

A New Transformation of the Public Sphere? Questions on Identity, Power, and Affect

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For some years I have taught a graduate seminar titled, "The Black Public Sphere." The course takes inspiration from one once taught by my doctoral advisor, Catherine Squires, whose theoretical work outlined multiple public spheres (enclave, satellite, and counterpublic) that might exist within subalternated collectives (Squires, 2002). Squires' work extended earlier Black (e.g., Baker, 1994) and feminist (e.g., Fraser, 1990) interventions into Jürgen Habermas's foundational concept and was published concomitantly with several also influential works on publics and counterpublics by critical and queer theorists (e.g., Asen & Brouwer, 2001; Warner, 2002). It is one entry in a now decades-long set of theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical interventions from scholars who, inspired or irked by Habermas's early formulations, have complicated and extended theorizations of the public, deliberation, and communication/media systems by considering the substantiality of social and political hierarchies, histories, and struggle. With these interests I eagerly read Habermas's (2023) newest work, *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*.

The new book is small but dense. I expect readers with different foci and across fields—from digital culture to voting behavior and from philosophy to political economy—will find something germane. The three sections offer an inside look at Habermas's latest thinking and reflections. The first section considers the "new conditions" the title nods to—among them the proliferation of social media and disinvestment from legacy journalism—and how members of the public have come to consume media and understand the public sphere given these conditions. The next two sections include a Q&A reprinted from the *Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* and an essay addressing "objections and misunderstandings" (Habermas, 2023, p. 81) about the concept of deliberative democracy. Both take up, sometimes obliquely, critiques that have been levied at Habermas's work.

Habermas's concerns with the current state of the public sphere reflect those that have animated much post digital-optimism study of the Internet. He writes of the reach and platformed character of new media, the "commercial exploitation" of the "unregulated internet," and the "fragmented" and "self-enclosed" nature of social media. Habermas views these characteristics as "distorting," warping the publics' perception of itself and putting at jeopardy the potential for collective will formation. He suggests this is because of the construction of echo chambers and the breakdown of the "customary conceptual distinction between private and public spheres" (Habermas, 2023, p. 51).

While I share Habermas's concerns about the sometimes-undemocratic potentials of new media, I (and many others) have long rejected the premise that narrow, undemocratic, and disenfranchising forces in media are new (see, i.e., González & Torres, 2011; Roberts Forde & Bedingfield, 2021; Usher, 2021).

Further, a range of scholars have spurned overreliance on the public/private framework given the ways raced and gendered groups in society, not to mention those formally disenfranchised like incarcerated people and noncitizens, have been perpetually cast into what Lewis Gordon (2008) describes as “discursive illegitimacy,” marginalizing them from participation in a normatively defined “public” (see also Barkley Brown, 1994; Ferguson, 2010; Park & Wald, 1998). While Habermas (2023) names the “revolutionary character of the new media” (p. 33), he bypasses a discussion that might complicate what he situates as a bygone “proper” (free and open) pre-Internet era of journalism and a corresponding “self-stabilizing” relationship between citizens, political will formation, and the public interest. Consequently, important consideration of the impact of shifting techno-social-economic conditions on politics is tied to a normative context that never was. The valorization of legacy media ignores that its inborn exclusions forced the proliferation of varied enclave, satellite, and counterpublic media long before the advent of the Internet and that the public sphere’s current reactionary conflagrations have some inverted relation to this. Consider, for example, the way antidemocratic defensive publics (Jackson & Kreiss, 2023) have engaged in a hijacked victimhood (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024) to frame themselves as casualties of a too-inclusive public sphere.

In the second section of the book, Habermas’s responds to critiques which described his standards for democratic deliberation as “regulative ideals” that ignore conditions of power in the public sphere and are ultimately unachievable. The exchange clearly refers to Seyla Benhabib’s (1997) analysis, so I was surprised not to see Benhabib (or any other sources of direct critique) acknowledged in the new book. Here, Habermas concedes that his original formulation offered a set of “pragmatic presuppositions” for the public sphere that are indeed highly regulative in such a way that very little can meet them in practice but argues that even when conditions like inclusivity and “pure” rationality are not met, they remain useful guides for public debate and value formation. I will say more about rationality below, but I think it important to acknowledge that Habermas is emphatic here that his prioritization of the “ideal speech situation” of deliberation in his early work long ago evolved and that he wishes his audience to engage with his latter, revised accounts. I found this a valuable reminder of the risks of canonization. Among other things, canonizing a scholar’s early work can freeze our own thinking, drawing from it in ways even they may find unhelpful. By canonizing *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1991), written in the 1960s and first translated into English in the late 1980s, we have missed some of Habermas’s own shifts.

Habermas also responds to commonly levied questions on the role of affect in the public sphere—or rather the missing role of affect in his formulations that privilege “rationality” as a “standard” condition for deliberative democracy. The circulation of affect in creating collective/public identities and influencing public politics has been explored at length by a range of scholars, some of whom also argue that media can work as affective objects (see e.g., Ahmed, 2014; Jasper 1998; Lünenborg, 2019; Papacharissi, 2014; Sedgwick, 2003). Habermas (2023) may be nodding to this work when he grants that the “passions and desires” that inspire “unedited ‘offstage’ voices” access the public sphere because of the resonant “spectacular, even transgressive” (p. 73) messages they create. Yet Habermas (2023) argues that these voices “are not the norm” compared to “the well-formulated pronouncements of the other political actors” (p. 72), and elsewhere equates the “emotionalization” of media content with entertainment and tabloid culture. I found the continued pitting of affect, tied here to demands for social change and/or presumably nonpolitical popular culture, against “well-formulated” political communication perplexing. This treatment of affective interventions into the public sphere as irrational or trivial is core to larger critiques of the regulatory

nature (and andro and eurocentrism) of Habermas's definition of deliberative democracy. Indeed, celebrated forms of deliberation treated as rational have always used affective appeals, while the questioning of the objectivity or rationality of emotion continues to be selectively used to denigrate particular kinds of appeals from particular types of publics.

Finally, Habermas (2023) makes an early and singular reference to counterpublics, writing that social movements and their critiques are frequently animated by "the incomplete inclusion of oppressed, marginalized, degraded, afflicted, exploited and disadvantaged groups, classes, subcultures, genders, races, nations and continents" as "a reminder of the gap between the positive validity and the still *unsaturated content* of the human rights that, in the meantime, have been 'declared'" (p. 7; emphasis in original). This line stands alone in the new volume in its clarity about the social structural conditions of identity and power that shape the public sphere. It is, as Habermas calls it, a "digression." While the contexts of global right-wing backlash, mis/disinformation, and neoliberal disinvestment from the welfare state alarm me as much as they do Habermas, I wish he had seized an opportunity in this new text to grapple more directly with the roles of identity, power, and affect in the present conjuncture, especially as many of the fields inspired by Habermas's work have been dragged reluctantly, but generatively, into doing so.

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