ISSA Proceedings 2002 – Public Sphere: The Problem Of Access And The Problem Of Quality

The public sphere has been an important category in rhetoric and argumentation research as it describes a socio-discursive space that is both widely accessible to participants and one in which arguments invented and delivered by individual speaking agents can impact decisions which affect all (Habermas, 1989; Kaufer & Butler, 1996; Kennedy, 1991; Murphy, 1983; Katula, 1983). Still, the particular role and shape of the public sphere in theories of argumentation and rhetoric remains and important and open research question (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, et.al., 1996, 211). Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the starting point for much of the work in this area, emphasizes the importance of both access and quality in an effort to delineate an authentic public sphere both theoretically and historically.

A number of commentators (Fraser, 1993; Negt & Kluge, 1993) have challenged the Habermasian model delivered in *Structural Transformation* on grounds that it reinforces the exclusion of socially and politically marginalized parties. The project has been criticized for its failure to articulate the conditions of "actually existing" conditions of democracy with their historic exclusions from public life (Fraser, 1993). These arguments emphasize the problem of access, critiquing specific historical and political public spheres on the basis of their exclusions of traditionally marginalized identities. In this paper, I will argue that 1) Habermas' conception of the public sphere is best understood as both a metonym for a set of qualities or critical criteria and as a material domain or social group, and that 2) this project, a prescriptive one, does not necessarily stand in contradiction to descriptive projects that aim to broaden access to historically specific "public" decision making forums by calling attention to exclusions. Following this distinction between the public sphere as a place or a body and the public sphere as a set of conditions, I argue that while the problem of broadening access to specific decision making bodies is important, the problem of discursive quality is a distinct but complementary investigation. At stake is the relationship between

the public abstraction and the empirical particularities of social groups. In investigations of the public sphere, what is the most fruitful way to characterize this relationship? The following are the key points on which Habermas' conceptualization of the public sphere has been challenged:
– the unitary nature of the public sphere
– the bracketing of power in the public sphere
– the bracketing of culture, class, and historical specificity in the public sphere

Many of those who have criticized Habermas' *Structural Transformation* for its faith in bourgeois social arrangements and in Enlightenment principles have stressed the specifically historical and material shape of the public sphere that he outlines in that work. While there can be no question that Habermas makes historical and material claims in *Structural Transformation*, in light of his later work in discourse ethics and communicative action, it is most productive to view his conception of the public sphere not as an historical and material space burdened with a telos of Enlightenment, but instead as a specific quality of discussion grounded in pragmatics.

A common solution that emerges from the critiques of Habermas' perspective is a pluralizing of the public or public sphere (Fraser 1993, Negt & Kluge 1993, Hauser 1999; Gal & Woolard, 1995) as a way to account for heterogeneous identity formations. This solution is a response to the problem accounting for the diverse identifications and interests of those "actually existing" individuals who comprise public. Fraser argues for a plural model on the basis of the historically exclusionary character of public. Negt and Kluge argue for a plurality of publics based on class and Gans (1974) describes "taste publics" that represent a variety of aesthetic identifications. Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) has an aim similar to Gans'. Hauser argues for a plural model that focuses on many smaller spheres of publicity as an antidote to a counterfactual unitary public sphere.

The plural public models parallel theories of multiculturalism and identity politics, where questions about who is included and who is excluded dominate the discussion. As in the case of those theories, to which a number of commentators have raised important questions concerning problems of authenticity and other limitations (Spivak & Gunew, 1993; Hall, 1991; Taylor, 1992; Readings, 1996), plural public models tend to rest on our ability to unproblematically identify and authorize individuals who represent cultural, discursive, ethnic, gender, and class categories.

In *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy*, Fraser replaces the public sphere with "subaltern counterpublics", emphasizing the need for a model of identity and interest conflict:

I propose to call these *subaltern counterpublics* in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (14).

Fraser wants to solve the problem of equitable representation of marginalized identities by imagining a plurality of publics which form constituencies for those identity formations. In this move, she attacks the unitary public sphere for its historic exclusions and challenges its claim to represent general interest.

In *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, Negt & Kluge bifurcate the public sphere into bourgeois and proletarian counterparts on grounds that the "classical bourgeois public sphere's" requirements of capital and education (cf. "Language Barriers", p. 45) systematically exclude the working class. They note that historically, in the bourgeois public sphere, the sphere of the factory and any attendant organizing or negotiating activity is considered private and therefore not admissible to public discourse (50). Like Fraser and others, Negt& Kluge critique the counterfactual nature of the unitary public sphere:

The only antidotes to the production of the illusory public sphere are the counter-products of a proletarian public sphere: idea against idea, product against product, production sector against production sector. It is impossible to grasp in any other way the permanently changing forms that social power takes on in its fluctuations between capitalist production, illusory public sphere, and public power monopoly (Negt & Kluge, 1993, 80).

