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Why if at all is the Public Sphere a Useful Concept?

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Summary

The public sphere is in the work of Jürgen Habermas conceived as a neutral social space for critical debate among private persons who gather to discuss matters of common concern in a free, rational and in principle disinterested way. Praised as a normative ideal – especially by the advocates of participatory democracy – and criticised as a working model, the concept of the public sphere has triggered many controversies.

The first part of this paper examines the usefulness of the concept by accentuating the procedural value of its central category – the rational-critical debate. Assuming that the rational public debate is possible and assessing it as highly enriching for democracy, the second part questions the potential of the media to provide a forum for it.

Although Habermas himself saw the media as contributing to the decay of the rational-critical discourse and causing the decline of the public sphere, numerous revisions of the concept, quite the contrary, have recognized the capacity of the media to initiate public discussion and give it a constructive spin. Hopes are high regarding the public service broadcasting and its principle of universal access. The Internet offers a range of still unexplored possibilities.

Key words: public sphere, Jürgen Habermas, rational-critical debate, deliberative democracy, media



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Introduction

The notion of the bourgeois public sphere, celebrated in the works of Jürgen Habermas, inspired the long running discussion, still one of the most popular among the experts and academics in the fields of the media and politics.

The public sphere is in the work of Jürgen Habermas conceived as a social space for the ‘rational-critical debate about public issues conducted by private persons willing to let arguments and not statuses determine decisions’ (Calhoun, 1992: 1). Praised as a normative ideal – especially by the advocates of participatory democracy – and criticised as a working model – the concept of the public sphere triggered many controversies. In this essay I will focus mainly on its central category – rational-critical debate. I will assume that the rational public debate is possible and I will value it as highly enriching for democracy. However, because of the space limitations, I will not closely elaborate on the categories of *rational* or *public* but rather concentrate on its procedural value and the potential settings for its implementation.

I will first expound Habermas’s notion of the bourgeois public sphere. Then I will focus on its critique and revisions, especially on those accounts questioning homogeneous and singular character of the public sphere and consensus as the likely outcome of the debate. I will also briefly refer to the critical voices of those who find this concept of the public sphere utopian and Habermas’s vision of the 18th and 19th century public life idealistic.

Since the idea of the public sphere is closely related to the model of deliberative democracy, I will try to briefly explain the procedural value of deliberation and the features of the public debate as its central category.

In the second part of the essay, I will examine the potential of the media to initiate public debate and provide a forum for it. Public service broadcasting, television debate and the Internet will be examined more closely.

In contrast to Habermas’s idealistic notion of the bourgeois public sphere and the critical view of the declined and distorted contemporary public sphere, I will argue that it is exactly today that ‘ordinary people’ have much better access to public discussion than ever before.

Habermas’s concept of the public sphere

Directed against the absolute will of monarchs, the bourgeois public sphere emerged in the 18th century as a neutral social space independent of the public authority and ‘made up of private people gathering together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state’ (Habermas in Calhoun, 1992: 21). These private citizens debated matters of common interest in ‘a free, rational and (in principle) disinterested way’ (Curran, 2000: 134).

Based on, as Curran (1996) suggests, ‘idealized’ notion of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas developed a normative model of the public sphere as ‘a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed’ (Habermas, 1974: 49). Access to all citizens, as Habermas argues, must be guaranteed. ‘A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body’, contends Habermas (*ibid.*: 49). This ‘public body’ is constituted when citizens ‘confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee

of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest’ (ibid.: 49).

Public opinion, as Habermas uses it here, is not the one that reflects “‘mere opinion” (or arbitrary views) of isolated individuals taken in the aggregate’ (Calhoun, 1992: 17) – today most commonly expressed in opinion polls. The genuine public opinion instead ‘comes to refer more positively to the views held by those who join in rational-critical debate on an issue’ (ibid.: 17).

The public sphere depends both upon the quality of discourse and the quantity of participation. This means that not only should discussion be constituted ‘around rational critical argument’ (Calhoun, 1992: 2) but ‘the more people participate as citizens in politics, the closer one comes to the ideal of a public sphere’ (Schudson, 1992: 147).

