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The Possibilities and Limits of Public Life: Habermas and the Mass Media

The present interest of political theorists and activists in the problems of public sphere dates back to the late 1980s when reflections on civil society began to enjoy renewed currency. One of the main reasons for the re-emergence of civil society as a key issue was that it seemed to provide the theorists and activists alike with a means by which to justify and reinvigorate political participation not only in Western mass democracies with their falling turnout at polls, but also in East-European socialist countries with their dissident movements fighting the one-party system. It became soon, however, clear that civil society, a concept generated by Enlightenment social philosophers in order to tackle with the phenomenon of the rising bourgeois society in the late 17th to early 19th centuries, was too contradictory and ambiguous a notion, at least without further specification, to serve as the axis of social and political theory (cf. Taylor 1990 and Honneth 1992). In any case, when the civil society and the public sphere were seen as the dual basis of a politically active society, it was natural that the work of Jürgen Habermas was brought into focus. His early treatise on public sphere, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, originally published in 1962, was translated eventually into English in 1989[1], and Habermas himself took up the concepts of public sphere and civil society, not part of his theoretical apparatus during the intervening years, for renewed inspection. Coupled with the different traditions in theorising civil society, the differences between 'young' and 'mature' Habermas in conceptualising public sphere have escaped the attention of many who have either drawn on or criticised his idea of how the public sphere has functioned, is functioning and should function in a democratic society. The debates around Habermas' relevance to understanding public communication and mass media have also been complicated by the fact that the philosophical and sociological interpretations, constituting the overwhelming majority of commentaries on his work, have usually bypassed his concern with mass communication. As a consequence, this justifies a dual strategy in evaluating Habermas' contribution to the defence of public life in the contemporary world. By linking in the following, on one hand, the work of

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[1] The Danish and Norwegian translations, eg, preceded the English one by some 15 years.

'young' and 'mature' Habermas, on the other, and his (mass) communication theory and social philosophy, I will try to adopt this dual strategy.

The Frankfurt Schoold, Delopment of Habermas' Thought and Public Life

Habermas launched his career as a Western Marxist of the Frankfurt School type, which has had a lasting effect on the manner he conducts social research. For this reason, I will start from the fact that *Strukturwandel*, his first major work and most substantial contribution to the theory of public sphere, was conceived in the midst of his attempts at developing Marxist social theory and philosophy. In order to understand Habermas' theoretical solutions concerned with public life one has, then, to situate them within this wider project. 'Western Marxism' is a catchword grouping different philosophers, sociologists and literary critics who, after World War I, opposed the economist and natural-scientific interpretation of Marxism (Anderson 1976 is a standard work on the subject). In addition to Antonio Gramsci in Italy and Jean-Paul Sartre in France, Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse of the Frankfurt School were its best-known representatives. To spell out basic motives in Habermas' *œuvre*, I distinguish between three avenues or dimensions of analysis that characterised both the way those associated with the original Frankfurt School were revising Marxism and how Habermas formed his own project on their basis.

First, as the great upheavals of post-World-War-I decades made clear, there was more to social development than mere economic determinism. The rise of fascism in Germany, the turn to Stalinism in the Soviet Union, and the growth of large corporations, cultural industry included, in the United States necessitated a revision in Marxist vocabulary. The case of fascism demonstrated that working-class lacked class-consciousness; that of Stalinism, that changing the economic basis was not enough for transforming the whole society; and that of culture industry, that capitalism could intervene effectively into areas which previously had remained outside of commodity-relations. What was needed, then, was a theory that could explain both the waning of revolutionary spirit, the dead-end of the communist alternative to capitalism, and the transformation of the cultural super-structure – or, the major political, economic and ideological trends in early 20th developments in Europe and North-America.

Second, the grounds for social critique had to be altered if the new – critical – theory was to be consistent. If the working-class was not the emancipatory force old Marxists had believed it to be, the yardsticks by which to measure emancipation had to be changed. There was no self-evident avant-guarde or infallible leader in society which would guarantee that the course taken was progressive. Instead, the normative grounding of critique had to resort to other

interpretations of emancipation than the one centred on the evolution of economy and class-structure. This made a return to Kant and Hegel, but also – in a more pessimist vein – to Nietzsche and Weber, attractive. So, in order to substantiate the diagnoses of 20th century social and cultural developments made by the members of the Frankfurt School, they had to rethink and rework the tension between Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment values.

Third, the 'Great Transformation' (Polanyi 1957) of the turn of the 20th century made it explicit that the bourgois society had a history, or that it developed through phases. The liberal phase of the 19th century was followed by a post-liberal which, with Auschwitz and Hiroshima, seemed to turn the wheels backwards. The first and second aspects – that is, the theory of post-liberal society and the normative grounds for its critique – had to be incorporated into a wider perspective provided by a philosophy or theory of history, if the critique wanted to help contemporaries to decide on what to do in the present, as the Frankfurt School had assumed to be the role of social theory. Here, it was the level from which history was witnessed as well as whether the view on history turned out to be optimistic or pessimistic that divided opinions.

I take these three problematics essential to the first-generation of the Frankfurt School – the transformation of the bourgeois society, the value of the Enlightenment tradition, and the need for a philosophy of history – as the starting point for my exposition of *Strukturwandel*.

The critical theorists before Habermas had based their diagnosis of the era of 'Hitler', Stalin and Disney' (Bathrick 1984) on the premise that liberal capitalism was over, and that a new illiberal type of society had taken its place. What Habermas attempted to accomplish in *Strukturwandel* was to provide the Frankfurt School with a well-defined theory of the bourgeois society that could spot the logic of the deformations the bourgeois ideals had to undergo in order to lead to the disasters of the 20th century. To do his Habermas turned to old Hegel. It is the social theory of *Philosophy of Right* – with its tripartite division of society into state, civil society and family – that informs Habermas' conception in *Strukturwandel*. Also Marx had made the same move, but he had flattened the division into the dualism of the economic base (civil society) and the super-structure (state and family). Because the later transformations of the bourgeois society, as we have seen, had made it obvious that there was something wrong with this kind of economism, Habermas not only abandoned the Marxist dualism but also introduced a new category into the Hegelian model: the public sphere. What was new in the bourgeois society inhered in the principles governing the public sphere, and what had gone wrong in its development into the 20th century could be diagnosed on the decline of public life. This is then the historical story Habermas tells in *Strukturwandel* – the rise, heyday and waning of a great promise.

