

A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction

Introduction

*T*he distinction between public and private is a ubiquitous feature of everyday life, where the terms are used in multiple and seemingly contradictory ways. “Private property” is a defining feature of a capitalist economy, but in capitalist systems participants also consider “private” those intimate relationships that are ideally protected from economic calculation. This combination is neither careless confusion nor a regrettable inconsistency. On the contrary, I argue that when the public/private distinction is analyzed as a communicative phenomenon—a product of semiotic processes—it shows a complex and systematic logic that explains this usage. The logic undergirds a great deal of social reasoning in everyday life as well as in political and social theory. To explicate the semiotics of the public/private distinction, one must first be clear about what it is not.¹

Since the emergence of the doctrine of “separate spheres” in the nineteenth century, social analysts in Europe and the United States have repeatedly assumed that the social world is organized around contrasting and incompatible moral principles that are conventionally linked to either public or private: community vs. individual, rationality vs. sentiment,

money vs. love, solidarity vs. self-interest. The belief that these values are antagonistic continues to generate heated political argument. It motivates the widespread fear that practices such as money payments for intimate care will contaminate the trust and love of private life. There is also the parallel fear that expressions of emotion and the mobilization of intimate ties will weaken the fairness and rationality of politics. Narratives about the dangers of mutual contamination by public and private spheres are evident in both republican and liberal political thought. These traditions differ in the value and location they assign to the public good as opposed to private interest. Yet they agree on the centrality of the opposition.

By contrast, feminist scholarship has made these dichotomies the center of its project of critique. First, feminist research has challenged the supposed incompatibility of the moral values associated with public and private. Despite the assumption of “separate spheres,” most social practices, relations, and transactions are not limited to the principles associated with one or another sphere. Empirical research shows that monetary transactions of various kinds are common in social relations that are otherwise understood as intimate interactions within families: love and money are often intertwined. Similarly, the “personal is political” in part because private institutions such as families often operate, like the polity, through conflict, power hierarchies, and violence. By the same token, political acts conventionally categorized as public are frequently shaped by sentiment and emotion. Far from being incompatible, the principles associated with public and private coexist in complex combinations in the ordinary routines of everyday life. Second, feminist research has successfully shown the error of assuming stable boundaries between public and private. Legal changes are perhaps the best indicators, but the stigmatization of practices once accepted and taken for granted also provides important evidence. Activities such as wife-beating, which were considered a private concern a few decades ago, are now the subject of public legislation around the globe; conversely, consensual sexual activity among adults that was once more widely subject to legal prohibition has become a private matter in many locales.

However, historical changes in the “content” of what is legally or conventionally considered public and private have not undermined the distinction in normative discourse and social theory any more than has evidence about the inseparability of principles. This should not be surprising. As feminist theory has argued, the public/private distinction is an ideological one, hence not easily susceptible to empirical counterevidence.

Yet the implications of this insight have not been sufficiently explored. Rather than mounting an analysis of the distinction as ideology, most feminist critiques have simply borrowed or extended the cartographic metaphors of everyday life. In a recent collection of key feminist texts, the excellent introductory essay by Joan Landes asserts as a cornerstone of current thinking that the “line between public and private is constantly being renegotiated”; it stresses the “stability and instability in the boundaries that separate these regions of social life” (3).²

These metaphors, however, hardly do justice to the regularity and conceptual subtlety of what we as theorists and social actors actually do with this ideological distinction. Public and private do not simply describe the social world in any direct way; they are rather tools for arguments about and in that world. Hence, to understand the persistence of the dichotomy and our sense of its constancy despite dramatic changes, we need an account of how it operates as ideological communication. Drawing on a Peircean semiotics as developed within linguistic anthropology, I suggest we look for the indexical properties of the public/private distinction. This will reveal that its referential content always relies on contexts of use and that the distinction is relative to those contexts. By using the public/private dichotomy, participants can subdivide, recalibrate, and thus make fractal recursions in their categorizations of cultural objects and personae. A Peircean approach also suggests that we can understand “ideologies” as metadiscourses that comment on and regiment other communicative practices. Only when a practice is labeled and named is it regimented referentially, thereby becoming relatively easy to discuss as a social reality. By contrast, fractal subdivisions enacted by participants through indexical signs are often hard to notice even for the social actors who use and impose them.³

