



The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society

Jürgen Habermas , Thomas Burger (Translator)

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This is Jürgen Habermas's most concrete historical-sociological book and one of the key contributions to political thought in the postwar period. It will be a revelation to those who have known Habermas only through his theoretical writing to find his later interests in problems of legitimation and communication foreshadowed in this lucid study of the origins, nature, and evolution of public opinion in democratic societies.

The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society Details

Date : Published August 28th 1991 by MIT Press (first published 1962)

ISBN : 9780262581080

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Format : Paperback 326 pages

Genre : Philosophy, Sociology, Nonfiction, Theory, History, Politics



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Gary Bruff says

Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere restructured my understanding and appreciation of Habermas. Everything I had read before by Habermas seemed to rest on a marginal utility of politics: politics is only as valuable as the last person to enter the political dialog. Trouble with this is it creates chaos where a true orderly dialog is required and founders a democracy on the notion that everything and everyone is relevant, which would seem to overwhelm any hope for political unity.

But this book is different. Rather than relying on a political pragmatics, this early work of Habermas's follows a closely argued historical method of political analysis. Here the reader can catch a glimpse of how the notions and realities of the public, publicity, and public opinion were created. Habermas argues that these political spaces were something entirely new when they were carved out of the previously incommensurable spheres of private intimacy and an alienated and supreme authority. We witness the birth of a separate space for the molding and shaping of opinion and politics. With their new found economic power, the Bourgeoisie (literate and defensive of their gains) gathered at coffee houses and consumed newspapers, both new to the world. With these new places for talk and action, people could fabricate a profoundly influential political imaginary. Opened by these new forums of debate, a mediation between home and throne emerged, and it is this mediation which formed the basis of another new political invention, the media. While Marxists caricature the Bourgeois citizen as self absorbed and absurdly individualistic, in the aggregate the Bourgeoisie were capable of creating a new and open notion of society, the public. It was as this public that the prosperous classes were able to articulate and fight for their interests. At the same time, the new spaces of coffee houses and newspapers provided a point of entry for the newest members of these privileged classes, thereby keeping the mix dynamic.

This creation of a space for open dialog fits well with Habermas's later political philosophy and in a sense rationalizes it. An open question is to what extent there are still more openings than points of semiotic closure in our currently highly mediated public sphere. Odd as it must be for Marxists, society's best hope might be in learning from the bourgeoisie of the late 18th century.

If you are going to try Habermas, start here with the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.

Alex Willow says

Must read

Gundega says

Habermas ideas about democracy and his attempt on giving historical background to public sphere was very appealing to me. The downside - his described 'democracy' reflects 'ideal' no realistic view on the subject

Carolina says

If this wasn't assigned reading I probably would've enjoyed this much more - that or I would've never picked it up. I'm glad it's over anyways.

Scott says

I can certainly see why this is an important book to political scientists and philosophers. It was heavy on the philosophy side, commenting on political philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Marx, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Mill, and Tocqueville and their contributions to scholarly thought on the public sphere.

With my research interests, the sections on the proliferation of popular culture and advertising (and the insidious pursuit of leisure) and their contributions to the dismantling of the public sphere were of most interest and value.

A note of warning--the translation of Habermas is very cumbersome and difficult to follow. If you are planning on reading this, put aside some serious time to read it carefully.

Vikas Lather says

Habermas' bourgeois public sphere is a seminal contribution to the Frankfurt School.

Michael says

Retold in fairy tale language for a class assignment

In a distant past, there existed a feudal society, and in this society, there was not yet a public sphere. In fact, public referred to nobility, and everyone else was common (6). However, with the rise of capitalism and the bourgeois class came the commercial trade in news (15), and a public sphere began to emerge between the private sphere of life and the government (23). This public sphere was composed of the bourgeoisie, mostly male property owners, who used reason to debate public issues (27-29). In western Europe and America, these citizens engaged in dialogue in coffee shops, newspapers, and letters — that is, they debated in largely private spaces that created publics. Public opinion began to develop, but this wasn't the public opinion we conceive of today: instead, it was formed through public debate, not through polling or other more modern mechanisms (66).

