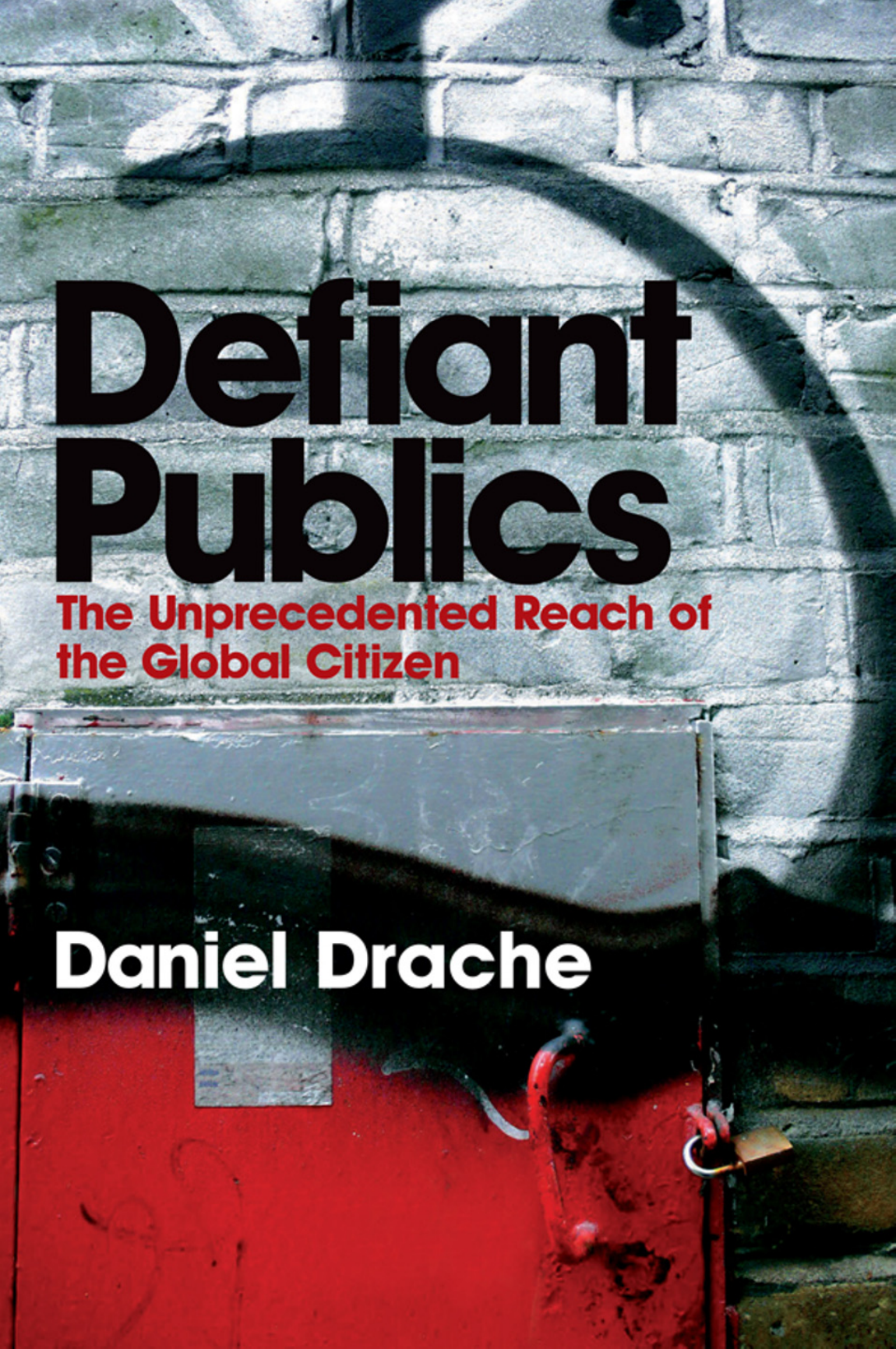




Defiant Publics

**The Unprecedented Reach of
the Global Citizen**

Daniel Drache

Defiant Publics

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DEFIANT PUBLICS

*The Unprecedented Reach of the
Global Citizen*

Daniel Drache

with Marc D. Froese

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If a man sets out to hate all the miserable creatures he meets, he
will not have much energy left for anything else.