To make the story plausible Habermas had to present some normative grounds for his counterfactual belief in the continuing relevance of public life. This is where the ideals of Enlightenment come into the picture. For Habermas, the bourgeoisie had made a world-historical innovation in developing, by the means of public discussion and debating, a counterforce to absolutism on the basis of which it could organise itself politically. The actuality of the public sphere or – in Kant's words – 'the public use of reason' is, in *Strukturwandel* and afterwards, important for Habermas because it is both a non-violent way of pacifying society and a method by which rational consensus can be achieved. In this Enlightenment sense, the public sphere functions normatively both as a means of social integration and legitimation. To derail public life is, then, to lead the society into a state of crisis. Against this measure, the 20th century society – Habermas' immediate objet is post-war West-Germany – with its public sphere turned into public relations kicks and cheap thrills is judged wanting.

To make the Enlightenment topos convinging, one could argue either historically or logically. In *Strukturwandel*, Habermas pursues neither strategy – that is, he does not present a grounding of the public-sphere thesis either by following the unravelling of (public) reason in history or by formulating a theory of rationality. Habermas did make substantial contributions in both directions after the early 1960s. In *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus* (1973), he offered a kind of philosophy of history based on the develpment of communicative reason, and in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1981), his *opus magnum*, he reformulated the function of philosophy and critical theory as the theory of rationality. The latter direction was to remain his main avenue of approaching communication and – *mutatis mutandis* – public sphere. This lack of either historical or logical justification for the theoretical solutions applied is one reason why one cannot formulate Habermas' theory of public sphere on the basis of *Strukturwandel* only. The other is the method adopted here but never to be returned to: historical sociology. *Strukturwandel* is deeply indebted to a sociological reading of historical research on 17th to 19th centuries political, social and cultural life. This is as close as Habermas ever gets to the empirical pulse of social world.

Between the turn of the 1960s and the late 1970s, Habermas changed his basic philosophy, if not his problematic – as had done before him Hegel or Marx. So there is some justification to be found for the separation between 'young' and 'mature' Habermas. Taking *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1981) and *Faktizität und Geltung* (1992) as the two main articulations of mature Habermas, I will next move to the way Habermas makes self-criticism of the public-sphere model presented in *Strukturwandel*. To make the changes explicit, I will a take

new look at the three fundamental issues of social theory, the ideality of Enlightenment, and the general basis of rationally motivated norms and values.

In *Theorie*, Habermas replaces the Marxist conception of bourgeois society by that of modern society. The change of vocabulary is motivated by that of conceptual order, in two important senses. Namely, the Hegelian categories are substituted for a mix of systems theory ('system') and phenomenology ('life-world'), and, which is crucial in our context, public sphere, in an uspecified manner, is incorporated as an independent category in life-world. The difference between system and life-world is based on the possibility of institutionalisation: what belongs to the system (the political and economic systems) can be institutionalised, whereas life-world (cf. family and public sphere in the earlier categorisation) cannot. As a consequence, the quadruple conceptualisation by which *Strukturwandel* kept its distance to orthodox Marxism is replaced by a dichotomy that retains a distant echo of Marxist verticalism: the life-world functions as the basis of the system, and, in an ideal sense, the former should determine the limits of the latter. What is more, this new bottom-up vision of modern society, which methodologically combines systems theory with action theory, provides Habermas with the opportunity to rephrase, in a new conceptual order, the relation between Enlightenment values and public life.

According to Habermas the modern society irretrievably differentiated into institutionalised and uninstitutionalised sub-systems – ie, economy and polity, on one hand, and life-world with its constituents, on the other. Differentiation means that one sub-system cannot dictate the logic of another, only control that the other keeps the functioning of its logic within proper limits. For instance, the capitalist logic of the economic system should not be hampered, but it must be regulated in the sense that capitalist commodity-production must respond to the authentic needs of people. The controlling of economy does not, then, occur by way of the workers' control of the production (industrial democracy), but by way of political system (political democracy) which passes laws redirecting the behaviour of firms. As a result of the altered focus, the central issue of Enlightenment political philosophy, the idea of popular sovereignty, becomes crucial in Habermas' political theory of modernity. But how can the people have the ultimate power, when society is divided into spheres – mainly, economy and administration, but (we will come to this in some detail later) also privately owned mass media – in which only those involved can have a word to say?

Habermas' theory of communicative action, the development of which takes in *Theorie* some 1000 pages, provides the answer. As I will concentrate on Habermasian ideas of communication separately in the following section, I will only indicate the main lines of the argument here.

In its rough contours Habermas' social theory follows the Hegelian idea of modernity as a unity of disjoined parts (*Entzweiung*) which was taken up by Marx in his dual model of society. The political problem with which both Hegel and Marx had to come to terms was concerned with the way the separated social parts could be recoupled and brought under control. In Hegel this called for the 'top-down' idea of the strong state whereas Marx reversed the model with his 'bottom-up' vision of the living labour as the ultimate site of power. Habermas accepts the general problem but not the solutions proposed by either Hegel or Marx. In an explicit sense, what Habermas strives for is updating some central theses of Western Marxism drawing on Neo-Kantianism (Weber) and Neo-Hegelianism (Lukács), especially the idea of the modern society governed by instrumental reason, processes of abstractification and everyday alienation. To accomplish this, Habermas both accepts Hegel's basic premise of the new level of rationality achieved by the bourgeois society and claims that today one can pursue this line of reasoning only by resorting to the theoretical means of systems theory and hermeneutics. It is with these conceptual instruments that he reformulates the political problem of popular sovereignty.

