

## **PHIL421 – Summer Scholarship Literature Review**

During the course of the summer honours scholarship my thesis has been altered, revised and amended many times. In the end my topic is very close to my initial idea. The scope of my reading reflected my uncertainty. As such there are some works that I have decided to leave out of the literature review for reasons of relevance (cultural studies in the main). I also consider that the revised topic is more coherent with the programme of the 'liberal democracy, citizenship, and social research group' than it previously was. I include a short synopsis of my intended thesis topic to supplement the literature review.

### **Synopsis**

In the months leading up to March 2003 the public sphere in Australia was engaged with three and a half little words which would be used to justify the most important political decision of the new century. The words were 'weapons of mass destruction' and the political decision was the invasion of Iraq. When the public relations campaign hype had dissipated it was clear that, stripped bare of its emotive fervour, there remained an incredibly weak inductive argument to suggest the existence of 'wmd's'. Yet despite this many Australians were fooled that Iraq did indeed possess weapons of mass destruction and the political decision to send Australian troops to war was in fact a legitimate one. The benefit of hindsight has exposed this paltry argument for its miserable folly.

This thesis is not another survey of the arguments used for war. Nor is it another critical assessment of the role of the media and public relations in manufacturing its consent, although the media and public relations are matters of peripheral concern. In countless studies these considerations have been allocated more than ample attention. Rather this thesis will concern itself with the public's capacity (or willpower) to reason and deliberate about issues of public significance and what legitimation of such decisions to the public sphere is required of our governments. The above example demonstrates the crucial and contemporary necessity of such concerns and this thesis is in part a normative argument asserting the desirability of the betterment of public reasoning and legitimation.

In this endeavour my thesis would need to draw upon theoretical literature pertaining to the public sphere, deliberative democracy, reasoning, legitimation and citizenship. Here my thesis will engage the work of key theorists and the main criticisms they have roused. This section will constitute the more philosophical aspects of my thesis (and is also what my summer research has been concerned with). I recognise that I have much still to read. I will also need to look at the Australian context. The theoretical discussion will be used to bolster my own argument and to this end it constitutes an important part of my thesis. But I do not mean for this thesis to be wholly concerned with pure theory. Instead I mean it to engage with a real social/political topic. Thus it will need to be grounded in history.

The thesis will also examine public reasoning in Australia from a historical perspective. I suspect this will confirm the ‘narrative’ of the decline of the public sphere. But moreover the historical perspective will complement my argument insofar as it will help identify problems or inadequacies (in the media or education policy for example) to the detriment of public reasoning. This will require a broad approach – I will need to look at things like the media and education policy as well as things like the role and influence of the public intellectual and so forth. I will also need to look at how policy has been legitimated in the past. Iraq and weapons of mass destruction will also be used as a case study throughout. In this manner my thesis would be an historical essay as well as a normative argument.

### **Literature Review**

The literature surrounding the concept of the public sphere has an obvious point of origin in Jürgen Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991). In this work, Habermas identifies the emergence of a medium between state and civil society in which rational-critical debate took place and where private people made “public use of their reason” (p27). This bourgeois ideal of the public degenerated from a forum for rational-criticism to a forum for popular opinion. It is historical and philosophical, engaging with both the circumstances of the development of the public sphere and its treatment by philosophers that were contemporaneous with its development. Above all,

however, *The Structural Transformation* is a normative argument, in which Habermas tries to extract the Enlightenment ideal of reason as a vehicle for effecting social change and that this ideal is thus of great worth to democratic theory. I consider that this is the most valuable point to take from *The Structural Transformation*.

Habermas' argument has been criticised on a number of counts. The edited collections by Craig Calhoun *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (1992) and Bruce Robbins *The Phantom Public Sphere* (1993) provided the most constructive criticisms of the theoretical and historical aspects of Habermas' public sphere. Calhoun's 'Introduction' (1992) provides a succinct overview of the main criticisms *The Structural Transformation* has encountered; these include his idealisation of the bourgeois public sphere as it existed historically, his close association of the public sphere within a Marxist historical framework (that is, that its historical development was concomitant with the rise of the bourgeoisie), his argument was too invested in the notion of the culture industry, the exclusionary nature (particularly in the case of women) of the bourgeois public sphere, to list but few. Habermas (1992a; 1992b) accepts most of these criticisms and even accommodates for them, but does not accept that any have dire implications for his underlying thesis.