In what follows I clarify this discussion of semiotic processes, providing examples of how they work and relying on the two major approaches to “public/private” in current scholarship: the sociohistorical and the typological. As I have mentioned, the first of these has emphasized the ideological nature of the distinction, showing that supposedly incompatible principles are closely intermingled in daily life. It has traced how definitions of public and private have changed. Writings about this dichotomy, along with everyday practices and institutional/legal arrangements in different national traditions, are constitutive of capitalism and instrumental in the making of liberal and republican politics.⁴ The typological approach is more normative, juxtaposing the writings of philosophers and

social theorists from different periods. It points out the inconsistencies in definitions of public and private, and draws implications for reform of social theory and of the social world.⁵ The semiotic analysis I propose aims to unpack the way this dichotomy operates in categorizing and differentiating cultural “objects.” It is meant to supplement and complement the other perspectives.

My examples in this essay will be drawn in part from East Central Europe because for those of us working in that region over the last two decades the changes consequent on 1989 provided a challenge: How is it that public and private are so different in state-socialist societies and in capitalist parliamentary democracies, yet also eerily familiar? By including American examples as well, however, I suggest that the processes discussed here are not limited to one part of the world. They help us to make more rigorous comparisons across regions and political systems.

Fractal Distinctions

The establishment of a cultural distinction between public and private has been a prolonged and often conflictual sociohistorical process. Over the last twenty years historical scholarship has outlined the development of this conceptual pair in Europe and the United States. Descriptions of the struggles over gendered divisions of labor, the reorganization of the economy, and the emergence of civil societies and public spheres have all been part of these traditions of research. Recently, Gail Kligman and I have outlined the continuities between these western European understandings of public and private and those that emerged in East Central Europe since the nineteenth century and during the communist era. My interest here, however, is not this important process of construction but rather the way that the categories operate communicatively once they are a taken-for-granted part of a cultural scene.

A semiotic approach to public and private suggests that, contrary to customary scholarly parlance and commonsense usage, “public” and “private” are not particular places, domains, spheres of activity, or even types of interaction. Even less are they distinctive institutions or practices. Public and private are co-constitutive cultural categories, as many have pointed out. But they are also, and equally importantly, indexical signs that are always relative: dependent for part of their referential meaning on the interactional context in which they are used.⁶ First, then, the public/private dichotomy is best understood as a discursive phenom-

enon that, once established, can be used to characterize, categorize, organize, and contrast virtually any kind of social fact: spaces, institutions, bodies, groups, activities, interactions, relations.

Second, the historical creation of a distinction between “public” and “private” is not dependent on the use of these or even parallel lexical items, though for historical reasons cognates of the English terms are frequent all over Europe and in postcolonial regions as well. Rather, the historically locatable process of developing these categories into politically and economically significant distinctions appropriates or is parasitic on the much more widespread pragmatic possibility of using, in interaction, a variety of indexical signals for more proximate versus more distanced relationships or events. Linguistic resources for doing this are the deictics such as “here” and “there,” as well as changes in gesture, posture, and what Bakhtin called “voicing.” The ideological distinction is a meta-commentary that regiments practices, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, mapping on them a grid of interpretation. Deictics and other indexicals most often use the speaker’s body as an orienting center so that far from being “merely discourse,” these processes of “pointing” away from self and towards self through speech have a strong materiality. Even when recruited—through metadiscursive commentary—for grand political projects, they remain available for creating embodied subjectivities.

Third, and most important for my purposes here, the public/private dichotomy is what some of us, in theorizing processes of social, cultural, and linguistic differentiation, have called a fractal distinction.⁷ This means it is a particular kind of indexical. Whatever the local, historically specific content of the dichotomy, the distinction between public and private can be reproduced repeatedly by projecting it onto narrower contexts or broader ones. Or, it can be projected onto different social “objects”—activities, identities, institutions, spaces and interactions—that can be further categorized into private and public parts. Then, through recursivity (and recalibration), each of these parts can be recategorized again, by the same public/private distinction. It is crucial that such calibrations are always relative positions and not properties laminated onto the persons, objects, or spaces concerned. They are like Bakhtinian voicings or perspectives rather than fixed categories. The term fractal is used in geometry to describe how a single pattern recurs inside itself—is self-similar—often with multiple nestings. But some venerable works in social science, such as the analysis of segmentary lineages in anthropology, have also explicated this logic, without the handy “fractal” label.

