

The Missed Encounter of Radical Philosophy with Architecture

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Nadir Lahiji

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Kant, Modernity and the Absent Public

Mark Jarzombek

The word public has such strong colloquial usage that even philosophically we can forget that it 'has a history'. And if we then try to trace that history we usually find our discussion expanding into issues of politics, law, governance, economics and even journalism and art. What I want to do in this chapter is to focus not on what public is or can be or should be, but on what it is not, to argue that, from a philosophical perspective, the idea of the *modern* public is haunted by the devastating and purposeful negation of that concept by none other than Immanuel Kant, often heralded as one of the great fathers of modern liberalism.

In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant outlines the three maxims of how a society moves towards Enlightenment: (1) think for oneself; (2), think in the mindset of others; and (3), think consistently (Kant, 1914, pp. 169–73). The longer one considers these propositions, the stranger they sound. For example, if we take Maxim 2 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' (Hegel, 2001, p. 140).

Now this might seem like a strange and much too casual way to begin a conversation about Kant, but one must remember that Jean-Jacques Rousseau made a big deal about the family and 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.'¹ Rousseau also dealt directly with issues of love, its passions and complexities in his novel *Julie*, a sensation when it first appeared in 1761.² Though Kant was always more resolutely intellectual than Rousseau, that does not itself explain his ambivalence to the topic of family and love. This is not to say that Kant is against 'the family'. He deals with the question in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), where he spends a few pages discussing marriage, procreation and parental obligations. But there are no particular details and the tone is purposefully lawyeristic. The main issue for Kant hinges on when a young person who was 'brought without his consent into the world, and placed in it by the responsible free

will of others', becomes 'in fact a Citizen of the world (*Weltbürger*)'.³ In other words, Kant is less interested in the before as he is in the after, for it is only when a person strikes out as an independent *Weltbürger* can she/he then presumably engage in Kant's planned three-step plan for enlightenment.

Whereas Rousseau 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 characteristic (*Eigenschaft*) belonging to humanity' (Kant, 1914, p. 174). The actual phrase he uses for what gets translated as sociability is 'Trieb zur Gesellschaft', which is much stronger than the English word might imply. It is an innate drive or compulsion towards the social.

The astonishing thing about this *Trieb* is that it is not linear. In fact, for Kant, we (and that means me and all the other billions of 'I's the world over) are motivated by our independence as individuals. In a sense, the *Trieb* is an internal dialectic that makes us want to be both independent and yet connected. 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. It would be better perhaps to say that Kant's modernity is markedly different from Rousseau's. One might even be tempted to say that he is more utopian than Rousseau, but that would be wrong. It is certainly obvious that we today might have greater difficulty envisioning what Kant might have wanted even in our modern era, and indeed the underlying tone of my chapter is to suggest that we can never be as fully modern as Kant would want even in the age of Facebook. Stated differently, though we like to generally think that we live in a modern age, Kant was in some respects more modern than we, if we take by the word modern a break from natural orders.

This break was not just when a young person becomes a world citizen, and it is not just when that person releases himself or herself to the driving dialectic of sociability. It is also a break *within* the discipline of philosophy. Whereas Rousseau discussed 'the public' in his *Social Contract*, differentiating the public person from the private individual and making the public person a key element in his republican ideal (a basic premise of much political thought even today) Kant shuns this distinction and, indeed, clearly tries to deconstruct that classic duality. The word that he proposes instead is *sensus communis*, a complicated term that he points out has a legal, Latin meaning and a more colloquial meaning as 'common sense'. *Sensus communis* is created not at the beginning of the three-step process, but at the end. Just as the *Trieb* is technically and initially split against itself between the I and the We in order to eventually be fused, *sensus communis* has a high and low, a legal and a colloquial, that in the end resolves itself into powerful commonalities.

Before I look more closely at the *sensus communis*, let me return to Maxim 2, where Kant asks us to 'think in the mindset of others'. The German phrase is *an der Stelle jedes anderen denken*, which means something a bit more like 'put yourself mentally in the shoes of others'. It involves almost a type of physical displacement of the mind. It

is obvious that regardless of what this entails, it is *not* the same as engaging in a public discourse, nor is discourse even asked for. Kant seems to suggest 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. It is a type of alternative ontology where I have to suppress my notion of self-hood and try to become someone else. The question then appears. How does one inform oneself deeply about this person's – any person's – life and activities? Kant does not say exactly how you and I should go about doing this. What does that person eat? Is he grumpy in the morning? How does he have friends? Etc. I would be expected, I presume, to do this with both men and women, since Kant nowhere – despite his culturally conditioned assumption that Man is a He – states that we should be careful to separate men from women.

