After the Public Turn: Composition, Counterpublics, and the Citizen Bricoleur by Frank Farmer (review)

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After the Public Turn: Composition, Counterpublics, and the Citizen Bricoleur

Frank Farmer
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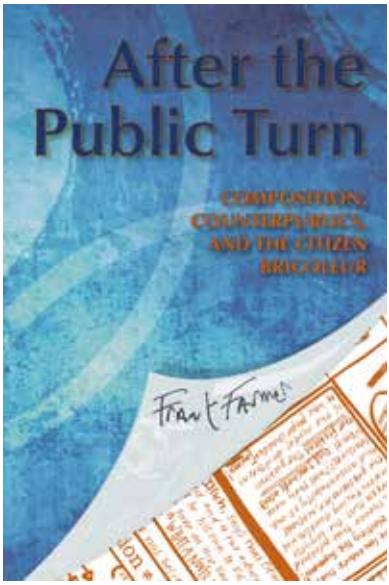

As *College English*'s recent special issue on the social turn can attest, English studies in general and composition studies in particular have often embraced the epochal language of "the turn" to gauge its self-efficacy, often hinging on the mission of its determined publics and/or the liberal mission of the university. It is in this context that Frank Farmer's book, *After the Public Turn: Composition, Counterpublics, and the Citizen Bricoleur*, is welcome, as it attempts to put these turns into perspective by splicing the concept of counterpublics into our understanding of two publics often evoked in composition studies: one cultural and ad hoc, one disciplinary and institutional.

In the introduction, Farmer begins by helpfully historicizing these various turns, winnowing in on the turn toward the public, which he explicates via Mathieu, Welch, Flower, Long, and others, while at the same time reminding us that this turn "encompasses a variety of concerns—pedagogical, institutional, disciplinary, and cultural" (24). Yet, for all of the public turn's complexity, Farmer argues that "definitional ambiguity" and traditional attachments to public sphere theory have led us to largely ignore *counterpublics*, a term he traces from Negt and Kluge to Nancy Fraser, the latter proposes that they exist in order to circulate counter-discourses that permit oppositional identities (16). Farmer also spends a significant portion of the introduction with Michael Warner's *Publics and Counterpublics*, *which* challenges Habermas and Fraser's ideas that counterpublics and its discourses must be deliberative. Importantly for composition studies, Warner proposes that counterpublic discourse can be affective, expressive and otherwise, non-rational. This should interest composition studies, says Farmer, because it opens up our students *and ourselves* to alternative, bottom-up versions of citizenship, democratic participation, and public engagement—understandings that include an array of discourses, forms and sites

for social change and rebuke the impulse to look to canonized public intellectuals, politicians, and social policy experts.

Chapter one is the first of two chapters on cultural publics and centers on zine culture, specifically anarchist and punk zines. Farmer's method is theoretical and historical in this chapter, using deCerteau, Levi-Strauss, and Hebdige to help explore the term *bricolage*, or "the artful 'making do' of the 'handyman' who, using only those materials and tools readily available to him, constructs new objects out of worn ones, who imagines new uses for what has been cast aside, discarded" (31). Farmer argues that because the practice of bricolage is "simultaneously resistant and constructive" it is useful for reimagining democracy through the *citizen bricoleur*, "an intellectual activist of the unsung sort, thoroughly committed to, and implicated in, the task of understanding how publics are made, unmade, remade, and better made, often from little more than the discarded scraps of earlier attempts—constructions that, for whatever reason, are no longer legitimate or serviceable" (36). Punk zine authors embody this citizen, since its culture articulates an explicit DIY ethos, the terms of which are laid out by Farmer at the end of the chapter. Such an ethic denies print's exclusivity and assigns making from remnant materials, rather than the consumption of new ones, the constitutive feature of its discourse. In this way, zine culture is able to "transform ordinary consumption into an alternative kind of production" (53).

Chapter two pushes this idea further by reintroducing zines as an exemplary cultural public, "a social formation, established primarily through texts, whose constructed identity functions, in some measure, to oppose and critique the accepted norms of the society in which it emerges" (56). He borrows heavily from Warner in this chapter as he looks to zines as cultural publics to demonstrate the kind of "poetic world-making" through reflexive circulation inherent to the counterpublics Warner observes in his work. That is, Farmer uses zines as "the quintessential example" (66) of a way to show how citizen *bricoleurs* can use various forms—as opposed to the content-driven arenas of deliberative rhetoric or rational-critical debate—to contest the dominant discourses of publics. As a result of these forms, new "spaces of circulation" are created that have transformative effects, requiring "a different sense of what agency might mean when it comes to counterpublic discourse and the worlds they make" (62). Zines, then, become an illustrative site for understanding the "discursive resources" necessary for the development of counterpublics—a site where "publicness assumes a far greater emphasis than it ordinarily does", where discourse is a way of being, not simply a space for deliberation and decision-making (66-67).

