



M I C H A E L M C K E O N

Parsing Habermas's “Bourgeois Public Sphere”

ONGOING DEBATE OVER THE early history of the public sphere provides a good index of the fruitfulness of the category. When did it come into being? How inclusive was it? The very heat of controversy on local problems associated with the category of the public sphere seems to confirm widespread accord that the category itself has become indispensable to historical understanding. This distinction between local debates on the details and general agreement on the category may be illusory, however, since often enough debates seem to be fueled by fundamentally different views of what Habermas means by the public sphere. This being the case, the problem of chronology may best be addressed through a brief effort to clarify the meaning of Habermas's phrase *Bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*, commonly translated as *bourgeois public sphere*.

Bourgeois. As Habermas's translator informs us, *Bürgerliche* might be rendered either as *bourgeois* or as *civil*.¹ His decision to use the former term has had the effect of suggesting, at least to an Anglophone audience, that the public sphere was a self-consciously class phenomenon. This is no doubt true to the spirit of Habermas's central concern in his study, which is not the initial formation of the category but its “structural transformation” in the later nineteenth century, when the public sphere was a feature of an unambiguously “bourgeois society.” But class terminology, however relevant it may be to the historical analysis of early modern England, is not relevant to the way early modern English people understood themselves: consciousness of class is an eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century development. True, Habermas would have us see the emergence of class consciousness and the emergence of the public sphere as intertwined developments. Indeed, the history of the public sphere—unlike that, say, of agricultural technology—is coextensive with matters of consciousness: to ask how people came to inhabit the public sphere is the same thing as asking how people came to think of themselves as inhabiting the public sphere. But the choice of the term *bourgeois* rather than *civil*

risks encouraging readers to project onto the opening chapters of the book an overly stabilized conception of the emergent public sphere as already bourgeois in a historically more developed sense of the term. By the same token, the focus on bourgeois society displaces attention from a crucial, and presumably less familiar, aspect of Habermas's argument, the emergence of civil society. By the end of the eighteenth century, he writes, "the elements of political prerogative [had] developed into organs of public authority: partly into a parliament, and partly into judicial organs. Elements of occupational status group organization . . . [had] developed into the sphere of 'civil society' that as the genuine domain of private autonomy stood opposed to the state" (12). The nascent opposition between the privacy of civil society and the publicness of the state is both an analogue and a foundation for the division between the public sphere and the public realm as such: "the bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor" (27). In other words, just as the public state coalesced over against the private realm of civil society, so, within that private realm, private people came together as a public sphere that was distinct both from other spheres of privacy and from the realm of public authority which they came together to criticize. Neglected by the language of "bourgeois" society, the status of the public sphere as a dialectical mediation between the modern realms of the public and the private—as a marker both of their unprecedented separation out from each other and of their capacity to be brought into relation—is thrown into relief by the language of "civil" society. The public sphere names the place where the citizen confronts the state in his or her own terms, the place of publicity in privacy.

Public. Habermas's point is not that the idea of the public came into being in early modern Europe—it is hard to imagine a human culture that lacks some concept of the public—but that the idea of the public cohered in this period with unprecedented explicitness, defined both as a political institution opposed to the privacy of civil society and as a notional entity—the public—within civil society. Not the content of debate but the very fact of it—the making explicit of what formerly had been tacit—lies at the heart of the Habermasian notion of the public sphere. "Discussion within such a public presupposed the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned" (36). In traditional societies, where the production of culture was embedded within and undetachable from political and religious authority, the "sacramental character" of culture was a given, a tacit implication of that authority. In civil society, however, "the private people for whom the cultural product became available as a commodity profaned it inasmuch as they had to

determine its meaning on their own (by way of rational communication with one another), verbalize it, and thus state explicitly what precisely in its implicitness for so long could assert its authority" (37). Thus rationalized, mere opinion acquired the ostensive self-consciousness of "public opinion": "the opinion of the public that put its reason to use was no longer just opinion; it did not arise from mere inclination but from private reflection upon public affairs and from their public discussion" (94).

