

# Habermas's Search for the Public Sphere

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## Abstract

Given powerful globalizing processes under way, the topic of how to conceptualize the modern public sphere is becoming increasingly urgent. Amidst the array of alternatives, the efforts of Jürgen Habermas to attempt to balance out the two main conceptual requirements of this idea, a universalistic construction of the principle of shared interests and a sensitivity to the fact of modern pluralism, might seem a particularly promising option. In order to reconstruct the main motivations of, and to determine a set of criteria of assessment for, Habermas's ongoing attempt to outline a theory of the public sphere adequate to the conditions of the present, the article turns first to a discussion of the seminal formulations of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. I suggest that the later writings are only partially successful in their attempt to redress some of the main conceptual difficulties that emerge in this early account.

## Key words

■ common interests ■ Habermas ■ pluralism ■ public sphere

## 1

Throughout the last decade, the development of an increasingly global market and of centres of private economic power with global reach has dealt a decisive blow to those mechanisms through which modern societies traditionally sought to exercise political controls over economic imperatives. Hans-Peter Martin and Harald Schumann, authors of the best-selling *The Global Trap*, argue that globalization has devastated the old nation-states and, with this, any hope of the assertion of politics over economics (Martin and Schumann, 1997). Martin and Schumann view the threat by international capital to the very idea of the nation-state as an attack on those modern institutions capable of housing the idea of the self-sovereignty of populations. They call for the 'democratic politicians of the next century to restore the State and the primacy of politics over economics' (Martin and Schumann, 1997: 11). By contrast, Jürgen Habermas has stressed the necessity of promoting the 'institutionalization of procedures for the worldwide coordination and generalization of interests, as well as for the imaginative

construction of shared interests' (Habermas, 1998a: 319). On this account, the functions of the welfare state in regulating a national economy can only be redeemed in the context of the globalized economy if 'they are transferred from the nation-state to larger political units growing to catch up, so to speak, with a transnationalised economy' (p. 319).

These different responses to the problem of how democratic control over the global economy might be achieved appear rooted in quite distinct understandings of the idea of the public sphere. In both cases, what is seen to be at stake is a search for the grounds upon which the notion of the generalizability of interests, which could underpin and galvanize a commitment to the principle of self-sovereignty, might be conceptualized in the current context. Those who see the present task confronting democratic politicians as the restoration of the strong nation-state appear influenced by the communitarian belief that the principle of self-sovereignty must appeal to the shared interests of *particular* peoples. By contrast, the conviction that the regulative function of the modern state might be reconstructed via the emergence of new kinds of cosmopolitan solidarities, which would, however, take account of 'the autonomy, particularity, and original mentalities of previously sovereign states' (Habermas, 1998a: 319) evokes the idea of shared *human* interests.

The question of how the principle of shared interests which underpins the idea of self-sovereignty might be conceived is by no means a recent preoccupation for modern theories of democracy. Modern society is so massive and complex that it is, in the words of John Dewey, 'not only not visible, but . . . not intelligible continuously and as a whole' (Dewey, 1988a: 215), and hence might seem to have long defied any organic experience of a common interest or shared fate. What is perhaps new is the extent to which a critique of all meta-narratives, hammered home by the postmodernists, has heightened the self-consciousness of all contemporary attempts to theorize a conception of shared interests. This critique has encouraged some to insist that the articulation of the principle of the democratic polity does not require a thematization of the idea of shared interests. According to Iris Young, 'self-sovereignty' ought to be embraced as the variously interpreted and autonomously realized goal of a diversity of modern publics (Young, 1997: 67–74). So, while there are those who look to the formation of a transnational public to respond to the threat of a globalizing economy to modern democracy, others have, in the name of a defence of the self-sovereignty of the different, sought to elaborate the idea of a plurality of publics. To get some clearer sense of the stakes in this confusing range of alternatives, it might be useful to appeal to an initial definition of the idea of 'the public'.

In his 1926 essay entitled 'The public and its problems', Dewey proposed the following sparse definition: 'The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for' (Dewey, 1988b: 245–6). On this account, 'the public' does not appeal to the idea of any given or essential shared interests. It refers, rather, to a process whereby solidarities are constructed via an interpretation of the indirect consequences of transactions;

hence to the formation of perceived common interests. This interpretative process must be capable of achieving consensus about the significance of these effects and of provoking recognition of the need for a programmatic response.

According to one theorization of the future of modern democracy, the idea of the public described by Dewey is simply incompatible with conditions in a complex, heterogeneous modern society. Carl Schmitt and his followers would argue that, given its allegiance to the idea of a plurality of competing interests and diverse points of view, modern liberal society cannot arrive at that consensus about threatened and unmet needs essential to Dewey's description of the public (Schmitt, 1996). For Schmitt, because there can be no construction of shared interests consistent with the ideology of modern liberalism, we must conclude that liberal pluralism cannot be reconciled with the idea of a self-regulating democratic polity. An ideologue of the Third Reich, Schmitt's own response is to tear away at the commitment to liberal pluralism, seeking its exposure as the mere unprincipled ideology of a marketplace engaged in endless battles between warring interests. Democracy, in his infamous view, can survive in the modern world only if strong authoritarian government decisionistically imposes, and defends to the death, a homogeneous idea of the 'way of life' of the people. We must, it seems, be alert to the authoritarian significance of any attempt to conceive the search for a way of formulating the idea of our shared interests which splits itself from any commitment to the principle of a multiplicity of points of view and heterogeneous needs.

