

First published in German in 1962, Jurgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* wasn't translated into English until 1989. One of his earliest works, the focus of the book is Habermas's historically-grounded and theoretical account of the emergence and ultimate breakdown of the bourgeois public sphere. Using both sociological and historical methods, Habermas demonstrates how the bourgeois public sphere was a historically specific moment in the western world. Defined as something between civil society and the state, for Habermas the public sphere was a space free of coercion where private individuals could engage in "rational-critical" debates on issues of general concern. Importantly, as a basis for normative democratic theory, the public sphere was, in principle, open to all citizens and as such was a space where legitimate public opinions could be formed.

In *Structural Transformation*, Habermas takes primarily a chronological approach. The first half of the book details the emergence and transformation of the public sphere while the second half focuses on the conditions and practices that led to its disintegration. Habermas links the emergence of the public sphere to the development and transformation of capitalism and the rise of bourgeois society. Specifically, Habermas claims that the public sphere came out of capitalism's ideal of separating what was the political sphere from the market. As a mediator between the two, a public sphere developed as a counterpart to the state. Bourgeois society uniquely fulfilled this counterpart role through the act of discourse -- critiquing, interpreting and discussing political matters in private, but openly accessible settings (such as 18th century coffee houses and salons).

The rational-critical debate function of the public sphere crystallized into the formation of public opinion. As with the public sphere, the type of public opinion that emerged in the 18th century was a historically specific phenomenon. In Habermas, public opinion is distinguished both from “mere opinion” or uncritical prejudices of single individuals in aggregate form, and also from a “reputation that emerges in the mirror of opinions” (p. 90). Instead, Habermas argues that a *public* opinion can only be formed by a single public which engages in rational-critical debate. Habermas claims that the ideal of public opinion attained its most fully developed theoretical form in the Enlightenment thought of Kant, for whom public opinion aimed at *rationalizing* politics in the name of morality.

In the second half of the book, Habermas accounts for the demise of the public sphere. He argues that as the public sphere became increasingly open to others (e.g. non-property owners) it became fragmented. Secondly, with the transformation of capitalism and the rise of the welfare state, society and the state became interlocked. As such, a unified and independent public sphere was no longer viable. Instead, the public moved from one of debate to one of consumption. In consequence, it was no longer possible for a single public to rationally devise an independent, critical opinion about the state. Rather, opinions were manufactured and manipulated by corporate and state interests and then fed back to the public.

Habermas’s Frankfurt School roots are evident in this critique. A student of Adorno and Horkheimer, Habermas’s *Structural Transformation* has vestiges of the mass culture critique. He criticizes new media such as television, radio, and even film as undermining the ability of audience members to engage in a discursive relationship. He claims that these new media

deprive the audience the opportunity to “talk back” or disagree. Instead, the public receives already-mediated information, which they consume rather than critique. As a consequence, instead of developing public opinion through rational-critical debate, public opinion becomes something that is manipulated, manufactured, and spoon-fed to an uncritical and voiceless audience. In this critique, public opinion and the public sphere become a fiction. And, according to Habermas, these trends lead to both the anesthetizing of the public and the disintegration of a critical public opinion.

Habermas’s work has important implications for democratic theory, particularly theories of participatory democracy. As a normative project, liberal democracies find their legitimation through the consent of an informed public. But *Structural Transformation* calls into question whether or not that legitimation is possible without a functioning public sphere. Further, his critique of the manufacture of opinion rings true in a time when public relations play such a central role in the practice of American politics, indeed so much of a role that the current administration even produces its own quasi-news stories for distribution. But important questions about the future of a critical public go unaddressed in *Structural Transformation*, leaving the reader wanting a new conceptualization of the public sphere in the current historical climate.

This isn’t the only problem in the work. Habermas falls victim to the same weaknesses of his Frankfurt School predecessors. He waxes nostalgic about a time of a high-culture consuming public, revealing a level of elitism. Further, he exaggerates both the manipulative powers of culture producers and at the same time under-estimates the agency of the audience. He assumes that all audience members are exactly the same and none are capable of being critical of the

media produced. Secondly, he idealizes a public sphere where alternative voices were, by its very structure, absent. Women, the working class, and ethnic minorities were silenced in the bourgeois public sphere. And, as Nancy Fraser argues, he completely fails to examine other non-liberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres and instead insists that alternative publics contributed to the demise of *the* public. Finally, his work is primarily a defense of the Enlightenment project, where reason and consensus through debate leads to informed, rational opinion. Yet, postmodernists like Lyotard have been critical of this approach because it brushes over difference and assumes that there is a possibility for a single, unified public. Fraser offers one of the more cogent arguments against this essentializing public, by theorizing a new conception of multiple subaltern public spheres that are parallel but conflictual arenas for subordinated discourse.

Yet, despite its weaknesses, *Structural Transformation* is an important contribution to democratic theory and theories of the power of communication. Though Habermas is certainly skeptical of the current public, the work has a far more optimistic bend than others in the Frankfurt School because he theorizes about the potential for informed communication as a way to realize participation. As such, he provides an important starting point for understanding the power and potential of discursive, deliberative spaces – whether those spaces are in physical communities, or as some have argued, realized in online spaces.