Robbins (1993) provides some useful challenges to Habermas' public sphere. Firstly he charges, and not without merit, that his responsibilities upon citizenship are overly idealistic. Less compelling is his claim that Habermas' public is indifferent to cultural indifference. To be sure, Robbins advocates a cultural pluralist publicity rather than a normative publicity. Importantly, however, Robbins introduces the idea of multiple publics and 'counterpublics'. This idea poses a somewhat alternative model of public space than Habermas and is often extolled by postmodernists. This argument is traced to Negt and Kluge, who attempted to theorise a proletarian public sphere, parallel to the bourgeois public sphere (Frederic Jameson, 1993). According to Jameson however, the model, like Habermas, simply ended up extolling the virtues of a bourgeois public sphere.

Nancy Fraser (1992) develops several original criticisms of Habermas' public sphere, although not all of these criticisms are compelling. Firstly, in her view Habermas

assumes that social equality is not a necessary condition for political democracy, and this is a considerable flaw. But, as Habermas himself retorts (1992b; p469) this is utopianism. Fraser argues for a multiplicity of 'publics' in contestation but relatively isolated from one another. I contend this removes itself from the normative ideal of a common good and replaces it with group interests. Her third criticism is an important one, and regards the 'line' between public and private interests and the implications of feminist critiques of the public sphere. Here Chantal Mouffe's (1996) challenge to the nature of the 'political' and Carol Gould's (1996) argument on difference have particular resonance.

Seyla Benhabib (1992) also presents some alternative models of public space. In her article she names three: firstly, the 'civic/republican virtue' of Hannah Arendt, secondly, the 'legalistic' 'public dialogue' of the liberal tradition; and then thirdly the 'discursive' model of the public sphere which can be identified with Habermas. The argument by Habermas in 'Three Normative Models of Democracy' (1996) reflects very closely this earlier argument. Habermas finds the republican model more normative than the liberal model, but too idealistic in its expectation of the virtues of citizenship required. In their stead, Habermas advocates a discursive and deliberative, normative model of democracy.

Calhoun's edited collection also offers some interesting historical articles on the public sphere. Keith Michael Baker (1992) and David Zaret (1992) provide historical accounts of the public sphere as it existed in eighteenth-century France and seventeenth-century England respectively. Their arguments serve to undermine the idealisation of the bourgeois public sphere and its distinctively 'bourgeois' roots. Michael Schudson (1992) and Mary Ryan (1992) discuss the limitations of the public sphere in the United States. Schudson looks at citizenship, parties, the press and public gatherings whereas Ryan focuses on the degree to which women's activities constituted a public sphere as opposed to the other, more conventional 'public sphere' from which they were excluded. Geoff Eley (1992) provides a useful historical and theoretical contribution by examining the relationship between different nation-states and publics. Drawing upon postmodernist sensibilities, the public sphere is envisioned as entwined with questions of power and

interest (Harry Boyte, 1992, p341). What these historical articles contribute is a critique of what Habermas considered to constitute the public sphere, not the notion itself.

Lloyd Kramer's 'Habermas, History, and Critical Theory' (1992) is the most theoretical of the historical articles and by far the most useful for my thesis topic. Kramer identifies the purpose of the historical nature of *The Structural Transformation* in its normative dimension. Moishe Postone (1992) is also at pains to emphasise this dimension of the public sphere and in particular Habermas' historical analysis of it. On the other hand, Thomas McCarthy's 'Practical Discourse' (1992) questions the possibility of such a normative endeavour in contemporary plural societies. There is merit in this criticism, however, it does not entail, as McCarthy concludes, that normative critical-rational debate is simply futile – and this criticism is made by Peter Uwe Hohendahl (1992). Harold Mah (2000) is an exhaustive study of the historical value of Habermas' public sphere that engages with most of these articles and authors from a historical perspective, whilst Calhoun (1996) also provides a lengthy and more theoretical argument that engages with critical theory, the public sphere, and its implications for social theory.