A familiar, everyday example of how this works is the common conceptualization of American, bourgeois domestic space. At a first look, the privacy of the house itself contrasts with the public character of the street around it. If we focus, however, on the inside of the house, then the living room becomes the public, that is, the public part of a domestic private space. Thus the public/private distinction is reapplied and now divides into public and private what was, from another perspective, entirely “private” space. But even the relatively public living room can be recalibrated—using this same distinction—by momentary gestures or utterances, voicings that are iconic of privacy and thus create less institutionalized and more spontaneous spatial divisions during interaction.⁸ The whispered aside, the confidential turn of bodies toward each other at a company party, come to mind as familiar examples of privacy fleetingly created. Conceptualizations of the street, in turn, share this same fractal property. The distinction between a store-front swept and cleaned by a proprietor as opposed to the sidewalk and road that are ideally the city’s or public’s responsibility also relies on a public/private difference, this time projected onto spaces that, when calibrated to a more encompassing context, are all “public.” Thus spaces that are undoubtedly public (in one context) can be turned into private ones by indexical gestures (the sweeping and caretaking) which are recalibrations that bring them into new contrast sets.

No matter how labile or “shifty” we imagine boundaries to be, the idea of boundaries does not do justice to this semiotic and communicative process. On the contrary, discussions of public and private spaces with unstable boundaries assume a single dichotomy, thereby collapsing the nested distinctions into each other, making the nesting processes and indexical recursions hard to notice.

An example shows the ways in which fractal thinking allows some distinctions to conveniently disappear. In an ethnographic study, Biggart (cited in Zelizer) describes the internal organization of direct-selling corporations in the U.S. such as Amway, Tupperware, and Mary Kay Cosmetics. Blue-collar women respond to their family’s need for money by taking this kind of paid work. But they retain the ideals of a public/private divide in which women are supposed to be in the private, unpaid (home) sphere while waged work is public (away from home) and done by men. The women think of their jobs as sidelines, not “real” work. In choosing jobs, they recalibrate the public/private divide, applying it now in the context of the world of paid work. This allows and encourages them to distinguish among the jobs themselves according to the home/

work principle. They declare that their satisfaction with direct sales comes in part from the fact that they are not away “eight to five,” so their children are unaware they are working for money. As Zelizer remarks, it is ironic that while overstepping the bounds of the home, these working women recreate a public/private dichotomy in which they can remain “stay-at-home mothers” (n.pag.). Note also that it is not a single distinction they impose. Rather, their ideological move involves at least one recursion of the home/work distinction in order to create the desired impression, and then requires a partial “forgetting” of that move.

In other cases, the public/private distinction is less fluid and more firmly institutionalized. In these cases, the institutions themselves show a fractal organization. Social science funding in the U.S. is a convenient example. There are public sources of social science funding and private ones: the U.S. federal government, say, versus the Ford Foundation. But within the U.S. government, there is once again a public/private distinction made, as the federal government distributes some of the money it spends on social scientific research through public organs such as the National Science Foundation but subcontracts other parts of that research money to private organizations such as the American Council for Learned Societies. In yet another fractal split, the ACLS also subcontracts some of its decision-making to scholars who work for federal agencies (e.g., the Wilson Center in Washington), so that there is clearly a “public sector” as well as a private one inside the supposedly private ACLS. Nevertheless, the differences between the ACLS and the NSF—despite the same original source of some of their money—are consequential, carrying different rules for eligibility, for evaluating proposals, and for disbursement.

Thus, public funds get turned into private money at numerous sites, but usually through nested subdivisions. It would seem that one can always deny the “publicness” or “privateness” of the funds by focusing on a higher or lower level of organization. Much intraorganizational strategizing focuses on such matters. Importantly, there are subtle changes at each embedding; it is not entirely the “same” public and private at each subdivision. Rather, the definitions of public and private are partially transformed with each nested dichotomy—each indexical recalibration—while (deceptively) retaining the same label and the same co-constituting contrast.

In all these examples of spaces, types of work, and institutions, there is no simple continuum of public to private. No funding agencies, for instance, are “more” public or “more” private. Each is one or the other,

by law. Nor are some forms of paid work “more” paid than others, though some are surely more lucrative. Here, as with the earlier example of bourgeois spaces, the issue is not one of unstable or fuzzy boundaries. Rather, the intertwining public and private is created by practices that participants understand as re-creations of the dichotomy. Yet, in part because these separations are indexical, participants can often collapse them into a single dichotomy, simplifying what is, in practice, complexly recursive.

