The Public Sphere and the Habermas Debate

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Since its belated translation into English in 1989, Jürgen Habermas's early treatise on the structural transformation of the public sphere[1] has made a remarkable come-back and gained the status of a global classic. The book has become essential reading not only for students of the social sciences and the humanities but also in political liberation movements in Eastern Europe, Africa and particularly China.[2] Here, the subversive and enlightening power of critical public discourse seems to have led to accelerated developments similar to those Habermas describes in his book for the early modern period of European history. However, the English translation not only proved the continuing political relevance of this canonical text of the German students' movement of the 1960s. It also unleashed an astonishingly lively and long-lasting new debate amongst historians on his theory of the historical development of political public spheres in western European societies.[3]

It was Habermas himself who co-started this new debate in 1990 by answering to criticism of his book in a preface to a new German edition. He

[1] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge, Mass., 9th printing, 1998; 1st published 1989).

[2] See for example Thomas Heberer, 'Erste Begrifflichkeiten, theoretische Rahmenansätze und Hypothesen zum Projekt "Diskurse über politischen Wandel und Demokratisierung in Ost- und Südostasien"', Project Discussion Paper 17/2001 of the project 'Discourses on Political Reform and Democratization in East and Southeast Asia in the Light of New Processes of Regional Community Building' (www.oapol.uni-duisburg-essen.de/d/discuss17.pdf), funded by the German Research Foundation.

[3] To quote just a few of the most important recent English and American titles: Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1992); A.J. La Vopa, 'Conceiving a Public: Ideas and Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe', *Journal of Modern History*, 64 (1992), pp. 79–116; M.E. White, *The Development of Jürgen Habermas's Concept of the Public Sphere* (Manchester, 1996); H. Mah, 'Phantasies of the public sphere: rethinking the Habermas of historians', *Journal of Modern History*, 72 (2000), pp. 151–75; N. Crossley and J. Michael (eds), *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere* (Oxford, 2004); Andrej Pinter, 'Public Sphere and History: Historians' Response to Habermas on the "Worth" of the Past', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 28, 3 (2004), pp. 217–32; Peter-Eckard Knabe (ed.), *Opinion* (Berlin, 2000); James van Horn Melton, *Politics, Culture and the Public Sphere in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, 2000); Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge and New York, 2001).

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admitted to a few omissions and blind spots, particularly with regard to the gendered nature of public spheres which was hardly spoken of at the time the book was written. In general, however, Habermas was of the opinion that the core of his historical argument still stood. When he presented this assessment in a famous conference celebrating the American edition in 1989, he was backed by several historians.[4] Others, however, were critical, and in recent years this criticism seems to have prevailed particularly among historians of the early modern period.[5] Various new interpretations of the historical forces that transformed political public spheres in western Europe have been suggested. These interpretations will be at the centre of this paper. It will try to assess and combine them in a way that might open up perspectives for a new comprehensive framework of interpretation that is less at odds with wider historical developments and contexts than Habermas's own account.

I: The Function of History in Habermas's Argument

Few academic books have been summarized as often—and, indeed, in as many different ways—as Habermas's book on the transformation of the public sphere.[6] Adding yet another full-length summary hardly seems necessary. However, as the focus of this paper will be on the use historians, and particularly those of the early modern period, have made of Habermas's 'grand narrative', it seems only fair to remind ourselves that this is not a book by a historian. Habermas is a sociologist and social philosopher—and above all a political animal and fighter for democracy. For Habermas, his inquiry into the nature and development of *Öffentlichkeit* in its two senses of 'publicness' and

[4] See, for example, for small criticisms but general approval Keith Michael Baker, 'Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth Century France: Variations on a Theme by Habermas', in Calhoun, *Habermas*, pp. 181–211; Geoff Eley, 'Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century', in Calhoun, *Habermas*, pp. 289–339.

[5] For general criticism particularly from a perspective of the history of communication and the media see Andreas Gestrich, *Absolutismus und Öffentlichkeit: Politische Kommunikation in Deutschland zu Beginn des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen, 1994); Karl Tilman Winkler, *Handwerk und Markt: Druckerhandwerk, Vertriebswesen und Tagesschrifttum in London 1695–1750* (Stuttgart, 1993); Winkler, *Wörterkrieg: Politische Debattenkultur in England 1689–1750* (Stuttgart, 1998); Bernd Sösemann (ed.), *Kommunikation und Medien in Preußen vom 16. bis zum 19. Jahrhundert* (Beiträge zur Kommunikationsgeschichte, 12, Stuttgart, 2002); from a gender perspective see J.B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of Revolution* (Ithaca, 1988), and Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', in Calhoun, *Habermas*, pp. 109–42; and Ulrike Weckel, Claudia Opitz, Olivia Hochstrasser and Brigitte Tolkemitt (eds), *Ordnung, Politik und Geselligkeit der Geschlechter im 18. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1998).

[6] For good summaries see James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public*; T.C.W. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe 1660–1789* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 5–14; Uwe Hohendahl (ed.), *Öffentlichkeit: Geschichte eines kritischen Begriffs* (Stuttgart, 2000).

'public sphere' is part of a normative theory of political communication.[7] His aim is the exploration of the prerequisites for democracy, which for him is linked to the implementation of reason, truth, morals and justice in political life. In true enlightenment fashion Habermas finds the main support for such a democratic political culture in public political reasoning in an environment in which the individual can speak freely and arguments are not distorted by fear or political or social power.[8] Thus, the chief purpose of the book was to understand and criticize the threat to democracy resulting from the decline of such a critical public sphere in late capitalist society.[9] In order to understand the function of the historical chapters of this book, they have to be read in the context of the political analysis of the corruption of the contemporary public sphere in its final sections.

