SO275 Permutations of the Public

Seminar Leader: Cynthia Browne
Email: c.browne@berlin.bard.edu
Office Hours: By appointment
Course Times: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 17:30 to 19:00

Course Description

Public, as a noun or adjective, traverses multiple disciplines and discourses. As a Euro-American concept that received its most explicit theorization and historicization in the wake of the Enlightenment, it has become a central category in understanding the political dimensions of cultural transformations across a wide array of domains. This course examines its significance for understanding how power, freedom, and authority become enacted and reconfigured in modern states. The course combines reading and discussion of the concept's foundational formulations by key political philosophers and theorists (Juergen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, Michael Warner, Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt) with its analytical use in historical and ethnographic scholarship, as well as its significance in contemporary art practices. This reach, which incorporates studies from both the Global South as well as the Global North, enables attention to how specific manifestations, such as da'wa publics in Cairo, circulating imagery in post-Suharto Indonesia, decollagist practices in post-WWII France, and parallel spheres in the former Soviet Union have challenged, revised, and expanded classical conceptualizations of the public and the role of media technologies therein.

Forging a conversation between political philosophy, history, anthropology, and the arts, the course offers students an opportunity to examine 1) how the concept has informed analyses of power, discourse, practices of exclusion/inclusion, and formations of collective life across the globe from the Enlightenment period to today, and 2) how techniques and technologies shape how, when, and what sorts of publics come into being. Readings, audiovisual material, and discussions provide perspectives into the concrete formations of publics across differing historical and social contexts and varying domains of practice. The overarching goal of the course is to provide participants with skills that enable them to parse how particular communicative modalities, spaces of reception, technologies of representation, linguistic practices, ideologies, processes of subject formation, and infrastructures of circulation are key for analyzing the political potentials and limits of publics across their multiple manifestations.

Course Requirements

Attendance Policy
Students are expected to attend all sessions, to arrive punctually, and to be active and thoughtful in class discussion. To account for minor circumstances, two unexcused absences from twice-per-week courses should not affect the participation grade or require documentation. For each unexcused absence beyond the two allowed, your final course grade will be lowered by two percentage points. [An excused absence requires that you provide me with a note from the doctor or relevant dean/Bard office explaining your absence in advance.]

Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Attendance involves not only being physically there but also with your full attention. Laptops, tablets, or e-readers should only be used for referencing readings and note-taking only. Students are strongly encouraged to bring hard copies of the readings to class.

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

If you have any question about quoting, paraphrasing, or referring to the work of others, please ask! The issue of attributions and correct citation have become even more complex with the rise of AI interfaces. Under no circumstances should AI be used to generate written passages for assignments. Any use of AI for research purposes needs to be documented in endnotes.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the Bard College Berlin Accessibility page. Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Assessment

Engagement

Students should arrive to class on time and prepared. The more you put into the course, the more you will get out of it. Being prepared means

[1] having completed the assigned reading (most will be made available on Google Classroom) and/or viewed the assigned material.
[2] bringing a copy of the readings, preferably non-electronic.
[3] coming with notes, questions, ideas, and comments and be ready to contribute productively to discussion. Please be considerate and generous to the contributions of your fellow classmates.
[4] Occasionally, I may introduce questions in class based on the assigned readings, initiate a short exercise, or request a short written response to encourage comprehension of key points in reference to the required readings.

Initiating Discussion
Students will be asked to sign up on a rotating basis to initiate seminar discussion with brief synopsis of the assigned material, followed by a question or discussion prompt.