Negt & Kluge also draw strong distinctions between their "proletarian public sphere" and the bourgeois public sphere on empirical grounds, suggesting that while all public spheres risk becoming illusion (even a proletarian one), the authentic public sphere would be strongly empirically grounded:

The proletarian public sphere is itself a matter of the future, but at the same time it is the only opportunity available for putting historical ground under one's feet and for structuring experience in historical temporal sequences. Only on this solid basis of real mass experience does the proletarian public sphere have the weight

it needs to be able to bring the movements of the bourgeois illusory public sphere, which are scurrying in every direction, to a halt. It itself, however, has the tendency to construct illusory public spheres as soon as it is not firmly anchored in the experiences of the masses and in history (Negt & Kluge, 1993, 80n).

In *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres*, Hauser develops a plural publics model he calls "the reticulate public sphere". He writes, "Whenever private citizens exchange views on a public concern, some portion of the Public Sphere is made manifest in their conversation" (64). For Hauser, as with others, a central problem with a unitary public sphere is its counterfactuality. As an antidote to this problem, Hauser prescribes, what he calls, a "rhetorical model":

A rhetorical model would require openness to those conditions that produce a plurality of spheres within the Public Sphere... A rhetorical model of public spheres not only expects participants to have interests but regards them as essential for the exercise of prudent judgments on public problems. It supplants disinterestedness with accommodation of conflicting interests as a mark of a well-functioning public sphere. . . . [A rhetorical model's] concern is for how the dialogue within any given public sphere mounts appeals that lead participants to understand their interests and make prudent judgments. Finally, a rhetorical model recognizes that civil society's defining conditions of interdependence and diversity require that communicative partners share a common reference world (Hauser, 1999, 55-56).

Unlike Fraser, who focuses on specific identities marginalized by a unitary public sphere, Hauser criticizes the counterfactual assumptions of disinterest and role taking implied by it. Working with a model of rhetoric where strategic self-interest is axiomatic, Hauser recommends his alternative on the grounds that it focuses on the empirical interests at work in a given communication situation.

Fraser, Negt & Kluge, and Hauser all propose variants of a plural public model as a solution to problems that they have found with the conception of a unitary public sphere. Counterfactuality is primary among these, warranted by heterogeneous identity formations, class-based exclusions, or principles of epistemology. While these descriptive approaches are valuable as an investigation of the many interests at work in a given social context, when they aim for a more authentic and accurate empirical account of public, they mistakes a useful abstraction for something that ought to be canvassed and enumerated. The

critical and political value of challenging the exclusion of specific interests from specific representations of public is clear. This challenge, however, addresses a problem that is different from the one that aims to theorize public abstractions or understand problems of discourse ethics. One asks "Who or what interests are included or excluded in a given representation of the public?" and the other asks, "What are the conditions of public discourse?" Although some have noted that counterfactuality complaints fundamentally misconstrue the motive of Habermas' research (Farrell, 1993), we could say that, at minimum, they seem to address a problem that is different from the one that has concerned Habermas.

Habermas himself notes that both the problem of quality and access present themselves in concepts of the public sphere, and he has defended his focus on the problem of quality that emerges in his communication theory (e.g. Habermas, 1982). Even in *Structural Transformation*, he discusses the Janus-faced problem of the public sphere. While he is explicit about the historical origins of the bourgeois public sphere under analysis, with its notable exclusions based on class, he suggests that the principle of publicity itself that emerges from this specific, and admittedly exclusionary, historical moment has value as an as-yet-unredeemed critical standard:

The identification of the public of 'property owners' with that of 'common human beings' could be accomplished all the more easily, as the social status of the bourgeois private persons in any event usually combined the characteristic attributes of ownership and education. The acceptance of the fiction of the *one* public, however, was facilitated above all by the fact that it actually had positive functions in the context of the political emancipation of civil society from mercantilist rule and from absolutistic regimentation in general (Habermas, 1989, 56).