Alan McKee's argument in *The Public Sphere* (2005) is an attempt to synthesise the idea of the public sphere with cultural studies. Utilising a postmodernist framework McKee argues against what he terms the 'modernist' narrative of the degradation of the public sphere and for the emergence of 'public spheres' connected to new social movements. Cultural difference is the sole norm with which McKee seems to be engaged. He identifies five criticisms of the contemporary public sphere; that it is too trivialised, commercialised, sensational, fragmented and apathetic and challenges these criticisms. Simplistic in argument and theory, it does however expound the postmodernist argument for the vibrancy of the public sphere relatively clearly; despite the argument being unconvincing. Coming from a cultural studies perspective, Dana Polan (1993) argues that Habermas' public sphere theory is flawed insofar as it presents the media as monster owing to the antiquated conception of culture. Habermas (1992a) cedes the point that cultural studies has rendered aspects of the cultural dimension of his theory antiquated.

In 'The Mass Public and the Mass Subject' Michael Warner (1992) develops a complex postmodern understanding of the relationship between publicity and the private person. The article does offer an understanding of the changing nature of the public sphere; insofar as it is concerned with the non rational-critical aspects of publicity however it is of little utility to my thesis. Benjamin Lee (1992) also discusses Habermas' public sphere in relation to postmodernity, in particular arguments about communicative action and the response by theorists such as Derrida and to a lesser extent Foucault. Lee also equates the public sphere of Habermas more with his later work such as that on communicative action, and the possibility of a discursive rationality more generally. Foucault (1988, ch4) also provides some good discussion on the relationship between politics and rationality.

Anthony Ashbolt (2005) and Stanley Aronowitz (1993) both provide arguments McKee would label as 'modernist' insofar as they are concerned with charting the decline of the public. Ashbolt provides evidence on the absence of critical-rational debate with regards recent events such as the war in Iraq and the 'war on terror'. It also engages with the Australian context, alongside issues of public language and the media. Aronowitz charts philosophical arguments about the American public, which he argues has been in decline since the 1920s. In his judgement the media are largely to blame; so too, however, is the great expectations upon citizenship in liberal democratic theory. The arguments are closer to my own position than the postmodern position and will be of utility to my thesis.

The chapters by Nicholas Garnham (1990; 1992) and Daniel Hallin (1994) combine the notion of the public sphere with more sophisticated understandings of the political economy of its principle conveyor – the mass media. Garnham (1992) provides another useful overview of the virtues and vices of *The Structural Transformation* and continues with a critique of the relationship between communications, big business and democracy (as he does in his 1990 chapter). Hallin (1994) also explores the relationship between the corporate media and the idea of the public sphere, but does so with more reference to the theoretical framework of critical theory. Luke Goode (1996) is another worthwhile study of the relationship between the media, the public, and democracy with reference to the public sphere of Habermas. These are useful explorations into the most pertinent problem

for the idea of the public sphere. One criticism is that they are possibly too media-centric in their formulation of the public sphere, at the expense of a fuller scrutiny of citizenship.

Benhabib's 'Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy' (1996) provides a clear and useful discussion of deliberative democracy and engages with some of the problems associated with the theory. Benhabib is primarily concerned with establishing the necessity of 'practical rationality' for deliberative democracy. Insofar as it also engages with problems of legitimation more directly, this article is of great relevance to my thesis. Iris Marion Young's (1996) article in the same collection offers a feminist critique of deliberative democracy advocating instead 'communicative democracy' as a sort of revised 'update' of a deliberative approach. Young considers the deliberative approach open to exclusion, and its assumption of unity neither feasible nor necessarily desirable. Regarding the public sphere Young (2000) is opposed to the way the public and private spheres have often been dichotomised which disadvantages some over others (p172) and accepts Fraser's argument for a multiplicity of autonomous 'public spheres'.

John Uhr's *Deliberative Democracy in Australia* (1998) (especially ch1) is a very useful overview and engagement with key theorists and theories in debates about the nature of deliberative democracy and the particularities of its Australian context. Although Uhr is primarily concerned with deliberation in the formal institutions of Australian democracy such as parliament, the book provides some useful insights for the Australian public sphere. Amy Gutman (1996) raises some good points on the foundations and legitimation claims of democracy and in particular its deliberative form. Joshua Cohen (1996) also deals with the question of legitimation that accommodates reasonable pluralism with normative and deliberative ideals. These works raise relevant questions for my thesis.

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