

Unpacking Public Justification

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Abstract: This brief response to Greenfeld's caveat submits that public justification is not omnipresent, but can extend, and has extended, beyond the modern, liberal, West. Subscribing to a thin, rather than thick, conceptualization of public justification, we chart the contested contours of public justification, and urge scholars of this emergent field to clarify their own take before advancing pertinent theories and case studies. We briefly expound the nature and historical roots of both "justification" and "the public," suggesting that their amalgam into public justification transcends the modern, liberal west.

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Citizens: We will be satisfied; let us be satisfied.

Brutus: Then follow me, and give me audience, friends...

And public reasons shall be rendered / of Caesar's death.

-- William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, The Forum

Liah Greenfeld's *caveat* provides a valuable opportunity to engage with some of the troubling aspects of public justification as both a concept and a research agenda. One quandary drives much of the discussion: What is the purview of public justification? Can it fit anytime, anywhere? Greenfeld forcefully argues against seeing public justification as "a key to the understanding of politics in general – not only politics in liberal democracies, not only modern politics, but politics everywhere and throughout history since the Axial Age." She suggests that public justification is predicated on (1) "politics as an autonomous sphere," (2) the existence of "publics, whose views matter," and (3) that "there is justification." Since public justification is ultimately a cultural phenomenon, it is essentially historical. Hence, we must not "juxtapose very distant past and very recent events," and instead study it in "only specific historical contexts." For Greenfeld, viable contexts for public justification are limited to predominantly "Western liberal democracies."

We share Greenfeld's premises, but beg to differ with her conclusion. Although public justification is not omnipresent, we submit that it can extend, and has extended, beyond the modern, liberal, West. Our take is partly driven by our subscribing to a thin, rather than thick, conceptualization of public justification. Below we briefly chart some of the contested contours of public justification, and urge scholars of this emergent field to clarify their own take before

advancing pertinent theories and case studies. In what follows, we unpack public justification: we briefly expound the nature and historical roots of both “justification” and “the public,” suggesting that their amalgam into public justification transcends the modern, liberal west.

Justification

Justification is about communicating reasons. We justify our past, present and prospective beliefs and actions when we explain to ourselves and to others *why* we take a certain stance rather than another one. We explain why something is right and another is wrong—factually, pragmatically, or morally. Humans, and humans alone, have developed this trait that gradually became a predisposition. The relations between justification and culture are multifaceted. First, as Greenfeld accurately points out, justification is culturally embedded: whether or not we reason and communicate, and how we do so (in terms of both form and content), is shaped by—but also shaping—the socio-historical culture we inhabit. Second, culture is often the object of justification: we reason why our culture is good, perhaps even better than others. Third, justification itself can become a culture, a socio-historical creation and practice, so much so that we occasionally justify our very recourse to justification; we may even attempt to justify the very language we use for justification (Schieffelin et al, 1998).

When we believe that the *is* and the *ought* are at odds, that the issue is important, and that the gap is troubling, we turn to justification to make amends, to propose a change. However, justification need not contest the status-quo; it can also reaffirm, even sanctify, it. When we believe that the *is* and the *ought* coalesce, we justify why we ought to resist change. Thus, justification can in fact underpin Greenfeld’s proposition, following Durkheim, that we

worship our cultural “collective representations.” Herein, however, lies a challenge, both theoretical and empirical: Why to reason the sacred? *Prima facie*, the divine needs no human explanation, let alone justification; it ought to simply be taken as is, a given to be followed, not a variable to grapple with. In practice, however, any *ought* can drive a *why*. On a collective level, this may be the result of worrying about the eventual emergence of internal dissent or of contact with external, divergent, cultures. On the individual level, it might be driven by the work of individual conscience; after all, “humans are inevitably evaluative creatures” (Keane, 2015, p. 4). Either way, religion, whether turning to God, Nature, or even People, not only allows for, but also often invites, justification. Ultimately, then, only utter hegemony precludes justification. Thus, studying *how* hegemony breaks is indispensable for grasping the social actors’ turn to asking *why*, and for understanding why they succeed or fail at giving answers. As long as any belief or behavior is potentially contestable, from within or without, justification kicks in.

Still, where justification kicks the *why*-can to is indeterminate. Justification is multilayered, occasionally like an artichoke, leading to a core, other time like an onion, lacking it. Either way, peeling the justificatory layers is key to its analysis. We effectively follow the *why* through the chain of reasoning. We distinguish between beliefs that are *inferential*, *supporting*, *basic*, and *absolute* (Abulof, 2015). Inferential beliefs are never used to justify other beliefs; conversely, absolute beliefs require no justification whatsoever, constituting maxims and taboos. In-between, the more common supporting and basic beliefs may both justify, and be justified by, other beliefs, with basic beliefs being more foundational.