An alternative response to the search for the contemporary public refuses to concede Schmitt's main point. A postmodern defence of the democratic ideal contests the proposition that the principle of a self-regulating democratic polity requires any sort of consensual understanding of common interests. On this account, a commitment to the idea of a radical plurality of ways of life, interests and points of view can be reconciled with the idea of the self-sovereign polity by reconceptualizing this in terms which dissolve all shared commitments. The polity reappears as a decentred totality in which diverse identities and chosen solidarities strive only after recognition for their irreducible difference (Young, 1997). Yet, as its critics have pointed out, in the end this postmodern 'solution' to the problem of how to reconcile the idea of pluralism with the democratic principle of self-sovereignty only restates a commitment to pluralism and offers no insights into how the idealizing construction of social interactions implicit in this commitment might be thematized (Calhoun, 1992; Postone, 1992). Essential, namely, to that conviction that the modern idea of the public must limit itself to the facilitation of an expressive publicizing of difference is a normative construction of our presumed 'common interest' in the recognition of the legitimacy of difference. As Craig Calhoun points out, then, it seems 'a loss simply to say that there are many public spheres . . . for that will leave us groping for a new term to describe the communicative relationships among them' (Calhoun, 1992: 37).

I have, so far, looked at two extreme responses to the problem of how the idea of shared interests might be articulated with a commitment to liberal pluralism.

The first, which pits democracy against pluralism and finds in favour of the former, is clearly intolerable. The second, which decides that the idea of democracy can make do without any appeal to the idea of shared interests, appears incoherent. It seems, then, that we need to identify a third construction of the idea of the public that seeks to formulate a conception of common interests capable of uniting the self-sovereign polity in terms sensitive to the fact of modern pluralism

Jürgen Habermas's systematic efforts to reconstruct an idea of the public adequate to a heterogeneous modern society began in 1962 with the publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1989a). While, in a number of key texts since then, Habermas has revisited this attempt to mount a contemporary defence of the idea of the public sphere, the present article focuses on an interpretation of the lasting significance of Habermas's first systematic work on the topic. I suggest that, by reviewing the kinds of conceptual commitments which informed the early work as well as diagnosing some of its main theoretical difficulties, we get a keener perspective on the real achievements and major tasks acknowledged by the later writings on this topic. The recent reformulations of the character of communicative interaction in the public sphere promise to overcome some of the main conceptual problems encountered in the early work. Yet, at more than one major point, Habermas's attempts to rethink the terms of the problematic normative investments of the first attempt to reconstruct the idea of the critical public sphere appear to have stalled, and difficulties encountered in the early work resurface in the later writings.

## 2

*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* offers a historical/sociological account of the emergence, transformation and partial degeneration of the bourgeois public sphere. Habermas wants to identify the social conditions which allowed reasoned discourse about public issues conducted by private persons willing to let arguments, not status or the authority of tradition, to be decisive. This principle, the normative centre of a modern conception of the democratic polity, was, he suggests, set in motion by features of that social revolution which followed in the wake of the irruption of a new dynamic market-based economy. Long-distance trade and commercialization undermined the household economy and created pressure towards a commodity market that unravelled the hold of traditional political regulations (Boyte, 1992). The depoliticization of the economy broke the claims of local regulations that had hitherto determined the process and outcome of commercial transactions, exposing all individuals, in a wholly unprecedented fashion, to the unintended consequences of private transactions. With the depoliticization of the economy and the increasing centralization of political power, the newly constituted private individuals sought each other out, conscious of their new-found, shared, autonomy and mindful, also of its fragility. Throughout the eighteenth century, the consciousness of the

emergence of a new public was, Harry Boyte points out, closely connected with the development of a vibrant urban culture which 'formed a spatial environment for the public sphere: lecture halls, museums, public parks, theaters, meeting houses, coffee shops and the like (Boyte, 1992: 342-3). Associated with such changes was an emergent infrastructure of new social information created through institutions such as the press, publishing houses, lending libraries and literary societies (Boyte, 1992: 343).

Casting itself as a loose forum for discussion and argumentation between private persons, the bourgeois public sphere understood its own *raison d'être* as the defence of the private autonomy of the bourgeois householder. At this stage, the principle of privacy not merely appeared as the stakes of, but also represented the currency of, intercourse in the public sphere. The eighteenth-century public sphere was, Habermas suggests, an arena in which public discussion had faith in the possibility of arriving at consensus, not on the basis of the suppression of the private autonomy of its members but precisely as a measure of their united commitment to the principle of the private autonomy of each (Habermas, 1989a: 23). Central, then, to the lasting significance of the classical bourgeois public sphere is, for Habermas, the fact that it was able to draw upon and to articulate the values embedded in a particular conception of subjectivity which served as the grounds through which the rationality of a plurality of individual points of view might seek recognition. In order to reconstruct Habermas's account of normativity of this early form of the bourgeois public sphere, it seems that we need first to identify his understanding of the sources and the peculiar character of that experience of subjectivity which came to be articulated through its procedural norms.

As Habermas sees it, the self-understanding of the individual in the early bourgeois public sphere did not cut across or compete with but drew upon, elaborated and extended the dispositions and self-interpretations of the private person. The attitude of the actor in the public sphere was seen to be continuous with that of the 'homme'. The private person was constituted as simply a 'human being, that is, as a moral person' and, Habermas continues, 'the consciousness of this . . . formless humanity grew up in the patriarchal conjugal family's intimate sphere that was oriented to a public' (Habermas, 1989a: 85). The bourgeois family had, on this account, a double-sided significance in the construction of a new sense of the private, autonomous self. On the one hand, it produced a domain of private autonomy that demanded freedom from the domination of external social constraint. The conjugal family also appeared as a living source of a new self whose passionate examination of its psychological and experiential states craved publicity, recognition, from others. This new self appeared to be established spontaneously by free individuals and to be maintained without coercion; resting on the 'lasting community of love between two spouses: it seemed to permit that non-instrumental development of all faculties that mark the cultivated personality' (Habermas, 1989a: 85).

The self-understanding of this kind of self soon craved broader horizons and, spilling its influence beyond the bounds of the intimate sphere of the family,

invaded the world of letters and literature. With its bent for relations with others which might offer a sympathetic audience for its quest for self-development, the new self sought to recreate and to extend a 'community of love' via the exchange of letters as well as in the reading of psychological novels and novellas (Habermas, 1989a: 50). Essential to Habermas's description of the early bourgeois literary salons is his sense of the democratizing character of the ideal that formed these circles. Unlike their earlier, aristocratic counterparts, the new salons extended the original principle of intimacy by revealing the subjectivity of each individual in the presence of the other, thus linking privacy to publicity (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 214).