However, Habermas’s demand for equal and unrestricted participation is in a way paradoxical. The bourgeois public sphere in its early days was reserved mainly for educated propertied men. Its character was therefore ‘exclusionary’ (Calhoun, 1992: 3). The inclusion of other social groups occurred gradually contributing to the openness of the public sphere but at the same time introducing ‘degeneration in the quality of the discourse’ (ibid.: 3).

The real decline of the public sphere and its ‘structural transformation’, according to Habermas (1989), came with the mass consumption and commodification of culture that was reinforced by the media. Personalized accounts of politics have been diminishing public readiness to take part in critical debates while the new public relations industry ‘engineers consent among the consumers of mass culture’ (Calhoun, 1992: 24). Acclamation, fears Habermas, not critical discourse is what became important (Calhoun, 1992: 26).

The media turn active citizens into passive spectators constructing a pseudo-public sphere: ‘the world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere by appearance only’ (Habermas, 1989: 171 in Calhoun, 1992: 23). Television’s appeal to emotions and the readiness of the press to adapt to the commercial rules of the market caused decay of the critical discourse.

Public sphere revised

The critique of the Habermasian concept of the public sphere amounts to a bulky volume of pages pointing to different aspects of it. I will concentrate here on the two elements I find most controversial: the homogeneity of the unitary public sphere and the consensus as the likely outcome of the debate.

Habermas’s notion of a singular public sphere has been criticized as a utopian ideal that does not consider the differences among those who participate in it (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001). The presumption of homogeneity and a potential to reach consensus underlie his concept. However, discussions among citizens or different social groups may not reach consensus but rather introduce diversity of opinions and views. Living-

stone and Lunt (1994) introduce the ‘oppositional public sphere’ as possible solution. It doesn’t aim for consensus but a ‘negotiated compromise’ (ibid: 26).

John Kean (2000: 60) writes about ‘differently sized, overlapping, and interconnected public spheres’ that vary in nature. He distinguishes between the ‘micro-public spheres’ that operate at the sub-nation-state level, the ‘meso-public spheres’ that gather people at the nation-state level and the ‘macro-public spheres’ that have a global, supra-national character.

Nancy Fraser (1990: 59, as quoted in Livingstone and Lunt, 1994: 24), argues that the public is ‘fragmented into a mass of competing interest groups’. Instead of one public, there are now many that overlap and work in tension with each other (in Sturken and Cartwright, 2001).

Calhoun (1992: 37) suggests that it might be more productive to think of the ‘public sphere as involving a field of discursive connections’. Within this field, according to Calhoun, intensive communication among certain parts would establish clusters that may be organized ‘around issues, categories, persons or basic dynamics of the larger society’ (ibid: 38).

The bulk of criticism is directed towards the Habermasian idealistic vision of the 18th and 19th century public life. The unified public sphere was actually welcoming only white men while other social groups were excluded.

Michael Schudson (1992: 146) refers to the idea of the eighteen and nineteen century public sphere of ‘rational-critical discourse’ as ‘inadequate and incoherent’ (at least in America). James Curran (2000: 139) looks back to the liberal belief that society is homogenous and harmonious and that conflicts may be resolved through the application of reason, which he believes, is an idealist vision.

For reasons of space, I shall set aside the critiques addressing the category of *rational*. The most rational argument, argues Scannell (1989: 159), meaning rhetorically most convincing, doesn’t necessarily lead to the best solution. He calls for ‘reasonable’ instead, as it has the force of the ‘mutually accountable behaviour’ that presupposes cooperation, that is, a ‘willingness to listen, to allow the validity of the other person’s viewpoint and if necessary, a willingness to leave aside what may be the best argument’. This is, however, to be discussed elsewhere.

Does this all mean that the idea of the public sphere, that once might have actually existed, should be disregarded? Not at all. This only means that Habermas’s concept of the bourgeois public sphere is to be evaluated from the perspective of its historical context. Despite the fact that some features of the bourgeois public sphere seem unacceptable for modern democracies, e.g. its exclusionary character, contemporary analyses should recognize how progressive it was at that time. From the perspective of democratic legitimacy, one of the biggest values of the bourgeois public sphere at the time of its emergence was that ‘practical reason was institutionalized through norms of reasoned discourse in which arguments, not status or traditions, were to be decisive’ (Calhoun, 1992: 2). It was ‘the best rational argument and not the identity of the speaker’ (ibid.: 13) that mattered.

