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Critical Notes on Habermas's Theory of the Public Sphere

By Simon Susen

Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to examine Habermas's account of the transformation of the public sphere in modern society. More specifically, the study aims to demonstrate that, whilst Habermas's approach succeeds in offering useful insights into the structural transformation of the public sphere in the early modern period, it does not provide an adequate theoretical framework for understanding the structural transformation of public spheres in late modern societies. To the extent that the gradual differentiation of social life manifests itself in the proliferation of multiple public spheres, a critical theory of public normativity needs to confront the challenges posed by the material and ideological complexity of late modernity in order to account for the polycentric nature of advanced societies. With the aim of showing this, the paper is divided into three sections. The first section elucidates the sociological meaning of the public/private dichotomy. The second section scrutinizes the key features of Habermas's theory of the public sphere by reflecting on (i) the concept of the public sphere, (ii) the normative specificity of the bourgeois public sphere, and (iii) the structural transformation of the public sphere in modern society. The third section explores the most substantial shortcomings of Habermas's theory of the public sphere, particularly its inability to explain the historical emergence and political function of differentiated public spheres in advanced societies.

INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this paper is to examine Habermas's account of the transformation of the public sphere in modern society (see, in particular, Habermas ([1962] 1989; 1992; and 1995). In the light of Habermas's communication-theoretic analysis of historical development, the transformation of the public sphere in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cannot be dissociated from the rise of

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the modern era. This paper aims to demonstrate that, although Habermas's approach succeeds in offering useful insights into the structural transformation of the public sphere in the early modern period, it does not provide an adequate theoretical framework for understanding the structural transformation of public spheres in late modern societies. The gradual differentiation of late modern social life manifests itself in the proliferation of multiple public spheres, and hence a critical theory of public normativity needs to face up to the challenges posed by the material and ideological complexity of late modernity in order to account for the polycentric nature of advanced societies.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section briefly elucidates the sociological meaning of the *public/private dichotomy*. Given that the distinction between the public and the private is of central importance in social and political thought, it is worth shedding light on its normative significance. The second section scrutinizes the key features of *Habermas's theory of the public sphere* by reflecting on (i) the concept of the public sphere, (ii) the normative specificity of the bourgeois public sphere, and (iii) the structural transformation of the public sphere in modern society. The third section explores the most substantial *shortcomings* of Habermas's theory of the public sphere, notably its inability to explain the historical emergence and political function of differentiated public spheres in advanced societies.

I. THE PUBLIC / PRIVATE DICHOTOMY

To reiterate, the main purpose of this paper is to examine Habermas's account of the transformation of the public sphere in modern society. Before analyzing the Habermasian approach to the public sphere in more detail in the second and third sections of this essay, this introduction shall be concerned with the distinction between the public and the private sphere, which is generally referred to as the "public/private dichotomy" (see, for example, Butt & Langdridge 2003, Condren 2009, Cutler 1997, Geuss 2001, Ossewaarde 2007, Rabotnikof 1998, Steinberger 1999, and Weintraub & Kumar 1997).

(i) The Historicity of the Public / Private Dichotomy

The historicity of the public/private dichotomy manifests itself in the various meanings attached to the notions of the private and the public in different societal contexts. "The Enlightenment category thus is different from its classical Greek ancestor, just as it is different from its transformed contemporary descendant" (Calhoun 1992b: 6). In ancient Greek thought, the distinction between the private and the public was used to indicate the way

in which society was divided clearly into two different spheres. According to this view, the sphere of the *polis* was strictly separated from the sphere of the *oikos*: whereas the former described a *public* sphere based on *open* interactions between free citizens in the political realm, the latter designated a *private* sphere founded on *hidden* interactions between free individuals in the domestic realm (see Habermas [1962] 1989: 3).

Whilst, at first glance, these two spheres might have appeared to be relatively autonomous, they were in fact *mutually dependent*: the power structures of the private sphere were intimately intertwined with the power structures of the public sphere. "Status in the *polis* was...based upon status as the unlimited master of an *oikos*" (ibid.). Hence, just as the freedom of autonomous citizens in the public sphere rested on their private autonomy as masters of their domestic environment, the autonomy of masters in the domestic sphere reinvigorated their freedom in the public sphere. Paradoxically, the relative autonomy of the private and the public was contingent upon their reciprocal determinacy. Given the structural interdependence of the two spheres, the public/private *polarity* can be conceived of as a public/private *reciprocity*. The socio-historical analysis of the public/private dichotomy is essential in that it enables us to explore the *material and ideological contingency* of the public/private reciprocity, which is rooted in the spatiotemporal specificity of every society.

First, the material contingency of the public/private dichotomy becomes evident when analyzing *different societal manifestations* of its historical variability. Different societies produce different *forms* of public and private life. The empirical relationship between the public and the private is malleable and thus varies over time and between societies. The spatiotemporal specificity of every *social reality* does not permit us to reduce the public/private dichotomy to a pattern of typological universality. Patterns of structural differentiation between the public and the private vary between societies.

Second, the ideological contingency of the public/private dichotomy comes to the fore when examining *different conceptual representations* of its historical variability. Different societies produce different *discourses* about the nature of public and private life. The symbolic relationship between the public and the private is always reconstructable and hence varies over time and between societies. The spatiotemporal specificity of every *social ideology* does not allow us to reduce the public/private dichotomy to a pattern of typological universality. The public/private dichotomy is discursively constructed and symbolically negotiated in multiple ways. Different conceptions of the world create different meanings of the world. Patterns of symbolic differentiation between the public and the private vary between societies.

In short, the malleability of the public/private dichotomy derives from

the material and ideological specificity of each society.[1] One of the questions arising out of a socio-historical understanding of the public/private dichotomy can be phrased as follows: What are the main factors which led to the gradual transformation of the relation between the public and the private in the modern era? Habermas's answer to this question is that "the development of mercantile capitalism in the sixteenth century, together with the changing institutional forms of political power, created the conditions for the emergence of a new kind of public sphere in early modern Europe" (Thompson 1995: 69).[2] In other words, the profound transformation of the economic and the symbolic constitution of society in the modern era triggered the creation of an unprecedented public realm. Before examining the key elements of Habermas's analysis of this transformation in more detail, however, it is essential to reflect upon the various meanings of the public/private dichotomy.