Writing Assignments

Writing assignments include 1) a mid-term essay between 2000 and 2300 words, due at the beginning of class on March 19th, 2026 to accompany in-class presentations, and 2) a final essay between 3000 and 3500 words that engages with an aspect of the course's themes and materials. Students are encouraged to meet with the instructor to discuss their final essay topic. Final essays are due by May 13th, 2026 at 11:59 pm. [For graduating students, final essays are due no later than April 30th, 2026 at 11:59 pm]

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students will receive feedback for their course work during and at the end of the semester. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

    25%   Mid-term Presentations and Accompanying Essay
              (10 % presentation, 15% essay; specific assignment will be distributed as class gets underway)
    35%   Final Essay
              (assignment and more specific guidelines will be provided in class as semester gets underway)
    30 % Engagement through class participation
    10%   Initiating Class Discussion

Schedule

	Tuesday	*Thursday*
Week 1 Jan 27 & 29 Historicizing the Public Sphere	Introduction to Course Required Reading: Kant, Immanuel. "What is Enlightenment?"	Required Reading: Habermas, Juergen. *The Structural Transformation Of the Public Sphere*, Part I.
Week 2 Feb 3 & 5 Historicizing the Public Sphere, cont'd	Required Reading: Habermas, Juergen. *The Structural Transformation Of the Public Sphere*, Part II.	Required Reading: Crow, Thomas. *Painters and Public Life,* Ch. 1
Week 3 Feb 10 & Feb 12 Situating the Public Sphere	Required Reading: Ravel. Jeffrey S. "Seating the Public: Spheres and Loathing in the Paris Theaters, 1777-1788."	Required Reading: Wedeen, Lisa. "Politics of Deliberation: Qat Chews as Public Spheres."
Week 4 Feb 17 & 19 Counterpublics, I	Required Reading: Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy."	Required Reading: Dawson, Michael C. "A Black Counterpublic?: Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics."
Week 5 Feb 24 & 26 Counterpublics, II	Required Reading: Hirschkind, Charles. "Civic Virtue and Religious Reason: An Islamic Counterpublic."	Required Reading: Warner, Michael. "Publics and Counterpublics."

	Tuesday	*Thursday*
Week 6 March 3 & 5 Ethnographies of Publics	Required Reading: Strassler, Karen. *Demanding Images,* Introduction	Required Reading: Strassler, Karen. *Demanding Images*, Ch 1. Face Value
Week 7 March 10 & 12 Street Publics	Required Reading: Strassler, Karen. *Demanding Images*, Ch 5. Street Signs.	Required Reading: Feldman, Hannah. "Of The Public Born."
Week 8 March 17 & 19 Staging Publics	Film: Poet, Paul. *Ausländer Raus! Schlingensief's Container.*	In-Class Presentations Midterm-Essays Due
Week 9 March 24 & 26 Public Sphere and Experience	Required Reading: Hansen, Miriam. 1993. "Unstable Mixtures, Dilated Spheres: Negt and Kluge's *The Public Sphere and Experience* , Twenty Years Later."	Required Reading: Kluge and Negt. *Public Sphere and Experience*, Selections.
March 30th – April 3rd	**SPRING**	**BREAK**
Week 10 April 7 & 9 Cinema and the Public Sphere	Required Reading: Hansen, Miriam. "The Cinema as an Alternative Public Sphere."	Required Reading: Stark, Trevor. "Cinema in the Hands of the People."

Week 11 April 14 & 16 Technologies of Public Forms	Required Reading: Dean, Jodi. "Cybersalons and Civil Society: Rethinking the Public Sphere in Transnational Technoculture." Bernal, Victoria. "Eritrea On-line: Diaspora, Cyberspace, and the Public Sphere."	Required Reading: Kunreuther, Laura. 2006. "Technologies of the Voice: FM Radio, Telephone, and the Nepali Diaspora in Kathmandu."
Week 12 April 21 & 23 Arendtian Publics	Required Reading: Arendt, Hannah. "The Public and the Private Realm."	Visiting Artist Reading: TBD
Week 13 April 28 & 30 Public vs. Private: Shifting Topographies	Required Reading: Gal, Susan. "A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction." Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Selections.	Required Reading: Berlant, Lauren. *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City,* Introduction.
Week 14 May 5 & 7 Totalitarian (Non)Publics	Required Reading: Yurchak, Alexei. 1997. "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism	Required Reading: Mazzarella, William. 2015. "Totalitarian Tears"
Final Essays Due	Wednesday, May 13th, 11:59 pm	

Deadlines at a Glance

Mid-term Essays: **March 19th, 2026**. Please bring a printed copy to class.