However, all the reflections on the contemporary public sphere should recognize the momentum of ‘modernization’ characterised by an ‘increasing social complexity’ (Swanson and Mancini, 1996: 9) and a growing fragmentation.

Even Habermas in his more recent work¹ attempts to revise the original concept according to the existing social circumstances. The notion of the single public coming together to discuss matters of general interest and for the sake of common good is now being replaced by the idea of a ‘more differentiated, pluralistic and organized’ public sphere with ‘public interest groups’ and ‘radical professionals’ as key players who ‘identify, draw attention to and interpret social problems, and propose solutions’ (Curran, 2000: 136).

Deliberative democracy and the public debate

In order to stress the importance of the public sphere as ‘an idea which calls for a rationalization of power through the medium of public discussion among private individuals’ (Habermas, 1974: 55), I’ll briefly refer to the model of deliberative democracy.

Thomas Christiano (1997: 243) defines deliberative democracy as a concept in which ‘democratic decision making ought to be grounded in a substantial process of public deliberation, wherein arguments for and against laws and policies are given in terms of whether they advance the common good of the citizens and the justice of the political society’. According to the theorists of deliberative democracy – and in Habermas’s view – the result of the public deliberation is ‘uncoerced consensus’ (Habermas in Bohman, 1996: 26). As mentioned earlier, this raises one concern. What if the final output is likely to be unbridgeable disagreement or increased diversity of opinions rather than consensus?

Christiano suggests (ibid.: 244 – 245) that the value of public deliberation is not to be looked for only in the results but in the procedure as well. This means that each decision is subject to critical debate which is a value in itself since in the course of it deliberating citizens build mutual respect and concern. The results are in this case justified by the procedure itself, because they are brought about ‘in a certain way’ (Christiano, 1997: 246).

Similarly, Bohman (1996: 27) argues that ‘the best defence of public deliberation is that it is more likely to improve the epistemic quality of the justification for political decisions. When deliberation is carried out in an open public forum, the *quality* of the reasons is likely to improve’.

This procedural perspective, however, does not say when we can judge the process of deliberation as successful. Bohman (1996: 33) suggests that success is not to be measured ‘by the strong requirement’, that is, by a general agreement but ‘by the weaker requirement’ that is that the participants are convinced to the extent they are willing to continue with the dialogue.

¹ ‘Further Reflections on the Public Sphere’ (1992) in C. Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

In other words, deliberation may be considered successful if all citizens involved in a public debate are addressed as equal, if the arguments are expounded in such a way that ‘any other citizen might be able to understand them, accept them, and freely respond to them on his or her own terms’ (Bohman, 1996: 26) and if the ‘participants in the joint activity recognize that they have contributed to and influenced the outcome, even when they disagree with it’ (Bohman, 1996: 33).

Through the concept of deliberative democracy I have tried to briefly explain the importance, procedural value and some of the features of the public debate as its central category. I will not go any deeper into discussing deliberation as a governing ideal since it falls beyond the scope of this essay. However, the question I would like to bring up at this point is related to the public sphere as the setting for public debates and “the social space necessary for democratic deliberation”, (Bohman, 1996: 37). Where is this space to be located in the complex, modern society and what are its features?

Media as a public debate forum

Habermas, in his concept of the public sphere and the critique of its structural transformation, tends to overlook the potential of the mass media to contribute to the public debate by providing a platform for it or by initiating discussions about matters of general concern.

The media are, on the contrary, seen as distorting the public sphere and providing only a false impression of it.

His work, however, started an avalanche of accounts and debates about the ‘normative conception of the contemporary public sphere as a neutral space within society, free of both state and corporate control in which the media should make available information affecting the public good and facilitate a free, open and reasoned public dialogue’ (Curran, 2000: 135). The question that underlies many of them, as Livingstone and Lunt (1994: 9) put it, is ‘How far do the mass media provide a public sphere in which citizens may debate issues in a democratic forum and in which those in power may be held accountable to the public?’.

