Habermas and the Concept of Public Sphere: A Review of Public Sphere Theory

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Abstract: Since the mid-1960s, public sphere studies have received increasing attention; because of the theoretical contribution of the German academic researcher Jürgen Habermas, who traced the history of the emergence of the public sphere in Europe in the modern era. The main dimension of Habermas' contribution was related to the nature of the communicational public sphere, as distinct from the political sphere, and from the civil sphere where relations based on mutual interest and trust. So, this contribution sought to identify the public sphere theory in public space; to monitor the structure of this space and its functions, and the role it played in understanding the issues of the contemporary world.
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Introduction

At the beginning of the last decade of the last century, the debate on the public sphere and its role in building democracy and rethinking political action grew. The contribution of the contemporary German philosopher Jürgen Habermas was the first contribution he made in the early 1960s, as the concept of the "public sphere" considers one of the most prominent concepts since the late twentieth century, and has been linked to several disciplines, including history, society and the field of political science and political systems in particular; as a result of the recent emergence of the crisis of democracy in the West, and the reluctance of citizens to participate in public and political life through the traditional tools of democracy, prompting the West thinkers to seek a solution to that crisis, and find an alternative to restore the role of individuals and groups at the political level.

The concept of the "public sphere" in western literature was spread in the 1990s, after the translation of Habermas' book "Structural Transformations of the Public sphere" into English. This book is considered a historical social study of the emergence, transformation, and deterioration of the public sphere in the West. It examines the preconditions, structures, functions, and internal interactions of this sphere in modern

society, as the public sphere is a central concept when we deal with modern society, and a central feature of modern society, to the extent that it needs to be falsified when it is intended to be suppressed or manipulated.

Charles Taylor in his book "Modern Social Imaginaries" (2003), and Habermas' main work, "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society" (1962), were the main focus of the debate on the public sphere and its appearance.

The Concept of Public Sphere

Habermas introduced the concept primarily in the field of political science, to examine the reasons for the decline of democracy and political participation in Western societies, following a historical approach to study the phenomenon of the public sphere in models of Western European countries in the modern era, considering it as an idea for the emergence and evolution of this phenomenon, ignoring the prior models and other cases to the development of the public sphere inside and outside Europe (Goode, 2005; Holub, 1991).

From his vision, the public sphere is simply a physical or virtual space, where any ordinary individual, whatever his/her economic, social, and cultural level, whatever his/her intellectual and ideological affiliation, whatever his/her political orientation, etc. can freely express his opinion, alone or in a group, without restrictions and any influence from any party, official or non-official body (Holub, 1991; Koopmans, 2004).

The public sphere in this sense is popular and not official or elitist. It is not related to specific institutions, even official institutions representing citizens, such as parliaments or representative offices, or serving them, such as bureaucracy or ministries, or community institutions such as civil or social organizations, but it is an open space that ordinary individuals find them despite their political, social and cultural difference, and despite their interest in public affairs and even different knowledge of the details. These are variable spaces, which were aroused according to the need and interest (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013; Calhoun, 1992). They may change according to the available and possible, as well as multiplicity of spaces representing the public sphere, creating parallel spaces of time and place that intersect or divide in the issues discussed (Burger, 1989; Goode, 2005). This will increase the spaces of popular social action in the public sphere from institutions related to society, although the public sphere is not disconnected from those institutions, both official and non-official, in its role support, undermine or besiege the public sphere (Burger, 1989; Adut, 2012).

So, the state here is not the main actor in the public sphere as in the political sphere, and it is assumed that has not had the greatest influence in it, since it does not directly regulate it through specific laws and regulations as in the case with civil society, although

the state continues its attempts to influence this sphere through indirect means even by media and communication, to guide citizens in the most stable countries and less despotic regimes, or indirect ways to impose their control over public spaces, whether even physical or virtual and to pursue their actors in the less stable and more despotic regimes (Burger, 1989; Holub, 1991; Calhoun, 1992).