Arthur Schopenhauer, *Studies in Pessimism*

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Daniel Drache, Toronto, January 2008

Introduction: Goals and Values that are Inescapably Public

The decisive turning point

In the aftermath of the Allied victory in the Second World War, values and goals that were inescapably public captured people's attentive imaginations. "Things public" was a highly evocative, catch-all phrase that covered everything from new citizenship rights to state regulation of the modern capitalist economy. To speak of the public had an authentic, highly optimistic ring of pluralism to it and seemed the perfect choice of words for a democratic age. No one who had experienced the cataclysmic war had any doubt that a greatly expanded public domain embodied hope for a better life. It evoked the collective power of entitlement and the longing for a fair and just international order. Collective action became a core responsibility of the public, just as the ideal of citizenship would constitute the postwar framework for many postcolonial countries. As for the heart of economic policy, the seamless functioning of markets seemed to be banished forever from the modern repertoire of public policy.

In a more cynical time when Western liberal democracies regrouped to manage the perceived danger of Soviet communism, right-of-center governments enthusiastically embraced these same virtuous sounding policies that promised stability because it made for good politics that won elections, kept the Left out of power, and also protected governments from the harshest criticisms of their own citizens. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, a new era of international politics began. It consecrated an improbable marriage between the economic triumphalism of technocratic elites and the

political optimism of easily led global publics that expected their governments would continue to build strong cohesive societies and foster the public interest through generous government spending. This book is about their violent and chaotic divorce.

At first during the Cold War period, elites everywhere were convinced that they had tamed the shrew of public dissent. Capitalism was to be the basis for all social life, and market fundamentalism was to be the religion that gave us domestic bliss at home and peaceful prosperity abroad. In his bestseller *The End of History*, Francis Fukuyama saw no reason to alter this convenient arrangement. Millions agreed with him that this was the most pessimistic of ages, a period in which the public saw few possibilities beyond the paternalism of global capitalism.¹

Today, coordinated and defiant activists are standing up to market fundamentalism and testing the conservative belief in a narrowly defined technocratic process of politics. These diverse publics in Australia, Brazil, and South Africa have challenged the command and control structures of undemocratic state authority and the new property rights created by global neo-liberalism's agenda of privatization, deregulation, and global free trade.² How could the high priests of supply-side economics, who preached the power of low taxes, freewheeling entrepreneurs, and liquid capital for global growth, have missed the other side of globalization – the rise of social movements, micro-activists, and networks of oppositional publics? How could Fukuyama, like many elites before him, have failed to learn Hegel's biggest history lesson?

Hegel, like the classical scholars he studied, understood well that history is a process of evolution and change. Social change is a foundational element of human society and the best efforts of the political class to maintain social structures that facilitate hierarchy and protect political privilege are ultimately self-defeating. What should we make of these angry, defiant, self-organizing publics as they reshape the sphere of interactive communication and affect the landscape of electoral politics? How should we think about this new geography of power with its disorderly voices, opposing interests, and virulent claims?

These are only a few of the pressing questions we must consider. Whether or not neo-conservatives are prepared to face it, their

defining moment is over. Global politics and US hegemony have dramatically changed over the two presidential terms of George W. Bush. Signs of imperial overstretch are visible everywhere, and US expenditure on armed forces has placed new stresses on the American economy. The Bush revolution's attempt at engineering regime change has organized new forms of resistance that challenge American bullying in managing the global economy.