The media facilitate public discussions by providing a technological and structural forum and, which is even more important, by initiating public discussions and setting the agenda for it. Although this demand for agenda setting may seem unpopular in the light of the political and economical interests that may be driving it, without ‘limiting debate, defining issues, and restricting alternatives, no debate can be rational’ (Schudson, 1992: 156). An unstructured flow of thoughts leads nowhere. ‘It has to be a small set of identifiable, branching alternatives that can be examined reasonably enough one at the time’, argues Schudson (ibid.: 156).

I will focus more closely on the potential of the public service broadcasting (as opposed to the commercial broadcasting), television debate and the Internet to facilitate and initiate a public debate.

Public service broadcasting

In contrast with Habermas who sees television as the cause of the decline of the public sphere, researchers such as Paddy Scannell and Nicholas Garnham argue that it was actually the public service broadcasting that brought the public sphere into existence. The commercial media, on the other hand, have been significantly contributing to the decline of the public sphere.

Recognizing the public service broadcasting as an ‘imperfect realization’ of Habermas’s ideal, Garnham (in Keane, 2000: 55) argues that it is the closest that the modern society can come to establishing a ‘space for a rational and universalistic politics distinct from both economy and the state’.

Scannell (1989: 136) contends that the public service broadcasting has ‘unobtrusively contributed to the democratization of everyday life’. The fundamental commitment of the public service broadcasting is its universal availability, unlike the commercial broadcasters whose primary interest is profit.

The public service broadcasting, according to Scannell, not only enabled universal access to broadcasted programme but gradually came to represent all social groups. It has not always been that any subject can be given airtime. The media agenda has been changing slowly, fighting resistance and pressure. Today’s broadcasting ‘Came to fulfil ... its role as an independent public sphere, as a forum for open discussion of matters of general concern’ (ibid.: 145).

Before the rise of the public service broadcasting, public events had restricted access and were not available to everyone. Broadcasting brought *general* public into existence: ‘public life was equalized in a way that had never before been possible’ (ibid.: 140)

The mixture of the content guaranteed by the public service broadcasting is endangered by “generic programming in which all the material in a particular channel is of the same kind” (ibid.: 139). Generic programming fragments the general public into the taste public that is easily seduced by advertisers. Furthermore, once information turns from the public good into a private commodity, society will be polarised into the information rich and the information poor – not everybody will be able to afford access to information. Commercial broadcasting, therefore, occurs as a threat to the general access and the mixture of the content. The process of ‘*decommodification*’, as Kean (2000: 56) paraphrases Garnham, can happen only through the public service broadcasting.

Scannell criticises the work of Stuart Hall and other media critics that perceive all broadcasting as manipulative and supportive of the dominant ‘economic and political institutions and processes, and of existing structures of class, gender and ethnic relations in capitalist societies’ (Hall et al. 1980; Hall, 1977, 1982 as quoted in Scannell, 1989: 156). The ‘ideological effect’ thesis is a ‘one dimensional critique’ that reads all outputs of broadcasting in the same way, argues Scannell (ibid.: 157).

Habermas’s concept of the general public has encountered heavy criticism just like his idea of the unified public. Listing the main problems the public service broadcasting has been faced with today – such as the questions of financing, legitimacy and technological change in the light of the rapid expansion of cable and satellite television and

computer networks – Keane (2000: 58) warns that television will have to undergo the process of ‘the gradual recognition of the fragmentation of mass audiences into different taste public’ as radio did years ago. By which standards can one indeed measure the taste of the general public? The idea that the commercial broadcasting encourages pluralism through its multiple choice of specialized programmes, rather than endangers democratic principles by widening the gap between the rich and the poor, is also worth giving a second thought.

Television debate

In the light of the controversy between the public service broadcasting and the commercial media, it may be useful to take a look at the television debate as a genre that may epitomize the idea of people getting together to discuss matters of general interest. It is present both in the public service and the commercial sectors – but with different aims and effects.

According to Habermas (1992: 164, in Örnebring, 2003: 504), television debates are only a semblance of public discussion but in reality they are consumer-oriented and harmful for the concept of the public sphere.

