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A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction

Susan Gal

Introduction

The distinction between public and private is a ubiquitous feature of everyday life, where the terms are used in multiple and seemingly contradictory ways. "Private property" is a defining feature of a capitalist economy, but in capitalist systems participants also consider "private" those intimate relationships that are ideally protected from economic calculation. This combination is neither careless confusion nor a regrettable inconsistency. On the contrary, I argue that when the public/private distinction is analyzed as a communicative phenomenon—a product of semiotic processes—it shows a complex and systematic logic that explains this usage. The logic undergirds a great deal of social reasoning in everyday life as well as in political and social theory. To explicate the semiotics of the public/private distinction, one must first be clear about what it is not.¹

Since the emergence of the doctrine of "separate spheres" in the nineteenth century, social analysts in Europe and the United States have repeatedly assumed that the social world is organized around contrasting and incompatible moral principles that are conventionally linked to either public or private: community vs. individual, rationality vs. sentiment, **[End Page 77]** money vs. love, solidarity vs. self-interest. The belief that these values are antagonistic continues to generate heated political argument. It motivates the widespread fear that practices such as money payments for intimate care will contaminate the trust and love of private life. There is also the parallel fear that expressions of emotion and the mobilization of intimate ties will weaken the fairness and rationality of politics. Narratives about the dangers of mutual contamination by public and private spheres are evident in both republican and liberal political thought. These traditions differ in the value and location they assign to the public good as opposed to private interest. Yet they agree on the centrality of the opposition.

By contrast, feminist scholarship has made these dichotomies the center of its project of critique. First, feminist research has challenged the supposed incompatibility of the moral values associated with public and private. Despite the assumption of "separate spheres," most social practices, relations, and transactions are not limited to the principles associated with one or another sphere. Empirical research shows that monetary transactions of various kinds are common in social relations that are otherwise understood as intimate interactions within families: love and money are often intertwined. Similarly, the "personal is political" in part because private institutions such as families often operate, like the polity, through conflict, power hierarchies, and violence. By the same token, political acts conventionally categorized as public are frequently shaped by sentiment and emotion. Far from being incompatible, the principles associated with public and private coexist in complex combinations in the ordinary routines of everyday life. Second, feminist research has successfully shown the error of assuming stable boundaries between public and private. Legal changes are perhaps the best indicators, but the stigmatization of practices once accepted and taken for granted also provides important evidence. Activities such as wife-beating, which were considered a private concern a few decades ago, are now the subject of public legislation around the globe; conversely, consensual sexual activity among adults that was once more widely subject to legal prohibition has become a private matter in many locales.

However, historical changes in the "content" of what is legally or conventionally considered public and private have not undermined the distinction in normative discourse and social theory any more than has evidence about the inseparability of principles. This should not be surprising. As feminist theory has argued, the public/private distinction is an ideological one, hence not easily susceptible to empirical counterevidence. **[End Page 78]** Yet the implications of this insight have not been sufficiently explored. Rather than mounting an analysis of the distinction as ideology, most feminist critiques have simply borrowed or extended the cartographic metaphors of everyday life. In a recent collection of key feminist texts, the excellent introductory essay by Joan Landes asserts...

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