On the other hand, the public sphere does not correspond with civil society, although it intersects with it, further, the activity of civil society may constitute an important area of the public sphere, with the role it plays in educating the general public or specific groups, moving them, or defending their rights in the face of the government (Koopmans, 2004; Goode, 2005). On the contrary, if the public sphere is not associated with a specific or rigid institutional framework, civil society institutions can be seen as an important regulatory tool of the public sphere (Adut, 2012; Lunt, & Livingstone, 2013).

The Concept of the Public Sphere in Modern Western Thought

What is meant here is the concept of the "public sphere" in its modern terminology, as a domain or space independent of both the private sphere and the political sphere, by specific conditions and features that limit its boundaries, and limit its significance and meaning (Habermas, 2001). This does not negate the existence of the concept before that, in other terms, in western thought or other thought associated with other civilizations.

The map of writing on the subject of the public sphere expands on the level of western thought or western writings, starting with Habermas as a promoter of this concept through his basic book, back to those who preceded him, followed by or synchronized with Habermas in his handling of the concept, and then subtracted from complementary or different visions of Habermas, in the same or different western style.

Habermas' book and his studying to the concept gain the importance; due to focusing on the concept of the public sphere as an independent sphere, as Habermas did not compose the concept in a vacuum, but he was focused and devoted to addressing it independently of civil society and the political sphere, extract the foundations of the concept and roots of Western thought and thinkers writings such as Kant, Hegel, Mill and Marx (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, Rucht, 2002; Trenz & Klaus, 2004; Eriksen, 2005). He was preceded by other thinkers in the use of the concept of "public sphere" or "public space" itself and mentioned its characteristics, features, and roles, notably the German thinker "Hannah Arendt", in her various works, especially her book "The human condition" (1998).

Other writings and works related to the public sphere coincided with different dimensions or entries from Habermas. Some of them met with him at different points and divergences in other points, but they did not receive the fame and spread of Habermas' work on the public sphere.

Western literature on the public sphere is many and numerous; either purely theoretical writings on the concept of the public sphere, including what is constitutive or founding, what is critical or supplementary, what is explained or detailed, besides, other applied writings borrow the concept as used by Habermas, or modify and focus on a particular dimension or element, then apply it to a specific situation or region.

Habermas emphasizes that the public sphere should carry many aspects, which represented equality and non-discrimination; the public sphere is based on the formation of relationships and social links between different individuals, regardless of the social situation, based on the humanity or equality and superiority of the strongest argument and not the class hierarchy, and away from the influence of power or social or economic influence or official position. (Habermas, 2001). Besides, allow discussion of all common issues among members of society, which were previously the exclusive monopoly of the state. It is an open space for all members of society to participate and act as it is inclusive, and not exclusive to a particular category or group (Habermas, 2001).

But Habermas contrasts those aspects with his vision of the reasons for the deterioration of the public sphere in Europe, which is due to the expansion of the public sphere, which has made it difficult to reach a consensus among the participants, as well as to involve marginal or special issues (such as feminist issues), which led to loss its generality (Lauristin, 2007).

Habermas thought of the public sphere concept as a part of the Western modernity system, rather, the concept came in an attempt to save modernity and preserve its survival by criticizing its negatives, and trying to reform and restore its credibility (Lauristin, 2007). Habermas introduced the concept of the public sphere in the twentieth century in the context of his critique of western modernity, which led to a decline in the political participation of individuals, but despite this criticism, the concept is limited on the modern western societies only; as the presence of the concept in western societies (pre-modern or non-western) was not confirmed (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, Rucht, 2002; Trenz & Klaus, E. 2004)).

Habermas linked the emergence of the public sphere with the establishment of a modern nation-state (with its institutional organization) at the political level and its technological techniques, besides, the multiplicity of tools for the circulation and transmission of information; where the market achieved the economic independence of individuals from the family, by shifting from domestic economy to market economy, and then give them according to the modernist vision equal opportunities to compete in the public sphere, not only economically, but also politically (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, Rucht, 2002).

