

The Origins of the Modern Public

Part One: *Introduction*, with Paul Yachnin, David Harris Sacks, Steven Mullaney, David Boruchoff, and Vera Keller

Paul Kennedy

I'm Paul Kennedy and this is *Ideas* about the public.

Michael Warner

The concept of the public is not primarily a thought about a group of people, that is to say, an actually existing, finite number of people, because we never have a very concrete idea of who those people are who are part of the public. And that's one of the interesting things about it, that we assume that there are lots of strangers out there who are sharing our tastes, having similar opinions, responding to similar events, and yet we don't actually know anything about how many such people there are or, or where they live—they're imaginary.

Paul Kennedy

All of us today participate in imaginary communities that we call "publics." As I speak this broadcast is assembling a virtual community of listeners— a listening public. But there was a time when making things public was the exclusive property of men of rank. "Matters of State," Queen Elizabeth proclaimed to her subjects in 1559, were fit to be treated only by "men of authority" and conveyed only to audiences of "grave and discreet persons." By the eighteenth century it had become meaningful to talk about "public opinion" as a sovereign power formed outside the state. What happened in the intervening years to make this revolution possible is the subject of this *Ideas* series. It draws on the work of an interdisciplinary group of Canadian and American Scholars, who for the last five years have been engaged in a research project called "Making Publics." Centered on McGill University, the project's field of study has been England and Western Europe during the period that scholars now call the "early modern," or, roughly, 1500 to 1700. Its aim has been nothing less than a new view of where the public comes from and how publics are composed.

Paul Yachnin

When we applied to the funding agency for this very large grant we were completely honest. We said we don't know what our object of study is. And we made this into a strength, we said, any major project that has a well-defined object of study is just a project that's going to run things through a grinder, whereas we are actually going to try to re-imagine early modernity.

Paul Kennedy

This re-imagining is what will occupy us during the fourteen episodes of this series. The individual programs will rage over the revolutions that shaped early modern life: the Reformation and the printing press, the expansion of markets and the rise of the nation-state—and over the new kinds of publicity and of privacy that they made possible. They will examine how specific arts and sciences formed publics. The new public theatres in

Elizabethan England are an example. And they will look, finally, at the implications a new understanding of publics might hold for another world in upheaval—our own. *Ideas* producer David Cayley has been following the work of the Making Publics project from its inception. He calls his series “The Origins of the Modern Public.” Here’s David Cayley.

David Cayley

In 1791, two years after the beginning of the French Revolution, a discussion took place in the National Assembly about the constitutional significance of public opinion. One of the delegates, Nicolas Bergasse, rose to speak. “Before public opinion,” he told the Assembly, “all authorities become silent, all prejudices disappear, all particular interests are effaced.” This was a remarkable statement, not least because the Terror and the guillotine were only two years away, a high water mark of the Enlightenment faith in public opinion as the voice of Reason. A century earlier, the very idea of public opinion would have been unintelligible. There was no general Public. Nor would it be long after Bergasse spoke before public opinion lost its identification with critical Reason. John Stuart Mill, in the early nineteenth century, was already writing of it as a coercive, rather than a liberating, force. Today, in the age of branding and spin, it's all the more difficult to think of public opinion cowing authority, overcoming prejudice, or dissolving special interests. And yet, much as we might smile at Bergasse’s naïveté and mock the myth that Reason ever ruled the coffee houses and salons of the eighteenth century, what else do we have to appeal to against tyranny and ruin but the public opinion? I have been for nearly forty years a public broadcaster and throughout that time I have been curious about what the “public” part of that designation implies. What is the “public” interest that the CBC exists to serve? What do we mean by “public” in the first place? Just “not private,” “open to all,” “in full view”—or something more? I was interested, therefore, when a colleague showed me a prospectus for an academic project called “Making Publics”, which was just beginning a five-year investigation into the origins of modern publics—an investigation, the project summary said, that would also illuminate our contemporary circumstances. I signed on as what amounted to an embedded reporter and have been following the work of the project for the last four years. This series is my report.

