



**New Publics
with/out
Democracy**

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Henrik P. Bang and Anders Esmark (eds.)

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New Publics
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Series foreword

Traditionally, politics has been understood as the ways in which people negotiate and legitimate the allocation of values in society – often focusing on the institutions of parliamentary democracy. In recent decades, however, a somewhat broader understanding has gained ground, associating politics with more diverse social goals and with equally diverse means of attaining them. Politics includes what people practice in a range of social contexts where they conceive of themselves as citizens, consumers, and cocreators of culture. The field of politics does not have one center, but is distributed, partly because of the presence of the media.

Politics is, to a significant degree, conducted in and through the media. And, the media have themselves contributed to new practices of political participation that involve a growing range of actors and interests. From the local newspaper to the internet, the media represent a meeting ground and battleground that is an integrated part of political activities involving both established and emerging social interests and groups.

This development has been addressed by a national research program in Denmark, ‘Media and Democracy in the Network Society’ (MODINET), during 2002-2006, with contributions by close to 50 researchers from media studies and social sciences.

The series of seven books presents the findings and implications of the research program. Each book identifies and examines a particular dimension of politics and media. From the local to the global level. Across state, business, and civil society. In the interplay between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media. And with reference to several contested notions of contemporary society as a ‘network,’ ‘information,’ or ‘knowledge’ society.

The book series includes empirical studies, theoretical reflections,

as well as policy deliberations concerning the field of media and politics. As such, it seeks to stimulate both further research and public debate on 'the network society' – what it is, and what it might become.

The MODINET research program was funded by a grant from the Danish Research Agency. During 2002-2004, it was directed by Professor Ib Bondebjerg, and during 2004-2006 by Professor Klaus Bruhn Jensen. Further information on the program and its activities is available at <http://modinet.dk>, which will be archived at <http://netarkivet.dk>.

Copenhagen, June 2007

Klaus Bruhn Jensen

Introduction – a critical look at contemporary publics

The book at hand is one amongst several results of a cross-disciplinary research project investigating media and democracy in contemporary society. The project involves a considerable number of political scientists, media researchers and a number of people outside of these categories. In keeping with the original credo of the project, the book aims to explore the *development of the public sphere in an increasingly globalised, regionalised and localised network society* by bringing together researchers from different academic disciplines. Obviously this is no simple exercise, as anyone who has ever engaged in cross-disciplinary work will acknowledge. Researchers based in different disciplines are not always eager to pursue different lines of argument to the point of conflict with disciplinary convenience and beyond; nonetheless, we think that this book is the result of a willingness to do just that. The book presents a series of theoretical and empirical reflections on recent developments in the public sphere, bringing together researchers from political science, public administration and media sociology, but within a common analytical framework. The framework of analysis has four core features:

First, the contributions in this volume are all *critically* engaged in the study of current public spheres; however, the studies presented do not belong to the critical theory tradition shaping much of the public sphere debates (Calhoun 1992, McKee 2003, Crossley and Roberts 2004). Rather, they approach the study of public spheres in light of what one might refer to as a critical *attitude* (Tully 1999). Thus, our intention here is not to present normative or democratic theories on

the proper standards of communication, but rather to analyse the various practices of concrete publics based on the simple proposition that these publics are contingent and particular formations in a chain of contrasting historical publics.

Second, we propose a *general model of public spheres* rather than a normative theory of the public sphere conceived as a democratic ideal. The move from critical theory to critical attitude implies a revised concept of the public sphere that is not instantly recognisable as a highly idealised version of the bourgeois public sphere or as an appendix to a republican constitutionalism grounded in transcendental pragmatics.

Third, the contributions all relate in some manner to the various forms of *political authority* at work in the public spheres within and beyond the nation state and civil society and thus with the ongoing reconfigurations of the relationships between political authorities and laypeople as well as with the changing role of media and journalists in relation to such reconfigurations (Bang 2004, Barnett 2003, Corner and Pels 2003, Bennett and Entman 2001, Pedersen et al. 2000).

Last but not least, we propose that public spheres should not be perceived as ipso facto democratic, but rather as societal functions and domains possibly displaying more or less *democratic imagination* (Archibugi, Held and Köhler 1998, Bang 1998, Connolly 1999). The potential for democratic imagination is fundamental to any engagement with the concept of the public sphere, but a critical attitude suggests that the public sphere ought to be regarded as societal domain with a capacity for a multiplicity of democratic practices as well as non-democratic practices, rather than as a fixed democratic ideal or standard unto itself. Prior to proceeding to the elaboration of these features of the framework employed, we begin by briefly taking stock of the current public sphere research.

