THE IMPACT OF SOCIO-POLITICAL CHANGE ON PUBLIC SPHERE THEORY EXPLORING THE RELEVANCE OF COMMUNICATIVE RATIONALITY

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the impact of socio-political change on the normative model of communicative rationality as the method of public sphere debate. It aims to explore the theoretical implications of the impact of new, diversified publics, institutional complexity and multilingualism, among others, on Habermas's model of communicative rationality. It proposes a reconceptualisation of this model in conditions of overcomplexity and along the lines of a de-transcendentalised, dynamic normativity.

Keywords: Habermas; public sphere; argumentation; communicative rationality; social change; normative theory; complexity; intersubjectivity; emergent publics.

1. Introduction

Habermas's theory of the public sphere (Öffentlichkeit) has been revisited and subsequently revised to account for socio-political change and maintain its relevance as a theoretical standard. Fraser's (1993) work on post-bourgeois, multiple public spheres, Benhabib's on the inclusion of identities, social struggles and power dynamics (1993), McCarthy's objections on the hypostatisation of a historical category to a normative model (1985: 475), Luhmann's on social systems and functionalism (1995) and Foucault's historical materialist objections to universal truths (1984) constitute some examples of scholarly studies that engaged directly with Habermas's work and influenced his own reconceptualisations of his original theory (see Habermas 1984; 1996; 2001). Initially "the sphere of private people come together as a public" (Habermas, 1992 [1962]: 27), Habermas's public sphere evolved into "a network for communicating information and points of view [... in which] streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesised in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions" (Habermas, 1996: 360). Still, while reconceptualisations of Habermas's model focused on the structure, role, the changing functions and spatiality of the public sphere, its method of communication, that is, communicative rationality, has not been revisited to the same extent. For this reason, this paper explores the impact of socio-political change, not on the public sphere per se, but on communicative rationality as its normative method of debate. In this respect, it argues for an alternative conception of normativity in de-transcendentalised terms that are connected to emergent communication practices.

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2. Communicative rationality

Habermas provides a number of definitions of communicative rationality; the following is the most concise:

“There is a peculiar rationality, inherent not in language as such but in the communicative use of linguistic expressions […]. This communicative rationality is expressed in the unifying force of speech oriented toward reaching understanding, which secures for the participating speakers an intersubjectively shared lifeworld, thereby securing at the same time the horizon within which everyone can refer to one and the same objective world” (Habermas, in Cooke, 1998: 315).

Therefore, by definition, communicative rationality is a process rather than a capacity, in which argument is central. It emerges and manifests itself through different forms of debate and argumentation in social interaction. It is this fundamentally social form of rationality that enables the creation and development of the public sphere.

Unlike practical reason, Habermas’s communicative rationality is not considered as an inherent capacity of all human beings in a way that its absence would denote irrationality (Habermas, 1996: 3-4). In opting for a conception of rationality that is based on communicative processes of mutual understanding, Habermas does not consider human beings as isolated subjects. Instead, his model suggests for “an intersubjectively shared social world” (1984: 392) where actors are consciously aware that the objective world and their common social world do not coincide and therefore they attempt to “discursively redeem validity claims” (op.cit.: 75) about truth, truthfulness or rightness of norms. In this way, an intersubjective conception of the world leads to intersubjective or “transsubjective” (op.cit.: 9) understanding.

Furthermore, Habermas describes communicative rationality as the “consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech” (1984: 10), which means that argumentation is regarded as the medium of this model of rationality, and consensus as its desired result. For this reason, it is also known as “argumentative rationality” (Devetak, 1996: 173). In achieving consensus, argumentation aims at transforming “something collectively problematic into something collectively valid” (Klein, cited in Habermas, 1984: 27). As long as argumentation by way of reflection perpetuates, Habermas argues that we can still learn from our mistakes (op.cit.: 22) and therefore communicate rationally. He claims, therefore, that his consensus-oriented model will still work even if consensus is not reached, as long as critical argumentation is in place.

