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**The Coffee House and the Ashram:  
Gandhi, Civil Society and Public Spheres**

by

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# **The Coffee House and the Ashram**

## **Gandhi, Civil Society and Public Spheres**

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This paper considers what light the associational forms that Gandhi created shed on the debate about civil society and the public sphere in political and social theory. As John Keane remarks, “reflexive, self-organizing non-governmental organizations that some call civil society can and do live by other names in other linguistic and cultural milieus” (Keane 1998: 55). How does his “Indian” variant square with the practice and concept of civil society and public sphere as they have evolved in European history, thought and practice?

### **CIVIL SOCIETY AND PUBLIC SPHERE AS BOURGEOIS RATIONALITY**

The discourse and practice of civil society have had a lively career in the 1990s, passing through numerous incarnations and representations that range from revolutionary – as in Eastern Europe – to collaborative. Civil society, Charles Taylor tells us, refers to a space that exists “over against the state, in partial independence from it. It includes those dimensions of social life which cannot be confounded with or swallowed up in the state”(Taylor 1990: 95). Taylor stresses the obstreperous, challenging aspect of civil society, the aspect that showed its face in the Narmada movement in India, in the WTO protests in the US, the contest over electoral corruption in Korea, the non-violent protests of the Chipko movement. But there are other ways to read it.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented by Susanne Hoerber Rudolph as the keynote speech at the 17<sup>th</sup> European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, held in Heidelberg, September 9-14, 2002. It draws on a longer essay to be published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi, in a volume on civil society edited by Carolyn Elliott. Susanne Rudolph is the William Benton Distinguished Service Professor Emerita in Political Science, University of Chicago (eMail: [srudolph@midway.uchicago.edu](mailto:srudolph@midway.uchicago.edu)) and Lloyd Rudolph is Professor Emeritus in Political Science, University of Chicago (eMail: [l-rudolph@uchicago.edu](mailto:l-rudolph@uchicago.edu)).

The Oxford English dictionary sounds a more gentle tone, stressing mutuality and *douceur* as aspects of civic society: “having a proper social order,” keeping “a certayn civile iustice and friendly love to one another” (Hooker, 1600), or “reformed, civill, full of good”(Shakespeare, 1591, in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*)”.<sup>2</sup> The Oxford Dictionary sounds rather like a text for Robert Putnam’s or James Coleman’s idea of social capital – the capacity to trust and habits of collaboration.<sup>3</sup> It is a vision which expresses itself in Rotary clubs, soccer clubs, Parent Teacher Associations, Lok Sevak Sanghs, associations of and for the homeless, and other friendly associations.

Civil society has also become a vehicle for discussing transitions to democracy in authoritarian states of the South. The question arises whether these countries have a social sphere autonomous of the state, an associational life that aggregates persons as citizens acting jointly for political purposes, and which serves as the platform for articulating democratic demands. The discussion of how Gandhi’s program bears on Indian civil society is relevant to this latter question.

Transplanting concepts such as civil society and public sphere, born and used in Anglo-American liberal contexts, requires re-calibrating the concept for use in the context of other histories and social structures. When talking about India, we have the excuse that so much of the liberal tradition was transplanted in the course of 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalist discourse and practice, as also in the constitution of 1950, that the concept of civil society can claim a comfortable home. But definitions of political categories are often captive to their point of first use in a European historical context.<sup>4</sup> As the concept of civil society travels out of its quintessential 18th century European origin point to new temporal locations in the twentieth century and to new cultural locations outside the West, it expresses itself through different cultural forms and takes on different meanings. Indeed it was one of Gandhi’s unique talents to give new shape to institutional forms and meanings associated with liberal and democratic spheres.

Jürgen Habermas’ Public Sphere is part of the same theoretical family as civil society. The version of civil society as expressed in his *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Habermas 1989) will serve me as the theoretical backboard off which to bounce a consideration of Gandhi’s associational inventions. The coffeehouse stands as a heuristic marker for Habermas, the Ashram as a marker for Gandhi. *Strukturwandel* established Habermas’ position as a defender of the enlightenment project of modernity against the critics of the modern, among whom

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<sup>2</sup> *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> See Robert Putnam (1993) and James Coleman (1990).