Jürgen Habermas and beyond – current schools of public sphere research

As with most of the central ideas in our current vocabulary of politics

and democracy, the notion of the public sphere can be traced back to classical Greece. However, a more recent author has framed the contemporary debate regarding the public sphere to such an extent that any work on the current state of the public sphere must come to terms with his work: Jürgen Habermas. While Habermas has been criticised in many respects, his work remains absolutely central to current debate concerning the public sphere. The book at hand is no exception. We find Habermas' work to be a vital frame of reference for the attempt to critically assess current trends and developments in the relationship between political authorities and laypeople beyond the publics of parliament and civil society. Although Habermas' grand *theory* of the bourgeois public sphere is rooted in the latter, his original multi-levelled *conceptualisation* of the public goes well beyond the particular form assumed by the public sphere in the modern nation state of industrialist mass society. It opens for many alternative avenues for studying transformations in the regime and culture anchorage of publics and in the roles of associations, media and journalists in relation to both types of public (cf. Calhoun 1992, Crossley and Roberts 2004).

Similar to many others concerned with the development of the public sphere, we find the original and path-breaking analysis in the "Strukturwandel" a fitting place to begin, since it continues to serve as a reference point for most of the debate on the past and present state of the public sphere. For the same reason, we do not consider it necessary to reiterate the substance of Habermas' analysis in much detail. Stated succinctly, the book presents an analysis of the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere during the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century, together with its subsequent deformation in the twentieth century. Habermas identifies an "emerging *public sphere of civil society*" (1979: 23) in the newly formed private sphere of modern society in the early 18th century for mediating between the private concerns of individuals in their familial, economic and social lives in contrast to the demands and concerns of social and public life. This involved the mediation of the contradiction between the sectional interest of the bourgeois as a capitalist class and the general interest

of citizens in civil society. Despite some differences, the story regarding the gradual rise and rapid decline of the bourgeois public sphere is basically the same across the three different “cases” in the book: Germany, France and Britain. In coining his argument, Habermas weaves together different brands of historical analysis (ideational, conceptual and institutional) within a framework of sociological reasoning.

In the “Strukturwandel”, Habermas basically approaches the public sphere as a historian (although he does rely somewhat excessively on secondary sources from the viewpoint of a conventional historian), working on the basis of a Marxist orientation (although without providing a strictly Marxist historical schematic). However, the book is not representative of Habermas’ oeuvre in general. Broadly speaking, Habermas has since turned from historical analysis to philosophy – or at least grand social theory. At one level, the turn from history to philosophy simply refers to the fact that the later Habermas does not attempt to conduct historical analysis, aiming instead to provide “pure theory” (Crossley and Roberts 2004: 2). At a more fundamental level, however, the turn from history to philosophy signals an orientation to universals as opposed to the contextual and historically bounded. This latter meaning of the turn from history to philosophy is caused by an increasing preoccupation with the Enlightenment tradition as embodied in the work of Kant. In short, Habermas has shifted from a Hegelian-Marxist orientation with a focus on ‘self-actualisation’, ‘struggle’ and ‘history’, and shaping historical analyses, towards an essentialist Kantian philosophy emphasising universal categories of ‘self-knowledge’, ‘consensus’ and ‘rationality’ (Habermas 1984, 1985, 1987a).

Habermas’ influence on the field of public sphere research can hardly be exaggerated. An inventory of recent perspectives on the public sphere clearly demonstrates that all though there is obviously a substantial amount of public sphere research to be considered ‘after Habermas’, current schools of public sphere research are framed more by dialectical critique, adjustments and the further development of Habermas’ work than by fundamental rejections and paradigmatic

conflict (Crossley and Roberts 2004). Most of the criticism levelled at Habermas deals with his tendency to overlook the exclusive and coercive nature of the bourgeois public sphere; the tendency to ignore the vitality and transformative potential of the so-called counter-publics in their own right; and finally, the tendency to simplify the role of media and interest organisations in his analysis of the fall of the public sphere in terms of colonisation, trivialisation, fragmentation and re-feudalisation.¹ However, rather than simply abandoning the concept of the public sphere, discussions have primarily concentrated on revealing that the concept of the bourgeois public sphere was excessively restrictive (McKee 2005). Based on this observation, Crossley and Roberts distinguish between three current schools of public sphere research.

