

Publicness beyond the Public Sphere

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Abstract

This essay begins by retracing the diverging reception in the German-, French- and English-speaking contexts of the notion of the public sphere, which shows the open nature and heuristic potential of Habermas's original conceptualization. Despite the many valid critiques formulated over the years, the notion of publicness has remained a productive one, and has even been applied in authoritarian contexts, which were not originally included within its scope. This essay argues that the concept of publicness offers a unique connection between three approaches, which no other concept has been able to establish: the history and sociology of the press and media, the study of public opinion, and participative democracy. For this reason, it may be undesirable to entirely discard it, or disconnect it from the normative preferences embedded in it.

The public sphere, a concept first proposed by Jürgen Habermas in his habilitation thesis, subsequently published under the title *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere) in 1962, has been a source of both academic inspiration and scholarly contention for over half a century. It has generated controversy across geographical and historical boundaries, with distinct reception histories in the German-, French- and English-speaking worlds (and beyond, as will be discussed below), intertwined with and shaped by historical events. Today, the notion is commonly used in the media and to some extent by social scientists, but has been severely criticized by humanities scholars, especially in the English-speaking world.¹

To put it succinctly, the original German context was marked by Habermas's use of the highly malleable or ambiguous term *Öffentlichkeit* (publicness) and the historical context of the post-war era, which emphasized rational-critical deliberation as the normative core of a reconstruction of democracy after the "irrationality" of the National-Socialist regime.² In France, where the term was translated narrowly but relatively

¹ For a comprehensive and relatively recent overview of the literature on public spheres across history and social sciences, see Andreas Koller, "The Public Sphere and Comparative Historical Research. An Introduction," *Social Science History* 34, no. 3 (Fall 2010), 261–290.

² This biographical aspect (Habermas's father was a member of the National-Socialist Party and he was made to join the Hitlerjugend) comes across strongly in the biography by Stefan Müller-Doohm recently translated into English (*Habermas. A Biography*. Cambridge: Polity, 2016). The recent study by Roman Yos provides a detailed investigation into the intellectual origins of Habermas's *Habilitationsschrift*, and notes that the search for the normative foundations of democracy provided a key impetus. Roman Yos, *Der junge*

uncontroversially as “public space” (*espace public*),³ the book appeared in 1978 and its reception was marked by Habermas’s critique, as an heir to the Frankfurt School, of the mass media and mass communication under capitalism within the global post-1968 context. In the English-speaking world, the notion was translated as “public sphere” and the full book appeared only in 1989, almost exactly in conjunction with the fall of communism in Europe and the end of the Cold War. This led to heightening the normative import of Habermas’s original formulation: the notion of “sphere” both as an idealized form and as a distinct dimension of social practice was seen as controversial, while the conjunction with the events of 1989 led to conflating it with civil society and seeing both of these notions as necessary conditions for a successful “transition” to democracy.⁴

This view was strongly challenged in the 1990s as democratic transitions in Russia and Eastern or Central Europe failed to live up to their promises. Its empirical relevance was sharply questioned in connection with studies of the French Revolution.⁵ In parallel it was subjected to accusations of logocentrism and eurocentrism in the context of the rise of cultural and later post-colonial studies, especially in the English-speaking world.⁶ Today, it is often dismissed as a starry-eyed idealization at a time when rational-critical discourse seems to be playing a dwindling role in the age of social media, twitter diplomacy and the spectacle society of mass media and reality-tv politics, even as engagement with the formation of public opinion and the dialectics of emotions and ideas in the context of global capitalism appears as an urgent task.

Habermas. Eine ideengeschichtliche Untersuchung seines frühen Denkens 1952–1962 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019). Habermas’s notion of the public may also have been inspired by Koselleck’s *Kritik und Krise* (criticized in “Zur Kritik an der Geschichtsphilosophie”). See John Raimo, “Dans l’ombre des révolutions: Reinhart Koselleck et l’historiographie française”, *Revue germanique internationale*, no. 25 (2017): 23, note 100. For an overview of the German reception of Habermas, see Peter Hohendahl, “Critical Theory, Public Sphere, and Culture: Jürgen Habermas and his Critics,” *The Institution of Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982), 242–280.

³ This “spatial turn” continues to inform the French Habermas-reception. See for example the introduction and Patrick Boucheron’s chapter in Patrick Boucheron and Nicolas Offenstadt, eds., *La Sphère publique au Moyen Âge* (Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 2011).

⁴ A sub-theme in this reading of Habermas is the way in which he was lionized as the “savior” of reason and rationality against the post-modern and post-structuralist critics he labeled “neo-conservatives.” Martin Jay for example describes his work as an “audacious attempt to restore the light of reason” in *Reason after its eclipse. On Late Critical Theory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 122. See also the debate between Richard Wolin and John Rajchman in *New German Critique* 49 (Winter 1990).

