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THE DIALECTICS

An Introduction

The Dialectics: Journal of Law, Leadership, and Society is a refereed, multidisciplinary publication housed at the Pennsylvania State University, Abington College. The Journal's aim is to promote undergraduate scholarship and to encourage students to pursue and engage in thoughtful discourses on topics of societal importance. The Journal's publication is made possible by the Lord Chancellor's Chair and the support of Albert and Suzanne Lord.



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ASSUMED IDENTITY IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE:
CAUSALITY AND CONSEQUENCES IN THE 2016 ELECTION

By Re'al S. Christian*
New York University

“By ‘public sphere’ we mean first of all a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens” (Habermas, 1962/1989). This opening statement in Jürgen Habermas’s (1962/1989) essay “The Public Sphere” sets up the theoretical framework, as well as the fundamental flaw, of his idea of the democratic public sphere. Originally conceived in his seminal book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas’s (1962/1989) concept is still considered the foundation of contemporary studies on the public sphere. He discusses both the physical and psychological spaces that constitute the public sphere, the historical context in which these spaces came about, and how members should engage in its discourse. What Habermas does not fully examine is the tendency towards and consequences of homogeneity within the public sphere, and how this tendency is, in many ways, facilitated by his model. The ramifications of this circumstance are explored in modern revisionist theories on the public sphere, aided by the acknowledgement of multiple “publics” in which people of similar mindsets or backgrounds can come together and discuss common themes. A multiplicity of publics is beneficial to those who seek a safe place to express their opinions without judgment; one caveat, however, is that some publics may be automatically stigmatized or discriminatory. The only solution to such a schism is a society that is without bias and prejudice; but how can such a society exist when its members are ideologically separated? This schism is particularly prevalent within the two-party political system within the United States, and between the Democratic and Republican parties, or liberals and conservatives, respectively. Using both the traditional and revisionist theories of the public sphere, one can begin to elucidate the circumstances that lead to such extreme partisanship.

Defining the Public Sphere

Habermas (1962/1989) begins his discussion of the public sphere by distinguishing between opinion and public opinion:

The term “public opinion” refers to the functions of criticism and control of organized state authority that the public exercises informally, as well as formally during periodic elections. . . . Whereas mere opinions (things taken for granted as part of a culture, normative convictions, collective prejudices and judgments) seem to persist unchanged in their quasi-natural structure as a kind of sediment to history, public opinion . . . can be formed only if a public that engages in rational discussion exists.

Opinions, in Habermas’s (1962/1989) use of the word, could then be thought of as a set of ethics or values passed from one generation to the next. They may vary depending on the society, but

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they are generally accepted and understood by members of that particular culture. The inherent value of the public sphere is that unlike opinions, which, as Habermas (1962/1989) states, “seem to persist unchanged,” public opinions are constantly in a precarious state of fluctuation.

He discusses the use of press in revolutionary periods as a forum for public discussion. For instance, during the 1848 Revolution in France, otherwise known as the February Revolution, “over 450 clubs and more than 200 papers came into being [in Paris] between February and May alone” (Habermas, 1962/1989), with almost every politician and radical thinker forming his own journal. He goes on to say, “Until the permanent legalization of a public sphere that functioned politically, the appearance of a political newspaper was equivalent to engagement in the struggle for a zone of freedom for public opinion, for publicness as a principle” (Habermas, 1962/1989). He explains that during this period of social and/or political change, journalists began writing from the opinion of the public rather than private interests. The type of press Habermas (1962/1989) is discussing here is not the kind that merely regurgitates the facts of a particular issue; he is instead referring to a more polemic, engaged, even politically charged form of writing that at once reflects the views of the public, but also incites debate. In this way, the press became an institution essentially by the public, for the public, a mediated space in which people could express their opinions without fear of persecution from feudal powers.

Revisionist Theories on the Public Sphere

In her article “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” critical theorist Nancy Fraser (1990) discusses the original concept of the public sphere set up by Habermas (1962/1989) in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* as she attempts to establish a new conception of the post-bourgeois public sphere. “The idea of ‘the public sphere’ in Habermas’s sense,” Fraser (1990) states, “designates a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk.” Using Habermas’s (1962/1989) model, Fraser (1990) delineates three analytical sections of the public sphere: the state, the official economy of paid employment, and arenas of public discourse. One of the values of discourse in the public sphere, as opposed to the state or the market, is that citizens can openly circulate opinions that are critical of the state and without capitalist intentions. Habermas (1962/1989) expresses a similar point, observing that the proliferation of capitalist society and its inherent undermining of unbiased public opinion in favor of private interests serve to undermine the public sphere.