It is evident that Habermas’s model is overburdened with too many presuppositions from the outset: intersubjectivity, understanding, argumentation and consensus. This results in an overly restrictive concept of rationality, which actually hinders instead of facilitating uninhibited expression and reflective participation in public sphere debate – contrary to Habermas’s aspirations for a
public sphere as “a medium of unrestricted communication” (1996: 308). In other words, communicative rationality implies narrow rationality. It also represents a model of linguistically embodied, “situated” reason (Habermas, 2001: 130) that is neither absolute nor goal-oriented but based on communication and therefore contingent. This contingency is significantly heightened if we consider the impact of socio-political change in shared communicative practices.

3. The impact of socio-political change

Rapid technological advancement against the backdrop of deepening globalisation has led to the emergence of new publics, new media and new platforms of communication. Communication has become ubiquitous, faster and has acquired global dimensions. Furthermore, socio-political developments increase complexity in public spheres and result in greater diversification of publics and of their deliberation practices. A constant differentiation of publics ultimately leads to opinions becoming segmented and thematised. This results in functional differentiation, with diffuse and polycentric activities involving different delegated institutions of power and control with clearly differentiated but “interdependent” functions (Zolo, cited in Bohman, 1996: 272, n.6). Zolo observes that this marks a shift away from hierarchical structures in a way that, for instance, political campaigns are dependent on media regulations, while the media are subordinated to relevant legislation as well as the advertising market etc. (Zolo, 1992: 5). Such complexity in the form of an increasing fluidity within society (structures, identities, etc.), functional differentiation and diversification of publics poses an enormous challenge to communicative processes in the public sphere.

Habermas did offer an extensive analysis of social complexity and its impact on public deliberative practices (1996; 2006), with a focus on the rise of complex bureaucratic institutions, the influence of money and technological advancement. However, he did not feed this analysis back into his original concept. He proposed a distinction between informal/weaker and formal/stronger publics (1996) but still, this solution addressed the issue of differentiation in the structure of the public sphere but not in communication. In this respect, this paper proposes the distinction between system publics and emergent publics (cf. Keith, 2013), which emphasises their deliberative character. While emergent publics are becoming increasingly active but also increasingly diffuse, system publics, such as parliaments, succumb to a routinisation of procedures that can seriously undermine the deliberative character of the public sphere in a way that debate would work almost mechanically. In addition to this, the diffuse and largely unregulated character of emergent publics in the public sphere matrix constitutes the lifeblood of its publicness, but it may also expose publics to risks. Smaller and weaker emergent publics may be swallowed by better-organised ones. System publics may be institutionalised and hierarchical, but their opinions and their reasons are institutionally protected, in contrast to those of emergent publics that are increasingly heterarchical in an agonistic public realm.
Lastly, multilingualism against the backdrop of increasingly multicultural and globalised societies leads to multiple competing rationalities in essentially agonistic public spheres. In this way, public spheres become "a field of competing traditions and competing languages" (Alejandro, 1993: 205). If, as examined above, communicative rationality is based on language, what happens when interlocutors use a language different to their native one, or when more than one languages are used in the same public sphere? It becomes even more challenging to determine whether understanding, one of the key parameters of communicative rationality, is truly established and also if agreement, another key parameter, is truly reached "for the same reasons" (Habermas, in Cooke, 1998: 320-1). From this perspective, multilingual debate in public spheres may constitute a case of "pseudo-communication" (Habermas, 1970: 205), where participants do not recognise any communication disturbances unless a third party points them out, and which may in turn lead to "false consensus" (ibid.). A presupposition of universal communicative rationality with emancipatory potential is of no use against this backdrop.

4. Rethinking communicative rationality

4.1. Power and over complexity

Socio-political change and the ensuing institutional complexity should not be seen as a threat to the nature of the public sphere as a space of public opinion generation through shared communicative practices. Instead, the task is to conceptualise alternative models of communication in contemporary public spheres, away from the exigencies of consensus and intersubjectivity. Elements such as conflict, power differentials (Honneth, 1991) and overcomplexity (Bohman, 1996) should be incorporated in a theoretical public deliberation model that remains connected to changing communication practices.