(ii) The Ontology of the Public/Private Dichotomy

In order to understand the ontology of the public/private dichotomy, we need to examine what the conceptual separation between the public and the private actually represents. What is the normative significance of the distinction between the public and the private? Given the socio-historical variability of this distinction, we need to acknowledge that the meaning of the "great dichotomy" (Somers 2001: 24) between the public and the private is multilayered and complex, rather than one-dimensional and straightforward. Three different meanings commonly attached to the public/private distinction can be identified: *society versus individual* ("collective" versus "personal"), *visibility versus concealment* ("transparent" versus "opaque"), and *openness versus closure* ("accessible" versus "sealed"). These three meanings constitute "heterogeneous criteria" (see Rabotnikof 1998: 3; see also Rabotnikof 1997) that have been conceptualized in different ways and used to varying degrees in social and political thought. It is therefore important to bear in mind that the various meanings of the public/private dichotomy should be understood as ideal-typical distinctions.

The first meaning of the public/private dichotomy refers to a central analytical distinction in modern social and political thought: the distinction between *society and individual*. This distinction is often conceived of in terms of binary differentiations such as "the social" versus "the individual", "the

[1] The importance of the socio-historical variability underlying the public/private dichotomy has been widely acknowledged in the literature. See, for example: Calhoun (1992a: 6), Dahlgren (1995: 7), Goodnight (1992: 243), Habermas ([1962] 1989: 1-2; 1992: 433), Susen (2009b: 101-102; 2010: 106 and 115), and Thompson (1995: 120).

[2] In this passage, Thompson refers to Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

collective" versus "the personal", and "the relational" versus "the monadic". By definition, the social sciences in general and sociology in particular tend to privilege the former over the latter, for the paradigmatic interest in the explanatory power of systematic analyses of "the social" describes the ontological cornerstone of social-scientific disciplines. The social sciences would be converted into "the sciences of the individual", and sociology would be transformed into "individuology", if they sought to prove the preponderance of the individual over the social. Regardless of the fact that the philosophical discrepancies between methodological individualism and social holism[3] demonstrate that there is considerable room for explanatory openness, and notwithstanding the question of how the public/private dichotomy is to be interpreted, there is little doubt that the social sciences tend to study the individual in terms of the social, rather than the social in terms of the individual. Thus, given their concern with the *relational* constitution of reality, the social sciences have a particular interest in studying the ways in which human life forms are *socially* divided into public and private realms.

The second meaning of the public/private dichotomy has to do with another key analytical distinction in modern social and political thought: the distinction between *visibility and concealment*. The controversial nature of this distinction arises from the fact that it is far from clear which aspects of social life are visible and which concealed. Even more contentious is the question of which facets of social life *ought* to be visible and which *ought* to be concealed. Liberalism—which can be legitimately described as the triumphant ideology of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—has always been deeply suspicious of interventionist states and, therefore, critical of authoritarian attempts to control people's private spheres by virtue of the public power of the state. It is ironic, then, that in the modern context the idea of the public—epitomized in political concepts such as "public power", "public interest", and "public opinion"—has been used to undermine the arbitrary power of potentially authoritarian states.

> A turning point in modern political life is the battle against a secretive state in the name of "public opinion" and "publicity" (Peters 1993: 548).

Hence, it would be analytically naïve and historically ignorant to assume that the realm of the state can be identified exclusively with the sphere of the visible. To be sure, the state can be regarded as an intrinsically public institution in that it represents, or claims to represent, a large-scale group of individuals who reside in a territory over which the state enjoys political sovereignty. In this sense, the state can be considered as both a legitimated

[3] See King (1987: 40) as well as O'Neill (1973: 168).

and a legitimating institution whose existence depends on public sovereignty. The exercise of this "public" sovereignty, however, can be "private" if the internal power structures of the state are systematically concealed by the state itself. This applies, first and foremost, to authoritarian, dictatorial, and totalitarian states, but also, at least to some extent, to liberal and democratic states.[4] Whatever the ideological bent of a particular state apparatus, the long-term functioning of an efficient and resourceful state rests on the coexistence of visible and concealed power structures produced and reproduced by the political elite of a given society.

The third meaning of the public/private dichotomy concerns a further analytical distinction in modern social and political thought: the distinction between *openness and closure*. Yet, it should be borne in mind that not all public realms are fully "open" and not all private realms are completely "closed". In other words, just as the terms "public" and "open" are not necessarily interchangeable, the terms "private" and "closed" are not always mutually inclusive. Although the state can undoubtedly be considered as an integral component of the public sphere, it is, for that reason, not necessarily open and accessible. And although the family can be regarded as an integral component of the private sphere, it would be erroneous to assume that it is therefore an entirely closed and sealed realm of social life. There is little doubt that *all* states—regardless of whether they are republican or monarchical, liberal or socialist, laissez-faire or interventionist, libertarian or totalitarian—require a minimal degree of systemic self-referentiality and closure. Similarly, *all* families—regardless of whether they are part of a premodern or modern society, primitive or complex division of labour, control-based or freedom-based life form, collectivist or individualist culture—require a minimal degree of societal embeddedness and openness.

In brief, the three conceptual pairs commonly attached to the distinction between the private and the public are by no means unambiguous and straightforward. As a tripartite framework for the study of the public/private dichotomy, the aforementioned oppositions can be regarded as central reference points in social and political thought. Given the ideal-typical nature of the distinction between the private and the public, however, the analytical usefulness and explanatory forcefulness of the "grand dichotomy" has to be critically examined. Far from representing a dichotomy of irrefutable validity, the distinction between the public and the private should be conceived as a useful but nevertheless controversial conceptual tool in social and political analysis.

[4] For an insightful analysis of this problem, see Kühnl (1971) and Kühnl (1972).

