

# INDIFFERENCE IN PUBLIC LIFE

On a certain illusory strategy for survival.

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Indifference is the opposite of engagement. It is also an attitude ever-more frequently encountered in public life, one that poses a growing problem, because it leads to the disappearance of action, so important for the public sphere. Indifferent individuals do not see others or their problems, are preoccupied with themselves and their own concerns, do not engage in helping others and often do not react to their problems. They have lost their sensitivity, and sensitivity is an important characteristic of human beings. Indifferent, neutral, insensitive, and uninvolved, such people stand on the sidelines of everything that is difficult and complicated and does not affect them directly. They do not see other people's problems and therefore do not have to take them into account, feel limited by them, or make unnecessary commitments. They are free, but such freedom is superficial and solitary. Indifference leads to the degradation of public life and the whole of the public sphere, altering them to a large extent and rendering them hostile towards other people.

## Humans as engaged social beings

As Aristotle pointed out, humans are social beings. By their very nature, they can live, develop, become better at what they do, and pursue their project of good life only within a community, which is indispensable for these purposes. Public life and the public space, as Hannah Arendt wrote, are a common sphere, intend-

ed for everyone, publicly available and open. This is a realm where we can act for the benefit of others and win their respect and recognition. Participation in public life and being present in the public sphere therefore require engagement, which stands in contradiction to indifference. Moreover, indifference leads to the degradation of the public sphere. When more and more people are indifferent towards others, both to the harm being done to others and to their success, public life changes. Richard Sennett describes the contemporary fall of public man, replaced by individuals preoccupied with their own particularistic interests and engaged only in what affects them directly. This negatively affects public life, which is created by sensitive and considerate people. Public life becomes debased by the disappearance of attitudes of engagement in helping others, which manifest themselves not only in large-scale social campaigns but above all in everyday reactions to minor examples of harm and injustice experienced by others (say, for instance, when the seat on a bus that someone gives up for an elderly person seat gets taken instead by a hooded teenager wearing headphones).

## The downfall of the public sphere

Growing indifference precipitates the downfall of the public sphere. According to Sennett, this means a shift in the values and virtues that had been recognized and practiced universally. We witness the disappearance of attitudes characteristic of public man, such as social action and systematic activities taken selflessly to help others – preoccupied with themselves and their private lives, people no longer care or demonstrate engagement. Public life changes. Sennett argues we are observing its decline, but he does not say what it is declining into. It is certain, however, that its quality is deteriorating dramatically.

Indifference in public life gradually turns into an ever-growing playing field for those who are indiffer-



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ent to the problems and needs of others. Nothing stops them from acting to advance their own, egoistically understood interests. This is possible because others do not react – there is no unequivocal condemnation and disapproval. Also, we witness the disappearance of what is referred to as social pressure, which reduces negative behavior in public space. What appears is impunity, which goes hand in hand with indifference. Indifference shown by ordinary people, their failure to react (maybe they are afraid, maybe they see no point, maybe they had a bad experience in the past), and callousness, which has become one of today's social ills, cause the worsening degradation of public life, because the informal constraints placed on negative behaviors are disappearing – it is impossible to regulate everything by law and ensure the presence of guardians of correct behavior on every corner. Simply put, this would make no sense. Instead, there is a con-

viction that the existence of competent and state-paid institutions means that we are free not to react, because there are specialists whose task is to intervene in a professional way. This is how the illusory sense of security and the absence of the moral duty to react arise, indifference spreads, and impunity grows.

## Costly mistrust

The ever-worsening degradation of public life, which manifests itself for example in negative attitudes and behaviors going unpunished, causes the spread of a culture of mistrust, where everything that instills trust disappears and becomes replaced by procedures aimed at protecting individuals from others. A culture of trust arises when a society practices universally the principles that make trustworthiness and honesty the norm, and the proper fulfillment of one's duties,



integrity, and openness to others are taken for granted. A high level of trust not only allows us to avoid elaborate procedures and verification systems but also fosters social engagement, which is very important for the proper functioning of public life.

A low level of trust, in turn, contributes to the spread of cynical attitudes and simple dishonesty. Trustful people who engage in *pro bono* activities are seen as naive and easy to take advantage of. It becomes necessary to launch large-scale procedures to verify the correct functioning of practically everything, which generates additional costs. Scrutiny replaces trust practically in every sphere of human life. Still worse, mistrust proves a good strategy for warding off various threats. Likewise, mistrust fosters the spread of indifferent attitudes, which provide a sense of security created by the absence of engagement.

## Complicated reality

Mistrust is not the only thing that impacts negatively on public life. Ever-faster and more complex development, reliant on state-of-the-art technologies, proves less and less comprehensible to ordinary people. The mass media report on global processes and

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global problems. There is an abundance of information, and humans, who are surrounded by the virtual world and a growing number of objects they need in everyday life, have less and less direct contact with other humans in everyday, face-to-face situations. The face speaks and, as Emmanuel Levinas wrote, signifies the fundamental ethical imperative, “Do not kill me.” In face-to-face encounters with others, we become responsible for them, and this ethical responsibility requires us to react and act in a proper way as well as rules out indifference. If real contact with other people is mediated by various technologies, this may result in growing insensitivity. We think we are more anonymous in the virtual world, and this encourages behaviors that are no longer so easy in the real world, when we look another human being straight in the eye. In addition, reality is so complex that it continually escapes our attempts to grasp it, it demands very profound scrutiny and analysis and

yet even then remains unobvious, and so doubts only grow, instead of vanishing.