Encouraged in its self-consciousness and in its sense of its own absoluteness via its participation in the literary sphere, the demand for recognition by the new self eventually overflowed the limits of its domestic spaces, establishing its claims in the open venues of a dynamic urban culture. The expansion of the terrain of the public was accompanied by the elaboration of a distinctive set of discursive norms. In the lecture halls, public parks, theatres, meeting houses and coffee shops which formed the venues of the eighteenth-century public sphere, the demonstrative, expressive mode of self-presentation developed by the reading public gave way to discursive procedures, in that particularistic points of view sought, not sympathetic endorsement from a 'community of love', but the acknowledgement of strangers. The political public sphere saw the reconfiguration of a transparent community of empathetic personalities into the achieved solidarities of private individuals. Specifically, these solidarities of the political public did not, as Habermas reads it, involve any dissolution of individuality. They were forged through the deployment of an experience of a shared humanity, not as the basis for mutual empathy, but as the grounds upon which reasons, in support of the intelligibility and the justice of heterogeneous points of view and claims, might be raised and communicated. This conception of a common humanity was embedded in those shared values of voluntariness, self-reflection and self-development, articulated through, and constitutive of, the procedural norms governing discourse in the political public. What might be acknowledged as good arguments in support of the rationality and the justice of a particular point of view finally turned on the capacity of the speaker and of the hearer to recognize the deployment of shared values which spoke to their common humanity.

The open-ended processes of argumentation and debate which, supposedly, characterized intercourse in the early bourgeois public sphere did not yet require that sacrifice of subjectivity which nineteenth-century liberalism was to exact from the disinterested 'citoyen'. Because at this stage the bourgeois public sphere, domain of the 'homme', sustained the presumption of a shared interest, the individuality of its participants was not constituted as a competition between private wills which had to be bracketed out by a contrived impartiality. Given a presumption of shared values articulated through the discursive processes of the public sphere itself, private individuals were able to confront each other, not as rivals, but as discussants, ready to persuade and open to the persuasion of the stranger.

At the same time, the eighteenth-century political public sphere constituted itself as a purposeful domain of activity; specifically, as a mode of interaction which had, as its final stakes, the defence of private autonomy. Accordingly, its participants required something of each other beyond that empathetic endorsement of their unique selves which had characterized intercourse in the reading public. In argumentatively articulating a point of view, the actor in the political public sphere called for recognition of the rationality and the legitimacy of his/her claims. Here, particularity was constituted, not as, for the reading public, an absolute which endlessly revealed its presence, but as a contingency which, dependent on the maintenance of a specific mode of intercourse, had to seek to remake the relationship each time it articulated its claims. The discursive procedures themselves embodied those values of voluntariness, critical enquiry and self-reflexiveness necessary to the articulation and to the defence of the principle of private autonomy.

### 3

*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is centrally concerned to disclose the normative residue which, Habermas argues, clings to this distinctive eighteenth-century idea of the political public sphere. This normative content is, he supposes, preserved within the procedural norms through which the purposes of the political public sphere seek realization. Specifically, the mode of intercourse promoted by the bourgeois public sphere, communication via processes of argumentation, is seen by Habermas to articulate terms for a reconciliation between two leading principles of a modern democratic polity which have, in other formulations, remained antagonistic. Underpinning this process of argumentative discourse lie, as we have seen, both a presumption of the plurality of interpretative perspectives and an assumed shared allegiance to a common set of values which is renewed with each attempt to articulate the rationality of specific viewpoints. It is this presumed capacity of the eighteenth-century formulation to harmonize the claims of the idea of the 'common interest' with the affirmation of the principle of plurality which Habermas seeks to preserve and to recharge with contemporary significance.

Habermas's attempt to redeem the normative significance of an eighteenth-century idea of the political public must first respond, however, to the charge that the conception of a 'common interest' to which it is indebted is too ideologically contaminated to be worth saving. Once it is admitted that certain mandatory constructions of private autonomy have already invaded this conception of interaction in the public sphere, the fraudulent character of the professed openness of this idea of the public sphere cannot, it seems, be ignored. The very principle of publicity itself is at stake for, as Habermas (1989a: 85) remarks, 'the public sphere of civil society stood or fell with the principle of universal access. A public sphere from which specific groups would *eo ipso* be excluded was less than merely incomplete, it was not a public sphere at all'. He goes on to point out that,

throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the claimed universality of the early bourgeois public sphere, its supposition that it might call upon an idea of 'shared interests' which invited only the self-recognition of the 'human being as human being', was decisively unmasked to disclose the fiction at its core. Specifically, once the idea of a common, abstract humanity which had underpinned the bourgeois public sphere was exposed to reveal the bourgeois character of the 'homme', it seemed that 'the foundation for a relatively homogeneous public composed of private citizens engaged in rational-critical debate was also shaken' (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 179).

Habermas clearly acknowledges what developments in a critical consciousness throughout the following centuries decisively demonstrated: that the representation of the conjugal family as the site of the formation of the idea of autonomous human subjectivity cloaks the deep entwinement of the bourgeois family with specific class interests. This self-image of its intimate sphere collided:

. . . even within the consciousness of the bourgeoisie itself with the real functions of the bourgeois family. For naturally the family was not exempted from the constraint to which bourgeois society like all societies before it was subject. It played its precisely defined role in the process of the reproduction of capital . . . As an agency of society, it served especially the task of that difficult mediation through which, in spite of the illusion of freedom, strict conformity with socially necessary requirements was brought about. (Habermas, 1989a: 47)

While conceding the ideological roots of the notion of unconstrained subjectivity, Habermas insists on the enduring, utopian significance given to this idea via the procedural norms of the bourgeois public sphere. As he sees it, although 'the needs of bourgeois society were not exactly kind to the family's self-image as a sphere of humanity-generating closeness, the ideas of freedom, love and cultivation of the person that grew out of the experiences of the conjugal family's private sphere were surely more than just ideology' (Habermas, 1989a: 48). The image of a human subjectivity bent on constant self-reflection and committed to the principle of voluntary association, which had taken shape in the conjugal family, overruns its bounds and, seeping into the processes of critical discourse, elaborates itself through the procedural norms of the bourgeois public sphere, finally establishing itself through legal and constitutional guarantees. Central, then, to Habermas's defence of this construction of a shared human interest is his supposition that, by the time of its formulation via procedural norms governing discourse in the bourgeois public sphere, the substantive contents which had tied the idea of the 'human being as such' to the specific person of the bourgeois property owner and patriarch of the conjugal family have dissolved, leaving only such descriptions of the discursive process as might admit universal access.

