



# Recentering power: conceptualizing counterpublics and defensive publics

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## Abstract

In this manuscript we consider the inconsistent ways the concept of “counterpublics” has been taken up in the field to make the claim that considerations of social power must be recentered in the theorization of publics. To do this we provide an in-depth genealogy of the concept of counterpublics, analyze its use by critical scholars, and then consider its application in empirical studies of digital networks and right-wing publics. We argue that scholars studying digital and far-right publics in particular must take the critical analysis of power seriously. Through this lens, we show that classifying right-wing movements as “defensive” is more theoretically and empirically accurate. In doing so, we conceptualize public spheres as indelible outgrowths of social structures, even as they work to transform them in turn, and provide a framework for scholars to understand public spheres through the lens of history, social differentiation, relations, resources, and access.

**Keywords:** public sphere, counterpublics, power, far-right movements, defensive publics

Since Jürgen Habermas’s early and influential development of public sphere theory scholars concerned with identity and inequality have critiqued it for the ways it failed to take up the realities of social power and social structures, and especially gendered and raced exclusions in the public sphere. Subsequently, differences in the prioritization of questions of power and inequality have arisen between scholarship relying heavily on normative ideals of the public sphere and those drawing from critical theories of counterpublicity. While these mark general tendencies across literatures, and not a sharp division in the field, there are overall patterns in scholarship on the public sphere, and especially counterpublics. Scholars who study things such as race, class, gender, sexuality, migration, and activism have drawn on the early critiques and expansions offered by Fraser (1990) and Baker (1994), and later Squires (2002), to produce painstaking work on social power and publics. These scholars tend to be clustered in so-called “critical” areas like cultural studies, media studies, rhetoric, and social movement studies. On the other hand, quantitatively and computationally-oriented political communication research, in the form of studies of mis- and disinformation, electoral politics, public opinion, polarization, and political movements, tends to avoid deep engagement with questions of power, social structures, inequality, and access.

The result is often that these literatures speak past one another. In what follows, we—scholars trained in these different traditions who have expanded our research to include the other—take up the call of the special issue asking if we need new theories of the public sphere. We argue that we do not need new theories of publics so much as to recover comparatively older and more critical emphases on analyzing historical forces and social structures in empirical work on communicative dynamics in media systems. This would enable scholars using theories of the public sphere to study groups that make claims of marginalization or enact communicative styles

outside the rules of politesse in liberal democracies to better center power in their analyses. We do so through a discussion of the varied ways scholars wield the concept of counterpublics across research traditions. While a number of scholars argue that “counterpublics” can, and should, be applied to contemporary right-wing movements, we argue that analysis of relations of various aspects of the right to the historical center across different axes (such as gender, race, and economics) provides a better means of contextually delineating what is actually “counter” as opposed to what we term “defensive.”

For instance, right-wing movements that strive to uphold a historically dominant racial order would not be considered a counterpublic, even if as a matter of style their racism is more overt than the approach of a more moderate, or even liberal, center that nevertheless perpetuates unequal racial power. Instead, these right-wing publics in many nations are better conceptualized as *defensive publics*. Indeed, particularly alarming in some recent work is how superficial engagement with the concept of counterpublics, such as studies that group Nazis and other unapologetically racist, sexist, and jingoistic movements under this label, risks perpetuating the very forms of oppression that counterpublics have sought to upend.

This matters more broadly because our field needs to better account for how Western democracies and their institutions came into existence, and thrived for most of their history, because of the enslavement, colonization, and exploitation of people at the margins (Mills, 2017). As such, exclusionary ideologies are rarely, if ever, “counter.” Even more, scholars should be attentive to ways that what might appear, at least on the surface, “counter” might in fact embrace the same underlying logics of social structural power. We opt for the term “defensive publics” over alternatives like “revanchist publics,” “revisionist publics,” or “authoritarian publics” because while each of the latter reflect a defense of exclusionary,

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ascriptive, or hierarchical political projects and social arrangements, they are not always the same. *Defensive*, then, becomes an upper-level analytic through which to further delineate and define publics that stand in alignment with (rather than counter to) and seek to preserve the ordering of systems of inequality. These systems can encompass unequal social and political relations across many dimensions of power, to be determined through analysis, including but not limited to race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and class.

Herein, we outline the approaches of scholars who have provided us with a level of complexity in the study of counterpublics and their relations to publics that should be more fully taken up in the contemporary study of communication, social stratification, and social change. We conclude by arguing explicitly for conceptualizing contemporary right-wing movements as explicitly defensive, not counter, in their efforts to protect, maintain, and extend exclusionary racial, social, political, and economic orders. We do so in the hope of bringing clarity to the study of the global rise of right-wing and fascist forces along the lines of work in adjacent disciplines (Pirro, 2022).

This article proceeds in four parts. First, we offer a genealogy of the theorization of counterpublics followed by a discussion of critical works on publics and counterpublics that model the centering of analyses of power in assessing the communicative capacity of social groups and causes. Second, we turn to some key works on the contemporary dynamics of digital public spheres, especially empirical studies that address digital networks and right wing movements and show how this work often centers communicative conflict while failing to address social structures. Third, we highlight work that begins to integrate the critical analysis of power in the context of the study of right-wing publics. Finally, we chart a path forward for scholars grappling with contemporary questions relating to right-wing publics and illustrate how future work can build from pre-existing traditions to center questions of structure, power, and access.