An aim of the public sphere was to abolish the domination of the state, and constitutional governments were set up to connect the law to public opinion (81-82). A central value of the bourgeois public sphere was inclusiveness — that as the bourgeoisie grew, so too would access to the public sphere. However, as the public enlarged, public opinion changed from the result of ongoing dialogue to a coercive force (133). This is largely because as the liberal state became a welfare state, it encroached on the private lives of people, or

“stateized” society (142); the public sphere became less politicized (140). In part, this was caused as economic struggles became political struggles, and the state began to protect families and individuals, through education, workers’ rights laws, and welfare (155). Consumer culture also arose, so that a debating public sphere was replaced by an advertising public sphere; public debate became administered and consumed (164). The state began to “‘address’ its citizens like consumers” (195). Public opinion and propaganda began to be used in order to gain good will and justify legislation (177). The public sphere became “refeudalized” by the state and others looking to gain publicity.

The bourgeois public sphere has since passed away, and in its stead we have the modern notions of public opinion and publicity, as well as private individuals not engaged in a public, rational debate. Good bye, dear bourgeois public sphere. You are missed.

Franditya says

Terjemahan bahasa Indonesia, lumayan. Bapak satu ini memang berupaya sebisa mungkin mengelola paham kritis tetap berada di aras idealisme Jerman. Agaknya menjadi usaha yang cukup sulit ketika barisan kiri baru di Amerika mulai berwatak anti kritik, tak menerima argumen di luar Marxisme dan Neo-Marxisme, dan mulai menuduh Bung Habermas ini sebagai pemikir Borjuis.

Mungkin karya Habermas tentang ruang publik, kategori-kategori masyarakat borjuis ini mencoba menjawab kebuntuan pemikiran mazhab kritis dan gerakan kiri baru yang menurutnya jatuh dalam ruang ideologis yang anti kritik. Ia mungkin ingin membuktikan bahwa melakukan kajian terus-menerus atas fenomena superstruktur (negara, konstitusi, politik, budaya, atau sastra), tak melulu soal basis, kelas, dan hubungan-hubungan produksi, bukan berarti menyingirkannya dari garis Marxisme.

Ciri pertama dari seorang penganut paham Marxisme, bahkan nyaris mutlak, adalah peduli dengan sejarah. Seremeh apapun subjek yang hendak diamati, bagi seorang Marxis akan bernilai historis dan dialektis. Dalam karya Habermas tentang Ruang Publik, nampak jelas sejarah dan asal-usul menjadi matra analisis utama untuk melihat kelahiran masyarakat Borjuis di Eropa pada abad 17an.

Sebenarnya ingin nulis lebih panjang soal buku ini, tapi khawatir mengurangi rasa makna sang pengarang. Jadi silahkan membaca sesuai tafsir masing-masing. Monggo ... []

Yousef says

Is hard to read this book, the writing is very complicated. But if you read the book with someone it might be a very interesting book. Habermas looks at the radical moment during the rise of the Bourgeoisie family and society and their struggle against the feudal order. In this moment there seems to be the enlightenment promise of holding power accountable and making it more transparent. However as the book draws to close he asserts that this promise faded away and rather you have an individualism disconnected from society and history and facilitating the convergence of civil society and the state, and the demise of the public sphere and the creation of a refederalization process where a new hierarchy of control of society is developed. This is central point but there is all kind of other stuff. But he is questioning this point the entire time I think...

Eric says

It's not the easiest read and the most interesting material is front-loaded but Habermas' first major work remains interesting half a century after it was published.

After a definition of terms, he moves onto a multichapter review of the history of the development of critical public debate, its gradual broadening to include more segments of the rapidly expanding bourgeoisie, and then its coalescing into the origins of constitutional states. The focus is primarily France and England with some acknowledgement of Germany's slow development, disappointingly ignoring most developments elsewhere in the Occident.

This could have served as its own book and perhaps should have as a more thorough examination and a broadening of the analysis would have made some of his later arguments more convincing. However, dividing up the book would belie the fact that this is, at its core, a philosophical work.

The second half shows the deep influence Adorno had on young Juergen as it lays out the ways in which the social welfare state and the corporate media compromise (or destroy) the existence of a true public sphere and propagandize the populace into a sort of political universe of false choices. The argument is a decent read, but overstated and ascribes too much agency to messy bureaucracies and too little to individuals. In that way, he occasionally sounds almost libertarian.

The work isn't without its problems. Habermas is particularly weak when he uses the bourgeois family structure as a model for the ideology of the bourgeois state (e.g., in Chapter 6). While his tone makes every attempt to be even throughout, one does find him slipping into utopian idealism: he really has a fondness for the bourgeoisie of the late 18th century and even hints that, really, the only problem with a ruling class is a practical one of proportionate representation from all segments of society.

But this is a book of analysis and not solutions, the fact of which left me feeling unsatisfied through the second half. Perhaps in this mediatized culture I *have* become so accustomed to punditry that its absence leaves me feeling empty. Perhaps. But perhaps it's also that a book of this scope and insight could benefit from a little speculative futurism.