A key moment in this chapter sees Farmer looking at zines in the context of the digital age. While Farmer rightly acknowledges that contemporary DIY print culture makes use of both print and online forms of making, the social function of zines rests upon the affordances of their materiality; more specifically, zines offer intimacy for feminist and queer communities by offering archival traces to make counterhistories. This leads Farmer to wonder if a DIY ethos, as he has imagined it, can even exist on the Web. This question is important if, as Warner and Farmer argue, counterpublics exist as ways of being, not simply as deliberative discourses. Blogs and other forms of push-

button publishing, for example, make use of templates that not only restrict the capacity for world making, but also require expensive and often incorporated infrastructure. This question is also important for community publishers who must consider the costs—both literal and figurative—of choose certain sponsors of circulation, whether they might be local institutions or multinational corporations like Facebook.

Farmer ends the chapter considering the effect zines might have in the composition classroom. Specifically, he considers how a DIY ethos defines "rhetorical success" by the extent to which one maker inspires another; he recommends we invite our students to make this their rhetorical goal through self-publication. Moreover, by asking them to tend to issues of format, we can "teach students about visual and typographical rhetoric" (Farmer 86). And perhaps most importantly, Farmer asks us to consider our classrooms as DIY projects instead of "by others, for others," a critique of the textbook-centered classroom that grafts hyper-professionalization onto our students. Finally, Farmer considers how the process of zine-making—through finding materials, designing layouts, imagining readers, engaging production methods, and circulating copies—dovetails with a version citizenship that can "transform consumption into alternate forms of production" (89).

Farmer then turns to academic or disciplinary publics in chapters three and four, exploring what it means when academics "go public" beyond the their traditional roles as public intellectuals, experts, or activists. In Chapter three, he searches for an alternative role through three counterpublic expressions plucked from the literature of architecture, via Shannon Mattern; teacher education, via Henry Gioux and Peter McLaren; and science and technology studies, via David Hess. Through these three case studies, Farmer describes the nature, activities, and extent of various disciplinary counterpublics, arriving at three possible forms: Internal, Autonomous, and Rhetorical. Internal Disciplinary Counterpublics are Janus-faced, projecting disciplinary conversations outward by cooperating with more traditional counterpublics in a manner unsanctioned by the disciplines themselves; Autonomous Disciplinary Counterpublics are counterpublics in and of themselves, such as departments of gender studies; finally, Rhetorical Disciplinary Counterpublics are built from discourses and networks. This last version importantly tables reified social formations to consider the rhetorical activities of *all* disciplines that are capable of creating what Eric Doxtader calls *counterpublicity* (126).

In chapter four, Farmer considers the bad press of composition—the countless op-eds from the George Wills, Stanley Fishes, or Louis Menands, who use their status as public intellectuals—and not instructors of writing—to disparage the state of literacy and literacy instruction and in so doing exclude the very literacy professionals who are best qualified to speak. In response, Farmer asks readers to consider the potential for composition's counterpublicity by "insinuat[ing] ourselves into discourses that were never meant to include us to begin with" (138). This can be done, he argues, by exploiting an ambiguity that exists between the addressivity of audiences and publics through the arts of bricolage, which "might be the methodology best suited for all counterpublics" (148). Farmer is not terribly specific about how we might go about

this, but he does suggest we embrace the ethos of the *bricoleur* and publicly abandon both the celebrity of the public intellectual and our titles as experts or activists; instead we might consider the ways in which we perform their functions as we work with and through the liminal scenes of the extracurriculum to *make* publics.

While this portion of the book might benefit from more specific examples, Farmer's larger point should not be lost on community literacy scholars who have used their "expertise situationally, creatively, tactically" (150) to make community literacy projects such as Adela Licona and Stephen Russell's *think-and-do tanks* centered around youth health and sexuality, just to give one example. That is, instead of only *responding* to public discourse when addressed (whether on our campuses or off), Farmer encourages us to consider crafting our own projects that help reimagine citizenship and the public sphere as something that goes beyond the critical and rational, that goes beyond discursive modes, in order to create publics from the materials at hand. What this may look like is in practice difficult to say, especially in frugal professional environments where *bricolage* is just another term for resourcefulness. "Do more with less" can be the mantra of the punk, but also the bureaucratic. Yet, *After the Public Turn* provides us with the language and terms necessary to distinguish between them as the field continues to consider the ways making, DIY, and counterpublics can inform not only what we think and do within our respective spheres, but also how we can actually make them.