The Public Sphere Rediscovered

Arendt and the Perennial Presence of Aristotle in Habermas

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This article aims to re-evaluate the influence the Greeks and especially Aristotle have had on Jürgen Habermas's thought via Hannah Arendt. The purpose of such a reassessment is to argue that Habermas's reconstruction of the public sphere is conceptually yet indirectly embedded in the Aristotelian historical and intellectual trajectory, which is often neglected.

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In his book *Theory and Practice* (1974a), Jürgen Habermas pronounces the break of modern politics from the old tradition of Aristotle. He argues that the tradition of Aristotelian politics was entirely founded on prudence and practical philosophy where politics is considered as the doctrine of a good and just life and thus a "continuation of ethics." To seek a good life, the citizen is dependent on the polis (the ancient Greek city–state). Thus, goodness necessitates engaging in politics and political discussions in the open spaces of the polis. The moral, legal, and political aspects of actions thus, in a way, superimpose and overlap with each other.

However, according to Habermas, Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Moore initiated a break from this tradition of politics, which was given a final shape by Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes conceptualised the permanent groundwork of a correct political order on the claims of a positivist social philosophy while replacing the Aristotelian foundations of prudence. It resulted in the untying of the enmeshed knot of ethics, law, and politics prevalent in the ancient tradition of political philosophy. After Hobbes, the correct political order can be envisaged through a government that considers human beings as objects who behave in a "calculable manner" rather than act uninhibited. Once such a naturalistic calculation regarding the politics of human affairs creeps in, the frameworks of the ethical nature of social interaction can be ignored. "This separation of politics from morality," writes Habermas (1974a: 43), "replaces instruction in leading a good and just life with making possible a life of well-being within a correctly instituted order."

Critics such as David Randall argue that the scientific reason of Hobbes cannot be merely viewed as a break from Aristotelian politics. He charges Habermas with presenting only one side of the debate while completely overlooking the other. For Randall, the notion of scientific reason is both a successor of classic prudence wherein the ongoing debate between traditional and modern scientific reason registered the strength of classical prudence. The path for such a registration was initiated by Machiavelli, who, according to Randall, detached prudence from morality and evolved the concept of "amoral prudence." Habermas interprets this development as a shift from, rather than a succession of, Aristotelian politics (Randall 2011: 205–26). Interpretations regarding this significant development in Western political thought can go either way, with some arguing for a continuation and others taking side with Habermas to emphasise on the break from tradition. The issue, however, is to dissect the break from beneath and find whether the necessity of conceptual basics also acknowledges this break.

In other words, one can agree with Habermas regarding the break in politics but disagree with him and argue that at the level of concepts such a break can never happen; not even in his philosophical thought. The shift might have transformed politics but the energies of normative content inherent in the concepts of classical political thought, to use Habermas's (1997: 36) phrase, "still inform our needs for orientation." My intention here is to argue that even after announcing this shift, Habermas's conceptualisation of the public sphere could not escape a historical start with Aristotle's distinction between *oikos* (ancient Greek household) and polis. What might have been conceived by Habermas as a historical break in the way we conceive of politics and political establishments today could not escape the conceptual continuity that a normative foundation of the public sphere needs. In other words, the ruptures and turns of political thought could not affect the historical continuity of concepts that are essential for a definition of the public sphere.[1]

During the last few decades, Habermas has been continuously modifying the normative ideals of his theory of the public sphere (Calhoun 1992). In his first major work, the *Structural Transformation*

of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (hereafter STPS), the framework for defining the public sphere as a discursive space emerges from a sociological and historical analysis of the modern bourgeois societies of Europe. He conceives the public sphere as a discursive space where "private people come together as a public" to discuss matters of mutual concern and arrive at a consensus in the form of public opinion (Habermas 1989: 26, 66; 1974b: 49–55). The discursive space is separate from both the domain of public authority (the government and state institutions) and the private domain of peoples' family life. As a concerted culmination of discussions in the public sphere, public opinion is both separate from and generally reflect a critical attitude towards the government and its public policies. He writes that public opinion served as the vehicle to "put the state in touch with the needs of society" (Habermas 1989: 31). The locus of such discussions were the coffee houses, salons, marketplaces or table societies, which were in principle open to all.

Romanticising the Public Sphere?