Because the modern society is divided into two halves, those of the system (state administration and economy) and life-world (public sphere, everyday life), it is only through popular sovereignty or democracy that it can achieve legitimate unity. This democracy can be, at the same time, only partial or indirect and dependent on specific structural requirements. Modern constitutional democracies are only partially or indirectly democratic, because there lies an unbridgeable political gulf in the way the life-world can influence state and business behaviour. In other words, people can elect and re-elect politicians, but they have no means at hand to replace state or corporate officials. Moreover, this is to the best interest of all because, considering the complexity modern societies have achieved, it is only on the basis of division of labour and competencies that the wheels can be kept rolling. But the people must have the last word in the sense that the system responds to the needs of the life-world. This gives to public life and mass media a central place in the conceptual edifice. Namely, it is only through public articulation that the members of the society can bring to light their wishes and inform themselves about the wishes of others. Or, the society as a whole as well as its individual members can realise themselves only by addressing and encountering each others in public. To see the implications of this social theory for media and communication theory, I will get a closer look at the foundations of Habermas' theory of public sphere and communicative action.

Communication as the Link between Private and Public Life

In *Strukturwandel* Habermas demonstrated his originality within the Frankfurt School by initiating what was later to be called the 'communicative turn' – that is, by addressing the basic problems of the Frankfurt School with the help of a communicative point of view. In order to weigh the magnitude of this change of perspectives one has to keep in mind that communication, meaning everyday communication in speaking and writing, was generally considered an anathema by Adorno, Horkheimer or Benjamin. The case of journalism, the object of Benjamin's antipathies, is illustrative. The development of modern news journalism, with its non-decorative and formulaic discourse, was seen as the degradation of language which deprived it of faculties capable of giving expression to personal experience. In this sense, news journalism was indicative of the fate public language had to meet in the post-liberal society with its narrowing spaces for individual freedom. As a result, Adorno, Benjamin and Marcuse turned from everyday communication to art as the avenue through which freedom could speak. It was not the direct, practical language used in discussion and debates that inspired the first-generation Frankfurt School, but the indirect, aesthetically distanciating language of art. With Habermas the centre of Critical Theory gravitates from aesthetics towards general communication theory (cf. S Weber 1976).

Habermas' communicative turn which became well-known in the 1980s, but which was anticipated by the conceptual solutions applied in *Strukturwandel*, can be seen as part of the pragmatist turn witnessed in post-war philosophy, linguistics and social research. Habermas made this move in order to address better the fundamental theoretical and methodological objective of the Frankfurt School, which was the attempt at developing an anti-positivist kind of social analysis. More closely, this called for a type of inquiry that would oppose both the atomism and value-scepticism of positivism. Anti-atomism explains, on one hand, why the role of philosophy and sociology as two paradigms of holistic inspection has been given special attention to in Frankfurt methodology (in concept and theory formation). On the other, explicit normativity clarifies why communication, aesthetic or practical, has been of prime importance for Critical Theorists. Critique implies values and norms by which a given state of affairs is judged good or deficient. If values, following positivism, are excluded from rational or scientific discourse, criticism becomes a matter of personal opinion without any objective foundation. German Idealism, from Kant to Hegel, had tried to circumvent this conclusion by stressing the primacy of practical reason (Kant) and the dialectical nature of concept formation leaning on normative and systematic presuppositions (Hegel); and the successive generations of the Frankfurt School have usually drawn on these sources. It is the normative grounding of critical social theory by Habermas' idea of communication which interests me in the following.

Art or aesthetic communication had given to the representatives of the first-generation Frankfurt School a counter-factual or utopian model by which to gauge contemporary society. Habermas preserves this utopian dimension, but he transfers it from the high altitude of cultural masterpieces to ordinary surroundings. The basic intuition from which Habermas proceeds lies in the idea that when discussing people relate to each others in a non-coercive and complementary way which can be taken as the image of good society in miniature. That is, in speaking to other people and in listening to them speaking to you one becomes a member of a community which, in the last resort, includes all mankind. In this sense, we can say that Habermas' theory of communication is informed by the age-old idea of finding a language by which humanity could be united. For Habermas this utopian hope is entertained by the possibilities inhering in such a use of language that, on the basis of the truth-claims presupposed by any utterance, strives for a consensus. The consensus may not be reached ever in any singular case, but it is the regulative idea of the way leading to a possible consensus which is at issue. Or, we may never realise the utopia of total harmony, but it is the attempts at approaching it that matter. Maybe we could also say that, in Habermas, communicative action makes possible the local realisation of the utopian existence which otherwise evades us.

Mature Habermas has, especially in *Theorie*, constructed his 'mild utopianism' on the basis of developments in the pragmatist philosophy of language (later Wittgenstein, Austin and others) which he has combined with sociological theories having a communicative component (Durkheim, Mead, Parsons). As we have seen, Habermas returned to issues of public sphere (and civil society) towards the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, mainly in *Faktizität und Geltung* and papers associated with it. What is noteworthy, and illustrative of Habermas' preferences, is that despite the massive theoretical breadth of both *Theorie* and *Faktizität* he has not given us a comprehensive treatise of private and public life comparable to *Strukturwandel* – that is, he has not updated in a systematic fashion his view on the role of public communication in contemporary society. As this is a major deficiency in his theory, I will touch upon it in the last and evaluative part of my paper. Here I try to spell out a rough scheme of how later Habermas conceives of the way interpersonal and mass communication (or mass media) are related in their relation to political action in general and the political system in specific.