⁵ See Lynn Hunt, “Révolution française et vie privée,” in Michelle Perrot, ed., *Histoire de la vie privée* (Paris: Le Seuil 1985), IV:21–53 and, for an overview, Benjamin Nathans, “Habermas’s ‘Public Sphere’ in the Era of the French Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 16, no. 3 (1990): 620–644.

⁶ For the earliest suggestions of such critiques, see the contributions by Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser and Benjamin Lee in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

Two reasons may lead us to maintain a critical interest in Habermas's original notion of publicness. The first one is analytical: no compelling alternative concept has been suggested to connect the history and sociology of the press and media, public opinion, and participatory politics, three dimensions inherent in the original concept of *Öffentlichkeit*.⁷ Relatedly, the term continues to be widely used in common discourse, suggesting the need to reconceptualize rather than simply dismiss it. Furthermore, while the border between public and private has been redefined and historicized, the existence of a distinction between these two realms has not been fundamentally questioned, at least not in liberal-democratic societies. Second, one might argue that the current breakdown of public rational-critical discourse precisely challenges scholars to rethink the modalities of the normative dimension implicit in the context of Habermas's original study, if not in the concept of publicness itself.⁸ This is what the present essay will attempt to contribute to, by retracing some of the controversies and challenges around the notion of publicness over the last decades.

Habermas's concepts and their critique

Habermas's concepts are widely known and hardly require further presentation. However, it bears recalling that Habermas's framing was from the start both normative and empirically grounded, distinguishing between different historical types of publicness. The ancient Greek distinction between public and private domains (the household and the polis) retains a normative force, although in Habermas's view it only found a concrete legal translation in the modern era.⁹ Contrary to Hannah Arendt in her framing of the public and private realms in *The Human Condition* (1958), Habermas does not idealize the Greek model, in which only the public realm is associated with freedom, whereas the private sphere is dominated by necessity.¹⁰ In European *ancien régime*

⁷ Craig Calhoun writes: "The basic question guiding Habermas's exploration of the public sphere was, To what extent can the wills or opinions guiding political action be formed on the basis of rational-critical discourse?" in "Civil Society and the Public Sphere," *Public Culture* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1993): 273.

⁸ The questions of the boundary between public and private speech and the connection between publicness and democracy are the focus of a recent special issue of *Leviathan* to which Habermas contributed an substantive essay. See Martin Seeliger and Sebastian Seivignani, eds., *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit?, Leviathan*, Sonderband no. 37 (2021).

⁹ For a critical discussion of Habermas's concept and ancient Greece, see Vincent Azoulay, "L'espace public et la cité grecque: d'un malentendu structurel à une clarification conceptuelle," in Boucheron and Offenstadt, *La Sphère publique au Moyen Âge*, 63–76.

¹⁰ Arendt's narrative presents a highly idealized notion of "the public," threatened by the rise of economic concerns ("housekeeping") in modern nation-states and by the "all-comprehensive pretension of the social sciences which, as 'behavioral sciences,' aim to reduce man as a whole, in all his activities, to the

societies, the public was conceptualized as the domain of representation at the court of the monarch, structured by status and ritual. The bourgeois regime of publicness was formed in late 18th century or early 19th century Europe, when professionals, nurtured and educated within the private sphere, stepped into a shared domain distinct from the state and, bracketing their social status, freely debated matters of public interest. In these physical (coffee houses and salons¹¹) or virtual (the press) spaces, sustained by print capitalism, an autonomous public opinion was formed that was able to question the power of the state.¹² Its two key characteristics were its bracketing of social hierarchy and its reliance on the public use of reason in the service of general interest. This was challenged later in the 19th century by the formation of a plebeian political sphere that sought to advance its class interests, and in the 20th century by the appearance of a mass society characterized by mass communication, acclamation and plebiscite. These “structural changes” led to the “refeudalization” of the public sphere and the bracketing of public interest, with the bureaucratic welfare state and its negotiated harmonization of interests emerging as the contemporary alternative to rational-critical debate.¹³ In this sense, Habermas’s normative impetus always coexisted with a historicist methodology leading to a typology with at least 4 or 5 types that may be considered as open to the addition of further categories.

The early critiques of this paradigm are also well known and I propose to organize them into the following categories.¹⁴

1) The first and most obvious one concerned the socially exclusionary nature of the bourgeois public sphere, which excluded the nascent working class and more generally

level of a conditioned and behaving animal.” “The Public and the Private Realm” in *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 33 and 45. See also Arendt’s earlier elaboration in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 301.

¹¹ Maurice Agulhon empirically documents a similar evolution (although he does not refer to Habermas) from the aristocratic salons of the 18th century, which in Agulhon’s view fall under the category of representational publicness, to the rise of bourgeois circles under the Restoration and the July Monarchy in 19th century France. See *Le cercle dans la France bourgeoise, 1810-1848. Etude d’une mutation de sociabilité* (Paris: Armand Colin/EHESS, 1977). Antoine Lilti’s study of salons takes a similar view to Agulhon’s, viewing them as examples of aristocratic representation rather than rational-critical discussion. *Le Monde des Salons, sociabilité et mondanité au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).

