The Habermasian Public Sphere: A Specification of the Idealized Conditions of Democratic Communication

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Abstract

Many contemporary political theorists agree that a public sphere of informal citizen deliberation is central to strong democracy. An increasing amount of empirical work is taking place that attempts to critically evaluate the extent to which everyday communication is advancing such a sphere. However, this work is hampered by poorly specified public sphere criteria. In this paper I draw on Habermas' theory of communicative rationality to detail a set of normative conditions of public sphere discourse adequate for critical analysis. Habermas argues that his formal pragmatic analysis of everyday communication illuminates a number of idealizing presuppositions of communicative rationality. From these presuppositions I delineate six public sphere conditions. These conditions include the reasoned exchange of problematic validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role taking, sincerity, formal inclusion and discursive equality, and autonomy from state and corporate power. I do not attempt here to answer possible critiques of these conditions. Instead, I simply focus upon providing a detailed conceptualisation of the Habermasian public sphere for the critical evaluation of everyday communicative practices, a conceptualisation that remains open to further development through subsequent reflection upon public discourse.

Introduction

The notion of a public sphere of informal citizen deliberation enabling the formation of rational public opinion that can critically guide political systems is seen by many democratic theorists as central to strong democracy (e.g. Benhabib, 1996; Bohman, 1996; Dryzek, 2000; Young, 2000). This conception is increasingly being employed in empirical research to evaluate the democratic quality of everyday communicative practice through which the public sphere is constituted. Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere has become a popular starting point for such evaluations.[1] Habermas' work is useful because it provides the most systematically developed critical theory of the public sphere presently available. However, there are marked variations in the actual public sphere criteria utilized in empirical research, and few projects actually arrive at specific criteria that can enable critical scrutiny of everyday communicative practice.

Much work focusing upon the actualisation of the Habermasian public sphere has involved general historical and politico-economical explorations concerned with narratives of institutional formation and with the incursions by systems media (money and administrative power) into the public realm (e.g. Boggs, 2000; Calhoun, 1992b; Dahlgren & Sparks, 1991; Hope, 1996; Peters, 1997). Such research need only draw upon the generally accepted and broadly defined conception of the public sphere as a space constituted by critical communication. More specific criteria are needed for closely examining the democratic quality of everyday interactions, analysis that researchers in communications and political science fields are increasingly turning their attention to. A number of these researchers (e.g. Schneider, 1997; Tanner, 2001) have developed and employed criteria for public reasoning from Habermas' early work, particularly his 1962 (English trans. 1989) publication *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (STPS).* However, Habermas (1992a, 1992b) has long since rejected his earlier immanent critique approach to elaborating ideals of public reasoning. A set of Habermasian public sphere criteria, while drawing substance from STPS, must look to Habermas' (1984, 1987) *Theory of Communicative Action (TCA),* along with recent developments (1996, 2001), which replace the philosophy of the subject with a more acceptable intersubjective grounding of rationality. Some researchers of the public sphere *have* drawn upon TCA (e.g. Fang, 1995). However, they have tended to use it in a limited or descriptive manner, shying away from formulating a set of criteria for critical analysis. Others have developed and

applied conceptions of deliberative interaction by loosely synthesizing the work of a number of democratic theorists, including Habermas (e.g. Kim, 1997; Muhlberger, 2000). But this synthesizing process largely reduces positions to overlapping elements, ignoring points of disagreement fundamental to the makeup of the particular theories involved. For instance, Gutmann and Thompson's (1996) theory cannot be merged with that of Habermas, as Muhlberger attempts, without ignoring the fact that the former includes substantive conditions of deliberation that are absent from the latter (see Gutmann & Thompson, 2002). The result of such an operation is an overly general conception that does not have the strong normative basis for critical analysis that comes with a rigorously developed model such as Habermas'.