<sup>4</sup> See for example my defense of treating transnational religious movements as an aspect of transnational civil society, in Rudolph (1997).

Gandhi is one. Habermas created categories and representations that highlight the contrast between the Gandhian and European variants of civil society.<sup>5</sup>

When Habermas examined England, France and Germany he found that the public sphere came into being in Europe in the eighteenth century, creating the ground for democratic participation.<sup>6</sup> It was embodied in coffee houses, political clubs and literary journals.

There sprang from the midst of the private sphere [he writes] a relatively dense network of public communication. The growing number of readers [...] was complemented by a considerable expansion in the production of books, journal and papers [...] The societies for enlightenment, cultural associations, secret freemasonry lodges and orders of illuminati were associations constituted by the free, that is, private decisions of their founding members, based on voluntary membership and characterized internally by egalitarian practices of sociability, free discussion, decision by majority etc. (Habermas in Calhoun 1992: 422).

In these locations persons who previously led separate lives in private spaces come together and become a public, transcending their private preoccupations and addressing common purposes. The communicative process directed at common questions creates a unified public. Communicating with each other, social actors learn to share ideas. Their communication is marked by certain features, by rationality, by disinterestedness, by the irrelevance of inherited identities to their deliberation, and by a rigorous separation of the private and public spheres.

First, rationality. Habermas' discourse implies the public interest can only be arrived at through acts of reasoning that conform to formal notions of rationality and rules of deductive logic. He imagines public intellectuals in engagement with each other. As Eley (1992: 293) suggests: "The faculty of publicness begins with reading, thought, and discussion, with reasonable exchange among equals, and it is this ideal which really focuses Habermas' interest". Habermas' faith in the power

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<sup>5</sup> The "original" 1962 Habermas has a more restrictive vision of civil society, focussing on narrowly political associations with a strong rationalist and speech-act oriented dimension. The Habermas who appeared at a panel on his work in 1989 had expanded his horizons to include associations with mainly social ends.

The institutional core of 'civil society' is constituted by voluntary unions outside the realm of the state and the economy and ranging [...] from churches, cultural associations, and academies to independent media, sport and leisure clubs, debating societies, groups of concerned citizens, and grass-roots petitioning drives all the way to occupational associations, political parties, labor unions, and 'alternative' institutions (Calhoun 1992: 253).

<sup>6</sup> For an account and analysis of the emergence of opinion and the rise of parties see Lloyd I. Rudolph, "The Origin of Party: From the Politics of Status to the Politics of Opinion in Eighteenth Century England and America," Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Government, Harvard University, 1956.

of communicative action makes him a denizen of that German tradition, leading back to Hegel, which imagined that the philosopher could, by speech acts and reason, break out of the objectification wrought by social forces such as capitalism and mass culture.

The deliberations that take place in the Public Sphere are not based on the common sense of ordinary people. Habermas explicitly brackets what he calls “mere opinion” as not the same as “public opinion”. Public opinion is the outcome of the deliberated, reflective consideration of bourgeois educated persons, while “mere opinion” consists of “things taken for granted, normative convictions,” and “collective prejudices” (Seidman 1989: 232). His exclusions remind of the exclusions common in the 18<sup>th</sup> century British political arena where the coffee house began. In that arena, what was called “opinion out of doors”, that is, opinion outside the deliberative circle of parliament, was regarded not only as inferior but as illegitimate.

Habermas’ volume traces a downward historical trajectory, following the degeneration of the Public Sphere from its peak moment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He articulates a pessimism common in the 1960s among conservative American sociologists and among critical Frankfurt Schoolers. Both expected to be overwhelmed by the deluge of mass culture, commodity fetishism, and vulgar interests. Associations marked by “convivial social intercourse and by a relatively high standard of education” engage in rational consideration of public issues only for a brief, transitional historical moment.

[...] they developed only in a specific phase of bourgeois society, and only by virtue of a specific constellation of interests could they be incorporated in the order of the bourgeois constitutional state (Seidman 1989: 232).