¹² Roger Chartier quotes Habermas at length and does not directly challenge his framework and conclusions; however, Chartier’s approach gives more importance to the desecralization of the act of reading in the emergence of what he terms a “democratic sociability” in 18th century salons. *Les Origines culturelles de la Révolution française* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2000), 37–60 and 229–230.

¹³ Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990); Jürgen Habermas “The Public Sphere,” *New German Critique*, no. 3 (Autumn 1974): 49–55 .

¹⁴ Most of them are set out in Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*.

“plebeian” forms of contention and contestation.¹⁵ Craig Calhoun has more recently argued, using historical material from 18th and 19th century England, that the original public sphere in the 18th century was socially open to radical artisans and workers, whereas bourgeois closure took place only after the French Revolution, around 1815, when the English state began taxing and prosecuting the popular press. The bourgeois public sphere was not inherently bourgeois: “Rather than seeing the public sphere as initially bourgeois, we should see it as made bourgeois by the expulsion of dissident voices.”¹⁶ We may also note here that Habermas’s original term *bürgerlich* refers both to the “bourgeois” and to the “civic” or “citizen” sphere.

2) The second one, formulated in particular by feminist scholars, concerned the nature of the boundary between public and private. This boundary should not be considered as a given, rather it is itself a historical construction and a historical and political object of contention. In particular, women were historically assigned to the private sphere and in so doing excluded from the public sphere for reasons that they contested. Harold Mah, for example, devotes an important discussion to how, at the time of the French Revolution, modern Republicanism was associated with a desire to displace women from the (superficial, emotional) public sphere of the cultural salons, creating the “enlightenment phantasy” of a masculinist public sphere; however, he also argues that it provoked a pushback (Staël, Goethe) defending the right of independent women to access publicness.¹⁷

3) Among the normative undercurrents in Habermas’s concepts there is an idealization of rational-critical discourse that can be described as logocentrism, and conversely a lack of engagement with conflictuality.¹⁸ While his exclusion of political emotions and passions from the realm of deliberative democracy was no doubt the result of the recent past of Weimar and Nazi Germany, on a descriptive level it is undeniable that publics and public opinions can be and are frequently formed by

¹⁵ See Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward and Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

¹⁶ Craig Calhoun, “The Public Sphere in the Field of Power,” in *The Roots of Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 136. See also the following chapter “The Reluctant Counterpublic,” 152-180. The tension between an idealized rationality and group “self-interest” features prominently in Calhoun’s study.

¹⁷ Harold Mah, “Classicism and Gender Transformation,” in *Enlightenment Phantasies: Cultural Identity in France and Germany, 1750-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003), 116–156.

¹⁸ For a recent collection centered on a more conflictual conception, which references Arendt’s “agonistic” view of the public sphere, see Sylvie Capitant, Michèle Leclerc-Olive, *A-t-on enterré l’espace public?, Sens Public*, no. 15-16 (July 2013).

emotions, normative (including religious) beliefs, identities (nationalism), or sensory/aesthetic experiences (e.g. music).¹⁹

4) Finally, the English concept of “sphere” hypothesized the unitary and apparently perfectly constituted nature of the public, as distinct from other “spheres.” Critics pointed out that empirical reality was often made up of many conflicting spheres and counterspheres that did not necessarily communicate with each other, raising the question of how to understand the connections between them, and whether publicness as *Öffentlichkeit* is necessarily unitary. Harold Mah goes so far as to argue that, even as publicness is what helps establish the agency of a group, insofar as its claim to publicness is underwritten by group identity, *Öffentlichkeit* or publicness is always prisoner to the teleological claim of establishing pure impartial reason as the decisive criterion in determining the “general will.” He cites the Terror as an example of instituting “the public” as a mass subject.²⁰

All of these critiques to some extent point out the lack of conflictuality in Habermas’s framework and prompted new paradigms to rethink the connection between media, public opinion and participatory politics.

Alternative conceptualizations

Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser contributed early insights into the constructed nature of the border between public and private spheres. Benhabib, typologizing the private into the areas of faith, property and intimacy, argued that democratization needed to also enter the realm of norms governing the family and the gendered division of labor.²¹ Nancy Fraser, viewing the public sphere as “a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk,” criticized three aspects of the “modern liberal” public sphere: its ability to simply “bracket” status differentials, the assumed need for a single, unitary sphere, and idealization of “public interest.”²² In particular, she argues that subordinated groups need “arenas for

¹⁹ On the role of emotions, see also the chapter by Jonas Knatz in this volume.

²⁰ Harold Mah, “Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians.” *The Journal of Modern History* 72 (March 2000): 153–182. This article is also an excellent synthesis of the Habermas reception among historians of the European Enlightenment.

²¹ Seyla Benhabib, “Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas” in Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 93.