II. HABERMAS'S THEORY OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

This section aims to examine Habermas's theory of the public sphere. In order to do so, the analysis will seek to respond to the following three questions: (i) How can the concept of the public sphere be defined? (ii) What constitutes the normative specificity of the bourgeois public sphere? (iii) What are the main features underlying the structural transformation of the public sphere in the modern era?

(i) The Concept of the Public Sphere

As stated above, the concept of the public has a number of different meanings.[5] Despite the definitional ambiguity of this concept, it is both possible and useful to develop an analytical framework which allows us to do justice to the complexity of the public sphere in modern society. Even if we acknowledge this complexity, however, it is important to bear in mind that any attempt to provide a systematic account of the nature of the public sphere is unavoidably controversial.

According to Habermas, "[t]he bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public" (Habermas [1962] 1989: 27). Hence, the public sphere is composed of private individuals whose societal interconnectedness transcends the boundaries of their personal lives. If the public sphere "is defined as the public of *private* individuals who join in debate of issues bearing on state authority" (Calhoun 1992b: 7; italics in original), the public sphere and the private sphere can be considered mutually inclusive, rather than mutually exclusive, social realms. Indeed, the public and the private seem to represent two necessary conditions of the social: to the extent that every private person is represented by the foreground performativity of a public persona, every public persona is embedded in the background subjectivity of a private person.

Since human actors cannot escape the various socialization processes imposed upon them by their environment, the purest form of privacy cannot eliminate individuals' dependence upon society. Individuals can assert their privacy only in relation to, rather than in isolation from, the existence of other individuals. In this sense, the public sphere is nothing but the socialized expression of individuals' reciprocally constituted autonomy: individuals are autonomous not in *isolation* from but in *relation* to one another, that is, in relation to a public of autonomous beings.

[5] Habermas is well aware of this definitional ambiguity. See Habermas ([1962] 1989: 1): "The usage of the words 'public' and 'public sphere' betrays a multiplicity of concurrent meanings."

From a sociological perspective, "[t]he importance of the public sphere lies in its potential as a mode of societal integration" (Calhoun 1992b: 6). The coordination of social life cannot be undertaken by completely self-sufficient and self-referential individuals who find themselves immersed in hermetically sealed and autopoietically sustained private realms. By definition, social coordination is carried out by interconnected and interdependent subjects who are situated in symbolically negotiated and materially constituted public realms. The deliberative organization that takes place in the public sphere can be regarded as an expression of the intrinsic sociability of the human condition. In fact, there is no societal integration without the existence of a public sphere. Just as the existence of each individual cannot be dissociated from the existence of society, the existence of the private sphere is inconceivable without the existence of the public sphere.

It is worth mentioning that, in the Anglophone debates on Habermas, the concept "public sphere" is based on a fairly imprecise translation of the German term *Öffentlichkeit*.[6] Whereas the term *Öffentlichkeit* literally means "publicness" or "publicity", it is the notion *öffentlicher Raum* that denotes the idea of "public sphere" or "public realm". Similarly, it should be noted that, in the English-speaking literature on Habermas, the concept "structural transformation" stems from a somewhat imprecise translation of the German term *Strukturwandel* (see Habermas 1962). Whereas the term *Strukturwandel* literally refers to the "transformation of structure", it is the notion *struktureller Wandel* that denotes the idea of "structural change". Thus, the emphasis in the German lies on the idea of the transformation of structures *in* the public sphere, rather than on the idea of the structural transformation *of* the public sphere, as the English translation suggests. It is important to take this terminological ambiguity, arising from the English translation, into account as it obliges us to recognize that Habermas, in his original German writings, appears to stress both the structural (*Struktur*) and the malleable (*Wandel*) constitution of the public. As a collective realm characterized by processes of both social reproduction and social transformation, "[t]he bourgeois public sphere evolved in the tension-charged field between state and society" (Habermas [1962] 1989: 141), that is, in a tertiary realm situated between the state "from above" and society "from below". It is the task of the following section to explore the normative specificity of this "tension-charged" (ibid.) realm, which is, according to Habermas, firmly situated between state and society.

[6] See the original title of Habermas's influential book on the structural transformation of the public sphere: *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1962). On this point, see also Peters (1993: 542-543).

(ii) The Normative Specificity of the Bourgeois Public Sphere

The normative specificity of the bourgeois public sphere derives from the fact that it possesses an emancipatory potential. To be sure, this is not to suggest that the bourgeois public sphere should be idealized as a pristine realm of social cooperation and human liberation. Rather, this is to acknowledge that its very existence depends on its capacity to promote *civic engagement in communicative processes of opinion and will formation*. The significance of Habermas's insistence on the emancipatory potential of the bourgeois public sphere can hardly be overemphasized, as it illustrates the sociological importance of the empowering nature of communicative practices performed by rational actors. From a Habermasian perspective, subjects capable of speech and action[7] are also capable of reflection and discourse, because the validity claims that linguistic actors raise in everyday communication are, at least in principle, always criticizable.[8] In the public sphere, the criticizability of validity, which is inherent in communicative processes oriented towards mutual intelligibility, can be elevated to the status of a coordinative driving force of rational sociability. According to Habermas, the discursive nature of the bourgeois public sphere manifests itself in three forms of critique: (a) the critique of the absolutist state, (b) the critique of the democratic state, and (c) the critique of the public sphere as a mediating force between state and society.

(a) The democratic discourses produced by the bourgeois public sphere have always been critical of the arbitrary authority exercised by the absolutist state. Given this anti-absolutist stance, the rise of the bourgeois public sphere is symptomatic of both the ideological and the material transition from premodern to modern society.

(b) Despite their general alignment with political liberalism, the prevalent discourses formed by the bourgeois public sphere are critical of the lawful authority exercised by the modern democratic state. Indeed, the bourgeois public sphere forms a discursive realm which enables collectively organized individuals to act as critical controllers of the democratic state in modern society.

