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Source: *New German Critique*, Autumn, 1974, No. 3 (Autumn, 1974), pp. 45-48

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/487736>

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# Jürgen Habermas: “The Public Sphere” (1964)

by Peter Hohendahl

The following short discussion of the concept of the public sphere (Oeffentlichkeit) appeared in 1964 as an article in the *Fischer-Lexikon*. It is based on the book *Strukturwandel der Oeffentlichkeit* (*Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*), first published in 1962 and reprinted four times since. With this work, the young philosopher and social theoretician, Jürgen Habermas, established his reputation. Originally written as a *Habilitationsschrift* for a small circle of scholars, *Strukturwandel der Oeffentlichkeit* soon became a standard work which was to help shape the political consciousness of the emerging New Left in the 1960s. The book remained in the center of discussion even after 1968 when many leftist students broke with the Frankfurt School, with which Habermas was also identified. It is significant that Habermas dedicated this first great work not to Horkheimer or Adorno but to the Marburg political scientist and legal expert Wolfgang Abendroth, a figure largely unknown in the United States. Abendroth had participated much more intensively in the political debates of the Federal Republic (FRG) than either Horkheimer or Adorno. Habermas, therefore, had more than personal reasons for this dedication; his study of the public sphere would not conform easily to the methodological thinking of the Frankfurt School. Like Abendroth, Habermas aimed much more directly at the transformation of political and social conditions, conditions which were seen by both men as approaching a state of crisis. The political similarity of Habermas' book to *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* by Horkheimer and Adorno is unmistakable, specifically in those portions which deal with cultural phenomena (culture industry). However, it is equally important to emphasize the difference in the method of investigation. Habermas is not content with mere speculation. He buttresses his socio-political argumentation with extensive references to other sources. Cultural history, legal history, mass media theory, empirical social science: Habermas draws upon a variety of disciplines in coming to grips with the phenomenon of the public sphere. The numerous references in the footnotes point once again to the tradition of German scholarship.

Habermas could in fact no longer realize his intentions within the framework of a single discipline. His study demonstrates that the public sphere constitutes one of the categories central to an understanding of the modern period, i.e. bourgeois society from 1700 to 1974. With the aid of this

category, social as well as political and cultural changes can be explained—changes which the older cultural pessimism perceived only in their outward manifestations as symptoms of decline. As is commonly known, the opposition of public and private derives from antiquity. At that time the private sphere encompassed the home, the family and its activities; the public sphere in the ancient city state, on the other hand, included common political activity, the concern for public welfare. Yet this distinction as it is still traditionally maintained by continental theories of constitutional law no longer corresponds to the relationship of society and state in the modern period. Among Habermas' major contributions is his ability to delineate conceptual inconsistencies and then logically to *historicize* the category of the public sphere. What we customarily characterize as “public opinion,” as “the public body” or “the public sphere” emerged for the first time in early capitalism as a specific sphere between state and society. This bourgeois public sphere arose genetically from the representative public sphere of medieval feudalism. Its structure and function were originally determined by a particular constellation in the confrontation between the absolutist state and an economic bourgeois individualism in the process of emancipating itself. This public sphere has evolved into an institution between the private sphere and the state and is therefore in no way an integral part of state power (and of its public sphere). On the contrary, as Habermas demonstrates, its function was to oversee the absolutist state. In order to secure this position, rational legal principles were instituted which were binding for all. One of the primary goals of this bourgeois public sphere was to make political and administrative decisions transparent. The legitimacy of this liberal model remained unquestioned in the Anglo-Saxon countries, having been established effectively at an earlier period. As a result, in these societies both the historical conditions leading to the emergence of the liberal model and its connections to capitalist forms of production have become obscured. Having himself lived and worked in a country with a weaker public tradition, Habermas is able to perceive more clearly the historicity of the public sphere. In short, writing at the end of the FRG's “restoration phase,” Habermas was forced to reconstruct historically the functions of a liberal public sphere, precisely because in Germany the public sphere had been realized belatedly and then only to a limited degree. His criticism of late bourgeois forms of the public sphere simultaneously provided the New Left with an instrument to confront the crisis in the FRG, already visible on the horizon in the early 1960s. The extent to which it can be shown that the liberal model of the public sphere, still espoused in West Germany by sociologists such as Ralf Dahrendorf, is linked to specific social