This Habermasian notion of "rational communication" in the public sphere is often misconceived as the disinterested, impartial exchange of ideas by citizens who, at least during the time of debate, undertake to suspend their private interests along with the interested implications of their social status. But as these passages suggest, Habermas's meaning is at odds with such a reading. On the contrary, "people's public use of their reason (*öffentliches Raisonement*) . . . preserves the polemical nuances of both sides" (27). When Habermas says that public-sphere discourse, "far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether," he does not mean that participants in public-sphere debate either did not know or pretended not to know each other's status (36). He means that social status was no longer (as it had been) the very precondition for participating in debate and that the validity of an argument, like the assumption of merit, was not seen (as it had been) to be predicated on status. In its formation, the public-sphere ideal of inclusiveness is not the ideology of a self-conscious class strategically concerned to universalize its own interest. It is the discovery in a society stratified by status that the idea of the public interest (or the national interest, or the commonwealth) has meaning only if it is premised on the conviction that interests are multiple and that no single interest—not even that of the monarch—is universal or absolute. The public sphere's impulse toward universality bespeaks not a (bad-faith) claim to equality of access and representation (which most contemporaries would have dismissed frankly as neither possible nor desirable) but rather the will to make tangible the notion of a discursive and virtual calculus capable of adjudicating between an indefinite number of inherently legitimate interests. For this reason, the impulse to correct Habermas either by pointing out the non-egalitarian nature of the public sphere or by adducing "counter-publics" to supplement his partial version of it misunderstands its "rationality," which entails not a claim to liberal-democratic practice but a nascent cultural skepticism about *arcana imperii* and "reason of state"—about the age-old assumption of ruling elites that public policy goes without saying.

Sphere. Habermas's association of the early-eighteenth-century public sphere with the institutions of the coffeehouse and the *salon* has encouraged many readers to forget that the term "public sphere" is fundamentally metaphorical. In fact, the force of Habermas's thesis depends entirely on the idea that what's new about the public sphere is that it is a virtual space, a

discursive realm of imagined collectivity where people “come together” in a sense far different from their traditional assembly in the *agora*, the public square, the meeting hall, or the like. The intimate connection between the public sphere and commodity exchange lies not in the fully fledged “middle-class” or “capitalist” identity of its participants but in the fact that both concepts hypostatize “places” where the circulation and exchange of virtual entities—information, polemic, commodities—establishes an imagined collectivity that is all the more compelling for not being limited by actuality. The most striking instance of this sort of virtualization is that of the market, in traditional (and modern) societies an actual place of exchange that in the early modern period is also abstracted from its embeddedness in physical experience so as to name the “place” where commodities are circulated and exchanged. For Habermas, the indispensable means by which the public sphere coalesces as a virtual place are the public post, print culture, the periodical essay, and the like. But a moment’s reflection will suggest that the virtualization of the public sphere also depends on a reconceptualization of the faculty of the imagination as capable not only of fantasy and error but also of a remarkably powerful and productive sort of human solidarity.

Publicity in privacy, explicitness, and virtuality: if these are the defining features of the public sphere, evidence of its existence and operation before the early decades of the eighteenth century is not difficult to find. This is, importantly (although obviously not exclusively), because the defining features of the public sphere show its existence to be a matter of degree, not kind, a cumulative and overdetermined process of coming to cultural consciousness for which determinate events such as the diffusion of print are necessary but not sufficient. Scholars of seventeenth-century England already have adduced diverse signs and symptoms of a nascent public sphere. The explicitation of discourse through print that exploded with the outbreak of civil war in 1642 was not surpassed in terms of annual number of publications until the 1690s.² During this period, petitions and addresses to “the people of England” and “the public” afforded the tacit subjection of political subjects an unwontedly self-conscious subjecthood. The term “opinion,” although it continued to mean belief that falls short of knowledge, also came to signify, especially as “public opinion,” a virtual and collectivized sort of knowledge in perpetual process of formation.³ The abolition of feudal tenures in 1646 officially sanctioned the past century of socioeconomic development whereby the consolidation of landowners’ absolute private property contributed to an epochal separation out of politics from the economy. And this separation of the public activities of the state from private ownership was the precondition both for the modern division between public and private and for the mediatory function of the public sphere. The killing of the king in 1649 also killed the doctrine of the king’s two bodies by showing that the death of the natural or private body of

monarchy—its separation out from the political or public body of monarchy—did not result in the death of the state, or even of monarchy. In short, the emergence of the public sphere is conditioned by a broad range of historical factors over a long period of time. If we wish to understand the phenomenon of the public sphere, then, whether we call it the beginning or the “prehistory” of that phenomenon, we must have recourse to seventeenth-century history.

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Notes

1. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (1961; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), xv. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
2. See Lois Potter, *Secret Rites and Secret Writing: Royalist Literature, 1641–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 4.
3. See Dario Castiglione, “Opinion’s Metamorphosis: Hume and the Perception of Public Authority,” in *Shifting the Boundaries: Transformations of the Languages of Public and Private in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Dario Castiglione and Lesley Sharpe (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995), 156.