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Distrust of representation: Habermas on the public sphere

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Those who have come to expect thunderous denunciations of mass culture from the Frankfurt School will be struck by the ambivalence with which Jürgen Habermas treats the mass media in his still unfolding theory of communication. While Habermas, the leading light of the second generation of the Frankfurt School, can do a good jeremiad against the commercial media's power to manipulate audiences, he also finds in the mass media a potentially liberating power that was quite absent from the analyses of Horkheimer and Adorno. Indeed, Habermas's willingness to view the social roles of the mass media multi-dimensionally is bound up with his more general *modus operandi* of rescuing the positive moment from political circumstances whose impurity could daunt the more squeamish. As James Schmidt (1982: 182) notes of Habermas's stance towards the Enlightenment, 'For something on the order of a quarter of a century, Jürgen Habermas has struggled to keep both his guard up and his faith intact'. First generation Frankfurt theory generally lacked a politically positive moment: like the music of Schoenberg or the plays of Beckett so admired by Adorno, critical theory spoke in 'negations' when it came to politics. FDR's liberalism, Stalin's communism and Hitler's fascism — no 'really existing' political alternative offered an adequate homeland. To be sure, hints of a utopian political horizon are never absent, but they are left as *visions fugitives* that defy discursive formulation. Habermas, for reasons I will speculate on later, is less ginger in his approach to a positive political vision: he writes incessantly and explicitly about what would be required. He does not wish to wander forever in exile, but to draw up norms for a just city on earth.

Habermas's larger political project, his theory of communication, and

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his scattered comments on the mass media converge in the notion of 'the public sphere' (*die Öffentlichkeit*), a site governed neither by the intimacy of the family, the authority of the state, nor the exchange of the market, but by the 'public reason of private citizens'. Partly due to its resonance with neglected aspects of the Anglo-American political tradition, the concept of the 'public sphere' has taken on a life of its own in scholarly and public debates (for examples of its impact in media studies, see Gouldner, 1976; Hallin, 1985; Dahlgren, 1987; Garnham, 1990; Scannell, 1989; Peters and Cmiel, 1991; Curran, 1991a, 1991b). Though 'communication' in Habermas's more recent writings sometimes seems a term to conjure with, his 1962 *Habilitationsschrift, Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1984a), recently and belatedly translated as *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989a), is a sustained treatment of concrete practices and institutions of communication. In its sweeping account of the history and sociology of institutions of public communication in England, France and Germany from the Renaissance to the mid-twentieth century, the book touches on newspapers, novels, letters, conversation, debate, salons and coffee-houses, concerts and the theatre, secret societies, living rooms and public parks, parliaments, advertising and the mass media in general, among other forms and fora of (public) communication. And all this in a framework that clearly shows Habermas's commitment to public reason, though without the theoretical elaboration this commitment has taken in his more recent work (Habermas, 1984b, 1987). Accordingly, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (hereinafter referred to as *STPS*) offers much of value to our understanding of the political and cultural roles and functions of public communication in late modern societies. It gives nothing less than an archaeology of the ideas and ideologies that inform current practices and policies of the mass media. This article aims to explain some central features of Habermas's theory of the public sphere with an eye to their relevance for media studies, drawing especially on *STPS*, but also his other work. It will raise more controversies than it can pretend to solve, in order to sketch major issues in interpreting Habermas's theory. His theory is invaluable, though I will ultimately argue that it rests on a problematic understanding of communication and its work.

I

What precisely does Habermas mean by 'public sphere'? Issues of translation help show the range of the concept and take away some of its exotic aura; in many ways, 'the public sphere' is Habermas's return gift to Anglo-American thought. *Öffentlichkeit*, the German term translated in *STPS* as *public sphere*, literally means *publicness*, as the noun formed from the adjective *öffentlich* (public). In current German, it means pretty much

what English-speakers mean by 'the public': a sociological aggregate of readers, viewers or citizens, that excludes no one a priori and is endowed with key political and critical powers. However, *Öffentlichkeit* can also be rendered as *openness*, as in Kennedy's translation of Carl Schmitt's *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1985), one of many influences on *STPS*. In fact, Gorbachev's *glasnost* translates *Öffentlichkeit* precisely. The English equivalent, *publicity*, which similarly once meant the condition of being public, has been incapacitated for political or theoretical usage (significantly leaving 'privacy' as a general term without a correlative opposite). In writings by theorists such as Jeremy Bentham (1843) and John Stuart Mill (1952), as we will see below, 'publicity' meant openness of discussion and commerce as well as popular access to government. Today *publicity* only suggests public relations. The semantic change of *publicity* thus mirrors Habermas's thesis about a structural transformation from critical participation to consumerist manipulation. Our language of public and private, then, participates in the structural transformation of the public sphere.

The concept of publicity was a decisive eighteenth-century invention, both as a political term and as a realm of social life.

Publicity [*Öffentlichkeit*] is one of those revolutionary concepts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that were forged into the battle-instruments of political propaganda by Enlightenment philosophy. Since then, publicity has counted as a decisive criterion of political reason at least, if not of reason as such. . . . Publicity is the social medium in which political authority not only must legitimize itself but also — and this is the specific feature of the modern world since the eighteenth century — should primarily form itself. (Hölscher, 1979: 7)

Öffentlichkeit had chiefly this political sense at first, but in the nineteenth century the term absorbed more and more of the semantic territory of *Publikum* (=audience) (Hölscher, 1979: 136ff), inasmuch as 'publicity' as an abstract principle presupposes a concrete 'public' or 'audience'. In Habermas's usage, *Öffentlichkeit* can mean the political principle of openness or publicity, the means of public-ation (the media) and the sociological groupings which are the object of such publication (the body of citizens or readers). Translating *Öffentlichkeit* as 'public sphere' helps us avoid thinking of 'the public' too exclusively as a body of people; it usefully calls attention to the larger political and institutional requirements for such a 'sphere'.

But the term can also be profoundly misleading if we think of it as an exotic or difficult new concept from critical theory. *Öffentlichkeit* combines two of the most ordinary and fundamental political terms of the Anglo-American tradition: (1) 'publicity' in the sense of openness and access, and (2) 'the public' as the sovereign body of citizens. In *STPS*, Habermas aims to take seriously a key political concept of Enlightenment vintage: he is retrieving, not innovating. Translation has unwittingly created a new

concept, 'the public sphere', associated with Jürgen Habermas, whereas in the German Habermas reads more clearly as trying to understand a traditional legal principle (one that appeared in the *Grundgesetz* of 1949, the constitution of the late Federal Republic of Germany — the *Öffentlichkeit* of parliament and trials is guaranteed in article 42). 'Public sphere' in English or '*l'espace public*' in French — Habermas's originality grows in translation. That Habermas is often known in the German-speaking world as an importer of Anglo-American thought and in the Anglo-American world as an abstruse German philosopher attests to both the range of his synthetic achievement and the vagaries of cross-cultural reception. A German scholar reportedly called Habermas 'the man who gave us Locke and Mill' (Kennedy, 1987b: 102, note 2); perhaps he will yet do the same for English-speaking scholars.

To be sure, Habermas has done a great service by reconstructing a largely forgotten concept that still lies, officially, at the foundation of constitutional government: the idea of a sovereign, reasonable public, nourished by the critical reporting of the press and engaged in the mutually enlightening clash of arguments. Over time, goes the story, the 'civic forum' arrives at a rational 'public opinion' which then both legitimizes and dictates the actions of the government. The dream of a participatory and reasonable public, however much it seems an eighteenth-century chimera, grounds the constitutional state normatively. The appeal to 'the public', as Habermas notes, is more 'than a scrap of liberal ideology' that can be discarded without harm to modern democracies (STPS: 4/17).¹ STPS, like Habermas's later work, is a quest for means to revive democracy in current circumstances — Habermas doesn't want to have to don a powdered wig to take the central ideas of democratic life seriously.

