

I

A Critique

Reflections on the public sphere have been mostly oriented by the writings of Jürgen Habermas. Despite certain disagreements with some parts of his theory, most commentators have followed the German philosopher. Here is his understanding:

By ‘public sphere’ we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens. Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion.¹

Public opinion can be formed only in physical or virtual spaces where citizens can partake in conversations regarding the common good, according to Habermas. So *The Transformation of the Public Sphere*, his groundbreaking work, traced the history of the phenomenon from the eighteenth-century coffeehouses to contemporary television.² In the communications that are to take place in these spaces, the eminent thinker claimed, the particularities of the speakers – their social class, economic interests, passions and prejudices, ethnicity, religion, etc. – need to be bracketed out for the public sphere to function as it is supposed to: universalistic discourse is a necessity. Access should be universal as well. There ought to be widespread and informed participation; the presumed outcome of dialogue is rational consensus.

Habermas claimed that these conditions were not satisfied before the eighteenth century.³ It was, above all, he argued, thanks to the commodification of news and culture and to the rise in literacy during the early modern period and the Enlightenment that the European bourgeoisie could organize itself as a deliberating public in the eighteenth

century by discussing general matters in coffeehouses, newspapers, salons, and reading clubs. The hierarchical and fragmented feudal world had not allowed for such an organization. Neither did the Greek agora (the market place) nor the pnyx (the venue of the Athenian legislature) do any better by Habermas's lights: these were simply competitive arenas for recognition and not fora for rational deliberation. While literary matters were the original discursive objects of the public sphere, soon politics became its cynosure. Censorious of secrecy and arbitrariness, the national bourgeoisies challenged their own governments. The principle of publicity regarding matters about the common good was held against the doctrine of *arcana imperii*, just as, in the same breath, truth and rationality were pitted against *raison d'État*. Deprived of participatory citizenship, the bourgeoisie demanded to critically discuss in physical spaces as well as in print matters pertaining to administration and economics. And eventually this rising class would seize political rights with the ascendance of the constitutional state, in part by dint of the opposition gathered in the coffeehouses and the press.

At this point, Habermas's narrative grows glum, though. The public sphere started to deteriorate in the 1870s, as competitive capitalism succumbed to the sway of monopolies. From then on, states took to intervening regularly in political conflicts, and economic interests invaded the public sphere – a paradoxical upshot of the extension of suffrage. In the course of the twentieth century, industrial capitalism transformed citizens into selfish consumers, democracy into masses, sensationalistic media into emotional dupes, public relations experts into subjects, and the welfare state into clients. Particularistic concerns, emotional irrationality, voyeurism and exhibitionism, technocratic reason all combined, conspired to vitiate civic communication. The content of the public sphere, now mostly supplied by mass media, was depoliticized, manipulative publicity superseding rational dialogue in print as in television.⁴ “The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only,”⁵ wrote Habermas with undisguised disdain.

The Habermasian approach to the public sphere has been very influential, spurring countless studies, typically with an explicit concern to broaden civic participation, in the absence of which democratic decision-making processes are expected to suffer. According to the political theorist Seyla Benhabib, for instance, the public sphere entails anonymous conversations in civil society by and among associations, networks, and organizations. Such communications are “the embodiment of discursive democracy in practice.”⁶ For sociologists, too, the emphasis is on civic

discussion in public spaces.⁷ Similarly, those who study social capital in the wake of Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* search for ways to reverse the decline of civic participation in America.⁸

Now, *The Transformation of the Public Sphere*, while a watershed, set off a flurry of criticism as well.⁹ Historical research has questioned its timing. A full-fledged political public sphere – one with explicitly religious concerns, which are slurred over by Habermas – was already afoot during the English Revolution in the form of petitions.¹⁰ Habermas has also been taken to task for his class reductionism: the enlightened public of the eighteenth century displayed little class unity; many of its leading lights were in fact liberal aristocrats.¹¹ And because of the repressiveness of the absolutist state, in several European countries the enlightened bourgeoisie politically operated within the secretive world of Masonic lodges, not open coffeehouses.¹² The substance of their discourse was not nearly as empyrean as the German thinker imagined; their motives were far from disinterested. There are, in effect, multiple ways of exercising citizenship other than the cerebral template championed by Habermas: the nineteenth-century American public sphere was at times quite carnivalesque, coarse, and even corruptible, a world where political allegiance could be openly traded for money.¹³

