



DISTANCED PUBLICS
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I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg to start a book that would at once be a history of radio and a new theory of the public sphere. There is a long tradition in political philosophy of imagining the public sphere as a theater, a “world stage” in which people gather and perform for one another. This tradition of political philosophy – exemplified for me by the works of Hannah Arendt – shaped my previous research about theater as well as my conception of political action. But after finishing my first book, I started to become interested in thinking about forms of political action that do not require physical co-presence or the visibility of public performance. While my earlier work sought to uncover what sorts of publics and forms of judgment a live theater performance might create, my new book project, *Radio Publics*, concerns dispersed publics that radio might foster. Radio – like theater – can create publics, but ones that – unlike theater – do not require physical co-presence and that are defined by sound rather than sight. This shift from a focus on the visual to the aural can be a way of imagining new models of the public in a time of mass migration and diasporic connections.

Back in 2018, when I applied to the Wissenschaftskolleg, I thought this idea of dispersed publics was a very clever and perhaps even novel idea; I had the great fortune that the selection committee agreed with me. Of course, by September 2020, when the fellowship started, it did not seem either so clever, or so novel, to be thinking about how dispersed publics work when we cannot gather physically. As the COVID-19 pandemic closed down public spaces in Europe, and then in the United States, we were all transitioning into a Zoom world. Of course, this is not to say that public assembly ceased. The summer of 2020 saw mass protests for Black Lives across the United States, and indeed the world. But in our day-to-day lives, we were all slowly learning how to be together while apart. After a first few in-person colloquia, we shifted our meetings online for what we all hoped would be a short time, but we never came back.

As I continued my research, and as the various waves of lockdowns swept over Berlin and changed our daily lives, I started to revise the conceptual pairs that I had long taken to be opposites: public and private, assembled audiences and dispersed listeners. With the help of the incredible Wiko librarians I was able to access copies of two magazines published in the 1920s–’30s by proletarian amateur radio clubs. These clubs advocated for working class people to have greater access to the airwaves, both as radio producers and as listeners. They also challenged government censorship of radio programming, provided guides on how to build and access international shortwave radio stations (especially the German-language service of Radio Moscow), and published poems, jokes, and cartoons about radio. In the magazines, I read through the radio schedules and descriptions of programs that Berliners listened to in the tumultuous final years of the Weimar Republic. Some sounded quite exciting. By 1932, a shortwave radio listener in Berlin could tune in to broadcasts from cities including Buenos Aires, Cairo, Nairobi, and Baghdad. Some of it was considerably less exciting, like the Deutsche Welle’s special “Women’s Radio” (Frauenfunk) shows on topics like “The Housewife’s Potato Worries” (Kartoffelsorgen der Hausfrau).

In the final years of the Weimar Republic, political struggle played out over the airwaves. Leftist activists interrupted scheduled programming and got their voices on the air. They would interrupt live broadcasts yelling slogans like, “Against the rich! For the poor!” and singing the “Internationale.” They even disrupted the signal of Hindenburg’s New Year’s Eve speech in 1932, broadcasting a call against militarization over his address. What was striking to me was how live assembly and virtual battles for the airwaves intertwined. The proletarian radio clubs built portable receivers and loudspeakers and would

broadcast from bicycles, boats, and cars; they even had their own agitprop theater troupe called the “Red Waves” (Die roten Wellen) that agitated in front of train stations and on flatbed trucks. These gatherings did not always take the form of street protests. The magazine *Arbeitersender* published article after article criticizing Frauenfunk programs for their reactionary gender and class politics and encouraging women to gather to listen to and criticize the program together.

It would not be responsible to conclude with any big generalizations about what this radio listening and activism in the Weimar Republic means for us today, though that would make for a nicer report. But what I can say is that doing this research at the time of the pandemic revealed to me new ways in which personal choices are always also political ones and how engaging with people at a distance is always also about how we imagine our lives together.