The structural transformation of publicity and of the public is a process with many ins and outs for Habermas, involving institutions such as court, king, people, family, press, market and state. Briefly, the bourgeois public sphere, whose ideal type is found in eighteenth-century England, emerges from the 'representative' style of publicity that prevailed in the Renaissance. A critical ideal of 'publicity' arises that undercuts the secrecy of the absolutist state, subjecting state policies and officials to the inspection of reason; the bourgeois 'public' as a collective of private citizens acquires considerable power as a critical influence on the state and as an economic force. The revolutionary moments in the late eighteenth century give birth to the democratic ideas which make constitutional states trustworthy and believable — in other words, legitimate.

II

The chrysalis of the bourgeois or civil public sphere (*bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*) is what Habermas calls 'representative publicity' (*repräsentative*

Öffentlichkeit). This latter term is hard to capture (STPS's translators render it, unhappily, as 'publicness or publicity of representation' or 'representative publicness'), but it refers to that Ur-form of 'publicity' in premodern Europe — the publicly displayed status of the feudal lord. Trappings of office and 'symbols of sovereignty, for instance the princely seal, were deemed "public"' (Habermas, 1974: 50). This sense of 'public' makes no reference to an open social site where citizens participate through discussion; it suggests for Habermas, rather, the display of prestige, not critical discussion, spectacle, not debate, and appearance before the people, as on a stage, not for them (STPS: 8/20). Such pomp and circumstance were aimed to be visible to all, to show off the sovereign and the lordly classes, and were public in the sense of 'open view; general notice', as Samuel Johnson defined that term in his 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*. Representative publicity, in short, 'forms the historical background for modern forms of public communication' (Habermas, 1990: 17).

Representative publicity is tied to persons, not principles: it was enacted in the dress, speech, hairstyles, gestures — the code of chivalrous behavior — of lords and ladies. As Hohendahl notes (in Habermas, 1974: 51, note 4), Habermas uses the term *repräsentation* in the sense of *presenting oneself*: 'The important thing to understand is that the medieval public sphere, if it even deserves this designation, is tied to the personal. The feudal lord and estates create the public sphere by means of their very presence'. 'Repräsentation' in German has connotations of prestige, ceremony and imposingness that the English lacks. It is just this sense of the potency of the person of the king that informs the medieval doctrine of the king's two bodies (Kantorowicz, 1957). The king has both a 'body natural' and a 'body politic', the one being his physical, mortal body, the other being the state as a metaphysical, immortal corporation. The natural body of the king thus *represented* the body politic (see the instructive if apocryphal comment of Louis XIV: *l'état, c'est moi, I am the state*). Representative publicity is necessarily *staged*: in pageants, jousting matches, theatrical productions and courtly conduct. Part of its legacy is the theatre (STPS: 12–14/25–8). The baroque festivals of the seventeenth century, especially those of Louis XIV, embody a later version of representative publicity, although they take place in the court at Versailles, out of the sight of the common people (Alewyn, 1973). Representative publicity, notes Habermas, survives today in the church — 'in ecclesiastical ritual, in liturgy, mass, and procession' (STPS: 8/21), and, as we shall see, in the mass media. Representative publicity, for Habermas a counter-organization to democratic participation, remains a perennial option for the organization of public life.

Habermas is profoundly suspicious of representative publicity and clearly enchanted with the bourgeois public sphere. Each offers a rival

model of political life: the theatre and the market-place. In one, the people are the audience, before whom sustained discourse can be performed; in the other, the people themselves are the actors, but the scripts are less clearly composed. If oppressive pomp is the danger of one, the chaos of chatter is the danger of the other. Whatever the artistry and splendour of a theatrical mode of politics, Habermas sees only its elitist social basis, its lack of participation. Hence Habermas (1990: 17) is critical of Richard Sennett's *Fall of Public Man* (1974) for importing features of a representative model into a bourgeois or civic model of public life. What Sennett laments as a 'fall' in public life — the replacement of more or less flamboyant forms of personal display in dress, speech and demeanor by private, 'intimate' forms of sober self-expression — is for Habermas a step toward a more democratic mode of civil society. This preference for plain speech, we shall see, clues us into the cultural background of Habermas's understanding of communication. It is accordingly quite incorrect to think of the public sphere as modeled on theatre or spectacle, as readers of Habermas often do (for example Carpiagnano et al., 1990).

Habermas's choice of terms for this theatrical mode of public life is clarified by referring to Carl Schmitt, a controversial political theorist who Habermas uses for key parts of his argument in *STPS* (see Habermas, 1986; Kennedy, 1987a, 1987b; Jay, 1987). Schmitt (1957: 204–20) contrasts two principles of political form: *identity* and *representation*. In the former, 'the people' are identical with the state, an identity realized through plebiscites, assemblies of all citizens, etc. The principle of identity, in other words, grounds the vision of participatory democracy (derived largely from Rousseau) that was so crucial to the early New Left at the time of *STPS*'s writing. The rival principle says there is no 'people' without representation, whether by a delegate ('representative') or other means. Schmitt's definition of *representation* combines the political and semiotic senses of the word: 'To represent is to make visible and realize an invisible entity through a publicly present entity. The dialectic of the concept lies in the fact that the invisible entity is presupposed as absent and yet is simultaneously made present' (Schmitt, 1957: 209–10). As air is to fire, so publicity is to representation: it cannot take place backstage. Both a parliamentary government (with its 'representatives' to a national assembly) and an absolutist monarchy (*l'état, c'est moi*) partake, in Schmitt's terms, of representation, since 'the people' are not identical with the government in either instance, but are symbolically mediated by others who stand in their place.

Representative publicity for Habermas, then, is public in the sense that its pomp is on display to all, but not in the sense of offering common access to popular participation. Clifford Geertz's notion (1980) of the 'theatre state' is suggestive of an extreme type of representative publicity. Ever since Machiavelli, according to Geertz, western political thought viewed

the trappings of rule as a pretty covering for the dirty work of government — pageantry serving to bedazzle spectators so that power might work behind the scenes. In nineteenth-century Bali, however, the relationship was reversed: 'Power served pomp, not pomp power' (Geertz, 1980: 13). 'The dramas of the theatre state, mimetic of themselves, were, in the end, neither illusions nor lies, neither sleight of hand nor make-believe. They were what there was' (Geertz, 1980: 136). *STPS* displays a discomfort with the long tradition in German thought on the aesthetic state (Chytry, 1989); Habermas sees no positive political value in public representations, leaving a problem for his political theory (as we shall see later).

Obviously, the concept of representative publicity is highly suggestive for understanding the social sphere that the mass media inherit in the twentieth century, and for debates about the role of the audience. In his introduction to the German reissue of *STPS*, Habermas (1990) softens claims about the immobilized spectators of feudal pomp, more in line with the current fashion in cultural studies of active audiences and resisting readers. In traditional forms of representative publicity

the people are the backdrop before which the lordly estates, nobility, ecclesiastical dignitaries, king, etc. present themselves and their status. The people belong to the constitutive requirements of this representative public sphere inasmuch as they are excluded from the represented power. (Habermas, 1990: 17)

The people, however, were 'by no means only a backdrop or a passive frame for the ruling culture' but took part in periodic revolts and countercultural carnivals against 'the hierarchical world of lordly dominion with its official ceremonies and everyday disciplines' (Habermas, 1990: 18). Though a participatory public sphere did not yet exist, still the people could do more than gaze stupidly at the lordly classes' power and glory (Habermas here draws on scholars of Renaissance culture such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Natalie Zemon Davis). Whatever the ability of the common folk to mock elite culture by inverting its signs, however, they had no real access to public life. The relation between spectacle and participation remains a live issue in media studies; as Habermas warns, a threat in the twentieth century is 'refeudalisation of the public sphere'.