²² Nancy Fraser, “Politics, Culture, and the Public Sphere: toward a postmodern conception,” in Linda Nicholson and Steve Seidman, eds., *Social Postmodernism. Beyond Identity Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 287.

deliberation among themselves about their needs, objective, and strategies,” which she calls “alternative publics” or “subaltern counterpublics.” Which topics enter the public domain, she argues, is usually decided through contestation. Relatedly, the “common good” can oftentimes only be worked out by deliberation between conflicting interests. This leads her to define a “postmodern, postliberal” public sphere in which status differences are not bracketed but eliminated, interests labelled as private are included in the public, and a multiplicity of publics deliberate simultaneously. Publicity now means staging a discursive struggle over the interpretation of certain social practices.²³ To this, she later added a critique of the “national subtext” of Habermas’s concept, based on a notion of citizenship in a Westphalian nation-state, which encompassed the need to generate and mobilize public opinion. In order to preserve the critical dimension of the public sphere paradigm, she argues that it must be broadened beyond the national frame to include all those affected by global issues under debate.²⁴

Michael Warner has particularly investigated the discursive dimension of publicness and further enriched the notions of publics and counterpublics. For Warner, publicity in the modern democratic context always relies on a form of “disincorporation” of individuals.²⁵ Publics are based on public discourses; they are not voluntary associations but “ongoing space[s] of encounter for discourse.” This is an important distinction that further clarifies the gap between the public sphere and civil society. Public discourse is always performative and therefore poetic in that it instantiates the lifeworld it addresses, but its poetic dimension is misrecognized because the “address to a public is ideologized as rational-critical dialogue,” whereas affect and expressivity are not thought to be replicable acts of reading. Within the hierarchy of faculties, “publics more overtly oriented in their self-understandings to the poetic-expressive dimensions of language, including artistic publics and many counterpublics, lack the power to transpose themselves to the generality of the state.” In this perspective, counterpublics only come into existence when the norms of ordinary speech are suspended, for

²³ Fraser, “Politics, Culture, and the Public Sphere,” 306.

²⁴ Nancy Fraser, “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere. On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian world,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 24, no. 4 (2007): 7–30. See also Craig Calhoun, “Imagining Solidarity, Cosmopolitanism, Constitutional Patriotism, and the Public Sphere,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 147–171.

²⁵ Michael Warner, “The Mass Public and the Mass Subject,” in Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 377–400. For the same reason, Warner argues that printing cannot be considered simply as a technical innovation, but corresponds to a change in representations: “Mechanical duplication equals publishing precisely insofar as public political discourse is impersonal.” *The Letters of the Republic. Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 39.

example in protected venues, or small-circle publications: “a public of subalterns is only a counterpublic when its participants are addressed in a counterpublic way—as for example African-Americans willing to speak in what is regarded as racially marked idiom.”²⁶ Social media with their built-in “confirmation bias” and their tendency to create “information silos” can perhaps be considered conducive to the formation of counterpublics, for better or worse.

James Scott is not usually mentioned in connection with Habermas despite repeatedly referencing his *Theory of Communicative Action*. Somewhat like Warner, Scott derides Habermas’s “ideal speech situation” as an approximation of Socratic dialogue or a generalization of the “perfect graduate student seminar.”²⁷ The gist of Scott’s argument is that public speech continues to function in situations of domination, but not in the way Habermas hypothesized. The notion of “hidden transcript,” in contrast with Habermas’s “ideal speech situation” derives from the insight that “dominated discourse is, of necessity, distorted communication because power relations encourage ‘strategic’ forms of manipulation that undermine genuine understanding.” Scott examines forms of public discourse that do not conform to the rational-critical ideal: carnivals, the spreading of rumors or gossip, folktales, religious-aesthetic rituals like gospel singing. These discourses are the mirror image of the “speech that is blocked or suppressed in another realm.”²⁸ However, it is revealing that Scott still relies on Habermas’s notion of public, as establishing a connection between public speech, public opinion and participatory politics. Hidden transcripts are the opposite of public transcripts, but they are not private: despite the displacement and disguise inherent in these specific forms of dominated speech, their significance lies in their ability to enter the public domain, with potentially powerful counter-hegemonic results.

To varying degrees, these critiques and reformulations all raise some question as to whether the concept of publicness can accommodate the fragmentation inherent both in the multiplicity of counter-spheres and in the substitution of conflicting interests for

²⁶ Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics (abbreviated version),” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 4 (November 2002), p. 413-25. The quotations are taken from pages 420, 422, 423 and 424, respectively. See also “Public and Private” in *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 21–63. For a discussion on the “black public sphere,” see Joanna Brooks, “The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2005), 67–92. For a study of the role of rhetoric in establishing publics and public spheres, see Gerard Hauser, *Vernacular Voices. The Rhetoric of Public and Public Spheres* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999).

²⁷ James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 115, note 12; 38, note 36.