I remember reading a review somewhere on the internet that argued that the internet made this text irrelevant, but while the internet fulfills C. W. Mills' criteria for a critical public, I think Habermas would argue that it is shot through with the sort of publicity that already infects the rest of mediatized culture. Look at the talking points cut and pasted into any comments thread on gun violence in the United States; the wording is almost always so well-practiced, and it becomes clear that the repetition of this ritual text is an extension of the ubiquitous publicity of nonpublic interests and political parties. It's sloganeering, not critical debate, and the goal is clearly political domination and not consensus and compromise.

A young Habermas would have likely despaired at the quality of modern discourse given the possibilities inherent in the tools, but he's no Adorno and has grown and evolved since these early days. I look forward to reading more of his early work, but I'm going to need some lighter philosophy as a palate cleanser before doing so.

Lindsay Campbell says

okay, yes its dense and wordy and translated from german. but it kind of is like a political sociology epic poem. smash together my high school modern european history class from high school with my freshman year college political philosophy course with the word bourgeois sprinkled throughout and you get a flavor. its fun to watch the public sphere evolve from feudalism to high industrial capitalism era. i'm sure i didnt glean whole swaths of it, but what i did get i enjoyed.

ralowe says

this book makes me not want to go outside. in fact, don't even bother, there's nothing for you there. but i'm already outside even if i feel barely visible here posting a book review. i can tolerate the scaled-back coercion here, but it's just me deluding myself. reading stuff like this courts irrational solipsistic longing. okay, really i'm deluding myself because i can go outside and still never been inside the public, never perhaps initially recognized of being capable of reading, let alone posting a book review on a website. but that's about blackness and a black public sphere, and we're not talking about that here, or yet. or, no i fucked that up: one always talks about blackness antonymically when one talks about the presentable. despite problems i got a lot out of this.

Phil says

I gave this book four stars because it is well considered and offers some valuable insights concerning the social organization of public opinion. However, not only are there questionable depictions of the historical account of the "public sphere," but I cannot accept the normative indictment on social organization. Habermas paints a convincing picture of what he considers the ideal form of civic participation of 18th century white culture. I object to its limitations though. It is very exclusive and is unapologetic on this point. Also, as a materialist dialectic on the human condition, I don't see how this idealized form could ever be re-captured. The logic precludes it and so the normative aspect of the discourse is self-defeating.

Phillip says

(Second Review): Habermas presents a strong case for understanding the history of the public sphere tied primarily to the interests of a bourgeois reading class during the Liberal era (roughly mid 18th-19th centuries), evolving out of a coffeehouse and salon culture and then mutating into different forms that eroded the rational-critical aspect of the public sphere while and by expanding democratic political participation. What Habermas means by the 'public sphere' is a rational-critical space where educated and propertied (which were almost universally the same thing during this period) individuals could gather together to discuss issues of common interest--literary, artistic, political, economic, social, etc. The central aspect of this public sphere was a debate between educated people which was ostensibly stripped of social rank and deference, and conducted entirely on the basis of reasoned arguments. He ties this public sphere strongly to classical Liberalism, which supported the ideals of individual rights (but only insofar as those rights were tied to property ownership) and freedom of ideas, information, expression, and assembly. One of the things I find most fascinating about Habermas' description of the public sphere and its Liberal

partisans is how anti-democratic this sphere and philosophy was (an anti-democratic tendency revived today in neoliberalism), at least by the etymological definition of democracy (the authority of the people). The late Liberal era developed (or seized upon) the idea of representative democracy precisely as a way of preventing non-property owners--women, the working classes, and the poor--from effectively engaging in politics. The idea was (and I think we see this in how contemporary US and UK politics runs) that if the people could only vote for leaders rather than vote on issues, then effective power would remain in the hands of property owners because they would have the leisure time and education to construct political platforms--in essence, we get to endorse someone's platform rather than having our own opinions on issues.

(Original Review): I didn't get all the way through this book, but I read a decent sized chunk of it considering how much other stuff I had to do this week (I read this for a class). But I think I got the major idea.

Habermas argues that the rise of a specifically bourgeois public sphere, as opposed to the ancient and feudal conceptions of publicness, was based in the rise of critical rational debate, or in the age of reason. He argues that the bourgeois public sphere began during the era of the coffee houses and salons, when ostensibly anyone could join in discussions of contemporary political, economic, and philosophical issues based on reason (of course in practice access to education, leisure, and reading material excluded many people from the public realm of debate).

