

Definition

Habermas defines the public sphere as a place where all citizens have equal access to express their opinion publicly, unrestrained by political bodies (Habermas 1964:49).

The evolution of the public sphere

The Jürgen Habermas released the idea of the public sphere in his dissertation and later a book in 1962. He titled it *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in which he stays true to its name and covers in depth, the transformations the public sphere has taken on.

The first traces of a public sphere were in Greek society. Political discourse could take place separately from the family and economy, in a distinct sphere. However, it was not a completely developed public sphere in that it was heavily impacted by status.

During the middle ages, the public sphere was not found with public opinion being directly connected to the rulers who legitimized their authority through ceremonial presentations (Habermas 1964:51).

Later, at the birth of the enlightenment, feudal bodies began to disintegrate. This separation of the economic and political spheres allowed space for a public sphere to be carved out (Kivisto 1998:78). Simultaneously, the middle class began to form, creating the conditions for the public sphere. Habermas identifies places such as coffee houses and literary salons in 18th century England and France as the archetypes of the public sphere. The salons of France were slightly more ideal than the coffee houses of Britain in that they allowed women (Habermas [1962] 1998:33). The salons were an equalizing establishment where the bourgeoisie was able to meet with the nobility on equal footing. In these places, discourse was open and it is important to note that arguments were won by persuasion rather than authority.

Origins of the Theory

Habermas' idea of the public sphere is a synthesis of enlightenment thinkers, especially Kant and Hegel. Kant came up with the notion of public opinion, while Hegel discovered the "civil society."

Kant wrote on public opinion in his philosophy of right and philosophy of history. He saw public opinion as a place where individuals could freely express their own opinions on the state of affairs. He defined it, in Habermas' words as "the subjection of domination to reason" ([1962] 1998:117).

During the fall of feudalism, Hegel believed modern society would be held together by the new civil society. He saw civil society as distinct from both the family and the state, creating the conditions for rational individuals.

Habermas, however, differed with Hegel's view on the role of the state in the civil society or what became the civil sphere. While Hegel believed the naturally chaotic civil society could be ordered by the state, Habermas believed that civil society would be capable of fixing these problems itself.

Habermas also credits modern constitutions as creating perfect images of the public sphere in that "they guaranteed the society as a sphere of private autonomy and the restriction of public authority to a few functions ... the constitutions further insured the existence of a realm of private individuals (Habermas [1964] 1974:52) Also comment on the connection between this and the newly founded German democracy of his time.

Habermas, Jürgen. [1964] 1974. "The Public Sphere." Translated by Peter Hohendahl and Patricia Russian. *New German Critique* 3:45-38.

Habermas, Jürgen. [1962] 1998. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Translated by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Kivisto, Peter. 1998. *Key Ideas in Sociology*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.