Then begins the decline. The public sphere is superceded when the bourgeoisie loses its short-lived monopoly of opinion and begins to be pressed by a widening democratization of the public. The forces that obliterate communicative action are mass culture, consumerism, capitalism, the proliferation of private interest. Coffee houses and political clubs are overrun by the competitive and presumably non-rational processes of “pressure of the streets” and cruder forms of interest confrontation.

Habermas’ pessimistic framing of this move toward democratization is governed by his privileging of the “rational” over the democratic. The rationality of a proper “public sphere” will be crowded out by the irrationalities of democratic mobilization. Real deliberation on the common good will be overrun by the narrow interests of organized pressure groups. Public spheres and their rational focus on a common interest are hazarded by democratization and mass politics.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Habermas speaks of a “weakening of the public sphere”; of the public sphere becoming “a field for competition among interests in the cruder form of forcible confrontations”; “Laws that have obviously originated under the ‘pressure of the streets’ can scarcely continue to be understood in terms of a consensus achieved by private persons in public discussion”.

The disinterested, rationalist nature of the deliberation in the coffee house is grounded in Habermas' severe dichotomization of the private and the public. Interest is a product of the private sphere, disruptive of public wealth.<sup>8</sup> In this, Habermas stands in line with the dominant tendency in European political and social theory. For Aristotle, the family was private and pre-political; the polis is public and political. Politics lives in a compartmentalized arena where rationality is uncontaminated by the preoccupations of the private person.

To summarize, the civil society associations instanced in *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* have a number of attributes which will anchor our discussion of Gandhi's variants of civil society and public sphere. They are voluntary, not coerced; they are located in public spaces – the “coffeehouse” – that are explicitly separated from the (private) sphere of house and home; they are marked by an opposition between private and public that impugns the private as the realm of personal interests, disruptive to the public interest; they are skewed toward the intelligentsia, not plebeians, presuming literate if not literary skills; they are grounded in rationalist forms of deliberation which implicitly exclude the force of residual inherited identities – ethnicity, religion – which are seen to live in the arena of private interest.

The Ashram transgresses almost all of these desiderata. It complies with the first condition – the ashram like the coffee house is voluntary. But there the overlap ends. The Ashram encompasses illiterate plebeians as well as literate public intellectuals, assumes the relevance of inherited identities – such as ethnicity and religion – not only in private but in public space; and it merges the home and the political arena, the private and the public.

## INDIAN VARIANTS OF PUBLIC SPHERE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

How does the theory of public sphere travel in the Indian and in the Gandhian environment? In India, Partha Chatterjee would like to restrict the concept to “those institutions of modern associational life set up by nationalist elites in the era of colonial modernity, [...] often as part of the colonial struggle”.<sup>9</sup> He would limit it

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Deploring the “refeudalization” of the public sphere he notes that “today [publicness] has [...] been enlisted in the aid of the secret policies of interest groups” (Seidman 1989: 236). Much of this is reminiscent of the impatience with political bargaining that lies behind Max Weber's distaste for democratic politics.

<sup>8</sup> There is a deviant lineage in the western tradition which argues otherwise. See Althusius (1995: 32). His pluralist view of the polity as constituted by a graduated set of socio-political units encompasses the family as a basic unit: “By politics alone arises the wisdom for governing and administering the family”.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Beyond the Nation? or Within?’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 4-11, 1997, pp.30-34, 32. Chatterjee's article recognizes the distinction between the traditional definition of civil society and public sphere and the Gandhian variant of this definition which we are about to elaborate. But he would prefer, apparently in the interest of heuristic sharpness, to “retain the term civil society [for] those characteristic institutions of modern associational life originating in western societies that are based on equality, autonomy, freedom of entry and exit, contract, deliberative procedures of decision-making, recognized

to Indian cousins of the Habermasian coffee house. And indeed, the nineteenth century specimens of voluntary associations, the Deccan Educational Society, the Brahmo Samaj, the Indian Association, the Prarthana Samaj, the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha fit rather well with the 18th century rationalist, voluntary, bourgeois, public sphere imagery that Habermas offers.

