

Once upon a time in the west: Or, the rise and fall of the (bourgeois) public sphere, as told by Jürgen Habermas

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Abstract

Jürgen Habermas' famous description of the public sphere, and its central place in liberal democracy, has unfortunately become a normative model, both within arts and politics. However, as this article argues, Habermas' proposition is not only historical, but was retrograde from the outset, and now functions more a blacking of political action than an enabler, and must be contested in terms of counterpublic formations and experiences, as well as criticized from its insistence on rationality and negotiation in an era of post-political consensus within the former public sphere.

Keywords

public sphere

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The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all else as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere

regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without precedent: people's public use of their reason. (Habermas 1989: 27)

Even though they have been enriched or contested over and over again, there are normative elements that continue to endure, at least in the theoretical history of civil society in Europe, regardless of changing political and social situations. That a citizen could only be someone who held political responsibility (be it in a community or city, in an estate, in a territory or state, or as the prince) and that a citizen could only be someone who exerted power (be it over oneself or over others or alternately with others): in this formal generality, the meaning – derived from constitution of the Greek polis – of a *polités*, a *civis*, a citizen, a *citoyen*, or indeed a *Bürger* is never lost. To this extent, *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (civil society) and its equivalents are as traditional as they are modern. (Koselleck 2002: 208–09)

In this sense, all those books and articles mourning the loss or disappearance of the public sphere in fact responds to, if in the mode of misrecognition, something important about the public – that it is not there. The public sphere is structurally elsewhere, neither lost nor in need of recovery or rebuilding but defined by its resistance to being made present. (Keenan 1993: 135)

In an article titled 'Three *bürgerliche* worlds', Reinhart Koselleck, outlines a method of comparative semantics, investigating the use of the term civil society in three different, bourgeois societies, England, France and Germany. Although this text is, as mentioned, mainly a methodological and investigation, it illustrates the emergence of the historical and political concept that is the topic of this article, the public sphere, and its role in the construction of civil society. What is immediately noticeable, is how Koselleck locates it not only in terms of history and genealogy, but also in terms of geography and territory: the three major nation states of Western Europe. Second, Koselleck points out certain genealogies *and* differences of the concept of citizen and civil society. Partly, there is the ancient link between citizenry and property ownership, and partly there are the linguistic inscriptions of, and upon, experiences, and thus politics. There are always contingencies according to language and location, and therefore various ways in which the history of the citizen, or the *bürger* and so on, develops and, in turn, posits and constructs the particularities of the given public sphere within the given nation state.

The public sphere is not only dependent on the given language and location, the history and the nation, but also part and parcel *of* the history of the nation, as well as integral *to* the writing of national history, of narrating the nation. It is not a universal, shared historical concept, or for that matter an easily defined and analysable historical object or fact. It is as much historical and national myth as it is fact, as much story as it is history. It must therefore be understood as storytelling, as a political imaginary, and analysed historically as well as presently through its stories, or if you will, theories. Since it cannot be limited to a single specific mechanism or space, it must be read through the different theoretical conceptions – theories that

linguistically produce social actualities, and as such are as much prescriptive as they are descriptive.

In other words, the story of the bourgeois public sphere (and of its apparent demise) must be told the stories about it, through its historization and theorization. The main theory being not only the work of Jürgen Habermas, both in its original form and later modifications, but also its critical reception. Jürgen Habermas' sociological and philosophical investigation of the emergence of the so-called 'public sphere', was first published in Germany in 1962, and was, crucially, posited as an 'inquiry into a category of Bourgeois society', as well as into its structural transformation. In other words located historically (to nineteenth century), geographically (again, Britain, France and Germany), and finally in terms of class (the bourgeoisie), but also actualized in terms of the later developments and permutations of the public sphere in twentieth-century mass democracy and consumer societies, in what was basically a story of a demise, more of which later. Although Habermas clearly moved towards the political thoughts of Kant, he had originally planned to submit his work to Horkheimer at the Frankfurt School, and he certainly shared a lot of Horkheimer and Adorno's skepticism of mass society and downright disdain for popular culture. As one of Habermas' later interlocutors, Craig Calhoun, wryly remarks 'Habermas tends to judge the eighteenth century by Locke and Kant, the nineteenth century by Marx and Mill, and the twentieth century by the typical television viewer' (1992: 33)

