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The Connection between the Political and the Cultural Public Spheres – a Neglected Young-Habermasian Problematic

The reception of Jürgen Habermas's (1962) early work on public sphere, especially in anglophone media studies, has routinely been characterised by three misunderstandings and limitations. The first is concerned with neglecting Habermas', admittedly perfunctory but still fundamental, idea of post-liberal democracy stemming from his redefining social organisations as the basis of a revitalised public sphere. Secondly, it has not been observed that in the early 1960s Habermas did not consider public sphere as part of civil society, defined, along with Hegel and Marx, as the field of individual autonomy encompassed by egoistic economic calculations – a mixing up of things made understandable by the post-Marxist atmosphere prevailing in the 1990s and 2000s. Finally, the basic conceptual innovation the young Habermas introduces, namely, the distinction between two kinds of public sphere – political and cultural – has been ignored, leading to misplaced critiques of his overall conception of the place of public communication in modern societies. The first issue is relevant in trying to figure out what communicative forms radical democracy, or socialism, could take; the second, in theorising the limits capitalism imposes on both democracy and public sphere; and the third, in working out the relations, so dear to the Frankfurt School and Cultural Studies alike, between the political and the cultural both constituted and mediated by communication, mass and other. In the following I will take up the third issue, intending to highlight some of the theoretical resources still comparatively untapped in Habermas's widely but not always so carefully read book.¹

Put briefly, the context to which Habermas reacted with *Strukturwandel* at the turn of the 1960s was three-fold: methodological, social and political.² Habermas wanted to continue the work that had been done within the Frankfurt School, by combining results both from the aesthetic approach of Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse and from the political theory of Franz Neumann and Otto Kirchheimer. The major issue tackled with by the first generation of Frankfurters was concerned with the 'great transformation' (Polanyi 1957) of the 19th-century

¹ For reasons of convenience and cultural background, I will refer to Habermas (1962) as *Strukturwandel*.

liberal society into the post-liberal one of the 20th century. Before Habermas no one had within Critical Theory attempted at such an overall historical narrative of and theoretical explanation to how 20th-century social arrangements were produced. Habermas's main focus on these was political, motivated by the fate of democracy in postwar West Germany, as seen through the eyes of someone who, in line with the old working class movement, thought that socialism was about completing the project of emancipation and self-rule that the bourgeoisie, with the new liberal order safely established, had abandoned. What *Strukturwandel*, then, provides us with is a theory of bourgeois-liberal society with political intent, the interest of which for media research resides in the central place Habermas accords to the public sphere and the institutions of communication.

Part of the difficulty of reading *Strukturwandel*, at least in post-1970s media studies outside of German-language scholarship, stems from its overall structure and multidisciplinary methodology. As an instance of Western Marxism of the Frankfurt School type, *Strukturwandel* examines the development of the bourgeois society not only in terms of its economic base but also in those of its so-called superstructural aspects, of which public communication is the most relevant for Habermas's analytical and normative purposes. More specifically, the nature of the public realm serves Habermas as a conceptual tool for characterising social and political formations in Western history, which he unsurprisingly separates into four developmental phases: Antiquity (with the agonistic public sphere), Middle Ages (with the representative public sphere), Bourgeois Society (with the liberal public sphere) and Post-Bourgeois Society (with two options: the dominant mass-cultural public sphere and the emergent organisational public sphere). In addition to this historicist strand of theorising, taking Ancient Greece as the major starting point and frame of reference, Habermas's choice of comprehensive methodology, too, belies his commitment to the Hegelian-Marxist tradition. Accordingly, it is hard to specify the disciplinary singularity of *Strukturwandel*. It is a work of social and political theory, combining historical sociology, political philosophy, democratic theory, social history and cultural history, media history included. Instead of linking himself explicitly to the Hegelian lineage, Habermas describes in the Preface this kind of approach as an attempt at revitalising the ancient discipline of politics. One may then say that Habermas's idea of knowledge, underlying *Strukturwandel* but also his later works, consists of giving a rigorously modern shape to ancient concerns with social and political life, centring on the significance of public life to democracy (cf. Habermas 1963; Cohen 1979).

