragmatist point of view, the success of any particular transaction hinges not on its conformity with externally given expectations but simply on what follows successively (!) after the fact. What is "objective" in Dewey's account is thus the mere fact that some kind of consequence can be observed. He starts, in a nutshell, from the social-theoretical premise that one thing we can assert about the formation of modern and complex societies is that they bring about things we may not have wanted and may not have seen coming. It is in confronting these problems that the public, and thus political authority, constitutes itself. It follows from this focus on the self-constitution of publics that the "recognition" of particular consequences—as well as the neglect of others—remains subject to the subsequent process of communication. All we can say about the public act of self-intervention is that based on the recognition of particular, possibly unintended, and unanticipated consequences of action, those who are affected constitute themselves as a public which manifests itself in the institutionalisation of contextually specific forms of addressing these problems. The specific kind of public that we refer to as the state:

> Is the organization of the public effected through officials for the protection of the interests shared by its members. But what the public may be, what the officials are, how adequately they perform their function, are things we have to go to history to discover….And since conditions of action and of inquiry and knowledge are always changing, the experiment must always be retried; the state must always be rediscovered. (Dewey, 1927/2004, pp. 33–34)

Dewey thus understands public spheres in terms of their performative constitution, as an ongoing, experimental, and open-ended process of self-intervention, self-regulation, and self-transformation (see also Honneth, 1999; Schmalz-Bruns, 1995). Despite its success in displacing an "absolutistic logic" which treats the state as unproblematically given, Dewey's reformulation reacts specifically to the rise of technocratic and "expertocratic" forms of domination epitomised in Walter Lippmann's dismissal of the public sphere (see the discussion of its impact on international relations in Holsti, 1992). In doing so, Dewey builds on a characteristic premise of left-Hegelian thought, namely that disagreement, with oneself and others, is constitutive of rather than antithetical to political order (see Fetscher, 1997). Dewey thus emphasises that the public does not stand outside of relations of political authority as an afterthought or as a corrective. It stands, rather, at the centre of the production of political authority itself. The terms in which this is done—and the inclusions and exclusions implicit in setting those terms—are open to political struggle and contestation. The public as such, therefore, has no normative quality outside of the political struggles by which it is produced.

However, Dewey, too, conceives publics in the singular. His concern is with *the public* and its *problems*, i.e., the confrontation of a single public with multiple problems. With Dewey, we can therefore adopt the performative view of the publics as constitutive of rather than reactive to political authority. For the purpose of thinking publics globally, however, we must go beyond Dewey and think publics in the plural. It is precisely in this context that Fraser's (1990) critical interrogation of the import of the idea of the public for a "critique of actually existing democracy" has not lost its bite. It provides an outline for a more historical and a more sociological understanding of publics which can help us to better understand how publics within and beyond the nation-state are imbricated in structures of power and domination, and it is this particular quality which makes Fraser's earlier discussion of subaltern counterpublics, even more so than her later work on transnationalising the public sphere (Fraser, 2007), relevant to our discussion of publics in global politics.

Specifically, Fraser introduces the idea of "subaltern counterpublics" in an effort to foreground the critical element of political struggle, an element she argues is overlooked in conventional "bourgeois" notions of the publics sphere. Taking for granted bourgeois society as an arena within which public spheres may emerge, Fraser

contends, comes with a series of problematic assumptions which figure as the tacit social theory underwriting conventional theories of the public sphere. First, she contends that thinking of the public as a singular sphere within a bourgeois society transforming itself into a nation-state invites us to "bracket status differentials and to deliberate 'as if' [interlocutors] were social equals" (Fraser, 1990, p. 62). On this view, "societal equality is not a necessary condition for political democracy" (Fraser, 1990, p. 62). Fraser thus highlights the socio-economic conditions of the possibility of political participation and public deliberation. It follows that there can be no political theory of possible inclusion without a social theory of practical exclusion. In other words, normative claims cannot be abstracted from their socio-political context.