The fact that the historical argument is constructed to fit the needs of this political analysis must be seen as one of the weaknesses of this book. The analysis runs as follows. In organized capitalism, the state and private economies have become increasingly intertwined. The welfare state's care for all individual hardship blurs the divide between public and private interests which was so dear to nineteenth-century liberal political theory. Modern political parties are neither independent of state power nor of the private economic interests of big business and capital. The same holds true for the media who have lost their critical edge and are more concerned with winning viewers and advertisments than being the platform for debating questions of the public good.

In order to support this analysis of the contemporary corruption of the public sphere, Habermas constructed as a counterpoint an ideal type which he named the bourgeois public sphere. It was a social space where propertied people reasoned in public on those private interests that were of general relevance, such as the rules of markets and economic production, and referred these interests back to the state. They debated in Parliament and used the media for their purposes without having to fear censorship or political prosecution for their open criticism. These were the ideal public, as viewed in a liberal theory of democracy. According to Habermas their emergence is based on the rise of private property and on the consequent division between state and civil society mentioned above. Thus, just as the fading division between state and society was the reason for the contemporary decline of the public sphere, its rise seems have been initiated by their separation.

[7] For this normative notion of Habermas's public sphere, see Jürgen Habermas, 'Volkssouveränität als Verfahren: Ein normativer Begriff von Öffentlichkeit', *Merkur*, 43 (1989), pp. 465–77; or Habermas, 'Ist der Herzschlag der Revolution zum Stillstand gekommen? Volkssouveränität als Verfahren. Ein normativer Begriff der Öffentlichkeit?', in Forum für Philosophie Bad Homburg (ed.), *Die Ideen von 1789 in der deutschen Rezeption* (Frankfurt/Main, 1989), pp. 7–36.

[8] Habermas, *Transformation*, p. 27.

[9] Important for recent debates in the social sciences: G. Göhler (ed.), *Macht der Öffentlichkeit—Öffentlichkeit der Macht* (Baden-Baden, 1995).

Habermas takes this mirror image construction of his argument one step further by drawing clear parallels between the ideal types of pre-bourgeois and post-bourgeois public spheres. In the early modern period the people functioned merely as an 'environment' for the ruler's demonstration of splendour and power. Their political participation was reduced to the role of bystanders in the streets, when the princes 'represented their lordship not for but "before" the people'.[10] Similarly today, public participation in political power and its control of it is reduced to sporadic acts of acclamation or disapproval through general elections whose outcome is not primarily a result of rational political discourse but of publicity campaigns presenting images rather than arguments to the people.[11]

In this mirror-image construction argument Habermas provides the reader only with a very brief outline of what he terms the pre-bourgeois 'representative publicness' of absolutist states. He examines neither the nature of early modern rulership nor the political function of this type of public in detail. However, in order to draw a comparison with the late capitalist public, he presents the latter as being void of any rational communication. This type of public sphere is presented as being based solely on the physical presence of the ruler who communicates with his subjects through symbols rather than words. Printed media do not seem to play any role in this type of communication.[12] Habermas also reduces the underlying forces of historical change to economic developments such as the decline of mercantilist economic policies in the eighteenth century and particularly the economic rise of the bourgeoisie and with it that of free labour. Only on the basis of these processes were the media revolution of the early modern period and the new spaces of social communication such as the coffee house or the salon able to transform the 'representative publicness' into that ideal-type reasoning body which is at the centre of Habermas's construction, the bourgeois public sphere.

There is hardly any aspect of Habermas' construction which has not yet been questioned by early modernists. However, no convincing alternative to his master narrative has been found by historians, and many critics seem to be satisfied with the basic line of his argument. Thus Timothy Blanning, in his masterful analysis of the dialectics of culture and power in the *Ancien Régime*, concludes his survey of Habermas on the harmonious note that 'once the Marxist residue has been cleared away—the insistence on the 'bourgeois' nature of the public sphere, its allegedly oppositional orientation, and its

[10] Habermas, *Transformation*, p. 8.

[11] *Ibid*., p. 176: 'The public as such is included only sporadically in this circuit of power, and even then it is brought in only to contribute its acclamation.'

[12] For this type of 'Anwesenheitskommunikation' see the interesting remarks by Rudolf Schlögl in 'Perspektiven kommunikationsgeschichtlicher Forschung. Ein E-Mail-Interview mit Prof. Dr. Rudolf Schlögl, Konstanz', sehepunkte 4 (2004), Nr. 9 [10 Sept 2004], www.sehepunkte.historicum.net/2004/09/interview.html; and for this type of direct communication in early modern towns see also Schlögl (ed.), *Interaktion und Herrschaft: Die Politik der frühneuzeitlichen Stadt* (Konstanz, 2004).

chronology—what remains provides an illuminating perspective from which to view the political culture of the old régime'.[13] However, it has to be asked what remains of Habermas's argument after Blanning has pulled out all its politically sharp teeth, and what will happen to it if several other bad teeth, not mentioned by Blanning, also need to be extracted.

In what follows, some core arguments critical of Habermas's book will be analysed. A first brief section will look at the social strata of Habermas's late-eighteenth-century public sphere. If its composition was not bourgeois, then we are faced with the problem of finding different factors that effected the undisputed rise of a debating public in the late eighteenth century. If it cannot be attributed to the rise of the bourgeoisie, it is also unlikely that it was the result of an increasing division between state and civil society which was said to have been brought about by the rise of the bourgeoisie. The following sections will therefore examine other explanations which have been put forward in historical research. A conclusion will look at the wider implications of historical research for new theoretical models of the transformation of the public sphere.

II: Was There An Eighteenth-Century Bourgeois Public Sphere?

Habermas based the rise of his bourgeois public sphere not only on the increasing economic power of this class. He also looked at its social practices and forms of sociability. He was, indeed, one of the first to realize how important literary circles and other associations and gathering places such as coffee houses were for the formation of a political public. However, were these associations and circles really bourgois in their social composition? Ute Daniel and others have asked this question and come to the conclusion that not only in Germany but also in France, Italy and partly even in Britain, eighteenth-century associations, enlightenment-oriented reading clubs, salons and even freemasons' lodges were by no means dominated by a rising bourgeoisie. The characteristic mixture was in fact one of élites, of nobility, civil servants, academics, priests, and only a few bourgeois men and women.[14]

[13] Blanning, *Culture*, p. 14.