(1) *The late modern school*: This school argues that civil society reveals how the structural differentiation of the lifeworld occurs through the emergence of institutions specialised in the reproduction of traditions, solidarities and identities (Cohen and Arrato 1988: 42). Civil society is an increasingly institutionalised lifeworld confronting an increasingly institutionalised system, and both of them have undergone a parallel redoubling of the public-private relationship. The system has developed both a public sphere relating to the political system and a private sphere relating to the economic system, whereas the lifeworld has developed a public sphere relating to institutionalised public communication wherein individuals can campaign for juridical rights whilst its private sphere relates to an intimate space of personal relationships (Crossley and Roberts 2004:13). This approach allows for a more complex public-private analysis than Habermas' former model (Habermas 1984, 1987a), where, for instance, the lifeworld is not merely the victim of colonisation but can also penetrate 'the system' via the construction of voluntary associations capable of promoting the interests of social movements.

(2) *The postmodern school*: according to this school, public discus-

1 It should be noted that Habermas has more or less acknowledged the relevance of these criticisms (see especially Habermas 1992).

sion is structured around 'cults and cliques' ordered by different kinds of 'knowingness' (Tolson 1991:196). Publics always unfold as blends of the ritual and the dialogical which invest them with both a demonstrative and deliberative aspect. In this view, the dissolution of the bourgeois public sphere in processes of fragmentation, trivialization etc. can have positive consequences for democracy by providing access to greater political difference and by casting light on the democratic potentials of hitherto excluded traditions, such as the alternative public spheres of housewives in history. Hence, the school recommends that we remain alert regarding the exclusion of identities in hegemonic publics and thereby regarding the historical processes constructing the boundaries and limits of that which is defined as 'normative' at any given moment in time (time-space). The power-resistance category is central here as constituting modes of subjectivity, which in turn establish new ways of reflecting and acting upon us and our contexts. The focus should therefore be on the elimination of systematic inequalities; on the multiplicity of contesting publics; and on the issues that bourgeois masculine ideology labels 'private' and treats as inadmissible (Fraser 1995a: 295, cf. 1992, and 1995b).

(3) *The relational and institutional school*: this school seeks to embed the public sphere both within a historical context and within wider social relations as a particular historical institution and a particular relational setting. Institutions are defined as organisational and symbolic practices operating within sets of rules, structural ties, public narratives and binding relationships that are embedded in time and space. Public and publicness here express "a contested participatory site in which actors with overlapping identities as legal subjects, citizens, economic actors, and family and community members, form a public body and emerge in negotiations and contestations over political and social life" (Somers 1993: 16). According to this definition, the public sphere and political culture in general offer a special space for the articulation of symbolic codes, values and representations contributing to the formulation of individual and political orientations (Crossley and Roberts 2004: 16-17). Such a view opens for expanding the analysis of public and publicness beyond the national domain to

new regionalising and globalising tendencies dedifferentiating public and private domains in terms of fluid flows of “people, information, objects, money, images, risks and networks moving across regions in heterogeneous, uneven, unpredictable and often unplanned shapes” (Sheller and Urry 2003: 117).

Although we certainly do recognise the important insights generated by these current schools of public sphere research, we also find them wanting in a certain respect; whether explicitly or implicitly, all three schools appear to accept the methodological programme of critical theory. In most cases, the question of analytical strategy and methodology is simply a non-issue, implicitly presenting the relationship between the concept of the public sphere and critical theory as self-evident and natural. Our claim is not that critical theory is the wrong way to engage the public sphere, but simply that it is not the *only* way to engage the public sphere. Abandoning the apparently self-evident relationship between the concept of the public sphere and the methodological programme of critical theory opens up a multiplicity of perspectives on the public sphere and even the possibility of proceeding beyond the notion of critique all together. However, our suggestion is less radical: rather than critical theory, we suggest a “critical attitude” based on the recognition of contingency and singularity (Tully 1999). In short, we wish to retain the concept of the public sphere, as well as the critical imagination comprised by it, without accepting the methodological programme of critical theory (Barnett 2003, Newman 2005).