Second, Fraser (1990, p. 62) challenges "the assumption that the proliferation of a multiplicity of competing publics is necessarily a step away from, rather than toward, greater democracy, and that a single, comprehensive public is always preferable to a nexus of multiple publics." Here, Fraser introduces the idea of *subaltern counterpublics*. The idea of counterpublics allows us to think of multiple publics standing in opposition to one another. The idea of the subaltern, taken from Gramsci's analysis of the subaltern classes and later at the centre of postcolonial theory (Shilliam, 2015; Spivak, 1988), crucially adds an analytics of social exclusion which highlights both vertical and horizontal forms of exercising power. The subaltern is both vertically "below" and horizontally outside the centre as the "other" thus doubly excluded from the centre of political power. Fraser's (1990) key example of a subaltern counterpublic is the women's movement in the US which succeeded in carving out a political space separate from the official public sphere in order to be able to express and articulate concerns otherwise rendered notoriously invisible. Fraser allows for the possibility of subaltern counterpublics feeding such concerns (e.g., the language of sexual harassment) into the official public sphere and thereby contributing to its transformation. Subaltern counterpublics may however also engage in a strategy of delinking in order to create political space for the articulation of experiences otherwise excluded. Even in this case, though, they are not entirely decoupled from the official public sphere; they are not filter bubbles or echo chambers but rather "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67).

Third, Fraser (1990, p. 62) challenges the "assumption that discourse in public spheres should be restricted to deliberation about the common good, and that the appearance of 'private interests' and 'private issues' is always undesirable." Fraser thus takes issue with the liberal separation of spheres which are presupposed as fixed and unproblematic. As Abrahamsen and Williams (2014) note, however, the distinction between the public and the private, constitutive of standard views of international politics much like the distinction between the domestic and the international itself, has increasingly been problematised. Rather than presupposing a fixed separation of separate spheres, subaltern counterpublics can thus observe and challenge the performative effects of drawing categorical distinctions such as the one between public and private.

Lastly, Fraser (1990, p. 63) questions whether "a functioning democratic public sphere requires a sharp separation between civil society and the state." Instead, the idea of subaltern counterpublics invites us to think of civil society, with Gramsci, as a site of the formation of social struggles which are constitutive of social relations of hegemony. Going beyond Gramsci, Fraser introduces the distinction between *strong publics* which can produce decisions (e.g., parliament) and *weak publics* which cannot. Whether or not subaltern counterpublics affect social transformation at the level of strong publics must remain open; it is a political question. If they do, however, they act not merely as a corrective to political authority, they partake in reconstituting it.

In developing the idea of subaltern counterpublics, Fraser combines insights from social and political theory to counter what McNay (2014) would later aptly criticise as "socially weightless" accounts of critique. Fraser situates conventional concepts of the public in a series of problematic social-theoretical assumptions and sketches possible alternatives. For the purpose of this article, this allows us to trace a history of contestation, inclusion/exclusion along each of these problematic assumptions in a way that remains sensitive to the "remarkable irony" that "a discourse of publicity touting accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies is itself deployed as a strategy of distinction" (Fraser, 1990, p. 60). Subaltern counterpublics thus do more than act as a placeholder for opposition and dissent. They insert a sharp element of power analysis into Dewey's vision of the performative constitution of political authority; they allow us to trace the inclusions and exclusions (of subjects, voices, perspectives, possibilities) co-performed in the performative self-constitution of publics, global and otherwise (see also Schlag, 2023).

At the same time, Fraser's discussion of subaltern counterpublics remains firmly statist. As she would later concede, her "critique presupposed the national-territorial understanding of publicity. Far from challenging the Westphalian frame, it aimed to enhance the legitimacy of public opinion within it" (Fraser, 2007, p. 13). Perhaps more fundamentally, Alexander (2006) has argued that Fraser's account of subaltern counterpublics pits them too schematically against a homogenised centre of a hegemonic public sphere thus viewed effectively as:

A kind of empty arena, as a fenced-off space that has the capacity to pacify and contain social conflicts

whose goals and ambitions remain fundamentally orthogonal to one another and to the culture and institutions of the wider social world. (Alexander, 2006, p. 277; for an instructive discussion of the Deweyan tendencies of Alexander's later work see Emirbayer & Noble, 2013)

However, applications of Alexander's own sophisticated effort to bridge the artificial divide between the normative and sociological concepts of the public retain a statist focus as well as they focus on civil spheres within countries rather than giving independent weight to an international, transnational, or global perspective (Alexander et al., 2019; Alexander & Tognato, 2018). Similarly, detailed applications of the concept of counterpublics tend to focus on one specific locale rather than exploring the global multiplicity of publics and counterpublics (e.g., Reinisch & Kane, 2023). Suspending with the premise of a homogenised centre, however, is precisely the challenge of translating the concept of subaltern counterpublics onto the stage of global politics.