²⁸ James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 176.

rational-critical discourse. The most persuasive attempt to heuristically conceptualize this tension is probably to be found in Craig Calhoun's work. Calhoun concurs that the ability to participate in the public sphere, as a form of voice and social recognition, defines an area of contention constitutive of modern societies. Therefore, conceptualizations of publicness as an arena of rarefied debate are unsatisfactory; it has always been shaped by struggles of inclusion and exclusion, by struggles over the constitution of public opinion. However, the critics neglect two important points. First, the notion of counterpublics obscures the fact that alternative publics are constituted precisely by their struggle to seek inclusion in the main public. Second, the public sphere cannot be simply seen as a struggle among different identities advancing their interests, because identities are not simply articulated in private but transformed by entering public life. Calhoun argues that this tension is not the result of a process of "degeneration" but constitutive of the public domain.²⁹ More generally he takes issue with Habermas's historical teleology which makes the public sphere more and more open at the same time as it becomes less and less rational.³⁰ Calhoun experiments with two concepts to understand the counterpublics and multiple identities within the framework of an integrative public: Gramsci's hegemony and Bourdieu's notion of field. In the Gramscian perspective, in many historical situations, counterspheres remain within the hegemonic culture of rational argument that dominates the integrative sphere. In the Bourdieusian perspective, the public sphere, as an arena in which persuasion is more important than personal connections, tends to devalue economic capital but also the articulation of "special interests," leading to a dramatization of asserted independence by those who wanted to join the public domain. In this perspective, the public sphere is part of the larger field of power formed by the rise of the modern state.³¹

Beyond Western Europe³²

²⁹ Calhoun, "The Public Sphere in the Field of Power," 124–128.

³⁰ Calhoun, "The Public Sphere in the Field of Power," 135.

³¹ Calhoun, "The Public Sphere in the Field of Power," 145–150.

³² Habermas's concept has given rise to fruitful discussions of many non-European societies. On Japanese concepts of publicness: Andrew Barshay, "Notes on the 'public' in postwar Japan" in *State and intellectual in Imperial Japan. The Public Man in Crisis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 223–250; Kaori Hayashi, "The 'Public' in Japan," *Theory, Culture and Society* 23, no.2-3 (2006), 615–616. On African street parliaments: Richard Banégas, Florence Brisset-Foucault, Armando Cutolo, "Espaces publics de la parole et pratiques de la citoyenneté en Afrique," *Politique africaine* 127, no.3 (2012), 5-20. On the practice of

Finally, it should be noted that Habermas's concept and its avatars also encountered great success – somewhat unexpectedly in view of his own reservations – in studies of the Soviet Union, China, and even Nazi Germany. State socialist regimes are generally understood to take a dual approach to publicness, on the one hand obsessively preserving the secrecy of the center (Politburo meetings behind closed doors), while at the same time performing authoritarian rule as an ostentatiously visible public spectacle mobilizing the masses in public spaces.³³ The control they exercise over many aspects of the public domain leads to a “radical homogenization,”³⁴ in which alternative expressions are pushed back into the private sphere.³⁵ However, scholars argue that in the late Soviet Union this dichotomy gave way to a tripartition: between the “official public sphere” governed by institutions of state repression, and the private or intimate sphere, there appeared an “everyday sphere” governed by “informal norms.”³⁶ Increasing numbers of people tried to minimize, avoid or routinize any contact with the official sphere and limited their social interactions to the “everyday sphere.” This intermediate “second public sphere” or “public-private sphere” is spatially associated with the communal apartments in Soviet cities, which served as an “in-between” space for practices that could not be part of the official sphere (“connections” are another example).³⁷ Mid-level spheres with influence on a limited audience (e.g. local issues)

adda debates in Bengal: Dipesh Chakrabarty, “*Adda: A History of Sociality*” in *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Reference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 180–213.

³³ In this sense, their “public” differs from the representational publicness of *ancien régime* polities, in which the representation takes place in the center and does not saturate the social space, although Dena Goodman argues that authentic public spheres in the *ancien régime* were also private. “Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime,” *History and Theory* 31, no. 1 (Feb. 1992), 20.

³⁴ Gabor Rittersporn, Malte Wolf, Jan Behrends, “Open Space and Public Realm,” in G. Rittersporn, Malte Wolf, Jan Behrends, eds., *Public Spheres in Soviet-Type Societies* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), 426.

³⁵ Michel Christian and Sandrine Kott argue that the distinction between public and private was never entirely erased in socialist societies. “Introduction. Sphère publique et sphère privée dans les sociétés socialistes. La mise à l'épreuve d'une dichotomie,” *Histoire@Politique. Politique, culture, société* 7 (2009), 1–12.

³⁶ Ingrid Oswald, Viktor Voronkov, “Licht an, licht aus,” in Rittersporn et al, *Public Spheres in Soviet-Type Societies*, 46.