[14] U. Daniel, 'How Bourgeois was the Public Sphere of the Eighteenth Century? Or: Why it is Important to Historicize *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*?', *Das Achtzehnte Jahrhundert: Zeitschrift der Deutschen Gesellschaft für die Erforschung des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts*, 26 (2002), pp. 9–17; R. Chartier, *The cultural origins of the French Revolution* (Durham, N.C. and London, 1991) formulates significant doubts as to whether the French political public in the decades before the revolution could be described as having been in its majority a bourgeois one. K.M. Baker, 'Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth Century France', in Calhoun, *Habermas*, who otherwise defends Habermas's version of the late-eighteenth-century rise of a reasoning public sphere, writes on pages 190f.: 'But it seems difficult to characterize the new public space as a specifically bourgeois phenomenon or to see "public opinion" as the device by which a specifically bourgeois civil society sought to defend its needs and interests against the absolute state.' For the important role of the nobility in the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century associations in Italy see G. Clemens, *Sanctus Amor Patriae: Eine vergleichende Studie zu deutschen und italienischen Geschichtsvereinen im 19. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen, 2004).

Tim Blanning summed his wide research on the rise of the eighteenth-century public sphere up with the image of it being socially 'more like Noah's Ark than a merchantman'.[15]

Having discovered that the members of those institutions of sociability and political reasoning which formed the embryonic nucleus of Habermas's pre-revolutionary bourgeois public sphere were by no means primarily of bourgeois origin, it was hardly surprising that historians did not stop short of further dismantling the concept by looking at the substance of pre-revolutionary public discussion. The topics discussed in these circles were primarily literary and academic, and if they were political, they were mostly directed towards reform and not opposition. This discourse on reform was supported by the state itself, by enlightened princes and civil servants who were frequently to be found at its forefront. Thus, if there was critical public debate on matters of the state, it was rather initiated within the administration than directed against it, and often enough it was conducted with explicit state support. In late-eighteenth-century Bavaria—as in Prussia—the enlightened reform discourse was able to unfold under the protection of the state administration and its system of censorship, which tolerated critical political treatises as long as they were not directed against the person of the elector or king.[16] This changed in Bavaria only in the middle of the 1780s and in the 1790s after the detection of the alledged conspiracy of the *Illuminaten* eventually turned into a state-geared anti-enlightenment campaign. This was also not without public support, which reminds us that there can also be 'bad' publics.[17] However, both phases of Bavarian politics affecting public political debate seem to point in a direction also suggested by other research, that in most of eighteenth-century Europe 'for most of the time, the relationship

[15] Blanning, *Culture*, p. 12: 'the public sphere which developed in the course of the eighteenth century cannot be described as "bourgeois" in a social sense, given the high proportion of clergymen and nobles of various types who operated within it. Socially the public sphere is more like Noah's Ark than a merchantman.'

[16] The most comprehensive analysis of this is Michael Schaich, *Staat und Öffentlichkeit im Kurfürstentum Bayern der Spätaufklärung* (München, 2001), esp. pp. 157–61; *ibid*., p. 161: 'Von einer Opposition zwischen staatlicher Zensur und aufgeklärter Öffentlichkeit lässt sich kaum sprechen. Die aufgeklärte Öffentlichkeit konnte sich im Laufe der 1780er Jahre vielmehr im Schutz der Zensur entwickeln.' For Prussia, see Eduardo Tartarolo, 'Censorship and the Conception of the Public in Late-Eighteenth-Century Germany: Or, are Censorship and Public Opinion Mutually Exclusive?', in Dario Castiglione and Lesley Sharpe (eds), *Shifting the Boundaries: Transformations of the Languages of Public and Private in the Eighteenth Century* (Exeter, 1995), pp. 131–50, esp. pp. 133–41.

[17] See also Christoph Weiß and Wolfgang Albrecht (eds), *Von 'Obscuranten' und 'Eudämonisten': Gegenaufklärerische, konservative und antirevolutionäre Publizisten im späten 18. Jahrhundert* (St. Ingbert, 1997). For an interesting contemporary parallel with explicit reference to the problem in Habermas's theory, see the internet paper by Peter Stamatov, 'The Making of a "Bad" Public: Ethnonational Mobilization in Post-communist Bulgaria', www.ksg.harvard.edu/kokkalis/GSW1/GSW1/12%20Stamatov.pdf

between the public sphere and the state was amicable and mutually supportive. Indeed, one might well go further and argue that the public sphere was both the creation and the extension of the state.'[18]

This statement not only invalidates Habermas's notion of the driving economic forces behind the rise of the public sphere. It also provides us with a key to a different explanation. Increasingly historians see the early modern states and their administrations as the main actors who, however unintentionally, facilitated the rise of a political public sphere by supporting the improvement of communication infrastructures and using the media for their own purposes. It is these material aspects of mass communication and their development in the early modern period which have to be examined first.

III: The Development of Communication Systems in Early Modern Europe and the Rise of the Press

There are two processes which form the foundation of any type of modern media-based public sphere: the printing press as a means of multiplying relevant information for a wider public, and efficient and regular postal routes for its distribution. Whereas the early modern printing revolution has always attracted scholarly interest, the rapid development of an efficient Europe-wide network of postal routes since the early seventeenth century has been largely ignored in its relevance for the transformation of early modern political culture.[19] It was Wolfgang Behringer's path-breaking work on the imperial postal system which put this topic right into the centre of the debate on the transformation of the political public spheres.[20] He was not only able to show how the development of a close network of postal connections became a vital prerequisite for efficient government, but also that the rulers and their administrations had very little influence on the actual shaping of this network once it had been established, interconnected with other postal routes abroad and opened to the public.[21] The postal networks functioned like independent machines where individual wheels cannot be taken out or changed without destroying the entire mechanism. Contemporaries used this metaphor, and imperial post masters were able to prevent attempts by the Emperor to interfere

[18] Blanning, *Culture*, p. 13.