III

If the public face of the Renaissance state was splendour, its core was shrouded in secrecy. The combination of the state's public pomp and private secrecy was raised to the level of a political philosophy by Machiavelli, but it was a commonplace of Renaissance statecraft. A positive role was given to the secrets of the state — *arcana imperii*. Indeed, since the fifteenth century, those with intimate access to this secret realm of

this state have been called *secretaries* (Hölscher, 1979: 130). As Hölscher (1979: 7) points out, since the late eighteenth century the opposite of *public* has been *private*, but before that it was *secret*. A turning-point in modern political life is the battle against a secretive state in the name of 'public opinion' and 'publicity'. 'Historically, the polemical claim to this kind of rationality against the secrecy [*Arkanpraxis*] of absolutist authority developed in connection with the public reasoning of private people' (STPS: 53*172). With the appearance of a bourgeois reading public and bourgeois economic power, the state was called upon to make its decisions before the open gaze of the reasoning citizenry. Not the arbitrary will (*voluntas*) of the prince but the reasoning (*ratio*) of the citizenry was the source of legitimacy, an early version of Habermas's notion of domination-free communication.

'Publicity' is the late-eighteenth-century name for what is called 'disclosure' (in business) or 'freedom of information' (in government) today. The concept was used to attack the state as a carrier of secrets: 'The light of the public is the light of the Enlightenment, a liberation from superstition, fanaticism, and ambitious intrigue. In every system of Enlightened despotism, public opinion plays the role of an absolute corrective' (Schmitt, 1985: 38). Or for Foucault (1980: 153-4):

A fear haunted the latter half of the eighteenth century: the fear of darkened spaces, of the pall of gloom which presents the full visibility of things, men, and truths. It sought to break up the patches of darkness that blocked the light, eliminate the shadowy areas of society, demolish the unit chambers where arbitrary political acts, monarchical caprice, religious superstitions, tyrannical and priestly plots, epidemics and the illusions of ignorance were fomented . . . This reign of 'opinion', so often invoked at this time, represents a mode of operation through which power will be exercised by virtue of the mere fact of things being known and people seen in a sort of immediate, collective and anonymous gaze.

Like Habermas, Foucault sees a momentous shift in the basic structure of political authority in the latter half of the eighteenth century — from kingly prerogative to public surveillance — yet with a crucial difference: Foucault sees the Enlightenment notion of publicity as the key disciplinary tool of modern 'carceral' societies (Foucault, 1979), while Habermas takes it as a lasting norm of public reason.

There is a large and illuminating literature on eighteenth-century political thought and the place of ideas about the public, publicity and public opinion in it that supplements STPS's Part IV (for example Gunn, 1983; Ozouf, 1988; Baker, 1990). Public opinion, for instance, is a concept that arises from a structural transformation of state authority, its opening up to popular control. In late eighteenth-century France, Baker (1990: 172) argues, relying at least somewhat on STPS: "Public opinion" took form as a political or ideological construct, rather than as a discrete

sociological referent.' It emerged from a legitimation crisis within the absolutist state: 'the public' offered itself as a new source of legitimation, with governmental power being justified through contestation or discussion. 'By accepting the logic of a politics of contestation in this way, the royal government unwittingly conspired with its opposition to foster the transfer of ultimate authority from the public person of the sovereign to the sovereign person of the public' (Baker, 1990). 'Public opinion' in France, according to Baker, was not just the weapon of a class whose burgeoning social and economic power whetted its appetite for a piece of the political pie as well; it is an unwittingly self-destructive trope used by the French monarchy in a last-ditch effort to legitimize its rule. It made reason the basis of authority, with after-effects we are still feeling.

Obviously the chief means of 'publicity' and igniter of 'public opinion' was the press — 'the public sphere's most preeminent institution' (STPS: 181*217). Habermas takes the guarantees of free communication of thoughts in the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen' of 1789 as an explicit instance of the principle of publicity (STPS: 70/91); doubtless, he would also take the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States (1791) in the same way. Thomas Erskine, defending Tom Paine against the charge of seditious libel in 1792, made publicity a human right as basic as breathing: as Keane puts it (1989: 36), 'Each individual naturally requires the oxygen of publicity'. Democratic government, then, rests on a posited link between the people and the state via the public sphere: the state opens itself up via *publicity*, and the people respond with *public opinion*. Parliaments (representative assemblies) are held by liberals such as Jeremy Bentham, F.P.G. Guizot and John Stuart Mill to be the mediating organs in which the public conversation is centralized. As Guizot said, 'In publicity consists the bond between a society and its government When absolute or aristocratic government prevails, publicity disappears' (Guizot, 1861: 80-1).

STPS surveys the history of the 'idea and ideology' of the bourgeois public sphere in Part IV. Rather than narrate his useful account, I want to compare other liberal political theorists who have conceived of publicity and its connection to the press (mass media). For Kant, with whom Habermas's ultimate loyalty clearly lies, publicity is the political counter-part of morality or the 'categorical imperative'. Those acts are just, says Kant, that an actor could wish were a universal law for all people and seasons. Similarly, publicity is based on universalizability: every citizen, regardless of personal status, may participate in public debate and discussion (on Kant, see STPS: 102-17/127-43). An act done completely in the light of publicity is, for Kant, necessarily a good act; evil requires secrecy. As throughout Kant's thought, a substantive result is thought to follow automatically from a formal procedure.

Despite some very suggestive comments on the politics of publication

(Kant, 1964), Kant pays less attention to the press than Jeremy Bentham, James Mill and John Stuart Mill. Thanks to Foucault's terrifyingly compelling account of 'panopticism' (1979) it is easy to see Bentham's vision of a new kind of architectural design, the Panopticon, as the high point of iniquity in modern times. Bentham proposed a circular prison with cells along the diameter and a guard at the center.

By blinds and other contrivances, the keeper concealed from the observation of the prisoners, unless where he thinks fit to show himself: hence, on their part, the sentiment of an invisible omnipresence The whole circuit reviewable with little, or, if necessary, without any, change of place. (Bentham, 1969: 194)

For Foucault the Panopticon is the very type of modern power: it is an allegory of the soul under the gaze of the disciplines. But for Bentham, philosophical radical that he was (and whose politics in defense of the marginal seem strikingly similar to those of Foucault: see Campos Boralevi, 1984), the Panopticon was an institutional embodiment of his philosophical and political doctrine of publicity. In moments of extreme enthusiasm, Bentham wrote as if the abolition of secrecy would cure social ills altogether. And the chief means of publicity was to be the press. Jokes about television as a 'state periscope' aside, it is hard for us to appreciate how radical were the views of Bentham and his associate James Mill: the press, as an invisible omnipresence, was to function as a social superego, a moral regulator, a check on all irrational action, not only for public officials, but for all members of the social body (Cumming, 1969: 257-60). Its job in the public sphere was not just the provision of information, but the coordination of the social body. Inasmuch as all acts were potentially under the watchful gaze of the press, morality would follow naturally. The 'sanction' of public opinion would make a society of transparent hearts and good acts. For these theorists publicity fills the vacuum of moral education once filled by religion.