Habermas posited a public sphere with a unitary public in his original formulation. By contrast, numerous scholars have pleaded for a multiplicity, for counter-publics contesting the hegemony of dominant ones.¹⁴ According to such left critics of Habermas, the universalism of the public sphere is a chimera, if not a chicanery: the actual public sphere privileges the discourses of the mighty and sets normative standards that discriminate against and mute the downtrodden.¹⁵ Critics have maintained that historical public spheres have frequently been erected upon ethnic and racial exclusion. Feminists have, in a similar fashion, argued that the private and public distinction that Habermas takes for granted is, in fact, a gendered and gendering institution with iniquitous impact, that it equates the female with the private and the emotional – thereby barring half of humanity from public life.¹⁶ They have objected to the banishment of personal and sexual matters, along with issues like childcare which predominantly affect women, from public discourse – a banishment that both disguises and actuates the dominium of men over women. At the same time, distinctly female forms of public action that do not square with the model stipulated by Habermas have been uncovered by feminist historians. Craig Calhoun has claimed that identities are often formed in the course of public debates, as opposed to preceding them.¹⁷ Others have

thrown into doubt the superiority of rationality over narrative knowledge and personal experience.

These criticisms have yielded incisive insights about debate in civil society. Still, Habermas and his followers, but also his critics – along with many who write about the “public realm,” “public square,” “public space,” or the “public domain” – all operate in broad strokes within something that I will refer to as the conventional perspective. Commentators in the media have equally, by and large, adopted it. The focus here is the civic or civil dialogue that is supposed to take place in physical and virtual public spaces. Public space is not treated in its own right. I will get to this very problematic – indeed damning – omission in the next chapter, but before doing that let us see how the conventional perspective suffers from three problematic elements: i) the condition of civicness or civility, ii) the conflation of the public sphere with citizenship, and iii) the ideal of widespread, egalitarian participation. There are scholars who have addressed some of these problems. Yet studies that escape one are usually marred by the others.

Civicness and Civility

Barring important exceptions,¹⁸ the scholars adopting the conventional perspective posit a close link between the public sphere and the normative orientation of its inhabitants. Public does not only qualify the space that we are in, but also the group we constitute as well as the moral telos of our action. When we are not oriented to the common good, when we are not plentiful the public sphere deteriorates, loses its *raison d'être*. According to Habermas, this is what happened when, as a result of capitalism, economic interests came to govern communications in public. For some, the public sphere is even contingent on a civic attitude. Nina Eliasoph writes that the public sphere “comes into being when people speak public-spiritedly.”¹⁹ Jeffrey Alexander’s “civil sphere” – an offshoot of the concept of public sphere – is equally defined by a universalistic morality: “a solidary sphere in which a certain kind of universalizing community comes to be culturally defined and to some degree institutionally enforced.”²⁰

Yet concern for the common good, far from being a self-evident social fact, is more of a will-o'-the-wisp, very hard to verify objectively by scholars or laypeople. The public-spiritedness that one spots in the world is frequently simply a reflection of one's ideological biases: hence the proclivity of public sphere scholars, most of whom are openly liberals or