In the 1990s, it was fashionable to define global neo-liberal reforms with such phrases as "macro-economic stabilization," "structural reform," and "deficit cutting." The respective crises in Mexico, Russia, Brazil, and Asia owe a lot to the rigid template thinking associated with the Washington Consensus. The new discourse is no longer framed by accommodating the market but by taming it. "Governance," "transparency," "institutions," "democratic policy," and "accountability" reflect the deep shift away from American leadership. Moises Naim got it right when he wrote that: "concerns about states that were too strong has now given way to concerns about states that are too weak."³ The single-minded obsession with crushing inflation has been substituted by a much more immediate need to regulate chaotic financial markets following the collapse of the US subprime housing market. A new global order is taking shape, and there is very little Clinton, Obama, or McCain can do to restore American hegemony to its former glory.

Polarized global publics and electoral volatility

Global elites and many publics still have not come to terms with the new politics of the age and the growing role of parliaments, courts, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the engaged angry citizen qua voter. What has changed is that the structure and system of global economic neo-liberalism are under siege from both the progressive left and the populist right. In 2007, a majority of angry French voters cast their ballots for Nicolas Sarkozy rather than Ségolène Royal; the Right garnered a larger share of the protest vote than the Left. In neighboring Belgium, the center-left Christian Democrats bloodied the nose of the Flemish socialist coalition. The ideological splintering of liberal values and economic principles has introduced new uncertainties for ruling parties

everywhere. Elites are divided about how much to spend on public services and how much the social market needs to be strengthened. For more than a decade, voter loyalty has become flux increasingly unpredictable as disgruntled publics shift votes to fit their volatile mood swings.

Presently angry voters have opted for Bolivarian alternatives in Chile, Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela. They not only want a change of government but more fundamentally a different model of development. In Spain, Sweden, Norway, New Zealand, and even Canada, voters are looking for alternatives to market democracy that so far have eluded them. They want governmental reform and a major policy overhaul. After more than a decade of unprecedented wealth creation, the issue of building more equitable societies is now on the agenda. In Germany, almost two-thirds of voters voted against Angela Merckel and the Right. In 2007 Australian voters finally turned with a fury against John Howard, the last Bush proconsul, to defeat his coalition government. They voted Labour into office with a massive majority more than doubling their seats in parliament. Even George W. Bush and Tony Blair, who once enjoyed popular support levels that verged on a cult of personality, have plummeted in public esteem following their tragic invasion of Iraq. In March 2003, public opinion formed a general consensus that Bush and Blair should be allowed to implement their vision of collective security. By December 2004, cautious support had turned to strong public opprobrium, and indeed a tidal wave of disgust was triggered by the images of Abu Ghraib prison (see figure 1). No one could have predicted this global electoral realignment that would polarize public opinion and shake up the electoral map.

The new IT model of social relations

Foucault's star has never shone more brightly in academic circles and he is the undisputed authority to discuss state governance practices, where panoptic authority disciplines citizens, punishes dissent, and ratchets up the grip of elites on the levers of power.⁴ As valuable as Foucault's ideas are for a penetrating analysis of the exercise of power in modern societies, this frame tells us surprisingly little about the current changes underway in the

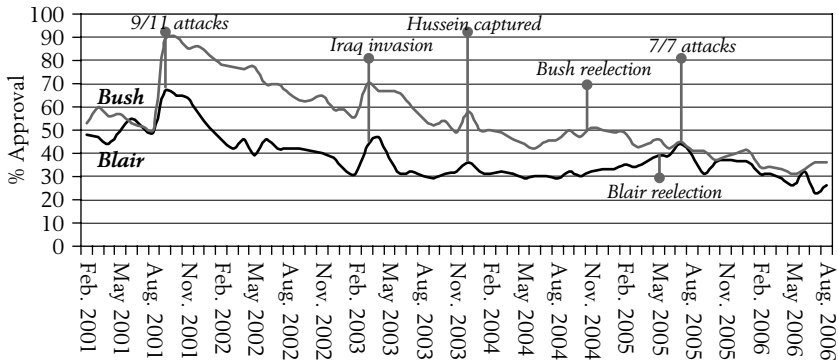


Figure 1 Declining support for the new “Pax Americana”: popular approval ratings for Bush and Blair