The Public/Private of Social Science

Social science theorizing is as permeated by fractal thinking as the everyday practices and institutional arrangements I have already described. Indeed, theories about public and private have usually done little more than point to these nested distinctions, presenting them as analysis without explicating their logic. Carole Pateman’s critique and reinterpretation of the classic Enlightenment theorists works by revealing the nested structure of their arguments. She shows that for Rousseau and others, the distinction between private property and public state rested on a previous (and unacknowledged) dichotomy between a more general private (the domestic) and a more general public (the social).

Fractal stories as analysis are evident elsewhere too. Albert O. Hirschman, in a classic discussion of public and private action in European history, writes: “The ancient contrast, much debated from Aristotle down to the Renaissance, was between *vita activa*, then understood precisely as active involvement in public, civic affairs, and *vita contemplativa* which referred to withdrawal from active life and studied abstention from participation in its futile struggles and excitement. [. . . I]n a more modern vein I distinguish here between *two varieties of the active life*: one is the traditional *vita activa* which is wholly concerned with public affairs; and the other is the pursuit of a better life for oneself and one’s family [. . .]” (7 italics in original).

Similarly, Habermas’s influential argument about the structure of the early bourgeois public sphere depends on a first distinction he draws between what he (and the social actors he is analyzing) thought of as the private realm and the sphere of public authority, made up of the state and the court. He writes: “[W]ithin the realm that was the preserve of private people we [. . .] distinguish again between private and public spheres. The private sphere comprised civil society in the narrower sense, that is to say, the realm of commodity exchange and of social labor; embedded in it was the family and its interior domain” (30).

Focusing on the public/private distinction as a semiotic or sign phenomenon in communication allows one to see the similarities among face-to-face deployments of these fractal distinctions, institutional examples, and the parallel moves of social theory. In having several “levels” of public and private in their theories, Rousseau, Hirschman, and Habermas are not being imprecise or confused, as some have argued. On the contrary, they show the same conceptual regularity evident in everyday usage. They, like all of us, sometimes take careful note of the embedded distinctions, but more often forget the various levels that are indexically signaled and collapse them into a single “public/private” distinction that is then referentially named and easily becomes the focus of discussion. This elision of fractal embeddings relies on the fact that indexical signals are difficult to discuss explicitly. Once named and thus semanticized, the fleeting distinctions of different roles, spaces, and categories indexically invoked in interaction turn into reified “objects” of the social world that seem solid and distinct. This quality of semantic distinctions as opposed to indexical signals, is a quite systematic feature of communication, and common in ideologies.⁹

In sum, public and private will have different specific definitions in different historical periods and social formations. But once a dichotomy is established, the semiotic logic forms a scaffolding for possibilities of embedding and thus for change, creativity, and argument. In these nested dichotomies, there is always some skewing or redefinition at every iteration. Furthermore, redefinitions that create a public inside a private or a private inside a public (be it in identity, space, money, relation) can be momentary and ephemeral, dependent on the perspectives of participants. Or they can be made lasting and coercive, fixing and forcing such distinctions, binding social actors through arrangements such as legal regulation and other forms of ritualization and institutionalization.

In the social world, many co-constitutive categories have the properties I have described, and regularly intersect with public/private. Left/right in contemporary politics, modernity/tradition, East/West (in the Cold War cultural sense) are clear examples. We are not surprised to find that within any leftist group there are always those who think of themselves as the “real” left, in contrast to their insufficiently radical comrades. But if we were to isolate these “real” leftists in a room, the same distinction of lefter-than-thou is likely to reappear (given an actual dispute), once again dividing the group into left and right. Single individuals may be, on some occasions, “left” (depending on what group they happen to be with, what issue they are arguing) or “right”—these

positions are indexical, that is, linked to occasion and situation, not fixed or permanently laminated to individuals. The same holds, of course, for the rightists.

Gender is another distinction that shows similar properties: it can be applied to virtually any “object” of social life.¹⁰ In a discussion of sex/gender dichotomies and their imitative, parodic, and undermining entailments, Judith Butler neatly shows how the male/female distinction is partially and complexly reiterated among “anatomical females” as butch and femme. But this is never the end of it, since “there will be passive and butchy femmes, femmy and aggressive butches. [. . .]” (309), and the fractal play continues on the “anatomically male” side of the opposition too. One can argue about the extent to which reiterations are fully imitations. I would argue that recursions (i.e., reiterations) are never entirely mimetic. They always introduce some change in meaning. One should also examine the political messages and implications of such reiterations and their effects on subjectivities and on how identity is established. My point is that we must theorize the fractal backbone.