radicals, to key in on left-leaning movements and their overall silence on nonprogressive groups – except to denounce them.²¹ Opponents in public discussions and controversies attribute selfishness to each other as a matter of fact. Indeed, how can we exclude that there can be a whole kaleidoscope of self-serving interests in our minds while we are marching in demonstrations, participating in parent-teacher association meetings, signing petitions, or sending off op-ed pieces? One can obviously attend a local meeting not only to reflect on public matters, but also to socialize, to meet prospective mates, to project a reputation for being smart, to signal a righteous concern to neighbors, to deny housing to immigrants, to prepare for a lynching, to kill time. Those who lead these events – community leaders – will typically have self-regarding political ambitions. Or it can reasonably appear that way to observers. Of course, from the National Rifle Association to the ACLU to anti-abortion organizations, most politicized groups, or rather their spokespeople who intone in public, dress up their discourse in universalist nomenclature – with terms like equality or freedom.²² Few would write a publishable letter to a newspaper without a pretension to speak in the name of some general, grandiose principle. But there is no reason for us to take these claims at their face value. High-minded rhetoric in public is not uncommonly found by its addressees to be ritualistic, hollow, not to say devious. The motive behind such discourse cannot be easily pinned down, and public-spiritedness in public rarely goes without instigating ethical assaults aiming to debunk it. Those who participate heavily in public affairs are typically recognized as partisan; they will not fail to be perceived by their opponents as selfish or brainwashed. Arguments in a supposedly civic debate are difficult to distinguish from the standard ideological positions in a society; it is hardly surprising that such situations get heated in no time.

What if we relax the discursive conditions and say that the public sphere is where people – whatever their intentions – engage in civil debate? But then we are still left with very little: it is difficult to find interesting and consequential public events, discursive or otherwise, that don't feature disruptiveness, ad hominem attacks, malice. It is a rare – and usually boring – debate, one that solely involves issues. The more a politician disquisitions impersonally, logically, professorially in public, the more, the linguist Michael Silverstein points out, the “message being conveyed is, in actuality, [his] rigidity, narrowness, and myopia.”²³ In political life, the more important the debate, the nastier it tends to get. Consider how both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton cruelly cudged each other's character in each of the three presidential debates in 2016.

Further, the one who receives attention from a multitude will be automatically aggrandized; personality, thus, cannot but be an integral part of any public debate. Even, or especially, when the stakes are low, public debate almost always induces grandstanding, if not in reality then in perception, which then instigates moral assaults on the grandstanding of the grandstanders. And public debate, no matter its civil genesis, will usually end up fomenting partisanship and polarization.²⁴ Parties routinely complain of each other's incivility, and the worst hidden agendas are ascribed to one's opponent in the press, on television, at the town hall. This holds as much as for today as it did for the golden age of American associational life touted by Tocqueville. Michael Young has found that the antebellum evangelical sin societies and fraternal associations charged one another unremittingly for being uncivil and anti-democratic.²⁵ The same goes for the voluntary organizations of the Reconstruction and Progressive Eras, whose antagonisms compounded the ethnic and religious rifts in the United States.²⁶ Consider as well the acrimony that dictates any debate about gun laws in the American public sphere, where each side habitually, hatefully holds the other responsible for untold homicides.²⁷ In a broader sense, the more people talk in public and the more public their talk becomes, the cheaper their talk gets – and, as Frank Knight's first Law of Talk posits, "cheaper talk drives out of circulation that which is less cheap."²⁸ At the same time, public positions in controversies tend to turn increasingly radical and noncompromising. The ease with which one can respond to discourse in the public sphere will only make things more uncivil. On Twitter, for instance, any public tweet – in its original or retweeted form – can be responded to by anyone. Responses, particularly to controversial tweets, are very often abusive, bordering on harassment.²⁹

Last but not least, most speech and action that succeed in changing society are rarely civil. The primary aim of civil disobedience, the paradigmatic example of effective public contestation, is to provoke violence by authorities. The public that most commentators write about is a collection of rational, well-behaved citizens. It is the opposite of a mob, which is irrational, rowdy, feverish, and manipulated by ill-intentioned politicians. Yet the referents of these categories cannot be easily agreed upon. Groups one likes are publics; those that one doesn't, mobs. In the United States, conservatives thought that the Occupy Wall Street protestors were a mob; predictably, liberals characterized the Tea Party members exactly in the same way.

Citizenship

The conventional perspective identifies the public sphere – for example, the town square or the media – as the site where citizenship is or ought to be exercised,³⁰ whether this entails rational dialogue or discursive struggles between dominant and subordinate groups. The public sphere is “a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk,” in the words of Nancy Fraser.³¹ Such a conflation of the public sphere with citizenship is problematic on multiple grounds.