[19] Although Habermas himself does mention the post as as a prerequisite of the development of the public sphere. Habermas, *Transformation*, pp. 14ff. For a general overview of early modern communication history see Michael North, *Kommunikation, Handel, Geld und Banken in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Munich, 2000).

[20] Wolfgang Behringer, *Im Zeichen des Merkur: Reichspost und Kommunikationsrevolution in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Göttingen, 2003).

[21] Contrary to the courier system of the ancient Roman empire which was exclusively for the state, the imperial post became available to the public as early as the sixteenth century. Other European states followed. See Behringer, *Zeichen*, pp. 66ff.

with the system by convincing him of its intrinsic rationality and dynamics.[22] Thus, communication routes became a commodity which the individual states had to provide for efficient government as well as for the public. They were, however, no longer able to control them effectively themselves after the networks had reached a certain complexity.

It was through the communication channels of this European postal network that regular information provided from all parts of the known world became the subject of private and public discussion. This resulted in a new perception of space and the interconnectedness of events and processes, which is vital for the emergence of a public sphere that goes beyond the local community. Contrary to what Habermas maintains in his book, this function of providing regular public information was by no means a new development of the late seventeenth or even the eighteenth centuries but characteristic of the European postal services right from the end of the sixteenth century and particularly after the beginning of the seventeenth century.[23] It was above all the regularity of the incoming news which prompted sixteenth- and seventeenth-century printers to turn their 'news books', which were published bianually, into newspapers published weekly. By the end of the seventeenth century there had developed a pan-European, if not global market for regular news spread by printed newspapers.[24]

Behringer provides—for the first time—a detailed analysis of the economic and other decision-making processes that led to the appearance of the first weekly newspaper in Strasbourg in 1605.[25] What is equally important is that in contrast to Habermas and other critics who found that the contents of early newspapers were of no political significance,[26] he maintains that the contents were of good quality and by no means uncritical. The Strasbourg printer Carolus, son of a Protestant priest, used almost proto-enlightenment arguments when he set as one of the aims of his newspaper to spread knowledge and reason.[27] There can be no doubt that distributing information in the early newspapers week by week at least helped to increase general knowldege.

It is an interesting phenomenon that the rise of the early modern state with its tendencies towards absolutist government also saw the rise of newspapers, which soon appeared not only in other imperial cities such as Hamburg or Frankfurt but also in the major towns of the territorial states. This meant that

[22] *Ibid*., pp. 280–301.
[23] Habermas, *Transformation*, p. 16; Behringer, *Zeichen*, pp. 308ff.
[24] For the development of a European political information system and the role of the press see the excellent study by Sonja Schultheiß-Heinz, *Politik in der europäischen Publizistik: Eine historische Inhaltsanalyse von Zeitungen des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 2004); for the early eighteenth century see Sebastian Küster, *Vier Monarchien—vier Öffentlichkeiten: Kommunikation um die Schlacht bei Dettingen* (Münster, 2004).
[25] Behringer, *Zeichen*, pp. 347ff.
[26] Habermas, *Transformation*, p. 21.
[27] Behringer, *Zeichen*, p. 353.

they must have been tolerated and approved of by rulers who on other occasions insisted that politics were no matter for the common people.[28] There were probably two main reasons why newspapers enjoyed court approval. One may have been that only the news in a regularly printed paper could be effectively censured.[29] The other was that the courts themselves used the press—like the pamphlets—for inter-court communication. Their news played an important role in all early newspapers. Courts released official news to the press and made sure that the right information was spread. Diplomats did the same.[30] Thus the courts and their diplomats were on the giving as well as the receiving end of newspaper production.

This was not only an important factor for the rise and stabilization of the early newspaper market, but had more far-reaching effects on the formation of a public sphere. The fact that ordinary people could read about political subjects several times a week sparked off conversations in taverns, coffee houses, reading clubs and similar locations where newspapers were normally available, often read out loud so that even those who were not able to read could partake in political debate. The limited public sphere of the courts and of inter-court communication via the press had unintended consequences and gave rise to a debating public that was by no means restricted to the nobility.[31]

IV: Wars and the Rise of a Political Public Sphere

One aspect completely ignored by Habermas was the importance of wars for the formation of a political public sphere. The steep rise of the printed newspapers seems to have been so closely related to the frequent wars of the time that one press historian even maintained that war was the 'father and provider' of the early newspaper.[32] Military news was most interesting to ordinary people.

[28] See Gestrich, *Absolutismus*, pp. 168ff.

[29] The fact that there was such a mass of broadsides in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries shows that no effective control could be exercised over their production or their contents. They appeared anonymously and were sold by hawkers or peddlers. A newspaper could not appear over a longer period without the printer being known. So a license was needed which then exposed it to government control.

[30] Gestrich, *Absolutismus*, pp. 88ff.

[31] See, for this model of unintended consequences of communication, *ibid*., pp. 75ff.

[32] Gerhard Piccard, 'Vom Ursprung der Zeitung: Eine Darstellung nach urkundlichen Unterlagen aus dem Badischen Generallandesarchiv', *Zeitungs-Verlag*, 48, 1/2 (1991), p. 4, quoted from Heinz-Georg Neumann, 'Der Zeitungsjahrgang 1694: Nachrichten und Nachrichtenbeschaffung im Vergleich', in Elger Blühm and Hartwig Gebhardt (eds), *Presse und Geschichte II: Neue Beiträge zur Kommunikationsforschung* (München, 1987), pp. 127–57, p. 145. See also Johannes Burkhardt, *Der Dreißigjährige Krieg* (Frankfurt/Main, 1992), p. 225, and Andreas Gestrich, 'Krieg und Öffentlichkeit in der zweiten Hälfte des 17. Jahrhunderts', in Angela Giebmeyer and Helga Schnabel-Schüle (eds), *'Das Wichtigste ist der Mensch': Festschrift für Klaus Gerteis zum 60. Geburtstag* (Mainz, 2000), pp. 21–36; and Gestrich, 'The Early Modern State and the Public Sphere in 18th Century Germany', in Knabe, *Opinion*, pp. 1–13, esp. pp. 4–6.

