

## (RE)THINKING THE «PUBLIC SPHERE» WITH ARENDT AND HABERMAS

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### Abstract

The term «public» is polysemantic; its meaning varies accordingly to that what is actually articulated by the opposition «private/public», which in turn may be regarded from this or that angle and in various contexts. Nevertheless, there is one meaning of the term, which is especially relevant to a contemporary political philosophy: «publicness» refers here to a key principle of a solidary political community and of the politics beyond the play of mere instrumental concerns. «Public sphere» is the notion, which is simultaneously empirical and normative: this principle is largely institutionalized in modern democracies, yet it embodies the utopian expectations transcending any empirically possible form and state of political life.

Reasoning about the «public sphere», thuswise understood, occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century's political thought for the greater part in a nostalgic and pessimistic manner; however, in the nineties the democratic optimism was worldwide associated just with the multidimensional developments of the public sphere. Realities of the capitalist globalization crossed out a lot of naïve hopes, yet the idea of «public» remains its significance, be it in the context of the «democratization of democracy» or in the post-communist settings.

In the paper it is intended to discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of the conceptions of a «public sphere» in Habermas and Arendt with respect to theorizing the actual transformations and emancipatory potential of the public sphere.

**Keywords:** Arendt, Habermas, political philosophy, social theory, public sphere, publicness, social imaginary.

The term «public» is obviously polysemantic; its meaning varies accordingly to that what is actually articulated by the opposition «private/public», which in turn may be regarded from diverse angles and in various contexts. Michael Warner (Warner, 2002: 29) distinguishes in particular the following meanings of public and private: open to everyone/restricted to some; accessible for money/closed even to those who could pay; state-related; now often called public sector/nonstate, belonging to civil society; now often called private sector; official/nonofficial; common/special; impersonal/personal; national or popular/group, class, or locale; in physical

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view of others/concealed; outside the home/domestic, circulated in print or electronic media/circulated orally or in manuscript; known widely/known to initiates; acknowledged and explicit/tacit and implicit.

Nevertheless, there is one meaning of the term «public» which is especially relevant to the modern social and political thinking: «publicness» refers here to the constitutive element of a politics as far as it transcends the play of mere instrumental concerns. «Publicness» understood in this way embraces three analytically distinctive aspects or ingredients: first, a specific normative principle of the legitimate political decision-making, second, a peculiar space of communication, that is the public sphere, and, third, an ensemble of specific publics.

As the normative principle, «publicness» implies that any regulation or course of governmental action, in order to be recognized as legitimate, should be mediated and approved by the public deliberations which are exercised by principally free and equal citizens and are principally open to everybody to whom the issues at stake may concern. «Publicness» is one of the core elements of the democratic legitimacy of any institution.

The public sphere of a society may be treated as the communicative space which is situated «between» the domains of private life and the bureaucratic state apparatuses and is constituted and reproduced by the interplay of the broad multiplicity of publics. It is worth mentioning that publics are not mere communities or groups of people. According to Michael Warner, «A public is a social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse» (Warner, 2002: 90). A public is an association of strangers which is essentially mediated by various texts, be it verbal or visual, which comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation.

Although the significance of the «strong publics» within the official public sphere constituted by the institutions of political representation is incontestable, it is worth emphasizing the fundamental role of the unofficial public sphere which is generated and maintained by the multidimensional interplay of the «weak publics», that is of the self-organized social movements, civic, cultural and artistic associations. While not making immediately the obligative political decisions, the «weak publics» are an influential factor of articulating the political will. The unofficial public sphere is just that communicative space which originates ideas, viewpoints, opinions, preferences and outlooks constituting social self-understanding.

Anonymous public deliberations proceed largely just in the interlinking of various «weak publics» and then in their interactions with «strong publics», and those deliberations are fruitful if they are regulated in a lesser or greater degree by some meta-norms. In particular, everybody whose interests are actually or potentially touched by the consequences is recognized as a rightful participant; all participants have equal rights to ask and to criticize, to initiate new themes and standpoints, and to contest the actually valid norms of communication if they are proved to be derogatory to somebody's rights.

Reflections on the actual state and the dynamic tendencies of the «public sphere» are marked in the 20<sup>th</sup> century's political thought for the greater

part by nostalgia and pessimism. Democratization of the public sphere as a result of the tension between its initial elitist character and its organizing principle of openness enabled easier access to it and that in turn implicated degradation of the public discourse: the conformist tendency overbalanced the rational-critical attitude. The public opinion lost its critical potential; its studying is widely used for purposes of social engineering; the public communication become rather an object of administering and is substituted by the «publicity», that is of an instrumental publicness associated with advertising and public relations. The deepening impotence of the public sphere in the late capitalist mass societies is added by its fragmentation, by shrinking the public spaces and people's encapsulating in private life.

