

The Decay of the Public Sphere and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy

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In *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*, Jürgen Habermas (2023) revisits and reconsiders his writings on the public sphere and deliberative democracy while clarifying misunderstandings of his work. This intellectual endeavor is most welcome for generations of readers of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1962), as the world has changed enormously politically, socially, economically, and technologically since its original publication in German sixty years ago. Many readers of Habermas's work, including myself, might have wondered how to make sense of the ongoing degenerated political development in many parts of the world in light of Habermas's theory. His reflection provides a systematic and timely account of the crisis of constitutional democracy and the vulnerability of the public sphere in our era, with implications beyond liberal democracy.

A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics (Habermas, 2023) has two major contributions. The first is theorizing the preconditions for a crisis-prone capitalist democracy to remain stable and for deliberative politics to function effectively. The second lies in its analysis of how the digitalization of communication has transformed the media system and the potential impacts of such transformation on deliberative politics. Readers of *Between Facts and Norms* (Habermas, 1996) will find that Habermas now provides a more extensive discussion on political economy and critique of capitalism, including considerations of the global implementation of neoliberal policies, growing social inequality, and the rise of big tech companies. In his words, "the theory of democracy and the critique of capitalism belong together" (Habermas, 2023, p. 80).

At the core of Habermas's theory of democracy and deliberative politics lies active and inclusive citizen participation based on constitutional rights and shared cultural assumptions. These shared understandings assume the power of public opinion to influence political institutions in the search for rationally acceptable, truth-oriented solutions for the common good. The connection between these shared beliefs about deliberation in the public sphere and decision-making within political institutions also helps sustain such beliefs and legitimize the government. Crucially, these shared assumptions serve as one of the few commonalities that mitigate social disintegration in a heterogeneous society, where people have different identities, cultural forms of life, and life conditions.

Juxtaposing Habermas's writing with other scholarly work suggests that the conditions supporting shared cultural assumptions and civil solidarity are dissipating in many democratic contexts, such as the United States, leading to a crisis in liberal democracy. The rise of social identity polarization has led the public away from the discursive norms essential for a deliberative democratic system (Strickler, 2018).

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Discourse in polarized settings tends to become deadlocked, mutually hostile, and otherwise limited and distorted in its communicative function (Backström, Creutz, & Pyrhönen, 2022). Such discourse usually neither aims to nor helps find rationally acceptable, truth-oriented solutions for problem-solving. Furthermore, increasing social inequality and the weakening of the welfare state under neoliberal policies in many national contexts are associated with economically disadvantaged groups abstaining from voting. As a result, political parties neglect these groups, reinforcing their abstentionism. Populist movements have mobilized these nonvoters in opposition to the system. This process has also led to the declining credibility of political institutions (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

The dissipation of shared cultural assumptions and the decline in trust in political institutions have unfolded as the media system—the infrastructure of the public sphere—has become digitalized since the turn of the millennium. Habermas postulates that this trend has adversely impacted the inclusiveness and quality of deliberation in several ways. First, the rise of social media has weakened traditional media, especially newspaper publishers, and journalists. The authorial, editorial, proofreading, and managerial functions of traditional media have played a critical role in the formation of public opinion. However, social media has undermined the readership and business models of traditional media.

Furthermore, Habermas critiques that platform companies operating social media have directly contributed to the decreasing quality of public discourse and the fragmented public sphere. While tech companies allow everyone access to use their platforms as content producers, they do not take responsibility for ensuring the quality of public communication based on generally accepted cognitive standards, leading to the growth of fake news and a “post-truth democracy” in some contexts. The technological and economic logics by which platform companies recommend content have also intensified the attention economy and the long-existing trend toward entertainment and sensationalism. Moreover, the rise of social media has blurred the boundary between private and public spheres of life, spreading semipublic, fragmented, and self-enclosed communication that undermines the inclusive character of the public sphere.

Here, I would like to highlight the implications of Habermas’s work that are not addressed in his reflections, particularly concerning the transnational aspect, as Habermas primarily focuses on the domestic politics of liberal democracies. The crisis of liberal democracy in specific countries has significant cross-border impacts. Cultural discourses, practices, and organizational resources that undermine liberal democracy and erode trust in political institutions can diffuse to other countries, creating a ripple effect that threatens democratic norms globally. This transnational diffusion and collaboration can be illustrated by networks such as the Conservative Political Action Conference in the United States, which has established connections with similar movements in countries like Hungary and Brazil. In these contexts, global far-right politicians form alliances, mobilize support, and learn from each other, demonstrating the interconnectedness of contemporary political challenges across national boundaries.

Furthermore, the ongoing crisis of liberal democracy has inadvertently strengthened the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes. As citizens in authoritarian countries observe the struggles and perceived weaknesses of liberal democracies, they may begin to view authoritarianism as a more stable and effective alternative. This perception is exacerbated by the failures of liberal democracies to address pressing social and political issues, leading to widespread disillusionment among the populace. Consequently, the erosion

of faith in liberal democratic ideals can undermine their viability as a political solution, allowing authoritarian regimes to position themselves as the only feasible option for governance.

From my own observations during a recent trip to China, I noticed that many legal and media professionals who were once liberal-leaning and viewed the United States as a beacon of democracy now feel disillusioned with liberal democracy both within and beyond the United States. Despite their discontent with the Chinese government, their skepticism toward liberal democracy reflects a broader trend of disillusionment that poses significant challenges to the future of democracy worldwide.

The inability of liberal democracies to effectively regulate influential digital platforms, which are integral to the structure of the public sphere, has made it challenging for these governments to justify their attempts to regulate platforms that could be influenced by authoritarian regimes. This situation is exemplified by the United States' efforts to regulate TikTok, a platform that has raised concerns over not only data privacy but also potential foreign influence.

In conclusion, Habermas's reflections offer crucial insights into the challenges facing modern democratic societies. His analysis highlights the erosion of shared cultural assumptions, the impact of digital communication on public discourse, and the interplay between capitalism and democracy. However, the implications of these changes extend beyond national boundaries, affecting global perceptions of democracy and strengthening populist leaders and authoritarian regimes. The transnational diffusion of antidemocratic practices, coupled with the disillusionment of citizens in both democratic and authoritarian contexts, poses significant challenges to the future of liberal democracy worldwide. As we grapple with these issues, it becomes increasingly important to find new ways to revitalize public discourse, rebuild trust in democratic institutions, and address the global dimensions of this crisis. Only through such efforts can we hope to preserve and strengthen the foundations of deliberative democracy in an increasingly interconnected and digitalized world.

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