## A genealogy of counterpublics and its critical application

The formative development of counterpublics was linked to analysis of power and social structures—particularly dynamics of citizenship, class, race, and gender as they are embedded in cultures and institutions of public communication and public life.

Of the most well-known critiques and expansions of Habermas's work is feminist theorist Fraser's (1990) insistence that a fixation on a singular public sphere reifies public/private and state/civil society binaries that by design limit participation and reify dominance and subordination. As opposed to Habermas's ideal in which "rational" deliberation brackets questions of identity—even when those identities reflect social inequities—Fraser argues that the struggle for social power linked to historically and institutionally constructed identity groups is a central function of the public sphere. Further, she writes, "The official bourgeois public sphere is the institutional vehicle for a major historical transformation in the nature of political domination," whereby the bourgeois and their norms became the "hegemonic mode of domination" after the fall of kings (p. 62). In this light, many and diverse publics are more robustly democratic

than a unified public because alternative publics, or "counterpublics" as Fraser, like fellow feminist scholar Felski (1990), named them, often challenge the domination inherent in attempts to force a unified set of ideals, concerns, and identities that align with existing arrangements of power (economic, social, and political). These multiple publics also serve as spaces where oppositional discourses and marginalized identities to a dominant center can develop and thrive.

Turkish-American philosopher Benhabib (1997) took this critique a step further in arguing that the regulative ideal of democracy is a constitutive fiction, especially in diverse societies. Benhabib argues that "The idea of the sovereign people, deliberating collectively about matters of common concern to all, is a *regulative ideal* of the democratic form of government, and disquiet about the public sphere is at bottom anxiety about the inability of democracy in modern, complex, multicultural, and increasingly globalized polities" (p. 2). Ultimately, Benhabib argues, the liberal virtue traditions relied upon by Habermas as well as philosophers and scholars such as Kant, Rawls, and Arendt are useful as starting points in theorizing publics but are inadequate because their assumptions of normative unity and unanimity conflict with the manifold realities of multicultural societies.

When Squires (2002) proposed her alternative vocabulary for multiple public spheres, she followed and extended the path that Black Studies scholars like Baker (1994) and other members of the Black Public Sphere Collective (1995) had blazed during the same time that Felski and Fraser were theorizing feminist counterpublics. Namely, they extended analyses of counterpublics explicitly to not only include, but center, analysis of racial orders. For Black scholars based in the US, the critical work of counterpublics had been obvious from the start. In a nation in which the public sphere was founded and maintained to exclude racialized subjects while casting their demands and needs as outside normative interest or rationality, a unified public felt painfully laughable. As Baker (1994) pointed out, the emergence of Habermas's public sphere was generated by property ownership and literacy among the bourgeois, but what of the fact that this same group's property *was* Black people whom they denied literacy? "Habermas," Baker writes, "understands fully that his most valued notion of 'publicity' is exclusionary, overdetermined (...) overconditioned by the market and by history, and utopian to the extreme" (p. 8). In what Baker calls the "flip side" offered by the Black public sphere, deliberation and opinion formation in democracy does not depend on the acceptance of social inequality (and its impossible bracketing), but the clarity and realism that an egalitarian democracy is an imagined goal developing through interventions from groups at the margins responding to unequal relations of power.

Crucially, for those rendered outside the qualifications for equal participation in the public due to forced differentials in political, social, and economic power, counterpublics were and are important collectives from which to build power that could challenge dominant social and communicative structures. At the same time Squires was writing, literary critic Warner (2002) integrated queer theory and performance studies into questions of publics and counterpublics. His work argues that much of what happens in counterpublics happens with intentional and complete disregard of the state, and that collective world-making by subordinated collectives need not be beholden to normative rationality.

Indeed, Squires also contended that publics at the margins include various forms of alterity, structured by power in their own right. For Squires, there is no singular form of being for marginalized publics any more than there ever was a singular public sphere. Squires offers a comprehensive conceptual framework for exploring the multiplicity that exists *within* what might otherwise be oversimplified as a homogenous, marginalized counterpublic dependent solely on socially constructed identities such as ethnicity, race, gender, or sexuality. In doing so, Squires also complicates Fraser's contention about the dual character of counterpublics as spaces of both withdrawal and political action. Instead, she argues that there are multiple Black public spheres that engage in disparate but overlapping ways, under different social conditions, with different relations to dominant publics across disparate contexts. Squires suggests that analyzing how African Americans at specific historical moments and within the confines of particular civic organizations have navigated these contexts, with different resources, values, and cultural norms, can offer greater refinement in interpreting resistance to oppressive conditions arising from dominant publics and the state wielding power across multiple dimensions. She writes:

Salient aspects of public spheres might include the following: the history of their relationships to the state and dominant publics; how diverse is a particular public sphere; what sorts of institutional resources are available to the collective; what these institutions' relationships are to the political, economic, and media institutions of the dominant society; and how their modes of communicative and cultural expression are different from those of other publics and the entities within political and economic society. (pp. 457–457)

Accordingly, Squires identifies three variations of subaltern publics: enclave publics, counterpublics, and satellite publics, suggesting that African Americans in the Jim Crow South, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Nation of Islam are examples of each respectively. An “enclave public” is hidden from dominant publics by necessity due to socially and often legally sanctioned forms of repression. It is characterized by the creation of safe spaces—in the most literal sense of the phrase for groups living under the threat of violence—for discourse among group members, the development of shared memory and strategies, the management of limited resources, and scripted public performances that obscure group members' true ideas from hostile, dominant groups.