Calhoun writes these words in the early 1990s, just after the late translation of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* into English, and thus a renewed reception and critique, mainly in the United States, when Habermas' account was most often categorized and criticized for being normative and idealist, and seen as

basically a reconstruction of the ideals and self-understanding of the emergent bourgeois class in the nineteenth century – positing a rational subject capable of public speaking outside of itself, *in* society and *of* society. Thus the separation between *the private* (the family and the house: property), *the state* (institutions, laws) and *the public* (the political and the cultural). According to Habermas, the public sphere is exactly a sphere in-between individuals and the state, a kind of buffer zone, and is made up of three basic features, political deliberation, culture and the market place. These features or spaces, if you will, are not clearly demarcated, but nonetheless placed inside a given society, in the sense that they are strategically placed in between the private realm of economic exchange and family relations on the one side, and sovereign state power and police actions on the other. It is thus a space that mediates between these two more clearly demarcated entities, and is as such the space for public debate in a political sense. In this way, the bourgeois public sphere is modelled on the ancient Greek polis, where only those who were exempt from the struggle of daily life and labour could be understood as free and thus capable of political speech for the common good, not just self-interest. Public speech is always, then, outside individual concern, outside economy and family in the sense that it is above it. Only the father of the household can participate in public matters. In the modern version, however, this meant an exclusion of specific concerns rather than subjects from public debate as well as a focus on rational argument. Excluded from politics, was, in effect, economy in the form of labour relations, and by extension class struggle, as well as family relations that were confined to the private realm, basically gender relations, domestic work, sexuality and child rearing.

It is perhaps, then, no coincidence that Habermas, used the metaphor of a ‘blueprint’ to describe this historical model. In discussing the public sphere’s social

structures, Habermas outlines what he calls the basic blueprint, by which he means a sketch of the new public sphere that was set up in between the private realm and state power in early bourgeois societies. But the phrase is very telling; a blueprint is not (only) a sketch, but rather a matrix from which forms are produced, such as in the printing of a book. It is moulding, setting into practice. The blueprint is, thus, that which is set in motion not to describe society, or a category here of such as the public sphere, but in order to produce specific social relations, ways of doing and thinking socially, culturally and politically. Moreover, a blueprint does not emerge organically from social structures, but is imposed upon them in order to configure or, possibly, reconfigure them. The important issue is one of spatial formation, namely, the in-betweenness of the public sphere and its mediation between the political, matters of state, and the non-political, labour and gender. What I have called its status of a buffer zone. Additionally, there is the issue of the placement of this spatialization of the concept, as inside, never outside society, either suggesting an emergence from within the social, or, more accurately, that the social is framed by certain boundaries, both real and symbolic. First, the notion of the buffer zone: In geopolitical terms, a buffer zone indicates a zonal area designed to separate two other, opposing areas, such as nations or tribes. The buffer zone may even itself be a nation, but its purpose is to alleviate tension or war between irreconcilable forces or interests – the same way Habermas views state power as opposed to private being. It is for this reason that the public sphere – as the buffer zone – by definition must strive towards consensus and equilibrium, as well as towards preventing the two areas from blurring or merging.

Indeed, within this way of thinking, the apparent ‘crisis’ of the public sphere, as it is seen by Habermas and some of his followers, has exactly to do with either side of the equation dominating too much, or with the space of deliberation itself, the

buffer zone, diminishing or even disappearing. In the latter case, the public sphere is experienced in the form of a loss, with telling titles such as Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man* (1977) or Michael Sorkin's *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (1992), both books that see commercialization and mass-mediation as the main transformer of the (bourgeois) public sphere, but without questioning its delimitations; its inclusions and exclusions. But many other culprits has been mentioned over the years, first and foremost Communism, where the public sphere literally was removed as the organizer of public opinion and political deliberation: all space may have been public in the sense of belonging to the people, and private property made common, but the role of overseeing the state apparatus did not belong to the public, but was, rather, a matter for the Party as the revolutionary avant-garde of the people, and as a supposedly scientific instrument of measure of the state, of the state of the State. In the post-Communist condition, however, this model no longer poses a threat or even counter model to the bourgeois public sphere and its monopoly on thinking civil society. Instead commercialization and surveillance are seen as blurring the boundaries between private and public, and as such threatening the effectiveness of the public sphere.

