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**Redefining and Extending the Public Use of Reason:  
Republic and Reform in Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties***

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In the mid-1780s essays *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* (1784) and *What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* (1786), Kant presents the notion of public use of reason. To the extent that someone communicates in his own person and bases his reasoning on universalizable grounds, his use of reason is public and shall be free from state censorship. Therefore, the public use reason includes in its scope, at least potentially, all adult human beings. However, according to influential interpreters, with *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), Kant adjusts his notion of public use of reason to the absolutist conception of speech, partially subjects it to state censorship, and restricts it to university professors and government members. In what follows, I shall refer to this interpretation as absolutist shift reading.

In contrast to this reading, I will argue that Kant, with the *Conflict of the Faculties*, reaffirms the public use of reason in its requirements and even extends it in its scope. My talk consists of four parts. In the first part, I outline Kant's initial notion of public use of reason and, in the second, the absolutist shift reading. In the third part, I show that Kant does not restrict the scope of the public use of reason but even extends it. Finally, in the fourth part, I classify each of the 68 occurrences of the adjective 'public' in *The Conflict of the Faculties* using a four-class-typology. This way, I intend to make sense of the misunderstanding underlying the absolutist shift reading and show that Kant's concessions to the absolutist vocabulary result from a provocative stance.

Part One: Kant's initial notion of public use of reason

What I call Kant's initial notion of the public use of reason is the one set forth in the essays *What is Enlightenment?* and *What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* In these articles from the mid-1780s, Kant coins the term 'public use of reason' and outlines its features, requirements, and function.

The public use of reason is "that use which someone makes of it *as a scholar* before the entire public of the *world of readers*" (WA, AA 8:37). Thus, scholars as subjects and readers as recipients constitute the participants in the public use of reason.

As for its subjects, anyone who meets an epistemic and a juridical condition qualifies as a scholar. The epistemic condition requires that someone only communicate thoughts that derive from universally shareable grounds. Specifically, it requires making one's thoughts

capable of addressing “the society of citizens of the world [and so] a public in the proper sense” (8:37). This is only possible if the grounds of one’s thoughts are universally shareable as opposed to being derived from particular standpoints of practical or epistemic nature. Since “reason alone can command validly for everyone” (*WDO*, AA 8:145), thoughts are fit to address all human beings only if they are grounded in reason. The epistemic condition is the one conveyed by the universalizability test of the *Orientation* essay: “To make use of one’s own reason means [...] to ask oneself [...] whether one could find it feasible to make the ground [...] on which one assumes [something] into a universal principle for the use of reason” (8:146n).

The juridical condition requires that someone speak in his own person and not on behalf of the state. The latter is the case of someone speaking as a state official and making private use of reason. Such use “is not and cannot be free” since the subject “is carrying out another’s commission” and is, therefore, bound “to deliver as prescribed” (*WA*, AA 8:38). Conversely, to the extent that someone speaks outside his function as a state official and thus “in his own person”, he makes public use of his reason and “enjoys unrestricted freedom” (*ibid.*).

As long as the epistemic and juridical conditions obtain, the use of one’s reason is public and, as such, it “must always be free” (8:37), namely not subject to state censorship.

Equally inclusive is the public use of reason as regards its recipients since anyone who has material and intellectual access to print media qualifies as a reader.

The function of the public use of reason is to realize that self-education of the citizenry that Kant terms enlightenment. As the scope of this self-education process, Kant singles out three areas: morality, legality, and physical health. The result of the self-education of the citizenry effected through the public use of reason is the “true reform of one’s way of thinking” (8:36), which in turn renders the people “capable of *freedom in acting*” and the ruler inclined to reform the “principles of *government*” (8:41) in conformity with what Kant will later term the regulative idea of a republic.

### Part Two: The absolutist shift reading

With *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant’s position seems to change. For several interpreters, Kant ends up adjusting to the absolutist conception and practice of speech and restricting the subjects of the public use of reason to university teachers and its recipients to university teachers and government members.

As for the subjects of the public use of reason, after reasserting university professors' freedom to judge publicly (*SF*, AA 7:8) and to dispute publicly (7:28), Kant characterizes the other state officials as "bound to uphold whatever [...] the crown sanctions for them to expound *publicly*" (7:8), "not free to make public use of their learning" (7:18), and forbidden "from contradicting in public" state-sanctioned teachings (7:29).