Whether there was going to be a war and whether their own area would be affected or whether it was safe to trade with another country was of vital importance. War-related reporting was therefore particularly prominent in early newspaper reporting and could reach up to 90% of the total reporting in late-seventeenth-century newspapers.[33] Partly to satisfy this anxious curiosity of the people and their need to plan ahead, and partly to complement the war of arms with a war of pens, the military themselves started very early to release regular reports in wartime. They provided newspapers with documents and additional information. As today, early modern warlords tried to hide defeats and enlarge the importance of their victories.[34]

This shows that the general public was increasingly perceived as a relevant 'partner' in political communication whom it was important to influence through propaganda. For the eighteenth century it is well known that the Silesian Wars and especially the Seven Years' War brought about a rapid increase in political consciousness and political interest in all major European states.[35] For the Holy Roman Empire this can be shown best in the steep rise in the number and circulation of newspapers and political journals.[36] One of the leading German newspapers, the *Hamburgischer Correspondent*, increased its circulation of printed copies between the 1730s and 1780s from around 1500 to over 10,000.[37] The number of independent newspapers in the German

[33] See Neumann, *Zeitungsjahrgang*. He shows on pp. 141ff. that in several newspapers of the year 1694 analysed by him, military news rose to a share of 70% to 90% of the total contents during the military campaigns in the summer and dropped to 40% to 60% during the winter breaks. This was already noticed by contemporaries like Kaspar Stieler (*Zeitungs Lust und Nutz*: *Vollständiger Neudruck der Originalausgabe von 1695*, ed. by Gert Hagelweide, Bremen, 1969), p. 122. See also Schultheiß-Heinz, *Politik*, pp. 95ff.

[34] See Silvia Mazura, *Die preußische und österreichische Kriegspropaganda im Ersten und Zweiten Schlesischen Krieg* (Berlin, 1996), pp. 219ff.; see also Hans Jessen, 'Die Nachrichtenpolitik Friedrichs des Großen im Siebenjährigen Krieg', *Zeitungswissenschaft*, 15 (1940), pp. 632–64; and Andreas Gestrich, 'Kriegsberichterstattung als Propaganda: Das Beispiel des "Wienerischen Diarium" im Siebenjährigen Krieg 1756–1763', in Ute Daniel (ed.), *Augenzeugen. Kriegsberichterstattung vom 18. zum 21. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2006).

[35] See, for example, Hans-Martin Blitz, 'Frühe Konstruktionen eines deutschen Vaterlandes: Tradition und Bedeutung antifranzösischer Feindbilder im Siebenjährigen Krieg', in Thoma Höpel (ed.), *Deutschlandbilder—Frankreichbilder 1750–1850: Rezeption und Abgrenzung zweier Kulturen* (Leipzig, 2001), pp. 139–52; Edmond Dziembowski, *Un nouveau patriotisme français, 1750–1770: La France face à la puissance anglaise à l'époque de la guerre de sept ans* (Oxford, 1998); Marie Peters, *Pitt and Popularity: The Patriot Minister and London Opinion during the Seven Years' War* (Oxford, 1980). For an impressive reinterpretation of the rise of the public sphere that puts the nation and early nationalism at the centre of the processes of change, see Blanning, *Culture*, pp. 15ff, 185ff.

[36] For the public propaganda in the Silesian Wars see Mazura, *Die preußische und österreichische Kriegspropaganda*; for the Seven Years' War, see Gestrich, 'Kriegsberichterstattung als Propaganda'.

[37] For the circulation figures of the *Hamburgischer Correspondent* see Brigitte Tolkemitt, *Der Hamburgische Correspondent: Zur öffentlichen Verbreitung der Aufklärung in Deutschland* (Tübingen, 1995), p. 29f.; for its reporting during the Seven Years War also Holger Böning and Emmy Moepps, *Hamburg: Kommentierte Bibliographie der Zeitungen, Zeitschriften, Intelligenzblätter, Kalender und Almanache sowie biographische Hinweise zu den Herausgebern, Verlegern und Druckern periodischer Schriften*, vol. 1.1 (Stuttgart and Bad Cannstatt, 1996), p. 198f.

territories rose from approximately 60 at the beginning of the eighteenth century to over 200 in the 1770s.[38] Newspaper reading formed a great part of what has been termed the 'revolution in reading', the onset of which is normally located in the 1750s.[39]

On a quantitatively lower level, similar effects of wars on the public interest in politics can already be shown for the second half of the seventeenth century. Then the various wars against France intensified media reporting and public discussion as well as the general interaction between rulers and their subjects. Particularly the Franco-German war over the Electoral Palatinate of 1689 to 1697 led to an increased production, circulation and reception of news on all levels of society, to public debate and the emergence of early patriotism. Patriotic sentiments in the press were frequently part of official press policy aimed especially at the nobility and the upper classes involved in political decision-making. However, patriotic articles also helped to create the impression that people of differing social status nevertheless belonged together and had a common enemy. They created a patriotic sentiment vital to governments needing to find soldiers and levy taxes. Early modern European courts always had to fight their wars on two levels; the actual fighting with arms had to be supported by a war of pens. War manifestos and many other political pamphlets had—as one of the Emperor's scribes put it in 1674—the function of defending 'the monarch's reputation, which is an important pillar of his might and his glory'.[40] Any written attack on the legality of a monarch's claims and conduct was an attack on his reputation and had to be publicly refuted. Thus—as the pamphlet quoted above continued—a monarch was sometimes forced to give a public account of the reasons and legal grounds of his actions although he was not legally obliged to do so.