4. Subaltern Counterpublics in Global Politics

How, then, can the concept of subaltern counterpublic contribute to our understanding of publics in global politics? It follows from the above that it is decidedly not conducive to producing a single, unified narrative shedding light on a singular and coherent pattern. Subaltern counterpublics are political. They break through the established order of things, and they do so in ways that exhibit irreducible moments of agency, contingency, and unpredictability. In doing so, however, they effectively disrupt the teleological idea of a singular public as a site of normative integration. In what follows, I will therefore highlight—in a necessarily brief fashion—three avenues for the further exploration of subaltern counterpublics in global politics. These are sites of conceptual engagement as much as they are sites of potential empirical application. For the purpose of the present article, they serve as vignettes of what specifically the concept of subaltern counterpublics can contribute to the study of publics in global politics.

4.1. Colonial Publics: How Subaltern Counterpublics Enable a Shift of Focus

If read (with Habermas, 1962/1990) as a category of bourgeois society, the public sphere is rooted firmly in a particular time and place. It is a modern idea, and it is a European idea. Analytics of subaltern counterpublics, while sensitive to the situatedness of publics, allows for a critical decentring of our understanding of publics in global politics. It suspends with the premise, shared by both the statist and the restorative view, that place and space can unproblematically be taken for granted—metaphorically speaking, that the theatre within which public contestation may ensue is always already there.

Indeed, in a discussion of recent historiography on colonial publics, Warner (2002) suggests that his own discussion of *Publics and Counterpublics* was crucially motivated by a critical engagement with Eurocentric conceptions of the public sphere. Conceptually, Warner suggests, the very idea of counterpublics serves to decentre our vision of order and political authority. It is precisely through this move that the binary focus on the presence/absence of the publics in global politics can be overcome in favour of questions such as: "How do these spaces form? What are the rhetorics and cultural forms that we have to have on hand in order to speak of a public or multiple publics or counterpublics?" (James et al., 2020, p. 243). Recent historical research zooming in on colonial publics provides a case in point as it suspends taken-for-granted notions of how publics are socio-culturally and politically embedded in real-existing (Western) democracies (Hunter & James, 2020). As Shilliam (2015, p. 7) has recently pointed out, even critical work on the history of colonialism may reproduce the "fatal impact thesis," the idea that the encounter between the West and the rest was one of such insurmountable asymmetry that non-Western agency becomes virtually unfathomable. Against this, the study of colonial publics, e.g., through the independent rise and circulation of print media (see Hunter & James, 2020) can serve as a reminder of the potential of subaltern counterpublics to both conceptually and empirically shift our focus away from the paradigmatic case of the Western, European, bourgeois public sphere (see also Getachew, 2019; Herborth & Nitzschner, 2021). Rather than dismissing the concept of the public altogether as inextricably expressive of a colonial matrix of power.

4.2. Transnational Social Activism: How Subaltern Counterpublics Constitute a Fundamentally Different Type of Political Engagement

A burgeoning literature on transnational advocacy networks has inquired into the causal efficacy of transnational protest (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). It thus typically focuses on the question of whether, how, and to what extent transnational social activism can achieve particular goals or change the terms of political engagement. Approaching it through the notion of subaltern counterpublics allows us instead to focus on how (transnational) activism engages in a type of politics geared towards the articulation of fundamental dissent with rather than the progressive transformation of a particular political order which can serve to correct the top-down view characteristic of governance perspectives with a bottom-up perspective building on insights from social movement studies (Della Porta, 2022; see also the discussion of the World Social Forum in Forough, 2015, pp. 244–251; Herborth, 2007). As Sassen (2011, p. 574) notes: "Powerlessness is not simply an absolute condition that can be flattened into the absence

of power. Under certain conditions, powerlessness can become complex…it contains the possibility of making the political, or making the civic, or making history." Movements such as Occupy or Fridays for Future thus engage in the forward-looking imagination of radically different politics. Such transformative ambition contrasts sharply with mass-mediatised narratives enframing protest movements established and routinised forms of political conduct. The politics of transformative types of transnational activism, however, is to disrupt those. As Weber (2013, p. 126) notes:

> Counter-public formations thus emerge, as it were, "aside" from the officialized codes of political communication in the public sphere, and develop a register of social and political experience which expresses "what is going on" differently to the established modes of self-observation ritualized in the "official" public sphere….Rather than seeking to expand the public sphere, they are seeking to change it, its justificatory discursive means, and its constitutive dogmas through a persistent demand for a perspective shift. The *dramatis personae* of this would say things like: "The world you are describing is not the world we are living in; the account you give of the problem is skewed, distorted and engenders solutions we do not recognize."