Several interpreters have focused on these passages and drawn similar conclusions. Particularly influential is John Christian Laursen's reading. Accordingly, 18th-century German jurisprudence deprives the adjective 'public' of its numerous meanings and, in line with absolutism, reduces it to 'pertaining to or owned by the state'. Conversely, literary critique reclaims the adjective and refers it to the authors and audiences of the literary arts. With his initial notion of '*Publikum*' and '*öffentlich*', Kant adheres to the literary appropriation of this terminology, refers it to writers and readers, and employs it "to subvert the language of absolutism" (Laursen 1996, 253). Kant's initial terminology serves "to introduce a subversive doctrine" (257) that Laursen terms 'two hats theory'. Specifically, "each individual can play two roles in society", namely the law-abiding citizen who speaks according to the state's will and the scholar who publicly and freely questions it (257). However, so Laursen, in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant's terminology undergoes a shift indicating that Kant is reverting to the narrower definition of 'public' as 'pertaining to or owned by the state' and of 'scholar' as 'university scholar'. Consequently, free debate becomes a privilege reserved for university scholars, and the "part-time men of learning are now disenfranchised" (259 f.).

For Kevin Davis, too, Kant insists on identifying those who reason publicly with scholars, but restricts the term scholar to university teachers: "The scholars here are specifically university scholars and thus are a narrower group than the 'scholars' to whom Kant refers in the essay *What is Enlightenment?*" (Davis 1992, 174).

According to Steven Lestition, Kant restricts the subjects of the public use of reason to university scholars as a result of what he comes to realize are the critical requirements of public debate. Since state officials are trained to a merely empirical use of passively learned theories, they are "simply unlikely to follow theoretical arguments [as] far [as required by Kant's] 'critical method'." As for the intellectuals with no academic affiliation or, in Kant's words, in the state of nature, "they were unlikely to take on the systematic self-disciplining [that Kant] thought was so central to [science]". Lastly, the uneducated people are disinclined to critical thinking because they are reluctant "to alter their lives in the ways any higher conception of human character and capacities might require of them" (Lestition 1993, 103).

Finally, in Sean Franzel's opinion, "[John Zammito and Jonathan Hess] show how Kant's attempt to limit certain forms of public debate to qualified scholarly participants" (Franzel 2013, 1) occurs as Kant grows increasingly "comfortable relegating philosophy's critical potential to the exchange of mature scholars in print" (15).

As for the recipients of the public use of reason, a parallel restriction seems to occur. Due to Kant's qualification of laypeople as "incompetent" (*SF*, AA 7:18), Laursen concludes that now "[t]he reading public [...] is evidently composed of only the government and the [university] faculties" (Laursen 1996, 260). Similarly, according to Lestition, Kant comes to realize that the "audience for his version of the Enlightenment [...] had perhaps always been narrower than he [...] had originally anticipated" (Lestition 1993, 104).

### Part Three: Reaffirming and extending the public use of reason

On my interpretation, Kant does indeed redefine his vocabulary of '*Publikum*' and '*öffentlich*'. Yet, far from restricting the scope of the public use of reason, he even extends it to an area initially assigned to the private use of reason.

Let us start with the subjects of the public use of reason. The groups that Kant discusses in *The Conflict of the Faculties* are three. The first group consists of theology, law, and medicine professors as the scholars of the higher faculties. The second one comprises philosophy professors as the scholars of the lower faculty. The third group encompasses clergymen, magistrates, and physicians as the practitioners trained by the higher faculties. All three groups consist of state officials. As such, according to Kant's initial notion of public use of reason, they should be allowed to speak freely while not in the exercise of their official function. This is the case in the *Enlightenment* essay and it remains the case for all of them in *The Conflict of the Faculties*. For the scholars of the lower and higher faculties Kant consistently claims the right to carry out a "public conflict of views" (e.g. *SF*, AA 7:29) through print media. As for the practitioners, the prohibition he keeps in place is to disregard state-sanctioned prescriptions while in the exercise of their official function. When Kant prescribes the practitioners "to uphold whatever [...] the crown sanctions for them to expound *publicly*" (7:8), he introduces them as "those who are appointed to teach the people" (*ibid.*), thus clearly framing them in the exercise of their official function. Likewise, when Kant claims that "clergymen, magistrates, and physicians [...] are not free to make public use of their learning" (7:18), he contextualizes them as "tools of the government [who] deal directly with the people" (*ibid.*), and clearly considers them in the exercise of their official function.

Since nowhere does Kant prohibit the practitioners from making public use of their reason in their spare time, it is legitimate to conclude that they still may.