However, is it not the role of the theorist to assist researchers in formulating specific criteria of the public sphere for empirical research? A number of democratic theorists and political philosophers *have* critically drawn upon and usefully interpreted Habermas' communicatively constituted public sphere in the process of developing their own democratic models (e.g. Benhabib, 1992, 1996; Bohman, 1996; Dryzek, 1996, 2000; Young, 2000). Yet they do not go as far as formulating and detailing specific criteria for empirical analysis. Other theorists have very helpfully illuminated Habermas' general presuppositions of argumentation, but again have not specifically explicated a set of public sphere conditions (e.g. Cooke 1994; Chambers, 1996). Meanwhile, empirical research is left to utilize out-dated, undertheorized, and crudely defined versions of the Habermasian public sphere. Thus, a systematic specification of the conception is urgently needed.

In this paper I intend to provide such a specification by way of Habermas' democratic theory. From Habermas' formal reconstruction of the pragmatic presuppositions of communicative rationality, I delineate a normative conception of the public sphere appropriate to the critical analysis of the democratic quality of everyday communication. I do not detail the method behind the derivation, nor closely examine the conception's status. Furthermore, I do not investigate the various critiques that may be raised against such a conception. Neither do I apply the conception to the analysis of actually existing practices. All this must be left for future work. The aim here is to provide a clarification and delineation of the public sphere's communicative conditions for the evaluation of everyday interaction.

From a Socio-Historical to a Linguistic-Philosophical Basis for the Public Sphere

Habermas' publication of STPS marks the beginning of his long association with the concept of the public sphere. In STPS Habermas confronted the historical manifestation of the bourgeois public sphere with the liberal ideals that it was proclaimed to represent. However, Habermas (1992b: 463) has since agreed with his critics that this classical ideology critique is fundamentally flawed because of the 'collapsing of norm and description.' He now believes that ideology critique places too much faith in historically contingent norms and value orientations manifested in specific institutions (Habermas, 1992a: 442).

To find a more secure basis for a normative conception of the public sphere Habermas turned to the 'critical reconstructive' method of 'formal pragmatics.' Rather than attempting to derive critical norms from specific historical moments, formal pragmatics aims to unearth the general structures of action and understanding that are intuitively drawn upon in everyday communicative practice.[2] The method is *formal* in the Kantian sense of attempting to reconstruct the conditions of possibility of communicative interaction. This 'contrasts with *empirical* pragmatic research to the extent that the latter is concerned not with the reconstruction of general competencies but with the description and analysis of specific elements of language use. It is *pragmatic* to the extent that it focuses on the *use* of language, and hence, on speech acts or utterances, in contrast to semantics (which is concerned with the properties of isolated sentences)' (Cooke, 1994: 3).

Formal pragmatic reconstruction shows, according to Habermas, that all communication contains a mode of action – 'communicative action' – that is oriented towards understanding or agreement. Rather than being based upon egocentric calculations of success (instrumental or strategic action), communicative action involves the intersubjective redemption of validity claims. These claims are always explicitly or implicitly raised in communication and include appeals to the meaning of statements, the truth of propositions, the rightness of norms, and the truthfulness of expressions.[3] For instance, the claim that 'abortion is murder' not only raises the explicit moral claim that that abortion is wrong, but implicitly raises the claims that the meaning of the statement is comprehensible, that a foetus is truly a human being, and that the claimant honestly feels this way.

Communicative action generally takes a 'conventional form.' That is, participants rely upon a background consensus of taken-for-granted interpretations, everyday routines, and established norms in order to reach understanding and agreement. However, this is not always the case, as Habermas (1979: 3-4) explains:

> As soon as this consensus is shaken, and the presupposition that certain validity claims are satisfied (or could be vindicated) is suspended, the task of mutual interpretation is to achieve a new definition of the situation which all participants can share. If their attempt fails, communicative action cannot be continued. One is then basically confronted with the alternative of switching to strategic action, breaking off communication altogether, or recommencing action oriented to reaching understanding at a different level, the level of argumentative speech (for purposes of discursively examining the problematic validity claims, which are now regarded as hypothetical).