The politics of subaltern counterpublics is therefore not reducible to acts of opposition within a given context of political authority. On the contrary, subaltern counterpublics challenge extant modes of authorisation and seek to radically transform them; they struggle to performatively constitute a different political space rather than voicing opposition to particular policies within existing ones.

4.3. Right-Wing Conspiracy Tropes: How the Notion of Subaltern Counterpublics Remains Radically Open

Much of the outline of the idea of subaltern counterpublics as discussed above is directed against a grand liberal narrative of naturally progressive inclusion. Still, the language of subaltern counterpublics—counterpower against hegemony—almost implicitly comes with a normative presupposition. Resistance against hegemony, at least its very possibility, is a good thing. It thus may serve as a reminder of the non-linearity of political struggle that extreme right-wing conspiracy tropes have been circulating in remarkably effective ways, and they do exhibit key characteristics of counterpublics, such as the explicit confrontation with and opposition to an alleged centre of power and authority (Drolet & Williams, 2022; Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019; Steffek, 2015). What stands out here, in particular, is the reverse intersectionality trope apparent in a variety of extreme right-wing shooter manifestoes (e.g., Utøya, Christchurch, Halle; see Millar & Costa Lopez, 2021). The reverse intersectionality trope

makes for a folk social theory to support the conspiracy narrative of a "great replacement" of a white majority by predominantly Muslim immigrants. Curiously, it connects various markers of social exclusion and dispossession and reverts them into a conspiracy narrative. At the centre of this narrative stands the crude anti-semitic cliché of a Jewish ruling class (Subotic, 2022). In an effort to undermine white supremacy, the Jewish ruling class allegedly "invented" feminism in order to lower birth rates and make space for large-scale Muslim immigration aka the "great replacement." What follows from this for the notion of subaltern counterpublics? I have argued above that subaltern counterpublics are inherently political, i.e., radically open-ended. The possibility of co-optation of the critical language of subaltern counterpublics by the extreme right then serves to underscore that subaltern counterpublics cannot be readily inscribed into a Manichaean scheme where subaltern counterpublics are by default morally valorised on account of their opposition to a hegemonic centre. In terms of future research avenues, it allows for the reconstruction of the ways in which counter-discourses to liberal democracy emerge within liberal-democratic contexts and by liberal-democratic means.

5. Conclusion

Taking the concept of subaltern counterpublics out of its statist context and considering its implications for the study of publics in global politics I have not only sought to challenge statist and restorative views but also to demonstrate how the global and the international make a difference in our understanding of the public itself (see also Herborth, 2022). Colonial publics, counter-politics in transnational social activism, and the circulation of extreme right-wing conspiracy tropes have served as examples showcasing the conceptual and empirical potential of thinking publics in global politics in a way that foregrounds their multiplicity, their constitution through conflict and social struggle, and their open-endedness.

Taken together these three vignettes demonstrate how the notion of subaltern counterpublics can be made productive for the study of global politics: by shifting the focus away from binaries such as the presence/absence of a global public or unity/fragmentation and toward the situated production of global public space; by highlighting a different mode of politics engaged in the struggle for the creation of new and different kinds of political space; by confronting the difficulties of treating the politics of subaltern counterpublics as radically open and contingent, as opposed to embedded in the narrative of progress always already settled a priori. As such, they unsettle three constitutive fixities in the statist and restorative view. They do so by unpacking the where, the how, and the whereto of the publics in global politics. On the statist and restorative view, the publics matter only within pre-constituted arenas, they matter only with a view to influencing policy, and their influence

is primarily directed towards a pre-conceived notion of progress. The concept of subaltern counterpublics, on the contrary, allows us to problematise place and space (see also Forough, 2015, Chapters 1.6, 7) by zooming in on both the globally unequal distribution of voice and opportunity and the entangled histories of their production (e.g., Jahn, 2000). It allows us to move beyond a narrow focus on influencing policy by foregrounding the possibility of a different mode of politics where alternative political vocabularies can be developed in order to reconfigure the terrain of political possibility. Finally, it allows us to break with implicitly linear and teleological views of history where "more (counter)public" always signals normative progress by foregrounding the open-ended, indeterminate, and potentially "regressive" nature of the social and political struggle.