Critical theory and critical attitude

How might such a shift from critical theory to critical attitude be conceptualised? Based on the critical theory approach, the public sphere serves as a: “(...) comparative standard or a radical democratic vision at the normative level, allowing for the *critique* of actually existing democracies” (Splichal 1999: 14, italics added). The essence of critical theory is the elaboration of the public sphere as a democratic ideal

within the framework of deliberative democracy or even a universal theory of truth and morality against which the successes and shortcomings of actually existing democracies can be measured (Habermas 1982, 1996). The core of the critical attitude, on the other hand, is to analyse the development of various publics based on the proposition that they ought to be regarded as contingent and particular formations in a chain of different historical publics (McGuigan 1996, Warner 2005). In other words, we aim to analyse the public spheres of late modernity based on a “historical consciousness” about what is being observed as well as about the way we observe. We do not set out to offer judgements regarding the extent to which different political institutions fall short of certain ideals; rather, we seek to understand the particularity of current public spheres in relation to earlier public spheres in greater detail.

We owe our distinction between critical theory and critical attitude to James Tully’s insightful discussion of the differences and similarities between the work of Habermas and Michel Foucault (Tully 1999). However, while Foucault is certainly a strong proponent of a critical attitude (Rabinow 1994), our proposition is not that the volume at hand should be read as distinctly Foucault-based; nor is our book indebted to any other particular representative of the critical attitude. The distinction between critical theory and critical attitude should be seen more generally as two closely related yet decidedly different interpretations of the “Enlightenment legacy” (Tully 1999:109). As such, Hegel, Nietzsche, Weber and several members of the Frankfurt School can all be said to have practiced a critical attitude – although in varying ways. Amongst the Frankfurt School members who have practiced a critical attitude, we would in fact count the young Habermas. Although possibly somewhat at odds with Tully’s analysis, we would hold that the work of Habermas does not fall decidedly on either side of the critical theory-critical attitude distinction. Rather, there appears to be a basic tension between the two interpretations of the Enlightenment legacy; at least in Habermas’ earlier work and in his most recent publications (2001, 2002).

Some 25 years ago, Hohendahl acutely observed a basic tension

between the public sphere as a “paradigm for analysing historical change” and as a “normative category for political critique” (Hohendahl 1979) in the “Strukturwandel”. Habermas himself has acknowledged that he was “not careful enough in distinguishing between an ideal type and the very context from which it was constructed” (Habermas 1992: 463). In fact, we find it quite puzzling that so few have discussed the apparent tension between the phenomenology and epistemology of the public sphere in Habermas’ now-classic text. Where phenomenology concretely examines the many irreducible forms in which public institutions and ‘the will to public’ have appeared as various forms of public sphere in time and space, epistemology abstractly derives all of these historically specific forms and modes of conduct from a ‘formative’ principle of rationality, which ‘unfolds behind the backs’ of all the generations.

The later work of Habermas and the bulk of public sphere research along with him have since turned more decidedly towards the epistemology of the public sphere and critical theory. However, our proposition here is to acknowledge the tension in the “Strukturwandel” and the other angle of approach to the public sphere that it opens, i.e. critical attitude. In fact, Habermas may even be said to have been closer to a critical attitude than he was to critical theory when producing the “Strukturwandel”. The critical theory-critical attitude distinction obviously holds great potential for elaborate arguments at the level of quasi-philosophy and philology. However, a brief introduction such as the one at hand is hardly the place to pursue such arguments in any detail. Following Tully, we shall instead set out from an identification of three basic, concrete junctures between critical theory and critical attitude that one can find in the study of public spheres.

The first juncture is the notion of *effective* criticism, i.e. criticism with a potential for having an effect on concrete practices. On this point, a critical attitude proceeds from the proposition that the critical theory programme very often becomes ineffective. Critical theory generally tends to assume that its particular mode of observation, that of establishing a ‘regulative idea’ against which the present can be judged, is in fact effective in relation to concrete practice – it shows no

interest in submitting itself to questioning of whether this is actually the case (Tully 1999: 110). Consequently, critical theory often appears more interested in elaborating the public sphere as a highly abstract regulative idea than in analysing concrete practices (Barnett 2003). Critical theory appears to proceed at a “vertiginous level of abstraction” and “tends to generate yet more theory, rather than anything practical” (Blaug 1997 quoted in Tully 1999: 115). Furthermore, critical theory often remains at the level of constitutional law and formal systems of rule when it does in fact attempt to provide a critique of actually existing democracies, leaving the level of concrete procedure and practice behind. Against this ineffective criticism of critical theory, we hold that a critical attitude grounded in a historical and specific approach can in fact be much more effective in terms of its relationship with practice (Dryzek 2000, Fischer 2003, Hajer and Wagenaar 2003, Hirst 1994).