In other words, argumentation enables the reflective continuation, with different means, of action oriented to understanding in 'postconventional' situations, that is, when all ultimate sources of validity can no longer be relied upon (Habermas, 1984: 17-18, 25). Argumentation or communicative rationality involves the public use of reason to redeem problematic validity claims.

It is the taking up of communicative rationality within informal interactions that constitutes the social space of democratic reasoning known as the public sphere (Habermas, 1996: 360). Thus it is the form of communication, and not the content, that is decisive in defining the boundaries of this sphere. While moral-practical validity claims – universalizable questions of justice – will be most often thematized in public discourse, because most likely to hinder life in pluralist societies, any social and political questions may become the focus of deliberation.[4] The public sphere is constituted wherever and whenever any matter of living together with difference is debated. When talking of *the* public sphere, Habermas is not talking about a specific, bounded public, but the whole array of complex networks of multiple and overlapping publics constituted through the critical discourse of individuals, community groups, civic associations, social movements, and media organizations. By *the* public sphere, Habermas is also referring to the idealized form of public reasoning. It is this idealized form that I want to now delineate.

Detailing the Public Sphere Conditions

As well as showing that various validity claims are raised for discursive validation in argumentation, Habermas demonstrates, by way of formal pragmatic analysis of everyday communication, that every participant attempting to undertake argumentation must make reference to a number of idealizing presuppositions. The explication of these idealizations provides a set of normative conditions or critical standards of the public sphere by which to evaluate and improve the democratic quality of existing communicative acts.[5] I will carry out this explication from my particular reading of Habermas' work.[6]

In undertaking argumentation, participants presuppose the taking of reasoned positions upon the validity of an aspect of social life that has become problematized. This is the first condition of public sphere discourse.

> *i. Thematization and reasoned critique of problematic validity claims*
> Argumentation involves the thematization and reciprocal rational testing of problematic validity claims. (Habermas, 1984: 18, 25-26, 287). Arguments must be addressed not just to those present in conversation but to all others potentially affected by the claims under consideration, to the 'larger' or 'ideal' or 'virtual' community of discussants.

Arguments about justice encompass all humans, and thus in such discourse actors must address their reasoning to the universal audience. This is what is meant by saying that claims must be universalizable, and is another sense in which we can speak of *the* public sphere. With less universal claims, participants speak to the 'virtual' public concerned. This first presupposition sets the basic structure of argumentation and the public sphere. However, reciprocal critique remains fruitless for the formation of rational, publicly-oriented opinions if positions and associated reasons are not open to revision when found wanting. In other words, argumentation presupposes the condition of reflexivity.

> *ii. Reflexivity*
> In argumentation 'participants question and transcend whatever their initial preferences may have been' (Habermas, 1992a:

449). This means communicative rationality presupposes reflexivity: the critical examination of one's values, assumptions, and interests in the light of all other relevant claims and reasons.

To be reflexive participants must first have attained a certain level of communicative competence – the level of postconventional communicative competence needed to take up a critical distance from pre-discursive positions and to call into question all sources of validity outside argumentation. This postconventional communicative competence has largely been attained within liberal democratic cultures. However, such competence does not guarantee reflexivity in argumentation. Argumentation relies upon participants accepting the challenge to reflexivity made when validity claims are offered.[7] This requires that participants are willing to question and modify their own positions in the light of all other relevant claims and reasons, which in turn demands taking the position of the other. In other words, in undertaking argumentation participants presuppose ideal role taking.

> *iii. Ideal role taking*
> In rational discourse participants put themselves in the position of all those potentially affected by the claims under consideration, and consider the situation from these other perspectives (Habermas, 1996: 228-230; 1990:198; McCarthy, 1992: 54). Participants must remain 'hermeneutically open and sensitive to how others understand themselves and the world' (Habermas, 2001: 34). This operation involves both impartiality and respectful listening. Above all, participants approach discourse with an attitude of seeking to understand rather than to aggravate or bypass difference. This attitude, in turn, demands a commitment to working through differences, and thus to ongoing communication.