In addition to the above considerations of agonistic public spheres with competing rationalities, the role of power in public sphere communication should also be included in communicative rationality in terms of the contingent games of everyday communication (cf. Goffmann, 1981: 38-39 and Lyotard, 1984: 15-17). The study of power struggles, power differentials and their role in Habermas’s theory, as well as in communication in general, would offer a more justified and balanced critique of “concrete forms of organisation of economic production and political administration” (Honneth, 1991: 202). In particular, instead of lamenting the nefarious consequences of (systemic, bureaucratic etc.) power on the public sphere, power should be incorporated in a reworked version of communicative rationality. In this respect, critical debate remains a medium of communication, 2

2 The impact of multilingualism on communicative rationality is not going to be analysed extensively in this paper. The implications of multilingualism, such as the need for interpreters in multilingual public spheres or the use of dominant languages by non-native speakers, will constitute the focus of a separate study that will be published in a forthcoming paper on Communicative Rationality and Multilingualism.
however due to the inequality and complexity of the publics, the purpose of debate is to compete for influence in dominant public spheres and formal institutions. ‘Agonistic’ is not considered here as an alternative to ‘deliberative’, but instead it defines the process of deliberation. It is essential for the public sphere to hold some form of internal struggle, because debate and polemic are at its core. By articulating power differentials within the public sphere, its idealising presuppositions will turn into functional preconditions for effective critical debate.

Moreover, managing overcomplexity in contemporary democratic societies is largely the task of system publics in cooperation with administrative institutions (cf. Bohman, 1996). In this intragovernmental context of routinisation of procedures and strategic interests, communicative rationality à la Habermas, based on intersubjectivity and oriented towards consensus, is simply not relevant. Instead, a re-worked version would follow certain principles of practical reason but would neither be centred on reason nor would it hypostatise it as the normative medium or prerequisite of debate.

4.2. Criteria for public deliberation

Based on the above, this paper proposes the following qualitative criteria for public deliberation: 

- Bohman’s (1996: 175) stipulations of political deliberation as pragmatic, moral and ethical, but guided by public interest;
- the inclusion of bargaining and negotiating procedures in political debate, as a necessary mechanism of forming balanced opinions and reaching balanced decisions (cf. Saretzki, 2009; c) the requirement of informed debate for purposes of “considered” (Habermas, 2006: 414) public opinion and ultimately informed decision-making.

Firstly, Bohman’s criteria require deliberation to be pragmatic in the sense of achieving practical ends, moral in the sense of fairness in conflict and ethical in terms of cultural values and identities (1996: 175). Certainly, practical ends, morality and ethics can be challenged and adapted in contemporary societies and using them as guidelines for political deliberation may lead to additional confusion. As Outhwaite observes, there are many cases in which people are faced with a pragmatic choice to be made between alternatives, which leads to negotiation and compromise (Outhwaite, 1995: 143) – or bargaining (Habermas, 1996b: 338; Saretzki, 2009). This process would eventually lead to “an accommodation (Vereinbarung) which balances out conflicting interests” (Outhwaite, 1995: 143-144). In this respect, fairness should be determined in the framework of what is considered as general public interest and open to scrutiny through different moral codes, publics and law.

Secondly, argumentation is infiltrated with power relations, negotiation procedures of bargaining and arguing (Saretzki, 2009) and specialised discourses. Publics need to be agonistic, they need to question, clarify, justify, contest and challenge opinions and information fed to them by various sources, if social emergence is to be taken seriously. This is not only because of communication uncertainties but also because of the increasing diversity of participants of all forms attempting to mediate public opinion. Instead of presupposing that all participants work towards a common interest (as Habermas suggests), we must instead
presuppose that participants aim at promoting their own (or their groups’) private interests. Only in this way can participants truly adopt a critical attitude to debate and communicatively seek the optimal solutions for the promotion of common interests. In this context, understanding is viewed as collective procedure, similar to Habermas’s original conception, which is necessary for opinion formation and further argumentation. The process is agonistic – in and between publics, as well as between public and the state.