Hadrian says

The Structural Transformation is the first published book of Jürgen Habermas and dates from 1962. The earliest English edition I know of is from 1989. Habermas, for his consideration of economic and social factors in cultural criticism, recalls the Frankfurt School of cultural criticism, although he has a less overt pessimism (at least compared to Adorno).

The main thesis around this argument is around the social institution known as the 'public sphere', where individuals can gather to discuss societal problems in a manner without reservation and come to a reasoned and unbiased conclusion. For Habermas, the 'glory years' of this institution started in the 18th century with the Enlightenment and final dissolution of feudal or aristocratic control over education, and the rise of social gatherings where such discussions could take place.

Through such discussions, 'public opinion' could form, which in Habermas' very limited definition, is the time where the public sphere's views on the government could be made manifest through elections.

Such a discussion is primarily focused on England and France, with the main contrast being made between England, with their rising bourgeois society and loss of absolute monarchical power after the Glorious Revolution, and also with their literary society of newspapers and the comparatively free press. France, on the other hand, was still absolutist, and although a public sphere in some sense existed, it was largely confined to the salons of the aristocrats. After the French Revolution, the public sphere spread rapidly among the bourgeoisie. In Germany, this sort of discussion only began later, after the July revolutions.

Habermas' discussion is similar to (and a possible influence upon?) the work of Gordon Wood and Bernard Bailyn on the study of pamphlets, newspapers, and discussion halls in late 18th century in America.

The decline of this system came with the intermingling of the public and private spheres, the rise of industrialism, the concentration of wealth, and curiously enough, the social welfare system. The rise of these concentrated centers of economic power led them to influence the mass media through newspapers and the

process of 'public relations', all factors to methods to influence the public sphere. Although I'm not so certain on the effects of the welfare system. Bismarck I know introduced those reforms in the 1870s, but the United States did not do so until the 1930s, and corporations were well engaged in the process of influencing political power before then. In either case, the means of political discussion and arriving at a rational debate have new been contaminated by the mixing of the public and private spheres, and a new 'feudalization' of power and thought is a result, where debate only exists in a vacuum and real power and ideological change exists among a limited few.

Now these ideas are not waterproof. The 'public' in the 17th century could only be considered a very small part of the entire population, and might largely consist of working men (with a few women being the rare exceptions), and that the very poorest segments of society, as well as discriminated ethnicities, would be excluded from public gatherings.

By contrast, his ideas on how media influence politics and culture and are influenced by economics are a cornerstone of modern media studies. I've heard recent talk about whether the Internet and discussion forums, with their relatively egalitarian access and means of anonymity, could be considered a new means of bringing about the 'public sphere'.

Habermas' ideas are not only empirically and historically grounded, they are compelling. They somehow have a solid grounding in the tenets of the Enlightenment. They speak that reason, democracy, and progress are all reliant upon unbiased communication. This is a extremely compelling idea and one which will continue to inspire further debate.

James says

Parts of this book were amazing: Habermas is here much more of a Frankfurt School author than he would be later. He integrates insights from sociology, literary theory, philosophy, etc. to show how the "public" was constituted as the subject of politics in the 17th-18th centuries, reliant upon a classed notion of reason: members of the "public" were, explicitly or not, in both theory and practice, male bourgeois property owners. These wielders of public reason, eventually deemed the legitimating principle of the state, used it to structure and protect a private sphere of civil society in which the free exchange of both opinions and commodities could be protected, while dismissing the whims of the lower classes as insufficiently rational. This collapsed later with the development of industrial, mass society, which simultaneously turned the "masses" into the public and integrated public reason into the maw of the culture industry. His account of the "public" as it developed from the literary public sphere into the writings of Hegel/Marx/Tocqueville/Mill et al is fascinating and seems right on.

Where he's different from his teachers, and where he probably for that reason is weakest in this book, is his belief that a moment of transcendental, humanistic rationality might be salvaged from the initial public sphere of the pre-revolutionary period. Whether this is true or not, JH certainly doesn't show it; I guess this is what he'd do in the "Theory of Communicative Action" series.

Kaia says

This is the ur-text of publics theory. I'm glad I read it, like I'm glad when I eat healthy food.

Rowland Pasaribu says

Several important influences on Habermas's work are evident. Firstly, he borrows many important terms and categories from Kant, Hegel and Marx. Many of his ways of thinking about the public sphere are explicitly Kantian, and he develops Hegel's central category of civil society into the basis from which public opinion emerges. Of these, Kant is perhaps the greatest influence, simply because for Habermas his work represents the "fully developed" theory of the public sphere.