(c) Paradoxically, the major discourses put forward by the bourgeois public sphere are critical not only of the control exercised by the state but also of themselves, that is, of the role of democratic discourses in processes of modern state formation. The public sphere is both a realm of mutually socializing

[7] See, for example: Habermas ([1971] 1988: 9); ([1981a] 1987: 86); ([1981b] 1987: 108); ([1984a] 2001: 9); ([1984b] 2001: 44); ([1984c] 2001: 118); (2000: 343); (2001: 16, 23-24, 42); (2004: 879).

[8] On Habermas's insistence on the *criticizability* of validity claims, see, for example: Habermas ([1981c] 1987: 287, 305, 308, 333); ([1981d] 1987: 125-126, 137, 139, 149-150); (1982: 269); (2001: 33, 79, 82-83). On this point, see also: Susen (2007: 76-77, 244, 266) and Susen (2009a: 106).

individuals able to create integrative spaces of solidarity and a realm of mutually criticizing individuals able to construct discursive spaces of reflexivity.

Considering the sociological significance of the critical spirit that is the hallmark of the bourgeois public sphere, it is worth reflecting on the normative implications of these three features in more detail:

(a) The bourgeois public sphere is unambiguously opposed to premodern forms of domination imposed by absolutist states. "The principle of control that the bourgeois public opposed to the latter—namely publicity—was intended to change domination as such. The claim to power presented in rational-critical public debate (*öffentliches Räsonnement*), which *eo ipso* renounced the form of a claim to rule, would entail, if it were to prevail, more than just an exchange of the basis of legitimation while domination was maintained in principle" (Habermas [1962] 1989: 28). The rational-critical public is equipped with the discursive capacity to *question the legitimacy of arbitrary forms of power*.

(b) The bourgeois public sphere extends the particular critique of absolutist rule to a general critique of state rule, including the political rule of democratic states. Consequently, the rule exercised by the modern state can only claim legitimacy to the extent that its existence is made an object of scrutiny by virtue of the discursive power of public rationality. According to this view, not only arbitrary but also democratic forms of political legitimation are at stake, because the very nature of political legitimation is a normative issue discussed in modern public spheres. If there is one thing we can take for granted in the modern world, it is the fact that nothing can be taken for granted. What makes the ideological power of political legitimacy so forceful is that, to the extent that it remains unquestioned, it operates behind our backs; what makes the critical power of public rationality so forceful is that it permits us to turn political legitimacy into an object of scrutiny. Modern citizens can claim "the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor" (ibid.: 27). The rational-critical public debate forms a *counter-controlling control* of the authority exercised by the modern state.

(c) The bourgeois public sphere is critical not only of premodern and modern states, but also of *itself*, for it constitutes an intersubjectively constructed realm based on open and reflexive discourses. "It provide[s] the training ground for a critical public reflection still *preoccupied with itself*" (ibid.: 29; italics added). The self-critical reflexivity of linguistically equipped entities—who, as communicatively interconnected subjects, form the public sphere—is an invaluable resource for discursively mediated forms of action coordination in the modern era. Dialogically created public spheres cannot exist without the *critical* reflection upon the socio-historical constitution of potentially *uncritical*

subjects. The rational-critical character of the modern public sphere is rooted in social actors' capacity to engage in intersubjective discourse oriented towards the communicative coordination and normative regulation of social life.

It is not irrelevant to note that the rational-critical analysis of the public sphere forms part of the rational-critical constitution of the public sphere. Hence, Habermas's theory *of* the public sphere is situated *in*, and can be critiqued *by*, the public sphere itself. "His theory and his practice assume that critical debate is at the heart of all intellectual activity and every healthy public sphere, and it is clear that he expects his own writing to face the criticisms and contestations with which he regularly confronts his opponents" (Kramer 1992: 256). Engagement in critical discourses, produced by prolific public spheres, is a constitutive element of modern social life. The normative potential of the bourgeois public sphere emanates from critical discursiveness able to question the taken-for-grantedness of accepted forms of quotidian experience. In this sense, the struggle over the creation of an emancipatory society "is a struggle to make publicity a source of reasoned, progressive consensus formation" (Calhoun 1992a: 28). The public sphere is a collective realm in which individuals' cognitive ability to take on the role of critical and responsible actors is indicative of society's coordinative capacity to transform itself into an emancipatory project shaped by the normative force of communicative rationality.

(iii) The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere

The structural transformation of the public sphere can be considered as a manifestation of the historically contingent nature of social order. Both the rise and the potential demise of the public sphere indicate that the transformative potential of public realms of intersubjectivity cannot be separated from the developmental nature of society. Put differently, the transformation of the public sphere has to be examined in terms of the wider context of macro-structural transition processes. Thus, the history of the public sphere should not be treated as a free-floating development divorced from wider social processes; rather, it should be conceived of as integral to these processes (see Thompson 1995: 71). Questions remain, however, as to what the main features of the structural transformation of the public sphere are and why they are sociologically significant.

According to Habermas, the structural transformation of the public sphere in the late twentieth century constitutes a process of *social disintegration*: "for about a century the social foundations of this sphere have been caught up in a process of decomposition. Tendencies pointing to the collapse of the public sphere are unmistakable, for while its scope is expanding impressively, its function has become progressively insignificant" (Habermas [1962] 1989:

4). It shall be argued here that, following the Habermasian analysis, there are three key interrelated tensions that lie at the heart of the decomposition process of the public sphere: (a) the tension between universal and particular interests, (b) the tension between communicative and instrumental reason, and (c) the tension between empowering and disempowering potentials.

(a) The tension between universal and particular interests is symptomatic of the contradictory ideological character of the bourgeois public sphere. In essence, the normative discrepancy between the universalistic and the particularistic elements of the public sphere is due to the confusion of the emancipation of the *homme* with the emancipation of the *bourgeois*: "so easy was it at that time to identify political emancipation with 'human' emancipation" (ibid.: 56). If social emancipation is pursued in class-specific, rather than in class-transcending, terms, then the ideal of human emancipation is effectively reduced to the ideal of political emancipation.