Habermas's supposition, to prove, as we shall see, particularly contentious for his feminist critics, is that the normative ideals of the bourgeois public sphere might themselves be exempted from any distortive ideological content. Admitting that the principle of discursive rationality, upheld by the early public sphere, has lost substantial ground to the rationality claims of instrumentalizing



relations, Habermas insists that this partial defeat does not depend upon and expose normative confusions within the principle of discursive rationality itself (Habermas, 1989a: 232–3). The decline of the normative power of this idea is to be explained, rather, on the basis of its vulnerability to those momentous sociological changes that have characterized the development of modern capitalist societies. For Habermas, the question as to whether the public sphere can reshape its supporting institutions to accommodate these developments or whether the historical processes will themselves overwhelm the constraining influence of the public sphere is, at this stage, still an open question.

## 4

In the course of the nineteenth century, the liberal public sphere proved vulnerable to the new kinds of demands placed on its own principled commitment to the ideas of democratization, universal access and voluntary association. Paradoxically, Cohen and Arato (1992: 248) point out, 'the historical process of democratisation contributed to the decline of institutions that sustained this ideal'. Its own governing ideology allowed the public sphere to swell with the claims of heterogeneous new populations whose specific demands would finally unmask those peculiar assumptions which, *de facto*, had organized that experience of a 'common humanity' vital to its functioning (Habermas, 1989a: 179). In particular, the growing recognition throughout the nineteenth century that its deep class divisions were required by the logic of capitalist economic development exposed the ideological character of the professed openness of the bourgeois public sphere. Once the structural character of a class-divided society had become apparent, the public sphere could no longer assume that all its participants had the capacity to satisfy their own needs through their own private activities. The unmasking of the ideological character of the idea of the 'justice immanent to commerce' meant that private autonomy might no longer be assumed as universally available, depending only on the industry and fortune of the specific individual (Habermas, 1989a: 86). In this new context, the public sphere might no longer presume the private autonomy of its participants but had to learn to cope with the publicity-seeking demands imposed by new claimants persuaded that their needs would never be satisfied by the mechanisms of the market. In this radically transformed public sphere, the principle of private autonomy ceased to provide the grounds for that shared set of interests which had made possible the communicative interactions of the public sphere; 'private autonomy' now irrupted as a demand through which unequally placed actors confronted each other.

Central to the transformation of the bourgeois public sphere was the unravelling of that conception of the separation between the private and the public domain through which it had interpreted its own principle of communicative interaction. The threat came, in the first instance, from those populations who

encountered the principle of separation as an ideological obstacle to their own aspirations. By about the middle of the nineteenth century:

. . . it was possible to foresee how, as a consequence of its inherent dialectic, the public sphere would come under the control of groups that, because they lacked control over property and therefore the basis of private autonomy could have no interest in maintaining the social (reproduction of life) as a private sphere. (Habermas, 1989a: 127)

There were two main aspects to the challenge here. In the first instance, once confidence in the 'justice' supposed immanent to the private sphere had been undermined, the public sphere, defender of the principle of the private autonomy of all, was required to adopt a new interventionist role. At the same time, precisely because the ideology of the just processes of commerce had crumbled, new participants increasingly entered the public sphere as claimants; as the bearers of unmet private needs.

As a consequence, 'private autonomy' figured no longer as the grounds upon which a communicative interaction might be enacted but as the principle in terms of which competing need claims sought primacy. The dissolution of this presumption of a common interest in the protection of the idea of private autonomy shifted the mode of public intercourse and its function from rational-critical debate to negotiated compromise between rival interests. By means of these transformations, the public sphere had, Calhoun (1992: 26) points out, become 'more an arena for advertising than a setting for rational-critical debate'. Nowhere was the effect of this transformation of the idea of publicity more evident than in the workings of the modern mass media. Here, publicity constructs its audience, not as private individuals capable of rational argumentation, but as passive consumers of messages which, utilizing strategies of repetition, seduction and disavowal, rely upon and reproduce relations of power. Amplifying on this theme, Leon H. Mayhew has recently described the terms in which the media machine has helped to change, seemingly forever, the character of public deliberation in the modern world (Mayhew, 1997: 189-286). This kind of contemporary 'reconciliation with reality' insists that we must learn to accommodate a conception of the public significantly less ambitious in its democratizing motivations than the Habermasian interpretation would allow.

Habermas has, on the one hand, always admitted that there can be no going back. Yet at no stage has he been willing to follow nineteenth-century liberalism in its 'realistic' response to the collapse of an early confidence in the idea of the shared interests which supposedly binds private individuals engaged in public discussion (Habermas, 1989a: 131, 135). To the liberals, the diremptions of nineteenth-century society shattered the image of shared public interests – a loss which required a necessary and profound transformation in the meaning of the exercise of public reason. Tolerance for a difference whose claims, finally inaccessible to argumentative support, might only be affirmed dogmatically was all that seemingly remained of the normativity of the bourgeois public sphere (Habermas, 1989a: 133-4). While Habermas also recognizes that the old basis for the convergence of opinion has collapsed, he refuses to break faith with the

ideal of communicative rationality. He will not concede that liberal pluralism can only accommodate a degraded idea of modern democracy guided by the pragmatic preoccupations with a market society concerned with driving bargains, negotiating settlements and 'doing deals'.