East Central Europe

So far, I have sketched examples from social science and from American culture and institutions. The contrast with East Central European cases is instructive. The public/private distinction was one of the ones directly targeted by communist theorists in the nineteenth century—and by Soviet and, later, East Central European communist parties—as essential points for transforming bourgeois, capitalist society through social engineering. As is well known, the aim was elimination of the “private” through the extension of state control into activities, spaces, and relations deemed “private.” The socialization of production and commerce—as much as of civil society, voluntary organizations, and housework—was understood as a means of ending or reducing social inequality and especially the oppression of women. Changing the conceptual or discursive linkage of women’s work to private and men’s to public was one of the goals of communist planners and ideologues.

Vast changes were attempted in political and economic arrangements, some successful, others notable failures. There were important differences in these social engineering projects between countries in East Central Europe and across historical periods. My goal here is modest: simply to provide a number of examples, mostly from Hungary, the case I

know best, to illustrate my claim that despite enormous structural changes that created state-socialist societies, some features of the public/private distinction bear significant similarities to the capitalist examples mentioned above, with important consequences for further change.

By the 1980s in Hungary, women were at least half the labor force, and over eighty percent of women worked for wages; all industry and virtually all commercial activity had been socialized for decades, and the interstitial, non-state forms of political activity such as unions, parent-teacher organizations, political parties, and professional organizations had been taken over by the state. Yet, as a result of the 1956 Revolution, a certain leeway in activity was allowed to Hungarians in what was deemed the private sphere, and the state to some extent turned its attention away from what was done by people after their official jobs, during their vacations, and in their households. The question here is how these changes were understood and how they were structured.

As in the West, the public/private distinction in East Central Europe was aligned with what were seen as opposed and antagonistic principles. However, in the communist period, these principles differed substantially from those common in the bourgeois world to the west. In the East, the public/private distinction was aligned with a discursive opposition between the victimized “us” and a newly powerful “them” who ruled the state. Private activities, spaces, and times were understood by people throughout the region as “ours” and not the state’s. Different moral principles and modes of motivation and reward were considered appropriate to work, spaces, and social relationships considered “ours” as opposed to those considered the purview of the state. People loafed in official jobs, but on their private plots practiced extremes of overwork (“self-exploitation”). The imperative to be honest and ethically responsible among those who counted as “us” contrasted with the distrust and duplicity in dealings with “them” and with the official world generally.¹¹

An ethnographic example will show the implications of these dichotomies for the activities of everyday life. Janine Wedel reports an incident in Poland in the 1980s when: “An employee took a desk from a state-owned factory, intending to resell it. He left the desk in a truck near his apartment building until it could be delivered to the intended purchasers. But to his dismay, it disappeared” (15). By the moral rules of public and private life, removing the desk from the factory did not count as theft at all, since it was merely “taking” from the state. The disappearance from the street, however, was seen by the man himself as a violation of the moral

injunction not to steal from “our own.” As Wedel notes, “He complained bitterly to his neighbors that ‘people are dishonest and immoral’” (15).

This incident is by no means an illustration of hypocrisy or divergent moral frames. On the contrary, according to Wedel’s account and my own parallel ethnographic experience in Hungary, the man who took the desk from the truck would have agreed in principle with the owner of the truck. For both there would be “theft” as opposed to justified “takings,” the first relevant to private, the other to public situations. They differed, however, in their assessment of how to calibrate the nestings of public and private for that occasion. This is what explains the rage of the man who originally “took” the desk from the factory. What was private and “among neighbors” for him was subdivided by another person to create a “public” in which the desk was again available for righteous taking. Similar indexical calibrations help explain denunciations of kin, family, and friends under socialism, as well as the apparently hypocritical participation in oppositional activities of families and individuals highly placed in the Communist party.¹²

The fractal nature of public and private under socialism was important not only in interpersonal ethical decisions; it also had implications for institutional change. By the 1980s, activities deemed “public”—understood to be properly the responsibility of and under the control of the state—were increasingly embedded in private life. Thus the private was understood as divisible into a private that revolved around reproduction and family life, and a public-inside-the-private that used those same resources for production and politics. For example, one development (actually surreptitiously encouraged by the state) was the growth of various forms of production with what was understood as domestic (private) space/time/activity/personnel. Such household production, using household members, domestic spaces, and after-hours time, provided as much as thirty percent of Hungarian production by the 1980s (though exact figures were hard to come by, given the partially clandestine nature of the production) and included agricultural, small industry, and service industries.

