General Introduction

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The phenomenon of "the public sphere" as it is conceived in these four volumes has many different precursors. Human beings are social animals and have always and everywhere gathered in order to discuss matters of common interest and in order to make life more rewarding through a variety of expressive or artistic activities. The Greek city-states of antiquity were slave societies but the first ideas of democracy were born there and then among men who gathered in the city square to debate the issues of the day. In the European cities of the Middle Ages, people of course met regularly outside of each others' homes to exchange gossip and news and talk about their lives. They could also be summoned by the ruling king or nobleman whenever important decisions or forthcoming events were to be made known to all his subjects.

In his 1962 classic *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (English translation 1989 as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*), Jürgen Habermas refers to the latter type of assembly as a "representative public sphere", an open, "public" proclamation or re-presentation of decisions already made behind closed doors. There were also other sorts of gatherings, at best very loosely tied to the exercise of power, what Habermas referred to as "plebeian" public spheres, where powerless people congregated, for the most part with little consequence outside of their own local community.

The bourgeois public sphere formed in 18th century Western Europe and North America represented a break with all of these antecedents. It was not about the proclamation of decisions already made, but about discursive processes oriented toward a "rational" or reasonable decision on matters of common interest. And it was not about powerless people coming together, with little consequence. It was about a self-conscious collective that demanded

the "rule of reasons" (Forst 2001), that binding collective decisions should be based on the outcome of discussions among citizens – and their representatives. The emergence of the bourgeois public thus represented the birth of modern democracy. Consequently, the history of the idea of the public sphere is a central part of the history of that form of government. These four volumes aim to document the continuities, the breaks and the diversity of the ever-ongoing debates on the meanings and significance of this historically decisive idea.

The word "public" carries at least four different but interrelated meanings in contemporary language. Firstly, we speak of physical spaces such as city squares and parks as public when they are open to all and part of a shared "commons". Extending this metaphor we think of information and cultural resources as public when they are freely accessible and communicable and therefore potentially "common". Secondly, we distinguish between public and private concerns. We identify the former with issues that are of common interest to all members of a polity and therefore the legitimate concern of governmental institutions and the latter with areas of life that should be left to people's private discretion and remain their personal secrets. This boundary is neither fixed nor self evident however. On the contrary, deciding on where the line between the public and private domains should be drawn has been a continuing focus of contention in democratic societies. Thirdly, we employ the term public as a social category. We use it in both a relatively restricted sense, to describe everyone who participates in particular public events or forms of expression, as in the phrase "reading public", and in a more general sense to characterize the collective of citizens. Fourthly, we describe the aggregate of individual views that emerge among a public of citizens on issues of the day as "public opinion". The contestations involved in the formation of public opinions are often called "public discourses", and reasons advanced in support of positions are thought of as public when they appeal to generally shared convictions and principles.

These different uses of "public" are all present in the term "public sphere". It is then not simply a description of the network of institutions, but has also a normative content and advances a principle of democratic legitimacy: that the exercise of governmental and state power should be both "public" (in contrast to "secret") and reflect the power of a deliberating public of free and equal citizens.

The bourgeois public sphere was in principle open to anyone. As citizens (*citoyens*) people should leave their specific interests as private persons (*bourgeois*) aside and engage in a search for a supposed "common good". Social position and economic resources should be of no consequence in the public sphere. It was supposed to be a sphere of egalitarian reciprocity where the force of the better argument would decide. But in practice, the public sphere was, outside of some cultural arenas, closed to everyone except the male

part of the business and professional classes. As Nancy Fraser (1992) has argued, referring to historical work by, among others, Joan Landes (1988), there were other publics, based in other social categories, with which the bourgeois public sphere in a sense competed. The idea of a public sphere was born as a "bourgeois" idea in and out of the struggles against absolute monarchy and aristocratic power, but due to its universalistic claim it set free a political dynamic that transcended its socio-cultural genesis.

The idea that not social positions, only the strength of arguments should count, would become weapons for the struggles for recognition of one social group after the other throughout the centuries that followed. This idea of the public sphere is opposed not only to any dictatorial rule but also to any systematic exclusion of any social group from participation on equal terms in political life. It forms a normative yardstick for measuring the conditions for the twin freedoms of information and expression in any given society, and for evaluating media and communication structures, media content or performance, media and cultural policies, etc. This is certainly not the same as saying it is unproblematic or undisputed. The selection of texts in these four volumes attempts to represent developments in the theoretical discourse on the public sphere and its role in society since the Enlightenment. While each contributor has a specific point of view and a set of arguments of her or his own, two broad currents/trends are discernable as recurring throughout at least two centuries. One might label them "optimists" versus "sceptics", since they are about differing judgments of the importance and value of public discourse.