Naturally, in the late eighteenth century, Kant would have imagined a restrained interest in each other's lives. Even so, his position is as scary as it is exciting and nowhere does he warn against 'going too far'. Nowhere does he imply that there are some things off limits to such a probe. Today we might use the word empathy to describe such a connection. 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 usually associated with a positive human value. But Maxim 2 is not about emotional contact. On the contrary! It is where Kant locates the empirical. The process is purely fact finding. It does *not* involve compassion or judgement. Its neutrality is key. Perhaps we can see the activity of Maxim 2 as performing a type of sociology or anthropology. We have to have a disinterested interest in the life of other people in order to successfully perform Maxim 2.⁴

Now Kant wants the person that I am having this exchange with to do the same with me. I am not just the instigator of such interest; I am the subject of the interest of others, *many* others in fact. And finally, we have to remember that he wants all of us to do this with everyone else over the extended period of our lives. That is the essence of Maxim 3, the cumulative result of which produces an allusive '*sensus communis*', the sense of the communality. This concept is sometimes discussed as if it were equivalent with 'the public'. It is sometimes also discussed in relationship to the now proverbial Public Sphere. In both cases this is a mistake, for 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 *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* (1784), Kant admits that the making of a *sensus communis* is a process that is easy to state theoretically, but is, in fact, 'difficult and slow to accomplish' in real life. '*Daher kann ein Publikum nur langsam zur Aufklärung gelangen*' (Kant, 1784, p. 483). A public can reach Enlightenment only very slowly. Kant's use of the word *das Publikum* in this context is not neutral. It is not quite a put-down, but nor is it particularly positive. The people who constitute a *Publikum* are people who have not achieved Enlightenment, namely who have not elevated themselves out of its limitations.

In replacing the concept 'the public', which importantly does not appear at all in *The Critique of Judgment*, with *sensus communis*, Kant changes the terms of the discussion, producing a whole new architecture of thought. If we want to coin a term it would be

Sphere of Sociability. In producing this communality, we are in essence deconstructing the classic duality of public/private.

What then does it take to have not a mere *Publikum*, but an enlightened *sensus communis*? It certainly does not require a vote. It does not necessarily require a democracy. Public spaces are not necessary either, nor even a parliament building. People do need the status of freedom, however, and spaces to meet and talk, but this could be served just as effectively on a public bus as in a private room. In this, Kant's philosophy is striking 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 clearly not Kantian in other respects, since Kant would want the Egyptians to connect with the Israelis and vice versa and for the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood to connect with the secularist, and this is most certainly not going to happen. Once again, Kant is imagining a modernity that was just as difficult in the eighteenth century as it is now.

My point here is to remind ourselves that the concept of 'the public' is hardly as stable as we might suppose, and in the case of Kant we have to deal with a difficult theoretical situation where there literally is no 'public'. We would have to draw up a footnote here, however, for just as Kant suggests that we are not by nature 'public' but 'social' so too are we not by nature 'private'. This complicates matters yet further, for all of us today would generally assume an interiority to our lives that would be impossible in the philosophy of Kant. Though his critique of 'the public' is quite conscious, his critique of 'the private' is, however, an accident of history, since 'privacy' as we understand it today is largely a construct of the nineteenth century. This means that in coming to terms with Kant we should not imply a 'private' where there is none; just as importantly, we should not sneak 'a public' back into his thought, a problem that vexes several contemporary interpretations of Kant.

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 corruptions.

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. So if it is not laws or contracts that hold us together, what is it? Basically it boils down to good behaviour. In *Groundwork of the Metaphysic 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' (Kant, 2005, p. 5). Kant is in a sense challenging the emerging tradition of Enlightenment legalism the very one that was to become the foundation of a certain stream of modern thinking. He is fighting several fronts at the same time, whether it be legalism, which for him is too static, or the family, which limits the individual's right to free association.

And this brings us to the reason Kant's philosophy was so distasteful to so many philosophers in the nineteenth century. Kant argued that it was precisely because we are potentially so different from each other that we have to strip away the natural overdeterminism of our ontology to engage the ontology of the Other. This *de*-ontological move is the most astonishing aspect of Kant's thought. We may be neighbours, but we are yet completely unknown to each other – and to *ourselves!* – until we begin the laborious, life-long process of interaction.