Moving on to the recipients of the public use of reason, Kant's depiction of laypeople as "incompetent" or, in his words, "*Idioten*" (7:18), does not signal any restriction. As Reinhard Brandt highlights, with the term '*Idiot*', Kant is not expressing his opinion but parodying "the sorry triad of feudal arrogance" (Brandt 2003, 9). Referring back to the *Anthropology Friedländer* of the mid-1770s, Brandt points out a passage in which Kant mocks the absolutist language that labels laypeople as cattle, children, and idiots (*V-Anth/Fried*, AA 25:541). Thus, so my argument, Kant does not restrict the recipients of the public use of reason to academic scholars and government members. Rather, retorting the absolutist conception of laypeople against itself, he defies absolutism to let academics and part-time scholars speak freely to a public who, by the government's own judgment, either "takes no notice" (*SF*, AA 7:8) or "is resigned to understanding nothing" (7:34). Significantly, nowhere does Kant mention a restriction of the periodical press, the instrument par excellence of public debate.

Not only does Kant not restrict the scope of the public use of reason, he even extends it to an area initially assigned to the private use of reason and thus subject to state control. Whereas the scholars of the higher faculties are allowed to make public use of reason in the press but bound to make private use of reason at the university, philosophy professors are free to make public use of reason in both contexts. In Kant's words: "It is absolutely essential that the [...] university also contain a faculty that is independent of the government's command [...]; one that [...] is free to evaluate everything, [...] one in which reason is authorized to speak out publicly" (7:19 f.). Remarkably, it is not only philosophy professors in their spare time that are allowed to judge freely and publicly, it is the "*philosophy* faculty, which has the public presentation of truth as its function" (7:33), namely philosophy scholars *qua* state officials.

Thus, since no restriction of either the subjects or the recipients occurs, the public use of reason is fully reaffirmed in its scope: potentially all adult human beings, provided that they meet the epistemic and juridical conditions mentioned at the beginning, may make free public use of their reason. And, whoever has material and intellectual access to print media can participate as public. Furthermore, whereas according to Kant's initial notion of public use of reason, philosophy professors *qua* state officials may only make private use of their reason and are subject to state censorship, they may now make public use of their reason even *qua* state officials and are thus fully free from state censorship. Evidently, this is an extension

of the public use of reason to an area previously subject to the restrictions of the private use of reason.

#### Part Four: Redefining publicness, defying absolutism

In my view, the widespread misunderstanding that Kant in *The Conflict of the Faculties* restricts the scope of the public use of reason derives from Kant's new vocabulary in which the adjective 'öffentlich' is indeed not as univocal as in its initial formulation.

Overall, in the 116 pages of which the essay consists, the adjective 'public' recurs 68 times. It has 6 different meanings and takes on 4 different connotations.

In expressions like "öffentlich, z.B. auf Kanzeln" (SF, AA 7:34 Fn.) and "öffentliche Volkslehrer" (7:60), 'public' means 'appointed by the state' and refers to state officials addressing the people while in the exercise of their official function. In expressions like "öffentlich vorzutragende Lehren" (7:22) and "öffentlicher Kirchenglaube" (7:60), 'public' means 'sanctioned by the state' and refers to the corpus of theological, legal, and medical doctrines prescribed by the state. In both meanings as 'appointed by the state' and 'sanctioned by the state', Kant employs the adjective 'public' in its absolutist connotation. This use occurs 37 times. By characterizing as a public address a communication that, according to Kant's initial notion of public use of reason, is a case of private use of reason, Kant is adopting the absolutist conception, according to which 'public' is primarily what pertains to the state.

However, Kant also employs the adjective 'public' 15 times in accordance with his initial notion of public use of reason. He does so in passages where expressions like "öffentlicher Vortrag" (7:27), "öffentlicher Streit" (7:29), "öffentlich urteilen" (7:29), "öffentliche Prüfung" (7:32), and "die Wahrheit öffentlich sagen" (7:32) indicate either a person addressing as a scholar the reading public or a philosophy professor addressing as a state official his students. In both cases, 'public' takes on the distinctively Kantian subversive connotation highlighted by Laursen.

Furthermore, in phrases like "das öffentlich gegebene Gesetzbuch" (7:24) and "öffentliche Eintracht und Frieden" (7:42), 'public' means, respectively, 'emanating from the state' and 'concerning the community'. Both meanings, occurring overall 13 times, stem from current legal terminology and convey a technical connotation that does not pose any problems as regards Kant's notion of public use of reason.

Finally, in expressions like "öffentliche Meinung" (7:102) and "Glaube an eine öffentliche Sache" (7:40), 'public' means 'commonly held as true'. This use only occurs 3 times, takes on

the residual connotation of ‘common opinion’, and does not have any bearing on the question of either Kant restricts or not the scope of the public use of reason.