The views of John Stuart Mill are closer to the liberal common sense of our day, but they also take the press as a creator of publicity. First of all, the press, like representative government itself, is an answer to the problem of scale. Ancient democracies were confined to the city-state: modern states, to surmount the limits on size, 'required the press, and even the newspaper press, the real equivalent, though not in all respects the adequate one, of the Pnyx and the Forum' (Mill, 1952: 330). The newspaper becomes the meeting place of citizens (the Pnyx being the assembly point of adult male citizens in ancient Athens). Though Mill takes it for granted that the actual work of government must be done by a cadre of elites who are specially trained for public service, he is convinced that public discussion is not only a school of moral and intellectual virtues but also the chief avenue of political participation. Popular government must above all guarantee

utmost possible publicity and liberty of discussion, whereby not merely a few individuals in succession, but the whole public, are made, to a certain extent, participants in the government, and sharers in the instruction and mental exercise derivable from it. (Mill, 1952: 363)

Parliament is the hub, but it sends spokes of enlightenment into the nation at large. By political discussion every citizen can be incorporated into the great whole: 'one whose daily occupations concentrate his interests in a small circle round himself, learns to feel for and with his fellow-citizens, and becomes consciously a member of a great community' (Mill, 1952: 382). The press portrays the public to itself and gives people means to hail themselves as members of an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983). Mill gives us a straightforward account of the role of publicity as a spark of public reason, and as a socializing (or to speak with Foucault, disciplining) agency, that, despite major philosophical differences, is certainly resonant with Habermas.

Reading Kant, Bentham and Mill against Habermas shows that the 'public sphere' is not so much a concept original to critical theory, but rather Habermas's return gift to liberal thought. This is not to say that Habermas endorses liberal thought without qualification — Habermas reads Mill's decided ambivalence on the capacities of the enlarged public (STPS: 129-40/158-71) as highly problematic. The point, rather, is that Habermas helps us to recognize parts of the tradition of Anglo-American political thought that can be reconstructed critically. The 'public sphere' has long been living next door. Little wonder that Habermas's most telling critics draw inspiration from Foucault: the core of the debate is whether modern ideas of publicity and public life, crystallized by Bentham and Mill, are a rational ideal of political participation or a subtly vicious form of control. Habermas is out to prove that democracy and reason are more than a totalizing dream of discipline.

IV

The counterpart to *publicity* in government was a social realm having subjects and cultural forms adapted for public discussion — 'the public'. Habermas draws together a variety of factors in eighteenth-century society to illustrate the contextual preconditions of the bourgeois public sphere. Here he practices the fine art of delicate dialectics, drawing normative ideals from the high watermark of the bourgeoisie. For some of his Marxist critics, Habermas succumbs too much to bourgeois ideology (see Hohendahl, 1979) and for others, his portrait of eighteenth-century life is overstylized (a point he is quite ready to concede: Habermas, 1990: 15). Nonetheless, Habermas clearly credits the contradiction between bourgeois ideals and

bourgeois reality, seeking to rescue the former from the latter (*STPS*: 86–8/108–11). The eighteenth century, the Age of Conversation, of salons, coffee-houses and other mini-republics of letters, gives birth to the ideal of free communication that is the core of Habermas's project. As Habermas (1987: 328) writes more recently:

Since the eighteenth century, the features of a form of life in which the rational potential of action oriented to mutual understanding is set free have been reflected in the self-understanding of the humanistically imbued European middle classes — in their political theories and educational ideals, in their art and literature.

In the 'utopia of reason' created within bourgeois self-understanding, 'communication was represented as standing on its own feet, setting limits to the dynamics of autonomous subsystems, bursting encapsulated expert cultures, and thus as escaping the combined threat of reification and desolation' (Habermas, 1987: 329). 'Communication' became a political and moral force to be reckoned with.

The origins of the bourgeois public sphere for Habermas lie in the rise of capitalism and of a Europe-wide system of circulation of both commodities and information. In this, the press succeeds the court as the site of publicity. In early forms of news — newsletters, pamphlets, public notices, etc. — the actions of the state become visible for the people. Moreover, with the rise of capitalism, production and reproduction, disparaged anciently as falling outside the realm of legitimate public attention, become matters of pressing political interest. Administrative attempts to control private life — regulations ranging from mercantile policies to dress codes — helped provoke a critical spirit on the part of the middle classes, which used the press as a weapon against arbitrary power. Open critique instead of stultifying pomp becomes the normative mode of public communication; a critical audience (*Publikum*) begins to take shape (*STPS*: §3).

Habermas finds a number of converging factors in the societies of eighteenth-century England, France and Germany (but see Nathans, 1990, for historical refinement). All of them support the ideal of a social realm in which reason, not arbitrary will, is the basis of power (*STPS*: Part II). There is the market with its ideals of free and equal exchange; the middle-class patriarchal family which acted as a training ground for literate argument and for a subjectivity suited for public life (*publikumsbezogene Subjektivität*); the appearance of state-free institutions of critical discussion in which equality was the norm and no honour was given to rank, only to persuasive argument — salons, academies, coffee-houses, lodges of free-masonry, debating societies; the shift from court-based to market-based cultural institutions, such as the theatre, music and the press, which offered entry to anyone who could pay, regardless of rank. Commodification of

culture could thus have a democratizing influence; here Habermas's position is distinct from Horkheimer and Adorno, who took the colonization of culture by the market in a monochromatically bleak way. All these changes nourished the ideology that all people possess humanity regardless of station — an ideology that Habermas claims transcends ideology.

A critical theorist might understandably be tempted to portray glowingly an era in which 'critique' was held to reign supreme. Habermas is quite aware, however, that, to use his more recent language, the Enlightenment is 'an incomplete project'; *STPS* paints the bourgeois public sphere as imperfectly realized and resting upon the flawed equation of the property-owner and the human being as such. Habermas does not hide the injustices of the market or the patriarchy of the bourgeois family even though both incubated the ideal of human equality and reason. The appearance of reason's claim to be the source of legitimate power is for him a revolutionary step forward, however muddled its social origins.

It is, admittedly, a tricky rescue mission, since the bourgeois public sphere rests on capital and patriarchy. As Gouldner (1976: 99) puts it,

In both bourgeois society and in classical antiquity, public rationality was grounded in class privilege and in unchallenged male domination of the family. Both provided that indispensable requisite for rational discourse: leisure, free from time-consuming work in the household and in the work-place, and the freedom to allocate one's own 'free time' without the control or permission of another. Patriarchal subjugation of women and private property, then, were the unmistakable conditions and limits of the post-Enlightenment development of public rationality in bourgeois society.

The bourgeois public sphere claimed the equality of all 'men' and yet depended on sexual and economic privilege. However, rational talk

is possible if and only if people may speak 'openly' without fear of sanctions, other than those imposed by the deficient logic and factuality of their speech, and only insofar as such sanctions are inflicted by co-speakers in their private capacity. (Gouldner, 1976: 98)

The personal characteristics of the speaker must be irrelevant to participation and critique. 'Publics thus require men to be treated as "private persons"' (Gouldner, 1976). The paradox is that the sanctions of the state and the privileges of the class system had to be excluded from the public realm yet such exclusions were funded by economic and familial power.

Probably the foremost challenge to Habermas's account of the rise of the public sphere, and to his theory of communicative reason in general, comes from feminist scholarship. Habermas is aware of the gendered character of the split between public and private spheres in *STPS*: he distinguishes a political public sphere from a literary one in the eighteenth century, the latter being a kind of shadow public sphere in which women and servants

could participate. And yet the possibly constitutive exclusion of women does not significantly shape his story. Carole Pateman (1988) has argued compellingly that the idea of public reason in civil society is based upon the exclusion of women from the public arena, inasmuch as citizenship has long been defined in terms of military service, and reason in terms of transcending the body. Joan Landes (1988) more directly faults Habermas for envisioning a public sphere whose regulative ideal of rationality owes much to an ideology of rationality whose maleness he does not recognize. Nancy Fraser (1985: 118–19) summarizes: 'as long as the citizen role is defined to encompass death-dealing soldiering but not life-fostering child-rearing, as long as it is tied to male-dominated modes of dialogue, then it . . . remains incapable of fully including women'. Habermas (1990: 18–21) responds by readily granting the patriarchal origins of the public sphere, but arguing for its enduring value because of its capacity for self-transformation. The critique that the bourgeois public sphere compromised norms of inclusion and equality, he notes, gains its force from the continuing relevance of those very ideals. The question whether universal reason is an as yet unredeemed claim or a plot against difference and heterogeneity is a notoriously vexatious issue; it is unclear whether Habermas's project could ever be fully reconciled with feminist thought, so incisive at showing the hidden specificity behind claims to universality (see, for example, Pateman, 1983; Fraser, 1985, 1990); Lisa McLaughlin's article in this issue pursues this question further.