However, that pessimistic diagnosis of the irreversible degradation of the public sphere in contemporary societies is one-dimensional and overhasty, which was demonstrated in the nineties by the great interest in the transforming public spheres understood as one of the key factors of «democratization of democracy» in the western countries as well as of the post-communist development. It is reasonable to diagnose the multidimensional transformations of the public sphere in the world we live in now rather than its unidirectional degradation. I would mention here only four main factors responsible for the growing complexity of the public sphere nowadays. First, it is the irreducible and, moreover, increasing diversity and multiformity of publics, which are in complex and often conflicting relations; that implies the huge internal heterogeneity of the public sphere in any society. First, transformations of the social life engendered by the expansion of the electronic mass-media and IT implies a certain «virtualization» of the public sphere and the complex interplay of «real» and «virtual» in the public discourses. Third, the processes of globalization (or, better, glocalization (Robertson, 2003)) generate the transnational public spheres which interact with the national and local ones. Four, the very separation of the private and the public shows their unstable and dynamic character and is largely politicized: that what belongs to the public realm is itself the issue of public deliberation, may be contested and redefined.

Confronting all these complexities, any attempt to properly conceptualize the public sphere must answer the following principal questions: first, what is the ontological status of publicness within the contemporary societies? Does it possess a kind of sociological reality or is it a mere moral ideal? How can its internal heterogeneity and its unstable character be thought?

Second, what could be an adequate model of the public sphere as of the space of peculiar social interactions?

Seeking to answer the above questions we can reasonably rely upon the classical conceptualizations of the phenomenon of publicness in Arndt and Habermas. It is well known that the both conceptions were strongly criticized. Nevertheless, some key elements of their conceptions retain their explanatory potential; I am going to use them for answering the above questions about conceptualization of the public sphere in the nowadays societies.

At the first gaze, the standpoint of Habermas appears to be more adequate to the realities of modern societies than that of Arendt. The latter seems to be based on the disorienting idealization of the Greek polis. As she wrote in *The Human Condition*, the term «public», «means, first, that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity» (Arendt, 1958: 50). Of course, all citizens of a polis could communicate face-to-face within an observable place, *agora*; but in the modern societies which are large-scale and complex formations the public life can't be organized on the communal bases. The public discourse is essentially mass-mediated and is only one mode of coordinating human actions in a society together with the state administering and the market. The modern concept of publicness, unlike the ancient, depends on the possibility of counterpoising the society to the state; the public sphere is produced and reproduced by the interconnected discursive practices of private persons.

In these regards, the Habermasian treating of the phenomenon of publicness seems to possess more historical and sociological correctness than that of Arendt. However, Habermas, in his turn, was wrong in absolutizing one – historically specific – form of modern public, the bourgeois public sphere, which he identified with the public sphere as such. According to Habermas, social differences among the participants of the public discourse are irrelevant to its organizing principles and should not be taken into account in the public sphere so that the latter appears to be essentially homogeneous. That depiction is obviously an unjustified idealization. The Arendtian treating which emphasized the moment of diversity in the world of public life corresponds better to the internal heterogeneity of the public sphere. The public life of classical Greece, she wrote, consisted «to an incredibly large extent of citizens talking with one another. In this incessant talk the Greeks discovered that the world we have in common is usually regarded from an infinite number of different standpoints, to which correspond the most diverse points of view... In a sheer inexhaustible flow of arguments, Greeks learned to understand – not to understand one another as individual persons, but to look upon the same world from another's standpoint, to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects» (Arendt, 1961: 51).

To do justice, it's worth mentioning that, first, the false homogenizing vision of the public sphere in Habermas was corrected by some of his followers (see, for example: Fraser, 1992), and second, differences within the public sphere should be considered as related mostly not to the differences between individual standpoints but rather to the social and political differences between various publics. As a result, we have a vision of the public sphere as of the heterogeneous and hierarchically organized space in which some publics dominate whereas some others are dominated. The boundaries of the public sphere are unstable because they are defined by the dominated publics and are contested by the «subaltern counterpublics» (to use the Nancy Fraser's term).

But if the public sphere consists of the multiplicity of – often conflicting – publics, how then can we speak of its unity? I believe that the

plausible answer is: by means of rethinking it in the processual terms. Public discussion is not a finite undertaking which results in the definitive consent but rather the ongoing and never ended process in which agreement is always only partial and transient. Public deliberation is a goal in itself, and not mere a tool for producing true decision. Arendt stressed that understanding which can be achieved through processes of communication is principally different from the uniform scientific truth, she wrote in *Truth and Politics* (Arendt, 1961: 51) that «every claim in the sphere of human affairs to an absolute truth, whose validity need no support from the side of opinion, strikes at the very roots of all politics and of all government». The public sphere not so much immediately reconciles existing disagreements and conflicts as makes them visible and transparent in their nature; by means of that the participants of public discourses become more capable of managing conflicts. Moreover, they become more receptive to the real complexity of the world they live in, and on this way the human solidarity emerges while the differences and even the acute contradictions still remain.