and economic conditions, is the extent to which it can also be shown that the liberal concept of the public sphere is no longer politically feasible. This institution has lost its significance as an instrument of political discussion—not because the critical judgment of the citizen is less important, but because the liberal model itself is constantly undermined by the intertwining of state and society, the diffusion of the state and social sectors. According to Habermas, this is the key aspect of the contemporary situation.

If one accepts Habermas' analysis of the end of the bourgeois public sphere in a late capitalist society, there remains the question of what will appear in its place. Habermas, at least, seems to be of the opinion that its function—i.e. the citizens' rational discussion of problems of public welfare in an atmosphere free of restrictions—is indispensable. Yet he declines to offer a draft of a future, post-bourgeois public sphere. At most he suggests a very rough outline of this post-bourgeois public sphere in the section of the book which describes Marx's solution to the bourgeois impasse (section fourteen of Habermas). Here the new public sphere is portrayed in the following terms: "The public sphere no longer mediates between a society of private property owners and the state. Instead, by systematically constructing a state which merges into the society as a whole, an autonomous public body, as private individuals, assures itself a sphere of freedom, free time and freedom of movement" (2nd edition, 1965, p. 143). The incursion of private interests into public opinion (the social question), so characteristic of the late bourgeois public sphere, can only be eliminated when the cause—the unequal distribution of property produced by capitalism—is removed. There remains then the question of identifying the strategies necessary within a late capitalist society to preserve, under the present conditions, the principle of the public sphere, but not its bourgeois form. This is the point of departure for Oskar Negt, a student of Habermas, and Alexander Kluge several years later in *Oeffentlichkeit und Erfahrung: Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Oeffentlichkeit* (*The Public Sphere and Experience: An Organizational Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Spheres*, 1972). As is known, the bourgeoisie had once maintained that it would make the institution of the public sphere accessible to everyone. This claim has never been realized. Instead, in the later phases the goal itself has often been modified to prevent the incursion of the masses. Yet in opposition to this trend, as Negt and Kluge demonstrate, a proletarian public sphere different in structure has begun to appear, a public sphere which will assert its claims to leadership in the future.

Habermas, as mentioned above, alludes at best cautiously to such an eventuality. This might be partially attributable to his skepticism that under the conditions of state-organized capitalism the proletariat has the same chance as the bourgeoisie three hundred years before. If one assumes with Habermas in *Kultur und Kritik (Culture and Critique)*, 1973, p. 76 that the "possibility of a politically organizable class struggle is no longer immediately realizable" and that the mission of the proletariat was therefore bound to the stage of high capitalism, then one *cannot* indeed hope for a renaissance of the public sphere under the aegis of the proletariat. No group in contemporary society could then be cited as the catalyst of progressive impulses. Therefore the way in which Negt and Kluge tentatively confront the form of the bourgeois public sphere with the model of a proletarian one indicates among other things the way in which the Left has advanced beyond the position of Habermas.

Nevertheless Habermas' study has not become superfluous. The profoundly stimulating influence of this work is just becoming apparent in related disciplines. Media research, sociology, but also humanistic disciplines such as art history and literary history, owe a decisive impetus to Habermas. The concept of the literary public sphere, which Habermas was the first to delineate as a significant aspect of the public sphere, has proven itself exceedingly fruitful for sociological investigations of literature and criticism. With the aid of this category, one can comprehend the historical as well as the contemporary value of literature and its function within the total social framework. For the transition from a method of literary criticism based on internal exegesis, which despite many misgivings still prevails here in the United States, to a method rooted in social history and sociology, we will have to turn to Habermas.

*Translated by Patricia Russian*