Speech communication is a life-world phenomenon or capacity because it presupposes a universal human faculty. In other words, people are not separated into different categories on the basis of their ability to speak – to be a human being in the full sense is to be able to use the symbolic medium of language. There may be different dialects or registers of articulation, such as revealing the educational status of the speaker, but nevertheless everybody has a direct access to

language and through it to each others, so language works as a non-specialised or non-institutionalised means of interaction. This means that language, for Habermas, fulfills simultaneously several important functions: it imparts information about the outside and inside worlds; while revealing ourselves to others and vice versa, it makes subjects intersubjective or dependent on each other; it is democratic while within everybody's compass; and it cannot be totally controlled because it has its roots deep in the traditions and pre-understandings of the life-world. In this sense, language defines man basically as a free, social and rational being: free, because language springs from subterranean wells no one can control; social, because language is inherently intersubjective; and rational, because the use of language is oriented on the basis of truth-claims which makes it self-corrective. I take the social aspect into closer scrutiny.

Habermas' turn away from the public sphere to communicative action, which marks the basic difference between *Strukturwandel* and *Theorie*, was propelled by his new interpretation of Hegel. In the *Strukturwandel* of 1962 Habermas had proposed mainly a critical reading of Hegel's idea of public opinion as expressed in *Philosophy of Right*. Around 1965, a decisive change in Habermas' attitude occured. In a seminal piece of 1967, Habermas showed that before his philosophy of mind assumed absolutist or monological pretensions, first in *Phenomenology of Mind* and then culminating in *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel had developed an authencitally heterological conception with three separate centres in which reflection or reason is mediated: language, work and interaction (Habermas 1968). In other words, the young pre-*Phenomenology* Hegel had conceived the multiplicity of reason not as a process leading inevitably to the synthesis of the Absolute Mind, but as a structural whole with singular, yet mutually determining components. Habermas' theory of communicative action, which describes a certain kind of interaction with the means of language to organise social life, was elaborated from this intuition of structural intersubjectivity – or of the different media by which people organise their intersubjective relations. More specifically, Habermas preserved Hegel's idea of the social mediation of needs and identity on the basis of language, work and interaction, but he abandoned mature Hegel's ambitions at logical completeness. This conception of language as social action was a new way of formulating the political problem underlying *Strukturwandel*.

Habemas had made it clear from the very beginning, in the first paragraph of *Strukturwandel*, that his interest in the public sphere was motivated by its central place in the functioning of modern democracies, a fact that is reflected in the constitutional guarantees accorded to it. The decline of the public realm, as diagnosed in *Strukturwandel*, was considered alarming because it threatened the political legitimacy of democracy by stripping popular sovereignty, or collective self-rule, of its substance. The experiences of the 1960s, with a new upsurge in political

and cultural activism, had some influence on Habermas, one may presume, because he dropped the Adorno-like pessimism of *Strukturwandel*, and started to develop a more optimistic political estimate, from *Legitimationsprobleme* (1973) on. In *Theorie* (1981) the optimism was located excplicitly in the new social movements. More recently, after *Faktizität* (1992), Habermas has expressed similar hopes in connection with the European Union. In all these cases the optimism of Habermas has grown from the constitutive link between language and politics as expressed in the idea of communicative action.

I hope it is now easier to see how, in its political implications, young Habermas' emphasis on the public sphere correlates with the conception of language and communication in later Habermas. Following the Hegelian intuition, human needs are for Habermas always interpreted through the filter of language in intercourse with other people, which means that identities are linguistically constructed on the basis of cultural traditions and interpretative models. One corollary of this is that public communication, the kind of opinions and expressions with which the public realm is filled, assumes central political significance in democracy. Namely, if democratic politics is about the course a society should take in response to what its people want to be done in order to lead an optimally satisfying life, then the available linguistic resources are a politically relevant matter. Or, the health or non-distortedness of public communication becomes a basic political issue – and this in two respects, which specify the relation between the cultural and political public spheres in Habermas.

The society needs a cultural public sphere which would assist people in monitoring their basic assumptions and giving expression to their intimate yearnings. This is mainly the realm of literature and other forms of imaginative rendering of human behaviour in fiction, both 'high' and 'popular', verbal and audiovisual. Via a non-distorted cultural public sphere people are presented with a plurality of languages by which they can come to know better who they are and what they want to be. This is vital for the political public sphere to operate properly. Ideally, the function of the political public sphere is to help the society in deciding on what amounts to public good. To achive this, the political public realm should reflect people's divergent preferences and arouse discussion about their generalisability – that is, about which preferences are only group-centred and which applicable to all. The political decisions are ultimately based on the formal procedures of voting, but it is the co-operation of the cultural and political public spheres which only gives sense and legitimacy to the act of voting. In terms of political theory, Habermas uses the theory of communicative action to articulate a substantial conception of democracy in contrast to a mere formal one. I will conclude this section by describing in some detail what kind of political options the conception implies.

Habermas' change of social theory from the model inspired by *Philosophy of Right*, in *Strukturwandel*, to that of synthesising hermeneutics and systems theory, in *Theorie*, is motivated by the conviction that by the late 1960s, the modern society had reached such a level of complexity and differentiation that the idea of undiminished popular sovereignty shared by radical democrats and socialist utopianists alike had to be reformulated. There is no going back to a holistic view with the corresponding collective subject because the modern society is irretrievably cut in two, the system of economics and state administration plus the life-world of civil society and everyday interaction. This means that there are no direct ways of influencing the material reproduction of society (the capitalist economy) and the implementation of popular will by conducting affairs of the state (administration). As a consequence, the concepts of democratic will-formation and power have to be given a new content. This leads Habermas, drawing on a distinction made by Arendt, to separate communicative power from administrative one: the former shows itself in the free exchange of ideas in the public, while the latter is restricted to the acts performed by administration on the basis of political decisions. In sum, we get an overall picture of the link between communicative action and democracy that looks like the following.