Örnebring (2003) describes how current affairs debate programs in Sweden have been continuously changing. It is interesting to take a look how the role of hosts and experts has been shifting in line with an increased participation of lay public. It is also worth noting how the nature of the genre has been gradually changing. In the first stage, the so called ‘courteous public debate’ (1956 – 1967), the programs were hosted mainly by politicians, representatives of different interest groups, media experts and academics, and the discussion was likely to end with a consensus. Lay participants in these debates were uncommon. The role of television in the public sphere was seen to be ‘mainly educational’ (ibid: 511). The ‘critical public debate’ (1968–83) marked the second stage which welcomed lay people as active participants. Journalists appeared as mediators between the experts and the studio audiences whom they often approached in a patronizing way. ‘The orientation towards consensus was replaced by an orientation towards conflict and confrontation’, notes Örnebring (ibid: 513). The ‘popular public debate’ of the third period (1984–96) started appreciating conflict not for the sake of criticism but for the sake of high ratings and attracting audience. The role of the host became central. They were given celebrity status. The issues ranged from trivia to high politics. Controversy was celebrated just for the sake of it. The genre was totally subjugated to commercial rules of the market, although lay people gained better access to the programme than ever before. It is hard here not to recall the Habermasian paradox of the inversed reciprocity between the extended participation and the quality of the discourse and his arguments about the decline of the public sphere.

However, other accounts about the genre point out different effects. Sturken and Cartwright (2001: 182) for example believe that different television debate programmes contribute to the public sphere in that they ‘create a forum for contemporary issues and thus promote the formation of public spheres’.

For Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt (1994: 101) participatory programming, such as audience discussion programs, has the potential to construct a particular relationship between the lay participants and the experts: 'Both are presented as interested parties but as knowing different things in different ways'. They analyse the changes in the setting of these programs that bridge the gap between the alleged incompetence of 'ordinary people' and the elitism of experts. These changes range from technical things, such as the seating arrangement (the experts are seated among the studio audience, instead on a raised platform) to the structure of the program, which became rather loose, and the role of the host who tends to address the studio audience in a more sympathetic manner and is more hostile, more provocative towards the experts. This type of programme encourages formation of the critical discourse and consensus in the public, bridging the communication gap between the 'life-world' and the 'system world', something that also Habermas has been striving for.

Internet

The growth of the Internet and its rapid expansion has led to extensive researches of the possible implications it might have for democracy. The bulk of it has been addressing interactivity as the main element to change the nature of citizens' participation in politics and public life in general. The advocates of the so-called 'electronic democracy' (Street, 2001: 214) argue that the Internet may either improve the existing form of democracy or revive the ancient form of direct democracy. Summarizing the arguments for electronic democracy, Street (2001: 217) notes that the Internet may offer solutions for the problems that have been obstructing political participation – 'time, size, knowledge and access'. The Internet has overcome the boundaries of time and space and it is no longer necessary for citizens to be physically present to contribute to a discussion. The limited political knowledge of ordinary citizens and the unequal distribution of resources, which has been hampering their capacity to get involved in the process of deliberation (ibid.: 217) may no longer be a problem.

The Internet has been recognized as a platform for public deliberation and the solution for other problems modern democracy may encounter: 'The net seems to provide a way around the practical problems posed by democracy, whatever its form; citizens can exercise their vote, deliberate on public policy or participate directly' (ibid.: 218).

Curran refers to Negroponte (1996, in Curran, 2000: 137) who thinks of cyberspace as generating a new world order based on international communication and popular empowerment. Keane (2000: 67) suggest that the 'internet stimulates the growth of macro public spheres' (Keane, 2000: 67) since one segment of the world population uses the Internet to 'generate controversies' (ibid: 67) about matters of common concern with other members of the virtual community. It is the forum for discussion or interaction between the members of special interest groups, *ad hoc* pressure groups or cyber protesters. Websites provide infrastructure for deliberation, which may eventually lead to real actions. In that, sense, the Internet opens up some options for the development of the international civil society.