V

Literature was revolutionary in the eighteenth century in the sense that it brought publics together and trained people in the art of critical analysis and discussion. Criticism had a decisively public function in that it combined literary, social and political judgments (Eagleton, 1984). *The Spectator* (No. 10, 1711), in many ways the prototype of literary journalism, recommended itself to 'everyone that considers the world as a theatre and desires to form a judgment of those who are the actors on it'. Here one can see a 'transitional form' between representative publicity and the bourgeois public sphere — the public realm was modeled on the theatre yet encouraged the lay judgment of middle-class critics. The institutional site of such criticism was crucial. Neither church nor state sponsored such publications nor the discussion around them; journalism was a private (market) affair carried out in 'civil society' and run by interested private people. The public sphere of 'letters' in the broad sense was a foretaste of a new and growing zone of social life that was neither court nor market nor private home, but 'civil society'. Indeed, *STPS*'s subtitle might be rendered as 'An Inquiry into a Category of Civil Society'. It is worth pausing briefly

to situate 'the public sphere' in terms of recent arguments about 'civil society'.

The intellectual historian Reinhart Koselleck (1988), who Habermas also relies on in *STPS*, usefully shows how *private* life could be stridently *political*. Thomas Hobbes's theory, he argues, left 'conscience' free from state authority. Thus a crack opened in the power of the state: some things were off-limits to its authority. Then John Locke, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1975: 353–7) posited a realm of law governed only by people acting upon each other (the law of opinion) supplementing the traditional twofold division of divine and civil law, a radical challenge to the claims of church and state to possess sole authority in moral and legal matters. The idea that censure could be administered solely by one's fellows was scandalous and caused Locke enough grief to fight for his position in later editions of the *Essay*. 'The carrier of this secret morality is no longer the individual; it is "society", a structure taking shape in the "clubs" in which philosophers, for instance, devote themselves especially to the investigation of moral laws' (Koselleck, 1988: 55). Public discussion, with no umpires to check the shock of opinion against opinion, was a kind of moral authority opposed to the arbitrariness of state edicts or the mystery of churchly rites. Locke's *Essay* in the eighteenth century ranked 'among the Holy Scriptures of the modern bourgeoisie' (Koselleck, 1988: 54). Hence private activities could be nonetheless explicitly political:

Eliminated from politics as a whole, the members of society would meet in wholly 'non-political' localities: at the exchanges, in coffee-houses or at the academies, where the new sciences were studied without succumbing to the State-religious authority of a Sorbonne; or in the clubs, where one could not pronounce judgment but where one could discuss the contemporary judiciary; in the salons, in which *l'esprit* could rule without commitment and did not carry the official stamp it bore in pulpits and chancelleries, or in the libraries and literary societies where one talked about arts and letters . . . (Koselleck, 1988: 66–7)

The bourgeois public sphere, then, arose from what had traditionally been considered private life — the concourse of non-political people. As Oskar Negt notes (1983: 318), in focusing on how debating *private* citizens function *politically*, Habermas captures the contradiction of the bourgeois public sphere. Part of the contribution of Habermas's work is a sketching of the relations between *public* and *private*. Ludwig Wittgenstein once spoke of a whole cloud of philosophy being condensed into a drop of grammar, and nowhere could this be more true than with these terms. Their senses stretch back to antiquity; they are 'categories of Greek origin transmitted to us bearing a Roman stamp' (*STPS*: 3/15). In ancient Greece, a clear line between public and private realms of social life could be observed in the difference between the *polis* (or city-state) and *oikos* (or household; see Arendt, 1958, on whom Habermas relies). The sphere in

which citizen-amateurs debated the *public* business of the Athenian polis was the polis, a term that incorporates what we would today call 'the state', 'the people' and 'the public' (Kitto, 1951: 71ff). Distinct from the polis was the *private* sphere of the *oikos* or household, which combined the labours of reproduction (bearing and raising children) and of production (economic activity). Women and slaves, thought to be bound to these labours by natural necessity, were considered *deprived* of the rights and duties of citizenship, and hence of freedom and full humanity. Hence the negative valuation given to the private realm (a sense that persists when those *without rank* in the military are called *privates*; STPS: 6/19). As Kitto (1951: 128) says,

the duty of taking part, at the appropriate season of life, in all the affairs of the polis was one that the individual owed both to the polis and to himself To the Athenian at least, self-rule by discussion, self-discipline, personal responsibility, direct participation in the life of the polis at all points — these things were the breath of life.

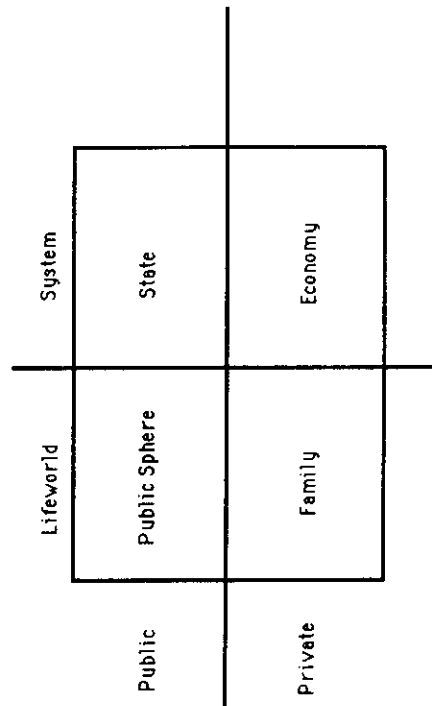
To have the leisure to act in the exhaustingly intense life of the polis a citizen needed private property: 'Status in the polis was . . . based upon status as the unlimited master of an *oikos*' (STPS: 3/16).

Modern social structure radically rearranges the meaning of these antique terms. Inasmuch as the bourgeois public sphere arises within private life as an opponent of the state, its institutional setting is quite different from the ancient polis although its task (guiding collective policy) and medium (civic debate), are similar (Peters and Cmiel, 1991). Whereas all that was not part of the polis was 'private' for the Greeks, all that is not part of the household is 'public' for us (as when we think of activities such as working, shopping and leisure as taking place 'in public'). Habermas follows Arendt (1958), who suggests that the *oikos* has grown enormously in modern times to create a new realm, a kind of super-household within the state, a hybrid zone not quite public or private: the social. Governmental affairs remain *public*, and the family *private* in modernity, but between the two is what Arendt calls 'society' and most other theorists call 'civil society' (Arato and Cohen, 1988; Keane, 1988). Civil society is another way of talking about the bourgeois public sphere: it is a historically new zone of social life in which people associate without mediation of the state or the family. As Arato and Cohen (1988: 61–2) note with obvious relevance for Habermas:

Ever since Aristotle, the normative thrust of the concept of civil society . . . entailed a vision of an autonomous domination-free association of peers who communicatively establish their goals and norms and who regulate their interaction according to standards of justice.