Democracy is about the self-rule of the people. Given the complexity of the modern society, the popular sovereignty assumes two forms: one is concerned with the relations of the citizens to the formal political system (and indirectly, via the passing of laws, to the economic system) through elections, and the other with the processes of public opinion and will-formation within civil society. Democracy remains formal if only the first condition is fulfilled, and it becomes substantial – or radical – if also the second one is met. Or, radical democracy has to do with the prospects of communicative action, in its private and public domains. In this respect, Habermas bases his political theory on two communicative premises or desiderata the level of which he thinks the modern society has now achieved. The first is post-conventional rationality which makes people both responsive to other's opinions and self-critical, and the second is an enlightened public sphere which, in its way, is responsive to people's needs while preserving the critical spirit of its own. Radical democracy works if and only if the communicative action of the civil society has genuine influence on the political system, and if the will-formation within the civil society is grounded on the reciprocity of private and public levels – that is, if people's sentiments or need-articulations find their way to the public consciousness, and if the people reflect on their basic assumptions with the help of discourses and representations in both the cultural and political public spheres. Keeping this in mind, the following tripartite conception of public life as viewed by Habermas emerges (cf. Habermas 1996).

As a Hegelian of sorts, Habermas is impatient with seeing only one side of a thing, and this drives him to relativise dichotomies too. The said applies also for his theory of public life and politics. Habermas' basic view is both liberal, starting from individual autonomy, and republican, stressing collective virtues, but it is also compatible with more avant-gardist leanings, foregrounding the decisive role of forward-looking minorities in defending democracy against encroachments of its fundamental principles. I will say a few words more about each case.

Fundamentally, Habermas' view on the relations between public life, mass media and politics comes from the liberalist tradition; in this respect, there is no marked difference between the earlier and later phases of his thought. Habermas has always stressed certain liberalist principles, if not all (on these, cf. Popper 1978). Among these are the autonomy of the individual, the prime significance of morality in individual behaviour, and the central place of critical discussion with its concomitant features such as readiness to learn from one's mistakes. This Kantian side of Habermas surfaced vigorously in *Strukturwandel* when he took up Kant's idea of the public use of reason and transformed it into a theory of the debating political sphere. Consequently, it will come as no suprise that his revised model of the public sphere, advanced in *Faktitizät*, looks pretty much the same as the one presented in mainstream US political-communication research (cf. Pye 1963). In both the basic problem of political communication with which the modern society is faced consists in managing a two-way process of communication flows between the professionalised mass media and the non-professional everyday actors. Ideally, both should be sensitive to the other – the media professionals to their receivers in order to give public voice to private grievances, and the audience members to the media in order to submit their assumptions to rational questioning.

At the time of *Stukturwandel* Habermas (1963) made it quite explicit that what he wanted to accomplish was to rehabilitate classical political philosophy with modern means, in opposition to the instrumentalist and technocratic conception stemming from Hobbes, and also diverging from Hannah Arendt's (1958) Neo-Aristotelian idealisation of ancient times (this is, by the way, one of the subthemes in *Strukturwandel*). In this sense we can say that through his career he has sided with republicanism, but with important provisos (on the idea of the republic, cf. Heller 1985). As the modern society is bourgeois and complex, ie giving precedence to economy over politics and restricting severely the possibilities of political interventions into society, the old republican virtues have to be adapted to modern conditions. The inherent romantic anti-capitalism, the idea of the irretrievable conflict between political virtues and economic interests as standards of ethical life in the traditional republican frame of mind, has to be discarded. This has led Habermas to make a distinction between two kinds of political action, influencing the political system through voting and the civil society through political activism (cf. Benhabib 1992) – a duality that correlates

with the two dimensions of democracy (formal and substantial) introduced earlier. What Habermas preserves from the republican tradition is the idea of endless discussing and debating as the heart of equalitarian relations between citizens – that is, as the core around which social solidarity is built (cf. also Habermas 1995). In other words, the modern republicanism à la Habermas is committed to communicative action as the paradigm of politically good life dedicated to the upholding of the society.

Synthesising liberalism and republicanism would be enough if the complexity and differentiation of the modern society could be stabilised. But they cannot, for two reasons at least. First, the systemic forces of the economy and administration threaten the autononomy of the life-world which makes the social whole inherently conflictual, and, second, modernity is still an unfinished project that has not exhausted its resources. As a result, radical democracy has now and then to fight its way through obstacles, which calls for persons, groups and social movements determined enough to oppose the normal way of thinking and acting. This aspect makes, inevitably, Habermas susceptible to a kind of avant-gardism. Literally, the avant-gardes in politics and arts have been defined by their forward-looking vision of society and culture: they as a minority try to anticipate in the present what the mass of people will do in the future (on the concept of the avant-garde, cf. Egbert 1967). Even if avant-gardism in the strong sense, with the demise of the communist movement and the modernist art, has lost much of its appeal, it is, minimally in a weaker sense, manifest in the way Habermas emphasises the role of public intellectuals and knowledgeable activists in initiating processes of opinion-formation in the civil society. Still, one could say that Habermas is advocating also the stronger case. When dissident groups and social movements defending their bodies and souls against incursions into the life-world that violate their idea of good life are also fighting for the possible future of the whole society, ie, in the case their values turn out to be generalisable, they do represent a sort of moral avant-garde. For it is the moral sensitivity and civil courage of exceptional individuals on which, in the Habermasian political universe, collective self-rule is ultimately based.

Assessing Habermas' Contribution

I started from a paradox: those who are interested in Habermas' theory of the public sphere do not normally pay attention to the overall architecture of his work, and those more at home in Habermas' philosophical-sociological developments hardly ever focus on the function of public communication in his social thinking. The lacking mediation between the two approaches encouraged me to propose a line of reasoning that could negotiate between, on one hand, communication and media

theory, and, on the other, political and social theory. Habermas' own career, the shift of emphasis from the 1960s to the 1980s, or the difference between 'young' and 'mature' Habermas, seemed to make the mediating approach all the more urgent while it highlights graphically how Habermas' general interests are reflected in the way he understands the place of the public realm and mass media in modern constitutional democracies. In other words, his theory forms a whole whose change changes the meaning of its elements, such as the concept of communication and media. After the analytical part, I will conclude my presentation with an evaluative one, by dealing with both the advantages and limitations of Habermas' position.