² Cf. Habermas's (2009) own account which describes in greater detail methodological influences on his work.

Given Habermas's problem situation at the turn of the 1960s coupled with the structural and methodological nature of *Strukturwandel*, it is easier to approach his idea of dual public sphere – and to appreciate the difficulties in devoting attention to it in the media studies of recent decades.³ I will shortly, first, describe the relation of both the cultural and the political public spheres in the work, and, then, analyse in some detail the foundations and functions of the former.

The bourgeois society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) inaugurated by the late-18th-century political revolutions is defined by Habermas as the separation of state (*Staat*) and society (*Gesellschaft*) as a result of the emergence of civil society or capitalist economy based on private property and commodity production (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft* in the narrow sense). Habermas complements this standard Marxist definition with two social domains, family and public sphere, outside of state and civil society, ending up with a four-realm depiction of the society in the large sense. Given Habermas's leaning towards dialectical reasoning, it is, however, incomplete to stick to analytically separate distinctions only. Namely, the function of the public sphere is to mediate between the three other domains, especially state and civil society plus individuals in relation to humanity (the individual as *homme*), in relation to civil society (the individual as *bourgeois*) and in relation to state (the individual as *citoyen*). With the help of these distinctions the relation between the political and the cultural public spheres can be illuminated.

In the bourgeois or liberal society from the late 18th century to the late 19th century, it was the function of the political public sphere to mediate the political society of state with the non-political civil society of economically autonomous private entrepreneurs. What politics was principally about was regulating the conflicts the anarchic capitalist markets were bound to provoke. The medium of this regulation was public opinion, which was formed by individual private-property holders acting collectively in public, namely by conversing in cafés and debating in newspapers. The special feature of the liberal political public sphere, in contrast to the classical idea of politics in Antiquity as described by Habermas, is that it is a publicly available arena where private matters are discussed among individuals. The political public sphere is, then, at the same time both public, in the sense of addressing the common good (*res publica*), and private, in the sense of forming an arena outside of state where the freedom of speech reigns. In order to bridge the gap in the political public square between the public virtues of the citizen and the private ones of the private-property holder or the bourgeois, Habermas introduces the cultural public sphere as a realm where political subjects are culturally educated. This political initiation,

³ As a representative and widely-known title which fails to inspect the duality of the public realm in *Strukturwandel*, see, eg, Dahlgren (1995).

following German Idealism as analysed within the Frankfurt School by Marcuse (1937), takes the form of aesthetic education by which solitary individuals are raised to the level of common humanity. In terms of culture and mass media, the relevant channels for this are non-narrative and narrative arts, especially the novel, the bourgeois art form par excellence.

In his insistence on the primary relevance of culture for political participation, early Habermas anticipates Cultural Studies, even if his solution is different. Both Habermas and Cultural Studies argue for the cultural constitution of political subjects via communication, mass and other, but Habermas's description of the liberal model of the cultural public sphere, the only one he seems to react emphatically to, reveals his commitment to the tradition of *Bildungsbürgertum*. I will dissect it into three aspects which together characterise the classical model of the cultural public sphere as envisioned by Habermas in *Strukturwandel*.

While the political side of the public sphere is concerned with regulating the outcome of private transactions in civil society, the cultural side centers on the production of the required commonality between private desires. What such a liberal public culture basically needs is the spirit of reciprocity or humanity. It is only through identifying themselves with the mankind, or assuming that all human beings are essentially equal, that the private egos can rise above their singularity and find solidarity with their fellow men and women. In order to make this feasible, Habermas offers three criteria of the cultural facet of the classical public sphere as the springboard for political participation.