First, while the darlings of most public sphere commentators are associations discoursing in the open, the very essence of citizenship is indubitably something else. It is voting: the only political act that a majority of citizens ever engage in. Even more devastating, voting in modern societies is a solitary act carried out in secret – that is, outside the public sphere. After all, the secret ballot is the *sine qua non* of contemporary liberal democracy. The rationale is that voting should not take place in public because its visibility can discourage good citizens from expressing their true preferences, while encouraging the venal ones to sell their votes – both of which would pervert citizenship.³² And most people who actively engage in politics in the town square or the media are not simple citizens but elites of some kind. It is often some kind of an intellectual – whom Sartre defined as “he who meddles with things which are none of his business.”³³ Or it is some kind of a political actor – in other words, someone who has an apparent gain in meddling. Simple citizens, even when they genuinely care about public matters, would rather hide their names or positions, especially if they think they may not be in the majority; open, sincere engagement is imprudent, perilous. This is why the hallmark of a liberal society is not widespread political participation in the open, which is rarely voluntary and is more of a feature of totalitarian states, but its opposite: the right given to citizens to not engage with political matters in public, and the liberty to peacefully lead private lives free as much as possible from societal and governmental surveillance and interference.

Second, there is ample elevated public discourse (which relate to truth, God, art, etc.) that has little to do with citizenship. Even in Habermas’s narrative, the origin of the bourgeois public sphere was in literary matters: discussions of eighteenth-century bestsellers such as Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*. This problem, already noted by several scholars,³⁴ is not necessarily an insurmountable one; nevertheless, the emphasis on citizenship

would leave out many significant communications – but also events – from the public sphere.

Finally, there is here a dubious motivational distinction among political activity within civil society, the political system proper, and state institutions. Public sphere is usually situated within civil society – the site of autonomous social organization outside the ambit of the state. Political behavior here is celebrated by a romanticized, universalist conception of citizenship, particularly when undertaken by leftist or minority groups, whereas politics outside the civil society is relegated to unscrupulous power-grabbing. Yet many citizens and civil associations defend narrow interests, their discourses notwithstanding.³⁵ And those who claim to act in the public sphere in the name of some common good however defined (neighborhood groups, LGBT activists, professional organizations, National Rifle Association, immigrant associations, churches, labor unions, etc.) tend to be collectivities often benefiting from connections to political parties. Frequently receiving funding or subsidies from the state, these actors, for all their windy rhetoric and alpine pretensions to be above the profane world of institutional politics, are objectively indistinguishable from interest groups or lobbies. Besides, there is no evidence that private citizens – singly or collectively – are more public-spirited in their words or deeds than professional politicians, or that community activists are bereft of self-regarding ambitions.

In any case, civic life can seldom be carried out independent of political structures. The antebellum American associational life that Tocqueville praised so much sprang from political party networks and was enabled by the national postal system, canals, and turnpikes built by the government.³⁶ Policy decisions at critical moments in history have vastly shaped the nature and organization of the American media.³⁷ Marking off a pristine space of citizenship from a contaminated political society and state administration is too naïve: there are robust financial, ideological, and organic links between actors in civil society and institutional politics.

Egalitarian and Widespread Participation

The conventional perspective envisions the public of the public sphere as a discursive community. It assumes the possibility of – it indeed prescribes – widespread, egalitarian, and consequential dialogue about important general matters. The norm is a hyper-politicized world where we are all community organizers or *intellectuels engagés* – or at least enthusiastic

joiners. A gloom-and-doom tenor is adopted when this stringent proviso is all too often not obliged by reality, and the tone turns denunciatory. As we saw, Habermas argued that the public sphere degenerated during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as citizens were degraded into listless, manipulated spectators. Others maintain that capitalism, neoliberalism, racism, patriarchy, or some other social evil makes the public sphere exclusionary.³⁸ But a paramount assumption here is that absent systemic domination and exclusion, egalitarian civic dialogue in public spaces should – almost naturally – flourish.