Sources: Roberts Centre, 2007, adapted from NYT/CBS polls; Ben Schott, “Five Years of Consequence,” *New York Times*, September 7, 2006

public domain. Anger over the heavy-handed tactics of elites has reached new levels, and publics are giving vent to their frustration. The “decline in deference,” to employ Neil Nevitte’s astute phrase, is challenging the core institutions of liberal society.⁵ In the family, father no longer knows best; in politics, presidents and prime ministers are magnets of distrust, in organized religion a majority of the faithful no longer practice rite or ritual.

Suddenly it would appear that people have acquired a new vantage point. Social movement activists today are in possession of the organizational and informational tools required to rescue the idea of the public from the instrumental economic rationality of the market and return it to its original roots in individual action, collective achievement, and public reason. The signing of the Land Mine Treaty in 1999 against the use, stockpiling, and production of land mines is perhaps the most iconic example of a success story of transnational protest helped by a small army of diplomats. The creation of the International Court of Justice in 2002 to prosecute any government or national citizen from a signatory state for crimes against humanity is another milestone that could not have happened without the support of millions of activists worldwide. Their cumulative impact has registered at the United Nations in

the dozens of conventions, treaties, and international agreements (see appendix).

One important boost for the NGO community is that government officials can no longer claim sovereign impunity for gross violations of human rights ever since an American judge accepted in the 1980s universal jurisdiction lawsuits against public officials who were alleged to have committed torture – war crimes against humanity – outside the United States. The near extradition of Pinochet rattled American governments as they realized that international law and foreign courts could have such legal muscle. The idea that the power of a national court can hold citizens from another country accountable for crimes against humanity and other extreme human rights abuses has given new legitimacy to the influence and role of non-state actors.⁶

We need to find an objective way of assessing the effectiveness and impact of all this micro global activism so varied and geographically disparate for imagining the future. There are tens of millions of micro-activists organizing their neighborhoods, protesting the abuse of power in their city, demanding clean water, better teachers, and a modern school system. Political scientists have not paid a lot of attention to these atom-like civic actors who operate under the radar screen and are not part of any formal social movement. No news network covers what they are demanding or reports on their successes or failures. They are cursed with anonymity but are important nonetheless. They connect people and frame issues like the environment, AIDS, and poverty when no one else cares. Some experts are dismissive of this innovative churning substratum of free-floating global activism that lacks organizational structure and a full blown ideological identity, but this too is a mistake.

Micro-activism and the dynamics of power

Inglehart's empirical research for the last decade has found that activities that challenge hierarchy and elitism are on the upswing in virtually all postindustrial societies ever since thousands of anti-globalization protesters stopped the World Trade Organization (WTO) Seattle Ministerial dead in its tracks in 1999. People are

not “bowling alone” as Putnam insisted in his classic article by the same name. Publics have become highly critical of institutionalized authority in general “and are less likely to become members of bureaucratized organizations.”⁷ While traditional clubs and organizations, from mass political parties to the Elks and the Masons, have experienced falling memberships, more people are active in public than ever before, signing petitions, holding boycotts, and joining online communities. Inglehart discovered no widespread pattern of citizen disengagement in the Americas, Europe, or Asia. People are shifting their loyalties, not switching off. They are getting their heads into the game.

The second signal condition is that publics are increasingly better informed and better educated about the world around them. Many decades ago the great American scholars Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton wrote about the social impact of the mass media, at that time print, radio, and television. They were deep pessimists about its “narcotizing dysfunctionality” and the information overload that the free flow of information has had on the world of the citizen.⁸ Two generations later citizen democracies no longer conform to this stereotype, if indeed they ever did.