First, people must orient themselves towards the public, or they have to be interested in other people outside of their own narrow sphere of life. In other words, a world is required where one lives not only with his or her family members, relatives and friends, but keeps company – real or imaginary – also with strangers. It is the singular specificity of the modern, or bourgeois, world to give rise, via public culture and mass communication among other things, to this kind of secondary identifications (Žižek 1997). This explains also why aesthetics, developed during the 18th century as a theory of the new culturally based subjectivity, gains such eminence (cf. Ferry 1990). It is then no surprise that Habermas illustrates his second aspect with the case of the novel. The novel is the paradigmatic case of the cultural public sphere towards which the subjects, especially women, orient themselves and with the help of whose role models or imaginary companions they can develop their individual identities. Narrative art in general, but especially in its literary fictive forms, is, in this tradition, the ideal means by which we can gain access to others' lives and learn humanity (Booth 1988; Nussbaum 1995). But there is also another aspect to the kind of secondary life opened up by aesthetic communication, that is peculiar to the liberal cultural sphere emphasised by Habermas. It is the discourse of criticism. For it is not only by

reading novels but also by reading critical commentaries on and by having discussions about them that subjects interpret their needs and learn to accommodate themselves to the needs of others. That is, cultural criticism functions as a mediator between private media reception and public cultural concerns. In the cultural public sphere people act first and foremost as spectators, that is, as receivers of cultural artefacts produced by others, and this is its third main characteristic. Spectatorship means distanciation, which makes reflection possible. Reading novels or listening to music cultivates one's cognitive, affective and volitive capacities not in a direct confrontation with the necessities of practical life but in a reflective mode. It is in this way that the cultural public sphere participates in the aesthetic, moral and intellectual education of man, preparing citizens for political participation.

Fundamentally, Habermas's idea of the duality of public sphere is based on the classic distinction between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, that is, active versus contemplative life. On one hand, in discussing, directly among themselves or via newspapers, burning issues of the day people take actively part in the constitution of the public opinion by which they as citizens try to govern the course of the society. On the other hand, in reading novels or other imaginary renderings of the human condition they contemplate in an intuitive or more reflected manner their wishes and needs, pleasures and anxieties – that is, their identities as persons. It is in this sense that the political subjects are, in *Strukturwandel*, culturally produced. One of the corollaries of this is that when the cultural public realm, or the cultural production of political subjects, changes so does the character of the political public sphere itself. In fact, Habermas, not unlike the tradition of *Bildungsbürgertum*, suggests that it is the substitution of the cultural public sphere of the literary type, distinctive of the heyday of the bourgeoisie, for the one of the audiovisual type prevalent in the 20th century, that illustrates the decline of the bourgeois era. Habermas's work has been criticised from many angles, with which any attempt at defending its basic conceptual, theoretical and methodological solutions has to cope. Using *Strukturwandel*'s four-dimensional idea of the bourgeois society as the frame of reference, I will sort out four main avenues of counter-arguments the work has aroused: Marxist, functionalist, feminist and culturalist.⁴ They all blame *Strukturwandel* for different omissions or shortcomings.

For Marxists (eg, Sørensen 1975), Habermas's main fault lies in his theory of civil society or capitalism which does not cut deep enough. Accepting too much of the heritage of the German Idealism, Habermas wrongly supposes that the institutions of the public sphere supported by mass media could withstand the capitalist logic of concentration, commodification and other

⁴ Peter Uwe Hohendahl (1978) presents a summary, organised differently from what I propose here, of early critiques of *Strukturwandel*.

such inevitable consequences. Instead, they are mainly means of socialising people to reproduce capitalist production relations. For functionalists (eg, Luhmann 1970), Habermas's idea of the political public sphere, based on public opinion as a way of regulating state and administration, is hopelessly out of tune with the functional differentiation and complexity of modern societies. As a result of this new phase of social evolution, no rational discussion through media is possible, and politics merely assumes the form of both interfering with and reacting to what kind of knowledge mass media distribute. For feminists (eg, Landes 1994), the way *Strukturwandel* grounds the public sphere on the kind of family relations, based on intimacy, humanity and equality, which set the bourgeoisie apart from its predecessors, is dismissive of the patriarchic power relations they inherently support. The ideology of humanity and of equal access to the public square is but a cover for male domination. For culturalists (eg, Dahlgren 1995), early Habermas has no understanding for popular forms of the public sphere, privileging, in an Adornian fashion, high culture and its elitist modes of address and genres of expression. Politically this turns *Strukturwandel* into a reactionary treatise which contributes to hindering popular sovereignty rather than to enhancing it.