Most understandings of civil society follow a threefold model: family/civil society/state (as in Hegel) or market/civil society/state. Habermas introduces more subtlety by using four categories, separating family from economy and the public sphere from the state. We can schematically locate the bourgeois public sphere in a fourfold table by using Habermas's distinction of 'system' and 'lifeworld' as one dimension and public vs private as the other (Habermas, 1987: 318–19; Arato and Cohen, 1988: 47–8; Fraser, 1985: 106ff, 112). By *lifeworld* Habermas means the everyday realm of face-to-face talk, experiences, traditions, understandings, norms and *Sittlichkeit* or solidarity. The lifeworld takes shape above all through language and communication. By *system*, in contrast, Habermas refers to realms of macrosocial life ruled by 'delinguistified steering media' such as money and power: *system* refers to the parts of society beyond the control or even the understanding of any individual (such as state bureaucracy or the market). The lifeworld is tailored to the human scale and is the realm in which a person can weave a life's experiences into a coherent biography, while *system* is ruled by the abstract, all-englobing 'media' of money and power, such that issues of individual meaning or mortality are completely irrelevant. Habermas deploys this distinction to subtle effect in his theory but here it is enough to note that lifeworld/system couplet turns on contrasting forms of communication.

FIGURE 1



The public sphere and the state are public in the sense that both deal with the whole, while the market and the family are private in the sense that they are ruled by particular interests. The family and the public sphere are

speech communities in which courses of action are governed, in principle, by efforts to reach a mutual understanding, while the workings of the bureaucratic state and capitalist economy are beyond the control of any single individual. In this sense, the family and the public sphere alike belong to a lifeworld of discussion while the state and the economy are ruled by abstract quantities such as money and power. In sum, the bourgeois public sphere is private in the sense that it is supposed to live through the reasons and arguments of private citizens, but public in the sense that its object is the critique and legitimization of state actions.

Admittedly, this fourfold scheme is problematic if taken as an empirical description rather than as an analytic grid. Fraser points out several pitfalls. Families and public opinion formation are empirically shaped, if not ruled, by money and power, just as bureaucracies and workplaces are importantly structured along gender and familialistic lines. Gender identity runs 'like pink and blue threads' (Fraser, 1985: 117) throughout family, market, public sphere and state. Habermas's fourfold scheme is not intended to enshrine oppressive structures but to offer an analytic model of social subsystems à la Talcott Parsons that is both empirically suggestive and normatively sound (see Alexander, 1991). Part of his project is to swim between the Scylla of ungrounded idealism and the Charybdis of a world-weary realism. For Habermas such distinctions as *public* and *private* hold important truths to be redeemed from their oppressive and unreasonable deployment thus far; he is a modernist in his willingness to grant the negative its due but to pass through it to the other side.

VI

In the second half of *STPS*, Habermas describes several historical changes that aided the demise of the bourgeois public sphere in its classic form, though he refuses to sound the death knell entirely (cf. Habermas, 1987: 389). The welfare state fused state and society together, making the privacy of citizens and the public authority of the state collaborators instead of antagonists; public opinion ceased to be trustworthy as either a form of critical reason or a direct expression of the people's will; the intimacy of the conjugal family was 'hollowed out' by an intrusive consumer culture, which broke down habits of debate and discussion; parliaments gave up even the pretense of gathering political truth into a great whole and became instead a site where private interests scrap for their turn at the trough; social scientists went hunting with 'positivist pathos' for public opinion through survey research, which ultimately served only as a coroner's report on the public sphere; and, the organs of publicity — the media — became a platform for national advertising. The

working premises of parliaments, courts and the press all presuppose a reasonable and attentive public, but such an entity seems on vacation, if not extinct. The channels whereby the 'consent of the governed' is expressed become, in *STPS*'s narrative, largely clogged.

Most important for us is *STPS*'s account of the changing function of the mass media. The book's treatment of media history and policy is not really sufficient by contemporary standards. But the strength of Habermas's analysis is his situating of the mass media within a long tradition of political thought about civic participation. In this respect, *STPS* merits comparison with Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961). The subtitle of the latter book, which is precisely contemporary with *STPS*, describes *STPS* as well: 'an analysis of the democratic, industrial, and cultural changes transforming our society'. The famous conclusion to *Culture and Society* can be read as a call for a revived public sphere. All three books acted within a particular historical moment, the formative years of the New Left; all seek solutions to social ills through democratizing access to the means of communication.

Habermas's key point is the ways that the mass media inherit a mixed mission which is itself a reflection of the long battle between feudal spectacle and democratic participation, between (to use terms from Carl Schmitt) the political principles of representation and identity. The mass media in industrial democracies have the 'the Janus face of enlightenment and control; of information and advertising; of pedagogy and manipulation' (*STPS*: 203/241). Their civic role is to provide information for public debate; their economic role is to provide entertainment ('bait') to produce audiences for advertisers. As carriers of both news and diversion, two genres starkly separate in liberal *theory*, and as agents of both political enlightenment and economic enticement, the mass media are profoundly ambiguous institutions. This contradiction, of course, is not news to anyone, but Habermas shows it to be a working out of inherent tensions within the bourgeois public sphere. The spectacle of a stupefied TV audience worries us because it seems a travesty of all the implicit principles of democratic life as we inherit them from the Enlightenment: the reasoning public, the political role granted to critical conversation, the dream of emancipation through reason. Debates about media audiences have such sharp political inflections because we are debating democracy by other means. Even the basic terms of the debate about media audiences — active/passive — go back to debates about the proper role for citizens, starting in the late eighteenth century; in the French Revolution active and passive citizens were distinguished by tax-paying status; J. S. Mill considers the relative merits of an active and passive citizenry at length (1952: 346ff). *STPS* helps us see the proper lineage of the main conversation in media studies.

In *STPS*, Habermas sees the danger of a triumph of an archaic form of

political organization in the mass media: 'refeudalization of the public sphere'. Instead of critical reason among citizens, we have spectacle before the masses. 'Representation' now takes place via the media rather than the king's body.

To the extent that the bourgeois public sphere takes shape through public relations it again assumes feudal features. The 'suppliers' display a showy pomp [*repräsentativen Aufwand*] before customers ready to follow. [Modern] publicity imitates that aura of personal prestige and supernatural authority once bestowed by representative publicity. (STPS: 195*/233)

Access to public communication has diminished and 'a new category of influence arose, that is, media-power, which, employed manipulatively, robbed the principle of publicity of its innocence' (Habermas, 1990: 28). *Publicity* underwent a *Strukturwandel* from a principle of political truth-seeking to a principle of commercial promotion; public relations replaced public opinion as the basis of institutional legitimacy. '[M]odern "publicity" is thoroughly related to feudal "publicness" The public sphere becomes a court in which prestige is displayed before the audience instead of critique developing in it' (STPS: 200-1*/239). A public sphere dominated by commercial media is not a realm in which all find access and arguments clash freely, but an arena for competitive claims to power (over market share, political loyalty, votes, and so on).

One will justly want to question the glowing estimate of journalism's history and the totalized view of modern media fare. Likewise, Habermas pays little attention to questions of media system: the differences between market and public-service models, for instance, do not inform the analysis of STPS. In many ways, STPS is most the child of *Dialectics of the Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1969) in its tale of a transition from 'a culture-debating to a culture-consuming public' (STPS: §18), which does not find much emancipatory potential in popular culture, to put it lightly. If a market-based culture was a liberating step in the eighteenth century, it is not in the twentieth; critical journalism once raised people to debate, Habermas effuses, while modern media treat people as part of a media market and even administer the debate for them (for example in talk shows).

While I will return to problems in Habermas's media analysis in the next, concluding, section, it is crucial to see that even in STPS Habermas is beginning to move beyond generalized attacks on the culture industry. A burden of his work since has been to develop the one-dimensional media critique of his Frankfurt forebears into a multi-dimensional media communication. Key to his recent thinking is a contrast between 'communicatively generated' and 'administratively applied' power: one is a matter of 'spontaneous opinion-formation in autonomous public spheres'

and the other of 'organized procurement of mass-loyalty' (Habermas, 1989b). Both of these criss-cross through the public sphere, but we cannot say that the latter extinguishes the former for ever. The media may indeed clog the public sphere with representative pomp or manipulation, yet he finds a potential critical spark in the communication among loosely networked private people in families, associations, unions and other vestigial sites of 'civil society' (Habermas, 1987: 389-91). Mass culture, for Habermas, while largely manipulative, cannot completely infiltrate the public deliberations of private people (it sometimes seems like he is trying hard to convince himself).