Thus, the absolutist connotation occurs 37 times against the 15 occurrences of the initial one. Not only does the absolutist connotation prevail in terms of frequency, it also conveys the notions of what, in Kant’s initial formulation, were both the public *and* private uses of reason. My thesis is that this reformulation is responsible for the misunderstanding according to which Kant is read as restricting the public, and hence free, use of reason to academics only. In the scholarship I have outlined before, the *Conflict* is considered to prohibit public officials from ever making public use of reason, namely even while not in the exercise of their official function. In the *Conflict*, given Kant’s reformulation of the adjective ‘public’, the term ‘*öffentlicher Vortrag*’ indicates both print media debates and state sanctioned doctrines. As a print media debate, an ‘*öffentlicher Vortrag*’ constitutes a public and free use of reason as conceptualized in the mid-1780s. But, as conveying state sanctioned doctrines, an ‘*öffentlicher Vortrag*’ also constitutes what in the mid-1780s is a private and not free use of reason. The misunderstanding that Kant is prohibiting non-academic state officials from ever making public and free use of reason derives from the fact that ‘*öffentlich*’ now means both a public *and* a private use of reason. What sometimes gets lost is that Kant, in the *Conflict*, employs the same conceptual opposition as in the mid-1780s but conveys it with a different (maybe more intuitive) vocabulary. In fact, just as the *Enlightenment* essay, the *Conflict* reiterates that state officials are prohibited from departing from state sanctioned doctrines while exercising their function but are free to communicate their own thoughts in their spare time. The only exceptions are, as previously seen, philosophy professors who now are in both cases free to make public use of their reason.

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By way of conclusion, it is worth asking why Kant reformulates his vocabulary as regards public communication so as to include in it what he had previously classified as private and, at the same time, maintain the conceptual distinction between public and private use of reason. In other words: if he holds on to the conceptual distinction between a free and a state sanctioned use of reason, why does he modify the relevant vocabulary so as to include in the concept of public communication what he had previously relegated to private communication? Why does Kant introduce a new vocabulary for old concepts?

One reason could be that his terminological distinction between public and private use of reason had met with incomprehension and rejection on the part of the educated readers. Therefore, Kant might have decided to convey his concept of public communication in a way that would stay true to its philosophical complexity while using a more intuitive vocabulary.

Another reason might be the intention to defy reactionary absolutism by challenging it on its own ground. As I said before, the function of the public use of reason is to foster the self-education of the citizenry as a means to render the people capable of acting morally and the ruler inclined to reform politics according to the republican ideal. Adhering to the absolutist vocabulary, according to which public and state are essentially coextensive, Kant is retorting absolutism against itself. In Kant's time, reactionary ideology makes political reform contingent upon the people's education to freedom but declare such education impossible. The French Revolution is allegedly the ultimate proof that unsupervised freedom turns human beings into raging mobs and political systems into terror machines. Thus, it is incumbent upon any sage government to preserve the *status quo* and strictly oversee the university, the pulpits, and the press. Kant defies precisely this conception that immorality can be contained by absolutism and exacerbated by freedom. He does so by confronting absolutism with the vicious circle of its own making: the government first enacts policies that hinder moral education and then uses moral immaturity as an argument against reforms. By defining as public the instruction that university professors impart upon the future state officials and the teachings that state officials impart upon the people, he makes the state responsible for the alleged immorality of the people.

Specifically, Kant first mimics the reactionary cliché of laypeople as recognizing as expert advisor whoever can teach them tricks to live as scoundrels and still go to heaven, break the law and still win the case, abuse their bodies and still enjoy a healthy life (*SF*, AA 7:30). Then, he denounces the scholars of the higher faculties and the practitioners they train for posing "as such miracle-workers" (7:31). The former "welcome [any transgressions of the law] as occasions for showing their great art and skill in making everything as good as ever" (*ibid.*). The latter spread "doctrines in keeping with the people's inclinations", thereby sowing "the seeds of insurrection" (7:34 fn). Finally, he suggests that the ruler reform university instruction according to critical philosophy's insights and spells out the ruler's advantage: better-instructed university professors, more enlightened practitioners, and, consequently, reliable citizens (7:29). But "this is possible only if complete freedom to examine [state sanctioned] teachings in public is permitted" (7:32).

Thus, averring the public character of the teachings imparted upon university students and laypeople, Kant manages to blame the government for the people's immaturity, reclaim his republican reform project, and advocate freedom of the press.

## Abbreviations

WA	An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?
WDO	What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?
SF	The Conflict of the Faculties

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They are indicated in the following form: *Siglum*, AA volume:page. All emphases are Kant's.

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