## 5

At this point in Habermas's thinking, welfare state jurisprudence appears as the only immanent tendency in modern society toward a reinstitutionalization of the public sphere. He notes two possible scenarios with respect to the futures of the welfare state in relation to the democratic ideals of the bourgeois public sphere (Habermas, 1989a: 227). Welfare state programmes can either represent an acceleration of the erosion of the principle of the public sphere or help to rescue and re-establish this ideal, placing it on footings appropriate to the realities of late-twentieth-century societies. In the first case, those policies of the welfare state which are supposed to supply the factual conditions for an equal opportunity to exercise negative freedoms, paradoxically, it seems, run the risk of impairing individual freedom. Because welfare state policies tend to reduce private individuals to consumers of public wealth, it 'makes room for a staged and manipulative publicity displayed by organizations over the heads of a mediated public' (Habermas, 1989a: 227). The welfare state might prove, namely, an enemy to that principle of private autonomy essential to the reproduction of a vibrant critical public sphere. At this stage, however, Habermas is also persuaded that the welfare state has the potential, at least, to achieve what the world of commerce had promised but had failed to deliver; to mete out justice in economic life, thereby enabling private individuals to enter the public sphere unburdened by the need to compete with others in the quest for publicity for their own private, unmet needs.

From the standpoint of the early 1960s, Habermas has some hopes that the combination of the massively increased productivity of a world economy, together with the emergence of welfare states seemingly committed to the idea of distributive justice, might finally see the realization of the utopian moment in the ideologies of *laissez-faire* capitalism. Economic justice could not, it turned out, be left to the operations of the private domain of market relations, with the inevitable consequence, as Habermas saw it, that the public sphere became swamped by demands from competing private needs. On this account, the modern welfare state, motivated by the principle of economic justice, appears capable of delivering the conditions of universal private autonomy and is, accordingly, embraced by Habermas as the agency of the moment which might restore the separation between private and public domains.

It is, according to him, only this kind of structural separation between private and public that can support the conditions under which the principle of reasonable communication might practically be defended against the tide of an irrational conformism. If the public sphere is allowed to collapse into the

negotiation between rival private interests, then any 'common ground' will only be achieved through the repressive, and usually unstable, acquisition of power and authority. Habermas argues that this collapse of a normatively loaded idea of the public sphere may only be avoided if the welfare state determines to inherit the utopian hopes of a liberal ideology, making practical efforts to ensure that negotiations concerning the reproduction of life do not become the essential business of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989a: 231–2).

As Habermas sees it, our capacity to make the distinction between irrational conformity and reasonable communication depends, above all, on our willingness to embark on a search for shared interests that might provide the grounds for communicative interaction. The welfare state cannot be appealed to as the foundations of a common outlook but, as the rolling back throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s of key programmes in many western countries has confirmed, the survival of welfare policies itself relies upon the reproduction of a set of common values (Habermas, 1998a: 315). Yet, although Habermas clearly recognizes that a contemporary defence of the idea of the critical public sphere requires a renewal of faith in our capacity to thematize the experience of the 'common humanity' brought by private individuals to the public sphere, he is not, at this stage, persuaded that this enterprise need look further than the normative content locked within the procedural norms articulated by the classical bourgeois public sphere. In this early work Habermas's efforts are all directed at demonstrating the kinds of threats faced by this normatively endowed mode of interaction in the current sociological context and at determining those practical conditions which might promote its regeneration.

From the standpoint of its contemporary normative significance, the discovery of the ideological function performed by the idea of human subjectivity given shape in the conjugal family is, for Habermas, not especially material. We have seen that, according to him, with its rearticulation via the procedural norms governing interaction in the public sphere, the particularity of this supposedly universalistic idea of subjectivity is expunged. In the expectations of critical self-reflection and in the openness to reasonable argumentation built into the norms of communicative interactions contained in the idea of the classical bourgeois public sphere, we continue to recognize a normative force.

Habermas is persuaded, then, that in late modernity this idea of critical reason continues to have a weak empirical presence. The claims of communicative reason are encountered as a 'constitutionally institutionalised norm' which has survived the structural transformation of its social bases in the ideologies of classical bourgeois society to now 'determine an important portion of the procedures to which the political exercise and balance of power are factually bound' (Habermas, 1989a: 237). At this stage, Habermas is unable to find any way of thematizing the sources of the idea of a general interest that might lend support to the struggles of the principle of communicative rationality to assert itself against the hegemonic claims of an instrumental rationality. For a historicizing and relativist twentieth-century society, the procedural norms elaborated in the bourgeois public sphere can no longer convincingly assert their normativity via an appeal

to a conception of universal human attributes. In this context, such claims can have only a weak empirical claim as the norms of interaction whose contingent presence continues to be upheld in a range of, not entirely discredited, democratizing institutions.

Reflecting on his early venture, Habermas has, in recent times, suggested that its failure to grasp the necessity of reconceptualizing the principle of a general interest 'to which a public opinion could refer as a criterion' (Habermas, 1989a: 237) creates considerable difficulties for his first efforts to reclaim the contemporary significance of the idea of the public sphere. In his new reflections, Habermas has recognized the limits of the immanently critical approach to the task of reconstituting the principle of critical publicity adopted in his early writings (Habermas, 1992: 430). This immanent critique approach meant that, while he targeted the ideological terms in which the classical bourgeois public sphere had understood its own supporting conditions, Habermas inevitably idealized its self-understanding of its own normative status. Since the 1980s, Habermas has conceived his distance from a liberal conception of the role of the public sphere in stronger terms. In these later writings, he determines that the idea of generalizable interests, which underpins the commitment to the idea of a modern polity, cannot be framed within the terms set by ideological self-representations of the bourgeois public sphere. This determination to formulate the idea of generalizable human interests in terms which owe nothing to liberalism, together with his ongoing commitment to finding a way out of the theoretical cul-de-sac encountered by contemporary critical theory in its efforts to keep faith with the principle of emancipatory reason, motivate the turn in the 1980s towards a thematization of the generalizable interests supposedly borne by transhistorical communicative capacities; by the capacities of reason conceived intersubjectively as a matter of communication. The discourse ethics looks, then, to a whole new terrain, to the idealizations implicit in our everyday communicative interactions, to support Habermas's ongoing efforts to discover the terms in which we might recognize generalizable human interests.

