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Rethinking the Concept of the Public Sphere

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Abstract: This paper rethinks the concept of the “public sphere” through the lens of contemporary events. Specifically, it examines the Palestine Solidarity Movement, since October 7, 2024. The central argument is that this historical phenomenon necessitates a re-theorization of the concept of the “public sphere.” To support this claim, three key questions are explored across the chapters; (1) What is the public sphere? (2) How can the recent Palestine Solidarity Movement be characterized? (3) Why does this historical phenomenon demand re-theorization of the public sphere? The first question is addressed using Jürgen Habermas’s foundational theory, which initiated academic discussions on the concept. The second question outlines a chronological account of recent events. Together, these answers reveal the asymmetrical structure of the public sphere, which serves as a basis for addressing the final question.

Introduction

The concept of the “public sphere” has traditionally been theorized in relation to specific historical phenomena. Jürgen Habermas’s seminal work, “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere” (1962), initiated this discourse by analyzing the formation and transformation of Western bourgeois society in the 18th century. In this work, Habermas derived the concept of the “public sphere” from tangible historical contexts, such as English coffee houses and French salons. Approximately 30 years later, Habermas significantly revised his original conceptualization of the public sphere in response to the “catch-up revolutions” in Central and Eastern Europe (Habermas, 1990a, p. 11). Another 30 years later, considering the pervasive influence of digital media, he reformulated the concept of the public sphere (cf. Habermas, 2022). This pattern demonstrates a recurring tendency to adapt public sphere theory to emerging social phenomena. Such adaptability is not unique to Habermas. This responsiveness underscores the critical relationship between theoretical development and practical realities.

Given this context, one may ask: What contemporary events will next compel a rethinking of the public sphere? This question does not imply a superficial conflation between theory and practice. Rather, as evidenced by the development of the concept, the theory of the public sphere has evolved precisely through its engagement with real-life challenges. Maintaining this connection to actual problems is crucial for advancing the theory.

This paper argues that the global solidarity movement with Palestine, which has gained significant momentum since October 7, 2023, represents a pivotal moment. This phenomenon, it is argued, provides a framework for re-theorizing the concept of the public sphere. To support this claim, this paper addresses the following three questions: (1) What is the public sphere? (2) How can the recent Palestine Solidarity Movement be characterized? (3) Why does this solidarity movement necessitate a theoretical evolution of the public sphere? Each chapter systematically explores these questions.

1. Concept of the “Public Sphere”

The purpose of this chapter is to elucidate the concept of the “public sphere” (Öffentlichkeit in German). This German term is widely used in everyday language, but within academic discourse, it has acquired a distinctive interpretation. This chapter focuses on Habermas’ conceptualization of the public sphere. While the concept of the public sphere does not originate solely from it, his theories have significantly shaped contemporary understanding and ongoing academic discourse.¹ To develop this characterization, I primarily reference Habermas (2008).

The public sphere is a domain that holds a central position in democratic societies. In such societies, the public sphere functions as a space that “connects state and civil society as a sphere for the free formation of opinions and wills” (Habermas, 2008, p. 140).² In simpler terms, the public sphere represents a space where unrestricted discussion about political decisions takes place, bringing up the gap between the state and civil society. To fully understand the concept of the public sphere as a “sphere for the free formation of opinions and wills,” it is essential to address two key questions: (a) What are “state” and “civil society”? (b) How does the public sphere function as a bridge between the state and civil society?

(a) In answering this first question, it is essential to examine Habermas’ theory of democracy. His analysis of democratic society emphasized the role of communication as a fundamental mechanism. Habermas identifies three levels of communication in a democratic society (Habermas, 2008, pp. 163–164): “Institutionalized discourse³,” “Media-based mass communication,” and “Everyday communication.” These types of communication occur within distinct arenas. The first level, *institutionalized discourse*, takes place within *state* institutions such as the cabinet, parliament, and courts. These bodies are legally organized and operate according to established rules that determine who can engage in discourse. The second level, *media-based mass communication* occurs in the political *public sphere*, where public themes are presented primarily by the mass media, and public opinion emerges through public discussion. The third level, *everyday communication*, occurs within *civil society*. Here, communication involves ordinary citizens and takes diverse forms, ranging from formal events like symposia or debates to informal interactions such as casual conversations in corridors or pubs. In summary, the state, public sphere, and civil society constitute the three main components of a democratic society, each distinguished by its unique level of communication.