As well, he separated the private sphere from the public sphere, after they were intertwined and interdependent, where the family was considered as the primary unit in

the process of production, as a result, the family and other units and social structures based on relations of kinship broke up, and its position declined in society, in favor of interest and production relations (Eriksen, 2005).

Politically, the distribution of power has been expanded as a result of increased tasks, which resulted in the spread and increase the power and control of the state, with the increase of formal democracy and participation of individuals in the decision-making process, as well as, regulate social relations, especially the relationship between state and society, and the separation between religion and politics.

The Use of Public Sphere Theory in Media Studies since the Origin of the Internet

There is no doubt that the Internet has supported the idea of a discussion forum on the common public sphere in the world, which brings together public opinion members and engage them in a dialogue on issues that concern them, that type of debate based on the idea of interactivity, which surpassed traditional media and state ownership.

Besides, the Internet has supported the concept of media democracy, and facilitated the idea of participation among a group of individuals in an area, that allows them to exchange views and information on controversial issues and reconcile opinions of them, like discussion forums through social networks, blogs, e-mail groups and other forms of technological communication created by the Internet, support the process of communication between groups, and include the agenda that are related to everyday life and culture in all its manifestations and forms (Papacharissi, 2002).

However, some studies have confirmed that the virtual sphere through the Internet may not be truly democratic; this is illustrated by the provocative and deceptive comments sent by some users; due to the nature of the anonymous identity in the virtual sharing environment, as the non-disclosure of identity gives some users a license to enter in socially unacceptable behavior (Papacharissi, 2002).

Researchers put dimensions of the political and socio-technological structure of the virtual sphere summarized in institutional dimension; technological dimension; developmental dimension. The institutional dimension clarifies through the weakness of the political parties' role, and legislative authority representatives as intermediary institutions between the ruler and the public, and their inability to carry the demands of public opinion, which led to the separation of these institutions from the social and political reality in which they live, in addition to the incompatibility between changes in public opinion and the process of policy development (Widdersheim & Koizumi, 2015).

While the technological dimension clarifies through the increasing correlation between ICT and the provision of opportunities for new players, especially the easy and cheap and fast-spreading features, as well as the integration of services with each other, where the Internet provides service, as well as, the available freedom compare with

traditional media (Mahlouly, 2013). The Internet has ended the role of gatekeepers and reduced the influence of political, economic, and governmental elites, which means that individuals can broadcast and share information and opinion freely without censorship, which positively affects the formation of the public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002; Gerhards & Schäfer, 2009). The mutability of the Internet, and the low cost of access to the sites, through which political information can be accessed and debated, led to erasing the oligopolistic monopoly of the media, and giving marginalized individuals and groups more diverse political opportunities (Mahlouly, 2013). The process of information and its interactions across cyberspace enables the development of a new knowledge structure for individuals on the issue at hand, or at least disrupts the old knowledge formation on the issue, by providing the recipient with various direct and indirect information, that works to root out existing knowledge assets to an issue or set of issues for individuals and replace new knowledge assets instead (Papacharissi, 2002; Mahlouly, 2013).

The developmental dimension appears through that societies are in the process of transformation have a growing situation of political mobility; Arab society has witnessed several policies that play an important role in creating a state of political mobility among those interested in public affairs. In addition, the citizen's openness to the outside makes him have greater ambitions and aspirations, which may put pressure on decision-makers (Mary & Ryan, 2010).

In its new structure, public sphere theory attempts to understand the role of the new media in providing public debate and facilitating the crystallization of consensus that reflects active public opinion, to be an integrated theoretical framework, that can clarify the limits of the role of new media, represented by forums and discussion groups in managing and guiding the political and social debate in the community, to promote public participation (Widdersheim & Koizumi, 2015; Gerhards & Schäfer, 2009).

