<u>Old rules, new publics</u>
Radha S. Hegde

Strategic interventions in the public sphere, writes Habermas in his 2006 article, must play by the rules of the game. Re-reading the piece four years later, one has to wonder about the game and the rules that Habermas conceptualizes and how it might apply to the politics of transnational communities and spaces. Habermas writes that for "the rules of the right game" to exist, two things must be achieved. "First a self-regulating media system must maintain its independence vis-à-vis its environments while linking political communication in the public sphere with both civil society and the political center; second, an inclusive civil society must empower citizens to participate and respond to a public discourse that, in turn must not degenerate into colonizing mode of communication."[i] The ideal of an informed citizenry participating in the public deliberation rests on both elitist and restrictive assumptions. In a context where the fluctuations of the global economy are reshuffling notions of citizenship on the ground, we have to reconsider what visions of modernity and assumptions drive the game and rules of publicness.

The subject of migration is at the forefront of current discourses of globalization and continues to stir impassioned debates about border control and citizenship, on both sides of the Atlantic. Immigration offers a site to rethink civil society, political participation and the meaning of democratic engagement. In recent months, the state of Arizona has been crafting its own draconian measures to police immigrants through profiling and surveillance. Some Arizona politicians are reported to be pushing for a law that would deny citizenship to babies whose parents can't establish their legal status.[ii] The argument, they claim is straightforward - the constitutional guarantee of citizenship to all children born in the U.S. is exploited by undocumented immigrants. So Arizona politicians suggest that undocumented immigrants leave the country and take their 'anchor' children with them. The logic of the security state is reflected in this effort to produce the singular national body through elaborate forms of surveillance and policing the terms of admittance into the nation.

This fear about Otherness is best exemplified in the media coverage of census reports. Every few years, there is a flurry of concern and panic about changing demographic patterns in the country. Projections about when whites will be outnumbered and by whom have become a publicity ritual over the years. While by all reports, the term 'white' itself is shifting, these demographic projections still continue to ratchet up levels of fear and phobia about otherness and the invasion of new publics. It is only the nature of the undesirables that have changed…yesterday, the Italians, Jews from Russia and today, the Somalis or the Mexicans. The discourse echoes and in today's context, the media can exponentially increase the reverberations of the fear.

In Europe the conversation about veils and minarets have reached hysteric pitch. Public discourse about migration, especially Muslim publics, mainly erupts in crisis mode pitting the citizen and the foreigner, in terms of the divide between tradition and modernity. As Mamdani notes the "culture talk we hear today, in the context of global mobility, splits the world into the modern and the premodern who

are lagging behind on the road to modernity.[iii] The civic body is constructed on exclusionary logics, which are continually reinforced and reproduced. Gender, of course, becomes a focal point in these minoritizing maneuvers with the head scarf standing in as an index of assimilability. [iv]

How do we reconcile this transnational mobility and the conventional understandings of publics and publicity? The immigration issue becomes a flash point triggering discussions about religion, cultural integration and citizenship. In the process of debate about veils and anchor babies, there is an active forgetting of the history of transnational linkages and global connections. The deep and violent intersections between nations are relegated even though old ideologies resurface with new neoliberal packagings. The debate is never just a simple evocation of who's in or who's out. In assigning the immigrant 'problem' to the immediate present, solutions are then posed as strategies for assimilation which fail to address both the politics and histories of difference. Instead it recuperates a nationalist narrative premised on the hegemony of western modernity. The histories of colonialism and the fluidity of global capital are forcing migration and at the same time statewide policies are restricting membership. Migrants increasingly find themselves in impossible spaces between the inside and the outside, between the national and the transnational. The dividing line pushes some beyond the juridical, separating the economic migrants from the sans papier, the rejects of globalization.

So how do we connect these shifting publics and the nature of their transnational visibility to the rules of the game that Habermas mentions in his essay. Which board game of publicity are we to choose? Which players are we to check mate? As recent examples of migrant organizing reveal, new technologies offer subaltern groups some space for democratic discussion and connection. Habermas, of course, dismisses online communication, in a footnote, for its parasitical role. He rightfully notes the colonization of the public sphere by market forces. But there are longer histories of violence that we need to contend with. Transnational communities force a rethinking of the meaning of publics by testing the adaptability of what Habermas refers to as the "institutional design of modern democracies."

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[i] Habermas, Jurgen "Political communication in media society: Does democracy still enjoy an epistemic dimension? The impact of normative theory on empirical research." *Communication Theory* 16, (2006): 411-426.

[ii] "Another bad idea from Arizona," *New York Times.* *http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/20/opinion/20sun2.html?emc=eta1* (Accessed June 21, 2010)

[iii] Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold war and the roots of terror*. (New York: Doubleday, 2005).

[iv] Radha S. Hegde, "Eyeing new publics: Veiling and the performance of civic visibility," in Daniel C. Brouwer and Robert Asen, eds., *Public Modalities: Rhetoric, culture, media and the shape of public life* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 54-172.