From that processual treating of the public sphere we can get a solution also of the dilemma: is publicness a sociological reality or a rather a moral ideal contraposed to reality. «Publicness» is the notion, which is simultaneously empirical and normative: this principle is largely institutionalized in modern democracies, yet it embodies the utopian expectations transcending any empirically possible form and state of political life.

The second principal question to be answered focuses on the adequate model of the public sphere understood as a peculiar space of social interaction. For answering that question, we need first of all to break with the habit to think of the public sphere in a static manner as of specific regional subsystem of a society having its «place» together with economic, political, cultural and other subsystems. As Mimi Sheller and John Urry stressed, there is a tendency in the existing literature to think of the phenomenon of publicness in terms of «spheres» and «spaces», concepts that are often static and «regional» in character (Sheller, Urry, 2003: 107–108). When we speak of the «public sphere», the term «sphere» means a virtual space of communication rather than the regional subsystem of a society. That key moment is expressed well in Habermas: the mode of social interaction in the public sphere is the mass-mediated talk among citizens on the issues of common interest and concern. However, the weakness of the Habermasian treating consists in his rationalist illusions concerning the circulation of public discourses: formation of the enlightened public opinion is regarded as a result of the public use of reason. Taking into account the scope and influence of the electronic mass-mediation, we should treat public discourses nor as (at least potentially) rational-critical discussion on the common good but rather as circulation of ideas and images in which the shared vision of the world (as well as identities of the participants) are formed. And that treating can rely upon some ideas borrowed from Arendt. In particular, the second meaning of the term «public» she defines as «the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it» (Arendt, 1958: 52). Characterizing

the world as related to the publicness, she understood it also as created through founding actions: constitution is essentially something similar to the world-making. Generalizing that idea over the extraordinary example of the American revolution, we may think of publicness as of the creative world-making, and so both in the periods of the radical changes and in the times of the relative stability. Thus we advert to the concept of «social imaginary». That concept is in wide use now just in relation with the actual experiences of instability of the social world as well as with taking into account the unprecedented role of electronically mediated and socially organized imagination. Needless to argue that social imaginary has nothing to do with fantasies and voluntary fictions; it is a constitutive element of social practices which organizes individuals' self-understanding and their hold on reality. Relying upon the work of, first of all, Cornelius Castoriadis (Castoriadis, 1975) and Charles Taylor (Taylor, 2004), we can specify here some features of social imaginary. It is the engaged practical understanding, which embraces not only the near social environment of people but the total social world as well. It is represented in the symbolic systems and endues institutions with its peculiar meaning. It works as the «invisible cement», which holds together a large scale community of the human beings. The social imaginary as a shared practical understanding is «both factual and normative; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go» (Taylor, 2004: 23). The social imaginary in any society is multidimensional and heterogeneous so that it should be rather said about the social imaginaries (in plural). The social imaginary is always inherently underdetermined and unstable; it leaves wide scope for the stabilizing interpretations and correcting re-interpretations. Any careful analyses of the social imaginary formation should take into account both its spontaneous geneses in the grass-roots routines of day-to-day life and the symbolic struggles, the stake of which is the legitimate view on a social world.

From that standpoint the communicative interactions in the public sphere mediates not only formation of the enlightened public opinion concerning the common good but more widely also formation and transformation of the social imaginary the dynamics of which embraces the processes of world-making as well as of identity formation. The concept of «social imaginary», as it was outlined above, provides us with the promising analytical tools which enable, in particular, to consider the relation between the tendencies of autonomization and of instrumentalization within the public sphere. I believe that the dilemma: does the public sphere possess the potential of autonomy and emancipation or is it a mere subject of manipulation, is false. We should rather analyze the unstable and ever shifting balances existing between diverse symbolic strategies pursued by a variety of actors within the public sphere (various and often conflicting publics, state agencies, corporations, etc.). Those strategies make use of the symbolic power the significance of which was influentially disclosed by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1992), that is of the power to bring to reality through nomination. The symbolic strategies compensate the principal

incompleteness of the social world and enable to their agents to manage the latent potentialities available in the existing forms of social life.

The domination of any set of the symbolic strategies over the multidimensional space of social imaginary is nourished and, simultaneously, limited by the spontaneous geneses of the social imaginaries in the routines of day-to-day life. That means that the «superstructural» articulation of the imaginary space through symbolic strategies should be considered itself as relying upon the «infrastructural» economy of the social imaginaries in a given society. However, the task of proper comprehension of those grass-roots dynamics of publicness in the hypercomplex contexts of glocalization can't be achieved only through appeal to the ideas of Arendt and Habermas, it implies rather a dialog with the social theory which is seeking to conceptualize the realities of the changing world in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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