When we do not understand something and simultaneously have too many options, we naturally react with indifference, which turns into armor protecting us from what is beyond our control and beyond human comprehension. When people are overloaded with information, options, data, and objects, they may adopt the attitude “I don’t care, this is none of my business, I’m not interested.” In this case, indifference gives them a sense of security. Insensitivity, which is related to indifference, allows people to “get on with their lives” without making difficult attempts that are often misunderstood by others.

## The indifference of consumers

The modern-day world, especially the world of the Western European culture, is increasingly characterized by the spread of consumerist attitudes, which do not encourage greater engagement in public life – unless we consider spending time in shopping malls, searching for, looking at, and buying various consumer goods as an element of public life, simply because all these activities take place in the public sphere. The world of consumption is a world full of goods, a world of overabundance and illusion. Everything is available to everyone on the condition that they meet the criteria for being a consumer, which means having sufficient financial resources. Consumerism, which involves succumbing to the requirements of the world of consumption and reducing activity to consumption in the broadest sense, is one of the factors behind growing indifference and by the same token has a negative impact on public life.

Consumers are preoccupied with themselves and their consumption needs; their main tasks are first of all consumption and secondly the generation of profits, which makes consumption possible. If consumers were sensitive to others, they would have to limit their consumption, which would be at odds with the logic of the world of consumption, based on materialism and utilitarianism. Reducing consumption and paying attention to others and their needs, for example the environmental aspect of the costs of growth and profit and the carbon footprint we leave behind, is undesirable for the world of consumption. Rather, it is a world of continual growth, and growth depends on consumption. If consumers become more sensitive, they cease to put all their effort into consumption, and start asking questions. Where do goods come from? How are they produced? In what conditions? Growing sensitivity indirectly leads to a drop in the profits of companies, which are forced to improve the conditions of production and technologies and to offer higher wages. Consequently, we should expect price hikes and a drop in the consumption potential

of individuals, because they buy less, but have to pay more. Things come full circle.

Therefore, consumers cannot be sensitive towards others and should not engage in public life. When they do so, they cease to be obedient consumers and they escape the world of consumption, because they start asking questions and reflect on the surrounding reality, thus freeing themselves from the compulsion to buy for the sake of buying. This is when consumers become more sensitive, initially only in the context of the satisfaction of their own needs, but it is possible that when they start asking questions, they will also become sensitive to others. They can only escape the world of consumption and liberate themselves from its rules by engaging in reflection, which is difficult and tiring and limits them in fulfilling their own materialistic desires. Consequently, indifference towards others and their needs does not protect consumers from inconvenient questions or from searching for answers to such questions.

## Indifference and egoism

Indifference and the related insensitivity are also linked to egoism. When the ego becomes the center of attention and a point of reference, subjective opinions can no longer be verified with the help of external, objective criteria. It's me, me, only me – because of a lack of sensitivity not only towards others but also towards the beauty of the world and its needs. The ego runs rampant, the ego makes demands, the ego will not yield to anyone and anything. This prevents any points of reference apart from the egoistic self. The ego is the master of all, the ruler of itself, and it does not wish to be disturbed. It is also indifferent to anything apart from itself.

Indifference causes the gradual disappearance of true public life, which requires engagement in *pro bono* activity, as Hannah Arendt wrote. But individuals who are indifferent and insensitive towards others and have been additionally taught to be egoistic while growing increasingly indifferent do not understand this and will never engage in such practices.

## The lethargy of the indifferent, of the helpless

Indifference could be seen as a certain blindness to others and their needs, to the surrounding world, to problems, to important matters. It allows people to remain convinced that everything is all right, so they become plunged into ethical lethargy, distanced from the world and from other people. Detached from others, they continue to live their self-complacent lives. That said, indifference may be also perceived as a strategy for surviving in unfavorable conditions in which sen-

sitivity hinders survival, hurts, and requires people to make difficult decisions and act, while realizing that all of their efforts may prove futile. Finally, indifference may result from a sense of helplessness that arises when people are convinced that nothing depends on them, things will remain as they are, and nothing can be done. A sense of helplessness paralyzes us and compounds indifference. If people are convinced that they cannot influence the world in any way, indifference again turns out to be a survival strategy, armor that protects them from the overwhelming reality.

Indifference leads to the degradation of what is typically human, sensitivity towards others, adequate reactions to the harm done to others and their problems, and causes the spread of the culture of mistrust and the bureaucratic procedures and various systems that it necessitates and that are aimed at ensuring control and surveillance. Indifference as a survival strategy is illusory and deceptive, because being indifferent does not protect people from being victims. Being indifferent allows them not to react, to remain unaffected, to hide, and to wait for the situation to get back to normal. The problem is that indifference causes the withdrawal of many individuals from the public sphere. Consequently, public life changes,

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and we can see what Richard Sennett described as its downfall, which means that public life may change from a sphere common to everyone into a field of activity for those who will agree to anything (harming and ridiculing others, lying, and so on) to advance their interests.

Indifferent people stay on the sidelines. And they may calmly live in this peculiar lethargy, this mixture of indifference and helplessness, for as long as they are not objects of interest for those who are setting the tone. The indifference that they have demonstrated so far will offer them no support, because it is often coupled with loneliness, which appears all of itself. In order not to be alone, human beings cannot be indifferent. Wise engagement in helping others and in building different relations in public life is what can provide succor from loneliness and from the downfall of the public sphere. The quality of public life is a reflection of the attitudes that people adopt. ■