Let the mob speak!

In 1748, Chesterfield described guttural laughter as the following: ‘It is the mirth of the mob, who are very pleased with silly things; for true wit or good sense never excited a laugh’.1 Perhaps good old Chesterfield just hadn’t heard a decent joke during his own life. Maybe this is why he thought that laughing loudly at a vulgar story was, at the same time, to descend to the depths of mind numbing stupidity. ‘True wit’, Chesterfield’s preferred drollness, was a lofty, as opposed to earthly, form of humour. It was, thus, a form of humour that sought to wrench itself away from the ‘mob’ so that only those lucky few who had obtained an élite education could actually understand what was ‘witty’ about the remark in the first place.

Possibly I am overstating the case here against Chesterfield. Perhaps he was right to criticise base and improper use of humour for corrupting the mind. But even if Chesterfield was justified, we are equally justified in asking why he believed that what he considered to be ‘witty’ comments were premised upon a considered and rational reflection upon the world. Could it be the case that ‘true wit or good sense’ was just as unconsidered and irrational? Let us, as an example, momentarily consider Chesterfield’s use of the term ‘mob’. First entering the English language to denote rioters in London during the Exclusion Crisis (1678–81), ‘mob’ was originally taken from the Latin expression mobile vulgus (the ‘movable’ or ‘excitable’ crowd). More specifically ‘mob’ was frequently used by an emerging patrician class to describe plebeian disorder in London and, in the process, to help to create its own distinctive patrician ideological boundaries.2

More generally, these sentiments took effect in particular places. Public parks, for example, began to be imbued with the characteristics associated with ‘public civility’. These were spaces where diverse members of ‘the middling sort’ could assert a shared identity. Strangers they may have been, but enemies they were not. Social bonds were

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1 Cited in Brewer 1997, p. 103.
2 Shoemaker 1987, p. 273. See also Shoemaker’s more extended and recent discussion in Shoemaker 2004. For a discussion of the differences between plebeian and patrician culture see Thompson 1974.
forged through difference and unity constructed through styles of dress and modes of speech. Those who did not match the necessary civil requirements were often excluded both symbolically and physically from participating in the new public culture. Respectability became a key word to guarantee access. A person lacking the right credentials could expect to be denied entrance.

Theatre managers, proprietors of pleasure gardens, organisers of public assemblies and members of exhibiting societies took measures... to exclude people they found undesirable. An ambience of ‘social taste’ and ‘social distance’ came to prominence that shunned the common traits of plebeian culture.

I think that the example of Chesterfield is, therefore, a useful starting point in exploring the peculiarities of the capitalist public sphere for at least four reasons. First, it highlights that access to what might be termed as the bourgeois public sphere is often defined by an abstract ideal of ‘rational’ reflection. This ideal is abstract in the sense that an important element of bourgeois ideology elevates the realm of mind as being of prime importance. Here, we discover the pure and cultivated faculty of human experience untouched by the ‘great unwashed’. The mind is transformed into an abstract realm of transcendent thinking, a pure void by which a thousand concrete particulars of bourgeois society can be pieced back together again through the most fantastic of abstract theories. The works of the great bourgeois thinkers such as Locke, Kant, J.S. Mill and Habermas testify to this type of thinking. Thus, perhaps most importantly, bourgeois theory suggests that ‘rational’ reflection is a self-enclosed realm compared to that of other realms such as the economy and politics.

Second, the example of Chesterfield demonstrates quite well the point that the bourgeois public sphere does not exist primarily to open up debate and discussion between people on various issues of public importance. Rather, the bourgeois public sphere exists to close down debate and discussion among those it deems as ‘lawless’, ‘uncultivated’ and ‘incompetent’. One of the main avenues open for the bourgeois public sphere to achieve this is to exactly construct a ‘cultural aesthetic’ of what it means to engage in ‘lawful’, ‘cultivated’ and ‘competent’ discussion. This aesthetic can then be used to denigrate and humiliate those utterances that the bourgeois public sphere wishes to exclude. But, more sinisterly, by constructing an abstract aesthetic of what is deemed to be good debate and discussion, liberal thinkers also defend an ideological form of the capitalist state as a means of regulating those utterances it deems as being ‘unlawful’, ‘uncultivated’, ‘incompetent’, etc.

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3 Sennett 1992, p. 16 ff.
4 Brewer 1997, p. 94.
5 For critical accounts of this type of bourgeois disinterested reflection see Bourdieu 1986; Eagleton 1990; Lloyd and Thomas 1998; McNally 2001; Roberts 2003; Sprinker 1987; Schott 1988.