That *Strukturwandel* has become a classic both in media studies and in political studies concerned with civil society speaks for itself. We can say that, so far, it has stood the test of time. This has not been self-evident while, during the years of the student movement, there were attempts at replacing Habermas' theory with a more radical one. The most ambitious of these 'anti-Habermases', which was at its time highly celebrated, was the work on the proletarian public sphere by Negt and Kluge (1972); howewer, it no longer inspires contemporary debates on and reformulations of the subject. Probably this is due to the greater amount of political realism in Habermas compared with his more radical Marxist colleagues in the late sixties and early seventies. Anyway, to assess the contuing relevance of Habermas' contribution one has to measure it against more recent, but differently thematised endeavours to diagnose the state of public life in the present-day society. I take up two variants of postmodernist social and cultural thinking – Deleuzeanism and Cultural Studies – for the purpose of comparison.

Keeping in mind the disastrous developments of the Second European 'Thirty Years' War' (1914–1945), some members of the first generation of the Frankfurt School had harboured the idea that the bourgeois society was a self-annihilating project. Even in the young Habermas of *Strukturwandel* one can find traces of this disillusionement. It is, however, after the 1960s that the idea of the post-bourgeois or post-modern society, usually associated with the French philosophy of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and others, has gained wide currency. More recently, the work of Gilles Deleuze has given rise to a new kind of social theorisation. As an example I comment briefly on Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's (2000; cf. also Hardt 1995) elaboration on Deleuze's (1990) idea of the society of control and its significance for reconceptualising the role of the public sphere.

The main thesis Hardt and Negri advance may be put in Hegelian terms. Hegel's (1973) social philosophy of modernity in *Philosophy of Right* is institutional – ie, he is interested in the kind of social structure that could guarantee the achievements of the bourgeois society, freedom and rationality. To this effect he makes the distinction between three basic institutions or institutional levels with their of own functions in educating men to recognise others as human

beings (family), as necessary partners in promoting one's self-interest (civil society), and as co-fellows in integral ethical life (state). In the Hegelian interpretation, then, the evolution of modernity equates the evolution of these institutions and their interrelations. Accordingly, Habermas' *Strukturwandel* adds to the Hegelian scheme the fourth institution of the public sphere, and tries to demonstrate by its fate how the evolution of the bourgeois society is regressive, turning the clocks back to the time of the Middle Ages (Habermas' thesis of refeodalisation). In a sense, Hardt and Negri accept Habermas' conclusion but not his premise that the rising bourgeois society should be considered as a model of freedom and rationality. This is so because the Hegelian-insitutional theorisation no longer holds in the postmodern or postcivil society.

For Hardt and Negri, the new kind of society that emerges after modernity is linked to the crisis of institutions, especially of civil society. More specifically, the process involves the blurring of boundaries, so that the distinction between state and civil society loses all meaning. In other words, Hardt and Negri stick to the interpretative tradition, leading from Marx to Weber to the first-generation of the Frankfurt School and Foucault, according to which modernity is based on one underlying logic – be it that of capital accumulation, goal-oriented and instrumental rationality, disciplining or (with Deleuze) control. With the withering of civil society deprived of its autonomy radical social theory and activism must then relocate their focal point which, to Hardt and Negri, can be found in the new forms of labour under capitalism's latest phase. Or, what Hardt and Negri propose in the guise of Foucauldian-Deleuzean biopolitics is a kind of postmodern Marxism stressing the informational or communicative nature of the new forms of labour. With these the communicative potential of the postmodern society is not to be found in a revised public sphere, but in the the new cooperative organisation of work relations – something which Marx anticipated with his idea of the intellectualisation of labour.

Hardt's and Negri's bleak depiction of the disapperance of civil society runs against the celebration of civil society and public sphere in recent social and media theory. It is not, however, clear that their critique of the Hegelian theory of civil society amounts to a counteragument against and replacement of Habermas – or, that it should give us sufficient reason for abandoning the modern frame of reference. Here Habermas' original idea of the public sphere, with the later parallel elaborations on the theory of the life-world, seem to offer the basis for a sort of immunity against Hardt and Negri. Namely, for Habermas the public sphere and civil society are not institutional in the sense the economy and state administration are – this was the reason why the young Habermas completed the Hegelian three-level model, and why the mature one sticks to the separatness of the system and the life-world. One of the fundamental characteristics of public sphere and civil society, for Habermas, is just their inherent working against one-dimensionality or

any attemps at their total subsumption. This is the basis of his optimism: the public sphere, life-world and civil society, with their of logic of communicative action, will always resist both the accumulation of capital and the interventions of state administration which strive for enlarging the domain of discipline and control in society.

With Cultural Studies the challenge to Habermas changes place from that posed by Deleuzeanism, even if the post-bourgeois or post-modern premise still holds. Like Habermas Cultural Studies locates the resistance in society within the life-world in its opposition to the system, but unlike Habermas it conceptualises the difference between the two as an unbridgeable divide. The case of John Fiske, one of the best-known representatives of Anglo-American Cultural Studies, may illustrate my point. I sketch briefly the evolution of his conception of popular culture in order to confront it with Habermas.