The trouble with these distinctly liberal nationalist organizations is that they were restricted to a tiny, English speaking urban elite. It was only when the nationalist movement was transformed into a popular agitation, first with mass resistance to the partition of Bengal in 1905 and then in the Gandhian period, that it began to reach significant publics. It began spawning collective action not easily contained within the sober, rationalist descriptors of the public sphere. Liberals like Ranade and Gokhale were one thing, religiously and plebeian toned reformers such J.G. Phule, Shri Narayana Guru and Gandhi himself another. Social movements were deeply infiltrated by the symbolism, relationships, and practices of a society that was rural, religious, collectively organized, and predominantly illiterate. Bayly, in an argument that provides a historical space for civil society in 18<sup>th</sup> century India suggests that such activity was carried on in the arena of religious discourses, the dominant site for ethical reflection and normative practice (Bayly 1999: 180-211). Indian associational life in the nationalist era reflected the society into which it was introduced, where realms of life, private/public, religious/secular, chosen/inherited had not been sharply differentiated. Civil society looked different.

One problem in asking the civil society/public sphere question in India is that one is moved, by the 18<sup>th</sup> century European genealogies of civil society, to look to urban contexts. The rural as an arena does not appear on the horizon, or only marginally. A coffee house in a wheat field? Marx spoke for a general theoretical perspective among modernists when he supposed that peasants did not enter “into manifold relations with one another.” They were homologous units; like so many potatoes in a sack, they made nothing more cohesive than a sackful of potatoes.<sup>10</sup> They had no civil society.

## THE ASHRAM AS PUBLIC SPHERE?

Wherever Gandhi’s mass politics project traveled, in South Africa or in India, his first step was to create a center, an ashram—although he did not call it that until he came to India. He created seven in all, two in South Africa, five in India. Here the

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rights and duties of members [...]” even though non-western countries provide “numerous examples of the emergence of what could well be called civil-social institutions which nevertheless do not always conform to these principles.” It is a position that denies (on historical grounds? on normative grounds?) the fluidity and adaptability of institutions. This is a different theoretical road than the one which we adopted in an earlier work in which we argued that “caste associations” represent a hybrid form of civil society which transgresses the dichotomy between ascribed and voluntary groups. See our *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Reprint, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> See Karl Marx, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon’, *Selected Works* (New York, n.d.), II, p.415.

vanguard participants of his movement could live together, the dedicated and trained resistance professionals who were key for his mass mobilization projects, the Delhi Satyagraha, the South African political marches, the Dandi salt march. Ashrams are retreats for those who wish to join a community of dedication, usually to a normative or spiritual life, in Gandhi's case also to wider political interests and to social service – projects Gandhi regarded as paired.<sup>11</sup>

Gandhi initiated these arenas to reach into rural India, beyond the literary elites to a non-literate mass public. Is deliberation in the public sphere conditioned on literacy? What happens to systems of communication, essential to the formation of civil society, when the potential citizens can neither read or write and before oral/visual mass communication provide another means of communication? When Gandhi attempted to create a public sphere, in 1900 in South Africa, in the 1920s in India, most villagers and towns people were not only illiterate but had neither radio nor television.

I mentioned before that the Habermasian coffeehouse does not function with public opinion defined as common sense but opinion as the fruit of a highly cultivated rationalism. Gandhi, in building a mass public, defines public opinion as common sense and assumes that common sense is widely distributed.

Gandhi did not assume a public sphere was conditional on literacy. He was aware that public deliberations and cultural performance reach high levels of complexity under conditions of low literacy. In India, Drama (traveling theatre)<sup>12</sup> domestic oral compositions (grandmother's tales)<sup>13</sup> and public oratory (the juridical deliberations of caste and village panchayats) regularly engage ordinary non-literate people in complex and sophisticated cultural production and communication.<sup>14</sup> To create a "public" focused on matters of public concern under conditions of non-literacy requires forms of organization different from the coffee house and the literary journal, forms in which exemplification and performance play a visible role. Satyagrahas were elaborately choreographed, though of simple materials.