The development of the public sphere concept after the Internet and its applications has transformed the nature of this public sphere to be more communicative and responsive to the needs of participants. It has also broadened the scope of the public sphere to be based on the Internet, which would bring about qualitative changes in the future of societies in the world (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2009).

The Criticism of Habermas' Perception and Different Visions of the Public Sphere

Habermas' vision about the public sphere has generated much debate in Western thought, where a large number of them criticized Habermas' ideas about the public sphere; some provided an alternative sight, in whole or in part.

We can identify those three main points have been criticized in Habermas' conception: criticism of the historical formation (criticism of the modernity of the

concept), criticism of public sphere aspects (the ideal model), and criticism of the essence and nature of the public sphere.

On the one hand, criticism was directed of Habermas' conception of the historical formation and development of the public sphere, the most prominent book was written by the Italian thinker Salvatore (2007); He criticized Habermas' conception of the emergence of the public sphere in the modern era in Western Europe, and his denial its historical roots before it, ignored the non-Western models of the public sphere and limited it to the modern western picture only, considering the concept as a product of the western modernity system, and thus, denied the relationship of the public sphere to heritage, such as the western prehistoric heritage or the non-western heritage of other civilizations and societies, whose historical and sociological development contributed to the development of the public sphere (Salvatore, 2007).

Salvatore's conceptions of the public sphere and its definition of Habermas' conception were not very different, although he focused more on the interactive relationship between individuals within society, and between them and the state, more than on the individual as an independent rational actor. But the biggest difference in Salvatore's perception of the public sphere clarifies in his vision of the origins and evolution of the public sphere; where Salvatore believes that the public sphere is not a modernity phenomenon, besides it is not only a phenomenon of western societies but also of other societies and civilizations (Salvatore, 2007).

In his book "The Public Sphere: Liberal Modernity, Catholicism, Islam", Salvatore focuses on the history of the public sphere evolution up and down in different cultures (Modern West, Christian Europe, and Islam), focusing on the role of heritage in mapping this development, and also in developing the concept itself; where he believes that the idea of the public sphere in its modern form has previous roots in different forms of heritage, which paved the way to form the public sphere in its modern form, and that the ideas and different images of heritage confirm the existence of historical alternatives to how the relationship between society and power was composed to form the public sphere.

On the other hand, Habermas' conception of the characteristics of the public sphere has been criticized, especially by postmodern and feminist thinkers, for example, McKee (2005), in his book "The Public Sphere: An Introduction", believes that Habermas envisions the public sphere ideally, as the public sphere should deal only with serious issues, and should not be emotionally, easily accessible or commercially consumed, it must contain rational arguments only without emotional or superficial orientations, besides, it must be unified and homogeneous that rejects fragmentation between different cultures. Thus, the general development of the twenty-first century in Habermas' view is a decline and deterioration in the public sphere than it was in the bourgeois public sphere; due to the domination of capitalist consumption (McKee, 2005).

While postmodernists see it as a positive development; as the emergence of certain special or non-political issues (such as domestic violence or workers' issues) in the public sphere are positive as long as some have sought to achieve them for decades, and the public sphere submission to the market demands means the expression of culture patterns among those in the working class. Also, dealing with less profound issues is important for managing public debates involving ordinary citizens. Multiplicity is an important step towards allowing citizens of diverse backgrounds to develop their ideas in the public sphere. Supporters of this trend, therefore, see citizens becoming more informed about public issues and more involved in cultural policies, even if traditional patterns of politics seem to discourage participation (Susen, 2011; Brettschneider, 2007; Mah, 2000).