The director of Making Publics—and its instigator and inspiration, as well—is Paul Yachnin, a professor of English at McGill and a Shakespeare scholar. When I visited his Montreal home recently I found him putting the finishing touches on a new critical edition of one of Shakespeare's history plays, *Richard II*. We spoke about the origins of the Making Publics project, and he traced his interest in the subject back to his days as a graduate student at the University of Toronto in the late 1970s and early 1980s. At the time, a movement called “new historicism” was exciting the field of literary studies. Strongly influenced by French theorist Michel Foucault, new historicism was preoccupied with questions of power and ideology, and how they were expressed in literature. Paul Yachnin was interested, but doubtful.

Paul Yachnin

I was very skeptical about new historicism because it wasn't historical enough. It couldn't answer fundamental questions. It couldn't answer the most fundamental question, which was "How do things change?" And when I've taught Foucault to graduate students they very often ask, "How do things change from historical period to historical period if everything seems to be bent on the reproduction of power and the relations of domination in any society?" So I was very unhappy with new historicism, which seemed to leave us unable to explain historical change and unable to explain how individuals or groups of individuals made a difference in the world.

David Cayley

How people make a difference and how theatre, his particular concern, makes a difference were the questions Paul Yachnin needed to answer. He knew that the new commercial theatre that began to appear in the Elizabethan England in the 1570s was not an overtly powerful institution. He had argued the point, he told me, in an essay called "The Powerless Theatre." But he still felt that this new institution must, in some way, be changing the world around it. Pondering this problem, he began to attend more to theatre as a general form of experience, rather than just looking at specific instances. Perhaps what mattered about the theatre was not just this or that play text, but the very fact that so many people went to plays and so thought about the world on the terms the theatre proposed: as a stage—and a commercial stage, at that.

Paul Yachnin

I realized that rather than look directly at the content of what Shakespeare said, that it was a better idea to look at the practices of playing and play-going. And that's where the Making Publics project came from in the first place. I thought there's something going on here that is changing the shape of society, in a very diffuse way, by changing people's practices, changing the way they talk, and it's not that it's directly political, but that it's changing the conditions under which politics are done. And I realized – I'm compressing this, I didn't really realize this, I had a sense, a notion that in order to make this argument persuasive it couldn't just be about English theatre – it had to be a broader argument. If we're going to talk about how works of art and intellect change politics—not directly, but by changing the conditions of politics—we need to bring in other forms of art and intellectual work, and also on the Continent as well as in England. So I got in touch with the people in early modern studies whose work I most admired and liked, and I said I want to do a project on how the growth of an entertainment market changed the shape of society and created a public sphere. And so I was able to recruit these wonderful people to come to Montreal and they came, I guess it was 2003, many years ago. And we sat in his large room in a hotel and the first thing that happened is that Steven Mullaney put his hand up and he said, "I'm really sorry to interrupt, Paul, but nobody in this room thinks that there was a public sphere in early modern Europe. So the only thing, the only term that gives this project its urgency now is something we don't think existed." And everybody nodded, "Yeah, that's true." Well, everyone had come to Montreal and we were settled in for two days in hotel rooms, and it seemed like a terrible situation.

David Cayley

Paul Yachnin told his colleagues that he was interested in investigating how institutions like the commercial theatre laid the foundations for a public sphere. His friend and colleague Steven Mullaney reminded him that there was no such thing in early modern England. Yachnin recognized that he had argued the same point himself. All right, but what's a public sphere? Well, that term was put into play by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas in an influential book published in German in 1962 but, for complicated reasons, not available in English until 1989, when it appeared as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas argues in this book that during the course of the eighteenth century in western Europe publicity became a means by which citizens could influence the state. In the years between then and now, the word “publicity” has become pretty deeply imbued with connotations of management and manipulation, and a whole history is summed up in that change in the word's associations. But in the eighteenth century, according to Habermas, publicity was a principle by which public authorities could be called before the bar of public opinion and made to give reasons for their actions. The public sphere, then, was a space outside the state, in which the associations and conversations of private persons took on public relevance. It was, Habermas recognizes, a bourgeois sphere—underpinned by private property and the free market—but he argues that it also transcended its class origins, and at least pointed to the possibility of a world in which people could associate in what Habermas calls their “common quality” as rational beings. It was this public sphere that was at issue in the conversation Paul Yachnin and his colleagues were having in Montreal. Some of Habermas's arguments are controversial, but there is pretty general agreement that the public, in our contemporary sense, came into being in the eighteenth century. So what was going on before 1700? Yachnin and the others eventually came up with the idea that though there was as yet no general public—one could not speak, as eighteenth-century people began to do, of “the public opinion”—yet there were embryonic forms of association that could be recognized as individual publics and that were beginning to actively form themselves around practices like play-going. They called their intuition “making publics.”