(b) The public sphere mediates between the state and civil society by functioning as both a *sounding board* and a *filter*. Habermas elaborates on this role:

¹ Prior to the theory of Habermas, there were no words in English that corresponded to his word “Öffentlichkeit” (cf. Fraser, 2009, p. 148).

² I translated Habermas (2008) into English by referring to the English translated book (Habermas, 2009).

³ In the discourse theory developed by Habermas, “discourse” refers to a specific form of communication (cf. Habermas, 1984, p. 130–131).

The deliberative model conceives of the public sphere as a *sounding board* for tracing problems which affect a society as a whole, and at the same time as a *discursive filter-bed* which sifts interest-generalizing and informative contributions to relevant topics out of the unregulated processes of opinion formation, broadcasts these “public opinions” back onto the dispersed public of citizens, and puts them on the formal agendas of the responsible bodies. (Habermas, 2008, p. 144, *emphasis added*)

To interpret this quote, I apply the three elements discussed above: the state, public sphere, and civil society. First, the public sphere functions as a *sounding board*, responding sensitively to the diverse issues that emerge within civil society. However, it is not merely a space where various opinions are scattered. Instead, the public sphere is characterized by a distinct centripetal force. In other words, it possesses the capacity to distill “public opinions” from transient and disparate views. This function is called as a *discursive filter bed*. The formation of public opinion is strongly influenced by individuals who can amplify their voices, such as journalists, politicians, entrepreneurs, civic activists, and intellectuals. As previously mentioned, the genesis of this “public opinion” lies in the issues confronting civil society. Once public opinions have been formed, they are reintroduced to the public through media and other channels, prompting further discussion among citizens. Through this interactive process, certain perspectives are again identified as public opinions. In this way, the cycle of opinion and will formation repeat within the public sphere, which is closely interlinked with communication in civil society. The relatively organized “public opinion” that emerges from this cycle eventually transitions into the institutionalized discourse at the state level. An illustrative example of this phenomenon is the influence of public opinion on policy proposals and legislation in parliament, which subsequently leads to political decisions.

This description provides a general overview of the public sphere concept. Above all, the public sphere is a domain in which opinions and wills can be formed freely. In a democratic society, in which people are sovereign, such a domain holds an indispensable position. This is because “public opinion” is crucial for reflecting people’s will in political decision-making. The public sphere serves as a platform for the formation of public opinion. Mass and digital media play a vital role in facilitating this process by narrowing down a broad range of topics to a limited number of themes suitable for public discussion. This selection process enables the crystallization of public opinion. It would be, however, improbable that a single, unified public opinion will emerge on a given subject. Public opinions can also surface with overt conflicts. These divergent opinions, on one hand, stimulate renewed discussion within civil society and, on the other, exert a tangible influence on political decision-making at the state level. Thus, the public sphere acts as a conduit, channeling the collective voices of the people into the political decision-making process.

2. Solidarity Movement with Palestine

This paper posits that the Palestine Solidarity Movement, which has been gaining momentum globally since October 7, 2023, represents a historical phenomenon

necessitating a reconsideration of the concept of the “public sphere.” The rationale for this proposition is explored in Chapter 3. This chapter provides a concise overview of recent developments in the Palestine Solidarity Movement. The discussion is structured as follows: (a) The historical events central to this study are presented chronologically. (b) These events will then be analyzed through the lens of the “public sphere” concept.

(a) The genesis of the recent Palestine Solidarity Movement took place on October 7, 2023.⁴ On this date, fighters led by the Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement) launched an assault targeting an Israeli military installation and a kibbutz (a rural self-governing community). This attack, which resulted in substantial casualties, prompted a “retaliatory” offensive by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Western media widely reported the October 7 attack as “a brutal act of terrorism.” Meanwhile, the intensifying war in the Gaza Strip was disseminated primarily through internet channels, demonstrating the severe impact on unarmed civilians. These events spurred global outrage, leading to widespread demonstrations in solidarity with Palestine and a surge in support for the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement.