Even if all of these critical strategies are relevant for assessing early Habermas's notion of public sphere I shall, following my main lead, concentrate only on the culturalist line, drawing attention to two alternatives – one broadly taken non-Habermasian (Cultural Studies as exemplified by Alan McKee 2005) and the other Habermasian (the cultural sociology of Jeffrey C. Alexander 2006) – to conceptualise the relevance of public culture to political participation. What I am aiming at is, by way of comparing two interpretations of *Strukturwandel*, a review of the extent to which the project of *Strukturwandel*, as far as its cultural conception of politics is concerned, can still be defended as a model for mass communication studies.⁵ Because of its huge popularity in media studies, the choice of a Cultural Studies alternative speaks for itself, whereas a work coming more from the tradition of cultural sociology provides us with a less known but illustrative contrast (for background, see also Alexander & Smith 2003).

McKee (2005), which can be taken as a representative sample of the conceptions of public sphere held within Cultural Studies, is organised as an explicit commentary on and critique of Habermas, *Strukturwandel* included. McKee is highly critical of Habermas, characteristically mixes up many things in *Strukturwandel*⁶ but summarises in a polemical tone some of the basic

⁵ Cf. Klaus Bruhn Jensen (1995, 58) who considers *Strukturwandel* as "the best framework for a comprehensive analysis of culture and communication in modern Western societies".

⁶ One of these confusions is the assertion that the separation of private and public spheres is essentially liberal. In fact, the city states of Ancient Greece made the same distinction. It comes as no surprise that, for McKee, Aristotle is a liberal philosopher.

issues relevant here. Alexander (2006) is an ambitious attempt at a new theory of civil society, dealing only comparatively briefly, given the some 800 pages of the book, with Habermas and *Strukturwandel*.⁷ In many ways the main thrust of Alexander's theorising is, however, not very far from what Habermas wanted to accomplish with *Strukturwandel* but then dropped from his agenda. To make the argument short, I will only consider the three aspects of the bourgeois cultural public sphere analysed by early Habermas and screen them in the light of a comparison between McKee and Alexander. For the comparison, I will rephrase the issues as those of (1) the universality of public sphere, (2) the status of narrative art and cultural criticism, and (3) the spectatorial public.

(1) The bourgeoisie, in young Habermas's reading, could conceive its particular political interests, namely, the regulation of an economy based on commodity production, only with the help of the ideology of humanity. It was the task of the family, existing beyond the reach of both the political obligations of the state and the economic imperatives of the civil society, to educate family members to reciprocal relations based on love and caring. In this way, individuals could find their common humanity but only within the intimate sphere. It was the task of the cultural public realm to add a social and collective dimension to this. As novels as the paradigmatic bourgeois narrative art, replacing earlier epic forms, took their subject matter from the new kind of private feelings and relations with which people had to cope with, reading them became a way of participating in the collective construction of a new subjectivity orienting towards universal humanism.

McKee considers the universal humanism of *Bildungsbürgertum*, which Habermas thinks is not only an ideology but also a genuine utopia, as a modern prejudice, privileging postmodern particularism. In line with Cultural Studies (eg, Fiske & Hartley 1978), McKee contrasts the liberal and plebeian variants of the public sphere, preferring the plebeian one on the account of the possibility it opens up for different popular groups to make their voices heard. The possibility of some kind of a universal or collectively binding identity is foreclosed. Or, to put the same idea in a communicative idiom, no universal language or system of expression exists, and every section of society is bound by its own idiolect, which, for McKee, makes translation a crucial instance of social communication. Accepting the universal pretensions of the liberal tradition, Alexander, in contrast, defines them not in terms of a general idea of humanity, like Habermas, but in those of a moral idea of solidarity, centred on civil society. For Alexander, there

⁷ Despite the – at the surface – perfunctory nature of Alexander's encounter with early Habermas, the acumen of his exposition can be appreciated when compared, eg, with Nancy Fraser's (2009) all too one-sided introduction to *Strukturwandel*.

exist in modern societies commonly felt moral sentiments and widely shared cultural conceptions which mitigate the group egoism of particular interests and enhance intergroup solidarity. And what is more, there is also a language for this, based on cultural codes and articulated in narratives, factual and fictive.