The splitting of the Self into a Self and a not-Self, which is the requirement of Maxim 2, is Kant's most radical proposition, and the one that Hegel would later most vehemently disparage since, for Hegel, it breaks the Self into incompatible and irreconcilable parts. For Hegel, philosophy, because it is philosophy and not social science, *must* talk about the Self as a unit, and for better or worse begin from that basic proposition. One cannot start philosophy, according to Hegel, with a Self split against itself. Ultimately, Hegel won the argument, since his views became the basic tenet not only of Romanticism and nationalism, but of existentialism and phenomenology with their long reaches into contemporary philosophy and politics.

Perhaps one can say that if Kant removed 'the public' from philosophical legitimacy and tried to replace it with an alternative concept, the *sensus communis*, it was really only the first effort that succeeded. Once 'the public' was removed as a philosophical project it was never really reinstated. Hegel, for example, does claim to put the public back into play, but he limits it by equating it with the nation-state. And the situation gets no better with Edmund Husserl. Husserl's idea of the Life-World, for example, is diametrically opposed to the idea that there is a metaphysics of 'the public' or even of 'the nation.' Needless to say the word does not appear in any of his major writings. In fact, Husserl is so anti-public that there is almost no glue holding society together. Kant at least believed in the significant power of moral teaching and the principle of duty, concepts that provided the 'glue' in the face of the absent public. These enlightenment abstractions are completely absent in Husserl.

According to Husserl, in a lecture he gave in 1935, 'to live as a person is to live in a social framework, wherein I and We live together in community and have the community as a horizon.' He then points out that by communities he means things such as 'family, nation, or international community', where it is expected that I participate in 'creating culture' within these continuities. Though this sounds not particularly controversial, remember that 'I' and the 'We' are first separate and, second, bound together into a cultural formation. As the lecture continues, he makes it clear that there are only two types of cultural formations, healthy and sick. The European nations he says 'are sick' this largely because of the false promises of science. So he asks his listeners to return to the 'birthplace' of Europe, namely to Greece, which developed 'a new kind

of attitude of individuals toward their environing world'. It was 'a new type of spiritual structure, rapidly growing into a systematically rounded (*geschlossen*) cultural form that in its totality can be called philosophy' (Husserl, 1935).

The standard English translation 'systematically rounded' is not accurate since the term is actually *geschlossen*, which means 'closed', 'closed off' or even 'locked up', like a door. The 'We' in that sense is not particularly inclusive. If anything it resists newcomers and thus stands as the furthestmost antithesis to Kant's system that, politically speaking, made no such injunction. The need for this closedness is, however, obvious in the philosophy of Husserl, since he needs to explain how the 'I' connects to the 'We' in a situation where there is no inbuilt requirement for social interaction.

The differences with Kant are obvious. Kant's command to put yourself in the place of others, even though he means this conceptually and not literally, will only yield a coherency over a long period of time. Initially, if anything it produces a purposeful destabilization of the ego. Husserl can accept no such shock to the system. A healthy community begins from a powerful 'I' that when multiplied along the line produces a closed reality, which in turn allows the 'I' and the 'We' to coexist, something which is not possible and not even wanted if the 'We' is sick.

To simplify a bit, one can say Hegel took away Maxim 2 and asked us to go from Maxim 1 to Maxim 3, 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 Maxim 1. And so the damage was done. As liberating as it is, Husserl's world is a potentially dangerous place to be. If the 'We' is sick, that liberates the 'I' from its social obligations. What then?

This foray into the twentieth century was only meant to raise the question, How did the 'public' as a philosophical project survive this assault against it? Why is that today we can talk of 'the public' with a sense of normalcy, against the grain of its spectral position within modern philosophical discourse?

The answer has a lot to do, ironically, with the rise of the nation-state in the nineteenth century. It was in the interest of the nation-state, after all, to have 'a public' that does not reflect on the philosophic impossibility of that term, much less return to Kant's positive negation of the word. Just as Romantic philosophy wants to produce a stable and active ego, it wants to produce the image of a stable and active public if only because the nation-state needs to stabilize its increasingly bureaucratic hold on life. The rise of the bourgeoisie, of global colonialism, and of professional societies in the Victorian era especially in the 1880s played a critical part in normalizing the idea of a public. But the 'public' was put back into the philosophical system really only with Karl Marx, who demanded the abolition of property in the name of some vaguely defined 'public purposes'. In other words, for Marx, 'the public' was the new super-structure that was bigger than the defunct bourgeois word, with its self-serving interests. And therein lies at least one of the sources of the modern confusion about the public as a type of enemy of the 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, 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 what he calls the 'public realm'. According to him,