³⁷ Larissa Zakharova, “Sphères publiques soviétiques,” *Politika*, 2 May 2017, <https://www.politika.io/fr/notice/spheres-publiques-sovietiques>. Oswald and Voronkov argue that in liberal democratic settings the border between private and social spheres is strong, but the border between social and public (state) sphere is weak, whereas in the Soviet context, the border between private and social sphere is blurry, whereas the border with the state sphere is stronger (“Licht an, Licht aus,” 57). See also Vaclav Benda, “The Parallel ‘Polis,’” [1978] in H. Gordon Skilling, Paul Wilson, eds, *Civic Freedom in Central Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), 35–41; Vit Havranek, “La troisième voie. Espace public et espace privé sous le communisme” in Christine Macel, Natasa Petresin-Bachelez, eds., *Les Promesses du Passé. Une Histoire discontinuée de l'ex-Europe de l'Est* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2010), 26–30; Kristin Roth Ey and Larissa Zakharova, “Communications and media in the USSR and Eastern Europe,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 56, no. 2-3 (2015), 273-289.

could generate a greater sense of possible participation than the level of “big questions.”³⁸ A slightly different way of making a similar point is to argue that the “deterritorialized” spaces that did not fit the binary of support or opposition to the regime should be considered “not as exceptions to the ‘norm’ of late Soviet life, but as paradigmatic examples of how that norm became everywhere decentered and reinterpreted.”³⁹ The State used this grey zone to generate a form of public opinion through petitions and complaints, which transformed private complaints (lack of apartment space or relations with neighbors) into public issues.⁴⁰ This effort to build a participatory publicness also included censorship and the silencing of deviant expressions, but at the same time affirming the importance of public opinion as a discursive norm opened up space for maneuver and discussion.⁴¹ In the Soviet context, the boundary between public and private came to be understood not so much as a watertight border but rather as a process of socialization,⁴² of learning the correct socialist language for expressing oneself in different contexts. Individuals played different social roles in different spheres, blurring the State-society dichotomy.⁴³

Ian Kershaw, addressing the issue of popular support for the Nazi regime, proposes that, “instead of ‘public opinion’, a term suited to the pluralistic formation of attitudes in a liberal democracy, it seems more appropriate to speak of ‘popular opinion’ to embrace the unquantifiable, often generalized, diffuse and uncoordinated, but still genuine and widespread, views of ordinary citizens.”⁴⁴ Building on Weber’s model of routinization of charisma, he distinguishes between “exceptional” and “everyday” spheres: in the “exceptional” sphere of politics, the regime was able to manufacture national unity by advancing distant, utopian goals to compensate for daily travails: the “people’s community”, the “myth of the Führer.” State antisemitism was removed from everyday life, and when it did appear, people reacted critically. But for the most part, it remained

³⁸ Rittersporn et al., “Open Space and Public Realm,” 444.

³⁹ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was Forever until it was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 34.

⁴⁰ Rittersporn et al., “Open Space and Public Realm,” 438.

⁴¹ Rittersporn et al., “Open Space and Public Realm,” 440.

⁴² This echoes Habermas’s own view of the public sphere as one of three modes of societal integration (together with state and market). See Jürgen Habermas, “Three normative models of democracy,” *Constellations* 1 (1994): 1-10.

⁴³ Forms of “private” writing were often marked by the writer’s eagerness to demonstrate conformity with discursive canons of Soviet propaganda, demonstrating loyalty, enthusiasm for collectivization, struggle against selfishness, and making the diary into an individual account of self-transformation into a Soviet man. Jochen Hellbeck, “Working, Struggling, Becoming,” *The Russian Review* 60, no. 3 (July 2001), 340–359.

⁴⁴ Ian Kershaw, “The ‘Everyday’ and the ‘Exceptional’. The Shaping of Popular Opinion 1933-1939,” in *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 120.

out of sight, which led to “lethal indifference.” On the other hand, the “everyday sphere” produced significant criticism (working conditions and wages, shortages), but it remained shallow, and non-ideological. Critical opinion was atomized, and hence rendered harmless. The division between public and private discourse under National-Socialism has been criticized more broadly and profoundly by historians of gender and sexuality, as well as on the basis of the study of “ego-documents” (letters and private journals) that reveal how “even highly critical private moral thinking remained shot through with public legitimations.”⁴⁵

In the Chinese context, Habermas’s notion attracted the attention of scholars only after the English translation was published in 1989, resulting in a broad conflation with a discussion about the weakness or inexistence of civil society in China, in the context of the bloody repression of the democracy movement of 1989. Historians focused on a set of practices in county towns in the late imperial era (late 19th century), in particular philanthropy, public works, chambers of commerce, and new educational institutions, to either endorse or deny that a “third realm” of social or public (*gong*) practices had existed that were neither state-controlled (*guan*) nor situated within the private sphere (*si*) but corresponded to the role of the local gentry as a mediator between the two.⁴⁶ A special issue of *Modern China* published in 1993 concluded on a skeptical note that the public sphere and civil society in China were characterized by a fuzzy border with and an overreliance on the state, suggesting that the public sphere as an “imported” concept had little heuristic value for the study of Chinese history.⁴⁷

The traditionally positive valuation of “publicness” (*gong*; as opposed to the private interests underpinning economic pursuits and political factions alike) allowed the reformers to establish the notion of “public opinion” (*gonglun*) as a benchmark of political legitimacy in the last years of the empire.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the development of a modern press from the mid-19th century was generally viewed in close correlation with

⁴⁵ Nicholas Stargardt, “Private and Public Moral Sentiments in Nazi Germany,” in Elizabeth Harvey, Johannes Hürter, Maiken Umbach, Andreas Wirsching, eds, *Private Life And Privacy In Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 84. This volume provides the most comprehensive and up-to-date discussion of the issue.