For example, in the biblical scripture of the Ten Commandments, proscribing killing or stealing is not reasoned, constituting taboos; conversely, the command to “honor thy father and thy mother” is reasoned on the consequentialist ground “that thy days may be long upon the land,” endowing life with an absolute value. Importantly, the Ten Commandments themselves include a preambular justification: “I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” God is the *cause sui*, bestowing Commandments upon the people, but even His authority seemingly requires justification through the people’s memory of their servitude and the implicit absolute value of liberty. This exegesis reads the Ten Commandments, a prime and primordial example of divine ordinance, as involving public justification: God communicating his case, and his reasoning, to his people. For Voegelin (2000, p. 19), this is the dawn of existential history: “The order of history emerges from the history of order. Every society is burdened with the task, under its concrete conditions, of creating an order that will endow the fact of its existence with meaning in terms of ends divine and human.”

This *nomization*, the justificatory creation of *nomos* out of chaos (see introduction), does not seem unique to modernity, but to human history, at least since the Axial Age. *Nomization* permeated antiquity, spanning China, India, Israel, Ancient Greece and Rome, and early Christianity (Harle, 1998). Yet more empirical evidence of *nomization* involves the early Middle Ages (Hen & Innes, 2000) onwards. For example, throughout the ‘long fourteenth century,’ much scholarly thought was given to the legitimation of authority (Canning, 2011). Christianity, by purporting to “know the truth,” ironically opened the astronomical gate for secularization (Blumenberg, 1983), paving path for “the rising existential authority of the

individual in late medieval thought” (Greenaway, 2012). Throughout the Middle Ages, order and dissent, in both idea and practice, fostered a creative tension that prepared the ground for the Enlightenment (Russell, 1992).

Yet modernity is a watershed in the chronicles of justification. Greenfeld rightly observes that “the modern consciousness” is informed by secularism, fundamental egalitarianism, and popular sovereignty, the three principles of nationalism. These three national principle have indeed revolutionize political thought, and modes of political justification. However, nationalism transformed, not engendered, justification. Political justification need not be national, and subscribe to secularism, egalitarianism, and popular sovereignty. What happens, however, when we append the “public” adjective – would that not require confining justification to modernity alone?

Public

The modern emergence of the public stands at the crux of Greenfeld’s caveat. Etymologically, the “public,” a Latin blend of *pubes* and *poplicus*, simply designates “adult people.” Still, in modern scholarship, the public involves much more. Dewey and Habermas are two prominent thinkers who assign great importance to the public, and both entwine it with justification and legitimacy. Dewey (2012 [1927]) saw the public as the wellspring of creative inquiry into social problems and their resolution, Habermas (1999) as the source of democratic legitimacy. For Dewey, it would seem a vibrant public is the prime goal, democracy a means to promote it; for Habermas, democracy is the main aim, public deliberation a way to ground it.

The very existence of a public, however, is often presumed, not demonstrated. Founding a normative prescription on an unsubstantiated empirical description is a rather perilous move for political theory. After all, what does it take to register a group as a public – is every society, a polity-bounded population, also a public? Conversely, does (or should) public harbor cultural homogeneity, common fate, political awareness, substantial communication and collective action? Simply put, is the public perforce an agent? Granted, like all social phenomena we can treat “the public” too, as a process, and in this regard an agent-in-the-making. But where do we draw the line – when does an aggregation of “adult people” become a public?

Greenfeld’s asserts that “there was no *public* in the aristocratic society, only the rulers and the ruled.” This makes much sense if we predicate public on modern nationalism and its three principles (above). Accordingly, aristocratic society precludes the very idea, let alone the practice, of public, which can thus be only modern. Where, however, should we draw the line between the premodern rulers and ruled to the modern elite and public? In order to avoid anachronism and tautology, we need to conceptualize the public without attaching its meaning to modernity. We should also bear in mind that the ethos of equality informed discourses and practices both before and throughout modernity, often challenging the rulers. This ethos is neither wholly absent from pre-modernity (e.g. Servile Wars) nor hegemonic in modernity (e.g. Occupy Wall Street). In fact, terms such as “public opinion” and “public relations” were invented by modern elite partly to contain, even tame, the masses, “engineering their consent” (Bernays, 1947) to an ostensibly benign hierarchical order, even in democracies.

We propose a more relaxed and inclusive conceptualization of public. Instead of adopting a binary either-or approach to the existence of public, we take a cue from Dewey and the situational theory of public to chart a scalar view of the public (Ni & Kim, 2009). Such a spectrum can, for example, span nonpublics (who face no common problem), latent publics (who have a problem), aware publics (who recognize their problem), and active publics (who respond to their problem) (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Other scales can pertain to the extent to which people come together to participate in, and commemorate, events; or the extent to which they substantially communicate with each other, and designate themselves (and are designated by others) as a distinct collective.

Was Shakespeare right – does giving “public reasons” in politics go back to antiquity? Bernays (1952, p. 12), the godfather of PR suggested as much: “The three main elements of public relations are practically as old as society: informing people, persuading people, or integrating people with people.” And contemporary scholars, focusing on political PR follow suit: “the practice of political public relations is probably as old as politics and society itself” (Strèombèack & Kiousis, 2011, p. 1). The annals of political thought, from Cicero to Machiavelli, abound counsels to heed public needs and sentiments. The important Greek concept of *doxa* (public beliefs) is a linguistic case in point. Whether or not the people actually listened to their rulers and prophets is, as Voegelin (2000a) recounts, a different matter.