Some critiques have emerged in the West regarding Habermas's romanticising the bourgeois public sphere and his purported concealment of its exclusionary nature by feminist scholars, Marxists and liberals alike. These criticisms led him to clarify and revise the foundational frameworks of the public sphere in his recent writings. In *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas widens the theoretical foundations of the public sphere to address and include the viewpoints of these critiques. Building on the notion of lifeworld—the set of beliefs and values that one is socialised in while growing up and living in a particular society—and the normative concept of communicative rationality—a distinct version of rationality which is epistemic, practical, and intersubjective as inherent in all communication—Habermas (1996: 374) does not confine the definition of the public sphere to the "episodic public sphere found in taverns, coffee houses or the streets." Rather he attempts to go beyond a site-based phenomenon—happening in coffee houses and other public places—to the meta-topical "social space generated in communicative action" (Habermas 1996: 360). Although Habermas (1996: 374) allows for a multitude of international, national, subcultural, regional and local public arenas, he argues in favour of a universal public sphere by assuming that the boundaries inside it remain permeable for building "hermeneutical bridges." The latest modification has been his inclination to address the role of religion in the public sphere of post-secular societies—societies where religious communities continue to exist within a secular environment. The notion of the post-secular is aimed at a reconcilement of secular public reason with religious reason so that religious citizens can be included within the fold of public deliberations in the political public sphere. It is also an attempt to get rid of the flaws in Rawls' contentious "provisio"—the condition that religious reason can only be included in pubic deliberation provided they follow with corresponding political reason. As an alternative, Habermas develops the model of "institutional translational provision"—the provision that ordinary citizens be freed from the burden of translation (as in Rawls) and instead officials and public institutions do the secular translation which has been widely critiqued by scholars such as Melissa Yates and Christina Lafont at the levels of "cognitive burden," "identity split" and "conflict of interest" (Yates 2007: 880–91; Lafont 2009: 127–50). These modifications, I argue, tend to root Habermas more deeply in the Greek tradition of Western political thought than detaching him from it. He is rooted in the Greek origins of the public sphere in two ways:
(i) Directly to Aristotle and his emphasis on public–private distinction and the idea of *lexis* (speech).
(ii) Indirectly through Arendt (the neo-Aristotelian) from whom he draws theoretical tools but stops short of acknowledgement. I will deal with both of these in detail.

The earlier Habermas of STPS is closer to the Greek historical understanding of the "public" and the "public sphere" than the latter one which we encounter after the *Theory of Communicative Action*. Peter Uwe Hohendahl argues that early Habermas follows the intense critique of modernity and enlightenment rationality by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W Adorno and develops a theory of the public sphere within the framework of "a historical narrative." The later Habermas, on the other hand, puts historical context to the background and takes an interest in a "purely philosophical grounding" of the concept of the public sphere (Calhoun 1992: 100–02). The historical narrative, with its primary focus on enlightenment modernity, starts with what Manfred Riedel calls as the Hegelian analysis of modernity. Such an analysis traces modernity back to the Aristotelian distinction between oikos and polis and is quite distinct from Weber's notion of analysing modernity (D'Entrèves 1994: 22–23).

The Hegelian analysis of modernity starts in the first chapter of STPS where Habermas acquaints the reader with the confusing meaning of the term "public" and how its meaning shifts with changing situations. He, however, despises the lack of any proper term that can replace such traditional categories. Despite a lack of conceptual clarity, he defines those events and occasions as public "which are open to all, in contrast to closed or exclusive affairs" (Habermas 1989: 1). This definition leads him to attend to the contested distinction between the notions of "public" and "private." Going back into Aristotelian political philosophy, he argues that the distinction has its origins in the Greek city–state where polis (the public sphere of freedom and permanence) was distinct from oikos (the household with its master). "The wants of life and the procurement of its necessities were shamefully hidden inside the oikos, so the polis provided an open field for honorable distinction" (Habermas 1989: 4). He argues that the feudal system of domination based on fiefdom lacked a proper outline for the distinction between the public sphere and the private sphere, as was the case with the Greek city–state. Instead, the tradition of ancient German law had the two categories of "particular" and "common" which seemingly correspond to the distinction between public and private. Publicness in the continent was only a representative publicness

that considered people or the commons only as spectators. The lord represented it in person and lordship was represented not for but before the people. Such a public representation was more a matter of display and lacked any characteristic of a sphere of political communication (Habermas 1989: 8). The narrative weaved by Habermas to expound on the evolution of the bourgeois public sphere is investigated from the vantage points of multiple disciplines simultaneously—especially history, sociology, and philosophy. It provides the reader with a window to look into the notions held by Greeks and Romans regarding the concept of the public sphere while at the same time interrogating their lineage vis-à-vis the modern times. While the historical importance of Aristotle for Habermas's theorisation of the public sphere is easy to grasp, I intend to have a closer look towards the abstract conceptual lineage which Habermas barely stresses on.