Meanwhile, a “counterpublic,” according to Squires, is importantly characterized by comparatively greater public engagement between marginalized and dominant public spheres, often in the form of protest rhetoric, performance, and alternative media as a form of contestation from the margins. Counterpublics are more openly oppositional (and importantly *can* be), reject the scripted public performances of enclave publics, and demand self-determination; they engage in strategies that involve shifting public opinion, the reclamation of public space, and the development of alliances. Importantly, counterpublics benefit from access to greater resources than enclaves, such as independent media channels to distribute information, but their efforts can still be undermined by dominant publics or the state in direct and indirect ways. Finally, “satellite publics” are characterized by a preferred separation from, and inconsistent engagement with,

dominant publics. A strong sense of subgroup identity is central for satellite publics, along with separate, independent group-specific spaces and institutions, with little interest in other publics unless it is strategically important or necessary.

We take the care Squires provides as instructive to ongoing efforts to define publics. She calls for ways to engage the fluidity of publics rather than reinforcing the idea of either a unified public sphere or unified alternative ones. This work makes a strong case for engaging a conceptualization of public spheres that accounts for differences in power and social structures and where a singular notion of identity does not overdetermine our understandings in ways that flatten political life.

In this spirit, [Ferguson \(2010\)](#) considers the anarchist counterpublics generated by the hybrid political and cultural labors of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman at the turn of the 20th century to show how a range of identity subgroups can be brought together to challenge social power vis-à-vis particular temporalities, social locations, and textual practices. Likewise, [Chávez \(2011\)](#) uses counterpublic theory to consider the importance of enclaves in social movement coalition-building across immigrant and LGBTQ groups. [Florini \(2019\)](#) works to recuperate Squires's early use of “oscillating publics” in her study of Black engagement with digital platforms. [Cavalcante \(2016\)](#) and [Jackson et al. \(2018, 2020\)](#) have considered layers of subalternity within counterpublics in their work on trans people's community building online. [Rothberg \(2006\)](#) links the overlapping emergence in the French public sphere of Holocaust memory and the movement to decolonize Algeria to a “counterpublic witness” that connects the historical logics of genocide and colonization. [Pezzullo \(2003\)](#) illustrates the false binary presumed in surface level definitions of publics and counterpublics by illustrating how the multiple critiques and actions present in social movements can simultaneously become mainstream while facing internal dissent and resistance. Brouwer centered AIDS activism and queer publicity in his early theorizations of counterpublics (see [Brouwer 2001, 2005](#) as examples).

In global, decolonial, and non-Western work on counterpublics, there have also been calls for the “need to attend to the particular conditions of domination and oppression, and the liberatory potential, in non-Western societies” ([Huang & Kang, 2022](#)). In this spirit, [Ncube and Tomaselli \(2019\)](#) point out that pre-colonial Zimbabwean societies had the Shona philosophies of *Dariro* and *Dare* to describe the ideals of democratic relations and participatory communication long before Western scholars presumed to introduce the Habermasian public sphere. In Josée [Johnston's \(2000\)](#) study of the armed, yet radically democratic, Zapatista movement in Mexico, Johnston links Habermas's idealized bourgeois public sphere to an “imperialist fiction” of minimalist democracy that privileges voting and formalized governance over economic democracy and social equality. She notes that in Western political science this minimalist conception of democracy stands in the way of theorizing the democratic potentials offered by social movements focused on expanding the power and self-determination of the most marginalized. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), she argues, offers a clear example of how actual existing democracy is expanded through the development and nurturance of multiple groups committed to popular participation, autonomy, and discursive (and when necessary physical) struggle in the public sphere. As a counterpublic that actively faces violent

repression from a state that claims, but fails, to embrace democratic values, EZLN promotes democracy not through the elite modes that have been closed off to its members, but by linking cultural recognition and economic equality to democracy.

What these varied works have in common is an acknowledgement that understanding local and national histories, structures and institutions, and relations of power is crucial to theorizations of publics and counterpublics. In this spirit, [Asen \(2015\)](#) positions scholarship on the public sphere as a form of critical theoretical engagement that elucidates the connections between theory and practice in ways that should intervene in established conditions of power and dominance. He takes up the work of Habermas, Dewey, and Goodnight to argue that their respective approaches to public sphere theory were necessarily critical in implicit or explicit ways, even if they considered the question of democratic practice in distinct ways or, particularly in the case of Habermas, their work was only a starting point for a melioristic turn. According to Asen, critical scholars have engaged with counterpublic theories in robust ways to “critique unjust practices and to imagine emancipatory alternatives” (p. 138), but echoing the concerns of [Pezzullo \(2003, as cited in Asen, 2015\)](#) and the work of [Squires \(2002\)](#), cautions scholars not to fall into the trap of creating overly simplistic binaries between publics and counterpublics.

Many of the scholars we have highlighted here are rarely cited in research that has taken up questions of the digital and right-wing movements and publicity. This marginalization of critical research has had an obviously deleterious impact on the uses of concepts of publics in the field that we hope to contribute to repairing.