As criticized by some, and pointed out that it is applied at certain periods in European history, which was before the late eighteenth century, and this, in turn, made Habermas perception of the public sphere is characterized as very narrow. The supporters of this vision demonstrate what they are going through by asserting, that the evolution of the capitalist system has revealed many problems that are related to Habermas's vision of the public sphere (Mah, 2000). It is noted that the growth of capitalism has been accompanied by many problems and economic contradictions, like the bourgeoisie, which used the public sphere as a means of political liberalization and change, now shows a tendency to adapt the public sphere to changing circumstances, in order to hide the contradictions between its interests and the interests of the general community (Hohendahl & Silberman, 1979). Moreover, once social contradictions have emerged within the public sphere, dialogue loses the aspect of the rational discussion that is free from power and sovereignty. Here, the process of penetration between the state and the society is increasingly manifested. Thus, this penetration destroys the basis of the liberal public sphere (Crossley & Roberts, 2004).

Eyal Rabinovitch (2001) went on to say, that the public sphere as a concept needs to be understood as a constructional construct, including cultural and ideological competition, or cultural and ideological negotiation among a variety of audiences, this requires a revision of Habermas' idea of the public sphere to include more social groups, and this amendment will certainly allow for the social conflict that is always present in the public sphere, therefore, there is a description of the public sphere as the land of "controversy and conflict", and that it consists of competing public spheres (Rabinovitch, 2001).

Criticizing Habermas' vision of the public sphere, Fraser (1990) presented her model on "Multiple Public", through which social inequality in capitalist systems never creates a single public sphere, but there are different or competing sectors or areas of society. These sectors or collective spheres contain different audiences among themselves, as a

result of the mechanisms of sovereign inequality, those mechanisms that exist deep within capitalist societies (Fraser, 1990).

In her essay "Postmodernism and the Public Sphere", Villa (1992) presents the most important criticism of the postmodernist paradigm of the public sphere as a venue for political dialogue and free deliberation. The first of criticism is the naive reliance on the terms of parity conditions and non-hierarchy, in the sense of overcoming the social differences existing between individuals, who engage in dialogue and deliberation; this would provide a social space free from all forms of coercion and subjugation (Villa, 1992).

Despite the controversy raised due to Habermas' vision of the public sphere, which appeared in many different scientific circles, but, his study about the structural transformation in the public sphere, introduced a new concept within the social sciences with its various disciplines, this has led many social, political, economic and other researchers to engage in this new concept.

Conclusion

Habermas' goal of using the concept of the public sphere (which was invented by the German philosopher Kant) was to characterize the reality experienced by some European societies. This is confirmed by Habermas himself when he pointed out that the roots of the public sphere are due to many social institutions in European society during the eighteenth century. In England, it appeared in magazines, newspapers, and cafes, in France it appeared in the Parisian salons after the middle of the century, and in Germany, it occupied a modest form in reading clubs.

This public sphere developed after the middle of the eighteenth century to discuss the political issues, which were in the past matters specific to the state, so by introducing the political issues in the circle of critical dialogue, the public sphere stop against the state and in the face of it.

Being the sphere of logic and reason, the only space for discussion and decision that is not spoiled by social and political power inequalities, it is the opposite of a power the state had to recognize. The historical result of the critical dialogues included in the public sphere was the entry into a parliamentary democracy, in doing so; citizens are able to be outside the state's domain as critics and observers, and within the state in the form of legislative representatives.

In that sphere, media plays an important role, both negative and positive, in creating the conditions of political and social debate in various social issues, while some researchers believe that the western media in particular, in the context of their criticism of its practices in capitalist societies has a negative role, as it seeks to mislead public

opinion, and confuse on the subjects that they deal with, or through its deliberate role in marginalizing issues at the expense of other issues in society.

But researchers who have looked at the new media in recent years believe that the media in its new form has a very positive role in supporting political and social debate in society, which leads to rationalizing public decisions, developing institutions, and excusing or reducing their thinking on the class or individual interests and benefits. Also, the new social space created by ICT has given a new meaning to the concept of the public sphere of the world that Habermas was talking about in the 1960s.

So, despite the previous criticisms, Habermas' study on structural transformation in the public sphere, introduced a new concept within the social sciences with its specialties, which led many researchers, politicians, and scientists to engage in this new concept.

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