Taking the position of the other assumes that all relevant information (identities, needs, intentions, interests, etc) are put forward honestly. Indeed, all communicative action presupposes the truthfulness of expressions, '[t]hat the manifest intention of the speaker is meant as it is expressed' (Habermas, 1984: 99). This presupposition makes up the fourth condition, sincerity.

iv. Sincerity
Argumentation is premised upon honesty or discursive openness in contrast to deception, including self-deception for which one must remain 'critically alert' (Habermas, 2001: 34). Rational communication presupposes that participants mean what they say and make a sincere effort to make known all relevant information, including that which relates to their intentions, interests, needs, and desires (Habermas, 2001: 34).

The previous normative conditions all assume and rely upon the most explicit meaning of the concept 'public': that all those affected by the claims under consideration are equally entitled and enabled to participate in deliberation, an idealization of communicative rationality that makes up the fifth condition.

v. Formal and Discursive Equality
Argumentation is open to all participants potentially affected by the claims under consideration (Habermas, 1990: 89; 1996: 305-306, 361; 2001:34). Furthermore, each participant is given equal opportunity to introduce and question any assertion whatsoever and to express attitudes, desires, and needs (Habermas, 1990: 89, 1996: 305-306, 308, 2001: 34).

This is a two-part condition. Participants undertaking rational discourse do not simply assume formal inclusion: that all relevant positions are *in principle* included. They also presuppose discursive equality: that all affected by the claims under consideration are equally *able* to participate. Even when inclusion is formalized, informal restrictions may hinder participation, restrictions that result from social and cultural inequalities. Inclusion may be limited by inequalities within discourse, where some dominate discourse and others struggle to get their voices heard. It may also be limited by inequalities from outside of discourse, such as when a certain level of material wealth or education is required to take part in proceedings. This in turn presupposes that social inequalities of all types (based on money, skills, status, etc) do not impact upon participation; and because discourse cannot be insulated from socio-economic disparities, substantive social equality is also ideally presupposed (Habermas, 1996: 308).[8]

All these conditions are based on the general discursive presupposition that the only factor determining outcomes is the 'revisionary power of free-floating reasons' (Habermas, 2001: 34). In other words, no force is to be exerted, 'whether it arises from within the process of reaching understanding itself or influences it from the outside – except the force of better argument' (Habermas, 1984: 25). Autonomy from coercive and instrumental forces *internal* to discourse (bribery, threats, dogma, domination, manipulation, etc) is already accounted for by the above conditions of communicative rationality. Autonomy from forces *external* to communicative reason (state coercion and corporate power) needs to be covered by a further condition.

> *vi. Autonomy from state and corporate power*
> Argumentation constituting the public sphere of citizen inter-
> action is free from the influence of state and corporate inter-
> ests.

This condition does not mean that communicative rationality has no place in the affairs of the state and the economy. Communicative rationality is required for the effective functioning and legitimacy of democratic govern-ment (both executive and legislative branches) and for democratic relation-ships to develop within the workplace. However, the activities of state and economy are largely apparatuses of purposive rationality (e.g. the capitalist economy constitutes subjects as consumers rather than citizens). The direc-tion of force and influence should be from the public sphere to these sys-tems, and not the other way around. The means by which this influence can take place is found in the final presupposition of communicative rationality: that argumentation in the public sphere aims towards reaching understanding and agreement. I will give this presupposition special attention here not only because of the critical attention it has received, but because it points beyond the conditions of discourse to the end point of argumentation: the forma-tion of public opinion through which citizens are able to influence and hold accountable formal government.[9] While I am not interested here in formal decision-making, I do need to specify how this final presupposition con-tributes to the six conditions of the public sphere conception outlined above.

Understanding and Public Opinion Formation

For Habermas, as already noted, reaching understanding is the telos of communicative rationality, it is presupposed in all argumentation. However, the idea of reaching understanding has a number of meanings, as Habermas (1979: 3) explains:

> The goal of coming to understanding [*Verständigung*] is to bring about an agreement [*Einverständnis*] that terminates in the intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another. Agreement is based on recognition of the corresponding validity claims of comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness, and rightness. We can see that the word understanding is ambiguous. In its minimal meaning it indicates that two subjects understand a linguistic expression in the same way; its maximal meaning is that between the two there exists an accord concerning the rightness of an utterance in relation to a mutually recognized normative background. In addition, two participants in communication can come to an understanding about something in the world, and they can make their intentions understandable to one another.