The first group of theorists are convinced that the activities in the public sphere, and especially public debates in a variety of fora, not only should but also regularly will influence the formation of political will in political parties and other associations as well as actual political decisions in the central arenas of government. They are also convinced that citizens' participation in the public sphere is of key importance to the functioning of a democratic system so that finding ways of facilitating and encouraging such participation becomes a priority.

The other group is labelled "sceptics" since it does not simply consist of theorists who hold that the public sphere is without importance or generally a negative phenomenon. It is rather a multifarious category where scepticism concerning the importance and virtues of the public sphere comes in many degrees and nuances. Some worry over the possibility that the public sphere opens the possibility that a majority can silence and repress minorities and individuals with opposing views. Some claim it is impossible for citizens to be sufficiently informed about all the matters under discussion to form a properly founded opinion. Others may regard the public sphere as important, but not so much as a set of arenas for debate, rather as an arena for propaganda, i.e., the mobilisation of support for a particular view or social interest by way of persuasion.

These positions are consequently also tied to different conceptions of "democracy", in theory as well as in practice. A useful distinction is between the "market" and the "forum" model of democracy (Elster 1986). The market model imagines democracy as a system where political parties are competing over support in elections and voters choose between their "packages" on the basis of their given preferences. According to this model the basic function of democracy is to aggregate individual preferences through voting. The public sphere is important, but primarily as a space for the "marketing" of political standpoints. In the forum model of democracy, on the other hand, the focus is on the formation and transformation of preferences through public deliberation. Here the public sphere is absolutely central; as a space for public discourse a well functioning public sphere is necessary to bring forward all (or as many as possible) of the relevant views on the issue at hand (a representational function), and to identify the essential facts and arguments of the matter (an epistemic function). It is assumed that public deliberation will influence the opinions of citizens, whether directly involved in an issue or not, i.e., the so-called public opinion.

However, the public sphere does not only consist of strictly political debates or the planned publicity of organised social interests. As once put by Bernhard Peters:

> "General public discussion is not limited to those practical questions either needing solutions or capable of resolution. To this belong debates on general orientation, normative principles and values (whether in public or private life), relationships to a collective past and collective aspirations for the future. The diagnosis of current social trends and cultural criticism belong as much to the public sphere as do political debates in a narrower sense" (Peters [1994] 2008: 37).

The public sphere must in line with this be understood as a highly complex set of arenas for all sorts of social and cultural activity, whether inside or outside the media, online or offline. According to Jürgen Habermas' classic text, the beginning of the public sphere was in fact a literary or cultural public sphere where the arts and especially literary works were digested and discussed with a view to not only aesthetic but also moral, ethical or political ideas and principles. Besides contributing to a civic culture necessary for any kind of sustained public discourse, whether properly deliberative or not, the public's entertaining and artistic activities and experiences are of key importance to the formation of basic attitudes and values as well as more specific perceptions of all sorts of issues. This is why we have dedicated one of the four volumes to texts with particular relevance for the cultural part of the public sphere.

Over the last couple of decades, theories of the public sphere have attracted great and growing interest across many disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences. The publication in 1989 of the translation into English of Habermas' 1962 classic is an important factor here, but there are of course several other reasons as well. The collapse of the communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and later political changes in the direction of democracy in other parts of the world, such as Latin America and Africa, as well as the often mentioned "crisis" of contemporary Western democracies, contributed to a boost in the interest in research on and theories of democracy. But then there are also phenomena such as the technological developments in media and communication – especially the opening up of the World Wide Web and its very rapid growth as a medium and a forum of fora. As one commentator has observed, "media theory and Internet research turned rather quickly to Habermas' study of the early European bourgeois public sphere and to theories of deliberation. Theories of deliberation addressed precisely what the Internet seemed to offer: possibilities for formation of productive enlightening and public opinion on a much broader scale than previously seen in history" (Rasmussen 2008: 75).

The current and future possibilities of a digitised public sphere is the central topic of the fourth and final volume of this set, signalling the continued relevance for as far as we can see ahead of the intellectual tradition(s) represented in the collection as a whole. The optimism and scepticism of previous epochs are reproduced in a variety of forms as attempts are made to take stock of the new situation. But there are also other issues of great importance that are brought forward in current discussions, only indirectly related to digitisation, such as trans-nationalisation, cultural pluralism and the new public role of religion. Debates continue in all of these areas and in a number of others, both on purely philosophical terms and informed by ongoing empirical research of many kinds. We hope these four volumes will contribute both to the quality, diversity and amount of further work in the field. It concerns, after all, matters of fundamental importance to our societies and the people who inhabit them.

References

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