Further, Habermas distinguishes between two kinds of 'media'. There are 'generalized media of exchange' such as money and power, which he calls 'steering media' and which govern the *system* aspect of social life, and the 'generalised forms of communication' found in the mass media *per se*. Hence the mass media are tricky to locate on the system-lifeworld grid. For Habermas, they do not replace but *condense* the dialogic processes of the lifeworld; all media rely on language, the essence of the lifeworld, for their work. The mass media both centralize message distribution networks and 'remove restrictions on the horizon of possible communication. The one aspect cannot be separated from the other — and therein lies their ambivalent potential' (Habermas, 1987: 390). The media harbour possibilities for ideological manipulation, but 'tapping this authoritarian potential is always precarious because there is a counterweight of emancipatory potential built into the communication structures themselves' (Habermas, 1987: 390). The media offer expanded horizons, but a thinner culture — perhaps one example of the useful rationalization Habermas believes modernity can afford.

Habermas is a believer in the power of conversation. The mass media 'free communication processes from the provinciality of spatiotemporally restricted contexts and permit public spheres to emerge' (Habermas, 1987: 390) — note the plurality of public spheres, an important revision in his more recent thought. The lifeworld, though under constant onslaught, seems to offer Habermas *ein feste Burg* of resources for emancipation (Sica, 1991). Big Brother can't do it with the telecreens alone; he needs the Youth League, the Spies and other collaborators to patrol the shriveled lifeworld in Orwell's 1984. On the question of media manipulation, then, Habermas's mature position fits more into a line of descent from the empirical media research of Lazarsfeld et al., in which mass and face-to-face communication productively intertwine, than the critical tradition of Adorno et al., in which mass communication completely corrodes and replaces face-to-face talk (Habermas, 1987: 389-91, 435, note 41; see Gitlin, 1978; Katz, 1987). Habermas's work has always defied the rather silly distinction between 'empirical' and 'critical' research that is still sometimes invoked in media studies.

VII

Representation, in both the political and aesthetic senses of that term, has a curious place in Habermas's theory of communication. First, in *STPS* Habermas is suspicious of representative government. *STPS*'s model of democracy, like other models in the New Left in Britain and the United States, is participatory: democracy is the identity of the citizens and the government. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the source for this conception of democracy, downplayed discussion and debate: in Book IV, section 1 of *The Social Contract* (1968), he suggested that nothing but *bon sens* was needed to discern the general will — no rhetoric, no PR, no talk. Rousseau's suspicion of political representation had an aesthetic correlate: he banned the sensuous means of shaping and changing minds from the formation of the general will, just as he denounced in his *Letter to d'Alembert on Spectacles* the prospect of a theatre being constructed in his native city of Geneva. Rousseau exalted immediacy in politics, as Ronald Beiner notes (1982: 66), 'because he was such a committed democrat If political rectitude is "immediately" accessible, unmediated by knowledge formed and shaped by mutual discourse, then it is accessible to all, the common people no less than the wise'. Habermas is critical of Rousseau for underestimating the need for public argument, but he does not fault Rousseau's distrust of theatrical forms of public life.

Ideals of participatory democracy often go together with a distrust of aesthetic representation; the two attitudes have an elective affinity. Habermas prizes conversation, reading and plain speech as worthy forms of discourse for a democratic culture and is frankly hostile to theatre, courtly forms, ceremony, the visual, and to rhetoric more generally. The brief flowering of the bourgeois public sphere is sandwiched, in *STPS*'s narrative, between two moments of 'representation': feudal pomp and modern PR. 'Show' and 'manipulation' always go together in *STPS*. Habermas, in his 1990 preface, chastises Richard Sennett for thinking of public display as crucial for public life, thus confusing two distinct types of publicity, representative and bourgeois. Sennett, however, might see in Habermas's austere conception of communication a Puritan notion of self-disclosure. Speaking of Parsons but with clear relevance for Habermas, Mayhew (1984) argues that the reasonable public as a model of solidarity arose in the *seventeenth* century, in Puritan pamphlet literature. Is not the pairing of political immediacy and aesthetic austerity a clue to the deeper cultural background of Habermas's thought? Skinner (1982) briefly portrays Habermas as a continuer of the Reformation. As Hegel notes with his usual lucidity: 'the characteristic element of modern times, and the peculiar principle of Protestantism besides' is 'the will to recognize nothing in sentiment that is not justified by thought' (1970: 27). Habermas's idea of rationality may disclose a distinctly Protestant orientation.

This is no surprise for a German thinker, of course, especially one so imbued with the spirit of German idealism, but Habermas's Protestantism works out in interesting ways in his thought. I can only suggest a few here. First, Habermas is a *Bildersünder*, an iconoclast, like all heirs of the great iconoclasts, Marx and Freud (Goux, 1978). Critical theory is of course all about destruction of the idols, revealing their human-made powers and the relativity of their power. Iconoclasm, as Goux argues, is a fundamentally Judaic mode, but Habermas himself has noted the intertwining of Jewish and Protestant themes in German idealism (Habermas, 1983); both take seriously the second Mosaic commandment against graven images. But unlike his teacher Adorno, Habermas's iconoclasm lacks sensuousness, a conflicted attraction to the things destroyed. In Adorno's aesthetic theory the notion of a *Bilderverbot* or ban on images acts as a principle of teasing, of conservation of pleasure and ultimately of sanctity. Habermas's distrust of images, in contrast, seems unmixed with any longing to give oneself over to them. Adorno was always trying to enter paradise for a moment while the music still played, but Habermas seems singularly untempted. Utopia for him is spare and earnest — formal, in other words. He speaks of the 'aesthetic-practical' as if the 'aesthetic' needed modification.

Granted, one can no longer say of Habermas that he lacks the characteristic Frankfurt preoccupation with the aesthetic dimension (Jay, 1988: 124ff, 131). Still his conception of communication is quite indifferent to the splendour or music of words, to the mind-shaping powers of rhetoric. 'Communication' for Habermas is a resolutely sober affair. Avoid graven images and bear no false witness: the second and the ninth commandments anchor Habermas's theory. To be fair, he does greatly appreciate thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt who plumb the world-creating and political powers of language more deeply than does he (Habermas, 1977, 1979). And yet, his nuanced readings of these thinkers aim more to rescue normative capital from them than to discover the dark and quirky side of their views of language. 'Communication' for Habermas is an Apollonian principle, one of unity, light, clarity, sunshine, reason. He slights the Dionysian side of language, its dangers and irrationalities and its creative bursts. The term 'communication' invites one to envision the social life of symbols in a subtly normative way, unlike terms such as rhetoric or discourse (Peters, 1989).

Habermas's conception of communication is culturally encoded: as he would be the first to admit, it is a rationalized and modern account of linguistic interchange. Like the bulk of twentieth-century theorists of public life, he has little use for style in politics or for grandiloquence or ornate oratory (Cmiel, 1990; Hariman, 1992). He is an inheritor of a long tradition of political thought that makes plain speech — 'communication' — the center of democratic life, rather than rhetoric, narrative or other alternatives. Unlike Aristotle but like Rousseau and Kant, rhetoric has no

important role in political life for Habermas (Beiner, 1982). Also like Rousseau and Kant, he assumes that a formal or procedural conception of public life alone is enough (cf. Habermas, 1989b). His is a politics within the limits of duty alone: 'the only utopian perspectives which we can straightforwardly maintain are of a procedural nature', says Habermas, to which Jay (1988: 13) responds, 'who, after all, would man the barricades for a utopia of procedures?' Due process is a stirring ideal in its ascetic way. But it gives little room for poetic vision.