A parallel development (in this case tolerated though certainly not encouraged by the state) was the growth of small dissident political organizations, voluntary groups of various kinds including *samizdat* publication ventures. Again, these were understood by actors as “politics,” and hence public. Once again, the private was imagined as subdivided, having a public embedded within it. Like production within the household, which

was labeled and discussed under the rubric of the “second economy,” this kind of politics was heavily theorized by those engaging in it. They considered this public-inside-the-private as a significant dissident gesture and famously called it “anti-politics.” For my purposes here the significant fact about antipolitics was that it created what everyone called public spaces within the private household. Incidentally, this form of politics was supported by the labor of women who did the scrubby work of antipolitics. In the process, they often became invisible as political actors exactly because they were understood to be in the private part of the private household, not its public part.¹⁵

These examples suggest that the description of the public/private distinction as fractal, and its organizational forms as embedded and self-similar, holds as much for the East Central European examples as for the earlier American ones, despite the important substantive differences. Fractal distinctions describe well the structures of interpersonal morality and social change in late socialism; and they are just as adequate for describing those in capitalist systems. In some cases, the fractal outcome may have been historical accident, or simply the result of a dearth of other possibilities.¹⁴ But in other cases, the cultural opposition itself inspired the form of social change. Embedding “public” activities in private spaces, thereby splitting the private space into both a public and a private, might well have occurred to people as a logic of their cultural categories and might have stimulated the forms of their dissent.

There is ample evidence of just this process in discussions by Hungarian planners during the 1980s who were trying to save the socialist economy. Just as the private world of Hungarian life was being transformed in the 1980s by embeddings of public activities, so the “public” economy—in this case the great state-owned corporations—were also changing drastically. State planners and economists were arguing that to make the socialist economy more efficient they would have to add new structures to socialist enterprises. The compromise measures invented by planners were “work groups” within factories and other productive units. These work-cooperatives were small groups of workers operating within their own factory, often on subcontract from the factory itself. They used the machinery and time of the factory, and their own labor, but produced not for the benefit of the factory but for their own profit. Such social structures existed on an informal illegal basis for years before they were legalized and institutionalized in Hungary.¹⁵

It is hard to see this as anything other than the embedding

of private enterprise (in a limited form, to be sure) within a (public) state-economy. The discussions of the economists make it clear that they considered the possibility of subdividing and embedding to be a clever move, a compromise that would allow the semblance of retaining the communist system's public/private arrangement, while importing into it much-needed motivation and efficiency considered characteristic of private economic activities.¹⁶ I would argue that the fractal possibilities of the public/private distinction provided a resource and template for conceptualizing and then creating social change. Importantly, and as the economists emphasized in their discussion, the embedding itself allowed them to deny that anything really drastic had been done.

Implications and Comparisons

In both capitalist arrangements and state-socialist ones—which are, of course, vastly different in many ways—a fractal private/public distinction can be shown to operate, first of all, as a discursive resource, but one that can be turned into institutional structures and into routinized organizations. I suggest that this observation enables larger generalizations and also finer comparisons.

For instance, in a discussion of the East Central European cases, Gail Kligman and I showed that while the standard bourgeois discursive pattern in Europe before the Second World War associated women with the private and men with the public, socialism reversed that association in many ways, so that women came to be seen as allied with the state (public). It is often said that this discursive linkage of women with the state helps explain the difficulties of feminist organizing in the region after 1989. Thus, feminism has been seen as a communist project and therefore discredited along with communism. But because both gender and public/private are fractal distinctions, the situation was in fact much more complicated. During the final years of socialism, women were associated not with the state in general but with its redistributive, social support aspects; men were associated not with the private in general, but with the antipolitics that was occurring within private spaces.

In addition to such comparative possibilities, I believe there are broader implications to such an analysis. Let me highlight just three I have already mentioned briefly. First, it appears that social theorists and ordinary people use the same fractal processes “to think.” This means it is not enough to find the fractals. Even though social theorists have often

noted that publics and privates are mutually embedded, they then usually revert to cartographic metaphors of shifting and unstable boundaries. Yet the imagery of shifting boundaries is a result and not an explanation of the ideological processes we observe and use.