What makes Alexander's position convincing, in relation to McKee but also to early Habermas, is its historical grounding. One of the analytical and normative weaknesses of McKee's conception of working-class culture is its ignorance of working-class history. For McKee, the labour movement was not a social movement orienting towards political change and organising itself in political, economic and cultural associations of various kinds, in which it was motivated by ideas of universal equality and classless society, not those dominated by sectoral interests. From McKee's presentist perspective nothing of this is relevant, and what remains is an ahistorical equation of commercial popular culture with the plebeian ethos. Alexander's case is more compelling, also in view of Habermas, as he shows that the moral foundations of civil society – implying both radical individualism and comprehensive collectivism – have a long genealogy in Western history. One aspect of Habermas's Marxist modernism in *Strukturwandel* is that he is unwilling to accord any positive determinacy to factors preceding the bourgeois society.⁸ This seems to apply to his concept of the cultural public sphere too: had he taken Aristotle's *Poetics* more seriously, he might have reconsidered the novelty of the dynamics of novel reading.

(2) Whatever the historical specificity of modern narrative forms, they have a privileged place in Habermas's argumentation for the cultural side of public life. The newspaper and the novel are what the bourgeoisie needs to give voice to public opinion: the newspaper in the conversational or debating format and the novel in the story-telling one. The one is directed towards immediate political action and the other towards the generation of the kind of subjects capable of participating in politics, even if in part only in principle.⁹ The gap between them is, for Habermas, narrowed by the practice of criticism which introduces argumentative strategies, in contrast to narrative ones, into the discourse of cultural public sphere.

The basic problem with McKee's interpretation of *Strukturwandel* lies in its inability not only to distinguish between the political and the cultural spheres of the public arena, but also to grasp the semi-public and semi-private nature of both. For Habermas, the peculiarity of the bourgeois-liberal public life, in contrast to its predecessors, is that private matters gain public

⁸ Later, in *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus* (1973), Habermas admits that religion has helped to consolidate the legitimacy of the bourgeois society, but he regards religion as a residual phenomenon, a sign of the fact that the bourgeois society is unable to stand on its own feet.

significance, both in their political and cultural sense. Political action is about how to regulate privately organised economy, and cultural expression is about how to conduct private life. Both need the media of mass communication because it is only through them that the generality required by the humanist-universal ideal of a public of free and equal participants can be secured. The problem at this point is how narrative forms and cultural criticism can contribute to this goal.

McKee pays special attention neither to narrative form nor to cultural criticism, although he subscribes to the idea, which is one of Habermas's main points about the bourgeois conception of culture, that "[W]e are offered identities by public communication" (McKee 2005, 58). Of course, it is arguable whether story-telling has the kind of personality- and community-supporting effects commonly attributed to it in the republican tradition, to which Habermas belongs. Given the 'narrative turn' of the past few decades, one is inclined to take Habermas's side on this issue. Still, McKee, and with him the whole popular culture movement endorsed by Cultural Studies, is right in emphasising the decreasing significance of high culture, narrative and non-narrative, in social life. That the relation between high and low has been reversed is a commonplace nowadays, also outside Cultural Studies. And it is here that Alexander may serve as a fruitful mediator between Habermas and McKee.

There are two major assets relevant for an analysis of the narrative public sphere in Alexander's reading of *Strukturwandel*. First, Alexander has no difficulty in getting the relation between the political and cultural public spheres straight, and, second, he is highly aware of the great difference between the Marxist Habermas of the 1960s and the Habermas of discourse ethics a couple of decades later, preferring on sociological grounds the former to the latter. Quite like the young Habermas Alexander makes a case for the political meaning of mass media, both factual and fictive. What he adds to Habermas is, in the spirit of the cultural turn, the emphasis on the narrative forms of all public communication, whether news or television serials. It is through telling stories of actual and imaginary persons and events that the cultural codes underlying social solidarity find concrete expression and have an effect on people's emotional attachments and attitudes. Instead of a general aesthetic education to humanity we have a more specific narrative education to citizenship.