### ‘Counter’ without a center

Soon after Squires’s careful consideration of the historical relationship between power and publics, the global proliferation of new technologies prompted a largely distinct literature to take shape across disciplines from communication and media studies to political science and sociology. This work especially focused on analysis of the new dynamics of digital public spheres. Many of these researchers were also involved in developing and deploying new methodological approaches, including those of computational communication science, to analyze shifting flows of communication in what was variously conceived as the “networked public sphere” ([Benkler, 2006](#)) or “networked publics.” While this research has offered the field indispensable insights, in this section we review some key works to draw attention to important issues in many of these studies of public spheres, which are especially apparent in the context of contemporary studies of right-wing movements. There was, and remains, a lack of attention to power as it maps onto communicative dynamics. This includes the fact that there is little consideration of social structures or even of power differentials more broadly between social groups as they shape communication and media. In contrast, these things are central features of the critical tradition on publics and counterpublics detailed above.

In what was perhaps *the* defining work of the past two decades on the Internet and the public sphere which in turn shaped reams of empirical work, including our own, legal scholar Yochai [Benkler’s \(2006\)](#) *The Wealth of Networks* offers no conception of counterpublics at all, and very little

on social or political power in general. The central claim, instead, is that “the various formats of the networked public sphere provide anyone with an outlet to speak, to inquire, to investigate, without need to access the resources of a major media organization” (2006, 11). Despite the lack of attention to power between social groups, *The Wealth of Networks* is important in capturing how the shifts in capital required to produce and disseminate media, and find audiences, had dramatically fallen. This, in turn, means that in theory those voices marginalized vis-à-vis dominant public spheres have new means to participate in public spheres and challenge entrenched power. Indeed, as a decade of scholarship on networked movements for social justice has shown, this was precisely the case ([Jackson et al., 2020](#); [Mendes et al., 2019](#)). Thus, the dynamics Benkler outlines made counterpublic theory, and the mapping of relations of publics onto social structures, even *more* important—not less.

Recent studies of counterpublics also reveal the *limits* of successful publicity (such as the lack of systematic, structural police reform in the US). Movements for racial and social justice and other cases reveal that the changing economics and affordances of media did not create a new world of leveled participation in the public sphere. And the intense backlash faced by marginalized individuals and groups in public forums reveal the continued power of social structures to shape capacities for participation and engagement ([Sobieraj, 2020](#)). In other words, even as media change created new opportunities for counterpublics to challenge and contest dominant relations and communication in public spheres, racial, gender, economic, and political orders have proven not only remarkably durable but defensive. Thus, as [Fenton \(2018\)](#) has argued, overly focusing on the capacities of technologies themselves “takes our critical gaze away from the institutional arrangements of liberal democracy itself” (p. 38).

Other influential works on networks have continued to deploy the concept of the public sphere without clearly conceptualizing underlying social structural relations between groups, instead privileging the analysis of different ideological positions. Here, the analytical focus is on the power to engage in, and win, communicative contests in networked public spheres. Benkler, Faris, and Roberts’s (2018) *Networked Propaganda*, for example, is deeply attentive to right-wing propaganda but frames the problem as primarily one of communicative dynamics *within* a contested networked public sphere. There is comparatively little analysis of how right-wing and left-wing propaganda maps on to different social groups and their position in social structures, and therefore little on the very different consequences for the distribution of power in the polity (e.g.: [Mason, 2018](#)). Broadly speaking, power in this work and others is “discursive power,” “the ability of contributors to political communication spaces to introduce, amplify, and maintain topics, frames, and speakers that come to dominant political discourse” ([Jungherr et al., 2019](#), p. 409) – including false right-wing epistemological claims and backlashes to the expansion of rights. Less well understood is how that communicative power maps onto maintaining the social-structural dominance of certain groups (e.g., Whites, economic elites, men) – or how right-wing power in the networked public sphere maps onto a broader history of conservative media and media institutions facilitated by access to capital and alignment with dominant racial and economic interests ([Peck, 2019](#)). And, these contests are too frequently read as only network-mediated, horse-race



style ideological debates, not identity and social group-based conflicts for the kinds of political and social power that can result in the expansion or contraction of human rights.

In essence, in some of the most popular frameworks in the field, the networked public sphere is a master battleground for different ideological positions—as opposed to the *defense* of dominant ideological positions against less-resourced counterpublics working to counter historically powerful forces that structure many societies.

For example, Kaiser and Raachfleisch (2019) expressly collapse any distinction between types of “counterpublics” in adopting a “functionalist” approach that limits the concept to “agenda-setting” and “identity formation.” They argue that this is necessary because of the growth of right-wing movements. Using Kaiser’s (2017) definition of counterpublics, Kaiser and Raachfleisch (2019) define as “counter” in a functional sense everything that is “problematic or ‘unruly.’” This includes publics that, for example, reject basic democratic principles, or that challenge extant social and racial orders. This approach is especially clear throughout the empirical literature on right-wing so-called “counterpublics” and “alternative media,” many works of which have a clear emphasis on analyzing communicative dynamics and contests without a conceptualization of social structure or the relative (and historic) power of different social and political groups.