To be sure, Habermas's awareness of the difference between the class-transcending emancipation of the *homme* and the class-specific emancipation of the *bourgeois* is embedded in both a Marxist and a post-Marxist view of modern society. Habermas's conception of society is firmly situated *within* the tradition of Marxist thought in that it recognizes that political emancipation is not tantamount to human emancipation if it is defined in *class-specific*, rather than in species-constitutive, terms. At the same time, Habermas's conception of society goes *beyond* the tradition of Marxist thought in that it suggests that the emancipatory potentials of the bourgeois public sphere, which stem from its *rational-critical* nature, cannot simply be denied by assuming, in an orthodox Marxist fashion, that knowledge production in the bourgeois public sphere is reducible to sheer ideology construction and, therefore, to the spread of "necessarily false consciousness"[9]: "Still, publicity...is apparently more and other than a mere scrap of liberal ideology" (Habermas [1962] 1989: 4).

The constitution of the modern public sphere in capitalist societies is paradoxical due to its *a priori* openness as a "civic" realm oriented towards political *inclusion* and its *de facto* closure as a "bourgeois" realm based on social *exclusion*. To the extent that the discourses generated in the bourgeois public sphere are motivated by the dialogical exercise of critical perspective-taking, they can claim to represent, or at least seek to represent, the interests of society. To the extent that the discourses produced in the bourgeois public sphere are based on the perspective of the dominant class, they serve, first and foremost, the interests of a particular social group. In short, the tension between universal and particular interests can be considered as the first element that, because of its contradictory nature, has contributed to the steady degeneration of the bourgeois public sphere.

[9] See Marx and Engels ([1846] 2000/1977: 175 and 180). See also Haug (1999).

(b) The tension between communicative and instrumental reason is another source of friction that has substantially contributed to the gradual decomposition of the bourgeois public sphere. As Habermas reminds us, "[t]he fully developed bourgeois public sphere was based on the *fictitious* identity of the *two roles* assumed by the privatized individuals who came together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple" (ibid.: 56; italics in original). In capitalist society, privatized individuals find themselves in the ambivalent position of taking on the role of the *homme*, capable of communicative reasoning, while aspiring to the role of the *bourgeois*, prone to instrumental reasoning (see ibid.: 55). "This *ambivalence* of the private sphere was also a feature of the public sphere" (ibid.; italics added), for the individuals who together form the public sphere are also part of the private sphere. Thus, we need to recognize the interwovenness of communicative and instrumental reason in both the private and the public spheres. Private individuals cannot break free from their immersion in the public sphere, just as public individuals cannot transcend their immersion in the private sphere.

If the private sphere is identified with the intimate sphere of the conjugal family, on the one hand, and the realm of commodity exchange and social labor, on the other (ibid.: 39), then it is founded on a contradiction: its "private" idiosyncrasy not only depends on "the public", but it *is* "public". The public character of the private sphere manifests itself in the societal composition of the market. Although the commodity exchange of the market is based on private property owned by free citizens, a precondition for its existence is the construction of a public sphere through the power of social labour. In liberal-capitalist society, the public sphere constitutes not only a discursive realm of critical intersubjectivity, but also a purposive realm of commodified instrumentality. The sociological significance of both dimensions illustrates that what lies at the heart of the public sphere is a profound tension between communicative and instrumental reason: not only is the public created by socialized subjects who relate to one another in a *forum* sustained by processes of discursive communication and shaped by encounters of critical intersubjectivity, but it is also colonized by privatized objects that compete with one another in a *market* founded on mechanisms of systemic regulation and oriented towards profitable utility.[10] Whereas the forum articulates the public interests of consensus-oriented subjects capable of communication, the market embodies the private interests of utility-driven subjects immersed in competition. From a Habermasian perspective, the tension between the critical force of communicative reason and the functional logic of instrumental reason can be regarded as another decisive factor in the decomposition

[10] On the controversial relationship between "the market" and "the forum", see, for instance, Elster (1986).

process of the modern public sphere.

(c) The tension between the empowering and the disempowering potentials of the modern era is fundamental to Habermas's account of the transformation of the public sphere. The sociological significance of this tension can hardly be overestimated, for it is indicative of the deep ambivalence of the normative potentials inherent in modern society. One significant paradox of the modern public sphere is that its continual expansion is closely associated with its gradual decomposition. Processes of social formation can anticipate processes of social deformation; mass democratization can lead to inflationary processes of political participation; social opening can result in ideological contraction.

> *The undermining of the foundations of the public sphere came about…through a "refeudalization" of society....State and society, once distinct, became interlocked*. The public sphere was necessarily transformed as the distinction between public and private realms blurred, the equation between the intimate sphere and private life broke down with a polarization of family and economic society, rational-critical debate gave way to the consumption of culture (Calhoun 1992a: 21; italics added).

In other words, there are two systemic realms that have decisively shaped the transformation of the public sphere: the *state* and the *market*. The former turns the public sphere into a social realm that is partly regulated by the functionalist logic of bureaucratic administration. The latter converts the public sphere into a social realm that is partly driven by the functionalist logic of capitalist commodification. The ubiquity of functionalist rationality poses a challenge to the possibility of human autonomy. In a world that is largely governed by the utility-driven power of functionalist rationality, the critical potential of a communicatively created public sphere is undermined by the steering capacity of a regulating state and a commodifying market. The systemic rationality spread by a regulating state and a commodifying market can degrade the critical potential of the public sphere to a decorative appendage of a disenchanted world. If reduced to a peripheral element of systemic steering processes, the public sphere degenerates into a state-regulated market sphere.

The systemic functioning of late modern society is inconceivable without the standardization of the mass media. Driven by the instrumental imperatives of the culture industry, the mass media play a pivotal role in the systemic regulation of the public sphere. In principle, the rational-critical potential of the public sphere can be swallowed by the integrationist potential of the mass media:

> For the "culture" propagated by the mass media is a *culture of integration*….The public sphere assumes advertising functions. The more it can be deployed as a vehicle for political and economic propaganda, the more it becomes *unpolitical* as a whole and *pseudo-privatized*….To the extent that the public and private became intermeshed realms, this model became inapplicable (Habermas [1962]

1989: 175-176; italics added).