Of course, Habermas would disagree, as the distinction between bargaining and arguing points to that between strategic and communicative action respectively (see Habermas, 1996: 338). However, in the same way that communicative action may be described as strategic or teleological, if success is defined in terms of understanding or consensus, bargaining may also be described as an alternative form of arguing, not entirely stripped of its normative content. Indeed, instead of claiming that in contemporary societies arguing is progressively swallowed and replaced completely by strategically-oriented bargaining, Habermas emphasises that “discourses and bargaining processes intertwine” (op.cit.: 339) as the main vehicles of deliberation in public spheres. This results in “normatively regulated bargaining processes as a combination of rational calculations of success with social norms that contingently steer from behind” (op. cit.: 338). Therefore, the normative element is still present, but it has shifted from governing critical-rational debate to regulating bargaining in the form of negotiation and compromise. This new form of reason, which is “detranscendentalised” (Habermas, 2001: 149) to an even greater degree, is examined in the next section.

Thirdly, public debate needs to be informed and “considered” (Habermas, 2006: 414), in the sense of availability of knowledge in order to treat a specific issue in an informed manner. Functional differentiation in contemporary societies has given rise to more complex issues entering public deliberation. Examples of this include GMOs, stem-cell research, and even religious issues. None of the qualitative criteria for deliberation examined above would be effective in achieving a balanced, fair and constructive debate, if participants do not have sufficient knowledge of respective issues, specialised or not. Again, access to relevant sources of information is key, especially in cases where expert knowledge is vital. The media, NGOs or lobby groups may offer erroneous or ambivalent information to the public in their attempts to guide them towards a particular opinion and ultimately influence will-formation. Moreover, the Internet is in many cases unreliable due to the lack of monitoring and evaluation of its content. Informed debate presupposes that citizens have the critical capacity to distinguish impartial and biased sources of information and knowledge.

The importance of “considered” debate is also raised by Habermas in his discussion of empirical applications of his normative theory (2006). He uses an experimental study by Neblo, which investigated how trial groups learn through deliberation by asking them for opinions on key political issues before and after deliberating on them and reaching collective decisions. The resulting individual opinions were found to be “quite different” (op.cit: 414) from their initial opinions prior to deliberation. According to the study, this change reflected “broader
perspectives” on the issues discussed, as well as “increasing trust expressed in the procedural legitimacy of fair argumentation” (ibid.). Habermas uses the example of similar studies that offer empirical evidence for the learning potential of political deliberation. In short, the argument is that the more we deliberate, the more knowledge we acquire, which lowers the possibility of “polarisation of opinions” (ibid.).

It is important to note that the stipulation of informed debate does not imply that participants who are not adequately informed about a certain issue should be excluded. Instead, it points more to the availability and opportunity given to participants to inform themselves on key socio-political issues so that they can make decisions about ways in which to pressure authority for change. Certainly, awareness of major issues is the duty of responsible citizens, however it is the task of the state, the media, civil society and pressure groups to make knowledge and sources of information available to citizens. Participants who are misinformed or not adequately informed about certain issues could actually benefit from participation in public debate in developing more “considered” (Habermas, 2006: 414) and balanced views, as the above studies have shown. The criterion of informed debate, therefore, is not elitist, as it does not imply the exclusion of participants with limited knowledge or experience. It is more directed to bodies outside the public sphere with the duty of making knowledge available to the public, so that citizens formulate considered opinions and make informed decisions. The requirement therefore is for informed debate, rather than informed citizens.