Final Essays: 11:59 pm, **May 13th, 2026.**

Library and Book Purchase Policies

Most of the readings are available online through Bard Berlin Library (marked by an *
in the course bibliography). Required reading will be uploaded to Google Classroom.
A reserve list of course books and audiovisual materials will also be made available at
the Bard Library.

Course Bibliography

Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. [Chicago]: University of Chicago
Press.

*Berlant, Lauren Gail. 1997. *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City : Essays
on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

*Bernal, Victoria. 2005. "Eritrea On-line: Diaspora, Cyberspace, and the Public
Sphere." *American Ethnologist* 32 (4): 660–75.
https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2005.32.4.660.

Crow, Thomas E. 1985. *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. Yale
University Press.

*Dawson, Michael C. 1994. "A Black Counterpublic?: Economic Earthquakes, Racial
Agenda(s), and Black Politics." *Public Culture* 7 (1): 195–223.
https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-7-1-195.

*Dean, Jodi. 2001. "Cybersalons and Civil Society: Rethinking the Public Sphere in
Transnational Technoculture." *Public Culture* 13 (2): 243–66.
https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-13-2-243.

*Feldman, Hannah. 2004. "Of the Public Born: Raymond Hains and *La France
Déchirée*." *October* 108 (April): 73–96. https://doi.org/10.1162/016228704774115726.

*Fraser, Nancy. 1990. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of
Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text*, no. 25/26: 56.
https://doi.org/10.2307/466240.

*Gal, Susan. 2002. "A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction." *Differences* 13 (1): 77–95.

Habermas, J. (1991). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere : An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1st MIT Press pbk ed). MIT Press.

*Hansen, Miriam. 1991. *Babel and Babylon : Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

*Hansen, Miriam. 1993. "Unstable Mixtures, Dilated Spheres: Negt and Kluge's *The Public Sphere and Experience* , Twenty Years Later." *Public Culture* 5 (2): 179–212. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-5-2-179.

*Hirschkind, Charles. 2001. "Civic Virtue and Religious Reason: An Islamic Counterpublic." *Cultural Anthropology* 16 (1): 3–34.

Kant, Immanuel. 1996. "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment? (1784)." In *What Is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, edited by James Schmidt, 1st ed., 58–64. University of California Press, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt4cgf8z.7.

*Kunreuther, Laura. 2006. "Technologies of the Voice: FM Radio, Telephone, and the Nepali Diaspora in Kathmandu." *Cultural Anthropology* 21 (3): 323–53. https://doi.org/10.1525/can.2006.21.3.323.

Mazzarella, William. 2015. "Totalitarian Tears: Does the Crowd Really Mean It?" *Cultural Anthropology* 30 (1): 91–112. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca30.1.06.

Poet, Paul, dir. (2002) Ausländer Raus! Schlingensief's Container, Austria: Bonusfilm.

Ravel, Jeffrey S. 1993. "Seating the Public: Spheres and Loathing in the Paris Theaters, 1777-1788." *French Historical Studies* 18 (1): 173. https://doi.org/10.2307/286963.

Ronald Feldman Gallery. n.d. "Press Packet | Mierle Laderman Ukeles." Accessed January 8, 2026.

*Stark, Trevor. 2012. ""Cinema in the Hands of the People": Chris Marker, the Medvedkin Group, and the Potential of Militant Film *." *October*, 117–50.

*Strassler, Karen. 2020. *Demanding Images : Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia*. Durham: Duke University Press.

*Warner, Michael. 2002. "Publics and Counterpublics." *Public Culture* 14 (1): 49–90. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-1-49.

*Wedeen, Lisa. 2008. "Politics of Deliberation: Qat Chews as Public Spheres." In *Peripheral Visions : Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

*Yurchak, Alexei. 1997. "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretense, and the *Anekdot*." *Public Culture* 9 (2): 161–88. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-9-2-161.