The Polis in Modern Europe

The idea of the public sphere in STPS has a radical philosophical and theoretical lineage where Habermas, in a way, attempts to reincarnate the polis in the European situation of the 18th century. Irrespective of the stark historical and sociological differences between the Greek and the 18th century European epochs, the conceptual similarities are hard to be overlooked. While Aristotle's citizen (male-master of household) had to "leap beyond" all concerns regarding the household affairs and participate in the public discussions of the polis, Habermas gives this "leap" a distinct twist to suit the contexts of modern capitalist societies. The master in Aristotle is replaced by a bourgeois owner of goods and persons in the private and intimate sphere. A leap into the public sphere transforms him into a *homme* (human being) among others who is qualified to discuss matters of mutual interest without any meddling by their bourgeois identity. Thus, the bourgeois public sphere was a public founded on the dual identity of the individual with the role of a property owner running parallel to his role as a human being. Habermas (1989: 56) writes:

> 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 transformation of Aristotle's master-citizen dialectic into the bourgeoishomme dialectic by early Habermas also signifies the spatial link that the concept of public sphere shares with the Greek one. While *agora* (marketplace) constituted the demarcated space where masters met each other as equal citizens, for Habermas, the coffee houses, table societies, and salons mark that open space where private individuals come together to form a public. Moreover, the exclusion of the proletariat, women, and other depressed classes from the realm of the public sphere is also reminiscent of the Aristotelian polis. Gerald Hauser argues that the consideration of the concept of the public sphere is participatory and both Aristotle and Habermas emphasise participation in public from their respective contextual vantage points. He points to a significant evolution from the Greek notion of public *life* to the modern conception of the public *sphere*. In the former, no distinction between the *ekklesia* (legislature) and agora was needed, as "the men interacting on public issues in one were the same men who later came together to vote in the other" (Hauser 1998: 24). The only difference between the two was that the actions performed in the legislature were official. Quite distinctly, the modern conception of the public sphere acts as a third arena between the state and family in the form of civil society where discussions meant to generate public opinion are expected to influence the governmental activities of the state. In Habermas's thought, society organises itself as a distinct realm outside of the purview of the state. The policies and other functions of the state are dependent on what Hauser (1998: 31) calls the "support of society's disparate segments whose will was expressed in the form of public opinion."

The most important link that Habermas shares with the Greek understanding of the public sphere is his emphasis on lexis and language. In a 2004 lecture, he underlines the "social nature" of human beings as being the starting point of his philosophical thought. The peculiarity of our social life lies in our existence within the elements of language through which we not only represent but communicate with others to reach an agreement and understanding. Language, according to him, is not a mirror of the world, but the only access we have to the world. He emphasises the Aristotelian notion of *zoon politikon* (political animal) as an animal who exists in a polity, that is, a public space. Public spaces are a unique feature of human affairs, which are possible only because we can learn from each other within a linguistically shared cultural milieu. Though born helpless, an infant grows up and "is able to form the inner centre of a consciously experienced life only by externalising herself through communicatively constituted interpersonal relations" (Habermas 2021: 108). Aristotle, if we remember, considers the capacity of speech and shared language as a distinctive feature of human beings. Speech becomes the sole criterion through which individuals meet, discuss, and cooperate on matters of their common good.

In a serious reformulation of Weber's idea of rationalisation, Habermas subtly appropriates the Aristotelian emphasis on lexis by distinguishing between two modes of action: (i) work or purposive-rational action; a form of action based on "either instrumental action or rational-choice or their conjunction," and (ii) interaction or communicative action which are forms of action where humans coordinate their behaviours based on "binding consensual norms" through communication. The communicative structure of interaction as a form of valid action is explicated by arguing that expectations regarding each other's behaviour "must be understood and recognised by at least two acting subjects" (Habermas 2021: 108). Thus, interaction as an action is only possible through a Wittgensteinian notion of public language in "ordinary language communication" (Habermas 1989a: 91–92).

The connecting link of lexis as a foundational feature of public interaction becomes clearer if we draw a parallel between Arendt's and Habermas's understanding of the public sphere. Arendt has had a tremendous influence in shaping later Habermas's pure philosophical grounding of

the public sphere, which is in sharp contrast to the historical narrative emphasised by the early Habermas. Quite interestingly, both Habermas and Arendt conceptualise the paradigm of public space as a democratic forum for intersubjective interaction almost simultaneously. While Arendt finds the modern age as a precursor for the disappearance of the public realm, Habermas finds it as playing a dual role. The early Enlightenment period according to him leads to the evolution of the public sphere as a space for deliberation on common interests of people vis-à-vis the state which later gets refeudalised and transformed into a sham public overridden by private interests and a corporate culture.