In its most basic sense, intersubjective understanding simply means linguistic comprehensibility. In every communicative act, we must presuppose that we can use the same expressions in the same way (Habermas, 1984: 307). As Habermas (1992b: 477) asserts, 'if we don't presuppose that we can assign the same meaning to the same terms, we wouldn't even start to speak.'

Comprehensibility is also a condition for the most demanding sense of understanding, which is agreement over the universal validity of claims to truth and justice.[10] Habermas (1984: 42) explains that, in such argumentation,

> the meaning of the problematic validity claim conceptually forces participants to assume that a rationally motivated agreement could in principle be achieved, whereby the phrase "in principle" expresses the idealizing proviso: if only the argumentation could be conducted openly enough and continued long enough.

The *possibility* of consensus is presupposed in reasoning over matters of truth and justice because the nature of such matters is such that participants have to work towards agreement in order to live together peacefully. Yet, in the

absence of coercion, consensus can only be *guaranteed* if discourse is continued indefinitely. The presupposition of reaching understanding extends no exacting demand that discourse in the public sphere must in fact reach consensus. 'Consensual agreement, if and when it does emerge, emerges gradually and is fragmentary and partial' (Chambers, 1995: 250). This means that public opinion, the result of discourse in the public sphere, is always in the *process* of formation. This process of development or *Bildung* is nicely explained by Chambers (1995: 238-239):[11]

> The rationality of public opinion and will formation in general does not depend on citizens reaching a rational consensus on all issues. A discursively formed public opinion can represent a process of *Bildung* or education in which citizens build better foundations to their opinions through discursive interaction. Through discursive interaction on various issues from who are we? To the best means of securing deficit reduction, citizens become more informed about the issues; they become aware of what others think and feel; they re-evaluate their positions in light of criticism and argument; in short, by defending their opinions with reason their opinions become more reasoned. The result of such interaction is that public opinion and the exercise of democratic responsibility are embedded in reasoned convictions, although reasoned convictions do not always need to reflect a consensus on an issue.

By presupposing the reaching of understanding, and in some cases agreement, participants of argumentation are committing themselves to an ongoing learning process involving rational-critical deliberations that challenge pre-discursive positions and move subjects towards more reasonable and publicly-oriented opinions. In other words, discursive participants simply commit themselves to the conditions of communicative rationality as delineated above. Thus, no further condition needs be added to our prior specification.

Conclusion

Communicative rationality is the form of communication that, according to Habermas, enables the formation of a public sphere of reasoned deliberation through which public opinion develops that can hold formal decision-making accountable. In this paper I have delineated a normative conception of the public sphere from my reading of Habermas' formal pragmatic recon-

struction of the presuppositions of communicative rationality. The conditions that I have specified as constituting the Habermasian public sphere are the thematization and reasoned critique of problematic validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role taking, sincerity, formal inclusion and discursive equality, and autonomy from state and corporate interests.

Many social and political theorists agree with Habermas concerning the importance of spaces of critical communication for strong democracy. Yet many are also critical of Habermas' specific formulation of communicative rationality, and thus the resulting public sphere conceptualisation. Some critics question the conception's realizablity in actual communications of contemporary culture. In reply, it must be noted that the conception is an idealization, useful for the critical evaluation of the democratic value of everyday informal deliberations, and only able to be approximated in practice. Furthermore, for the discursive conditions to be approximated in large, complex, plural societies, various institutional conditions are needed as mediations and groundings of communicative rationality, including a democratic media system, a vibrant civil society, and open governmental processes. It is to these institutions that we must look in order to strengthen citizen deliberation and public opinion, evaluating their success via the communicative conditions outlined in this paper.