Subaltern counterpublics thus cut across the different manifestations of global publicness helpfully outlined in the introduction to this thematic issue (Mende & Müller, 2023). *Audiences* and *interests* are not simply there (or not); they are performatively constituted in and through social struggles. Giving voice to audiences and articulating interests may trigger processes of institutionalisation and the creation of a public sphere where more conventional forms of politicisation come into view. Whether or not this happens, and whether or not subaltern counterpublics seek to do so, however, remains a question of open-ended political struggle.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Abraham, K. J., & Abramson, Y. (2017). A pragmatist vocation for international relations: The (global) public and its problems. *European Journal of International Relations*, *23*(1), 26–48.

Abrahamsen, R., & Williams, M. C. (2014). Publics, practices, and power. In J. Best & A. Gheciu (Eds.), *The return of the public in global governance* (1st ed., pp. 243–256). Cambridge University Press.

Alexander, J. C. (2006). *The civil sphere*. Cambridge University Press.

Alexander, J. C., Palmer, D. A., Park, S., & Ku, A. S. M. (Eds.). (2019). *The civil sphere in East Asia*. Cambridge University Press.

Alexander, J. C., & Tognato, C. (Eds.). (2018). *The civil sphere in Latin America*. Cambridge University Press.

Bartelson, J. (2006). Making sense of global civil society. *European Journal of International Relations*, *12*(3), 371–395.

Best, J., & Gheciu, A. (Eds.). (2014a). *The return of the public in global governance*. Cambridge University Press.

Best, J., & Gheciu, A. (2014b). Theorizing the public as practices: Transformations of the public in historical context. In J. Best & A. Gheciu (Eds.), *The return of the public in global governance* (1st ed., pp. 15–44). Cambridge University Press.

Black Public Sphere Collective. (1995). *The Black Public Sphere: A public culture book*. University of Chicago Press.

Castells, M. (2008). The new public sphere: Global civil society, communication networks, and global governance. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *616*(1), 78–93.

Chernilo, D. (2011). The critique of methodological nationalism: Theory and history. *Thesis Eleven*, *106*(1), 98–117.

Cochran, M. (2002a). A democratic critique of cosmopolitan democracy: Pragmatism from the bottom-up. *European Journal of International Relations*, *8*, 517–548.

Cochran, M. (2002b). Deweyan pragmatism and post-positivist social science in IR. *Millennium*, *31*(3), 525–548.

Della Porta, D. (2022). Progressive social movements and the creation of European public spheres. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *39*(4), 51–65.

Dewey, J. (2004). *The public and its problems*. Ohio University Press. (Original work published 1927)

Drolet, J.-F., & Williams, M. C. (2022). From critique to reaction: The new right, critical theory and international relations. *Journal of International Political Theory*, *18*(1), 23–45.

Eley, G. (1991). Nations, publics, and political cultures: Placing Habermas in the nineteenth century. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the public sphere* (pp. 289–339). The MIT Press.

Emirbayer, M., & Noble, M. (2013). The peculiar convergence of Jeffrey Alexander and Erik Olin Wright. *Theory and Society*, *42*, 617–645.

Eriksen, S. S., & Sending, O. J. (2013). There is no global public: The idea of the public and the legitimation of governance. *International Theory*, *5*(2), 213–237.

Fetscher, I. (1997). Eduard Gans über "Opposition" und Karl Rosenkranz über den "Begriff der politischen Partei" [Eduard Gans on "opposition" and Karl Rosenkranz on the "concept of the political party"]. *Hegel-Studien*, *32*, 161–169.

Forough, M. (2015). *Transnational public spheres: A spa-*

tial perspective [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Groningen.

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, *1990*(25/26), 56–80.

Fraser, N. (2007). Transnationalizing the public sphere: On the legitimacy and efficacy of public opinion in a post-Westphalian world. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *24*(4), 7–30.

Getachew, A. (2019). *Worldmaking after empire: The rise and fall of self-determination*. Princeton University Press.

Habermas, J. (1990). *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* [Structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society]. Suhrkamp. (Original work published 1962)

Herborth, B. (2007). Verständigung verstehen: Anmerkungen zur ZIB-Debatte [Understanding understanding: Remarks on the Habermas debate in German international relations]. In P. Niesen & B. Herborth (Eds.), *Anarchie der kommunikativen Freiheit: Jürgen Habermas und die Theorie der internationalen Politik* [The anarchy of communicative freedom: Jürgen Habermas and the theory of international politics] (pp. 147–172). Suhrkamp.

Herborth, B. (2022). Denying the international. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, *35*(6), 783–795.

Herborth, B., & Kessler, O. (2010). The public sphere. In R. Denemark (Ed.), *International studies encyclopedia*. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/97801908466 26.013.426

Herborth, B., & Nitzschner, P. (2021). Europe in historical international relations. In B. de Carvalho, J. Costa Lopez, & H. Leira (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of historical international relations* (pp. 432–440). Routledge.