Paul Yachnin

So we had the phrase. We weren't quite sure what it meant, in fact it would take us a further two years to know what it meant. But it seemed like the right phrase, it seemed like a clue that we could follow, that would show us our path. And that's how we started the project. And when we applied to SSHRC [the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council], to the funding agency, for this very large grant, we were completely honest: we said we don't know what our object of study is. And we're going to put into our research plan two years that we're going to spend trying to define our object of study. And we made this into a strength: we said any major project that has a well-defined object of study is just a project that's going to run things through a grinder, whereas we are actually going to try to re-imagine early modernity.

David Cayley

In what follows in this *Ideas* series you'll hear some of what Paul Yachnin and his colleagues have come up with. I'll begin today by sketching, in very broad strokes, the sixteenth century world in which modern publics had their origin.

(Interlude)

Every era of the world can plausibly claim to be a transitional age—and most do. One of the historian's great pleasures lies in pointing out that today's news is a lot more like yesterday's news than those innocently adrift in the present usually realize.

Nevertheless, there are periods when the past shatters more thoroughly than at other times. And one of them is surely the world that scholars used to call the Renaissance and now, more typically, designate as the “early modern”. This shattering was, in the first place, cosmological. Europe was discovering that the world was dramatically unlike the integrated cosmos that appeared on medieval maps. Here's historian David Harris Sacks, a professor at Reed College in Oregon and a founding member of the Making Publics project:

David Harris Sacks

There's a surprising unhooking of the received idea of how the world is that comes about at the beginning of the sixteenth century. One of the principal elements in unhooking it is the discovery of a fourth continent. You have this long, long history of understanding the world as consisting of Asia, Africa, and Europe, depicted in a tripartite map, a *mappa mundi*, or sometimes even a more stylized map that looks like a “T” enclosed within an “O”, a “T-O map.” Those go back to the twelfth century, and among the most famous of them is the Hereford *mappa mundi*. It's on one single ox skin, and the whole point is to show the parts depicted on something that is a whole in and of itself, a seamless skin. Such maps usually depict Jerusalem at their centre with Christ triumphant there and then the continents arrayed around it, and the ocean around the outside. Well, Columbus didn't expect to run into the American continents. In fact it's well known that, if he hadn't run into them, he probably would have died in the middle of the ocean because he so badly miscalculated the circumference of the Earth that he didn't have anything like the supplies he would have needed to make it to Asia if there hadn't been a North America or a South America to stop at. But that's a surprise because North and South America are not self-evidently in the Bible or in the ancient geographies. And that then forces a rethinking of a great many, many things, and it also exposes Europeans to encounters with peoples they'd never met, commodities they'd never met, geographical environments they'd never met and for which they didn't have any convenient theories yet. Columbus was a great resister to what it is he found. He refused to believe that he'd found another continent because it so destabilized his worldview. Even when he knew that he'd found this enormously long river, the Orinoco, because he saw the tidal bore of the Orinoco and he knew there had to be a very long river that could produce so much water to create the tidal bore—he had to invent the idea that this was one of the four rivers that come from Eden. And in order to do that he had to give a description of the Earth, of the shape of the Earth, neither as a globe nor even as an oval, but as a kind of pear-shaped thing. So one of the things that unhooks the story is this discovery of new things you don't have a place for and you have to start to find a place for—a new way of conceiving of the world.