4.3. Towards a dynamic normativity

It is evident from the above analysis that the shift in the conceptual role and structure of public sphere deliberation also denotes a shift in the normative core of Habermas’s model. As a rule, normative theory has to do more than be prescriptive. It must not be detached from practical life concerns or from contemporary issues; otherwise it runs the risk of becoming self-referential. Moreover, normative theory does not have to be non-pragmatic and belong to the sphere of the ideal and unrealistic. It should maintain its guiding role without claiming moral or ethical supremacy. The aim is to have norms that do not “possess conclusive validity” (Honneth, 1991: 281), but the role of which is to go beyond the contingent. Habermas himself recognises that “absolute, binding normativity only exists in law, which is both positive and compelling” (1996: 58).

Communicative modes of sociation are actually governed by a looser version of normativity, which tracks practice and acquires reflexivity. This type of normativity, advocated here for the status of the reworked version of communicative rationality, does not bestow on its respective theory a meta-status. It is de-transcendentalised and represents a dynamic as opposed to static normativity, constantly tested against shifting social practice and not locked in time.
The notion of a dynamic normativity has been advocated by scholars in the fields of social sciences, law and human sciences. It lies between the extremes of positivism and relativism and focuses on the impact of change on values, laws and practices. Social norms are governed by a dynamic instead of static, diachronic normativity, because they are “institutional embodiments of communicatively-produced knowledge” (Honneth, 1991: 259). Furthermore, as Sherry (forthcoming) points out, normativity as a social dynamic is “always elusive” in the sense that it is contingent upon social interaction, through which it can be “complicated, modified, reshaped, reinterpreted and reconstructed” (Sherry, forthcoming). Similarly, Peschard argues that “the normativity of a cooperative practice can only be a dynamic normativity, generated from within, in response to the elucidation and reformulation of what is at issue” (Peschard, 2007: 151). Conversely, the rigidity of Habermas’s concepts of rationality and the public sphere as a purely normative space threatened by non-normative forces functions as a barrier to free expression, diversity in communication and communication with bodies outside the public sphere.

To avoid the risk of being criticised for utopianism, Habermas opts for the convenience of characterising his ideal model “a methodological fiction” (Habermas, 1996: 326). In this way, he points to its normative role and attempts to show that, even though it can never exist under current social conditions, it should function as a guide to existing discursive practices. Besides, he states: “Even under favourable conditions, no complex society could ever correspond to the model of purely communicative social relations” (ibid.). Moreover, as noted above, communicative rationality represents a form of “situated” reason (Habermas, 2001: 130), which Habermas nevertheless aims to establish either as the only reason or as the normative reason. Even though he recognises that public debate is always infiltrated by vested interests and motives, he chooses to privilege communicative rationality in the public sphere. This makes it an empirically questionable “grand narrative” (Lyotard, 1984), which is not even useful as a “methodological fiction” (Habermas, 1996: 326). Instead, dynamic normativity would accommodate the renewed version of communicative rationality advocated in this paper.

5. Conclusion

This paper has shown that socio-political change in the form of the introduction of new actors, new media and multiple languages results in agonistic public spheres with competing rationalities. The ensuing contingencies, as well as the uncertainty and risk inherent in overcomplex contemporary societies pose significant challenges to the normative role of Habermas's model of communicative rationality. Idealising presuppositions cannot be made in light of such circumstances without risking crossing the fine line between counterfactuality and impracticality. The tension between normativity and empirical relevance requires a reconceptualisation of communicative rationality on the normative level as well as its redefinition on the operational level (cf. Splichal, 2013). Against this backdrop, this paper has a) reconsidered communicative rationality away from the constraints
of consensus and intersubjectivity towards the inclusion of conflict, power dynamics, bargaining and negotiating, pragmatism, overcomplexity and informed debate and b) argued for a de-transcendentalised redefinition of normativity less tied to idealising presuppositions and counterfactuals and more informed by actually existing practices. In the face of challenges such as increasingly multicultural societies with different moral and ethical norms, commercialised societies with changing values and ensuing legal and constitutional modifications to accommodate such radical changes, the purpose and role of this dynamic conception of normativity is all the more evident.

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