

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

Publics and Protests

Katharine Keenan



Demonstrations of Public Grief in the Wake of Tragic Events

In early April 2011 [Ronan Kerr](#), a young Catholic police officer in Northern Ireland, was killed while leaving his home by a car bomb. Planted by dissident republicans who rejected the terms of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the bomb went off 13 years deep into the supposedly “post-conflict” era. At noon on April 6, less than a week after Kerr died, more than a thousand people congregated in front of the City Hall, filling Donegall Square for a minute of silence. Organized swiftly by the Belfast chapter of Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the crowd was visibly diverse in age and profession—but very few marked their political allegiances in what they wore or carried to the event. Politicians from several parties spoke on a small stage, iterating the slogan “not in our name” to shame and distance the dissidents who claimed responsibility for the attack. After a moment of silent reflection a piper played, as attendees dispersed through the city streets and back into their offices.



Trayvon Martin shooting protest. Photo courtesy David Shankbone and wikicommons

In July of this year, following the acquittal of a Florida neighborhood watchman, George Zimmerman, for the killing of black teenager [Trayvon Martin](#), thousands more poured out onto the streets of New York, Los Angeles, Washington and across the United States. In New York City, organizers from the Stop Mass Incarceration Network arranged a rally and march on the evening of July 14 at Union Square in lower Manhattan. Occurring so soon after the verdict was announced on the night of July 13, the rally carried the momentum of the previous night’s spontaneous vigils and demonstrations. It attracted hundreds of participants carrying homemade signs and t-shirts calling for justice, or wearing stickers provided by the political groups associated with the event, which read, “We are all Trayvon; the whole damn system is broken.” At 6 pm the crowd began to march north on Broadway, gathering enough participants to block traffic as they approached Times Square for a sit-

in. Later, the marchers proceeded further northward toward a meeting place in Harlem, less organized and now facing police opposition, they continued walking late into the night, some eventually even reaching the Bronx (Robbins 2013).

Both of these events were described as protests in news media, ([McAleese The Belfast Telegraph 2011](#), [BBC 2011](#), [Resnick The New York Observer 2013](#), [Robbins The Gothamist 2013](#) and [Wisloski, Liddy and Kieth The Huffington Post 2013](#), to name a few), and while that label is not entirely incorrect, it does condition our perception of them in two important ways. Protests carry the implications of being both political—demanding specific concessions or actions—and angry—doing so in a spirit of clamorous dissent. However the spirit of both events encompassed more than just protest. The Kerr event was described by the [Belfast Telegraph](#) as “a day of grief, condemnation and protest, but ... also a day of unity and defiance” (McAleese 2011). Politicians who spoke on the day, regardless of their party affiliations, made sure to emphasize that they disapproved of the dissident republicans’ actions, and that Kerr, who was a Catholic and nationalist officer in a police force fraught with a sectarian history, was a sign of Northern Ireland’s progress. The spirit of the rally was melancholy, but also a forceful show of numbers. In New York, the demonstrations were indeed tinged with anger over the apparent racial bias in the way Martin was characterized by the media, the controversial Florida “Stand Your Ground” law, and perceived miscarriage of justice at Zimmerman’s acquittal. But many of the people interviewed by reporters on the day also expressed a profound sense of connection with the boy who was killed. A woman interviewed by [DemocracyNow.org](#) said “I had a feeling in my stomach, in my gut, and it felt like—I don’t know. It felt like it was my son. I cried” (2013). In both of these examples, the feelings expressed by members of the crowd were ambiguous and complex, leading in some cases to the criticism that protestors were fractured or disorganized (Robbins 2013). Rather, along with the political demands of event organizers and speakers, the demonstrators palpably conveyed grief, disappointment, and mourning. Their presence and their sadness pose important questions about the meanings of mass demonstrations in the wake of tragic events.

The most salient feature of mass demonstrations is, of course, their public-ness: the presence of large numbers of people filling city squares with their bodies and voices, making for striking images that iterate globally in news and social media. In addition to visibility, however the quality of being public is equated with the “world-making activity of the polis” ([Warner Publics and Counter Publics 2005: 59](#)). As [Hannah Arendt](#) writes, “For us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality” ([The Human Condition 1958: 50](#)). Activity “in the view of others” thus constitutes the “creative fashioning of a common world” precisely because we cannot participate in “public” activities without at once being aware of our own and others’ different subjectivities ([Warner 2005: 59](#), emphasis added). For Arendt, “reality ris[es] out of the sum total of aspects presented by one object to a multitude of

spectators”; this is the mutually constructed common world (Arendt 1958: 57). In Michael Warner’s interpretation, there is not one public but many, some of which “are defined by their tension with a larger public” (2005: 56). These are counterpublics: situated “against the background of the public sphere, [a counterpublic] enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power” (56). For both Arendt and Warner, then, participation in a public is an act of citizenship, but for Warner participation in a counterpublic is a critical response to common expectations of personhood. Counterpublics provoke “visceral reactions” aimed at transforming these expectations, by making visible the bodies, identities and values deemed irrelevant and invisible to the “common” world (62).

Warner is careful to define his concept in such a way that broad numbers of people can participate in the creation of a counterpublic through modern social media. Much in the way that Benedict Anderson (Imagined Communities 1982) defines the nation, the counterpublic’s “extent is in principle indefinite, because it is not based on a precise demography but mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk, commerce and the like” (Warner 2002: 56). But this kind of public is limited in its visibility to those who subscribe to a particular discourse (or website). The text-based public is only visible to itself, and within itself is structured vertically and chronologically in a kind of perpetual comment thread. Authority—the ability to control discourse, and to validate or invalidate individual participants—is built into the text-based public via various modes of moderating and trolling social media. In contrast, a public that shares a physical space—a crowd—seizes visibility, demanding the attention of the greater public sphere, and maintains its horizontality even as images of protesters and police radiate into the realms of other publics.

When we look at events such as the rally for Ronan Kerr, or the march for Trayvon Martin, we must consider them not only as protests, but as public disclosures of something the broader public had hoped to ignore. In these two instances, grief demands attention. Both young men died under tragic circumstances that quickly turned political; they became martyrs of the Northern Irish peace process and of American race relations. The striking power of these events, however, was not in their efficacy as protests, but in their capacity to re-humanize Ronan and Trayvon (perhaps at the expense of particular political agendas), and to make visible the pain of others who have suffered similar losses. In drawing their sense of sadness, disappointment, empathy and outrage into the public realm, demonstrators validated those feelings for each other, but also for the broader public. The masses of mourners in Belfast and New York formed counterpublics that reconstituted private grief as a common loss, reminding observers that we all have lost members of our polis.

Katharine Keenan is a recent graduate of Columbia University, Teachers College with a PhD in applied anthropology. Her research is primarily concerned with the role of civic events and public performance in the reconstruction of Post-Conflict Belfast. She currently teaches anthropology at Fordham University at Lincoln Center and Contemporary Civilization at Columbia College.

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