What is clear, however, is the fact that at the time of their writing, both share a nostalgic trope regarding the existence of the public sphere that was but is now not to be found. The difference in the depth of nostalgia is that Arendt idealises the Greek polis as being paradigmatic, and Habermas laments the loss of the bourgeois public sphere found in coffee houses, table societies, and the world of letters in the early 18th century. Dana Villa argues that in Arendt's and Habermas's critique of the present times, the primary attempt is to search for a recovery of the lost public realm. It is through the nostalgia of this loss that both elucidate minimal conditions needed for "uncoerced deliberation and decision amongst diverse equals" (Villa 1992: 712). Seyla Benhabib widens the ambit of this nostalgia with history to almost all the 20th century thinkers of the public sphere. From the American journalist Walter Lippmann who wrote the *Phantom Public* to the pragmatist John Dewey's response to Lipman in the *Public and Its Problems* and from Hannah Arendt to Habermas in Europe, all

> appear to be afflicted by a nostalgic trope: once there was a public sphere of action and deliberation, participation and collective decision-making, today there no longer is one; or if a public sphere still exists it is so distorted, weakened, and corrupted as to be a pale recollection of what once was. (Benhabib 1997: 1)

In the search for a justification of the pervasive presence of this nostalgic trope she argues that more than being a philosophical date with the past (be it far or near), the nostalgia is a symbol of concern that all these philosophers share about the possibility of democracy in complex, multicultural, and excessively globalised societies. In almost all her writings on the public sphere, she finds the Arendtian conceptualisation severely limited for modern reality which is one of advanced capitalism, corporate culture, and impersonal communication. She argues that Arendt's model emphasises a corporeal form of interaction between people who are confined within the walls of spatial metaphors. Such a form of interaction is at odds with the modern experience. Habermas (1997: 7), on the other hand, takes the challenge of modern reality seriously and describes the public sphere as "an impersonal medium of communication, information, and opinion-formation." Habermas (1977: 14) himself finds Arendt's theory of the public sphere that is based on rigid dichotomies of classical Greek philosophy as "inapplicable to modern conditions."

Speech in Arendt and Habermas

The framework-oriented differences withstanding, both Habermas and Arendt come closer to each other in their emphasis on speech and communication. In the same article, Habermas argues that the Arendtian concept of power is a communications concept with a huge normative content. In Arendt, the fundamental phenomenon of power is directed to the formation of a common will in an unconstrained communication directed towards reaching a consensus. The strength of this consensus is measured by the amount of rational validity immanent in speech. While making rational validity the sole form of the meaning generator in speech among actors, Habermas interprets Arendt's notion of power as a form of communicative action. Power, he writes, "is built up in communicative action; it is a collective effect of speech in which reaching agreement is an end in itself for all those involved" (Habermas 1977: 6). Arendt, therefore, disconnects the concept of power from any teleological necessity. It is the power of this common communication which helps to maintain the action or the plurality of actions from which it emerges. Power thus is not a means to an end where it is employed for gaining majority or dominance. It is rather an end in itself.

According to Villa, Habermas's interpretation of Arendt's concept of power through his conception of communicative rationality underlines their similarities regarding the mode of interaction to be followed in the public sphere. In other words, it "stresses the parallels between her reassertion of the Aristotelian distinction between praxis and poiesis and Habermas's fundamental distinction between communicative and instrumental action" (Villa 1992: 713). Habermas foresees Arendt as emphasising a politics of dialogue whose underlying conditions can only be met through undistorted communication. Although Villa (1992: 717) treats this interpretation as wrong, he views it as a "prefiguration" of Habermas's ideal speech situation. Gerard Heather and Mathew Stolz agree with Villa as they consider Habermas's inclination of finding rationality claims inherent in language as his conclusion. However, they are quick to add that Arendt becomes the medium through which he channels critical theory's interest towards political theory. It is through Arendt that he "turns his attention to the classical doctrine of politics as it is embodied in the thought of Aristotle" (Heather and Stolz 1979: 6).