Scholars, for instance, have used the idea of right-wing counterpublics to frame empirical studies that analyze their dynamics (e.g. von Nordheim et al., 2019), often delineating their ideology without any express analysis of their relationship to the center. Perhaps this is best seen in studies of “alternative” news media (Haller et al., 2019; Holt, 2019; Holt et al., 2019) that expressly conceptualize right-wing media as alternative and counter-hegemonic, an approach these authors position as “a nonnormative, multilevel relational definition” (Holt et al., 2019, p. 242). Alternative media here is defined in relation to a mainstream set of institutional news producers across individual, content, organizational, and system levels. This approach, like the functional counterpublic idea, evacuates normative claims, defines “alternative” as relational to a “mainstream” news center, and at times relies on these media’s own claims for being *counter-to* (as opposed to analysis of the discourse of the center) (Holt et al., 2019, p. 4).

The upside of this approach is that it affords analysis across many different contexts or issues and especially lends itself to large datasets because it does not require deeper understandings of positionality with respect to historical power. The downside is that it often erases the history of public spheres and politics in terms of what is actually “problematic” or “unruly” from the perspective of the workings of its dominant institutions. While some publics might be unruly as a matter of style, for instance, their aims might align with incumbent interests (and, indeed, sometimes the more radical fringes of dominant publics legitimate mainstream efforts to neutralize threats to existing inequalities).

Indeed, this dynamic is at play in work that takes public/counterpublic structure and relations in isolation and defines what is counter as what is discursively in opposition *to*. As a result, much empirical research adopts a presentist approach to the public sphere and an acontextual relation to social structural power. Toepfl and Piwoni’s (2015) framework posits a main public sphere and set of competing sub- and counter-public spheres across three criteria: communicative

spaces, discursive patterns, and participants (Lien, 2022 adds “ideology” to this framework in evaluating discursive competition between “Islam-hostile” and “Islam-sympathetic” narratives). Toepfl and Piwoni (2015, p. 476) conceptualize counterpublics discursively within the context of “unequal (sub)public spheres” and state that they entail being oriented towards “deconstructing power relations,” challenging consensus, and strengthening collective identity. Without close analysis of historical power relations or social structure, however, it is hard to evaluate what exactly counts as “counter.” Other works that adopt this approach to counterpublics include Reijven et al.’s (2020) study of “far-right movements that claim counterpublicity, or “do being a counterpublic,” including conspiracy theorist Alex Jones and South Korean Evangelical Christians and Xu’s (2020) equivalence of the Alt-right with antifascist movements.

While this work is attentive to defining a dominant mainstream and attuned to threats to it (including to democratic institutions and norms), it also risks labeling “counter” what is still fundamentally aligned in terms of social, economic, and political power. To take one example, it might be a dominant discursive fact in many Western democracies that some forms of explicit racism are taboo—but calling something that is still in a fundamental way aligned with structural disparities in nearly all aspects of social, economic, and political life between White and non-White people *counter* works to obscure the reality of ongoing structural relations (just as a discourse of being color-blind or inclusive works to obscure structural inequalities).

Often scholarship in this vein can equate differences of opinion, or positions that simply run counter to present dominant or seemingly consensual discursive patterns, with the more social structurally-defined “counterpublics” in the critical tradition detailed in the previous section. To take some examples, Kunst et al. (2020) analyze perceptions of exclusion among so-called right-wing counterpublics and how expressed and perceived victimhood leads right-wing people to paradoxically be more vocal. Toepfl and Piwoni (2018) analyze “counterpublic” newspaper comments in relation to dominant mainstream media framing about a right-wing anti-EU party. Törnberg and Wahlström (2018) analyze a radical-right, nationalist, anti-immigration Swedish online discussion group as a counterpublic to a wider public sphere. In each of these cases, scholars define the center by what is prevailing at a discrete *moment* in time, and do not consider these positions in terms of the longer history of a given country, the participatory resources individuals or groups may have to engage in public debate, or—particularly of concern to scholars such as Squires—the institutional arrangements that serve political and social power. We believe that were these things considered such studies would be better understood as examinations of defensive, rather than counter, publics.

The result is often that *any* claims of a group to be a counterpublic are legitimized as such, regardless of their position of power, and there is often no real interrogation of the center historically or relationally. Meanwhile, self-espoused claims of subordination and victimhood are treated as *de facto* markers of counter status. In other words, the contest *itself* around a temporarily defined center is what marks counter or contending publics. This means that a set of assumptions often stand in for historical or power analysis. And yet, as the critical tradition reminds us, the rejection of democratic and liberal principles is, on a longer time scale and despite

contemporary espoused ideals, the reality counterpublics have long challenged—not the exception. Further, what some scholars take to be right-wing “counterpublics” are often instead a *backlash* in the defense of established social, racial, and political orders that comes in response to challenges from below and the compromises dominant groups have made in response to these challenges (see [Hooker, 2009](#)).

### Taking social power seriously in research on right-wing publics

In our view, contemporary right-wing social movements have only become necessary to the collectives they benefit in a world of *challenges* to White supremacy, imperialism, and other forms of social domination. In other words, right-wing movements are *defensive*, not *counter*. As such, we view right-wing movements as aligned with historically dominant orders that continue to shape the nature of power and publics. In some cases, the difference between the unquestioned power relations at the center and illiberal expressions from the far-right are only a matter of degree and style. This is why we see dominant institutions of the press treat right-wing movements differently from movements for racial equity (i.e., [Brown & Harlow, 2019](#)), police responses are often different in the context of surveilling and containing right and left-wing movements, and large, systematic, structural inequalities in health, wealth, criminal justice, and political participation and representation persist across Western democracies.