It is thus hardly surprising the main criticism of Habermas are not so much based on the later transformations, and, perhaps, betrayals, of the model and its democratic ideals, but rather on the limitations of these ideals, on the exclusions of the model itself. In the Habermasian model only certain spaces and certain experiences can be formulated as political, regardless of *how* they are experienced. It was very much a question of *when* and *where*: not at home and after work. That is, a separation in both time and space. The notion of the buffer is always to separate,

obviously, and never to bring the different spheres closer – and as such the buffer is not only a location for politics, but rather for rendering certain things, emotions and economies, *political* and others decidedly *non-political*. It is thus not only enabling political speech, but also hindering it, blocking it from becoming public. And this was precisely the point of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's early, Marxist critique of the Habermasian model, tellingly entitled *Public Sphere and Experience* ([1972] 1993). Their claim was, that the exclusion of the private and the spaces of production (i.e. work and school and so on) from the term public, was in fact an act of blockage of experiences, of depoliticization of certain areas from the sphere of politics that was public space. Instead, they tried to posit spaces of production and reproduction as political, as discursive spaces of experience, and thus as in public spaces, in the sense that they are organizing collective experience. By placing the emphasis on the notion of experience, Negt and Kluge do not only point to the inequality of access to the public sphere in Habermasian terms, it also allows them to analyse modes of behaviour and possibilities for speech and action in different spaces. And they argue for a specific, but plural, public sphere that can be termed 'proletarian' in opposition to the normative 'bourgeois' public sphere, where commonplaces become public spaces.

This proliferation of spaces of to be considered public or to be publicized, so to speak, not only brings antagonisms into the light, that the bourgeois public sphere tried to shade and even hide, but also leads to a fragmentation of the very idea of public space as one kind of place, as one specific location (even when it exists in a limited number of forms). In opposition to the normative, and very exclusionary, stand a number of other public formations, or what has also been termed *counterpublics*. Counterpublics can be understood as particular parallel formations of

a minor or even subordinate character where other or oppositional discourses and practices can be formulated and circulated. Where the classic bourgeois notion of the public sphere claimed universality and rationality, counterpublics often claims the opposite, and in concrete terms often entails a reversal of existing spaces into other identities and practices, most famously as in the employment of public parks as cruising areas in gay culture. Here, the architectural framework, set up for certain types of behaviour, remains unchanged, whereas the usage of this framework is drastically altered: acts of privacy are performed in public (Chauncey:1996).

According to Michael Warner, who, in a more recent account emerging from queer theory rather than the analysis of class composition, counterpublics has many of the same characteristics as normative or dominant publics – existing as imaginary address, a specific discourse and/or location, and involving circularity and reflexivity – and are therefore always already as much *relational* as they are *oppositional*. The notion of ‘self-organization’, for example, in recent art history and activist vocabulary is most often an oppositional term, and certainly one filled with credibility, is thus not itself a counterpublic. Indeed, self-organization is a distinction of any public formation: that it constructs and posits itself as a public through its specific mode of address. Rather, the counterpublic is a conscious mirroring of the modalities and institutions of the normative public, but in effort to address other subjects and indeed other imaginaries: ‘Counterpublics are “counter” [only] to the extent that they try to supply different ways of imagining stranger sociability and its reflexivity; as publics, they remain oriented to stranger circulation in a way that is not just strategic but constitutive of membership and its affects’ (Warner 2002: 121–22).

That is, spaces that share some of the same organizational features as classic public formations, such as clubs, groupings, publications, but for other or opposite

aims: *other spaces for other subjectivities*. Historically, these were of course the public formations of the counter-culture and new social movements. We can therefore only use the notion of public in a plural sense, as multiple, coexistent publics – historical (residues), actual (present) and potential (emerging). It must, however, be added that the notion of publics and counterpublics relates to the notion of public as a (mainly) historical notion, a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century concept based on specific ideas of subjectivity and citizenship, that cannot be so easily translated into the modular and hybrid societies of late global capital, into the postmodern as opposed to emerging modern era. Indeed, it can be argued that ‘the’ public sphere and its counter spaces, in its historical, singular form, may not even be an adequate term to describe contemporary forms of representational politics (in art and culture) and political democracy (in democracy and its others).

Rather, the bourgeois notion of the public, and its adjacent counterpublics, appear to us in the form of a phantom, as Bruce Robbins has suggested (1993). That the public does not have any solid ground or placement, but rather an *afterlife*, a spectre-like presence. As a phantom it exists as an experience of loss, of something that may never have been existent, as Tom Keenan suggests in Robbins’ critical anthology. It acts as an empty signifier that can produce political subjects in a specific way, both in terms of placement (space, citizenship, class) and gender, as being included only by limiting one’s lived experience and adopting rational deliberation as form of speech. The idea of the phantom becomes no less haunting, naturally, when employed as a model in contexts where it does not even have a history of affirmation, subsummation and/or contestation – as mentioned in the beginning, the bourgeois public sphere is not only a historical notion, but also located within certain nation states, within certain national histories, and not others. Just as it must be pluralized,

the public sphere cannot be generalized, but must be analysed, whether as history, phantasmagoric myth or both, locally, in each case, in each nation state.

