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New Media, New Democracy?

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The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society
by Jürgen Habermas
Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991, xxii, 301 pp.

¶1:26 Emerging information and communications technologies reopen, in both thought and practice, a host of basic questions pertaining to public life. Perhaps this is why the Internet excites so much attention: anticipatory perceptions arouse participatory engagements. It is difficult, however, to specify clearly what possibilities new media open and how this may be happening. A reading of Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* may help us understand how new media can affect public life and clarify the prospects for a new democracy.

¶2:26 Habermas published *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1962, at the age of 33, asserting with it his autonomy among German social thinkers. He articulated a critical agenda for European intellectuals of the postwar generation, an agenda that was not so much more optimistic than that of his elders, but less tragic. His teachers, pre-eminently Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, had lived through the collapse of their tradition with the rise of Hitler. As it went under, they accounted for the disaster through a critique of the Enlightenment, contending that its drive to develop instrumental reason left its progeny without guiding principles in the face of expediency. They espoused a tragic sense of history by finding the destructive flaws in the historical effort to bring Fortuna and the contingencies of life under rational control to be integral in the very nature of reason itself. Habermas remained a critical theorist in holding the current public world to be deeply flawed, but he did not assert a tragic sense of history, for he contended that those flaws arose, not from the nature of reason itself, but from changes in the conditions under which people could apply it in the conduct of life.

¶3:26 It took nearly thirty years before an English translation of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* appeared in 1991, long after Habermas's later works had secured his Anglo-American reputation. These books were of two types: more abstract treatises, as in his two volumes on *The Theory of Communicative Action*, and somewhat programmatic statements that he asserted as a leading intellect facing the issues of his time. As a result, Habermas in English has stood more for a

position in his time than for an historical diagnosis of his time. *The Structural Transformation* came late, too late to alter this basic impression.

¶4:26 In addition, the inevitable treasons of translation may have narrowed the relevance that *The Structural Transformation* seemed to have when read in English. The title in English itself suggested a more ponderous process than *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* would indicate in German. *Öffentlichkeit*, implying the activities of making things public, is more active than "the public sphere" suggests in English, and the German *Öffentlichkeit* resonates with the concept of an open society, *die offene Gesselschaft*. Likewise, "structural transformation" suggests a determinate process of change arising from necessary causal dynamics, whereas *Strukturwandel* has a quality of unexpected mutation and historical wandering to it. Habermas described a series of contingent changes in European history, starting in the later middle ages, that had considerable import for the ways people might reciprocally interact. He ended with an invitation, not merely to critique the contingencies, but to try to understand and control them so that a rational openness in human experience could better flourish.

¶5:26 Habermas began the study by attending to the necessity in human societies to make some ideas, convictions, and decisions become public, common to all. He situated the locus of his inquiry on the process by which becoming public takes place in various historical settings. For the most part throughout history, important matters had become public, common characteristics, through force, via domination, as a result of imposition by the stronger party. Occasionally, ideas, convictions, and decisions became public, historically operative, through rational persuasion. Where a rule of force was in place, going public, a process that generates the stream of historical life, usually involved what Habermas called representation – public appearances, ceremonies, assertions. Representation made visible the dynamics of domination that were taking place, for instance, through a coronation ceremony, which represented in a careful order of precedence the various components of sovereign power. In contrast, where rational persuasion was at work, people situated the process of going public in deliberative reasoning, open to all who were able and willing to engage in a shared commitment to the pursuit of truth. Discussion among informed individuals in diverse settings – salons, dinners, meetinghouses, street corners, coffee houses, and so on – provided Habermas with the characteristic example of deliberative rationality leading to the emergence of bourgeois society.

¶6:26 In his book, Habermas charted a course from the late middle ages to mid-twentieth century. His starting point for structural change began with the representational powers of medieval courts and clergies, who made things public not for the people, but *before* the people, memorializing in pomp and circumstance domination, physical and spiritual, by feudal interests. Who could represent what to whom through ceremony, image, proclamation, or symbolic action defined the public sphere. He then analyzed how during the three hundred years, beginning roughly in 1500, a rational-critical public emerged under bourgeois leadership in eighteenth-century Western Europe, enabling aspirations to democratic, national self-governance to became historically operative. A new public sphere emerged as private individuals constructed public convictions through letters, pamphlets, treatises, speeches, conversations, pageants, and papers; as people wrote and read, talked and challenged

one another in a process of thinking together about the governing principles of public life. Empowered by subjecting commerce, industry, and agriculture, even daily life, increasingly to reasoned control, they extended the impetus in an effort to deal with the issues of public purpose through rational deliberation.