While Fraser (1990) believes that “Habermas’s idea of the public sphere is indispensable to critical social theory and to democratic political practice,” she points out the ways in which his model is not wholly satisfactory:

He never explicitly problematizes some dubious assumptions that underlie the bourgeois model. As a result, we are left at the end of *Structural Transformations* without a conception of the public sphere that is sufficiently distinct from the bourgeois conception to serve the needs of critical theory today.

Fraser (1990) cites some of the major revisionist theories by authors such as Joan Landes, Mary Ryan, and Geoff Eley, all of whom contend that Habermas (1962/1989) idealized the liberal public sphere and its exclusion of women and the existence of multiple publics. In his essay,

“Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century,” historian Geoff Eley (1994) argues that while, at times, Habermas (1962/1989) acknowledges the limitations of the class and property-bound basis for the public sphere, he does so in a way that does not jeopardize his key claim about the democratic nature of his model. Like Fraser (1990), Eley (1994) points out that

It is important to acknowledge the existence of competing publics not just later in the nineteenth century, when Habermas presents the fragmentation of the classical liberal model of *Öffentlichkeit* [public sphere], but at every stage in the history of the public sphere.

Acknowledging the multiplicity of publics within the public sphere raises the question of citizenry, and how some voices within the public sphere achieve greater legitimacy than others. Eley (1994) uses Fraser’s (1990) argument about the role of gender within the public sphere to explain this phenomenon.

How men functioned within the public sphere was constructed in opposition to traditional notions of femininity. The presence of the female figure in the public sphere, the authors claim, was seen as counterintuitive to the aims of the sphere;

A new, austere style of public speech and behavior was promoted, a style deemed “rational,” “virtuous,” and “manly.” In this way, masculinist gender constructs were built into the very conception of the republican public sphere, as was a logic that led, at the height of the Jacobian rule, to the formal exclusion from political life of women,

in the context of the French Revolution (Fraser, 1990). In other words, the fundamental concept of womanhood defined that of manhood.

In 17th- and 18th-century France, women, especially those of elite status, served a crucial role in public discourse in the space of the salon. The notion of *politesse* defined discussion within the salon, and because women were thought to have a “natural aversion to coarseness,” they were actively sought out by gentlemen who believed they could improve themselves through conversation (Cohen, 2002). While women were valued in this capacity, they still did not share the same level of equality as men. As Eley (1994) states, “The new category of the ‘public man’ and his ‘virtue’ was constructed via a series of oppositions to ‘femininity’ which both mobilized older conceptions of domesticity and women’s place and rationalized them into a formal claim concerning women’s ‘nature.’” Moreover, as the concepts of public and private life became increasingly polarized, and the latter became increasingly feminized and domestic, women were excluded from the public sphere; “the natural identification of sexuality and desire with the feminine allowed the social and political construction of masculinity” (Eley, 1994).

Fraser (1990) argues that one of the fundamental flaws of the “bourgeois public sphere” is that it claimed to represent the interests of *the* public. Multiple publics or “subaltern publics” can have their advantages, but they can also be detrimental if they prove to be undemocratic and exclusionary. According to Fraser (1990), “the view that women were excluded from the public sphere turns out to be ideological; it rests on a class- and gender-biased notion of publicity, one which accepts at face value the bourgeois public’s claim to be *the* public.” The Habermasian (1962/1989) model does not account for this claim, or at least does not polemicize it in the way Fraser (1990) and her colleagues do;

On the contrary, virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public there arose a host of competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics, and working class publics. Thus, there were competing publics from the start, not just from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as Habermas implies. (Fraser, 1990)

Publics and Counterpublics

In his book *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner (2005) argues that as a fundamental aspect of modern culture, the concept of a public is a social construct. He examines the dynamics present within publics, particularly in regards to speech and active participation and how the concept of "otherness" comes into play within the public arena. His discussion of counterpublics is based on Fraser's (1990) definition of "subaltern publics," but he expands upon her theory by suggesting that one's presence in a counterpublic is inherently stigmatized (Warner, 2005). In other words, Fraser's (1990) idea of a counterpublic includes marginalized members of society, while Warner's (2005) includes those who are discriminated against by their willingness to participate in what is considered socially taboo.

Counterpublics are, by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment, and this context of domination inevitably entails distortion. Mass publics and counterpublics, in other words, are both damaged forms of publicness, just as gender and sexuality are, in this culture, damaged forms of privacy. (Warner, 2005)

In chapter four of *Publics and Counterpublics*, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," Warner (2005) directly engages with Habermas's (1962/1989) work in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. He believes that Habermas's (1962/1989) model pays particular attention to the structure and practices of mediated publics, i.e., print, genre, architecture, and capital. What Warner (2005) finds lacking in Habermas's (1962/1989) approach is a practical interpretation of the social conditions necessary to achieve his utopian ideal. "The bourgeois public sphere claimed to have no relation to body image at all," Warner (2005) observes,

Yet the bourgeois public sphere continued to rely on features of certain bodies. Access to the public came in the whiteness and maleness that were then denied as forms of positivity, since the white male *qua* public person was only abstract rather than white and male.