The boldly innovative attempt made by the discourse ethics to theorize the general principles through which the idea of a critical publicity might negotiate its twin commitments to the idea of generalizable human interests and to the principle of human plurality cannot be entered into here. The remainder of the article proposes, rather, to narrow down somewhat a description of the conceptual difficulties encountered in Habermas's early defence of the idea of the public sphere and to use this description to guide an interpretation of the achievements and the remaining difficulties of the more recent sociologically elaborated writings on the idea of the public sphere.

## 6

I noted earlier that, for the younger Habermas, the normative claims of critical publicity become meaningful only in the context of an unequivocal separation

between the private and the public spheres. It is his faint hope at this time that the welfare state will understand its own significance in terms of a historically new opportunity to restore and to give practical effect to what, in the latter part of the twentieth century, appears a damaged and discredited liberal ideology. A range of his critics have pointed out, however, that Habermas's attempt to reconstruct that separation between private and public domains which had underpinned the self-interpretation of the classical bourgeois public sphere fails to confront fully the ideological equation between 'bourgeois' and 'homme' that had characterized this conception (Benhabib, 1992; Cohen and Arato, 1992). In particular, several of his feminist critics have argued that, far from establishing the universal accessibility of its discursive processes, the principle of separation between private and public domains which informs the self-understanding of the bourgeois public sphere confirms its de facto closed character (Fraser, 1992; Landes, 1995). To them, the supposition that the idea of the critical public sphere requires a separation between private and public rests upon a repressive attempt to render some human attributes and modes of interaction foundational – beyond the realm of public discussion. This process of essentialization happens in both directions. If the procedural norms that govern interaction in the public domain are never tested against the claims of private dissatisfactions, then these norms can only finally entrench and absolutize certain forms and styles of intercourse as foundational, expressive of supposedly essential human attributes. At the same time, by quarantining 'private' concerns, Habermas's early efforts to cement a division between public and private are seen to require a repressive essentialization of sets of power relations generated out of, and legitimated by, the conjugal family.

Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser and Joan Landes argue, moreover, that Habermas's critique of the ideological self-representations of the bourgeois family does not penetrate far enough (Benhabib, 1992a; Fraser, 1992; Landes, 1995). While he does seek to unmask the extent to which the specific idea of subjectivity produced in the bourgeois family complements and is functionally adapted to the needs of the capitalist economy, his critics find that Habermas is insufficiently critical of the particular values that cling to this conception of human subjectivity. To them, the suggestion that the family provides an empathetic mutuality that fosters the self-development of each appears as a patriarchal myth that obscures the reality of the sacrifice underpinning this 'community of love'. The exclusionary character of the values embodied in this conception of subjectivity is not, for Landes and Fraser, dispelled by their reconstitution into the terms of the procedural norms governing interaction within the public sphere. They insist that the articulation of the self-understanding of this idea of subjectivity through the norms of rational argumentation still carries into the public sphere the main aspects of that gendered ideological equation of 'homme' and 'bourgeois' which Habermas had discovered characterized the self-representations of subjectivity in the bourgeois family. Landes maintains that the self-understanding of the liberal public sphere fashioned in eighteenth-century Europe, and heralded by Habermas as the kernel of the modern democratic idea, was in principle closed and

exclusionary. This particular self-representation of the public sphere constituted itself in direct opposition to a 'woman-friendly' salon culture. Consequently, a new, austere style of public speech and behaviour was promoted, a style deemed 'rational', 'virtuous' and 'manly' (Landes, 1988). The closure of the eighteenth-century public sphere identified by Landes does not appear as a result of its own misformulated objectives. Rather, an exclusionary logic is built into the discursive practices themselves for, to the extent that this mode of interaction demands an already constituted private autonomy understood as the capacity of the self-mastering individual to satisfy their own needs, it seems that Habermas seeks to confer normativity on the style of interaction between subjects made available to them on the basis of their gender, as well as their class, position.

There has been some agreement among the critics that Habermas's early defence of the public sphere has relied too uncritically on a liberal conception of the necessary bifurcation between the private and the public spheres and has, accordingly, finally found itself entrapped by an essentializing construction of the terms in which the common humanity of participants in public discourse might be recognized. Yet there remains significant dispute about how to estimate and respond to these limitations of the theory. For some, the conceptual difficulties of this first formulation are indicative of misconceptions deep in the Habermasian project, which ties the defence of the idea of the public sphere to an attempt to offer a proceduralist reconstruction of the idea of common human interests. Habermas has always conceived this search for a proceduralist formulation of the idea of shared interests as an attempt to reconstruct those discursive norms through which a diverse humanity might communicatively interact. Yet, for Geoff Eley, Mary Ryan and others, there can be no proposed reconstruction of the supposed universality of discursive norms which does not finally collude with the assertion of a certain regime of power (Eley, 1992; Ryan, 1992).

For Landes also, the critiques of Habermas's early formulation of the normativity of the idea of the public sphere have exposed the deeply problematic character of his insistence that a defence of the idea of critical publicity requires a willingness to search for non-repressive terms in which the idea of a common interest might be formulated (Landes, 1995). As she sees it, Habermas has falsely reduced the idea of democratizing relations to an extrapolation from one single type of publicity. On her account, Habermas dogmatically opposes the publicity of a discursive rationality, in which subjects use processes of argumentation to achieve recognition for the justice and intelligibility of their claims, to the publicity of expressive communication in which the subject seeks to disclose the uniqueness of his/her 'world'. As we have seen, Landes argues that Habermas's attempt to model an understanding of democratizing relations simply on the basis of an appeal to the normativity of a discursive rationality implicitly denigrates the peculiar discursive processes at work in the feminine-led domain of the eighteenth-century salon.