⁴⁶ For an overview, see Frederic Wakeman, “Boundaries of the Public Sphere in Ming and Qing China,” *Daedalus* 127, no.3 (Summer 1998): 167-188.

⁴⁷ See for example Philip C.C. Huang, “ ‘Public Sphere’ / ‘Civil Society’ in China? The Third Realm between State and Society,” *Modern China* 19, no. 2 (April 1993), 216–240.

⁴⁸ Joan Judge, “Public Opinion and the New Politics of Contestation in the Late Qing, 1904-1911,” *Modern China* 20, no. 1 (January 1994): 64–91; Peter Zarrow, “The Origins of Modern Chinese Concepts of Privacy: Notes on Social Structure and Moral Discourse,” in Bonnie McDougall and Anders Hansson, eds., *Chinese Concepts of Privacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 121–146.

the role of foreign concessions and transnational capitalist networks, in particular organized by overseas Chinese, and part of the modernization paradigm, rather than as an endogenous development.⁴⁹ Although some scholars⁵⁰ pointed out the role of a public sphere sustained by local print capitalism during the Republican era (1912-1949), a subsequent series of studies questioned their reliance on rational-critical deliberation and instead highlighted the role of sentiments and emotions in constituting publics.⁵¹ Rather than public opinion, Eugenia Lean uses the notion of *tongqing*, which she translates as “public sympathy” or even “collective sentiment.” In her view, mass sensations, derived from the consumption of urban spectacles but with a more specific focus on the moral dimension of emotions, were able to mobilize public sympathy more effectively than critical rationality, highlighting how traditional forms of virtue and the authenticity of sentiment were crucial in creating modernity and civic identity, rather than a bourgeois public sphere.⁵² The field generally remains distrustful of the implications of using a “Western” concept to discuss Chinese history, further buttressed by nativist passions in scholarship within the People’s Republic of China.⁵³

Toward a more heuristic approach.

What conclusion can be drawn from this overview and is the public sphere still an operational concept today? Many of the controversies unsurprisingly revolve around the issue of normative or descriptive perspectives. Political scientists and, to some extent, social scientists more broadly, seem to express fewer reservations about the normative dimension of the concept.⁵⁴ Humanities scholars, especially in fields strongly reshaped by postcolonial and subaltern studies, tend to express discomfort about the genealogy of

⁴⁹ Wagner, Rudolf, “The Early Chinese Newspapers and the Chinese Public Sphere”, *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), 1–33.

⁵⁰ See Leo Ou-fan Lee, “Incomplete Modernity: Rethinking the May Fourth Intellectual Project,” in Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, Oldřich Král, eds, *The Appropriation of Cultural Capital. China’s May Fourth Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Centre, 2001), 31–65; Xu Jilin, “Public Sphere in Neoteric China: Forms, Functions and Self-Understandings – a case study of Shanghai,” in Deng Zhenglai, ed., *State and Civil Society. The Chinese Perspective* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2011), 241–270.

⁵¹ Lee Haiyan, “All the Feelings that are fit to print. The Community of Sentiment and the Literary Public Sphere in China, 1900-1918,” *Modern China* 27, no.3 (2001), 291–327.

⁵² Eugenia Lean, “Introduction,” *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 1–20.

⁵³ See also a recent overview: Sebastian Veg and Edmund W. Cheng, “Alternative Publications, Spaces and Publics: Revisiting the Public Sphere in 20th- and 21st-Century China.” *The China Quarterly* 246 (2021): 317–30.

⁵⁴ For an early collection of essays preserving the concept while questioning its normative dimension, see Alain Cottureau and Paul Ladrière, eds., *Pouvoir et Légitimité: Figures de l’espace public* (Paris: Éd. de l’EHESS, 1992).

a Eurocentric, logocentric and, ultimately, bourgeois concept. I would like to conclude this overview with two proposals to reduce if not eliminate the normative import of the public sphere paradigm, one emanating from the humanities, the other from the social sciences, followed by some final thoughts on normativity and heuristicity.