Second, the fractal nature of distinctions such as the public/private one allows people to experience them as stable and continuous, in spite of changes in the contents of the distinction. So we can see the nineteenth-century arrangements in western Europe as the “same” as today’s despite evident and enormous differences because the co-constitutive oppositions are still in place, and we collapse the embedded distinctions. In East Central Europe this continuity “effect” is currently quite important. For instance, it allows people to sense the family as stable in the midst of frightening political-economic change.

Third, and most generally, the indexical and fractal nature of the dichotomy allows for the denial or erasure of some levels or contexts of distinction, as people focus on other contexts. It is generally the case, as I have suggested, that nested recursions are collapsed into each other and their differences elided, especially in explicit discussions. Participants often erase their own experience of embedded practices; in discussions that favor referentially stable categories they can easily ignore the indexical character of the dichotomy. This regularly results in the conflation of several nested public/private distinctions into a single distinction. Hence the common illusion that there is only one division or distinction—and one shifting boundary to worry about—as the numerous levels of embedding disappear from view.

This latter erasure can have diverse political consequences. In the case of socialist planners in Hungary, it allowed them to deny that they were making radical changes in Hungarian economic arrangements when in fact they were introducing various forms of market economy. In the case of Rousseau’s multilayered theory of the state, Pateman has shown that it allowed denial of the way in which the public/private of state/economy depended on a previously denied distinction between domesticity and society, with implications for the understanding of women’s position in that ideological formation.

It is from this Enlightenment tradition that we inherit the use of the category “private” in the apparently contradictory manner with which I started this essay. The example can stand for the larger point. My aim has been to argue that such supposed ambiguity and incompatibility—as between “private” property and private (non-economic) relations—is in

fact a predictable and unambiguous result of ideological communication in which social organizations are imagined in nested ways. Furthermore, such fractal imaginings—whether in bourgeois or in state-socialist societies—provide a productive point of comparison between regions. A further and important question is the redefinition of the contrast under multiple recursions (iterations), and when paired or laminated to other distinctions. As I have suggested, public and private can make contrasting bundles of oppositions in different political systems. Within single political systems, as well as across them, fractal processes provide fertile nodes for conflict and debate, as well as ways of creating differentiation and cultural innovation.

SUSAN GAL is Professor of Anthropology and Linguistics at the University of Chicago. She is presently doing research on the political economy of language, including linguistic nationalism, and especially the rhetorical and symbolic aspects of political transformation in contemporary Eastern Europe. In studying postcommunist societies, her work focuses as well on the construction of gender and discourses of reproduction. Her recent publications include *The Politics of Gender after Socialism* (Princeton University Press, 2000) co-authored with Gail Kligman, *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics and Everyday Life after Socialism* (Princeton University Press, 2000), which she coedited with Gail Kligman, and *Languages and Publics: The Making of Authority* (St. Jerome's Press, 2001) coedited with Kathryn Woolard.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of my argument, further developed here, appeared in chapter 3 of Gal and Kligman. My thanks to Andrew Abbott, Judith Irvine, and Gail Kligman for discussion of these issues.
- 2 Although the phrases in quotation marks come from Landes's introduction, similar metaphors occur throughout her fine collection. A fuller survey would include the early feminist anthropological arguments about universals of public and private as well as the definitive retorts in Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako's *Gender and Kinship*. My own argument is not a structuralist recapitulation of the earlier debate but, rather, what one might call metastructural: an attempt to sketch the semiotic conditions for making a structuralist argument of that kind.
- 3 Works that introduce and exemplify this kind of analysis of ideology are collected in *Regimes of Language* edited by Paul Kroskrity, and in Bambi Schieffelin et al.'s *Language Ideologies*; see also the earlier work of Michael Silverstein, "Language Structure."
- 4 See, for example, Davidoff and Hall, Fraser and Rose, Habermas, and Landes.
- 5 See Benhabib and Fraser.
- 6 In addition to indexicality as discussed by Peirce, I am drawing here on the further development of the notion of indexicality and shifter by Jakobson and then Silverstein.
- 7 The idea of fractal distinctions as a feature of language ideology and thus of linguistic and social differentiation is developed in