In sum, in much of the work we discussed above, the links between social groups, political institutions, and dynamics in the public sphere are comparatively under-theorized compared with critical traditions which are deeply attentive to structural forces that shape discursive power. There is often little theorization of relations *between* different social groups as they map onto media dynamics within public spheres and political systems more broadly. As a result, expansive use of the concept of “counterpublic” can lead to the equation of the most unabashed movements to defend and ultimately maintain an already, and long existing, unequal social order with those that seek more expansive democracy. This is not only normatively dangerous, but also empirically and analytically inaccurate.

In contrast, a number of scholars working on far-right movements have approached these questions in ways that we embrace. [De Velasco's \(2019\)](#) study of the struggle to take down confederate monuments in the U.S. South refuses to equate neo-confederates and confederate defenders with a Black Southern Counterpublic working for removal, while [Lee \(2021\)](#) does not equate progovernment media in Hong Kong with democratizing counterpublics. Other scholars add useful qualifiers to their concepts. [Tischauser and Musgrave \(2020, p. 283\)](#) use counterpublic theory in their study of the anti-immigrant, White nationalist website *Vdare*. They explicitly define “imitative counterpublicity” as a strategy of White supremacist co-optation of critical race rhetorical strategies and draw from [Sik's \(2015\)](#) work on “the imitated public sphere” (developed in the context of Hungary (see also [Jasser, 2021](#))). In their view, far-right media claim victimhood and subordination from a position of power to enhance that power, including “essentialized racial belonging” ([Tischauser & Musgrave 2020, p. 285](#)). Other scholars add a qualifier, such as “right wing counter-publicity,” to distinguish between dominant and subordinate dynamics ([Rocha et al., 2021](#)).

[Korstenbroek \(2022\)](#) meanwhile notes the “ambivalent nature of radical right-wing populism as dealing with two separate hegemonic discourses, making it constitute (to remain in Habermasian terminological territory) both an *uncompromising counter-sphere* as well as an *extreme manifestation of the hegemonic sphere*.” [Korstenbroek](#) notes both the degree to which exclusion of extreme right discourse has furthered its reach and power, even as it is historically, politically, and culturally linked to a dominant center. [Korstenbroek](#) grounds his analysis in the private individualization of the public sphere following other theorists, arguing we are in “a time wherein a process of individualization has created a liquid society wherein social categories (e.g., religion, tradition, culture) that before provided individuals with societal embeddedness have melted.”

While we appreciate this analysis of right-wing populism's deep connection to the center, we are skeptical about the liquidity of social life and the attenuation of social embeddedness. More than two decades ago [Castells \(2011\)](#) was prescient in arguing that growing global informational power, economic precarity, and declines in civil society would make identities including religion, nationalism, and race and ethnicity increasingly important, not less. Indeed, we see a glaring absence of attention to racial and ethnic identity and power as an enduring part of the structure of scholarly knowledge production—what [Mills \(2017\)](#) calls an “epistemology of ignorance”—and especially in the field of communication ([Freelon et al., 2023](#)). Nativist and exclusionary social identities are central to right-wing populist projects in countries around the world, and their rise based on often fundamentalist identity appeals cannot be dismissed ([Klinger et al., 2022](#)).

This includes the lack of clear recognition of Western empires, colonization, and imperial legacies in much scholarly production within and outside our field ([Chakravartty, et al., 2018](#); [Crenshaw et al., 2019](#); [Chakravartty & Jackson, 2020](#)). Already in 2006, [Daniel Brouwer \(2006\)](#) noted the imperative that counterpublic theorists center oppositionality and power in their analyses of discursive spaces. Central to [Brouwer's](#) argument is analysis of both a set of dynamics of opposition between groups and within a discursive semantic field, premised on analysis that “foregrounds the status of relations between dominant and subordinate as one of mutual influence and the status of rhetorical structures and practices as contingent” (p. 199–200). This can be evaluated through analysis of access to power and symbolic resources based on group identity, or in relations of dominance and subordination in center and marginal discourse (see [Asen & Brouwer, 2001](#); [Ferree et al., 2022](#)).

All of this matters both because it is often an explicit strategy of the right to adopt the rhetoric of democracy in pursuit of anti-democratic ends, and because the lack of conceptual and normative clarity among scholars risks legitimizing anti-democratic movements at best, or furthering them at worst. The conceptual clarity of scholars is particularly important at a moment of global democratic crises with the rise of anti-democratic right-wing movements that often structure their appeals around protecting the status of dominant racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural groups.

### Integrating power in empirical work on publics

What can, and should, we learn from work that successfully integrates the kinds of considerations of power critical

scholars have offered in theorizing publics? We hope to offer a path forward for scholars committed to the study of the public(s), one generative for empirical work. To this end, we draw on works attentive to power to develop a framework for how the concepts of counterpublics and defensive publics should be applied in the course of empirical research. In doing so, we seek to avoid three significant limitations in some veins of the literature. First, normatively scholarship should not equate movements *for* democracy with movements *against* democracy—and distinguishing between them requires appreciation of the historical and sociological contexts within which they are unfolding. Second, distinguishing between counterpublics and defensive publics helps us see that it is only the former that furthers the idealized public spheres imagined by classic scholarship, which are premised on a degree of political and social equality. Third, researchers should not be in the practice of simplifying their theories in order to do the research they desire, lest they sacrifice validity for narrow empiricism.