The integrationist nature of the mass media transforms the public sphere into a functionalist appendage of political reformism. Class antagonism is perpetuated by the systemic integrationism of the mass media. Hence, a constitutive element of the bourgeois public sphere, namely its critical potential derived from reflection, seems to give way to the core component of the culture industry, that is, its tendency towards constant commodification:

> [M]ass media...themselves have become autonomous, to obtain the agreement or at least acquiescence of a mediatized public. Publicity is generated from above, so to speak, in order to create an aura of good will for certain positions. Originally publicity guaranteed the connection between rational-critical public debate and the legislative foundation of domination, including the critical supervision of its exercise. Now it makes possible the peculiar ambivalence of a domination exercised through the domination of nonpublic opinion: it serves the manipulation of the public as much as legitimation *before* it. Critical publicity is supplanted by manipulative publicity (ibid.: 177-178; italics in original).

The communicative rationality inherent in the public sphere can be colonized by the functionalist rationality inherent in the state and the economy. Generally, this colonization process is not openly challenged but surreptitiously legitimated by the "bourgeois" mass media. The colonization of the lifeworld by the system[11] is reinforced, rather than undermined, by the mass media. Under conditions of late modernity, then, it is not the system that is shaped by the lifeworld, but, on the contrary, the lifeworld that is colonized by the system. In short, the tension between the emancipatory nature of communicative rationality and the instrumental nature of purposive rationality poses a significant challenge to the organization of modern public spheres.

III. CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON HABERMAS'S THEORY OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Habermas's theory of the public sphere has been extensively discussed in the literature.[12] It is because of, rather than despite, the fact that the Habermasian

[11] For an excellent analysis of the relationship between "lifeworld" and "system", see Peters (1993: 557-560). See also, for example, Susen (2007: 61-73; 2009a: 86, 106).

[12] On Habermas's theory of the public sphere, see, for instance, Habermas ([1962] 1989; 1992; 1995). In the secondary literature, see, for example: Calhoun (1992a), Crossley & Roberts (2004), Forester (1985), Gardniner (2004), Goode (2005), Holub (1991), Kelly (2004), Kögler (2005), Martin (2005), Negt & Kluge ([1972] 1993), Rochlitz (2002), Sintomer (2005), and Voirol (2003).

account of the public sphere has been highly influential that it has been criticized in numerous ways. Hence, the multifaceted forms of criticism levelled against Habermas's theory of the public sphere should not be one-sidedly interpreted as evidence of its analytical weakness and explanatory inadequacy; rather, they should be considered indicative of the fact that Habermas provides a useful and insightful theoretical framework for understanding the structural transformation of the public sphere in the modern period. Notwithstanding its considerable merits, it is essential to be aware of the analytical limitations of Habermas's theory of the public sphere. It is the purpose of this section to shed light on the key shortcomings of Habermas's approach to the structural transformation of the public sphere and thereby illustrate that his account needs to be substantially revised if it is to serve as a theoretical framework for understanding the increasing complexity of public spheres in advanced societies.

(a) Habermas's analysis of the public sphere can be criticized for centring almost exclusively on the nature of bourgeois public life (*bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*). To reduce the complexity of the *modern* public sphere to the singularity of the *bourgeois* public sphere means to underestimate the sociological significance of *alternative*—i.e. non-bourgeois—collective realms that contribute to a rational-critical engagement with the world. Although Habermas is aware of the class-specific nature of the bourgeois public sphere, "he neglects the importance of the contemporaneous development of a *plebeian* public sphere alongside and in opposition to the *bourgeois* public sphere, a sphere built upon different institutional forms" (Garnham 1992: 359; italics added).[13] An analysis that is limited to the study of the bourgeois public sphere runs the risk of excluding other, equally important, public spheres from the picture. The consolidation of the bourgeois public sphere is paradoxical in that it promotes a discourse of universal interests of human beings, while in practice serving the particular interests of the dominant groups in society:

> A discourse of publicity touting accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies is itself deployed as *a strategy of distinction* (Fraser 1992: 115; italics added).[14]

Put differently, the claim to universality of bourgeois public discourse—expressed in the slogan of the French Revolution: "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*"—

[13] On this problem, see also Calhoun (1992b: 5), Dahlgren (1991: 6), Fraser (1992: 111-112), Golding & Murdocl (1991: 22), Habermas (1992: 425-429), and Ku (2000: 220).

[14] See also Fraser (1992: 117): "...the official bourgeois public sphere is the institutional vehicle for a major historical transformation in the nature of political domination. This is the shift from a repressive mode of domination to a hegemonic one, from rule based primarily on acquiescence to superior force to rule based primarily on consent supplemented with some measure of repression."

remains trapped in the pursuit of class-specific interests. For the politics of universality advocated by the bourgeois public sphere represents, above all, the particular interests of the dominant class, even if it claims to embody the general interests of humanity. The *liberté bourgeoise* is defined primarily in terms of negative freedom as in "freedom from", rather than in terms of positive freedom as in "freedom to". The *égalité bourgeoise* is, first and foremost, an equality of opportunity as a formal right, rather than an equality of outcome as a substantive entitlement. The *fraternité bourgeoise* is, in practice, an exclusive type of competitive solidarity between privileged social groups, rather than an inclusive form of unconditional solidarity between all human beings. To reduce the analysis of the modern public sphere to an examination of social realms generated and controlled by dominant classes means to leave aside collective spaces created and shaped by other social groups, whose existence and influence play a pivotal role in the construction of modern public life.

(b) Habermas presents a somewhat *idealistic* picture of the public sphere. Given his one-sided emphasis on the fact that the bourgeois public sphere possesses a "rational-critical"[15] character, he tends to overestimate the significance of the emancipatory features of modern public life and therefore underestimate the influence of its repressive elements. As Habermas self-critically acknowledges, it is

> …*tempting to idealize* the bourgeois public sphere in a manner going way beyond any methodologically legitimate idealization of the sort involved in ideal-typical conceptualization (Habermas 1992: 442; italics added).

