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# Capturing Hearts and Minds

## Understanding the complex social lives of public debates

Sarah Bracke and Aslihan Özturk

9th November 2021

Public debates tell us much about what captures the minds and hearts of the imagined communities of, and within, a nation – they are both sites of moral panic and barometers of political climates. For sociologists, they are not only rich sources of empirical data, but also places to make interventions and to have impact. But how do we adequately capture what goes on in such debates?

We tend to rely on our sociological routines: we choose an issue, a national context, a time period, and delineate which media to consider. For example, sociologists focusing on so-called headscarf debates would likely track discussion of the issue in one or more countries, within a certain time span, and within a selection of media (national TV, newspapers, or, more recently, social media). These routines delineate and organise public debates in ways that enable further investigation, and yet we also know that the actual debates elude such attempts at methodological enclosure.

This discrepancy, or perhaps alterity, is the very condition of the social scientific study of the empirical world, as social scientific methods organise and effectively reduce social reality into data to be analysed. But could it be possible to study public debates in ways that attend more carefully to their social life? Such lives, after all, are not easily confined to the boundaries of a thematic focus, a clear-cut timeframe, a focus on specific media, or on national and linguistic borders.

Public debates rarely present themselves as solid or discrete objects; they can't be easily distinguished from their surroundings – such as other public debates, other national contexts, the events that led to these debates, or their afterlives. They can be seen as associations among a set of utterances, texts, politicians, journalists, media (social media, newspapers, television), images, laws, policy responses, to name but a few of the things public debates usually comprise.

So how could we begin to capture more adequately the living quality of the public debates we study? We can look to neighbouring disciplines and methodologies central to these disciplines, and borrow and adapt for our purposes. One source of inspiration in this respect is Robin Judd's 2007 study *Contested Rituals: Circumcision, Kosher Butchering, and Jewish Political Life in Germany, 1843-1933*.

A historian doing meticulous archival research, Judd developed a genealogical account to capture the "transposing, rearranging, and repositioning" (Harding, 2000, p.15) of various public debates that took place in Germany between 1843 and 1933, in which Jewish rites and rituals were systematically problematised. Extensive archival research tracking the topics of circumcision and butchering allowed Judd to compile maps of the rise and fall of many different (local, national) debates centred on these rites and rituals. In a genealogical spirit, this approach doesn't provide the debates with a point of origin, let alone a point of culmination.1 But Judd shows how the soaring of public discourse on circumcision or kosher butchering was informed and compelled by traces of previous debates, while the subsequent waning of these debates enlarged the cultural archive (Wekker, 2016) from which the next debate would draw.

Here public debates appear as living matters – rising and falling, resembling other debates and differing – in interaction both with political events and contingencies of the day, as well as with the cultural archives and afterlives of other debates. This approach brings to life the deeply recursive quality of public debates, renders visible the connections and interactions that each single debate is made of, and accounts for the fluidity and liveliness of public debates as we encounter them in society.

We find another source of inspiration in the work of anthropologist Susan Friend Harding, and more specifically an understanding of cultural workshop, which she discusses in *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (2000). In this study of the conflated lives of Protestant fundamentalism and secularism in the US, Harding lays out how the cultural formation of the fundamentalist other could only manifest through "a hive of workshops, of sites of cultural production, that smelted, shaped, packaged, and distributed [a] myriad [of] … rhetorics and narratives" (2000, p.15). This cultural work, these cultural workshops, Harding shows, were part of a process of narrative encapsulation, in which the struggle over cultural dominance implied that a previously more dominant account, ie, that of Protestant fundamentalism, was reframed and indeed encapsulated within the new ideological sovereignty of a secular world view.

Harding offers an in-depth account of the labour of cultural transformation in which public debates figure as cultural workshops, ie, the sites of intense cultural labour. She does so while attending to the fact that this cultural work doesn't come to a halt when public debates fade away, and those cultural transformations do not emerge solely during explosive, havoc-wreaking moments . In other words, this cultural work is understood to be more continuous and fluid than a focus on high-profile public debates allows us to see, and once more as recursive in its relation to existing cultural archives.

So how can these historical and anthropological investigations of public debate contribute to a sociological method of capturing the social lives of public debates? Both Harding and Judd examine public debates, and account for their gravitation, through factors internal to the debates and factors belonging to the social and historical worlds that surround them (whether through the Gramscian notion of hegemony in Harding's work, or the history of nation formation and disintegration in Judd's). As a result, the fluidity, contingency and connectivity that characterise the social life of the examined debates become tangible. We could enrich our sociological approach to contemporary public debates by adapting the following elements from their methodologies: first, the notion of the cultural workshop allows us to interrogate public debates from the perspective of what is at stake on the level of cultural hegemony and its reproduction or transformation.

Here public debates appear as an intense encounter of forces invested in maintaining, reinforcing or transforming existing cultural frames or orders. We often find current public debates on Muslims in Europe to be cultural workshops, where Islamophobia is further mainstreamed and where the lines of what is "acceptable" racist speech are stretched and moved (Bracke & Hernández Aguilar, 2020). And while such efforts don't necessarily succeed in every single debate, given the contingencies of each debate, including the forces seeking to push back against racism, the repetition of these debates does produce the redrawing of lines of what is publicly permissible speech on Muslims.

Second, the different ways in which the studies by Harding and Judd point to how public debates carry and continue the traces of other public debates, underscore the importance of recursive history (Stoler, 2016). Public debates should be studied in relation to each other, to their precursors and their afterlives, and these are relations and interactions that do not come to a halt at national or linguistic borders. In our research we find it crucial to trace how debates on the problematisation of Muslims have longer lives, such as the debate on male circumcision (Hernández Aguilar, 2020), which has been re-articulated in different times and places, crossing national and linguistic borders, and indeed crossing different religions/racialised constellations.

Finally, the rich accounts of public debates that Harding and Judd offer serve to draw our attention to how densely populated these debates usually are, including by motives and tropes that are animated through their travel from one debate to another, and that have cultural lives of their own. We keep encountering the trope of brown men as sexual predators; it is a trope that has a long history and has been projected and mobilised with respect to different non-White male populations (Bhattacharya, 2008; Bonjour & Bracke, 2020).

So while we continue to rely on the methodological routines within our own discipline when approaching public debates – and when selecting the topics, time periods and media we will focus on – we also consider other dimensions in our methodological and analytical grids: in what way might these debates be cultural workshops, what are the recursive histories at work within these debates, and what motives and tropes figure in these debates? This important process brings us closer to grasping the intense social lives of the debates that we study.

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