¶7:26 From there, through the nineteenth century, Habermas found that the bourgeois elites too slowly adapted the arena of rational-critical discourse to more inclusive participation. Rural peasants, urban proletarians, frontier settlers, freed slaves, women, ethnic minorities: all had compelling claims for inclusion as active members of polities defined by the abstract definition of the universal citizen and the rights pertaining thereto. The entire succession of events, leading from the breakdown of the French Revolution through the failed revolutions of 1848 and the awful losses of the American Civil War, showed how the emerging bourgeois public sphere could not maintain a rule of reason as new groups sought inclusion in its deliberations. Over and over, with persuasion at an impasse, the recourse was to force. Then, as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, what had originally been a governing idea, long rent by internal conflicts, became a distorting ideology, with national polities achieving greater internal stability as they displaced conflict into imperial expansion and foreign wars, which became all-too-cataclysmic. The system of democratic, national self-governance became an arena for the clash of interest groups vying for acclamation, gaining the right of the strongest according to the voice of the people, with the potential for terrible havoc when manipulated acclamations gave power to the depredations of an irrational will-to-power, as in the Third Reich and other totalitarian movements.

¶8:26 Unlike Marx and many other philosophers of history, Habermas did not describe his *Strukturwandel* as a process driven in determinate directions by causes immanent within – an engine of change independent of choice. People made choices and consequences followed. Choices determined by the flux of status or interest would be erratic and alien to many. Choices determined by an open process of critical-rational deliberation, would be both wiser and more inclusive. An element of stoic realism characterized Habermas's view, however, for background causalities were at work, beneath or behind the *Strukturwandel*, kneading human options so that at any time people would find some things to be in their control and some things not. For Habermas, deliberative reasoning was the highest procedural good, for it was objectively important as the best means by which a public could disclose what its realistic options were.

¶9:26 Habermas argued that deliberative reasoning had been operative in the late eighteenth century through a "bourgeois public sphere," an unfortunately muddy term. At one level, it was an ideal type useful in the construction of theory and the analysis of historical change. But Habermas also found it significantly grounded in historical example, perhaps most effectively in the lifeworld of Immanuel Kant and his ideas about political practice articulated, for instance, in "Perpetual Peace" and his "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Practice. Habermas did not hold that controlling principles such as Kant's became operative in a full or exclusive sense in the late-eighteenth century. Nevertheless, he did see them having significant determining influence, slowly shaping British public life in the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries, clearly affecting the American Revolution and Constitution, driving the French Revolution at least in its initial stages, and residually present in the nineteenth-century formation of the national system of Europe. The bourgeois public sphere as an ideal type had a dimension of historical actuality because bourgeois groups developed a relatively effective ability to engage in deliberative reasoning and to convert the fruits of that deliberation into operative convictions shaping public action during the late eighteenth century in Western Europe and its North American offshoot.

¶10:26 In this process, representation took on a new meaning. In the prior system, representation disclosed the hierarchy of the feudal orders and symbolically manifested the supremacy of their ruling wills. In the emerging bourgeois public sphere, representation stood not for power, but for the ability to think and enter into efforts at reasoned persuasion about matters of public life. Delegates, those who represented others, represented neither their status nor their fixed opinions, but rather the reasoning powers of their electing peers. Representatives in this sense would use those reasoning powers in open deliberation on behalf of the larger group. As a result, people reconstituted the state, as in the American Constitutional Convention, using systems of checks and balances in an effort to construct a system of governance that would approximate a faction-free, deliberative democracy. In the pursuit of such an ideal, people substantially reshaped their political and socio-economic lives to be more secular, rational, and productive, triggering a tremendous demographic and industrial surge through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