However, the critique of the electronic democracy rests on diametrically opposite assumptions: ‘democracy involves deliberation and dialogue in the formation of collective goals, rather than the aggregation of individual preferences’ (ibid.: 219). And the Internet is all about registering preferences. People in most parts of the world do not have access to it, while the very idea of electronic participation is based on the assumption of the universal and cheap access (Street, 2001: 220). Furthermore, Curran (2000: 137) argues that the fastest-growing branch of the Internet is e-commerce which only shows that the relations of power shape new technologies and not the other way around.

What distinguishes the Internet from the other media, besides its basic technological characteristic, is its rather unstructured form of communication and the absence of mediators which is an issue of great controversy when, for instance, television discussion programs are addressed.

Despite the professional, technological and structural constraints and the need to adjust to the rules of the market – which sometimes proves not to be particularly rewarding for the quality of discussion – the media have the potential to facilitate public discussion.

Curran (2000: 141) hopes that democratic media can bridge the gap between the fragmented social groups and the universally shared arena of general discourse. The specialist media sector should cater for different audiences and enable them to debate issues of ‘social identity, group interest, political strategy and normative understanding on their own terms’ (ibid.: 140). These media should foster discussion within multiple and mutually overlapping public spheres. The general media sector should reach the general, heterogeneous public in such a way that ‘different groups in society come together and engage in reciprocal debate’ (ibid.: 141). The general media should be sensitive to public initiatives and pursue response from governments if the civil sector requires it.

Conclusion

The public sphere is an ideal model that has probably never existed. As Calhoun (1992: 39) remarks: ‘Habermas constitutes historical category of the public sphere and attempts to draw from it a normative ideal’. This normative ideal of an independent social space where private citizens join in a rational-critical debate to discuss matters of common interest has been scrutinized as a working model. Doubts have been raised about its singular and homogenous nature, rationality of arguments, quality of discourse and the probability that debate will reach a consensus.

Critics have been also attacking the historical category of the bourgeois public sphere of the 18th and 19th century. They have been pointing out its exclusionary character. However, despite the problematic elements from the perspective of contemporary democracies, critics should recognize its progressive nature at that time. For instance, the idea that the power of the rational argument should enjoy primacy over the status and the identity of the speaker. Hence, to properly judge the bourgeois public sphere, it should be examined within its own historical context.

Numerous revisions of Habermas's concept lead to different accounts about the multiple, mutually overlapping public spheres, accounts that recognize the complexity of the modern society. Some of these accounts recognize the media as a chance for the public sphere. Habermas thinks they have been contributing to its decline. The quality of the debate has been damaged by the commodification of culture and the commercialization of the discourse.

In contrast with this critical view about the distorted contemporary public sphere, it is claimed that it is exactly today that the 'ordinary people' have a much better access to public discussion than ever before. Habermas's concept seems paradoxical: he wants everybody to participate but this damages the quality of discussion.

In modern democracies the media do have the potential to initiate public debate and provide a forum for it. The features of this mediated public sphere and the role of journalism, lay public and experts within that sphere, depend on the notion of the role of the media in democracy. A significant contribution to the public sphere lies in the capacity of the media to structure public discussion and give it a constructive spin. High hopes are entertained regarding the public service broadcasting and its principle of universal access as opposed to the commercial media with their generic programming. The Internet offers a range of still unexplored possibilities.

The concept of the public sphere and the model of deliberative democracy are inseparable. What underlies them is the rational-critical debate. Its biggest value lies in the procedure itself. Each decision is a subject of a critical debate, which is a value in itself, and the results are justified by the procedure.

Habermas's notion of the public sphere, despite all its features that simply lack the sense of reality, is a wonderful contribution to the theory of the human society: people are encouraged to participate in a process of deliberation and access is guaranteed to everybody; they are respected as equals and are expected to behave in a disinterested way contributing to the common good; power elites are held accountable to the independent public body.

Hence, if we find the model of deliberative democracy rewarding, if we think of the reasonable public debate as contributing to the ultimate goal of democracy – the biggest happiness for the greatest number of people – then we certainly must recognize the normative concept of the public sphere – together with its numerous adaptations and modification – as useful. The real challenge for democracy is how to measure up to this ideal as much as possible.

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