Holsti, O. R. (1992). Public opinion and foreign policy: Challenges to the Almond-Lippmann consensus. *International Studies Quarterly*, *36*(4), 439–466.

Honneth, A. (1999). Demokratie als reflexive Kooperation: John Dewey und die Demokratietheorie der Gegenwart [Democracy as reflexive cooperation: John Dewey and the theory of democracy today]. In H. Brunkhorst & P. Niesen (Eds.), *Das Recht der Republik* [The right of the republic] (pp. 37–65). Suhrkamp.

Hunter, E., & James, L. (2020). Introduction: Colonial public spheres and the worlds of print. *Itinerario*, *44*(2), 227–242.

Jahn, B. (2000). *The cultural construction of international relations: The invention of the state of nature*. Palgrave Macmillan.

James, L., Barber, K., Putnam, L., & Warner, M. (2020). A conversation: Revisiting publics and counterpublics. *Itinerario*, *44*(2), 243–259.

Kaiser, J., & Rauchfleisch, A. (2019). Integrating concepts of counterpublics into generalised public sphere frameworks: Contemporary transformations in radical forms. *Javnost—The Public*, *26*(3), 241–257.

Keating, M. (2009). Putting European political science back together again. *European Political Science Review*, *1*(2), 297–316.

Keck, M. E., & Sikkink, K. (1998). *Activists beyond borders: Advocacy networks in international politics*. Cornell University Press.

Landes, J. (1988). *Women and the public sphere in the age of the French Revolution*. Cornell University Press.

Liebetrau, T., & Monsees, L. (2023). Assembling publics: Microsoft, cybersecurity, and public-private relations. *Politics and Governance*, *11*(3), 157–167. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i3.6771

McNay, L. (2014). *The misguided search for the political*. Polity Press.

Mende, J. (2023). Public interests and the legitimation of global governance actors. *Politics and Governance*, *11*(3), 109–119. https://www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance/article/view/6778

Mende, J., & Müller, T. (2023). Publics in global politics: A framing paper. *Politics and Governance*, *11*(3), 91–97.

Millar, K. M., & Costa Lopez, J. (2021). Conspiratorial medievalism: History and hyperagency in the far-right Knights Templar security imaginary. *Politics*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957211010983

Peters, B. (2007). *Der Sinn von Öffentlichkeit* [The meaning of public]. Suhrkamp.

Reinisch, D., & Kane, A. (Eds.). (2023). *Irish Republican counterpublic: Armed struggle and the construction of a radical nationalist community in Northern Ireland, 1969–1998*. Routledge.

Ryan, M. P. (1990). *Women in public: Between banners and ballots, 1825–1880*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Sassen, S. (2011). The global street: Making the political. *Globalizations*, *8*(5), 573–579.

Schlag, G. (2023). European Union's regulating of social media: A discourse analysis of the Digital Services Act. *Politics and Governance*, *11*(3), 168–177. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i3.6735

Schmalz-Bruns, R. (1995). *Reflexive Demokratie: Die partizipatorische Transformation moderner Politik* [Reflexive democracy: The participatory transformation of modern politics]. Nomos.

Shilliam, R. (2015). *The black Pacific: Anti-colonial struggles and oceanic connections*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.

Steffek, J. (2015). Fascist internationalism. *Millennium*, *44*(1), 3–22.

Strydom, P. (1999). Triple contingency: The theoretical problem of the public in communication societies. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, *25*(2), 1–25.

Subotic, J. (2022). Antisemitism in the global populist international. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *24*(3), 458–474.

Warner, M. (2002). *Publics and counterpublics*. Zone Books.

Weber, M. (2013). "It's over; I've seen it on TV": Occupy's politics beyond media spectacle. *Global Change,* *Peace & Security*, *25*(1), 123–126.

Zürn, M. (2018). *A theory of global governance: Authority, legitimacy, and contestation*. Oxford University Press.

Zürn, M. (2021). Öffentlichkeit und Global Governance [Public sphere and global governance]. *Leviathan*, *37*, 160–187.

Zürn, M., Binder, M., & Ecker-Ehrhardt, M. (2012). International authority and its politicization. *International Theory*, *4*(1), 69–106.

About the Author

Benjamin Herborth is a senior lecturer in history and theory of international relations at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. His current research at the intersection of social theory, political theory, and international relations focuses on the semantics of struggle in global politics.