Today massive social change in the structure of power is intimately related to the remarkable evolution of the structure of communication. In previous times the technology of communication was highly centralized along with the mechanism of governance and public authority. We live in a very different world that is defined by the globalization dynamic in which the technology of communication and structures of public authority are highly decentralized, networked, and driven by a model of social relations rooted in a complex culture of consumption. When this occurs, society becomes destabilized by the intense diffusion of new information technology, new ideas and the anti-democratic top-down command-control model of social organization. Like the rapid and massive introduction of the radio in the early twentieth century and the telegraph decades earlier, new forms of communication and political activism require us to rethink the dynamics of power and the way that digital technology reallocates power and authority downwards from the elite few towards the many.⁹

This is a radical idea perhaps, but one that has always been firmly grasped by those who understand the power of words, ideas, visual images, and texts. Sixty years ago, Harold Innis described the “bias of communication,” a phenomenon by which technology transfers a great deal of social power to those with the ability to use it.¹⁰ The strategies of new social movements seem to validate this Innisian hypothesis. The central idea that this book sets out to explore is that new communication technologies of text-messaging, blogging, and going on line, when coupled with grassroots organizing strategies, offer citizens a unique set of opportunities to engage in public participation and advocate bold strategies for social change. The public is no longer constituted of individuals meeting face to face; more than ever it is a complex network of many engaged individuals who come together around large and small issues that consume their time and interest in spite of geographic distance. Why is all of this happening?

The individual in public: reasoning together

At the heart of every dissent movement is a struggle with elite authority over how societies allocate public and private goods. Establishing the boundary line for rights and responsibilities between private interest and public purpose has always been intensely important, but is particularly so at a time when states, markets, and publics are negotiating the rules of economic integration and political interdependence. Societies need rules, and when political power is no longer contained within the nation-state, finding new ways to address transnational issues, from poverty eradication to climate change, becomes a primary focus point for publics. If there are to be clear sites of national authority and a stable international community, the public domain, in which consensus, cooperation, and public discourse figure predominately, has a compelling role to play as one of the coordinates that will “rebundle” identity and territory, in John Ruggie’s evocative words.¹¹

Terms such as “the public domain” and “public reason” constitute the new vocabulary of global dissent.¹² But it is this exercise of reason in public for defined social ends that has been pushed to the

front of the agenda by new information technologies. These differently constituted discursive arenas should not be confused with the commonly accepted definition of the public sector. Nor should the public domain be limited to the provision of public goods, a staple of modern liberal economic theory. The public domain is a sphere of political agency, first and foremost, in which individuals work together to meet collective needs and overcome complex political and economic challenges. *The public domain, above all else, is a forum in which to be heard.* This is a very different insight on what it means to be in public, but it is hardly radical. This definition of the public can be found in the political writings of Enlightenment philosophers and more recently, in the theoretical contributions of the aptly named and loosely defined recognitionist school of citizenship founded by Hannah Arendt and led today by Charles Taylor, Arjun Appadurai, and David Held.¹³

Recognitionism has become the dominant current in social science for thinking about the public domain. Even the term is new and its ideas reflect the need to transcend narrow academic disciplines such as law, economics, and political science. The irreversible trend toward the growth of democratic rights and the rule of law at the international level has gone hand in hand with a more inclusive approach to pluralism. Through this rights-based discourse the international community empowers governments to take collective responsibility for all their citizens. The urgent need to create pluralistic, diverse societies was born out of the catastrophic world wars of the twentieth century and the Holocaust. The colonial legacy of racism and social exclusion has been amply documented by anthropologists, historians, and cultural theorists. After 1945 societies began to rededicate themselves to humanist ideals best reflected in the growth of international human rights law. Philosophers have long argued that rights rest on a foundation of tolerance and social recognition. Without recognition of the uniqueness not only of individuals, but also religions, ethnicity, and cultures, there can be no strong system of human rights.

Recognitionism has struck a deep cord with researchers worldwide. Its theoretical contributions range from a deep study of the transcendent ethic of human rights, to the power of public reason as one of the motors of transformative social change. It also