Note that Habermas acknowledges that the notion of a single and unified public body is a fiction; however, rather than concluding that this disqualifies the notion, he investigates the potential of the principle of publicity as a critical standard. Later in *Structural Transformation,* he defends the choice to take the principle of publicity seriously rather than disqualifying it:

Bourgeois culture was not mere ideology. The rational-critical debate of private people in the *salons*, clubs, and reading societies was not directly subject to the cycle of production and consumption, that is, to the dictates of life's necessities. Even in its merely literary form (of self-elucidation of the novel experiences of

subjectivity) it possessed instead a "political" character in the Greek sense of being emancipated from the constraints of survival requirements. It was for these reasons alone the idea that later degenerated into mere ideology (namely: humanity) could develop at all (Habermas, 1989, 160).

For the Habermas of *Structural Transformation*, the exemplary value of the emergent bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth century is in its relative insulation from "life's necessities" and its attendant priority on arguments among interlocutors as decisive. This focus is the one, of course, that he later develops in his communication theory. The fact that the bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth century rested on exclusions that were contrary to its own principles ought not necessarily lead us to the conclusion that the principles themselves are without merit.

Habermas' notions of the public sphere from *Structural Transformation* can be traced through the rest of his work, with his *Theory of Communicative Action* and his work in discourse ethics being of particular concern to theorists of communication. Though less historical than *Structural Transformation*, his communication theory depends on the possibility of rarefied communicative space in which power is bracketed, akin to his conceptualization of the public sphere. While more sociological than historical, the *Theory of Communicative Action* develops a model to account for the continuous regeneration of "lifeworld" in its tense but symbiotic relationship to "system". For Habermas, "system" is a reified outgrowth of moments or parts of the "lifeworld", which is itself dynamic and admits argumentative challenges to norms. Habermas narrates the growth of modern economic and administrative forms of power by measuring its impact and relationship to the "lifeworld." Modern totalizing ideologies such as Nazism and Stalinism are, according to Habermas, "modern manifestations of withdrawal and deprivation – that is to say, deficits inflicted upon the lifeworld by societal modernization" (1987:354). He terms the process by which this deprivation takes place, the "colonization of the lifeworld" (1987:355).

Whereas in *Structural Transformation* he provides an historical account of socio-discursive space of bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth century, in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas builds a model of a rarefied discursive space as the basis for his social theory, what he calls the "context-forming horizon." Habermas imagines argumentation as a shared communicative process in which speakers could rationally test any validity claim, and based on

this process of communicative action, construct and reconstruct their shared lifeworld (1987). His notion of the "linguistification of the sacred" (1987:77) highlights the role of language in rationalizing the lifeworld, in providing the possibility of testing validity claims for even the most tacit understandings. He writes,

The lifeworld that members construct from common cultural traditions is coextensive with society. It draws all societal processes into the searchlight of cooperative processes of interpretation. It lends to everything that happens in society the transparency of something about which one can speak – even if one does not (yet) understand it (1987, 149).

Habermas joins this idea of lifeworld, a space that is regenerated by communicative action, with the notion of system, a consideration of the relationship between the communicative action of individuals and the systems of the modern administrative state, the economy and government administration.

In his communication theory, Habermas focuses on the problem of quality, developing idealizations as necessary standards of critique. This concern with argumentative prerequisites has its root in *Structural Transformation*, where his critique of the "refeudalized" public sphere rests on a standard of openness, both in terms of *accessibility by persons* and *priority of argument*.

Central to Habermas' theory is a commitment to the possibility and preservation of contingency in communication. By insisting on a model of communication in which the validity of statements, even and perhaps especially those carrying the weight of norms, can be challenged with reasons demanded, as articulated in the *Theory of Communicative Action* and in his conceptualization of Universal Pragmatics, Habermas illustrates his commitment to not only a highly rationalized understanding of communication, but also one that is adamantly open, dynamic, and resistant to totalizing discourse. This is why, in part, even those who find serious problems with his willingness to entertain idealizations like the "ideal speech situation," and his comfort with Enlightenment principles have reasons to acknowledge the importance of his project.

Fraser, who challenges Habermas on the basis of class and gender exclusion and proposes a plural public model, opens her challenge by writing, "I am going to take as a basic premise for this essay that something like Habermas's idea of the public sphere is indispensable to critical social theory and to democratic political practice" (3). Although she focuses on the problem of access, she acknowledges

the import of the problem of quality in understanding the public sphere.
Fraser and others criticize specific deployments of the public abstraction (e.g. the bourgeois ideal of the 18th century, the Athenian ideal) as a way of challenging the very existence and validity of the public abstraction itself. Fraser and others are concerned with a problem of access to adequate political representation for marginalized groups in specific societies, yet it is not clear how the complaint that specific public abstractions exclude certain parties represents a challenge to the existence and validity of the public abstraction as a regulative ideal. Fraser herself acknowledges that a regulative ideal of a unitary public sphere "is indispensable to critical social theory an to democratic political practice" (3), yet later concludes that "the idea of an egalitarian, multicultural society makes sense only if we suppose a plurality of public arenas in which groups with diverse values and rhetorics participate" (17). Fraser is wrestling with the tension between the empirical particularities of societies and the public abstraction that glosses them. The question that is smuggled in with Fraser's argument asks how can we simultaneously acknowledge the empirical particularities hidden in a public abstraction without sacrificing the principles of publicity (open access and priority of argument) that it offers?