The Gandhian ashram expanded the concept of a public sphere from emphasis on the discursive exchanges of educated men to exemplary performances whose enactment would provide political education and trigger mass discussions. Satyagrahas were not just large scale assertions of non-violent resistance. They were political theatre, pedagogic drama for launching dramatic actions designed to politicize millions of people, including uneducated rural and urban folk, alerting them to issues, engaging them in public debate.

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<sup>11</sup> India saw a proliferation of ashrams in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, institutions which mixed classical models with more recent institutional forms and spiritual needs. The forms also traveled across denominational lines, to Christians and New Agers. For an introduction to the forms and review of historical instances see Richard Taylor (1986).

<sup>12</sup> See Susan Seizer, [Dissertation on traveling village drama troupe] (Ph.D. dissertation in the Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, Spring 1997).

<sup>13</sup> See A.K. Ramanujan (1991: Introduction).

<sup>14</sup> For a remarkable display of juridical village rhetoric see the documentary, "Courts and Councils", made by the University of Wisconsin and available from its Center of South Asian Studies.

## THE PRIVATE AS PUBLIC AND POLITICAL

A crucial feature guaranteeing the disinterested rationality of Habermas' public sphere is the insulation of the public from the private, the private which is seen as the realm of private interest, of "Normative opinions" and "collective prejudices". Gandhi's strategy of reaching wider constituencies and his moral conviction about the unity between the public and the private self conspired to have him transgress this dichotomy. That transgression has to be read against the complex meanings of public/private harbored by Indian society—meanings to which conventional European usage is a poor guide. The meaning of privacy is modified by the structure of the family and the pattern of housing and rural settlement. In multi-generational ("joint") families with strong collective norms, privacy has little meaning; surveillance of the most trivial or intimate acts was/is common.<sup>15</sup> The borders of what constitutes privacy become problematic when the family reaches beyond the nuclear unit and constitutes a small community, an incipient public. Again, in villages and hamlets, most quotidian activity is accomplished on verandas or in courtyards, within sight of the neighbors, in "public." Privacy is more an urban than a rural phenomenon, and a luxury of the walled-in middle class rather than the open-air poor.

Many nominally private practices in India display in public and for the sake of public certification personal acts that begin in and belong to the private sphere: the pulling of the headcloth over the face designating a woman's modesty; the tying of the dhoti designating caste status; the choice of or mix of desi and angrezi dress forms; the participation in a public meal; the marriage of two incompatibly ranked social actors display in public for the sake of approbation or defiance personal acts that begin in and belong to the private sphere. A narrow view of politics would relegate these to the private.

Yet the most fundamental social transformations that Indian reformers have sought to accomplish in the last hundred years have been as much embedded in private as in public spheres. Major public figures engaged in the search for just and meaningful social practices among the conflicting claims that the colonial situation generated often affected the public sphere most profoundly by performing some act of private deviation – marrying a widow; crossing the ocean; ignoring the family's conventional commensal rules. As the feminists say, the personal is political. When these individual transgressions proliferated, and reformers sought social legislation to modify oppressive private practices – The Age of Consent Act; the Widow Remarriage Act – the claim of privacy, that intimate spheres are beyond the reach of public scrutiny, or at least beyond the scrutiny of the colonial state, was

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<sup>15</sup> For an extended discussion of the crosscultural meaning of "Privacy" see Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and Lloyd I. Rudolph (2000); Introduction to Part V, "Private Lives in Patriarchal Space".

invoked.<sup>16</sup> What Gandhi did was to assert the opposite, that all private matters – or most – were on the table.