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.⁵

Strangers meeting, talking and sharing experiences in the real and metaphorical openness of the public space 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. He claims, for example, 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 how this happens in real life and he most certainly does not say that people should go and live like these strangers for a while 'in thought and place'. Rather, I am expected to *express* myself and it is up to the stranger to try to figure it out. It demands an ethos of attentiveness, which, as admirable as that might be, is – remarkably – not required in Kant. We are not witnessing someone's studied performance, but engaging their ontology more directly (as impossible as that may in fact be). Kant, in other words, 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. Kant's modernity 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. What would a Kantian city actually look like? 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. It would probably be a city of apartments. One could envision any number of scenarios from linear cities to sprawling field cities to smaller more irregular towns. At regular frequencies in the city there would have to be meeting and seminar rooms, and places where people can visit and talk. A university as such would be too top heavy for Kant; there would be instead a loose infrastructure

of exchange-and-learning centres and community colleges. The city would also have a good deal of glass, both transparent and reflective, for in 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, but only as places to get away and think about things. 'To think for yourself' – that is Maxim 1 – 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 in any number of places.

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, listening to music, or at any rate, thinking for oneself. 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 which 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. But 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 just 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 or 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 not to our politicians, but to these artistic geniuses as 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. There are no Foucaultian, heterotopic zones. 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 associations created by people who come together to define a particular common interest around a particular problem or concern. Courthouses would not be banned, of course, but they would only exist in a small scale and be distributed throughout the urban landscape as places that stabilize and reaffirm 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 or Harvard? Impossible. The city would have to be networked across the landscape with other villages and cities and in no way 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 'connection zones'. Residents would have to be accustomed to signs reading: 'Not currently in my office. Work will resume in two weeks.' Imagine the late nineteenth-century Victorian city with its city hall, post office and concert hall. Most definitely, not Kantian.

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 world. Perhaps thankfully, and this means that if we can agree that we live in a world saturated with the presumption of its modernity, Kant's modernity, if we can call it that, never became realized as such, even though pieces of it infiltrated here and there into various disciplinary and political realities. Its most powerful impact, however, was to transform the philosophical understanding of the public into a dialectic, the negation of which became the dominant thematic in the philosophy of Hegel, Husserl and others. The modern idea of a public is not just a signifier of certain types of realities, but signified by its negation, which it carries with it like a scar despite the various attempts to maintain and normalize it as a signifier. What I, therefore, intended in this chapter was to bring us back to that particular moment in Kant's thought where we can see the beginning of this rupture and indeed the mechanism that put it in place. Kant had hoped that his deconstruction of the public would yield a new positive, but it did not play out that way. Instead it produced a powerful reactionary movement. This means that before we can write a history of the concept of the public, we have to recognize the productive strangeness of the Kantian premise and the fact that this strangeness, built around a strategy of calculated impossibility, wound up producing the unresolved equation of our modernity.

Notes

- 1 Jean Jacques Rousseau, 'Book I, *The Social Contract*. Available at: <http://www.constitution.org/jjr/socon_01.htm>.
- 2 For a good discussion of Rousseau see: Eileen Hunt Botting (2006), *Family Feuds: Wollstonecraft, Burke, and Rousseau on the Transformation of the Family*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- 3 I. Kant (1797), *The Science of Right (Rechtslehre)* in *The Metaphysics of Morals (Die Metaphysik der Sitten)*. First Part, Par. 28. To this he adds

All this training [by the parent] is to be continued till the Child reaches the period of Emancipation (emancipatio), as the age of practicable self-support. The Parents then virtually renounce the parental Right to command, as well as all claim to repayment for their previous care and trouble; for which care and trouble, after the process of Education is complete, they can only appeal to the Children by way of any claim, on the ground of the Obligation of Gratitude as a Duty of Virtue. [*The Science of Right*: First Part, Par. 29]

Available at: <http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=359&chapter=55767&layout=html&Itemid=27>.
- 4 Some scholars had mistakenly argued that Kant was a type of empathy theorist. See for example: C. Calloway-Thomas (2010), *Empathy in the Global World: An Intercultural Perspective*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, p. 10; M. Moen (1997), 'Feminist Themes in

- Unlikely Places: Re-reading Kant's Critique of Judgement', in *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant*. Robin May Schott (ed.). University Park: Pennsylvania State University, p. 221.
- 5 Available at: <<http://www.richardsennett.com/site/SENN/Templates/General2.aspx?pageid=16>>. [accessed June 12, 2012].

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