¶11:26 Thus, the bourgeois public sphere worked constructively, to a limited but significant degree, in the late eighteenth century. Its achievements set loose, however, further background causalities that raised conflicts of interest between those within the sphere of deliberative reasoning and newly enfranchised groups, which were outside of it. In this situation, bourgeois leadership responded, not via deliberative reasoning, but as one interest group among many others. With that, the original bourgeois idea of representative democracy ceased to function as an idea implementing deliberative reasoning, and started to work instead as one among other ideologies within a political system dominated by interest group competition. Delegates who had represented the deliberative rationality of their constituents now came to represent the principal interests and expectations of their constituents in an effort to find out which ones had the most powerful set of adherents. Political parties became powerful, extra-constitutional elements in representative systems, functioning not as means of deliberation, but as shapers of opinion and mobilizers of the vote. Bargaining displaced deliberation. One might exemplify such a shift in American history, for instance – recognizing that real life never makes distinctions perfectly -- by comparing the work of the Constitutional Convention with the working out of the Compromise of 1850. For Habermas, it all led to a process of refeudalization, which was the hallmark of public life in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Representatives came to stand for, to represent the opinions and interests of their constituents, and democracy became a contest to see which opinions and interests could elect the greatest number of representatives.

¶12:26 In 1962, Habermas ended *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* by indicating the prospects for renewing the influence of deliberative reasoning in public life. The choices he then envisioned were real, but not particularly promising. From the vantage point of the mid twentieth century, the mass media were the great shaping influence working on politics and the public sphere. Habermas analyzed the effects of mass media on the formation of public opinion, engaging fully with American critical sociology of the 1950s – scholars such as Bernard Berelson, Edward L. Bernays, Leo Bogart, John Kenneth Galbraith, Morris Janowitz, Elihu Katz, William Kornhauser, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Seymour Martin Lipset, Herbert Marcuse, C. Wright Mills, David Riesman, Wilbur Schramm, Gilbert Seldes, and William H. Whyte. Mass media had displaced the more literate, reflective media essential in constructing the sphere of deliberative reasoning in the late eighteenth century. The mass media were conducive to an acclamatory politics at the level of the nation-state and consequently institutions of representative democracy had ceased to function deliberatively and had come to function as a contest among interest groups competing for power through the mobilization of money and adherents and the manipulation of opinion.

¶13:26 In Habermas's view, the promise for deliberative reasoning did not lie in trying to resuscitate the eighteenth-century character of representation in which elected delegates represented the reasoning capacities of their electorate. He thought the mass media, although non-deliberative in themselves, could give resonance to the fruits of deliberation, just as well as they could publicize representations of self-interested ideological distortions.[1] People could create spheres of deliberation within organizations and parties, making their articulation of their positions rational, not ideological, and those organizations and parties could then enter into the interplay of the mass media with the goal of making their rationally determined positions win dominance in the media driven competition to determine controlling public opinion. For instance, one might adduce the American civil rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s as an example of this process effectively at work. The Freedom Rides and the violent dispersal of non-violent marchers, the eloquent contrasts between propounders of principle and purveyors of prejudice, provided, for instance, by Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bull Connor or Orville Faubus, all of it reshaped ruling views on civil rights, not through processes of deliberation, but rather through dynamics of contagion via the publicity apparatus itself.

¶14:26 Habermas suggested that affluence could be a carrot and the threat of nuclear annihilation a stick leading to public rationality. One would expect, given the law of diminishing returns, that increasing affluence would diminish the degree to which people would let their economic self-interests control their participation in public life. The benefits of rational policies, of service to all, might prove attractive in an era of muted ideological conflict. Indeed, the thirty years following the Second World War were the time during which the democratic welfare state reached its height in Western democracies and pundits proclaimed the immanent end of ideology. One would expect, too, that Cold War fears of mutual destruction between leading nation-states

1 The organization, Common Cause, might be taken as a late-twentieth-century effort to test such a hypothesis within the sphere of American politics.

would lead people to modulate their conflicts internal to each nation by maintaining a broad level of domestic consensus. Under the discipline of nuclear stalemate, elites would find policies that worked rationally for the common good to be valuable as a means to maintain stability. Indeed, in the U.S. and its allies, the era of nuclear fear was one of bi-partisan foreign policy and on both sides of the Iron Curtain national consensuses blanketed deep conflicts that would later surface at terrible human costs.

¶15:26 These expectations made considerable sense from the vantage of 1962, the year of the Cuban missile crisis. But it was not long before western democracies, particularly England and the United States, became confidant that the Cold War could be controlled, even won, and the ethic of good greed showed that affluence was far from sufficient to curb the selfish appetites of wealthy persons and powers. In 1962, Habermas thought a significant historic choice was open: "The outcome of the struggle between a critical publicity and one that is merely staged for manipulative purposes remains open; the ascendancy of publicity regarding the exercise and balance of political power mandated by the social-welfare state over publicity merely staged for the purpose of acclamation is by no means certain." (p. 235) History has treated Habermas's hopes poorly. In the ensuing forty years, the social-welfare state has been largely dismantled and the most important voices in the shaping of policy have become the reactionary masters of manipulation. Recent history seems to have chosen in favor manipulative public communication and against deliberative reasoning in public life. What was an open possibility then seems a closed actuality now.