Habermas's preferred model of communication is the conversation of intimate equals in the lifeworld. He even likes literature best when it is most conversational in tone. Crucial in *STPS* is the participatory character of literary culture in eighteenth-century England. As Neil Saccamano notes (1991: 694), 'For Habermas, conversation and publication are continuous media forming a closed circuit of communication. The periodical articles of the *Tatler*, *Spectator*, and *Guardian*, he contends, were merely conversations by other means . . . Such literature, Habermas notes, was 'an immediate part of coffee-house discussions . . . The same discussion, transposed to another medium, was continued, only to reenter, via reading, the original medium of conversation' (*STPS*: 42/59-60, emphasis added).

But only on a small scale, in small speech communities, is a harmonious fit between talk and writing possible. As eighteenth-century England discovered, there is no upper limit, in principle, to the size of a reading public; there is, as Aristotle insisted, however, a natural limit to friendship and hence to political community. Habermas, that is, problematically assumes a continuity between speech and writing that has been voraciously attacked of late (for example Derrida, 1967); he does not see the mediated character of face-to-face discourse. He might respond that mediation is not the issue, but participation. But this too is a question of scale. As the number of participants in a conversation keeps growing, at some point not everyone will be able to speak and be heard. An inflection point will be reached and most participants will become spectators. *STPS* does not address 'natural' limits on the size of the public. Habermas more recently (1990: 43) has made clear that he has overcome the lingering ailment of modern democratic theory, Athens-envy: 'If the idea of popular sovereignty is to find realistic application in highly complex societies, it must be severed from a concrete interpretation of a body of present, participating, and mutually consenting members of a collective'. Instead, he proposes a procedural notion of popular sovereignty in which the dispersed citizenry can embody itself in 'subjectless . . . forms of communication' (Habermas, 1990). Habermas's citizens resemble Rousseau's 'denatured' citizens perceiving the general will or Kant's world-citizens purged of all 'particular interests' or John Rawls's citizens temporarily ignorant of their own particularities.

What is the danger for Habermas in an aesthetically representative form of the public sphere? In a modern nation-state, some form of representation, some fiction of the whole might be the very thing to allow a common backdrop for participation. Writing, like broadcasting, but unlike intimate conversation, has an economy of scale; texts and audio or video tape can undergo multiplication without severe pain or alteration in form whereas conversation cannot: this is *the* hard fact underlying the mass media that continually foils dreams of democratic participation (cf. Mills, 1956: 302). At times Habermas does seem on the verge of admitting the role of aesthetic representations in constituting public spheres. In his treatment of the newspaper as the new site of publicity after the king's court he implicitly grants the need for a generalized symbol sphere to serve as a nodal point for civic discussion. More importantly, Habermas notes the weirdly reflexive character of the public sphere: 'The public [*das Publikum*] that read and debated this sort of thing [*The Spectator*, *The Tatler*, etc.] read and debated about itself' (*STPS*: 43/60). The eighteenth-century English public thus bootstraps itself into reality by reading about it and discussing the discourse about 'the public' in the newspapers. Public fictions, once believed, can become public facts (McGee, 1975). Membership in a collective whose scale rules out face-to-face interaction or acquaintance, such as a nation, needs representation or some mediating fiction of the whole (Anderson, 1983). But such forms are suspect for Habermas: why not admit that representations can be constitutive of the public realm to at least some extent?

The critical tradition has long approached public ceremony with nothing but the hermeneutics of suspicion. What is at stake for Habermas in the question of political spectacle is the direction of modern politics. Since 1789, he suggests (1990: 44), the symbolic place of power must remain a vacuum. To fill it up again with any content, whether people or nation, is to risk paternalistic forms of authority: we risk resurrecting the king and his *voluntas* rather than the public's *ratio*. Beyond all symbolic politics, for Habermas, lurks the king's body, which must not be resurrected. This is a prime example of Protestant iconoclasm: the place of power must remain empty; attempts to render the divine symbolically present risk reification and violence. In its place there can be nothing but the word — the critical-rational debate of the citizenry, guaranteed by just procedures.

Given the Nazi aestheticization of politics, and Habermas's lifelong struggle against fascism, it is not hard to imagine why he resists theatre, rhetoric, narrative, festival or pomp from entering into the political. But public representations can be more than smoke and mirrors, more than Nuremberg rallies, more than ermine and purple. Such an iconoclastic stance toward the symbolic leaves us with both an impoverished account of how communication in fact works and impedes the imagination of alternative forms of participatory media. Modern ideas of democracy are

coeval with new literary techniques for representing social wholes. Novels, newspapers, encyclopedias and social statistics all make their decisive first appearance in the eighteenth century. All attempt to describe a social world in which first-hand acquaintance alone is no longer sufficient; the novel, as Georg Lukács and Raymond Williams have taught us, is a response to the disappearance of 'knowable communities'. Such forms of social representation offer panoramic surveys of the social horizon in varying ways: they mediate society for us. Modern media are means for imagining community. Our plight is that the making of such public visions has become largely undemocratic and is left to the experts or the commissars; such representations may become monsters, a defining modern horror from Kafka to Baudrillard.

In a more optimistic moment, *The Federalist Papers* (Hamilton et al., 1982) argued that the scale of modern politics requires *representation*: assemblies of the whole were ruled out of the question by geography and transportation. Hamilton et al. did not employ the aesthetic sense of that term, but they did hope for technical improvements in transportation and communication (see nos. 10, 14). Today the mass media are, in general, just splendid for representation but horrid for participation. To be sure, as Habermas (and Raymond Williams) would be the first to point out, the 'representative publicity' of the mass media today is a matter of the social organization and use of the technology. Proposals for electronic democracy abound, as modern technology seems to have overcome the age-old barriers to universal participation. To address a citizenry that lives in something larger than an ancient city-state, some vision of the social totality must be provided. To condemn style in politics *per se* is to miss how such visions could be democratic and participatory. The dispersed members of a newspaper or TV audience may discuss what they read or see among themselves, but such conversation lacks a central place of assembly and a means for registering its content. Few such audience members can 'reenter the original medium' as participants. The only 'place' that holds the whole process together is the 'no place' of the mass media, understood in the broadest sense. The mass media, as J.S. Mill might put it, are our Pnyx and Forum, for better or worse. We go 'there' to see each other seeing each other. Mass communication is to moderns what assembly was to the ancients: that which gives a collective image of the collective.

Habermas seems close to saying something like this in his discussion of the revolutions of 1989.

The mass media were not only decisive for the contagion-effect of worldwide diffusion. The physical presence of the demonstrating masses on the streets and public squares, otherwise than in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, could exert revolutionary force only to the extent that they were converted by television into a ubiquitous presence. (Habermas, 1990: 49)

The events of 1989 were not only transmitted to viewers by TV, he suggests, but actually took the form of a TV transmission (1990). History was mediated. Though he flirts with a Baudrillardian thesis here, Habermas insists still on the ambivalent character of the media. If we admit that public spheres are initially constituted by fictions, need this discredit public opinion as the central term of democratic governance? This leads us to the implicit question throughout Habermas's work, the normative basis of democratic politics — something that has been battered and bruised in the past two centuries. It is no accident that the question of how to rebuild democracy has led Habermas to focus on forms of communication. A more catholic conception of (mass) communication, appreciative of its gloriously raucous as well as soberly informative qualities, might make Habermas's theory of communication even more useful for theorists of the democratic role of the media.

Notes

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1. Citations to *STPS* give the page number in the 1989 English translation, and then the page in the 1984 German edition. E.g. (*STPS*: 8/20) = p. 8 in the English, p. 20 in the German text. An asterisk (*) by the reference to the English page indicates that I have altered the translation.

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