Whoever the authors and whatever their aims were, the fact that political pamphlets were printed and often sold in bookshops in major towns, sometimes even reprinted illegally or sold by book hawkers, meant that many of these pamphlets had a much wider readership than intended by their authors, and that they did indeed influence public opinion.[41] By the end of the seventeenth

[38] Martin Welke, 'Zeitung und Öffentlichkeit im 18. Jahrhundert: Betrachtungen zur Reichweite und Funktion der periodischen deutschen Tagespublizistik', in *Presse und Geschichte. Beiträge zur historischen Kommunikationsforschung*, (München, 1977), pp. 71–99, esp. p. 77f.

[39] Emmy Moepps and Martin Welke (eds), *Vorboten der Freiheit: Das Ringen um die Unabhängigkeit der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika im Spiegel der zeitgenössischen deutschen Presse* (Bremen, 1976); Tolkemitt, *Der Hamburgische Correspondent*, pp. 52ff.

[40] Die Gerechtfertigte Verhaftung / Printz Wilhelmen / Von Fürstenberg. o.O. [1674], p. 3. On war manifestos see esp. Konrad Repgen, 'Kriegslegitimationen in Alteuropa: Entwurf einer historischen Typologie', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 241 (1985), pp. 27–49, and Hermann Weber, 'Zur Legitimation der französischen Kriegserklärung von 1635', *Historisches Jahrbuch*, 108 (1988), pp. 90–103.

[41] Mazura, *Kriegspropaganda*, p. 14; Wolfgang Dienstl, *Flugschriften zum Spanischen Erbfolgekrieg mit besonderer Beachtung des Entwicklungsstandes von Öffentlichkeit und öffentlicher Meinung in den beteiligten Ländern und Staaten* (Diss. Vienna, 1987), pp. 473ff.

century controversies published in pamphlets tended to be picked up by other media such as journals. Sometimes they formed the basis of university lectures on public law because some of them contained publications of treaties, intercepted correspondence and other documents which might be embarrassing for the enemy. Pamphlets therefore often set the agenda of discussions in circles they were not aimed at and supplied people with information not intended for them.

Neither the rise of the newspapers nor of a generally politicized reading public happened in a new social space between state and society, nor was this new reading public bourgeois by nature, nor, in fact, did it take a long time for this public to become politicized, only gradually turning conversations on literary subjects into political debates, as Habermas suggested. We can clearly trace in the seventeenth century the rise of a public in the sense of a supra-local social unit connected through communication via printed media and both interested in political matters and able to debate them. While it might not always have been critical of the state, it was, however, concerned about affairs public and private. And the European princes and their administrations and war machines furthered the rise of this wider public, willingly or unwillingly, by providing it with information, media and in wartime even appealing for its support. Most of these early appeals to patriotic sentiment might have only been aimed at the estates, who perceived themselves as representing the land in the traditional sense. However, they were read more widely and had a much wider impact.

V: Different Circles of Public Political Communication

Putting the state back into play as a main actor in the early modern public sphere seemed necessary. However, it is not really sufficient. In the original preface to his book, Habermas himself had briefly mentioned the ordinary people as sporadic political actors. E.P. Thompson, in particular, showed that Habermas's 'plebeian public sphere' was worth further exploration and by no means as anarchic and irrational as Habermas suggested. A great deal of work has been done to prove this. Research on the French Revolution has been particularly fruitful. However, it is probably even more relevant to look at the politicization of the wider populace in earlier and less extraordinary times.

An interesting example of this is Andreas Würgler's study on popular uprisings and the press in early modern Germany and Switzerland.[42] He was able to trace numerous uprisings, both in towns and in the countryside, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. He also wanted to show that Habermas's picture of the early modern public sphere as nothing but the

[42] Andreas Würgler, *Unruhen und Öffentlichkeit: Städtische und ländliche Protestbewegungen im 18. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen, 1995), for his critical assessment of Habermas see especially pp. 29ff.

acclamation of a ruler's self-representation was fairly distorted. He maintains that the people watched the actions of their governments critically, commented on them and were ready to resist them if they seemed too burdensome or unjust, and that they demanded their traditional right to be consulted on specific occasions. Early modern urban uprisings in particular were directed against the tendencies of oligarchic policy-making in the German town-states, but similar targets can also be found in territorial states.

Particularly interesting in Würgler's study is the fact that these local unrests were widely reported on in eighteenth-century newspapers. This, again, is clear proof of the fact that newspapers did not contain politically irrelevant court messages but gave detailed information even on subjects which were politically as 'hot' as unrests and attempts to depose a prince. Again, it becomes clear that an active political public public existed long before Habermas sees it rising, and that it already contained many elements typical of his bourgeois public sphere. Indeed, particularly the tradition of an active urban or communal public sphere under the *Ancien Régime* was not without a considerable influence on the political aims of early ninteenth-century liberalism.[43] Local unrest alone, however, does not explain the rise of the regular press nor of a geographically wider political public interconnected by the media. Unrest tends to be locally or regionally limited and generally also of short duration. However impressive in number, from their own intrinsic dynamics they would not have resulted in the development of a permanent communication infrastructure nor in regular media-reporting. This had to come from a different, more powerful side which had the opportunity and interest to act on a larger geographical scale.

Another important area of research where similar tendencies are revealed, namely of a wider public participating actively in questions of individual as well as collective importance, is religion and religious movements. This area is also closely connected with the rise of literacy and the media. There have been several studies exploring the impact of printing and early news reporting on the dissemination of the Reformation, and it is standard knowledge how much literacy gained from individual reading of the Bible and religious tracts.[44] However, these developments in the sphere of religion also had an wider impact on the way religious groups perceived their role in the realm of politics.