David Cayley

New continents, new peoples, new flora and fauna, new commodities—all testify to the overwhelming novelty to which people in the early sixteenth century were exposed. Another was the appearance of the national state.

David Harris Sacks

Take the word “state”—until about the beginning of the sixteenth century it never really meant anything other than the condition of something. So the “state of the king” or the “state of England” is what its condition is like at the moment. To think of it as an autonomous set of institutions that have a life of their own, independent of the people who are there at the time— that’s new, and that really does come into being around 1500 or so, and the usage changes and you can begin to see people thinking about the state as an agent, rather than simply the state as a condition, and thinking of kings and such as agents. Empires certainly had regimes that could rule, but they didn’t penetrate very deep into the life of any small community. Those small communities lived rather independent lives, apart from a certain limited range [where] the empire could extract revenue. It could mount an army, but it wasn’t trying to govern the local community on a day-to-day basis. So empires did not have monopolies of the legitimate use of force in their own territory. There were separate princes and kings and such that had power. There were warlords. The church managed to maintain itself in some independence from the state. Even within the church the same kind of a story could be told: the Pope’s authority didn’t penetrate into village confraternities and craft guild confraternities. One of the biggest worries in the Reformation for the Catholic Church was how to get control over these autonomous centres of religious and spiritual activity and put them under a hierarchical structure.

David Cayley

Along with these political changes came sweeping economic changes: population growth, urbanization, the expansion of trade, and the influx of gold and silver from the New World all helped to heat up the European economy. Prices soared, and new opportunities for profit undermined traditional relationships of fealty and mutual obligation. Tenants were dispossessed and feudal tenures broken as landholders began to pursue market rents. New instruments of credit appeared. And all this contributed to a situation in which practice ran far ahead of received moral principles.

David Harris Sacks

The conventions of thought about getting and spending are really challenged by this set of developments. Most people had some activity that they had to undertake in the market, but the majority of most people’s livelihoods was not earned in market transactions. Most people lived on the land. Much of what they got they made for themselves or traded, if they traded at all, by a form of barter. There were certain things they needed to have money for but only to a very limited degree. So you have a kind of dual economy, an economy on the one side in which people participate in market transactions and make things or sell things in markets, and, on the other, they’re engaged in something like gift exchange or patron-client relations, or living off the land in one way or another. One of the things that happens in this period is that cities start to grow – quite rapidly, after the beginning of the sixteenth century. London is the classic example. It’s maybe about 50,000 people in 1500, it’s certainly 200,000 people around

1600, so a four hundred percent or four-fold, increase. And it's almost 600,000 in 1700. How do you feed those people? The food has to come from somewhere, and it comes from the country. So you start getting market-oriented activities to supply these new people. You have a reorientation of the economy in a quite significant way. So you end up having larger numbers of people engaged exclusively in market activities, or almost exclusively in market activities, and more people engaged with more of their lives in market activities. And that then creates a whole series of tensions, problems for the standard rules of good neighborliness, the standard rules of what's known in the business as the "moral economy." It's hard to avoid seeking your own advantage and feeling guilty for doing so under these circumstances. So there's a new environment and a need to try to rethink the way in which you can live under these kinds of pressures, as you and your family rely more and more on transactions in a marketplace and less and less on face-to-face relations with neighbors or independent extraction of sustenance from your own resources. So greed then becomes an interesting issue. It's an old question, but how to deal with it became an interesting issue.

David Cayley

David Harris Sacks speaks here of a "dual economy" and of the doubleness that entered people's dealings when they might be operating, at one moment, according to the impersonal laws of supply and demand, and at the next within a world of gift exchanges and traditional commons. The shock of the new, which we feel keenly in our own time, may have been even more acute at the time we're talking about. But of course there were also many ways in which the new was domesticated and drawn within old and familiar stories. Harris Sacks finds an example in a book he's been studying, Richard Hakluyt's *The Principal Voyages, Navigations and Discoveries of the English Nation*, a compendium of the writings of English explorers first published in 1589. Hakluyt was interested in fostering the arts of navigation and inspiring his countrymen to support new projects of exploration and colonization—both very modern objectives. But like Columbus, taking the Orinoco for one of the rivers that flow from Eden, Hakluyt sets his chronicles of discovery in the context of a universal history of salvation. And so the news that he imparts about previously unknown people and places is comfortably slotted into the reassuring arc of the Holy Bible.