In the tradition of Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, Fiske started as a defender of working-class culture, but unlike these he identified television as the main locus of what can be called, even if Fiske does not do so himself, the 'proletarian' public sphere. The early Fiske (see Fiske & Hartley 1978) sees television, with its oral emphasis, as the main weapon against the class-rule of the bourgeoisie established by the means of literary culture. Accordingly, television gives legitimate expression to the working-class with ist collective and participatory way of life, and against the bourgeois individualism constructed on the pillars of literate modes of thought. Even if there is in television, in sports programmes for instance, a battle between middle- and working-class regimes of signification, which makes television contradictory, Fiske sides with popular resources of the medium. It is noteworthy that Fiske, in a McLuhanesque fashion, bases his argument mainly on the oral nature of television – the difference between the two paradigms of language-use, writing and speaking, being associated with negative values in the former case and with positive values in the latter one. This is a media-specific way of stating how the post-bourgeois society actually emerges.

Next Fiske's paradigm of popular culture was transferred from the working-class context to a more classless idea of popular culture (see Fiske 1987). Now television is no longer popular because of its oral allure, but because of its semiotic openness making different interpretations possible. Actually, Fiske invests popular television with those qualities modernist asthetic theory had preserved for rare pieces of 20th century art and literature: textual open-endedness; polysemy or ambiguity of meaning; the active response required from the reader or viewer; and the resistance to the powers that be provided by the critical tenor involved. This move seems to transform mainstream television into 'high culture for the ordinary man' – or, it does presuppose a high degree of self-reflexivity and intellectuality in the television-viewers. To make

things complicated, Fiske (1992a) has at the same time drawn on a strong dualist vocabulary privileging tabloid journalism over quality and alternatives ones. The idea is that popular journalism is critical because it turns the society upside down: it ridicules the elite's way of comprehending the world and is in this way authentically expressive of popular sentiments and wisdom. Ultimately, Fiske is defending the people which is no longer defined in class-terms, but in opposition to 'the power-bloc'.

The challenge Fiske's Cultural Studies poses to the kind of Frankfurt School represented by Habermas can be cut down to three major issues: the relation between the life-world and the system; the rationality of the public sphere; and the reflexivity of everyday actors. I think Habermas' alternative is more convincing, both intuitively and argumentatively, on all counts. First, Fiske, like most of Cultural Studies, lacks a social theory that could explain the working of modern societies in more elaborate terms than just by abstract dichotomies. In Fiske the modern society is mainly reduced either to a class-antagonism (middle-class against working-class) or a dichotomy reeking of populism (the people against the power-bloc). What is more, there is no attempt at according to the other side of the barricade any positivity. In this sense, Fiske's is a distant echo of *ouvriérisme* or the doctrines of the proletarian culture. Instead, Habermas social theory, from *Strukturwandel* to *Theorie* and *Faktizität*, while admitting that the perspective of 'the people' (life-world) must be given a certain priority in its relation to the 'power-bloc' (system), is able to describe in detail how the operation of the society calls for coordinating the actions of the people and the power-bloc, not only trying to eliminate the latter one.

Second, in terms of public life, this means that the bourgeois public sphere with its corresponding ideals of rationality based on argumentation, criticism and self-critique are found useless by Fiske. They are only weapons of coercion and intimidation, not means of rational expression of opinions and coordination of interactions. The irony resides in the fact that Fiske's conception of popular culture, consciously or unconsciously, draws on modernism, and so he, indirectly at least, admits that high culture can have salutary effects. However, it is more relevant to point out that, because of the lack of mediation between the people and the power-bloc, Fiske's theory of democracy is purely cultural or semiotic, excluding parliamentary politics. In other words, Fiske is not interested in whether the resistance put up in the field of the public sphere, civil society or the mass media actually leads to changes in formal politics. This makes Fiske's conception of resistance mainly symbolical – semiotic 'guerilla war' has existential significance to those involved (it is identity-work of sorts), but not any connection to the outer-world. In this sense Fiske's concept of popular culture, as a political theory of the media, is introvert or defensive – the main function of the popular public sphere is to safeguard the seclusion of the people from contamination by the

power-bloc, not to make its voice heard in the upper echelons of society. While Habermas reserves room for both functions life-world actors perform – that of inner cohesion and influencing the rest of society – there are systematic reasons at least for privileging his theory.

Every political media theory proclaiming popular sovereignty or the power of the people as its *raison d'être* must account for the basic premise of this, namely, the ability of all men, ordinary or extraordinary, to exercise judgement. Consequently, one of the main tenets, if not *the* main one, of Cultural Studies in general and Fiske in particular is the idea of the active audience. Television-viewers or radio-listeners are not mindless dupes but highly reflexive persons prone to judicious readings of the media fare. Among the ordinary media audience it is, however, the fans who demonstrate this capability best (cf. Fiske 1992b). As the avant-garde of the people, fans not only bend the media output to correspond with their own interests, but they also produce, on the basis of what the culture industry has to offer, their own communities or sub- and counter-cultures. For Fiske the function of the fan community, as we have seen, is not to change society but to defend a way of life. Yet, at this point the more important issue is concerned with the basis of audience activeness, whether of the normal or the fan type. Fiske, like Cultural Studies in general, fails to adduce any substantial theoretical support for the thesis of elaborate reflexivity prevailing in everyday media reception. The evidence presented consists mainly of general theoretical assumptions and, in most cases, empirical case studies, but a convincing connection between them is missing. It is just here, I argue, that Habermas' theory of communicative action comes to help. Namely, Habermas' theory, following the Enlightenment tradition, not only gives theoretical support for the existence of common sense, but it also explains why the development of modernity, in the conditions of post-conventionality, increases the amount of reflexivity. The former part of the theory specifies the foundations of audience activeness, while the latter one expounds why the phenomenon becomes more prevalent as we approach the present or the late modern society. Put in other words, Habermas' theory explains more than that of Fiske, and this makes it more heuristic.