Yet it seems that we do lose something important if we respond to the difficulties that beset Habermas's early defence of the idea of the public sphere by determining to abandon any attempt to champion the idea of *the* public sphere.

There are two considerations that might be raised in support of his continuing effort to defend the specificity and the universality of the idea of the political public sphere. First, an ongoing commitment to that principle of the public sphere outlined by Dewey (1988b: 245–6) so many decades ago, in which the public appears in the determination to marshal a collective response to those ‘private troubles’ which arise as the indirect consequence of private transactions, would seem to justify Habermas’s ongoing efforts to defend the ideal of the public sphere as a mode of interactive rationality. This interest, outlined by Dewey, is forfeited once the idea of the public is dissolved into a conception of a plurality of diverse publics, home to the self-expressive motivations of diverse subjectivities. Furthermore, if the idea of the political public sphere is understood in terms described by Dewey, then Habermas’s ongoing determination that the public sphere must be invested with a universalistic, not parochial, significance again appears as a very defensible standpoint. That is, the self-constituting public, which recognizes itself through a mutual acceptance of a responsibility of ‘care’ with respect to those damaged by ‘the indirect consequences of transactions’ can have no ‘natural’ boundaries.

We need, however, to distinguish the legitimacy of Habermas’s ongoing determination to defend the specificity and universality of the idea of the public sphere from a consideration of the adequacy of the various formulations of this project. As we have seen, significant reservations have been raised about the terms of Habermas’s early reconstruction of the specificity of the idea of the public sphere. Because Habermas supposes that that the public sphere is unable to accommodate negotiations on behalf of unmet private needs, at this stage, his account of the norms governing public discursivity cannot reconstruct those conditions through which the responsive public, identified by Dewey, is able to constitute itself. Again, the critics, as we have seen, have demonstrated that, the universalistic pretensions of his conception of the public sphere notwithstanding, Habermas’s first attempt at a proceduralist reconstruction of the idea of common human interests still bears the marks of a gendered and class equation between ‘bourgeois’ and ‘homme’.

Given this account of the shortcomings of Habermas’s first attempts to defend the idea of the public sphere, we can approach the later writings armed with some more or less specific questions. Overcoming the limitations of the early formulation would mean a redescription of those procedural norms through which the public constitutes itself. Responding to the early shortcomings would also require a rethinking of the terms in which the universalistic scope given to the idea of the public sphere is conceived. In the last section of the article I argue that, while major writings from the 1990s have addressed the first issue in a comprehensive fashion, the latter task is again given a rather equivocal formulation in these recent works.



## 7

Published, in the German edition, in 1992, *Between Facts and Norms* (Habermas, 1996a) recognizes that the idea of the critical public sphere does not have to quarantine itself from the supposedly anti-solidaristic influence of private need claims. On this later account, the idea of public autonomy (articulation of the principle of equal respect for each person embedded in a legally protected system of rights) assumes an interdependent, not antagonistic, relation to the idea of private autonomy (affirmation of the legitimacy of the struggles of particular groups and individuals for the recognition of the specificity of their needs for the self-realization of their identities). New in the recent formulations of the idea of the public sphere is the creative role Habermas now gives to solidarities forged around local interests in the construction of an evolving recognition of our shared human concerns. The construction of a sense of shared interests is viewed as a dynamic process in which interdependencies, shared risks and solidaristic aspirations are disclosed through the ongoing negotiations and struggles between a range of private interests.

We saw that the liberal conception of the public sphere, supposed domain of the citizen deliberating on those conditions necessary to an impartial protection of the liberty of the private individual, tended to homogenize the meaning of private autonomy construed as the birthright of a particular kind of self-sufficient subjectivity. The later Habermas breaks in a radical fashion from this narrow, prejudicial construction and insists that only particular, located individuals can, by means of their ongoing efforts to appropriate the significance of the contexts in which they find themselves, be recognized as the legitimate source of meaning for the principle of private autonomy. This effort at active appropriation of the potentials of one's found context is seen necessarily to involve a struggle for public recognition (Habermas, 1996a: 351). With this changed understanding of the significance of the principle of private autonomy, Habermas dramatically shifts a conception of the role of the public sphere away from its liberal constitution as that site in which general political principles deemed necessary to the pursuit of a private autonomy, achieved elsewhere, might be determined. On this new interpretation, the meaning given to the idea of public autonomy must not only incorporate general political goals, but must also accommodate collective goals that are articulated in the struggles for recognition waged by diverse social groups and interests (Habermas, 1996a: 123).

Habermas insists that the interdependent needs for both private and public autonomy must be secured by a system of civil and political rights. Yet he also acknowledges that, in a systematically unequal social environment, gaps between these formal guarantees and their actual realizability will inevitably appear. This systemic tension between 'facts' and 'norms' requires Habermas to stipulate a set of conditions necessary to ensure the fairness and stability of rational public dialogue. To meet these conditions he introduces a category of 'social rights', describing them as 'basic rights to the provision of living conditions that are socially, technologically, and ecologically safeguarded, insofar as the current

circumstances make this necessary if citizens are to have equal opportunities to utilise . . . civil rights' (Habermas, 1996a: 35). In this analysis, the welfare state is charged with the responsibility, not of defending a separation between the private and the public domains, but of equipping those marginalized by the logic of the marketplace with the material capacities needed to empower them as effective participants in public deliberation over the character of civil and political rights. For Habermas, the welfare state must, above all, commit itself to securing the conditions for the genesis of personal freedom through civil rights and not suppose that its function ends with a mere distribution of a 'fair share' which tends, in market-driven societies, to be, mistakenly, equated with the very meaning of personal autonomy itself (Habermas, 1996a: 407).