¶16:26 What hope, then, remains for the potential rule of reason? We can pose this question, but not answer it, for it is a question embedded in the flow of unfolding historical action and its answer depends not on what we say, but on what we do. In considering large-scale courses of action, however, we might keep in mind two matters that Habermas may have underplayed in his historical diagnosis.

¶17:26 As we have noted, Habermas said little about the historical causalities driving the process of structural transformation that he charted. He described the shift from a feudal order in Europe to mercantilist capitalism and from there to an industrial order, in which mass media increasingly structured public opinion. In the process, participants in the public sphere ceased to form public opinion through reflective contributions to critical-rational debate through journals, personal engagements, and public speech. Instead, they built up an alternative system of mass media and mobilization, through which the values of entertainment and commerce dominated. He did not give an elaborate neo-Marxian analysis showing how the economic interests of the bourgeoisie determined this process, rather he presented it largely as something that happened, *sui generis*, an existential given. Let us explore this quality of Habermas's historical discourse.

¶18:26 Habermas was interested in what happened, not how and why it happened. This existential quality to Habermas's history was not so much a deficiency or an omission; rather it was a tacit commitment to an important type of explanation by means of the dynamics of self-organization. Since Adam Smith, the market as a self-organizing source of economic pricing and allocation was well known. In a much different sphere, Hegel had traced the power of sentient self-awareness to develop

itself in response to its surroundings in *The Phenomenology of Sprit*. Darwin, too, had shown how environmental pressures could create selective courses of development from random changes in the characteristics of living species. Since Habermas wrote, scientists and scholars have significantly extended the ability to identify and describe emergent, self-organizing phenomena. Abstractly stated: an actor of one sort or another, confronted with a threshold change in its immediate local environment, will shift behavior in a significant way. Such a shift will result in an emergent development when aggregated with similar shifts by other actors of the same type as each of them likewise reacts to the threshold changed in the local vicinity of each. There is no grand plan, but rather an emergent phenomenon as each contributor reacts independently to surrounding change. We might say that in this fashion, the bourgeois public sphere emerged, not from a blueprint imposed on historical life, but from the aggregate of private considerations by members of the bourgeoisie, as each perceived expanding opportunities for self-determining, autonomous action and thought in his immediate circumstances.

¶19:26 In histories shaped through self-determining change, one can observe patterns of differential stability and flux: one side of a given development may prove very stable and last for a long time while another may quickly arise and then give way to another one made dynamic by a slightly different combination of factors. One sees such fluctuation within a stable form often in the histories of various technologies. For instance, for a long time steam engines used a structure of pistons and condensers to drive rotary motion and within that structure, they underwent a long succession of functional improvements, increment by increment. Then, in the late nineteenth century, steam turbines, an entirely new structure for extracting rotary power from steam, began a new course of functional development. Most development is of this sort: a relatively stable structure animated by incremental change until its functional possibilities have exhausted the potential of the structure.

¶20:26 Let us identify the highly stable dimensions of a self-organized system as its structural elements. These create a sphere of possibility that the system actualizes for itself over time. Let us also identify domains where change seems continuous. This domain constitutes an arena of functional exploration for searching out the diverse possibilities existent within the stable structure. When the functional possibilities that a structure provides become exhausted, the structure ceases to be an arena for pursuing solutions to its vital problems and then becomes a key element limiting its basic effort at on-going self-organization and maintenance. Then the reciprocal relation between structure and surroundings begins to trigger emergent exploration that may lead, not to further functional change, but to new structural innovation, distinct from the merely functional. Hegel called this leap to a new structural arrangement an *Aufhebung*, an upheaval, and the late Stephen J. Gould has shown such processes to be pervasively at work throughout biological evolution with his theory of punctuated equilibrium.