Among historians, studies of the public sphere have been absorbed to some extent by the history of reading, and the history of knowledge and disciplines.⁵⁵ For China historians in particular, since public opinion remains elusive and measuring it in any systematic way at any time in 19th or 20th century China (there is no material even approaching Kershaw's opinion reports) has proved well-nigh impossible, there is a preference to focus instead on mechanisms of social and institutional construction, validation and reproduction of knowledge.⁵⁶ The public sphere is envisaged as the framework in which different types of knowledge and different mechanisms of knowledge validation contend for recognition. The distinction between academic or institutional and alternative or subaltern knowledge is not lost, as both fields have attracted academic attention, but translated into the more concrete objects of social validation and dissemination such as textbooks, manuals or even DIY books.⁵⁷

This reframing of the paradigm to some extent echoes Habermas's own turn away from the public sphere project (which he never reworked for the English translation) and toward communicative rationality as a means to reach agreement on significant issues and as a third realm of societal integration (in addition to state and market).⁵⁸ It suggests a connection between the public sphere and the "emancipatory interests" which, together with historical and analytical interests, inform the main types of pursuit of human knowledge, so that public discourse can be subsumed under a more general

⁵⁵ See for example Stéphane Van Damme, "Farewell Habermas? Deux décennies d'études sur l'espace public" in Boucheron and Offenstadt, *La Sphère publique au Moyen Âge*, 43-61. For a radical critique of the heuristicity of the notion of publics/counterpublics, see Bruno Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public," in B. Latour and Peter Weibel, eds., *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy* (Boston: MIT Press, 2005), 4-31.

⁵⁶ See for example Milena Dolezelova-Velingerova, Rudolf Wagner, eds., *Chinese Encyclopedias of New Global Knowledge (1870-193): Changing Ways of Thought* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2014).

⁵⁷ See Eugenia Lean, *Vernacular Industrialism in China: Local Innovation and Translated Technologies in the Making of a Cosmetics Empire, 1900-1940* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

⁵⁸ On law as the common language of the public sphere, see Jürgen Habermas, "Deliberative politics: A procedural concept of democracy" and "Civil society and the political public sphere" in *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press: 1996), 287-387. Ya-Wen Lei uses this approach to argue that legal norms and mediation of social problems by the investigative media were conducive to the formation of a contentious public sphere in mainland China in the mid-2000s. Ya-Wen Lei, *The Contentious Public Sphere. Law, Media and Authoritarian Rule in China*. Princeton UP, 2018.

“knowledge interest.”⁵⁹ In his recent contribution to a special issue of the journal *Leviathan*, Habermas further argues that the blurring of the boundary between public and private speech on highly commodified social media platforms has given rise to centrifugal communication networks that no longer provide the space for discursive clarification of contending claims to truth, instead provoking a return to a form of plebiscitary publicness.⁶⁰

On the side of the social sciences, while the concept is alive and well, there is a trend toward situating the public sphere within the framework of media and communication studies. The sociologist Ari Adut for example argues for the need to bracket the ideas of common good and civil discourse (often produced by “ambitious types in front of nonparticipating audiences,” as he writes⁶¹) and to focus on spaces rather than types of communication. While civil society is about struggles between groups, the public sphere is about conflicts over space and access to attention and visibility. Contention over publicity pits the strategies of making things visible (for example through the strategic use of scandal) against the need to regulate visibility, because too much transparency is, in his view, detrimental to democracy (e.g. the need to preserve the secrecy of the ballot, to avoid public trials turning into media circuses, and to preserve space for compromise and deal-making that is vital to parliamentary procedure). In this sense, publicity in itself has no normative dimension, it can be desirable or undesirable according to circumstances.⁶²

It seems indeed to be in line with developments in social sciences and humanities to take at least a more self-reflexive approach to normativity, if not attempting to eliminate it outright, which is probably a futile enterprise. The question the present essay attempts to raise is whether such a displacement does not risk losing the connection between public discourse, public opinion, and participative democracy. Habermas was close to Marxism when he wrote *Strukturwandel* and preoccupied with the threats that capitalism posed to democracy; however, the decisive break he introduced was a turn away from a historical subject (the proletariat), and toward the emancipatory potential

⁵⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972); Paul Terry, “Habermas and Education: knowledge, communication, discourse,” *Curriculum Studies* 5, no.3 (1997), 269–279.

⁶⁰ Jürgen Habermas, “Überlegungen und Hypothesen zu einem erneuten Strukturwandel der politischen Öffentlichkeit,” *Leviathan*, Sonderband no. 37 (2021), 470-500, especially 496-499.

⁶¹ Ari Adut, “A Theory of the Public Sphere,” *Sociological Theory* 30, no.4 (2012), 241.

⁶² Ari Adut, “A Theory of the Public Sphere,” 254.

of the intersubjective communication process. His reply to the dynamics of refeudalization was the internal democratization of parties and bureaucracies; maintaining the impetus to base social integration on communication rather than domination.⁶³ In this perspective, Calhoun highlights the advantage in retaining a normative dimension (the “valuable kernel in the flawed ideology of the bourgeois public sphere”) of the public sphere paradigm: the conditions for discourse in which arguments, not status or traditions are decisive. There can thus be at least a heuristic advantage in not separating the study of discourse and its context of production. More substantively, because the relationship between public discourse, public opinion, and participative democracy is not simply a matter of inquiry but also of normative preferences, defining a public may in fact not be analytically possible without self-reflexively acknowledging a certain degree of normativity.

⁶³ Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 5.