The public sphere is no less *permeated by power relations* than society as a whole. The power-laden nature of publicity is impregnated with the stratified constitution of society. The ideological nature of public discourses is embedded in the material organization of social resources. The symbolic resources of critique are always dependent on the social resources of power. The vertical structuration of society manifests itself in the interest-laden structuration of ideology: socially positioned subjects produce relationally contingent discourses. The hegemonic discourses generated within the bourgeois public sphere express the particular interests of the most powerful social groups. The discourses of educated, wealthy, mostly white, and predominantly male elites reflect the specific interests of the privileged sectors of society (see Thompson 1995: 72). To idealize the public sphere as a communicative realm of rational-critical intersubjectivity means to underestimate the substantive impact of interest-laden hierarchies on the constitution of communicative interactions in stratified societies.

(c) Habermas's account of the public sphere is largely *gender-blind*.

[15] See, for example, Habermas ([1962] 1989: 28, 176, 178, 179).

Nevertheless, in his response to the objections raised by feminist critics, Habermas admits that the patriarchal nature of modern European public spheres can hardly be ignored:

> …the growing feminist literature has sensitized our awareness to the *patriarchal* character of the public sphere itself (Habermas 1992: 427; italics added).[16]

Gender inequality, which in most Western societies manifests itself in heterosexist and masculinist forms of normativity, is not a peripheral phenomenon but a central element of modern public spheres. The marginalization of women within the modern public sphere as well as their *de facto* exclusion from particular—for example, religiously defined—positions of power can be seen as an expression of the patriarchal character of society in general and as an extension of the patriarchal character of the bourgeois family in particular. To account for the normative significance of the gendered division of power in modern society requires acknowledging that modern public spheres cannot escape the ubiquity of materially and discursively constructed forms of patriarchy.[17]

(d) In a similar vein, Habermas's analysis of the public sphere is based on overly *rationalistic* assumptions. As such, it stands in the tradition of a male-dominated social theory, putting forward what feminists describe as "malestream" conceptions of the social world and social development:

> [Habermas's] interpretation underlies an overly *rationalistic conception of public culture* within a republican model that builds upon the Enlightenment ideal of rationalism (Ku 2000: 221; italics added).

The idea that the bourgeois public sphere is dominated by the continuous production of rational-critical discourses that endow society with an emancipatory potential rests on the short-sighted view that we can, and should, privilege rational over non-rational forms of engaging with the world. To be sure, it is possible to question such a rationalistic conception of human actors without denying that rationality can, and often does, constitute a crucial source of social emancipation. We need to recognize, however, that neo-Kantian approaches, which rightly insist upon the empowering resources of rationality, tend to underestimate the social complexity arising from public forms of intersubjectivity, whose variegated nature transcends the realm of reason-guided forms of normativity. Various cultural forms—such as art, music, dance, and painting—derive their emancipatory potential from their

[16] See also Johnson (2001).

[17] On the gendered nature of the public sphere, see, for example, Brettschneider (2007), Cameron (1998), Moore (2003), and Rendall (1999).

ability to rise above the seemingly disembodied realm of reason.

(e) Habermas's theory of the public sphere is problematic in that it promotes a *universalistic* conception of public interest founded on a monolithic account of public life. The assumption that the *bourgeois* public sphere represents *the* public sphere of the contemporary world *par excellence* is both conceptually and empirically reductive. For such a view fails to take into account the fact that modern society contains a multiplicity of simultaneously existing, and often competing, public spheres. The increasing pluralization of modern public spheres reflects the growing differentiation of complex societies. Modern public spheres are differentiated and stratified realms of interaction and, as such, they are inhabited by various social groups, some of which occupy subordinate positions in society: members of the working classes, political minorities, ethnic minorities, religious minorities, and sexual minorities—to mention just a few of these groups. Social groups that are excluded from sharing the monopoly of symbolic violence in a given society have an interest in creating *alternative* public spheres that are materially sustained by counter-hegemonic practices and ideologically legitimated by counter-hegemonic discourses. The empowering potentials of alternative public spheres emanate from their capacity to challenge the legitimacy of dominant practices and dominant discourses by creating counter-hegemonic realms based on alternative practices and alternative discourses. Hegemonies need to be continuously re-hegemonized in order to ensure that they are not de-hegemonized. Counter-hegemonies need to be constantly de-hegemonized in order to avoid becoming hegemonized. Alternative public spheres, then, can be characterized as

> *subaltern counterpublics* in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (Fraser 1992: 123; italics in original).

To eclipse the possibility of constructing polycentric public spheres means to ignore the normative potentials of radical pluralism emanating from the competition between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices and discourses in different public realms.[18]

(f) Habermas's socio-historical analysis of the modern world is based on the *dichotomous* distinction between the public and the private. Yet, as explained above, the distinction between the public and the private should be regarded as an analytical, rather than an empirical, separation, since society

[18] On Habermas's remarks on the construction of polycentric public spheres, see, for example, Habermas (1992: 440). See also Ku (2000: 221), Robbins (1993: xvii), and Thompson (1995: 71).

is a conglomerate of relationally constructed realms whose boundaries are far from clear:

> In general, critical theory needs to take a harder, more critical look at the terms "private" and "public". These terms, after all, are not simply straightforward designations of societal spheres (Fraser 1992: 131).

The conceptual distinction between the public and the private is *relatively arbitrary* in that public realms are generated by private subjects, just as private realms are composed of public subjects. Indeed, the construction of *all* social realms is contingent upon the interaction of private and public subjects. Whatever the degree of structural differentiation of a given social formation, the interrelatedness of social realms stems from the interconnectedness of social actions. To the extent that the construction of social realms derives from the realization of social actions, the very possibility of human coexistence depends upon the consolidation of social structures. Social structures without human actions are tantamount to societies without subjects. Insofar as human actors are both private and public subjects, their multi-contextual actions transcend the public/private antinomy and thereby contribute to the pluralized construction of social reality.