Furthermore, a notable increase in academic engagement with the Palestinian issue has been observed. For instance, American philosopher Judith Butler, a longstanding advocate for Palestinian rights, issued a statement titled “The Compass of Mourning” (Butler, 2023) on October 13, calling for the immediate cessation of hostilities. On November 1, the open letter “Philosophy for Palestine” (Abbound et al., 2023), endorsed by over 400 scholars from North America, Latin America, and Europe, was released, amplifying calls for academic solidarity.

In contrast, state-level responses exhibit rigidity. For example, the Jordanian-proposed ceasefire resolution in the United Nations General Assembly on October 27 was challenged by opposition or abstention from G7 member states and their allies (cf. Al Jazeera, 2023). Meanwhile, military support for the IDF has persisted, notably from the United States and Germany, as of November 2024.

(b) To organize these developments, I apply the three-dimensional framework of “civil society,” “public sphere,” and “state,” as outlined in Chapter 1. State responses, characterized by “institutionalized discourse,” have largely been inflexible. While certain governments, such as those of Jordan and South Africa, have treated the Palestinian issue as a priority, the Western nations primarily responsible for addressing the conflict demonstrated little adaptability. Consequently, efforts to resolve the crisis at the governmental level can be described as rigid. In contrast, civil society has exhibited dynamic engagement. Demonstrations and rallies organized by citizens have proliferated, and statements

⁴ However, it would be erroneous to situate the inception of the enduring dispute between Israel and Palestine on October 7. The arbitrary and problematic nature of the starting point for discussing the Palestinian issue has been a topic of considerable debate (cf., e.g., Pappe, 2023; Sunose, 2024). This paper establishes the date in question as the point of origin for the recent Palestine solidarity movement, which serves as the subject of our analysis.

from civil society organizations advocating for Palestine have gained significant visibility in the public sphere. Researchers and organizations regularly host colloquia and lectures on the Palestinian issue, further amplifying its prominence. The collective activities of civil society have transformed the Palestinian issue into a focal point of public discourse. Discussions have permeated diverse public forums, fostering the emergence of public opinion on the matter. These developments underscore the role of civil society in bringing the Palestinian issue to the forefront of the public sphere.

3. Rethinking the Concept of the “Public Sphere”

How can the concept of the “public sphere” be reconsidered through the lens of movements in solidarity with Palestine? First and foremost, this phenomenon underscores the essential characteristics of the public sphere as a domain rooted in civil society. The voices of citizens, often independent of national and economic interests, stimulate discussion within the public sphere and shape public opinion, which, in turn, exerts pressure on political decisions. This dynamic has been observed repeatedly in recent times. Such a phenomenon exemplifies the public sphere model anchored in civil society, a framework Habermas sought to construct since 1989 in response to successive revolutions (cf. Habermas, 1990). The renewed recognition of the public sphere’s influence is significant.

Nevertheless, merely examining the correspondence between the extant concept of the public sphere and actual phenomena fails to achieve a comprehensive reconsideration of the concept itself. In this chapter, I aim to *critically* rethink the “public sphere” in light of historical phenomena, focusing on how the Palestinian issue highlights the limitations and distortions of the public sphere.

To commence this critical examination, it is necessary to consider a crucial fact: it was not until the series of civic movements following October 7 that long-standing issues, originating as early as 1948 (or even earlier), suddenly became central to the public sphere. This development can be described as a success of these movements. However, it would be overly optimistic to interpret this solely in a positive light. The Palestinian issue has persisted for over 70 years, and it is only now that significant sacrifices have allowed these concerns to enter the public sphere. This demonstrates that the public sphere has been dysfunctional on this issue for decades.

Why has the public sphere failed to address this issue? I argue that this failure reveals a distorted structure within the public sphere, one that has only become active after the extraordinary events since October 7. To address this issue, I propose examining the “asymmetric structure” of the public sphere as a potential framework for re-theorizing its concept.