What must researchers analyzing dynamics of public spheres and counterpublics consider?

**History:** To understand the relationship between publics, counterpublics, and defensive publics, the comparative power of social groups, and the contexts that communicative and political symbolic and social action takes shape within, researchers must account for history. It is worth remembering that Habermas's original formulation of the concept of the public sphere was in a work of *historical* sociology, tracing how the public sphere developed and changed over the course of centuries. It is impossible to understand Habermas's theory without accounting for the role of an independent institution of public opinion in the context of a monarchical state and a mercantilist economy, the particular sets of actors who had access to it and the types of claims that were legitimate, and its expansion and development over the course of the past two centuries. Similarly, it is impossible to understand the critiques of Nancy Fraser and the Black Public Sphere Collective without accounting for the ways their writing was deeply attuned to the history and context of communicative action. As Warner (2002) has declared, "publics act historically" (p. 88).

The lesson for researchers is that to understand varied kinds of publics requires an analysis rooted in history. Understanding relations of power, and their communicative dimensions, in the present requires recovering the contexts within which the historical status of groups took shape. Our argument here is not that there are one-size-fits-all analyses of publics that can be applied to nations with vastly different political, economic, and racial histories. It is that we need to be attentive to how multiple forms of power work to structure relations in public spheres and what is actually counter to them, an empirical "forensics" (Ralph, 2015) approach that would account for the concrete ways discursive relations are structured, tied to social locations and institutions, and shape capacities to act socially and symbolically.

In other words, scholars should empirically analyze power in the context of publics in ways that are sensitive to national and international contexts. For example, in conceptualizing counterpublics in relation to power, it does not make sense in countries with colonial or slave histories to name groups aimed at the *preservation* of the ideologies behind these systems of White supremacy as "counterpublics." Even if the political styles of the center shift, such as the embrace of

"color-blind" as opposed to "overt" racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), we maintain this makes movements aligned with structural White supremacy defensive as opposed to counter. Particularly because in these cases White supremacy continues to have deep lasting effects over which groups have access to communicative resources and dominant forums, as well as the communicative styles and ideas that are legitimate (Adams & Kreiss, 2021).

**Social differentiation across and within social groups:** Accordingly, scholars need to analyze social differentiation both within, and across, groups to analyze the dynamics of public spheres, counterpublics, and defensive publics. The conceit of Habermas's original formulation of the public sphere is that it was a group of individuals assembled into a public. While it appeared to be a general public, it was a public of the White, landed, mercantilist class. As a generation of Black and feminist scholars pointed out, only by attending to the social differentiation across groups can we account for disparities in accessing public spheres and addressing publics—such as historic discrimination against women and people of color from public life in the democratic West, not to mention histories of imperialism across the world, legacies that still shape public spheres today. Thus, when looked at from the perspective of *groups*, and not individuals, it makes no sense to call those who historically have dominated public life a counterpublic, regardless of the particular status of individuals at any moment in time. Was the White Southern majority that claimed it suffered under Reconstruction and the oversight of the Union after the U.S. Civil War a counterpublic simply because, for a short period of time, it faced censure and a waning of political power over its insurrection and refusal to grant Black Americans manumission? Certainly not given the ease with which Southern Whites reclaimed power, instituting Jim Crow policies that remade the logics of slavery in forms that continue today.

At the same time, researchers must look at social differentiation *within* groups. The insights of intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 2017) reveal the degree to which power operates through a set of structures that differentiates between institutionally defined and group-based identities. This means that *within* groups there is also social differentiation, and therefore unequal power relations, based on things such as class, citizenship status, gender identity, ability, sexual orientation, colorism, etc. Publics at the margins, as Squires told us, can be as highly differentiated as general public forums.

Groups, or individuals, are defensive when they engage in social or symbolic actions intended to preserve unequal relations between or within groups—or if these actions have this effect.

**Relations between groups:** Following from this, researchers need to analyze and understand relations between groups to gain purchase on publics. Are relations between groups defined in terms of domination and subordination, competition, or collaboration? This is necessary for understanding communicative action in the public sphere and the *need* for counterpublics and enclaves—as well as the emergence of defensive publics in response to challenges. As Maragh-Lloyd (2020) has argued, for instance, Black publics deploy careful strategies to navigate relations with dominant White publics, including the use of "hidden transcripts." Only by understanding these communicative strategies, navigated in contexts defined by unequal relations and power, can researchers understand the dynamics of publics and

counterpublics. At the same time, not being attentive to such relations leads researchers away from understanding how public communication is negotiated in context. To take Habermas's ideal as an example, being allowed to take part in discourse is a product of power; but so is the willingness and ability to question assertions, introduce ideas, and engage in expression more broadly. For some groups, the *stakes* of participation in dominant public spheres are simply higher, and individuals and collectives risk ostracism, punishment, or repercussions from defensive publics for engaging openly. Yet this is conceptually different from accountability. Individuals from dominant and defensive groups might face accountability for their expression, especially from non-dominant publics, but as a group maintain supremacy within public discourse (Clark, 2020).