The public seemed to matter in the Middle Ages too. A fascinating example is the Peace and Truce of God (*Pax Dei*), a Catholic movement that sought to limit violence. *Pax Dei*, “by attaching sacred significance to privacy, helped create a space in which communal gatherings could take place and thus encouraged the reconstitution of public space at the village level”

(Ariès & Duby, 1987, I, 27). The movement demonstrated “the remarkable development of popular interest and cooperative public action” (MacKinney, 1930, p. 181; see also Head & Landes, 1992). On a more philosophical plane, *Pax Dei* resonates rather well with Nietzsche’s (2007) thesis on the advent of “herd morality.” In the late Middle Ages, we might also consider “the introduction of public justice and the concepts of crime and punishment” in 13th century Norway (Kangas et al., 2013) and the persistent preference of public reading in both Britain and France from the mid-fourteenth to the late-fifteenth century (Coleman, 2005). When it comes to inter-group relations, the Scottish Declaration of Arbroath (1320) is quite remarkable in justifying its demand for independence through the will of the people. Whether a proto-national document, presaging popular sovereignty, or a piece of propaganda (and probably both), the Declaration remains a public-based justification of politics.

Yet, even more than with justification, modernity underscored the importance *the public* in politics. The French Revolution married the once pejorative term “opinion” with the “public,” thus bestowing upon it positive significance (Ozouf, 1988); the revolutionaries thus effectively deployed “public opinion as an instrument of political legitimization and delegitimization” (Cowans, 2001). In Britain too, terms like public opinion, the public spirit, the public mind, the public voice – all became ubiquitous in political discourse, catchphrases to be used and abused in justifying and criticizing politicians and their policies (Thompson, 2013). Ultimately, by the end of the eighteenth century, the socio-moral imagery of “public opinion” had come to signify “the authoritative judgment of a collective conscience, the ruling of a tribunal to which even the state was subject” (Vopa, 1992, p. 79). This did not dismantle the elites, or elitism, but made the public explicitly essential for the justification of politics.

In light of the above, we would like to propose that while public justification predates modernity, it has become increasingly prominent in modernity. To wit, public justification does not postulate that the *whole* public *constantly* engages in the reasoning of politics, but that parts of it occasionally do. It does not transpose reasoning from the elite or the private spheres onto the public; rather, it breaks the barrier between these realms. It focuses on how social actors come to assume a position that provides them with the authority to be agents and carriers of legitimating ideas, employing political reasoning in, by, and for the public. Public justification thus interweaves *reasoning* and *resonance*: it is about the emergence, adoption and adaptation of the reasons agents give, and the ways these reasons appeal to their carriers in the larger public sphere (Abulof, 2016). Importantly, speakers do not necessarily engage the public as a whole, and often target a specific public that they deem most pertinent to their cause, and reasoning.

Public justification may have become increasingly prominent in both domestic politics and global politics. The latter is less bounded by the borders of nation-states, and its justification is likewise less confined to the nation-state container. Growing need, and possibility, for public justification drive this trend. First, the nation-state is often ill-equipped to meet single-handedly its myriad challenges, let alone justify their handling. When a civil war rages in Syria, for instance, this is very much felt in Europe as well. States and a plethora of other actors ranging from civil society to international organizations have to figure out what to do together. This reckoning typically involves public justification. Second, expanding channels of communication—from the CNN effect (Strobel, 1996; Gilboa, 2005) to new social media (Lynch, 2011; Segerberg and Bennett, 2011)—allow public justifications to flow more easily.

To be sure, more public justification does not promise better results in addressing pressing political issues. Publics engaging in justification often find it very difficult to communicate in meaningful fashion. Sometimes, they are part of different 'interpretive communities' (Fish, 1980), which, all too often, speak past one another. Yet there are examples for successful justificatory exchanges in global politics. The International Criminal Court (ICC), for instance, was justified into existence (Glasius, 2006; Schiff, 2008). Land mines and cluster munition were justified out of it (Carpenter, 2011; Docherty, 2009).

A final note on the content of public justification – is it, ought it be, only liberal, and culturally embedded in western heritage? To this, we answer in the negative. Public justification can be applied to the liberal legitimation of gay marriage as it is to ISIS vision of a global Caliphate. When people communicate their political reasoning in order to persuade many others to follow, public justification transpires. Hence, public justification need not, and indeed often does not, follow Habermasian deliberation, and be open, equal and peaceful. It also need not subscribe to universal, or even universalizable, principles of morality, although it occasionally does, and as Greenfeld accurately points out, this practice is especially prevalent in the west. This is why, again following Greenfeld, we cannot but fully endorse a research agenda that situate public justifications in their cultural context; we append this by calling for socio-historical comparison of such justificatory dynamics, acknowledging cultural uniqueness while avoiding the pitfalls of essentialism and determinism. If public justification does not apply to

premodern, non-western societies, let our research show it. Finally, and unfortunately, public justification is no panacea; communicating political reasons in public does not preclude bloodshed or tyranny. Indeed, often enough it facilitates them. “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears,” asked Mark Antony in his funeral oration of Caesar, and they did.

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