Naturally, a public abstraction that posits a "universally accessible and communicable" space (Kaufer & Butler, 1996) or that engages the "fiction of the *one* public" (Habermas, 1989) will consistently fail when measured against the "actually existing" conditions of social and political practice (Fraser, 1993). Yet Fraser seems to want to maintain both the principles of open communication represented by the public abstraction while at the same time indicting it for failing to describe empirical particularities (especially political exclusions).
The plural public solution (Fraser, 1993; Negt & Kluge, 1993; Hauser,1999; Bourdieu, 1984; Gans,1974) seems to provide a way to account for problems of historic exclusions from political participation, but it trades empirical accuracy for the principles of universal access and communicability that form the basis of the public abstraction of a unified public sphere. The plural publics solution overemphasizes the sense of public as a body (Who?) at the expense of the sense of public as a set of qualities (What conditions?). Without its sense as universal and open, the public abstraction loses its normative and prescriptive content and is reduced to a way of referring to a social group, constituency, or identity. Gans' notion of "taste publics" for instance, divides the world into groups based on their aesthetic sensibilities. While this shift carries a valuable lesson about the

divergent positions and sensibilities unified under the public abstraction, positions and sensibilities that may have suffered historic exclusions, its use of the language of "public" is a misnomer. Erasing the notion of generality from public subtracts its minimum semantic distinction.

Rather than asking Fraser's question, demanding to know how to square empirical particularities with the public abstraction, we should ask the question that it begs: Is there a relationship between the public abstraction and the empirical particularities of social groups, and if so, what is the best way to describe it?

One solution to Fraser's problem is to surrender the language of "public" in descriptive projects, investigations of specific interests in specific societies. This move resigns public to its role as a regulative ideal in discourse and frees descriptive projects from the overly ambitious demand of squaring the ideal to the "actually existing" conditions of a given society.
Negt and Kluge, who have been considered critics of Habermas, themselves acknowledge the importance of the difference between the problem that concerns them and that concerns Habermas. Alexander Kluge suggests in an interview that his and Negt's project is not so much in opposition to Habermas' but is operating with different aims:
SL: The notion of Offentlichkeit was, I believe, introduced by Habermas in his book *Strukturwandel der Offentlichkeit*. Your and Negt's notion of Offentlichkeit, however, is opposed to, or at least significantly different from Habermas.
AK: It is not really opposed. It is a response as part of a process of discussion. We quite agree with him about the necessity of the process of enlightenment, of the need for a new encyclopedia (Liebman, 1988, 41-42).
When Kluge is asked if he and Negt disagree with Habermas, he says, "No, we have no objections, but we have a different field of employment… If he would work in our field, I am convinced he would have the same results" (Liebman, 1988, 42).

Many of those who have challenged Habermas' *Structural Transformation* have done so on the basis of its historical method, and the Kantian assumptions about class and freedom that he builds from. Accused of making the rising bourgeois class of the 18th century an historical ideal, Habermas has been charged with developing a special origin that few historiographers would accept on methodological grounds. Still theorists such as Negt & Kluge and Fraser, and

Hauser who aim to address these problems by imagining plural public spheres where class, ethnic, and gender identities are represented have not challenged the basic import of the problem of quality.

Plural public models aim to solve the problem of access by conceptualizing a mezzanine where the singular, unified public sphere, deemed merely ideological, and a notion of radically fragmented sphere are both avoided. What is sacrificed in this solution is attention to the problem of the quality of discussion in socio-discursive space. Despite its counterfactual status, the singular and unitary public sphere carries vital normative value that can be redeemed in a critical stance. Habermas notes the "fiction of the *one* public" as a way of focusing attention on the valuable principles of publicity that emerge from it. Plural models have emphasized the public body and its heterogeneous identity formations at the cost of considering conditions and standards of public discourse. Critiquing the public abstraction, the "fiction of the one public", as inconsistent with the many identities that it glosses does not erase the effectiveness of the public abstraction in discourse (Kaufer & Butler, 1996), or its importance as a critical standard (Habermas, 1989).

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