

10 Conclusion: Translocal Knowledgescapes and Transnational Public Spheres

10.1 Creating female counterpublics

The preceding chapters have shown the multiple ways in which social spaces are constituted through the activities of women's organisations and activists in Malaysia as they position their agendas in contested public spheres at the local level. I have traced three partly overlapping public spheres created by specific subaltern groups against the dominant public where they were constructed as non-legitimate and non-knowledgeable public actors: the *counterpublic* of urban advocacy women's organisations, the *complementary public sphere* of semi-urban social work organisations, and the *public of resistance* of socialist-oriented women's workers organisations. The aim of this chapter will now be to condense the empirical complexity in the sense of developing an empirically grounded theory and to "drum some reality into theories of globalisation" (Burawoy 2000b, 341) (see Chapter 3). This will be done by working out the underlying modes of constituting social spaces and translocal public spheres (Lachenmann 1998b; 2002; 2004b; Nageeb 2005; Dannecker, Spiegel 2008). Several modes of political action which create gendered spaces and lead to the restructuration of the public sphere can be detected from the empirical data. These are 1) the popularisation of feminist concepts and theories by specific use of media, 2) the practice of connecting different fields of knowledge, 3) the redefinition of places, 4) the redefinition of culture and tradition, and 5) the establishment of translocal networks. Before these modes are discussed in detail, it is necessary to focus on their distinct relationship to the dominant public.

The female public constituted by the network of urban-advocacy-oriented women's organisations in Malaysia has provided women with an alternative political space beyond the male-dominated system of political parties and a misogynist state where women were assigned only supportive roles to male political activities and so-called women's issues remained rather secondary or were instrumentalised for Islamisation purposes. Within this alternative space, women were able, in the first place, to cultivate different political practices and their own, clearly gendered, visions of a common good (Stauth 1998; Salvatore 2001). However, beyond being only complementary in nature, this sphere

proposes a clear counter-vision to the male-dominated public as it explicitly aims to transform and challenge the very foundations of this dominant public via legal reform, critical engagement with state institutions, the use of general public media such as newspapers, the redefinition of urban places, and the politicisation of consumption—as will be discussed later. These women's organisations see their power as a power of definition and of the negotiation of rules and norms, and they follow a culturally innovative strategy (Müller 2000, 10).

The case of the female sphere as constituted by the network of social-work-oriented women's organisations in the Malaysian semi-urban periphery (Kelantan) differs from this in significant ways. It is characterised by a higher degree of interconnectedness between state and civil society actors and is based more strongly on the Islamic idea of segregation and complementarity between female spaces and male spaces. This Islamic concept of gender complementarity gives women the legitimacy to gather in single-sex female spaces, but these female spaces are clearly subordinated to male spaces and are not connected to the concept of equal public female agency. The parallel spaces constituted by women's organisations are much more hidden, and negotiations on gender relations in Kelantan do not take the form of an institutional fight between women's organisations and the state, but rather one of everyday negotiations on an individual level between women and their family members at home and at court, albeit strengthened by women's activists.

In contrast, the social space constituted by organisations of women workers, plantation workers, urban squatters, and other socially and economically marginalised segments of the population is based very much on the notion of "fight". The public constituted by these organisations explicitly threatens and challenges the political, social, and economic foundations of the Malaysian state. Here, the interface between the civil society organisations and the state is extremely conflict-ridden, not only on a discursive level but also on a very concrete level of violent and suppressive disciplinary measures by the state. It is a public created in situations where the very basis of the livelihood of women workers, urban squatters, plantation workers, and small farmers has been called violently into question by evictions and labour fights—situations very distant from the ideal form of public deliberation in the bourgeois public sphere as it evolved in Europe in the 19th century (Habermas 1989). To counter this violence, the organisations referred to in this study have developed specific modes of constituting public spheres and modes of social transformation. These include providing assistance to local communities in their interaction with plantation authorities and the state by, for example, writing petitions or organising demonstrations, rallies, and blockades.

These results deliver new opportunities for theorising the constitution of different types of public sphere and the interplay of multiple public spheres. Much of the recent literature on the public sphere indeed goes beyond the idea of only one encompassing public sphere and proposes the existence of multiple public spheres (Calhoun 1997; Fraser 1997; Ryan 1997; Lachenmann, Dannecker eds. 2008). Nancy Fraser's contribution to this discussion is especially inspiring. While accepting the existence of a dominant national public sphere, she simultaneously points to the existence of multiple "alternative subaltern counterpublics". These are created by actors holding a marginal position within the political field in terms of their social, material, and political resources. Women in different contexts—the urban context in Kuala Lumpur, the semi-urban Islamic periphery in Kelantan, and the context of precarious working conditions—clearly belong to those actors in a marginal position compared to the dominant public sphere. Within these discursive spaces, counter-discourses are circulated and oppositional claims and identities are formulated. These counterpublics do not exist in isolation from the dominant public sphere, but are, as could be shown, involved in permanent negotiations about the meaning of the common good. Habermas, who has also been criticised for his idea of one public sphere, now recognises his overdrawn emphasis on *the* public sphere and states that "it is wrong to speak of one single public sphere [...]. A different picture emerges if *from the very beginning* one admits that coexistence of competing public spheres and takes account of the dynamics of those processes of communication that are excluded from the dominant public sphere" (Habermas 1997, 425).

This notion of exclusion, however, cannot be one of radical disassociation and disconnectedness between the dominant and the non-dominant publics, but one that is negotiated interactively at specific interfaces. The analyses of such interface situations in Chapters 7 and 8 have revealed three different tropes around which such negotiations of publicness are organised in Malaysia—dress, knowledge, and cultural belonging—and shown the conflict-ridden character of such tropes. The construction of publicness is thus related to the construction of knowledgeable and legitimate public subjects and to the conflict involved in establishing and countering multiple systems of ignorance through popular modes of political action (Bayart, Mbembe, Toulabor 1992, 29 ff.; Bayart 2005, 185-225) related to dress, knowledge, and cultural belonging. The new concepts of dress range from political uncovering, which goes hand in hand with the culturalisation of the headscarf, to the wearing of the headscarf as an apolitical garment. The new concepts of cultural belonging range from positive appropriation to rejection of cultural otherness. Finally, the new concepts of knowledge range from the feminisation of Islamic knowledge to the de-