Other critics of Habermas focus upon the post-metaphysical (universal yet immanent) status claimed for communicative rationality, or upon the democratic validity of the conception. Although I do acknowledge these as important sets of critiques, this is not the place to undertake their exploration.[12] My intention here has been simply to specify the normative conditions of the idealized public sphere from my reading of Habermas' theory of communicative rationality. The defence, re-development, and further detailing of the necessarily hypothetical conception must be left to elsewhere.[13] In the mean time, the conception is offered as a starting point for the critical examination of the democratic quality of everyday communication.

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Notes

1. While Habermas's work is the most popular, and arguably the most compelling, there are various possible starting points for public sphere evaluations. See Ferree et al. (2002) for a sketch of four public sphere models.

2. Habermas' (1984: 288-337) reconstruction takes place with reference, in particular, to Austin's and Searle's speech act theory. The fact that Habermas looks for universals embedded in the structure of everyday language use indicates that he has not given up the idea of carrying out an immanent critique. Rather, as Calhoun (1992a: 40) explains, he has transferred 'the immanence from specific historical conditions to universal characteristics of human communication.'

3. Although every speech act implicitly refers to all three areas of validity (truth, rightness, truthfulness), only one validity claim is explicitly thematized by the illocutionary component – the aspect of speech where the speaker performs an action in saying something, such as a promise, command, or confession (Habermas, 1984: 289).

4. Habermas (1996) has relaxed his earlier insistence that the public sphere is to be confined to the thematization of moral-practical claims. While still seeing moral-practical discourse as central, Habermas now sees ethical discourse (about the self-understanding of a community) and pragmatic discourse (about the most efficient means of achieving certain goals) as also constituting the public sphere. The term discourse is used here to describe all forms of rational-critical deliberation, although Habermas (1984: 42) in the past reserved the term specifically for that type of argumentation involving universal validity claims (claims of truth and justice).

5. I have chosen to use the word 'condition' because it has the double meaning of 'state of existence' and 'something required to achieve an ideal existence,' which expresses the embedded yet idealized nature of the public sphere conception as derived from Habermas' theory of communicative rationality.

6. I draw here from Habermas' theories of communicative action, discourse ethics, deliberative democracy, and the public sphere. See, in particular, Habermas (1984: 1-26; 1990: 43-115; 1993: 31-33, 56-76; 1996: 267-387; 2001). Cooke's (1994) illuminating work on Habermas' idealizations of communicative rationality and Chamber's (1996) insights into the conditions of discourse have been particularly helpful in clarifying the public sphere conditions.

7. Reflexivity may or may not be a conscious activity. This is in contrast to reflection, which connotes conscious thought. For further discussion of this distinction see Beck (1994).

8. While equality will not be fully realized in practice, it is presupposed by participants, which is made explicit when claims for participatory equality are thematized in argumentation.

9. Many democratic theorists are vehemently opposed to the idea that democratic consensus can result from rational deliberation in pluralist societies (Flax, 1992; Gould, 1996: 172-174; Lyotard, 1984; Mouffe, 1996: 248).

10. Callinicos (1989: 105) charges Habermas with conflating understanding and agreement. However, Habermas agrees with Callinicos when the latter asserts that we can understand what someone is saying without agreeing with them. Central to argumentation is the idea that a claim may be fully understood and yet rejected.

11. As emphasized by Jeremy Shapiro's (1970) translator's preface in *Toward a Rational Society*: 'Bildung literally means "formation," but also "education" and (cultural) "cultivation." In German these narrower meanings always connote an overall developmental process.'

12. As well as Habermas' ongoing discourse with his critics, defence of the critical status and democratic validity of the public sphere conception as based upon communicative rationality can be found in Baynes (1994), Benhabib (1996), Chambers (1996; 2000), and Dryzek (2000).

13. In Dahlberg (2000) I offer a defence of the public sphere criteria as derived from Habermas' theory of communicative rationality. In Dahlberg (2003) I prepare the conditions of discourse for the critical analysis of online communication by identifying suitable (to the object of analysis) indicators for each of the criteria listed in this paper.

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