What both McKee and Alexander overlooks in *Strukturwandel* is the function of cultural critics as mediators between the world of culture and its ordinary receivers. It was no coincidence that the institution of criticism was born during the 18th century and became an essential part of the new emerging bourgeois cultural public sphere (Hohendahl 1982; Eagleton

⁹ Habermas maintains, in accordance with historical studies, that the majority of the readership of novels were women, and they were politically disenfranchised. (Still, what is not commonly observed is that the early Habermas stresses feminine aspects of the cultural public sphere.)

1984). But the proponents of the plebeian public sphere routinely ignore it, maybe because popular culture did not give rise to a similar institution, or because in a cultural environment diffused with relativistic sentiments there is no need for a principled discussion about cultural works and the criteria used in their judgment. While McKee's silence is understandable, Alexander might have given a second thought to a public debate about narrative forms. In this respect, the Habermas original still carries the day.

(3) Among the many implications of the political/cultural divide in terms of public sphere, Habermas's distinction between the spectatorial and the discussive mode of media participation is one of the most important. As such, it reflects the dual meaning of the concept of public, referring to its political and cultural halves (see also Ruby 2007). The political/cultural divide also makes understandable the parameters of the debate, conducted in media studies during the past few decades, on the comparative merits of Walter Lippmann and John Dewey. As usually construed, Lippmann is taken as an example of a passivist conception of democracy, relegating citizens to the margins of politics, whereas Dewey's position is given as a paradigm of democratic activism.¹⁰ The stylised opposition, however, conceals many affinities between their positions. And it is here that the idea of spectatorial democracy, or the new cultural interest in politics, of which *Strukturwandel* provides an early instance, may assist in making the point.

Cultural Studies has here paved the way for conceptualising media reception as political participation, a view emphatically shared by McKee, but also in line with Alexander's kind of culturalism. Like young Habermas, McKee and Alexander think that democracy is predicated on the kind of people its support requires, and this has to do with certain frames of mind and codes of behaviour. What unites the three is the premise that cultural reception, such as reading novels and watching news on television, is paramount in helping individuals construct their identities, and what divides them into two blocs is the relevance accorded to popular media. One may stress the discontinuity more than the continuity between Habermas, on one hand, and McKee and Alexander, on the other, but I would like to conclude by following the affirmative line.

Confronted with the new political reality of 20th century America, which arguably differed so much from what the framers of the U.S. Constitution had to face, Lippmann (1925) conceived of liberal democratic polity in terms of a division of tasks between acting and spectating. It is the task of the political system, government at its centre, to act, and it is the task of the voters to see that the political system serves them well. What is required of citizens as spectators, capacity for judgment, is in principle no less demanding than what the political action in the systemic sense calls

¹⁰ This is the interpretive line initiated especially by James W. Carey. As for rehabilitating Lippmann, see besides my own contribution (Malmberg 2009) also Schudson (2008).

for of its practitioners; anyway, it is an invaluable art that you can master in varying degrees, which underscores the civic duty of spectators not to assume their role too lightly.

Lippmann had in mind the political public sphere, but a similar case can be made for the cultural one. Here early Habermas joins forces with McKee and Alexander. The analysis of the cultural undercurrents of politics, so closely knit together with the study of mass communication in contemporary societies, links the kind of Frankfurt School thought provided by *Strukturwandel*, which is too often considered an anathema by latter day progressives, to contemporary cultural studies of media in the broad sense. What I have tried to achieve by a return to *Strukturwandel*, hopefully correcting some misunderstandings in today's mainstream English-language media research, is to make such inter-theoretical triangulation more feasible. There are, admittedly, limits to this, forcing us to make a choice between basic political world-views. In contrast to what McKee insistently claims, the alternatives are not those of modern versus postmodern options. Rather, we have to make up our minds about gravitating either towards the republican or communitarian camp of Habermas and McKee, or towards the liberal camp of Lippmann and Alexander. It is the dialogue between them that must now be tackled with more systematically in our field.

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