It is, however, again quite naïve to expect that everybody can or will be equally interested in public affairs and take part equally in the critical debates about them. Pace Aristotle, only so many men – and women – are political animals; those who are, are only so part of the time. Political indifference and lethargy in social life are widespread across time and space, a fact we cannot chalk up to domination or exclusion. Participation in public life is a source of personal fulfillment for some, sheer drudgery for others. According to Albert Hirschman, when we do steer toward participation, we do it mainly because of the ineluctable disappointments in our private lives, and only temporarily so, as the public arena will never ultimately not foster frustrations of its own – all this making interest in the polis cyclical.³⁹ For quite a few, it is escapism, a search for distractions that generates occasional, yet rarely sustained, interest in public matters. When asked about them, citizens' attitude is ambivalent; most don't have strong feelings or fixed opinions and give contradictory responses.⁴⁰ Only 5 to 10 percent of Americans are active participants in local or national politics.⁴¹ In effect, interest in politics seems to be a minority taste. With the advent of cable television in the United States, 10 percent of all viewers watched more news; 30 percent stopped tuning into news altogether, simply concentrating on entertainment.⁴² Further, cable television executives realized quickly that those who wanted political content wanted it unapologetically partisan.

At any rate, deliberation about public issues is contingent upon knowledge, if not expertise, and we are ignorant about the most elementary facts.⁴³ A poll found that in 1964, at the height of the Cold War, only 38 percent of Americans were aware that the USSR was not a member of NATO.⁴⁴ Half of contemporary Americans don't know the names of their elected representatives or the major political issues of the day.⁴⁵ A recent poll found that only 36 percent could name all the branches of the US government.⁴⁶ If you find this shocking, consider that the figure was even lower, less than 20 percent, in the 1960s.⁴⁷ Ignorance expectedly erodes

interest. There is thus substantial evidence showing low levels of civic participation in the contemporary United States.⁴⁸ The federated membership organizations of the first half of twentieth century (such as fraternal societies like the Masons, religious organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and veterans' groups like the American Legion as well as labor organizations, business groups, and the PTA) have given way to professionally managed advocacy groups since the 1960s.⁴⁹ The latter are operated by paid staffs of professionals, whose principal worry is getting donations to support their lobbying efforts rather than recruiting members.

"America's new civic universe is remarkably oligarchic," bemoans Theda Skocpol.⁵⁰ But have Americans ever been very civic? Contra the common wisdom legated by Tocqueville, a number of historians has marshaled evidence that the image of an antebellum America with a rich associational life is a hyperbole.⁵¹ And things were not much better in the early sixties, either. In 1961, Robert Dahl observed that most people were uninterested in politics; what they cared about mainly, he said, were "food, sex, love, family, work, play, shelter, comfort, friendship, social esteem, and the like."⁵² Michael Schudson has contended that all these issues have been politicized since then.⁵³ Maybe. Nonetheless, it is not any less true that those who have politicized them are a tiny minority of politicians, activists, and intellectuals. Most of us seldom experience these issues in our everyday lives, especially when they involve us personally, as political matters.

Obsession with civil society associationalism is peculiar to American intellectuals. Yet are European democracies, much less concerned with voluntary organizations, inferior? In fact, voter turnout, welfare functions, social services, and political literacy are superior on the other side of the Atlantic – with lower crime rates, to boot. Tocqueville, the sacred reference of America's pride in its supposedly exceptionally vibrant associational culture, was far from uncritical of it; he saw that voluntary associations could engender standardization, conformism, intolerance. A researcher has found that those who join voluntary associations are more likely to interact with people like themselves.⁵⁴ And a long tradition in political science has argued that apoliticism is not necessarily bad. Civil society activism in the absence of stable political structures can yield anarchy, radicalism, and eventually authoritarianism.⁵⁵ Contemporary Egypt in the wake of the Arab Spring is an example. There is also evidence that fascism in Germany was fueled by an ever-politicizing civil society.⁵⁶ Waxing civic participation in a society can indeed be both a symptom and