CONCLUSION

The critical study of the public sphere is central to a sociological understanding of the emancipatory potentials inherent in the communicative processes of modern society. Habermas's social theory provides astute insights into the normative constitution and structural transformation of the public sphere in the modern era. Far from being reducible to an autopoietic realm of self-referential debate, the public sphere plays a pivotal role in providing a forum for deliberative processes aimed at the democratic construction of society. Indeed, the development of social life in the modern era is shaped by both the normative opportunities and the normative limitations of public discourses. The sociological importance of the public/private dichotomy is reflected not only in the fact that it has been widely discussed in the literature but also, more importantly, in the fact that the separation between public and private realms is fundamental to the construction of modern liberal societies.

The first section of this paper has critically examined the public/private dichotomy in terms of its historical and sociological significance. The historical variability of the public/private dichotomy manifests itself in its material and ideological contingency: its material contingency is due to the fact that different societies produce different *forms* of public and private life;

its ideological contingency is due to the fact that different societies generate different *discourses* about the nature of public and private life. In short, both realities of and ideas about the relationship between the public and the private vary over time and between different societies.

The analysis of the ontology of the public/private dichotomy is concerned with the question of what the conceptual separation between the public and the private actually stands for. As elucidated above, three distinctions are particularly important in this regard.

(a) The distinction between *society and individual* refers to the difference between "the collective" and "the personal". By definition, the social sciences tend to privilege "the social" over "the individual" and, consequently, conceive of both the public and the private in relational terms.

(b) The distinction between *visibility and concealment* designates the difference between "the transparent" and "the opaque". It is the historical mission of an active and democratic public sphere to ensure that the exercise of state power can claim legitimacy only to the extent that its social acceptability is subject to governmental transparency and public accountability.

(c) The distinction between *openness and closure* relates to the difference between "the accessible" and "the sealed". Yet, just as public institutions—such as the state—are rarely completely open, private institutions—such as the family—are not structurally detached but socially embedded. Thus, the "grand dichotomy" between the public and the private hinges on an ideal-typical distinction whose analytical validity needs to be measured in terms of its empirical applicability.

The second section of this paper has sought to shed light on Habermas's theory of the public sphere. As demonstrated above, Habermas's account of the public sphere is highly complex, and the foregoing analysis has by no means aimed to provide a comprehensive picture of its constitutive elements and presuppositions. Rather, this paper has focused on three main dimensions: (i) the concept of the public sphere, (ii) the normative specificity of the bourgeois public sphere, and (iii) the structural transformation of the public sphere in the modern era.

(i) According to Habermas, the public sphere constitutes an intersubjectively constructed realm of linguistically equipped and discursively engaged individuals. Mediating between systemic imperatives imposed "from above" and normative concerns articulated "from below", the modern public sphere emerged as a tension-laden realm between state and society. As such, it is structurally divided between two diametrically opposed forms of rationality: functionalist rationality, which underlies systemic mechanisms of steering and regulation, and communicative rationality, which is mobilized by actors capable of intersubjective speech, purposive reflection, and deliberative action.

(ii) The normative specificity of the bourgeois public sphere stems from the fact that, in principle, it constitutes an empowering realm of social interaction. As argued above, its emancipatory potential is threefold and manifests itself in (a) its ideological opposition to arbitrary forms of power, (b) its scrutinizing function in relation to the political legitimacy of modern states, and (c) its reflective engagement with public forms of reasoning. Ultimately, the emancipatory potential of the public sphere is located in the rational-critical resources of linguistically interacting subjects. The public sphere is inconceivable without people's capacity to overcome the normative limitations of individualistic societies through the coordinative power of socialized and socializing individuals.

(iii) From a Habermasian perspective, the structural transformation of the public sphere in the late twentieth century constitutes a process of social disintegration. As argued above, three fundamental tensions underlying this process of gradual decomposition can be identified. (a) The tension between *universal and particular interests* lies at the heart of the modern public sphere. Rhetorical claims to universality cannot always conceal their interest-laden particularity. (b) In a similar vein, the tension between *communicative and instrumental reason* illustrates that, in liberal-capitalist society, the public sphere constitutes not only a discursive realm of critical intersubjectivity, but also a purposive realm of commodified instrumentality. To the extent that debating forums generate rational-critical public spheres, profit-driven markets produce commodified public spheres. (c) The tension between *empowering and disempowering potentials* is crucial to Habermas's critical conception of modern society. Paradoxically, the increasing expansion of the public sphere has contributed to its gradual decomposition. The commodifying imperative of capitalist society appears to transform the public sphere into a market sphere. If left unchallenged, the "invisible hand" of the market and the "visible hand" of the state seem strong enough to neutralize the rational- critical force of the public.

The third section of this paper has examined some of the main shortcomings of Habermas's theory of the public sphere. (a) It is *bourgeois-centric* in that it focuses almost exclusively on the hegemonic public sphere of the ruling class, thereby underestimating the social and political significance of alternative public spheres. (b) It is *idealistic* in that it tends to overestimate the emancipatory potentials of liberal public discourse. (c) It is *gender-blind* in that it does not account for the impact of sexist discrimination on the development of public life in modern society. (d) It is overly *rationalistic* in that it conceives of communicative rationality as the key emancipatory driving force of human interaction. (e) It advocates a *universalistic* conception of public interests, thereby neglecting the fact that advanced societies are

composed of a multiplicity of competing, and often counter-hegemonic, public spheres. (f) Its *dichotomous* view of the social fails to question the validity of the binary distinction between the public and the private. It is difficult to study modern public spheres without drawing on Habermas, but it is impossible to understand the transformation of late modern public spheres without going beyond his conceptual framework. If the above shortcomings are seriously addressed, Habermas's theory of the public sphere may serve as an analytical basis for confronting the normative challenges arising from the material and symbolic complexities of advanced societies.

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