David Harris Sacks,

It starts with the Fall, goes through the Tower of Babel and the dispersion of the people and the confusion of tongues, and ultimately will end with the reunification of all peoples and the return of Christ and the end of History. So it's a conventional story in that respect. What's not conventional is what Hakluyt thinks the mechanism for this will be: he thinks the mechanism is going to be trade, it's going to be the goodwill that's created between peoples by making their exchange relations necessary to one another, that then paves the way for better understanding, peaceful relations and a better understanding between them, that could then be a stepping stone to this next thing. This is not an original idea of Hakluyt's—there's a large number of people in the sixteenth century who think trade works this way. Erasmus says God created the world in such a way—with scarcities in one place and abundances in others—as to make friendship necessary. But I think the idea is that the material interest that's created then

becomes the basis for building other forms of advantage, of mutual advantage, of mutual benefit, including ultimately the sharing of the One Truth.

David Cayley

The story of Babel, where one language was broken into many, and Pentecost, where the many were reunited into one, was often told in the sixteenth century, and unsettling discoveries brought within a Providential design. But the Reformation and the birth of multiple forms of Protestantism made religion a source of discord and disorientation as well. Whole countries became Protestant at the behest of their rulers and the people were obliged to follow, whatever their views. One effect was a profound disruption of the relationship between generations, and the relationship between the living and the dead. People accustomed to praying for their dead in Purgatory discovered overnight that Purgatory had been abolished. Steven Mullaney is a professor of English at the University of Michigan and a founder of the Making Publics project. It was his crucial objection, as you heard earlier, that led to the project's getting its name and initial direction. He has a story that illustrates the disappearance of the dead from the scenes of everyday life after Henry VIII broke with the Roman Church in the 1530s

Steven Mullaney

In London, during the reign of Henry's son, Edward VI, which was a period of radical Protestantism—much more radical Protestantism than Elizabeth instituted or than Henry, when he was wearing his Protestant, rather than his neo-Catholic hat, instituted. And this is just years before Edward's half-sister Mary became Queen and returned the country to Catholicism. But under Edward's reign there's a certain moment in 1549 when one night, in the middle of the night, at the ossuary, also known as the charnel house, at St. Paul's Cathedral...

David Cayley

...Ossuary... "place of bones"...

Steven Mullaney

...A place of bones, where the bones of the dead, who'd been buried in the graveyard at St. Paul's, were housed after they were removed from the graves to make room for the newly dead. The ossuary, or charnel house, that had existed in the basement of St. Paul's for over four hundred years—so imagine this is not all of London, this is the immediate vicinity of St. Paul's—but this is four hundred years' worth of Londoners—one night, John Stow says, that over a thousand cartload of bones were emptied out in one night from the ossuary at St. Paul's, the entire charnel house was emptied out in the dark of night. All night long carts went backwards and forwards emptying out the charnel house, taking the bones out to a marsh outside the city walls, in Finsbury field, and dumping them. Afterwards, that marsh was filled in with soilage, he says, from the city—with sewage. That's the effort to sever affective relations between the present generation of living Londoners and their quite material sense of their own past and their ancestors.

David Cayley

The emptying of the ossuary at St. Paul's was part of an effort by evangelical Protestants to sever, as Steven Mullaney says, the ties that bound the living and the dead. This

effort, like most of Protestantism, had strong biblical sanction, but it ruptured a relationship which had been integral to popular religiosity in the Middle Ages.

Steven Mullaney

Natalie Davis has a wonderful phrase, in an essay of hers from some time back trying to register the importance of the dead in late medieval society throughout Europe, and she says that, along with youth and adulthood, the dead were one of the primary age groups of medieval society—and, considering their number, by far the largest age group. So much of the culture revolved around the dead in the graveyard, the dead as figures for whom one said intercessory prayers. This was a large part of living society, and of day-to-day experience for people—this whole cult of the dead, the entire concept of Purgatory, where those dead who one said prayers for were housed, whom one could still help, was one of the focuses of the Reformation. One of the things the Reformation most wanted to undo in medieval society was this phenomenal power of the dead. The theological animus against Purgatory was keen.

