

## Review:

### Frank Farmer. *After the Public Turn: Composition, Counterpublics and the Citizen Bricoleur.*

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If rhetoric and composition is taking a “public turn,” Frank Farmer cautions, let’s be sure that the “public” we imagine actually exists.

Farmer examines what a *public* is—or, more precisely, what publics and counterpublics are. His close examination of the punk zines and his new term, *citizen bricoleur*, highlight the creative ingenuity of counterpublics, and reshapes usual assumptions about how to engage in civic life. His consideration of disciplinary counterpublics in the final half of the book reveals new perspectives about how expertise functions within the dominant public sphere: he shows us why our expertise in writing studies is rarely enough to get us heard within those all-too-common public outcries about the failures of composition classes. The book is sharp, timely, and well-worth the read.

## 1. PUNK ZINES, CULTURAL COUNTERPUBLICS & OCCUPY WALL STREET

In the first half of the book, Farmer distinguishes a counter<sup>public</sup> from the more common term *counterculture*. A *counterculture* group opposes dominant culture by creating a new style or aesthetic, but a counter<sup>public</sup> offers a new example of how to be a citizen. Farmer calls those who create counterpublics *citizen bricoleurs*. His term makes visible how counterpublics repurpose, in unauthorized ways, the rhetorical tools of dominant public life and create alternative civic actions.

To explicate the components of counterpublics first introduced by Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner, Farmer uses an interesting new example—punk. Farmer argues that the punk counterpublic was formed not only through its music, but also through the circulation of zines, which are deliberately unprofessional stapled pages of drawing and notes, distributed through concerts and other loose networks. Punk is an excellent counterpublic site to explore, because punk explicitly resists and creates democratic identities. In the punk worldview, “the passivity required by consumer capitalism is profoundly anti-democratic, [whereas] zine anarchism tries to imagine an alternative way of being . . . that is at once both democratic and perpetually self-created” (54). Punk is “a refusal to stand in line for the ready-made existence offered by straight society” (39), but it is not *just* refusal. Punk celebrates the amateur; the appropriate civic behavior is to *create*. Everything about punk screams: “do it yourself” (47).

Reading the first half of the book, I was compelled by Farmer’s argument that punk zines are central to the formation of this counterpublic, but I kept wondering whether his example might be anachronistic. The heyday for punk culture was the late 1970s or 1980s, depending on whom you ask. And zines themselves, I presumed, had probably given way to some digital manifestation on the internet. Farmer addresses this concern, and in the process, interrogates the broader idea of digital public spheres. Here, he enters an emerging area that the “public turn” in composition needs to meet head on.

Drawing on the work of Tim Wu, Farmer observes the overwhelming consolidation of control of the internet: “Those who develop information, those who own the network infrastructure on which it travels, and those who control the venues of access” are converging, and when they become one network, control of information will become absolute (as cited in Farmer 80). A dire picture indeed. But control is not complete, Farmer reminds us: punk zines offer an alternative, and their very materiality has been an explicit rejection of that kind of control from the start. Farmer writes,

Recall that zines look the way they do not because of aesthetic choices (or rather, not primarily for that reason) but because of necessity. In other words, this is what a publication looks like when you do not have free access to corporate-owned resources; this is what a publication looks like when you intend to make a statement about that fact; this is what a publication looks like when you do it yourself. [Within zines], central ownership of information and media must be both critiqued and actively, passionately, resisted. (81)

While only a small section of the book, this examination of zines against the pervasive digital world is an important reminder to the field to take up the problem of public formation in the era of the internet.

Farmer explores the counterpublic of Occupy Wall Street also, in his epilogue. Just as zines do, OWS challenged the usual vocabulary about publics, and the arguments Farmer makes about punk could productively inform this discussion. Echoing Nancy Fraser, Farmer asks, what is a *citizen* when the powers that control the everyday conditions of our lives are no longer governments, but instead transnational corporations and other non-governmental agencies that don’t respond to public petition? Despite the frustration it caused onlookers, OWS never created an official list of demands. Outraged that the government had yielded democracy to the one percent, OWS could not petition that government. Instead, as Farmer explains, OWS demands were “more likely to be performed than articulated, embodied than debated, lived than reasoned” (163). I’m with him so far. But Farmer seems to set aside this observation when he

says “OWS, I believe, consciously decided to let others debate and deliberate issues, advance policy issues or engage in course court challenges” (163). Here Farmer could have drawn on the spirit of punk citizen bricoleurs to illustrate how OWS’s anti-capitalist critique happens through their daily living – the bricolage in their camps, their bartering and general assemblies. To be fair, I think this argument is present in the book, but it could have been more explicit here.

## 2. DISCIPLINARY PUBLICS

The second half of *After the Public Turn* contemplates counterpublics of academia. In Chapter 3, Farmer introduces scholars who believe that their disciplines should embrace a counterpublic role. What this means varies by discipline. An architect pushes her field to extend their narrow focus on “built” environments to the architectures of discourse (such as the architecture of zines and blogs). Two education scholars oppose how their field define teachers as “education technicians” whose students become docile servants for the state. They urge teachers to practice critical pedagogy. Finally, a professor of science and technology studies, describes scientists whose findings land outside of their field’s dominant theories. Such scientists turn to the public to mobilize support for “undone science” (121).

Farmer turns his gaze back to composition in Chapter 4. Here, he notes a particularly interesting conundrum: how might we as field respond to public comments made *about* us when the address is not made *to* us? Recalling those all-too-common moments when someone berates writing teachers for not teaching students well (he uses the classic example of Stanley Fish), Farmer notes that such arguments are made *about* us but never *to* us. He explains why our attempts to respond *as writing studies experts* seem to fail. We cannot insist on our own expertise in order to enter the discussion, he says, because experts stand *outside* of public deliberation. What to do? Look at the situation as counterpublic citizen bricoleurs, Farmer says, and be tactical; mix and match strategies of public intellectuals and activists.

I enjoyed exploring these examples of disciplinary counterpublics, but I came away wondering about the dominant academic public that these disciplines might be countering. What are some of the

dominant public identities that universities adopt, and how much do disciplines vary in their embrace of those public roles? How do disciplinary funding streams and the evolving corporate model of universities affect the disciplinary identities, both public and counterpublic? When does a disciplinary counterpublic orient itself *within* the discipline and when does it orient outside of the discipline? These broader questions seemed especially important for the analysis of composition's counterpublic potential, given that the funding and justification for teaching composition is so deeply tied to the perceptions by the broader public, other disciplines, and university management about what we do. Our public and counterpublic messages have to engage multiple audiences that are themselves addressed by publics with competing expectations about what "good writing" is and how it should be used. I hope someone will continue the important work that Farmer started here.

Farmer says that his book is meant to ensure that we provide students with accurate understandings of "what qualifies as democratic participation, of what counts as authentic public engagement, of what a *citizen* is" (19). However, I see the value of the book as much bigger than what we teach our students. Farmer pushes us to rethink the relationship between composition and public life. Those who want to understand how to be a citizen within the shifting landscape of global and digital public spheres would do well to begin with this book.

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