Now, Habermas' later response to his critics and followers alike – printed in Calhoun's above-mentioned volume – acknowledges some of these critiques, as well as those from feminist theory, mainly Carol Pateman (and in the anthology itself, Nancy Fraser), but makes them into issues of vicinity, of deferred (possible) inclusions, and thus, positive transformations of the public sphere (1992: 421–61). For Habermas, inclusions of other (political) subjects into the public are positive transformations of the sphere, whereas bureaucracy and marketization are the negative transformations. However, the very idea of the political remains unchanged. That is, the ideality of the 'original' conception of publicness and thus democracy are not questioned, but rather seen as under threat by later transformations, and the separation between what he terms *system* and *life-world*, with the first category indicating the state, the media and capital, although without offering a definition of a concept of power, and the latter indicating personal, social relations and interactions – basically what Negt and Kluge would surely have called collective experience – and, hopefully, a space for communicative action. This split, though, is a later, unfortunate transformation of the public sphere, and *not*, as Negt and Kluge, would have claimed, to be seen as an integral part of the model itself.

Here, Habermas' ideas become muddy, not to say unsatisfactory, especially when he acknowledges Foucault's theories of discourse and 'otherness' through the introduction of the term exclusion, but without thinking of system in terms of governmentality and subjugation, but rather as a split from the life-world which cannot be overcome, and as such borders more towards the system theory of Niklas Luhman, as well as the cultural pessimism of Adorno and the Frankfurt school.

Second, Habermas still maintains that political subjectivity must take on certain form of publicness, regardless of whether these are alien to the specific identity and placement, simply in order to *become* political. In other words: a separation between private being and sense of self on the one hand, and political agency and action on the other. Although Habermas dutifully notes Carol Pateman's critique of the bourgeois public sphere as paternalistic and masculinist in its articulations and separations between private and public, and acknowledges its structuring significance (1998). He nonetheless claims that feminism, along with class struggle, has been able to transform the public sphere from within, and is, obviously, a positive transformation in the advance of universal democracy, and transforms the specificity of the *bourgeois public sphere* into the generality of a *political public sphere*. But if such discourses lie outside of the bourgeois conception of political subjectivity and speech, how can it be from *within*? Is it not, rather, from *outside*? And can such 'new' political subjectivities arrive on the scene, and make their public claims without changing the structure itself?

As Habermas notes, this was, surely, more possible for the labour movement, simply because it merely expanded 'public' space into the workplace, politicizing and publicizing it, so to say. But this was done without any alterations between the fundamental separation between the private (in terms of the home and family), and the public (in terms of representational politics; parties and unions). However, as feminist theory puts it, this split is not only fundamental, but also foundational, and since the bourgeois sense of privacy hinges on the conjugal family, any publicization and thus politicization of the private sphere cannot be done without undoing the very split between private and public, sense of self and political speech, lived experience and political space. Herein lies the radicality of the feminist critique of the bourgeois

public sphere and its version of democracy, that it eradicates the very foundations upon which it is constructed, simply by making the claim: the personal is political. Which is, of course, quite a different statement than saying all men are created equal...

Additionally, there is the issue of inclusion, of political recognition, and how so-called 'new' social movements differed from the centralization and universalization of class struggle within the historical labour movements. First of all, there is the question of whether 'rational' argument is always the desired, if required, mode of address? Second, the question is whether all social movements really strive for inclusion as the form of recognition, and if recognition is always the goal? Or, put in other words, whether recognition is equivalent to autonomy? These are, naturally, to large a set of questions to be answered at length here, but let me just suggest that new social movements, from the queer movement to the squatters movement, always involve moments of inclusion and exclusion, and not only those given by society, by specific contingencies, but also tactically: moments of exodus always alternate with movements of publicness. There are always political moments of retraction, invisibility and disappearance from the public sphere as much as there are moments of presentation and publication, which is something that is not recognized in Habermas', and many others, theory of politics. Indeed, this seems to be shared by one of Habermas' foremost detractors, Chantal Mouffe. Even though radical politics are always of inclusion for Mouffe, she does, however, diverge strongly from Habermas on the issue of rational speech, and has instead argued for the irrational's foundational placement in the political, and therefore that political speech must strive towards the agonistic rather than the consensual (2002: 87–96).