Benhabib underlines the centrality of theoretical dialogue between Habermas's notion of the public sphere and Arendt's concept of the public space. The central role of this exchange can be gauged by the fact that Benhabib (1996: 200) calls the Habermasian concept of the public sphere "a systematic transformation of this Arendtian concept." She laments that scholars and commentators have not given Arendt her due for this transformation. According to her, Habermas is indebted to Arendt in three respects. First is her discovery of the linguistically structured notion of human action, which serves as a preamble to Habermas's theory of communicative action. Second is her conception of public space and its discovery which becomes an "important conceptual legacy" inherited by Habermas. And finally, the distinction between "work" and "interaction"—at the origin of Habermas's theory of communicative action—draws from Arendt's critique of Karl Marx and more importantly from her threefold distinction

between "work," "labour," and "action." Habermas could make a conceptual move from "public space" towards his conceptualisation of "public sphere" only because of the persistence of this complex dialogue with Arendt. Whereas the move from "public space" to "public sphere" led to a lot of crucial transformations, the significant relationship between the public sphere and the theory of democratic legitimacy needs to be underlined. Arendt's notion of public space is so much embedded in its emphasis on the space of appearances that it completely overshadows the concept of democratic legitimacy. It is only through Habermas's transformation of public space that a link between the public sphere and democratic legitimacy gets re-established.

Benhabib argues that Habermas helps us to understand two functions that a public space fulfils: a holistic function and an epistemic function. These functions are central to any theory of democratic legitimacy, be it ancient/Arendtian or modern/Habermasian. The holistic function of public space is that in it "collectivity becomes present to itself and recognises itself" (Benhabib 1996: 201) through layers of shared interpretations and a cohesion evolving around those interpretations. Cohesion here means the convergence of interpretations rather than any Rousseauian general will which can be unilateral or stately. It enables the individuals to recognise the "what-ness" and "who-ness" of the actor. Without convergence and cohesion, the uniqueness of action remains unfulfilled. A public space fulfils its epistemic function when it transcends the limitations imposed by the overarching metaphors of spatial and temporal metaphors invoked by Arendt. It, according to Benhabib, is fulfilled when a public space successfully transforms "narrow self-interest" into a more broadly shared public or common interest. The common interest signifies the anticipated communication to foster an "enlarged mentality" where one gives and entertains reasons. The significance of anticipated communication lies in the fact that it simultaneously transcends the boundaries of spatial face-to-face interactions and loosens them. The two functions, though essential for a theory of democratic legitimacy, cannot be culled single-handedly in Arendt. She conceives public space as a space "mired in a romantic invocation of power that emerges whenever and wherever the people are united together through mutual promises" (Benhabib 1996: 202). It is through Habermas that the missing link between Arendtian language and democratic legitimacy is established and made clearer. Benhabib (1996: 202) writes:

> If the reasonable and voluntary consent of citizens, or their mutual promises in Arendtian language, are the basis of legitimacy in the political realm, then a public sphere of the exchange of opinion, of the sifting through the arguments, and of the mutual deliberation is fundamental to modern political institutions. Habermas clearly shows the link.

Arendt's influence on Habermas's thought has another critical relevance. He and other scholars (for example, George Kateb) find Arendt's work anti-modernist and Aristotelian in nature (Benhabib even calls her a Grecophile theorist). Heather and Stolz and Benhabib's stress on conceptual lineage between them also highlights Habermas's dialogue with Aristotle; although an indirect and impersonal one. Arendt becomes the table (to use her metaphor), which simultaneously separates and unites Habermas and Aristotle. In Arendt, he meets the classical and contemporary together and takes it forward towards a firm philosophical grounding of the public sphere. Habermas carefully sieves the classical to find conceptual tools of contemporary relevance. In a metaphorical way, he uses Arendt to bridge the break, which he argues had been initiated with Hobbes's scientification of politics. Habermas (1974a: 286) writes,

> the study of H Arendt's important investigation *(The Human Condition)* and H G Gadamer's *Warheit and Methode* has called my attention to the fundamental significance of the Aristotelian distinction between *techne* and *praxis*.

Conclusions

Scholars only interpret Habermas's notion of the public sphere as being a response to the present. They completely overlook that Arendt's presence works as a handle through which the past is appropriated and transformed into a critique of the present. It is only through the simultaneous existence of this appropriation and critique that Habermas becomes ready to tackle the challenges of the present. Aristotle via Arendt remains conceptually fundamental in this appropriation in the works of Habermas.

NOTE

1 What I mean is that the historical continuity of a concept or its ancestral origins are important and form an important marker for a new beginning at any point of time by enriching and broadening its newness rather than by restricting it. An emphasis on this historical necessity is needed even if, as Deleuze and Guattari (1996: 18) say, "this history zigzags" and passes through other problems or onto different planes." Habermas underlines this historical zigzag as a break and radical transformation of politics itself which I partly agree to. I however disagree with the fact, that this break is a complete break, which ends every possible relation with the past and becomes "alien" (as Habermas writes) to our political experience.

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