The second juncture is the notion of *reasonable* criticism. Critical theory, as proposed by Habermas, suggests that it is “irrational to challenge the presuppositions of communicative rationality” (Tully 1999: 118). However, such an attempt at dismissing all that is non-rational as unreasonable is merely to conflate the difference between public reasonability, which is certainly not the domain or privilege of grand theorising ‘philosophers’, and communicative rationality, which often appears to be so. Conceiving of critical theory as the guardian of rationality does not amount to much more than a sort of “enlightened blackmail”, forcing reasonable opponents into a game of transcendental pragmatics. Furthermore, judging the proponents of a critical attitude as unreasonable – even within the game of transcendental pragmatics – misses the mark, since they are not really caught up in the self-referential denial of universal validity claims that a critical theory must necessarily hold (Tully 1999: 120). Applying a critical attitude is not to deny the possibility of universal structures of communication, but merely to stress that the search for such structures is essentially motivated by attempts to fend off the paradoxes and flaws of logical systems (Luhmann 1995, Easton 1990). A critical attitude simply takes another interest in things, proposing that it is much

more rewarding to analyse how different “language games” are structured and played out than to establish the universal rules of true or morally tenable communication (Gunnell 1998).²

The final juncture is *productive* criticism. In short, productive criticism refers to the potential of opening up new avenues for the practices of freedom; using a terminology suggested by Deleuze and Guattari, we might refer to them as “lines of flight” that are tied to the deterritorialisation of established societal domains, both in regime and culture (May 2005, Latour and Weibel 2005). On this point, the claim voiced by proponents of a critical attitude is that the utopian critical theory approach closes such avenues – or at least abstracts itself from the possibility of opening them up (cf. Benhabib 1996). In essence, the issue here is the relationship between power and freedom. From the critical attitude perspective, the ideal, power-freedom situation ought to be recognised as utopian in the strict sense rather than as something abstracted from reality (Bang, Dyrberg and Hoff 2005). The ideal is utopian, firstly in the sense that there is literally no place – and no such place can ever come to being – where humans communicate and dispute without putting power relations into play. There is no other side of power. Secondly, and more importantly, approaching actual communication games on the basis of a regulative utopian ideal is to “(...) abstract oneself from what is really going on and the possibilities of concrete freedom *within them*, the only kind of freedom available to humans” (Tully 1999: 131).

A critical attitude rests on the contention that the power-freedom opposition is untenable, as most famously formulated by Foucault (Foucault 2004, Faubion 1994). For Foucault, freedom is only possible

2 Whereas the above takes a defensive stance against the accusation of “self-referential denial” and “unreasonableness” from critical theory, we should note that there are also proponents of the more offensive view that critical theory is in fact itself unreasonable. Such a proposition was in some ways at the core of the debate between John Rawls and Habermas, the former taking great care to identify why Habermas’ system may work as a philosophical system – or logic in the strict sense – but that his expectation of agreement on his own comprehensive doctrine as the common rules of the game in actual political communication is unreasonable (Tully 1999: 123).

within relations of power, and power is only possible as power over free subjects – what has come to be known as the “conduct of conduct”.³ Even a public sphere released from (coercive, ideological) domination could not accomplish anything without the use of power. Assuming a critical attitude thus implies a concept of freedom that displaces the entire foundation for the normative theory of the public sphere. It is no longer possible to imagine the public sphere as the other side of power: we cannot simply assume that the public sphere conforming most closely to the utopian ideal of the public sphere brings us more democracy or greater emancipation. More public does not necessarily mean more democracy; rather, we must conceive of any historically particular public sphere as a specific configuration of the power-freedom relationship, which may not – but in most known instances does – imply domination (Bang 2005a+b). Hence, what is required in order to remain productive in relation to such actual public spheres is not the reinforcement of a utopian ideal, but careful attention to the structures of power and domination that form them and condition the various practices within them.

Defining the public sphere – function, form and framing

The move from critical theory to a critical attitude necessitates substituting the public sphere as a utopian democratic ideal for a concept of the public sphere. Rather than a set of universal and utopian rules, we must develop a conceptual toolkit that is sensitive to the particularity of different historical publics, much in the same manner that Foucault needed to coin concepts such as discourse and dispositifs to capture the communality and singularity of knowledge and power formations. A concept of the public sphere congruent with a critical attitude distin-

3 We will later introduce a distinction between power and domination that dissociates itself from the Foucauldian tendency to conceive of all power relations as relations of domination and resistance.