The Marxist cultural theory of the Frankfurt School is also an important influence, particularly on the second part of the *Structural Transformation*. The Frankfurt School was a group of philosophers linked to the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt, active from the 1920s on. Two of its most famous names were Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. The Frankfurt School adapted Marx's theories greatly, in order to study modern culture and society. They took the unorthodox view that the experience of totalitarianism in the Second World War showed that the lower classes, or proletariat, had become corrupted by mass culture. They could no longer act as a revolutionary force. Their pessimism about what social force might replace the proletariat increased as the twentieth century progressed. Adorno is well known for his critique of the modern "culture industry", which manipulated the public, creating consumers of the mass media, rather than critical readers. Habermas draws on this savage criticism of modern society and culture in his treatment of advertising and the press.

A more personal influence was the German legal scholar Wolfgang Abendroth, who supervised Habermas's original thesis at Marburg, after it was rejected by Horkheimer and Adorno in Frankfurt. Abendroth's work analyzed the relationship between the social-welfare principle and the inherited structure of the German constitutional state. He argued that the Federal German constitution aimed to extend the ideas of equality and welfare, and that a socialist democratic state could emerge from its constitutional predecessor. Habermas moved away from this concept of the development of states, but acknowledges his debt to Abendroth in the dedication to the *Structural Transformation*.

Habermas's influence over other writers is considerable. It has recently become more evident in the English-speaking world, with the publication of a translation of the *Structural Transformation*. An important collection of essays edited by Craig Calhoun (see bibliography) shows wide range of responses to his work: scholars in English, political theory and philosophy respond to Habermas in this volume. Responses are so varied because so many different elements are present in Habermas's work. Historians criticise the factual basis of many of his claims about the publishing industry, about economic history and bourgeois culture. More abstract theorists challenge his assumptions about a range of issues. Feminist scholars, for example, argue that Habermas neglects the importance of gender, and of the exclusion of women from the public sphere. This is a point that Habermas has recently conceded.

Theorists have attempted to work out the implications of the *Structural Transformation* for modern political theory. This perhaps a more difficult task, as the second half of the book is more problematic and less satisfying than the first. Habermas's debates about public reason with the US philosopher John Rawls are well-known. Also, many writers have attempted to apply Habermas's model of the bourgeois public sphere to other countries and periods. They have tried to find the public sphere in America, the Far East, and a host of other unlikely places. There is a tendency for these projects to misrepresent Habermas's original idea of the public sphere. Given that he makes it clear that the public sphere was inseparably related to the social and economic conditions of eighteenth century Europe, these attempts do not always seem worth the effort.

Almost all histories of publishing and the book trade, such as those of the US historian Robert Darnton, react to Habermas's ideas.

Habermas himself has attempted to answer his critics. In his essay *Further reflections on the public sphere*, he revises his position in several ways.. Firstly, he admits some problems with the historical basis of his work. He also suggests other areas for consideration, namely; one) the possibility of a popular or plebian public sphere with a different social basis, in which popular culture is not merely a backdrop to representative publicity two) a reconsideration of the role of women in the bourgeois public sphere three) a need to develop a less pessimistic view about the modern mass public. Some of the issues about public discourse and the role of the state raised in the *Structural Transformation* reemerge in later works, such as his *Theory of Communicative Action* and *Legitimation Crisis*. Habermas has changed so many of his positions, however, that it is unwise to see his work on public sphere as a basis for his later philosophy.

Paige says

I forgot to put in that I read this, because I got so swept up in school. So the thing about this is that I had to read the book and then in the next week my class and I had to read different articles all about the problems with the text and it was my job to discuss all the articles that found all the problems and talk about it at length. I don't really know how to rate or even talk about this book, because I can't say that I enjoyed it but I do understand why it's an important foundation. Even in all the articles we went over that talked about the problems with the text it still applauded what Habermas did as groundbreaking. So all at once I don't get it and I do get it. It's not a super clear argument, but is doing something important so I don't know I'm kind of middle of the road about it.

Andrew says

Habermas, you're a helluva humanist thinker. I can't complain about the man's motives-- this is the sort of qualitative commentary that stands on its own merits rather than feeling like the speculations of some dude in a bourgeois university position in Paris or New York.

But when he tries to claim that the public sphere has degenerated from its role in the early-capitalist era, I have to question Habermas' work. To what extent did this public sphere play a role in the expansion of justice, and to what extent did it simply protect its own neck? Looking for a "Golden Age" is almost always a bad idea, and I'm afraid Habermas slips into this trap. His analysis of how consumers receive rather than debate culture remains provocative, however.