He goes on to say that "The bourgeois public sphere has been structured from the outset by a logic of abstraction that provides a privilege for unmarked identities: the male, the white, the middle class, the normal" (Warner, 2005).

Understanding the Party Lines

Warner (2002) draws a distinction between *the* public and *a* public:

The public is a kind of social totality. Its most common sense is that of the people in general. A public can also be a second thing: a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space. . . . Such a public also has a sense of totality, bounded by the event or by the shared physical space.

Therefore, a public exists within the public and is defined through the medium of speech or text. A public can be joined willingly, but given its concrete form, it can, in principle, be exclusionary. Such a phenomenon can be understood in the context of the current election cycle. The line that has been drawn between Democrats and Republicans on issues of policy is reinforced by social media algorithm-based news. When people get their news from Facebook, Twitter, or other social media platforms, they are only presented with authors who express opinions similar to those of other articles selected by the user. Therefore, while social media allows people to participate, perhaps even simultaneously, in multiple publics, the tendency to only read left- or right-leaning texts creates a polarization between publics.

Despite the role of social media in inciting this division, the phenomenon of compartmentalized knowledge this media creates is far from new. Walter Lippmann's (1925) theory on the impossibility of the "omnicompetent, sovereign citizen" as described in his book, *The Phantom Public*, is uncannily reminiscent of the present election cycle. In the chapter "Principles of Public Opinion," Lippmann (1925) argues that the role of the public in politics is reduced by the appointment of "executive actors" who carry out actions on the public's behalf. Given Lippmann's (1925) perception of the general ineptitude of the public, these executive actors serve the public by allowing them to give up the burden of decision making. Such nonparticipation in the simplest of political actions was prevalent during the time Lippmann wrote his book, but such indecisiveness is still seen today as people fail to overcome the constraints of partisan opinions. On this process, Lippmann (1925) writes:

1. Executive action is not for the public. The public acts only by aligning itself as the partisan of someone in a position to act executively.
2. The intrinsic merits of a question are not for the public. The public intervenes from the outside upon the work of the insiders.
3. The anticipation, the analysis, and the solution of a question are not for the public. The public's judgment rests on a small sample of the facts at issue.

In other words, the failure to be fully versed on the issues of both one's own party and the opposing party or parties fuels partisanship. Moreover, it sets up a scenario in which members of the opposing party become marked bodies of otherness, seemingly incapable of being understood.

"Today newspapers and magazines, radio and TV are the media of the public sphere" Habermas (1962/1989) writes. "We speak of the political public sphere in contrast, for instance, to the literary one, when public discussion deals with objects connected to the activity of the state." By this, he seems to mean that political spheres cannot achieve the same level of critical discourse as the public sphere. Lippmann would probably argue that this is because members of the general public do not have enough information to engage in political discourse. Politicians, or "executive actors" in Lippmann's (1925) words, are then characterized by a limited set of values that set them in opposition to their opponent. If voters are not given all of the facts about a candidate, they cannot make informed decisions. They can, however, single out the candidate

with a public or following with which they can identify; e.g., Trump's public is perceived as socially, politically, and morally backwards by Clinton supporters, and vice versa. According to Warner, a public is both self-aware and self-organizing. Consider a rally for Trump and the way his protestors are mistreated by members of his public. The reaction of the Trump protestors proves that this is not a public sphere in Habermas's (1962/1989) sense of the term; it is private, self-isolating, and exclusionary.

Conclusion

Trump's public is what Warner (2005) believes constitutes the bourgeois public sphere, "privilege for unmarked identities: the male, the white, the middle class, the normal." Habermas (1962/1989) claims,

To the public sphere as a sphere mediating between state and society, a sphere in which the public as the vehicle of public opinion is formed, there corresponds the principle of publicness—the publicness that once had to win out against the secret politics of monarchs and that since then has permitted democratic control of state activity.

The lack of discourse within the political sphere is detrimental to the foundations of democracy. It stigmatizes dissenters and perpetuates partisan ideology, but also creates a system in which the nuances of political alignment are imperceptible. It also fails to recognize how heavily social stigma plays into politics. The system that silences political opposition is ideologically based on the one that marginalized nonhegemonic groups. For the political public sphere to function, social inequality must be eliminated. In Fraser's (1990) words, "this theory should render visible the ways in which social inequality taints deliberation within publics in late capitalist societies."

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