Fulcrum

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bodysuits and boundaries.

Over the last decade, the popularity of full-body spandex suits has risen substantially. This could not be said, conversely, for their vinyl and latex counterparts, which remain largely associated with sexual subcultures (or the Pulp Fiction sodomy scene).

Gradually, the more breathable nylon blends have become normalised, and enjoy almost universal acceptance as legitimate costumes. Known alternatively as "bodysocks" and "morphsuits" this form of clothing first came to prominence in Japan more than a decade ago under the name "zentai." Today, they constitute the foundation for practically all superhero costumes and frequently appear in team colours and national prints at sporting events.

Naturally, the anonymity afforded to the wearer has been a source of some controversy. Like a kind of secular, sexualised burkha, the zentai (which includes a hood and gloves) has been banned from all airports, certain stadia and anywhere else that individuation is necessary to uphold public order.

This is precisely what makes them so popular in Japan, a nation famous for its sexual repression and rigid social hierarchy. The zentai's power to simultaneously expose the naked form while concealing the wearer's identity is understood as a double liberation, and it is perhaps no coincidence that popular prints resemble dazzle camouflage. Further, because they cover the eyes and mouth, zentai make it extremely difficult to communicate. And since the most basic capacity that defines all public activity is speech (or the right to speech) the zentai wearer becomes strangely both a hyper-public and hyper-private figure. They radicalise the category of voluntary political invisibility.

The possibility of this condition points to a more general situation: the conflation of traditional conceptions of the public and private. In the era of #prism, of instinctive self-censorship, of heightened autodiscipline — as well as the accelerated deconstruction of the state and its common assets — what do these terms even mean?

There are three types of publicness we might consider: the general public; the public domain; and the public sector. The first no longer exists; the second is ubiquitous; and the third is in its death throes.

The general public, Hobbes suggests, is more than simply a population — and diametrically opposed to what is called the multitude. This is because the population is just a statistic, produced by surveying inhabitants over a given geographical area. The multitude, by contrast, describes a group of individuals, each of whom preserves their own self-interests and whose lack of formal organisation prevents them from articulating a specific opinion.

Against this, the general public is defined by its capacity to speak with one political voice — the will of the people. For Hobbes, the most perfect leader of the public was a monarch. That said, sovereigns are not intrinsic to the expression of public will.

For example, the general public was extremely clear about its position on the prospect of war in Iraq — a position perfectly manifest in marches numbering in the millions. What the public think about Pepsi versus Coke is much less clear: here the disunity and fragmentation of the response remains a statistical opinion, which is that of the multitude.

So what makes us think that the general public no longer exists (and certainly not in the form Hobbes describes)? Namely this: that the public requires a specific type of forum to present itself, and for at least two centuries that forum has been founded on geopolitical units called nation-states.

The weakening of these units by the forces of globalisation has compounded with a catastrophic failure of representational democracy to outpace the rise of a neoliberal elite (the 1%).

We therefore have a situation in which regions divide nations and no one can rightly speak for anyone — least of all politicians, whose ignorance is only surpassed by their willingness to plough forward with policies of social inequality and wealth redistribution.

The belief there is no general public, in the sense of an organised voice of the people, might seem at odds with an assertion that the public domain has exploded. Far from it.

The public domain is quite literally the realm of the commons: where information and property can be, or is, known to anyone, and owned by everyone. Examples range from shared language and mythology, to Nigela Lawson recipes and Wikileaks. This is not dependent on a forum or audience — it doesn't matter if everyone *does* know how to speak English, it is important that anyone *could* know. That is, the monopoly of language is impossible. Even if I only have a few Twitter followers, the transferal of a private thought into a public message means it *might* be read by anyone, and therefore *potentially* by everyone. This risk and indeterminacy constitutes the public domain.

Practically all aspects of our lives are being incorporated into the public domain — our desires, dreams, opinions and preferences. However, unlike the monastic commons of feudal Britain (which was a specific construction of legal rights and obligations), today's public domain is increasingly a vast database of minable data. We willingly give up our personal information via one or other of the domain's corporate conduits with the result, unsurprisingly, that corporate and state interests are learning to better exploit the multitude.

The penetration of the public domain into our personal lives is mirrored by the dissolution of the private realm: very probably our children will live in a world without privacy as we know it.

The dystopian ramifications of this process are not inevitable. However, they will require a strategic shift in how we handle our own personhood. This will be the century of the poker face: the withdrawal of the self behind a cold, impenetrable facade. Even better (for the impenetrable facade is in itself an admission of something hidden), we should all adopt that piercingly confused expression favoured by models and the fashion world. #lightson #nobodyhome

The destruction of the people as a political group, and the explosion of the public realm as a locus for commercial exploitation has had a massive impact on the third category: the public sector. This term used to refer to any service provided by the government intended to serve the public. Today it doesn't really mean anything.

The premise of the public sector is that the state operates in the promotion of the general good. But as we've discussed, since representational democracy can't handle the multitude, it follows that the general good cannot be executed by government (even if it *was* interested in doing so, which doesn't seem to be the case).

Government now operates without substantial difference from any other "private sector" corporation, in that these too have come to resemble governmental bodies. An authoritarian state like Russia and a totalitarian company like Apple actually share a lot of similarities — except that Apple is more efficient at world domination than Putin. There is a serious case to be made for Google replacing Westminster as our principal provider of public amenities. We might have to give up privacy in order to get affordable mass transport, but probably we will have to give up our privacy anyway and we might as well get something out of it. The absurdity of the tech giant running Britain makes a lot more sense when you think that London is basically a walled garden corporate campus anyway.

For an architect interested in dedicating themselves to civic service the choices are far from straightforward: the public sector doesn't serve the public, the private sector serves itself, and the public as a body politic have become atomised. The common good can't be precisely identified and even if it could there are no means to implement it. This is why the way forward requires pairing back our positions to a priori moral assertions, which can be said to be true irrespective of the existence of the public, in any form described here.

Foremost amongst these assertions must be that we cannot justify social inequality. To accept this doesn't necessitate the end of capitalism or bloody revolution in the streets. But it does mean everything must change.