- Gal and Irvine's "The Boundaries of Languages" and Irvine and Gal's "Language ideology and linguistic differentiation"; see also my "Bartók's Funeral" for a political example. For a full-dress analysis of scholarly discourses in fractal terms, and suggestive observations about such analysis more generally, see Abbott. Numerous social theorists have written about what seem in retrospect like fractal processes. The most prominent of these are E. Evans-Pritchard and Gregory Bateson. Descriptions of such processes are not hard to find in ethnographic and sociological literatures.
- 8 See Goffman.
- 9 The process outlined here bears some resemblance to what Bourdieu and others have called a "theory effect," though its communicative properties have not been described in this way (133).
- 10 See Scott.
- 11 This general issue has a large literature and the phenomena have been noted by virtually every researcher of state-socialism. Gail Kligman provides a close look at the duplicities of public and private in Romania; János Kenedi describes the nestings of public and private provisioning in Hungary.
- 12 See Gal and Kligman 51.
- 13 There is a large literature on the "second economy" and "anti-politics" in the former Soviet bloc. For instance, Katherine Verdery provides a general discussion of the communist and postcommunist periods. See also Gal and Kligman for an overview.
- 14 See Stark.
- 15 See Burawoy and Lukács.
- 16 See Seleny.

Works Cited

- Abbott, Andrew. *Chaos of Disciplines*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001.
- Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981.
- Benhabib, Seyla. "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition and Jürgen Habermas." *Feminism: The Public and the Private*. Ed. J. Landes. New York: Oxford, 1998. 65–99.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1991.
- Burawoy, Michael, and János Lukács. *The Radiant Past: Ideology and Reality in Hungary's Road to Capitalism*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.
- Butler, Judith. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*. Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1997. 301–15.
- Collier, Jane, and Sylvia Yanagisako. *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987.
- Davidoff, Leonore, and Catherine Hall. *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.
- Frader, Laura, and Sonya Rose. "Introduction." *Gender and Class in Modern Europe*. Ed. L. Frader and S. Rose. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996. 1–35.
- Fraser, Nancy. "What's Critical About Critical Theory." *Unruly Practices*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989. 113–43.

Gal, Susan. "Bartók's Funeral: Representations of Europe in Hungarian Political Rhetoric." *American Ethnologist* 18 (1991): 440–58.

Gal, Susan, and Judith T. Irvine. "The Boundaries of Languages and Disciplines: How Ideologies Construct Difference." *Social Research* 62.4 (1995): 967–1001.

Gal, Susan, and Gail Kligman. *The Politics of Gender after Socialism: A Comparative-Historical Essay*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000.

Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Beacon, 1959.

Habermas, Jürgen. *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P, 1989.

Hirschman, Albert O. *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982.

Irvine, Judith T., and Susan Gal. "Language ideology and linguistic differentiation." *Kroskrity* 35–84.

Jakobson, Roman. "Shifters and Verbal Categories." *On Language: Roman Jakobson*. Ed. Linda R. Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1957. 386–92.

Kenedi, János. *Do It Yourself: Hungary's Hidden Economy*. London: Pluto, 1981.

Kligman, Gail. *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1998.

Kroskrity, Paul, ed. *Regimes of Language*. Santa Fe: School of American Research, 2000.

Landes, Joan. "Introduction." *Feminism: The Public and the Private*. Ed. J. Landes. London: Oxford, 1998. 1–20.

Pateman, Carole. *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988.

Schieffelin, Bambi, Kathryn Woolard, and Paul Kroskrity, eds. *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*. New York: Oxford UP, 1998.

Scott, Joan. *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia UP, 1988.

Seleny, Anna. "Constructing the Discourse of Transformation: Hungary 1979–82." *East European Politics and Societies* 8.3 (1994): 439–66.

Silverstein, Michael. "Language Structure and Linguistic Ideology." *A Parasession on Linguistic Units and Levels*. Ed. P. Clyne, W. Hanks, and C. Hofbauer. Chicago: Chicago Linguistics Society, 1979. 193–247.

———. "Shifters, Linguistic Categories and Cultural Description." *Meaning in Anthropology*. Ed. Keith H. Basso and Henry A. Selby. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1976. 11–55.

Stark, David. "Recombinant Property in East European Capitalism." *American Journal of Sociology* 101.4 (1996): 993–1027.

Verdery, Katherine. *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996.

Wedel, Janine. *The Private Poland*. New York: Facts On File, 1986.

Zelizer, Viviana. "Intimate Transactions." *Economic Sociology for the Next Millennium*. Ed. Randall Collins, Mauro Guillen, Paula England, and Marshall Meyer. New York: Russell Sage, forthcoming.