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Habermas Between Facts and Norms: A Helping of Hope in Dark Times

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Communication scholars came face to face with Jürgen Habermas in 2006 when he addressed the International Communication Association (ICA) conference in Dresden. The talk, subsequently published in an ICA journal (Habermas, 2006), was delivered more than a decade after the signal event in Habermas's English-language reception: the appearance, in translation, of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1989). The English publication was a watershed moment across a half-dozen disciplines, including communication research. It also had peculiar intellectual effects, because 27 years had elapsed since the German-language original, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Habermas, 1962). The lengthy translation delay acted as an intellectual time capsule—a significant one, as Habermas's own thinking had, in the interval, taken some sharp turns away from the 1962 work's normative and epistemological positions. By the late 1960s, Habermas had already abandoned *Strukturwandel*'s form of immanent ideology critique—its effort to recover an ideal in history—as inadequate to the task of critical theory. As an alternative, he turned first to Freudian psychoanalysis (Habermas, 1968/1972) and then, in the monumental *Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1981/1984, 1987), to the philosophy of language and the validity claims inherent in speech acts. The translation was a Rip Van Winkle text, its historical underpinnings no longer central to the mature scholar's project.

Picture, then, the ICA's communication scholars gathered in Dresden to hear the philosopher opine on the public sphere. They must have been baffled. In place of 18th-century English coffee shops, they heard Habermas (2006) claim that, in everyday life, people are "always already exposed to a space of reasons" (p. 413). They cannot *help* but "raise validity claims for their utterances," since an "implicit reference to rational discourse" is "built into" communication (Habermas, 2006, p. 413). Habermas proceeded to lay out the way that mass media sit between legislative politics and everyday talk, exposing an "open flank" of filtered public opinion(s) to politicians. Such a mass-mediated public sphere could work reasonably well, Habermas told the gathering, but market imperatives and a muted citizenry have opened a chasm between facts and norms.

The brief volume under review, issued some two decades after the Dresden talk and 60 years since *Strukturwandel*, promises more than a status update. The book's title, *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics* (*NST* hereafter), announces a second transformation, after all—

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a follow-on (or so we are encouraged to assume from the title) to the 20th-century shifts catalogued in the bleak second-half of *Strukturwandel*.

This is not quite right, however. The slim essay that anchors the volume makes no claim for a public sphere newly transformed. Habermas does address the implications of digital culture for deliberative politics, mixing real insight with speculation. It is, however, an underdeveloped effort, as Habermas (2023b) himself acknowledges (p. vi).

The book's origins help to explain its peculiar, bite-sized form, set against the robust "new structural transformation" framing. *NST* grew out of a 2021 special issue in the German quarterly *Leviathan*, which included a reply from Habermas. Most of the *Leviathan* articles, including the Habermas (2022a) essay, were translated and republished the next year, in *Theory, Culture & Society* under the headline "A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere?" (Seeliger & Sevignani, 2022). *NST*'s publisher, Polity, extracted the Habermas essay-reply, removed the special issue's question mark, and added a pair of thinly related works: a recent interview (Habermas, 2018) and a foreword that Habermas (2022b) had written for an English-language collection of interviews. *NST* is the composite result, with each of the three contributions hitched to projects initiated by others, only one of which aims to revisit the work—*Strukturwandel*—that Habermas long ago left behind.

That anchor essay includes nods to the Trump menace, Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) surveillance capitalism, and the pandemic. Citing the "literature in communication studies," Habermas (2023b) invokes familiar tropes around "algorithm-steered platforms" and—in a haunting phrase—the "desolate cacophony in fragmented, self-enclosed echo chambers" (pp. 53, 46, 37). The most interesting thread centers on social media's blurring of public and private. Instagram and the like present, he writes, a "mode of semi-public, fragmented and self-enclosed communication" that—and here is the original bit—may be changing the way that the public sphere is seen (Habermas, 2023b, p. 3). Its publicness hinges on the widespread *belief* that it is an open space for political debate and opinion-making. The "new and intimate kind of public sphere," neither public nor private, may be undermining that belief (Habermas, 2023b, p. 54).

Habermas slots this fear into a wider diagnosis, grim as it is familiar. He laments the data extractivism of the app economy, marked by the "libertarian grimace of world-dominating digital corporations" (p. 38). He points, too, to the "the spectacular development towards a 'post-truth democracy' that became the alarming normality in the U.S. under the Trump administration" (p. 43). Western democracies, he adds, have "entered a phase of increasing internal destabilization" (p. 28).

What is admirable, if also vexing, is Habermas's commitment to the deliberative ideal, in defiance of the chastening empirics. No matter how bleak things seem, he will not give up on the unforced force of the better argument—so long as we and our fellow citizens keep the faith (or some semblance of it) too. This normative obstinacy is to his enduring credit, a needed helping of hope in dark times. But it is hard to follow him too far, when his brass-tacks prescriptions (here at least) are so meager and unpromising. His main fix for a broken public sphere is to prop up journalistic gatekeeping, a move tinged with nostalgia and misplaced confidence. The essay ends on a "must" note—that maintaining a "media structure" to support the "deliberative character of public opinion" is not a "matter of political preference but a constitutional

imperative" (p. 59). Absent a structural transformation in how we fund media, however, it is hard to see how his deliberative model might be fitted, even imperfectly, to the profit-driven system we have.

Perhaps we are asking too much of the book and of Habermas himself. He notes in *NST*'s preface that the German special-issue editors' work had prompted him to "revisit an old topic, even though I have long since turned my attention to different questions" (p. vi). He admits that he "only take[s] very selective note of the relevant publications," an anticipatory apology of sorts (p. vi). What follows are, as he relates in the essay's title, "reflections and conjectures" delivered in strikingly large print. *NST*, despite its bold title, is no sequel to the 1962-*cum*-1989 public sphere blockbuster.

The 94-year-old's attention is elsewhere. On his own time and initiative, he is writing (with remarkable sweep and sagacity) a multi-volume history of philosophy, the first of which recently appeared in English (Habermas, 2023). That 400-page *Project of a Genealogy of Postmetaphysical Thinking* opens with five dense pages of abbreviated works, starting with "Plato's writings" and on through Augustine, Aristotle, Aquinas, Spinoza, Locke, Hume, Kant, Herder, Schleiermacher, Humboldt, Hegel, Feuerbach, and Kierkegaard (Habermas, 2023a, pp. xii–xvi). "The work on a book and the concentration it demands," he writes in the preface, "leave[s] little time for anything else in life" (Habermas, 2023a, p. xii). Virtuosic though he is, Habermas cannot do it all. In that light, *NST* is its own small gift, an invitation to think across the chasm (wide as it is) between facts and norms.

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