¶21:26 In last half or so of his *Strukturwandel*, Habermas analyzed the difficulties for a rule of reason triggered by the continuous functional elaboration of communications media within a relatively stable structure of capitalist nation-states, governed through institutions of representative democracy. The nation-state, which took shape as part

of the structural development of the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas described in the first half, has subsequently proved very stable as the primary arena of political interaction. In contrast, the functional agencies of communication and transportation have continued to be very dynamic, generating wave upon wave of innovation as people have sought out new ways to move themselves, with their goods and ideas, within and between their national arenas. In the subsequent forty years since Habermas described the situation, two developments, about which Habermas was silent, have become increasingly salient. First, interactive, digital networks have spread as a quite unexpected wave of further innovation in communications, one that substantially strains the institutions forming public opinion that Habermas analyzed. Second, key elements of national structures have changed significantly as finance, both production and consumption, and the system of information and communication technologies have all become global. Together, these two developments place a great deal of stress on the structural arrangements developed over the past two hundred years, suggesting an emergent *Aufhebung*, a punctuating of the equilibrium, bringing with it the possibility of a different prognosis for deliberative reasoning than the one Habermas foresaw.

¶22:26 Do the functional changes taking place in communications as we start the twenty-first century depart from the patterns of functional change characteristic of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Are there signs of structural change possibly altering the long stable structure of capitalist nation-states, governed through institutions of representative democracy? Let us venture some relatively optimistic considerations.

¶23:26 Within the sphere of communications innovations, the means, at least, seem to be developing to depart from the dominance of mass communication and to resuscitate tools of rational deliberation open to all. Habermas shared the distrust of mass communications characteristic of the Frankfurt School. Participation as producers of communications through broadcast media was closed to all but narrow elites. These media could subject large numbers of people, simultaneously and powerfully, to the manipulation of emotions, expectations, and purposes. They were deeply inimical to deliberative reasoning. For some years since the publication of *Strukturwandel*, communications innovations seemed to strengthen the dominance of a very limited communications elite with ever-more powerful one-to-many media. But late in the twentieth century, digital information and communications technologies may have started to alter this fundamental pattern, for they seem to operate, in the phrase of the late Ithiel de Sola Pool, as technologies of freedom. The infrastructure is terribly costly, but once in existence, it makes it much easier for people with ideas but little capital to address a universal audience as peers of the most powerful. Given the new media, many-to-many interactions, conducive to a shared pursuit of truth, has a much better chance of becoming more publicly significant in the twenty-first century than it did in the twentieth.[2]

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2 My optimism here is rooted in the belief that the sequence of mergers creating vast communications conglomerates is not a sign of their strength in the emerging communications ecology. Rather it belies their weaknesses, especially the great difficulty they are having in maintaining profit margins as the ability of large-scale capital to limit access to the opportunity to communicate dissolves.

¶24:26 What about the structure of the public sphere, however. Why was there such a push towards mass communications in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Habermas alluded to the rise of industry, mass production, the whole emergence of the modern economy, and the interest of the bourgeoisie in controlling its fruits. What he did not say much about was the demographics associated with these developments. The rise in population is notorious, as is its steady shift from rural to urban centers. It may well be that deliberative reasoning, feasible at the scale of the eighteenth century, largely ceased to be so at the scale soon attained in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

¶25:26 Between the eighteenth century and the twentieth, the uses of literacy changed. A much larger proportion of a much larger population became part of a reading public. In the eighteenth century, the bourgeois public sphere encompassed only a few thousand persons in the largest national polities. There is a basic incommensurability between how they could operate a process of deliberative reasoning, in principle open to all and universal, and how tens of million, even hundreds of million persons can participate in an arena of national action. At the scale and scope of the nation-state, issues become abstract, accountability obscure, and procedures of rational deliberation weak. In the early twenty-first century, the nation-state as the locus of public life shows signs of weakening under the influence of globalization and regional integration. But this course of development seems likely to exacerbate the incommensurability between the scale of the public sphere and the requirements for effective public deliberation further. At a global scale, the issues become even more abstract, accountability even more obscure, and procedures of rational deliberation ever weaker and weaker.

¶26:26 Might the structural weakening of the nation-state lead to a new structure for public life, one that would be more commensurate with the characteristics of open, rational deliberation? This question leads well beyond Habermas's *Strukturwandel* and it should remain open. Suffice it to close with the observation that within cities and between cities interests are relatively concrete, participants in public life know one another relatively well, and the prospects for rational deliberation may be relatively good. The archaic meaning of bourgeois is "of the city." Perhaps it is time to revitalize bourgeois society in a very twentieth-first-century sense of the word.

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