The public sphere is traditionally conceived as a space for deliberation, where opinions and wills are shaped. However, it is essential to note that such deliberations primarily occur through mediated communication rather than face-to-face interaction. The public sphere provides platforms for journalists, intellectuals, and other influential individuals to highlight critical issues and articulate their perspectives through public statements. These statements, in turn, stimulate further

debate, resulting in the formation of “public opinion,” a hallmark of the public sphere. Nevertheless, an *asymmetrical structure* is inevitably embedded within this process. The *actors* in the public sphere: politicians, journalists, and intellectuals—are endowed with the authority to speak, while the *public* often assumes a passive role, primarily as receivers of these messages. Habermas acknowledged this asymmetry, describing it as follows:

It is [...] the *asymmetrical structure* of mass communication that turns participants in deliberation, who must face questions and objections, into more or less passive spectators and consumers. Whereas deliberation requires reciprocity in assuming the roles of speaker and addressee, mass communication in the public sphere is best understood by analogy with a stage which does not permit an exchange of roles between the few *actors* and an anonymous watching *public*. (Habermas, 2008, p. 160, *emphasis added*)

While Habermas identifies *asymmetry* as a flaw in the public sphere, he reinterprets it as a necessary condition for the production of opinion.⁵ In this view, public opinion emerges through the actions of individuals who act as “*actors*” within the public sphere.

Although actors are indispensable to the public sphere, the asymmetry between speakers and their audience persists as a structural issue.⁶ The fact that the Palestinian issue only became a significant topic of discussion after the events of October 7 underscores the problematic nature of this asymmetry. It raises the question: how effectively were the voices of third-world governments, NGOs, local residents, and other storytellers heard prior to these events?

Habermas describes the public sphere as a “sounding board” through which society’s multifaceted challenges are articulated. However, can this sounding board resonate only with sensational events such as mass casualties? The delayed response to longstanding issues, catalyzed by such tragedies, highlights fundamental distortions in the public sphere. This raises further questions: Who qualifies as an actor? Whose voices are deemed worthy of being heard? And who constitutes the public? A comprehensive theory on the public sphere must address these questions.

Finally, I mention the asymmetry between the narrative and the narrated. This imbalance is distinct from the asymmetry between the speaker and listener; it concerns the relationship between the narrator and the object of the narrative. For instance, statements such as Israeli Defense Minister Galant’s characterization of Palestinians as “human animals” (cf. Zaiton, 2023) exemplify this asymmetry.⁷ In the public sphere, narrators possess distinctive voices; however, those who are the

⁵ Habermas asserted “Without these actors, a public sphere would not be possible in national societies” (p.161).

⁶ The advent of the Internet seems to have contributed to a reduction in this asymmetry. Nevertheless, the imbalance of voices in the public sphere persists. The dearth of attention devoted to the long-standing Palestinian issue, despite the pervasive reach of the Internet, serves as empirical evidence of this assessment.

⁷ For a detailed consideration of this statement, see Yasui (2024).

subjects of these narratives can only appear through the narratives of others. Their existence within the public sphere is contingent on the narrator's portrayal. This form of asymmetry, which gained prominence as a concern post-9/11, requires further examination.⁸

Conclusion

The historical phenomenon of October 7, 2023, compels us to rethink the concept of the public sphere. This reconsideration can be viewed in both positive and negative terms. The concept of the public sphere provides a framework for understanding the political significance of the solidarity movement with Palestine, which has gained momentum since October 7. The public sphere is an essential condition for democracy. However, the fact that the public sphere has become responsive to the Palestinian issue only after the significant sacrifices made since October 7 highlights the structural "asymmetry" inherent within it. The examination of asymmetry, as discussed in this paper, offers a pathway for critically reconstructing the concept of the public sphere.

I would like to extend my gratitude to all those who provided valuable comments at the international seminar. I am particularly thankful to Professor TRIPATHI, Priyanka for enabling me to move beyond a simplistic positive reconsideration of the concept and engage in a deeper critical examination. However, her observation regarding the inherent imbalance in language itself has been addressed only briefly in the final part of this paper. I intend to explore this dimension further in my future research.

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⁸ Habermas underscored the significance of media autonomy within the public sphere and make the following observation in reference to 9.11; "In view of the shock caused by that horrendous and heinous terrorist attack among the American population, the interpretation ["war against terrorism"] seemed to fit the event all too well. The remarkable thing was the absence of competing attempts to place the monstrous event in a different context, or to "frame" it differently" (Habermas, 2008, p. 181). The similarities between the phenomena noted here and those surrounding 10.7 would be obvious.

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