Even if the Habermasian kind of Critical Theory can compete successfully with some contemporary alternatives like Deleuzeanism and Cultural Studies, or with some of their aspects at least, it is far from faultless. Actually, during his career Habermas has repeatedly aroused scathing criticism from both the academic right and left. The critiques have centred aroung recurring themes, like those of, especially, idealism, formalism, affirmativeness and gender-blidness. Habermas' idealism ('Hegelianism') is usually associated with the communicative view on society, which according to the critics renders him oblivious of more material factors; his formalism ('Kantianism'), with discourse ethics and the theory of democracy constructed on its bases, which give political commitments a procedural flavour only; his affirmativeness ('social democracy'),

with the consensus theory of truth and its application to the resolution of social conflicts, which amounts to accepting capitalism not only as a historical necessity but also as the limit to social experimentation; and his gender-blindness ('patriarchalism'), with universalising from the experience of privileged 18th-and-19th-century white bourgeois males to all human beings, which deprives his theory of its most ambitious aspect, universality, and turns it into an expression of European male prejudice. Admitting that these items of criticism, for any observer sympathetic to the main tenor of Habermas' project, are worthy of careful scrutiny, they are not immediately relevant in the present context. Instead, I will take up three lines of counterarguments against Habermas which concentrate more directly on the media and communication aspects of his theory. They are concerned with the specificity of mass communication, the diffentiation of the media system, and the consequences of the increasing growth of the channels of public communication.

After *Strukturwandel*, when he began to elaborate on the foundations of the theory of communicative action, Habermas made it quite clear that communication was for him about speech communication or speaking. This intuition, influentially developed in the post-war pragmatist philosophy of language and significantly anticipated in the philosophy of spirit by the young Hegel, led him to the idea that, if speaking could be seen as a form of social action, the edifice of social theory could be constructed on communication. This left in the air the problem, of crucial importance to media scholars, of how interpersonal communication between two speakers is related to mass communication between an unspecified amount of persons. In mass communication theory this is known as the problem of limiting the lower level of its object-domain, ie, that level below which we no longer have to do with mass but interpresonal phenomena. It is, then, no wonder that Habermas' theory of the public sphere has been considered out-of-date because it presupposes such conditions of public speaking, namely a physical place like the *agora* in ancient Greece, that no longer apply (see Thompson 1995). The point is relevant, which can be identified by the fact that more recently – in *Faktizität* – Habermas has tried to detach his concept of public sphere from those aspects that make it the continuation of dialogues in limited locales like salons or cafés. If this line of arguing is correct, the major fault of Habermas' theory of communicative action as a social theory and – *mutatis mutandis* – a media theory lies in the deduction from dyadic relations to relations involving practically an infinite number of actors (cf. also Lanigan 1979).

The *Strukturwandel* includes a media theory, whatever its connection to conceptions of speech communication. To be more specific, Habermas grounds his concept of public sphere on the existence of two major forms of media at the time of the rise of the bourgeoisie: the newspaper (political public sphere), and the novel (cultural public sphere). As Habermas is more interested in the former, it is not inadequate to claim that the political newspaper and the critical magazine

approximate his ideal type of media making rational formation of beliefs possible. Given the plethora of media forms which the 20th century gave rise to, commentators have voiced doubts about the applicability of Habermas' ideals to a later phase of the modern media system. In this culture-industry phase, and as a consequence of the increasing differentiation one could say, it is not only that the media are dictated by commercial imperatives, which *Strukturwandel* takes into consideration, but they also form the junction of several independent logics which vary from a medium to another (cf. Miège 1989). This complicates transferring Habermas' ideal type from print media to audiovisual media, mainly television – and not only to the commercial but also to the public-service one. Again, one can detect a glaring inconsistency in Habermas. This can be inferred from the fact that, while he still sticks to the centrality of public sphere in democracy, he openly admits that he has nothing to say about contemporary media politics – ie, about how to reform the media system in order to make it correspond more adequately with the requirements of his political theory (see Habermas 2001). The conclusion seems to point out another major problem in Habermas, the questionable ideality of the political newspaper in the age of television (although the age of the Internet may reopen the case).

Even if the differences between the media, considered as vehicles of political will- and cultural self-formation, could be dismissed as irrelevant, it is their number that works against the idea of the public realm. Namely, in order to work adequately the public sphere should be accessible to all, not only in principle but in reality – otherwise we have at hand only partial or illusory public spheres (cf. Ludes 1993). The phenomenon in itself is not new. Since the late 18th century, with the so-called second printing revolution, and the turn of the 20th century, with the so-called first audiovisual revolution (for a history of the media clarifying these periodizations, see Barbier & Bertho Lavenir 2000), the amount of total media output has continually increased. Nobody has ever been able to read all the newspapers and books nor to see all the films and television programmes – not to speak of listening to all records or tuning in to all the available radio stations. What is more, the most popular books, films or television shows do not ever reach but a minority of the population (barring wholly exceptional social circumstances). Even if this structural fact can be dated back to the beginning of the modern media system during the latter part of the 18th century, it has been aggravated by what could be called the 'second' structural transformation of the public sphere. The first transformation was concerned with the emergence of the culture industry, when the commercialisation of the media took on qualitatively new dimensions, while the second one is about the extreme pluralisation of both the media and their output – that is to say, about their both extensive and intensive growth. In a way Habermas has noticed the relevance of this development, for he has – in *Faktizität* – begun to speak, as the basis of the public sphere, not

only of issue- or media-specific debates but also of 'anonimous' communications flows. While this may save Habermas from some awkward concequences as far as his original theory of the public sphere is concerned, and bring it closer to post-structuralist ideas of textuality, it is not evident that the democratic premise of his theory, namely that the public sphere taken as a totality should authentically reflect what goes on in the life-world, still holds after these revisions. For maybe the media system has become over-complex in the sense that, given the immensity of its manifestations, nobody can with any certainty say what it includes. If this is so we, or any finite subject in the sense of Habermas' post-metaphysical philosophy, can never know what the people wants politically save through the formal procedures of voting. Such an upshot would, however, threaten to collapse the basic idea of substantial democracy so pressing to Habermas.

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Note. I have indicated the versions I have used, even in the cases where I know translations exist. Anyone interested in resorting to translations should find them with little effort.

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