David Cayley

In Purgatory, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, the souls of the dead are purged of their sins before entering Heaven. And this time of purgation can be shortened by the prayers and alms of the living. The reformers decried the abuse of this doctrine—for example, the sale by the church and what were called “indulgences”, or time off one’s sentence in purgatory. And they also objected to it as a form of superstition. But Purgatory was much more than a belief—it was also a set of practices that were integral to a way of life. And this is Steven Mullaney’s point about the officially sanctioned raid on the Saint Paul ossuary: Protestant authorities were attempting, as historian Keith Thomas once wrote, to produce a generation that was spiritually indifferent to the fate of its ancestors, who didn’t care that their grandparents, according to current teaching, were condemned to Hell because they had belonged to the wrong variety of Christianity. And in this way the Reformation brought about a decisive, and often traumatic, break with the past.

(Interlude)

Paul Kennedy

You’re listening to ideas on CBC Radio One on Sirius Satellite Radio 137 and cbc.ca. Our program is called “The Origins of the Modern Public” and it’s presented by David Cayley.

David Cayley

The break with the religious past occasioned by the Reformation was repeated in the world of knowledge. During the Middle Ages, ancient authority had been revered. But now it was becoming plain that the Ancients had got quite a number of things badly wrong, and completely overlooked others. The discovery of the Americas, for example, completely wrecked the existing scheme of geographical and cosmological science. The resulting crisis of knowledge and authority is one of the studies of David Boruchoff, a member of the Making Publics project and a professor of Hispanic Studies of McGill.

David Boruchoff

People have always known that the moon exists, you can see the moon. But America didn't exist, and furthermore its existence was denied. And that played a huge role not just in ancient culture, but in medieval culture and in ecclesiastical culture. If you look at the maps of the ancient world before America, you had three land masses: Africa, Asia, and Europe. And very often they were depicted as one body with three parts, which was very convenient for Church culture, because you had a Trinity that was both one and three and other things of that sort. And furthermore, if you look at the names that were often given as subtitles to the land masses, they were the three sons of Noah. So where do you put America? There is no place for America in a scheme like that. The existence of a fourth mass ruins the balance of the whole scheme, ruins the artistic niceness of the scheme, and so America was a truly revolutionary event that caused people not just to add something but to rethink what they thought they knew.

David Cayley

This rethinking led to the idea that the moderns, as people were just beginning to call themselves, might in some respect at least be superior to the Ancients. An index of this superiority was the fact that the moderns possessed things that the Ancients had lacked, and by far the most frequently mentioned of these things were: printing with movable types, gunpowder, and the nautical compass. This idea of the three great inventions which define modernity seized thinkers and writers all over Western Europe in the sixteenth century and, in David Boruchoff's view, made a public.

David Boruchoff

For me what was most interesting is not what these inventions mean today, or even who invented them, or even exactly how they functioned, but rather how the idea of the three inventions together just took off. And it took off among a Who's Who of European culture— people such as Francis Bacon, the historian of the French language Joachim du Bellay, Michel de Montaigne, and François Rabelais—it's the Who's Who of the sixteenth century, and they're all talking about the same thing: these are the three greatest inventions of modern times. These are people on both sides of the Reformation, people are writing about these inventions in French, in Latin, in Spanish, Italian, English, and so all of a sudden we have what you can really call a public of humanists—that's their commonality—who are taken with this idea that the moderns had certain things that the Ancients never had and that, in fact, allowed the moderns not only to compete with the Ancients, but to surpass the Ancients. And this is a great emblem of modernity. This is an idea that is the quintessence of humanism and of modernity: how do you explain these things, how do you explain modernity? Well, here's an example. And you can't say that these are all people who are moved by the same material forces, the same spiritual forces— although for most of them Providence played a great role in these inventions— you can't say that they're moved by the same political forces. It's a very interesting kind of public.