The Tolstoy farm in South Africa was constructed as a model of the imagined India, a diverse India, and its private negotiation of those differences were displayed in public through Gandhi's prolific publications. *Public Opinion* was one (Gandhi 1928: 134).<sup>17</sup> *Navajivan* and *Young India* reached a circulation of 40,000. The accounts are full of the quotidian details of negotiating the integration of private difference into a public space. How to arrange feeding? By allowing every family to work their own kitchen, as religious, caste, and culture based differences might dictate? The Ashram dwellers came from a society in which inter-dining was forbidden by ideas of caste purity and pollution. If they were to eat in a common kitchen, an act of social transgression, how to mediate between meat-eaters and vegetarians? The conundrum appears to have been settled by Gandhi's usual negotiated voluntarism, not unsurprisingly on the side of vegetarianism. Dish washing arrangements were partly designed to override residual reservations about purity and pollution: no one was exempted from the cleaning of common dishes.<sup>18</sup>

The Ashram as vehicle of displaying the private in public became a species of road show, moving its performances around India and recreating its forms of life at each of the major reform and resistance sites – in Champaran in 1917, in Kheda in 1918, on the salt march in 1930. Part of the road show was the visible practice of simplicity: performing menial work, wearing plain clothes, living in unfurnished environments, doing for yourself, working with comrades of diverse religion and ethnicity. It was a multi-valenced practice, signifying the asceticism of the religious seeker, an abjuring of private self-indulgence in favor of the public interest, identification with the least, and a strike at the hierarchical and exclusivist features of Indian civilization.

Many of the middle class professionals who came to the nationalist cause came with Habermasian assumptions about the division between public and private spheres. They would gladly have collaborated in the public realm, shielding the more difficult and precious private arena of sectarian, class and caste practices behind the claim of private space. Dismantling the public/private boundary enabled the unabashed invasion of the private practices that drew the boundaries constituting caste and religious difference.

The exemplary performances of simplicity at Champaran, in Bihar, during Gandhi's work on behalf of the indigo labor force in 1918 offer a famous example. The volunteers whom Gandhi had recruited for this campaign were prosperous

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<sup>16</sup> M.G. Ranade (1842-1901), who favored social reform as an appropriate issue for the Indian National Congress, was forced to back off when it became apparent social reform, as against political freedom, would deeply divide the Congress.

<sup>17</sup> For the massive repercussions in India of the violence committed against the South African strikers in 1913, including Viceroy Lord Harding's surprising condemnation of the South African authorities, and G.K. Gokhale's amplification to India of the news he received from South Africa, see Gandhi (1928: 286).

<sup>18</sup> "There was to be one single kitchen, and all were to dine in a single row. Everyone was to see to the cleaning of his own dish and other things. The common pots were to be cleaned by different parties in turn" (Gandhi 1928: 216).

upper caste advocates, who helped bring court cases to challenge labor-hostile laws and help take witness from the laborers. They assumed serving the movement was compatible with upper caste life styles. Gandhi teased them into shame, and coaxed them into adopting the egalitarian practices of the Ashram.

Writes Gandhi:

The curious ways of living of my companions in the early days were a constant theme of raillery at their expense. Each of the vakils had a servant and a cook, and therefore a separate kitchen, and they often had their dinner as late as midnight. Though they paid their own expenses, the irregularity worried me, but as we had become close friends [...] they received my ridicule in good part. Ultimately it was agreed that the servants should be dispensed with, that all the kitchens should be amalgamated, and that regular hours should be observed [...] it was also felt necessary to insist on simple meals (Gandhi 1957: 417).<sup>19</sup>

Dr. Rajendra Prasad, who became India's first president, was one of the advocates. He wryly recalls his experiments with simplicity, trying to figure out how to lower a clay pot by rope into the village well, to the immense amusement of the locals.<sup>20</sup>

These practices demanded a sharing of common social premises: simplicity and abstinence from servants, saving money, dignifying labor, enacting respect for tasks performed by the humble. The lawyers who signed up with Gandhi, hadn't counted on cleaning their own chamber pots. This public sphere made greater demands than the coffee house, excavating the political meaning of private life-ways, buttresses of the deepest inequalities and oppressions of Indian society. The enactment in the ashram of multi-ethnicity, encompassing several Indian regional-linguistic subcultures; of ecumenism, grounded not in a privatization of religion but in a deliberate ethic of mutual respect for publicly practiced religiosity; and of cross-caste neighborliness, made the ashram as theater, the model and exemplar of an imagined society.