Since the 1960s, Habermas has increasingly recognized that his early hopes that the welfare state might preserve the conditions necessary for the defence of a critical public sphere were not only problematically conceived but had, as it happens, exaggerated the vibrancy and the resistant strength of its institutions (Habermas, 1989b). The traditional welfare state faces seemingly insuperable obstacles as supply-side economic policies oriented to deregulating markets gain ground and raise the prospects of social costs which 'may well exceed the integration capacity of liberal societies' (Habermas, 1998a: 315). The retreat of the welfare state will, as Habermas sees it, finally result in the emergence of underclasses excluded from the employment and education systems. This slide into desolidarization will 'inevitably destroy a liberal political culture, for democratic societies are dependent on precisely those shared beliefs, attitudes and practices that articulate universalist principles' (Habermas, 1998a: 315). The role of the welfare state in maintaining the public sphere must, in Habermas's view, shift its jurisdiction from the disempowered nation-state to 'larger political units growing to catch up, so to speak, with a transnationalised economy' (Habermas, 1998a: 317). Habermas (1998a: 318) now suggests that all hopes for the survival of the public sphere rest with the as yet unformed project for a 'supranational politics', understood as a 'structure of communication' capable of reining in the unintended consequences of private dealings on the transnational markets.

It seems, then, that the later writings in no sense pull back from the universalistic scope which *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* had given to the idea of the public sphere. Yet, unlike the early version, the later works are able to appeal to empirical tendencies that, supposedly, draw from diverse cultures a more abstracted understanding of our common human ties. The globalization of:

. . . commerce and communication, of economic production and finance, of the spread of technology and weapons, and above all of ecological and military risks, poses problems that can no longer be solved within the framework of nation-states or by the traditional method of agreement between sovereign states. (Habermas, 1998b: 106)

Through globalization processes, we get more and more accustomed to a different perspective which sharpens our awareness of the growing interdependence of our 'social arenas, of shared risks, and of the joint networks of collective fates'

(Habermas, 1998a: 318). This accelerating sense of the interdependence of the fate of all peoples might, Habermas hopes, see the progressive undermining of national sovereignty and necessitate the 'founding and expansion of political institutions on the supranational level, a process whose beginning can already be observed' (Habermas, 1998b: 107).

Yet we misunderstand the real continuities which shape Habermas's ongoing commitment to the principle of the modern public sphere if we suppose that his universalism now only invests in the reconstruction of the significance of certain empirical tendencies in a globalizing world (Habermas, 1996b: 1483). To Habermas, the idea of critical publicity continues to carry a heavy normative load. It appears, namely, as the contemporary democratizing formulation of an Enlightenment commitment to the production of a self-sovereign humanity able to arbitrate rationally on its own futures. The modern idea of the public sphere does not merely articulate a contingently acquired universalism in which we are seen to develop new, more abstracted, understandings of our shared humanity as global forces extend the range of intercultural negotiations. At no stage, then, does the later Habermas suppose that the universalistic claims of the idea of the public sphere can cut free from its normative moorings (Habermas, 1998c: 16–24). Participants in public discourse finally stand before each other as communicative actors and Habermas continues to see his theoretical obligations in the light of a reconstruction of the kinds of normative significances that emanate from this relationship. In his latest formulations, Habermas stresses that the recognition of the other as a communicative actor in the public sphere is adequately articulated through procedural norms which specify, not an impartial disinterest in his/her particularity, but facilitate 'a nonleveling and nonappropriating inclusion of . . . his otherness' (Habermas, 1998c: 40).

In the later writings, then, Habermas continues to attempt to derive the universalistic scope of the concept of the public sphere from that account of the significance of transculturally relevant forms of communicative interaction that had informed the discourse ethics (Habermas, 1998c: 45). He attempts to distance his own later position from what in his view are the unnecessary and unfortunate concessions which the older Rawls has made to the contextualist argument (Habermas, 1998d: 75–105). To many critics, this determination to hold out and to insist that the normativity of the idea of the public sphere finally rests on the quasi-transcendental context supplied by the recognition of our shared status as communicative actors continues to offer grounds for substantial reservations about the terms of the theory as a whole (Benhabib, 1992c; McCarthy, 1991). In particular, the critics have targeted a perceived ethnocentric bias in the universalistic ambitions of the theory for, as Agnes Heller points out, 'the very idea of a universal procedure is no less embedded in Western tradition than the claim to the validity of these maxims' (Heller, 1984–85: 9).

If the reconstructive ambitions of the theory are fully followed through, we can, I suggest, discover terms in which the normative universalism of the idea of the public can be reclaimed as a cultural choice: not as a choice of merely narrowly described liberal democratic societies, but as an option which might be

chosen, in at least partial self-awareness of its normative significance, as the preferred mode of interaction between diverse cultural groupings. As Michelle Moody-Adams points out, 'in actual practice, diverse groups do sometimes agree (even if only implicitly) to accept some "vocabulary" as, at least for a time, neutral between previously competing vocabularies' (Moody-Adams, 1997: 27). On the interpretation being advocated here, Habermas's account of transculturally relevant forms of communicative interaction appears as a reconstruction of those conceptual conditions which makes possible, and as an elaboration of the generalizable significance which attends, the search for neutral and uncoerced conversational ground which, Moody-Adams points out, also features in contemporary intercultural relations.

Even if we cannot finally accept Habermas's universalizing claim about the significance of language and its originary function as implying the presuppositions of mutual understanding, the idea of the public sphere can still be upheld as a norm endorsed for either cultural or pragmatic reasons. The fact that we do share a world and that strangers are constantly confronted with the problem of their differences means that we either embrace the choice of the public sphere or face the consequences. In this article I have attempted to establish that Habermas's proceduralist reconstruction of the idea of the public sphere has increasing sought to elaborate the democratizing potentials of this concept. Against the liberal and welfarist paradigms, which have expunged or minimized the participatory dimension of the idea of the citizen, Habermas's reconstruction moves in a direction responsive to that heightened sensitivity to the claims of difference that has also shadowed the acceleration of globalizing processes. As we have seen, Habermas at no stage wants to diminish the important insights embodied in the liberal emphasis on human and basic rights. He makes the point, however, that the institutional domestication of liberal democracy has perhaps blinded us to the real physiognomy of these principles. Central, then, to his own ongoing search for the public sphere is the determination to rescue these obscured contents via a reaffirmation and reconstruction of the normative framework underlying liberal democracy.

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