David Cayley

The figure of the three inventions allowed sixteenth century writers and scholars to assert their difference from the Ancients. And these were people for whom ancient authority remained formidable—which makes it the more remarkable, in David

Boruchoff's view, that they dared to call themselves "modern" and thus to acknowledge that a fundamental rupture had occurred.

David Boruchoff

I'm interested in those people who choose to define themselves as "modern", which I think is a really interesting step to take, because once you put a label on yourself as "modern", you're making a break, you're making a difference with the past, and for me that's much more interesting than the specific items that are cited by people as those points of difference. There's something that's spurring them not to think of themselves as inheritors, not to think of themselves as continuers, not to think of themselves as the legacy of something.

(Interlude)

David Cayley

To call oneself "modern" was to admit that the received way of understanding the world had shattered. "Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone," the English poet John Donne wrote in the early seventeenth century. "New Philosophy calls all in doubt,/ The element of fire is quite put out." Vera Keller thinks that modernity is the reassembling of the pieces. She was a postdoctoral fellow with the Making Publics project when I interviewed her but will soon take up a permanent post at the University of Oregon. Early modern people, in her view, were improvising. "Rummaging together a future," as she puts it. And one form of this improvisation was a new account of what it means to be public.

Vera Keller

As you know, the word "public" flips in meaning in this period. It used to refer to an individual person, a public man, who had an office, versus a private man. We still have a reflection of that in the army terms that we use today when we talk about a private in the army. He's a private because he's not a captain and therefore he's not a public man. He didn't have a place in a feudal hierarchy. So you were public if you had a place in a feudal hierarchy, which is very different from the way we think about the meaning of that word now, where a public exists on a horizon, on a plane, and that we're all members of the public and it has nothing to do with a hierarchy, and it's not about a person, an identified person in a family that connects in a specific way with other chains of power, it's basically anonymous, you know, the members of the public. That is a huge transformation that has totally transformed the world today and it's one of the key ideas in understanding modernity and so that is why we're devoting all this energy to understanding that transformation.

For me, what "public" came to mean was, instead of a "public" man versus a "private" man, a public was a collection of private people, or of particulars. So it's not one single person anymore, it's a lot of people and those particular people are all private people. And they have their own concerns and interests, etc. and then they come together to form states, constitutions, democracies, etc. in which we find a way to make all of our private interests and concerns mesh together in order to pursue, overall, the public good. That's the broad strokes. But what, in an even broader view, has happened is the overcoming of that the fundamental cultural obsession with hierarchies, with holistic views of the universe, with an encyclopedia of knowledge in which everything

could be contained and in which everything could be made one and whole, which, if you look at the history of philosophy, going back to the beginning of the idea of the encyclopedia, this is what you're trying to learn in school. You're trying to learn how does everything connect, how does Fire connect to Water, connect to Earth, how does it all interact in this marvelous way that accounts for every phenomenon. And it's a very systematic view of the world.

And then, you get this breakdown of these knowledge systems, in which nothing makes sense anymore. "The element of fire is quite put out." Everything falls into disarray, and you have this world in fragments, and that's what I'm interested in looking at, is the collection of these fragments. Those fragments are both things, pieces of knowledge, commodities, and people. And you build a new world by collecting fragments and filling in the blanks. So you basically start with a clean slate, you say, no, the knowledge that we have, the world that we have, it wasn't whole, it wasn't complete, we didn't know everything. We in fact have vast gaps, we have holes that we want to fill in—and we have the power to fill them in. And so let's collect whatever we can to rummage together—a new future and that new future is what we live in today.

David Cayley

Vera Keller sees evidence of the change she's been talking about in the shifts undergone by a whole series of key terms during the course of the early modern period. "Science," which it once meant knowledge of universals, comes to mean knowledge of particulars. "Experiment," which had referred to general experience, becomes the word which we recognize today as the name for a carefully constructed and controlled staging of nature. Political philosophy alters in the same way, Keller says. The frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, published in the mid-seventeenth century, shows a giant crowned figure which is actually composed, on close inspection, of hundreds of tiny individuals. "For...that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMONWEALTH, or STATE," Hobbes says, "is but an artificial man."