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<sup>19</sup> It is not our objective in this paper to analyze Gandhi's rhetoric, but it is worth pointing out that Gandhi's accounts of the Ashram's negotiated voluntarism report no agents: "It was agreed", "it was decided upon". The various decisions to create a common vegetarian kitchen, at Tolstoy Farm, at Champaran, appear to happen without the active intervention of any advocate or persuader, but rather appear as the fortuitous and appropriate result of a spontaneous consensual expression of ashram souls.

<sup>20</sup> See Rajendra Prasad (1956).

## THE COFFEE HOUSE AND THE ASHRAM: CONTRASTS, CONGRUENCES

Among the features that distinguish the ashram from the 18<sup>th</sup> century political club is the religious grammar in which the ashram is embedded as against the enlightenment rationalism of the club. Yet we ought not draw too sharp a distinction: the Gandhian ashram is about civic virtue, service to a general interest, and the creation of a just society. Gandhi would align with Habermas' understanding of a decline in the public sphere due to the proliferation and institutionalization of private "interest". The ashram's idea of service which builds on models of religious obligation as well as self-abnegating asceticism sits somewhat awkwardly with rationalism. Yet it points in a similar direction as the civic virtue face of the public sphere.

Voluntarism, free entry and exit, are features in which associations operating in a public sphere overlap with the ashram. Ashrams, writes Richard Taylor, "may be the only traditional kind of Indian association (perhaps along with some bhakti groups) that are outside the [...] conditions of ascriptive membership – at least in theory, if not always in practice" (Taylor 1986: 20). Volunteers "applied" to the ashrams, alerted by the fame of Gandhi's projects. Some arrived in the spirit of novices entering a religious order, some in the spirit of peace corps volunteers. Neither ethnicity nor caste nor religion nor nationality qualified or disqualified. Those, for whom it was too much or too little, left. Entry by merit, exit by choice.

The ashram's projects were/are based on a more holistic vision than that of the coffee house, of how to improve the human condition. In the world of the coffeehouse, the political is separable from other spheres, from personal vocation, religion, ethnic and other "primal" solidarities. The Public Sphere focuses on politics. The ashram embodies the belief, more native to the religious than the political adept that social change comes about through the ethical and moral transformation of selves rather than through public and political institutions. Gandhi formed his first ashram in the grip of a "spell" cast by Ruskin's espousal of such a holistic vision.<sup>21</sup> After reading *Unto This Last*, the four political economy essays that constituted Ruskin's slashing attack on market capitalism and modern society,<sup>22</sup> he made himself a promise that reaches well beyond political agendas: "I determined to change my life in accordance with the ideals of the book" (Gandhi 1957: 298). The ashram was established in part to enable its indwellers to practice a community of virtue: dedicated to the collective good; to the belief that all work is equally worthy; to the conviction that the life of tillers and craftsmen is worth living (Gandhi 1957: 299).

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<sup>21</sup> "One of the great prophetic books of the nineteenth century", which "pierces through the smoke-screen of classical economics, and reveals true human realities". Kenneth Clark (1982: 265).

<sup>22</sup> See Clive Wilmer's review of six books on Ruskin that herald the "return" of this alternately celebrated and shunned figure, "Go to Nature," *Times Literary Supplement*, April 7, 2000, pp.3-4.

In Gandhi's view the state is too frail, even impotent, to be the arena of a public good. The locus of true power being the civil society on which the state is ultimately dependent, civil society becomes the proper arena for change. Deliberations in the public sphere are predicated on the assumption of a state that will execute the general interest that evolves. But for the Gandhian ashram, it is the transformation of inner selves, of the will and intent of human actors, that is the path to social change. Thus the world views and behaviors that constitute the practice of injustice, such as beliefs in untouchability or extortionate dowry practices are not affected by the weak hand of legislation, but by persuasion and the enactment of justice, routinized in committed associations. Change is more than a political act – for which the coffee house and the political club are sufficient, influencing legislation, public policy and public sanctions. Change for Gandhi is a societal act engaging subjectivities as well as political structures. Such a political process requires bearers other than the limited and rationalist forms of the 18th century coffee house, pub and literary society.

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