The issue of rational speech or not, of the public use of reason, becomes crucial when we try to situate, not only Habermas' primary account of the bourgeois public sphere and its transformations, but also his later 'further reflections' and their formulations and transformations. Where his book on the subject was, as noted, published in 1962, that is, during the period of reconstruction of the liberal democratic Western Germany and its *Wirtschaftswunder*, his modifications were published in 1992, just after the fall of the wall and the subsequent German reunification. Indeed, Habermas professes a certain optimism for democracy and a political public sphere, what he refers to as a 'less pessimistic assessment' (1992: 457). Despite the warning against a loss of a sense of place in the information age, and, we presume, globalization, Habermas sees a great, positive transformation going on as well, namely in the public's use of reason in the former GDR, which led to its demise and the peaceful overthrow of the Communist regime. While Habermas is undoubtedly correct in noting how self-organized groups, what has also been termed new social movements, was pivotal to the political changes in GDR, it is also crucial to see what happened to these movements and their claims, not only in the long run, but also in the short run from 1989 through the German reunification the following year, and thus around the time Habermas made his reflections.

As Peter Uwe Hohendahl has pointed out, there was no real unification, but rather that one nation ceased to exist, and a number of East German republics becoming integrated into the constitution and institutions of the Federal Republic of Germany, the BRD (1995: 27–55). There was to be no new public sphere or culture, but rather the implementation of old, phantom public sphere. And the work of the new social movements was to be quickly overwritten by another narrative, not only that of reunification, but also in their crushing defeat at the East German parliamentary

elections in early 1990 with the massive electoral victory of the newly constructed version of the old (West) German Christian democrats, the CDU. As if a public sphere could only be articulated in this specific way, in the liberal tradition, that became synonymous with the voice and vision of reason. And hence there was to be no new East German constitution, no alternative models of democracy and participation, but only the rationale of joining the BRD system, hoping that this would lead to its life-world being installed as well, hoping that form will always produce the same content. Now, *that* equation, was never to happen, due to different histories and contingencies, but the formal categories of the political sphere are possible, but its supposed content always already a phantom – *the phantom of liberty*.

Finally, the argument of reason has not only been contested by political theory, such as the one propagated by Mouffe, nor by modes of consumption and mass-medialization, but also from within the discipline of politics itself. Since the early 1990s, that is, the post-Communist era, we have not only seen the victory of liberal democracy and the market, but also the rise of right-wing populism and nationalism. This, obviously, is no public use of reason, but rather of unreason, of passion and fantasy. This was manifest not only in the Yugoslavian War of the 1990s, but also within the former west, and, strikingly, within the former bastions of rational, social democracy such as Austria, Denmark, Holland. And subsequently in the Baltic States, in Poland and Hungary, as well as in the blind mirror states that are Croatia and Serbia. Again, it would be important not to generalize these events and possible political responses to them, but rather to always analyse them as specific, as contingent on national histories and stories. For instance, working mainly on the Austrian case, Chantal Mouffe has analysed right-wing populism as a direct consequence of the Habermasian model of rational consensus, as its unconscious,

almost (2005: 63–68). In response, Mouffe has suggested a certain normalization of these parties, which would lead to their diminished attraction when they are seen as ‘normal’ politicians rather than agents of radical transformation. However, such a normalization has several effects. Almost all over Europe, right-wing populism is not only stronger than before, but also more integrated into the political landscape and institutional frameworks of society and the European Union. These parties are not only marginalized, and, presumably, dangerously exciting, but also fully capable of normalizing their nationalistic and xenophobic views and values, both by participating in coalitions and governments, or even, as in the case of Hungary, running governments and changing the constitution. It is thus clear, that rather than any sense of disillusion with their policies setting in, we have seen an institutionalization of their anti-immigrant nationalism, and a normalization of their more or less openly racist discourse in all layers of society. But again, these cases must be analysed in their historic specificity, including the contingencies of political regimes, their transformations or demises, as well as well as the forms and uses of their phantasmagoric public spheres and cultures. However, what is evident, is that the political structures of liberal democracy and the European Union are now fully willing and able to include, and, if you will, mainstream, the far right, hence the relative muted European response to the regime change in Hungary as opposed to the moral outrage that greeted the advance of the Freedom Party in Austria in the 1990s. Moreover, where right-wing populism can be easily integrated into neo-liberal hegemony, any attempt at political from a populist left, such as currently in Greece, is met with a wall of resistance and rejection from all other EU governments, despite their otherwise claimed placement on the left or right spectrum of parliamentary politics, establishing, in effect, what Tariq Ali has accurately coined *the extreme*

centre, allowing for no political changes on the systemic level (2015). It is, today, not that we have lost public space, nor that we have ‘no sense of place’, as Habermas would have it, but rather that there cannot be any – central, political – *place of sense*.

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