Vera Keller

You once had a political body, a corpus, that was organic and was whole, and was harmonious, and was a whole system that made sense, that was rational. Everything had to be kept in balance, there were humors that had to be balanced, and we understood what was needed and nothing could go its own way because everything had to fit together in a system. Something radically changed in the seventeenth century when all of a sudden you now have a constructed body, made up of tiny individual pieces, which really would be just fine on their own, they'd at least be alive. So, on the way between having one body, one political body, to having this constructed body, Hobbes's *Leviathan* made up of tons of little people, is this conception of the public going from being just the head of that body to the public being this collection of little particulars. And in order to keep those particulars together you now have to offer them some sort of reason for coming together—it's not enough just to say, "well, without the head the body dies." Of course. Now all of a sudden you realize, no, we don't actually know what a state is anymore, we don't in fact know what brings people together, we don't know what keeps them moving, we don't know what advances them, we don't know how money is made, and we don't know how invention works. We need to study all this—anything that's useful, anything that helps, is what needs to be studied. Which includes

knowledge of nature, which includes knowledge of invention, which included, back then, history—it doesn't anymore.

And so the state must advance useful knowledge and collect it from all over—versus the way philosophy, political philosophy, had been done previously, which was all operating on universals and *ideal* politics. Now they actually need to know what reality is like. You know, we need to go out there and survey people, we need to find out what our population is, and what they want, and what they don't have, and what we can give them, and how we can make them come together, and make them produce, and make them not revolt. We need to study them. And so that study of the public can also be seen as an object of the state. Viewing the population as actually what is now making up the state and as an object of study by the state, because a state no longer presumes, “well as the head of a body that's all I need to know.” They, in fact, develop a whole new information state based on the survey of their resources, their natural resources, including their people, and the ways to transform those natural resources through art, through invention, through engineering, through manufacture—in a competitive way with other states.

David Cayley

During the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, according to Vera Keller, the public was reimagined as a collection of individuals. The particles that made up society were, in one sense, more free to form their own associations, in another more controlled, as the state made them the objects of new forms of discipline. And this new world, she thinks, is our world, which is why we ought to try and understand how it came to be.

Vera Keller

My main view that I wish people would think about is that nineteenth-century commonplace, that “if you don't know history you're doomed repeat it.” That's what most people think is the reason why you do history. You're doomed to repeat it. But historians don't think you're doomed to repeat it. Historians don't think in cycles of history the way they did, say, in the 14th century, we think in terms of arrows of time. You're not doomed to repeat anything. What you're doomed to do is to continue it. Early modern Europe has established so much of the modern world, and so many of the ideas that we have in our brains were thought up, once upon a time, for some reason, that made sense—perhaps, perhaps not— at that time. We continue to have those ideas inside our heads and we don't even realize that they're the products of history. Unless you understand the history, you have no choice to examine those ideas to decide whether or not they make sense, whether they're moral, whether they have anything to do with you or your culture. And so it's only by understanding your whole world as a historical product—and specifically as a product of early modern Europe—that you can do anything to change your world.

David Cayley

Today's program has looked at the origins of the Making Publics project and at the broad outlines of the world early modern Europe that it set out to reimagine. In upcoming episodes of the series I'll look in more detail at how new publics took shape,

beginning, next time, with a program on the Reformation and on the ways in which religious controversy gave rise to Europe's first instance of a public sphere.

Paul Kennedy

On *Ideas* you've listened to "The Origins of the Modern Public" by David Cayley. His series continues tomorrow night. It's also available as a podcast at cbc.ca/podcasting. Production was by David Cayley, Dave Field, and Bernie Lucht. To find out about upcoming *Ideas* programs you can sign up for our weekly newsletter. Go to cbc.ca/ideas and follow the links. The executive producer of *Ideas* is Bernie Lucht. I'm Paul Kennedy. The hourly news is next on CBC Radio One and on Sirius Satellite Radio.