We want to draw attention here to how other literatures have also focused on relations between groups within fields and vis-à-vis broader publics. Writing in the context of scientific controversies, Hess (2011, 629) defines “counterpublic” as a type of mobilized public opinion that is based on subordinate social positions that have emerged to contest “official publics” the latter of which is defined by “political, economic, and in some cases, intellectual and civil society elites.” We view this as complementary to our approach here, in that the definition of subordinate is determined *empirically*, and through analysis of multiple, overlapping sites of power, even as it has a more expansive approach to social fields than our emphasis here (i.e., Hess locates subordinate with respect to things such as research fields.) Building from this work, Bricker (2019) expands “counterpublic” to mean “voices that are wrongly or unjustly excluded, repressed, silenced or marginalized in the public sphere.” In each of these works, the emphasis on empirical analysis of relations of power (construed broadly), would be consistent with our own approach.

**Relations with and within institutions:** The public sphere is diverse, including institutional sites of public discourse—mass media such as cable television, periodicals, newspapers, magazines, radio, as well as physical sites such as bookstores, public squares, houses of worship, and commercial sites such as coffee houses, barbershops, salons, restaurants, and bars (Harris-Lacewell, 2010; Lim, 2012). Institutions matter for the ways that they pattern public discourse, enable collectives to form, provide resources and subsidies for public discourse, and support the routine production of ideas and argument. Institutions can also suppress expression. It is no surprise that Black journalists, publishers, and their presses were targets of defensive White mobs during Reconstruction and its aftermath and of political agents and those of the state through the Civil Rights and Black Power movements (Carroll, 2017). While on the other hand dominant media institutions have been intimately tied to projects of White supremacy and economic elitism, at times even driving the forms of violence and suppression faced by counterpublics (Forde & Bedingfield, 2021; Usher 2021). Researchers must analyze discourse in various publics via connection with institutions that support and facilitate them. At the same time, researchers must consider relations *within* institutions to understand dynamics within the public sphere. Dominant institutions, such as general interest newspapers, for example, might speak a language of diversity while bracketing difference, facilitating social dominance (Glasser et al. 2009; Zhang, 2020).

**Resources:** A related concept is resources, understood here as the material, social, and symbolic forms of capital that

groups differentially possess to engage in public discourse. Having material resources, for instance, often means having access to an audience (through owning media outlets, engaging in advertising, or buying audiences online). Social resources mean a degree of connections and privilege to be able to access and engage in public debate, be taken seriously, and be understood. Some people and groups can gain power in the public sphere by virtue of their role or position, such as religious leaders of dominant religious traditions, or political leaders that have parties behind them and journalists who view them as credible on their face. Symbolic forms of capital include prestige and status such that access is granted to audiences, or that they take the speaker seriously.

**Access:** Finally, scholars must analyze dynamics of access in the context of the public sphere. This requires analyses of the different types of power that pervade publics—including the power to set the agenda, legitimate ideas, shape forms of dialogue and dissemination, define the appropriate expressive styles, etc. Access refers to the question of which individuals, and more importantly what groups, can access mass media and the public, when and how, and on whose terms. Access also requires analyzing representation, not just in terms of formal barriers to entry, but structural and systematic ones that prevent some groups from accessing the public sphere or that create systematic distortions of public discourse towards dominant groups and grounds favorable to them—which we see as a core function of defensive publics, including their work to regulate access to public forums through threats and harassment.

## Conclusion

It is largely since the rise of Trumpism in the US and a parallel far-right move in much of global politics that scholars have attempted to use the concept of counterpublics to specifically investigate the discourse, media, networks, and other forms of publicity engaged in by anti-democratic, conservative, and fascistic groups. It is this generalized turn to which we object. We are by no means the first scholars to critique the appropriation of the language of marginalized and oppressed groups (and the study of them) by those who oppose the expansion of rights. The concept of counterpublics, which like “intersectionality” has become a “traveling theory” (Said, 1982) that has crossed into multiple subfields and outside its original contexts, must be understood as both a theory and analytic tool that best serves scholars when considering power in the ways we have outlined above. The goal of studying counterpublics has long been attached to a moral imperative among scholars to recognize and analyze unequal power relations, interrogate social structures, and center recognition and analysis of groups and collectives who have been deliberately and structurally embargoed from institutions of civil society and public sphere. We hope that a turn toward defensive publics might be undertaken with similar care and acknowledgment of the ways these publics push back against counterpublics and their goals.

As such, we have advanced two central claims. The first is that research in the field would be analytically and empirically stronger by accounting for *power* and especially social structures as they map onto and shape dynamics within public spheres and efforts that run counter or complementary to relations of dominance. As we reviewed, in many corners of the field, power is often left unaddressed in understanding the



social locations of actors in public spheres and their capacities to act, especially as these things are shaped by the workings of political, economic, social, and cultural capital, and its embeddedness in institutions, across time.

Second, and related, that scholars working to understand contemporary right-wing movements understand them through the lens of defensive actions designed to maintain, protect, or otherwise return to unequal social, political, and economic orders. This politics of revanchism might appear counter on the surface, especially stylistically, but right-wing movements are about defending relations of power that institutions have traditionally protected in Western democracies—and, indeed, only give up through struggle. We suggest that scholars who wish to better theorize publics that defend ideologies of nationalism and White supremacy avoid removing the “counter” from its original theoretical and practical contexts. Studies of the public sphere must take seriously models that deeply consider history, social differentiation, relations between and among groups, and group relations to institutions, resources, and access.

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