David Zaret, for instance, has shown how a liberal model of the public sphere emerged in seventeenth-century England from the context of lay Bible-reading, experimental science, the development of print culture and advancing capitalism. His aim is to go beyond Habermas's focus on economic factors and place the transformation of the public sphere within the

[43] *Ibid*., pp. 259ff.

[44] See now especially James van Horn Melton (ed.), *Cultures of Communication from Reformation to Enlightenment. Constructing Publics in the Early Modern German Lands* (Aldershot, 2003).

broader context of general cultural developments. Underlying the transformation of the public sphere there is, according to Zaret, a transformation in mentality.[45]

A final example of an independent field also contributing to the transformation of the function of the public in politics is the academic world. After Descartes' *Discours de la méthode* of 1637, public discourse and open criticism within the academic community was seen as an important element on the path to the truth. Open discussion not only within the universities but also in learned journals and other printed publications was seen as vital to academic life and progress. These principles were adopted quite quickly for the sciences but also for other academic subjects and resulted in the rise of learned journals containing critical book reviews. Whether politics should also be debated at universities or even in public print was not clear at the end of the seventeenth century. Academic interest in the subject of public law rose considerably during that time, however, and in academies for young noblemen as well as in normal universities courses on 'notitia rerum publicarum', the forerunners of the modern subjects of contemporary history and political science, became increasingly fashionable. It is interesting that newspaper reading formed an important part of these courses.[46] At the new reform university of Halle at the end of the seventeenth century several professors offered special classes in newspaper reading. It was their aim, as the professor of public law Johann Peter Ludewig put it in 1700, to make the students acquainted with the strong and weak sides of every state and to enable them to reason rationally on state affairs.[47]

Apart from contributing to a new ideal of science and new politics-related curricula, academics were also involved in the unfolding of a critical public sphere in other ways. They served as learned councillors and had access to political information; professors specializing in public law had to write legal opinions on political controversies and support their government by writing state pamphlets and treatises as well as other, more popular tracts. Political pamphlets released by governments were frequently the work of academics either already employed by the courts or offering their services to them. But apart from these more official or semi-official writings, academics also started to write and publish political texts and regular journals for a wider public of their own accord and partly without the consent of the government.

Since the end of the seventeenth century we also find an increase in sometimes only short-lived journals or short tracts which tried to present political

[45] David Zaret, 'Religion, Science, and Printing in the Public Spheres in Seventeenth-Century England', in Calhoun, *Habermas*, pp. 212–35.

[46] See Gestrich, *Absolutismus*, pp. 110ff; Harm Klueting, *Die Lehre von der Macht der Staaten: Das außenpolitische Machtproblem in der politischen Wissenschaft und in der praktischen Politik im 18. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1986).

[47] Johann Peter Ludewig, 'Vom Gebrauch Und Mißbrauch Der Zeitungen Bey Eröffnung Eines Collegii geführet Anno 1700', in *Gesamte Kleine Teutsche Schrifften. Nebst einem Register* (Halle, 1705, repr. Hamburg 1964), p. 109.

news and reasoning in an entertaining way. Most of these journals and tracts originated in the context of the French Wars, were wildly anti-French and patriotic, and tried to appeal to a wider public by wrapping the news up in stories or satirical dialogues. It is impossible to reconstruct the exact readership of these journals and tracts. However, one can assume that they were read by the urban élite, in coffee houses but also at courts. In any case, these periodicals show that with a new type of journalism a new type of public debate and reasoning was emerging at the turn of the seventeenth century. The topic of this debate was mostly foreign policy and war, and this formed the bulk of the contents of these journals as well as of newspapers.[48] Home news was still rare and a debate on it within the country dangerous. Nevertheless, the framework of a new public sphere was set, able to form itself especially in the disguise of anti-French reporting and propaganda. And what we see is the emergence of a new media market which was at least in theory open to every one and which appropriated the right to public discourse on political matters.

VI: Conclusion

This paper has only been able to summarize some of the burgeoning international research on the public sphere, most of which has tried to come to terms with or correct and improve Habermas's historical model of its transformation. What these studies seem to have in common is that they stress the role of the state and particularly the power of the rising market of the periodical press and its intrinsic dynamics for the transformation of the public sphere. It was the media which caused public communication to become institutionalized and permanent, quite independently of the social strengths or weaknesses of the bourgeosie or unfolding capitalism.[49] Furthermore, many of these studies work more or less explicitly with a more complex model of the transformation of the public sphere by taking into account the multiplicity of political public spheres with their own social backgrounds, their own dynamics and potential for criticism.[50] The universities and academies are being

[48] Jürgen Wilke, 'Zeitungen und ihre Berichterstattung im langfristigen internationalen Vergleich', in Elger Blühm and Hartwig Gebhardt (eds), *Presse und Geschichte II: Neue Beiträge zur historischen Kommunikationsforschung* (München, 1987), pp. 287–305.

[49] For such a view from a sociological perspective see also Niklas Luhmann, *Die Realität der Massenmedien* (2nd rev. edn, Opladen, 1996), particularly p. 187, with reference to Keith Michael Baker, 'Politics and Public Opinion Under the Old Regime: Some Reflections', in J.R. Censer and J.D. Popkin (eds), *Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France* (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 204–46.

[50] The concept of a plurality of public spheres was particularly emphasized in a work on sixteenth-century Prussia by Esther-Beate Körber, *Öffentlichkeiten der frühen Neuzeit: Teilnehmer, Formen, Institutionen und Entscheidungen öffentlicher Kommunikation im Herzogtum Preußen von 1525 bis 1618* (Berlin and New York, 1998); see also, with slightly different categories for the early eighteenth century, Gestrich, *Absolutismus*; partly critical of this tendency is Ernst Opgenoorth, 'Publicum—privatum—arcanum: Ein Versuch zur Begrifflichkeit frühneuzeitlicher Kommunikationsgeschichte', in Bernd Sösemann (ed.), *Kommunikation und Medien in Preußen vom 16. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 2002), pp. 22–44.

increasingly perceived as transnational communication networks with a very high level political impact.[51]

Taking all this into account, a model seems to be gradually coming to the fore which suggests different explanations for the transformation of the public sphere to those of Habermas. It sees the rise of a capitalist economy and a self-conscious bourgeosie or the model of the underlying division of state and civil society as far less important for this process and emphasizes instead developments in other sectors of society where core elements of a modern public sphere were being formed under completely different circumstances and for different reasons.

Looking for a theoretical framework to hold these different new aspects together, it might be most rewarding to turn to Habermas's arch-rival Niklas Luhmann. His theory of changing types of social differentiation of society presumes a gradual switch of European societies from primary differentiation according to social status groups or estates (stratificatory differentiation) towards functional subsystems of society (such as politics, economy, religion, academic learning). Access to these functional subsystems of society is general and no longer restricted to certain social status. Discourses within these functional subsystems follow their specific rules which exclude those of other subsystems of society. Thus, for example, legitimate discourse within the economic system became increasingly restricted to economic categories rather than including religious arguments. Similarly, with the rise of Roman law and of the territorial state, the spheres of law and politics gained the status of independent functional subsystems of society that followed their own rules and logic. These were processes of functional differentiation that started as early as the middle ages. In contrast to economics and politics it took science much longer to free itself from religion and communicate exclusively according to its own rules. Functional differentiation of society was a slow process and subsystems of society developed their own modes and media of self-reflection at very different times. Thus, in the case of the political public sphere, its development has to be analysed less within the context of the rise of the bourgeoisie than within that of the long-term changes in the general structure of society and the ways communication is organized within its emerging functional subsystems.[52]

Luhmann's very formal description of what happens in a political public sphere has been criticized as unsatisfactory or even cynical from the point of view of a normative theory of democracy. Thus, Luhmann explicitly rejects the basic presupposition in almost all Habermas's work that public discourse

[51] See also H. Bosse, 'Die gelehrte Republik', in Hans-Wolf Jäger (ed.), *'Öffentlichkeit' im 18. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1997), pp. 51–76, or D. Goodmann, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of French Enlightenment* (Ithaca and London, 1994).

[52] But see also Luhmann, *Politik*, p. 285.

undistorted by power relations increases the rationality of political decision-making.[53] However, for historians this barren description of communication processes offers a solution to the irritations brought about by Habermas's fusion of the public sphere as a normative and a historical concept and its separation from general political communication. It forces us to examine individual sectors or subsystems of society more closely and analyse how their particular type of public communication was transformed under the pressure of the emergence of a functional mode of societal differentiation. In modern societies it is no longer possible for membership of a particular status group or estate to be the prerequisite for access to specific spheres of knowledge and communication. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were a time of change when the formation of this new system seemed to accelerate.[54] What happened to the political public sphere in this period should be seen in this context.

Historical research into the transformation of the public sphere has so far hardly started to discuss this alternative model.[55] Luhmann's own historical research on this topic is limited in ways similar to Habermas's account. More studies and theoretical reasoning are needed to reach a coherent and empirically sound framework for the transformation of the political public sphere. So far empirical historical research seems to be less at odds with Luhmann's cold dissection of social structures and functions of communication processes than with Habermas's normative approach, however convincing it may be as a lodestar for democratic political development.

Abstract

Since its first American edition in 1989, Jürgen Habermas's 1960 classic *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* has made a remarkable come-back and influenced both academic and political

[53] See Luhmann, *Politik*, pp. 282ff. 'Entgegen allen Erwartungen der Tradition garantiert Öffentlichkeit kein validiertes und als solches bekanntes Wissen, geschweige denn eine Art Vernunftauslese. Vielmehr ist Öffentlichkeit geradezu ein Symbol für die durch Transparenz erzeugte Intransparenz' (p. 285). According to Luhmann public discourse undermines transparency because its consequences, and related future discourses, cannot be predicted. The future of communication is always open. For an interesting new systems-theoretic appoach to this problem see Michael Beetz, *Die Rationalität der Öffentlichkeit* (Konstanz, 2005).

[54] Niklas Luhmann, *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik. Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt/Main, 1980); Luhmann, *Politik*, particularly pp. 274ff on public opinion.

[55] See, however, systems-theoretically oriented historical works like Rudolf Stichweh, *Der frühmoderne Staat und die europäische Universität: Zur Interaktion von Politik und Erziehungssystem im Prozess ihrer Ausdifferenzierung (16.–18. Jahrhundert)* (Frankfurt/Main, 1991); Michael Giesecke, *Der Buchdruck in der frühen Neuzeit. Eine historische Fallstudie über die Durchsetzung neuer Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologien* (Frankfurt/Main, 1991).

discussion on the topic worldwide. Historians, however, have been and still are sceptical about the validity of Habermas's master narrative on the causes of the transformation of the public sphere. This paper summarizes some of the criticism, most of which comes mostly from early modern communication history. It first deals with Habermas's assessment of a new critical public sphere as being bourgeois in character by analysing the social groups which constitute the institutions and circles of communication identified by Habermas as the driving forces behind the early modern transformation of the public sphere. It shows how socially varied the participation in these circles was. The paper then looks at some new research on the developing infrastructure of European and global communication (post courses; networks of correspondence) and the development of the newspaper press and its role in the institutionalization of a political public sphere. It stresses the importance of the early modern state as a main driving force behind these processes. This analysis of the central role of the state for the steady supply of political information which forms the basis of any form of critical debate is then supported by a closer examination of wartime state information policy. Finally the paper tries to suggest a different model from Habermas by moving away from the notion of a unified critical public sphere. Instead it suggests regarding society from the perspective of Niklas Luhmann's system theory and identifying the rise of separate platforms of public debate as a consequence of the rising functional differentiation of society.