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Diana Elena POPA

Affective vs Cognitive Dimensions of the Cultural Public Sphere

"Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, ROMANIA
diana.popa@ugal.ro

Introduction

The fairly recent interest in the concept [1] of public sphere [2] and perhaps even the use of the phrase itself in English stems from the publication in 1989 of the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [3], a translation of Jürgen Habermas's *Struckturwandel der Öffentlichkeit,* originally published in 1962. Oversimplifying, the function of the ideal Habermasian public sphere was public opinion generation through rational critical thinking and debate. Concomitantly, deliberation itself is the very foundation for a consummately open and participatory society. Habermas (1997: 105) defines the concept of public sphere as follows: "A domain of our social life where such a thing as public opinion can be formed [where] citizens…deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion…[to] express and publicize their views." Consequently, citizens must continually and voluntarily come together to exchange perspectives on matters of mutual political interest. Habermas traces the development of the public/private dichotomy from ancient Athens to modernity, but his emphasis is on the enlightment bourgeoisie's conceptualization of a public sphere, and how this ideal has been eroded in modernity. In Habermas's view, in the modern era, a social-structural transformation has taken place. Although the original public sphere was limited to propertied and educated males, over time, the ideals of equality embedded in constitutions, empowered various groups in their struggle for access and voting rights. Thus the role of the state expanded. The tendency toward a mutual infiltration of public and private sphere, the erosion of the public sphere, the 're-feudalization' of the public sphere, as the process has also been called, could no longer be stopped.

According to Habermas, the enlightment bourgeoisie believed only matters of public concern needed to be discussed, because the private sphere markets and the intimate sphere of family were self-regulating. Further on, Habermas shows that when private people come together to make public use of their reason, they must all share the same societal and cultural values and norms, the same formal educational background. They must not be tainted by outside influence as it might interfere with their views.

To Habermas such a sphere can be only one, one in which civil discourse is coupled with discursive reasoning devoid of emotion and spectacle. In this respect, Habermas moves away from the ancient Greek concept of public sphere and the Socratic model of deliberative democracy, where the central function of reason was to cultivate human constructive emotions. On the other hand, ancient Athenians also recognized the elements of spectacle and show which were seen as an integral, harmless part of the process of the social gathering and human interaction.

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While I embrace Habermas's conviction that the keys to an evolving democracy are participation and engagement, I reject his over-selective criteria for what makes a public sphere most effective an instrument for democratic advancement. Consequently, in counterpoint to the ideal described and suggested by Habermas, I argue that:

1. the public sphere needs to develop a nexus of several coexisting public spheres that would fulfil the ever-changing needs of the contemporary heterogeneous society we live in (see Popa in press). The formal vs. informal public sphere, the elitist vs. cultural public sphere are just a few examples of such competing public spheres that are dealing with the elite but also with the minorities, with formal but also with informal forms of participation and socio-political engagement;
2. reason cannot possibly be separated from our emotions due to their interdependent relationship. However, I claim that emotions, be they constructive or destructive are essential ingredients of an evolving democracy as they lead, in time, to paradigm shifts of our thinking through positive and negative emotional experimentation. Emotional expression is, according to Habermas, potentially damaging as the logic of the life-world has the potential to disrupt the procedures of deliberation. However, emotional expression plays an important role in authenticating the accounts of participants and in information diffusion. Moreover, affective communication contributes to public participation, expression and engagement, thus having a democratizing role. Dahlgren (1995: 109) notes that "rational communication is necessary, but if our horizons do not penetrate beyond the conceptual framework of communicative rationality and the ideal speech situation, we will be operating with a crippled critical theory."

1. An alternative for the mass public: the cultural public sphere

One of the underlying assumptions of Habermas's (1962/1989) work on the public sphere is that the proliferation of a multiplicity of competing publics is necessarily a step away from, rather than toward democracy and that a single, comprehensive public sphere is always preferable to a nexus of multiple publics.

In 1992, Nancy Fraser sets out to prove that such an assumption is not standing in present-day stratified democratic societies. One of the most important features of the public sphere, such as it was described and prescribed by Habermas, is equality in participation. Yet, stratified societies are based on an institutional framework that generates unequal social groups in structural relations of dominance and subordination. Therefore, Fraser (1992: 122) rightly points out that "(…) in such societies, full parity of participation in public debate and deliberation is not within the reach of possibility." In consequence, she concludes by saying that "a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public." Counterpublics having an emancipatory potential and force and competing publics that permit contestation is the solution proposed by Fraser in the particular case of contemporary post-capitalist societies.

The cultural public sphere is such a competing public sphere. McGuigan [4] (2005: 435) identifies the cultural public sphere as the late-modern world version of the 18th century literary public sphere [5]. Instead of dealing with classical, modern or even postmodern 'serious' art, the contemporary cultural public sphere focuses on "(…) the various channels and circuits of mass-popular culture and entertainment, the routinely mediated aesthetic and emotional reflections on how we live and imagine the good life." (ibid)

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Such an approach to the public sphere is in direct opposition to the Habermasian thinking that advocates rational-critical debate (see Popa in press). For Habermas, emotion and emotional expression are distracting and only critical discussion can really be rational. Moreover, Habermas (1989: 248 and 1997: 106) claims that solely critical rational discussion can really be public and lead to deliberation.

As far as contemporary world is concerned, Habermas strongly believes that the public sphere has been hopelessly eroded. This is mainly due to the irremediable change in the importance, value and reality of things that pertain to the content of today's issues at stake (the first two ones), and also to the interaction and participation [6] (the last one). As a more specific example, we could mention here women's traditional concerns about domestic, emotional and relationship issues. In Habermasian terms, the question that needs to be addressed in this particular case is whether such concerns should be recognized or, rather, we are bluntly suggested that such concerns are not to be recognized as worthy of public discussion. The cultural public sphere is precisely that: a public sphere concerned with the practices of mundane existence and with the pleasures and pains of the contemporary good life, that together capture popular attention. Synthesizing, the three main features of the cultural public sphere are: 1) it is individual concerned; 2) it is non-restrictive; 3) it is emotion-dependent.

As shown above, the cultural public sphere is, unlike the ideal Habermasian public sphere, concerned with ordinary people's everyday lifeword situations and also how to negotiate their way in and through their country's socio-political systems.

By being non-restrictive public sphere, it allows everybody to join: women and majorities of all kinds that have otherwise been excluded. They can all now make their voice heard.

In contrast to the bourgeois public sphere, the cultural public sphere is emotion-dependent in that it simultaneously allows for: emotional expression, emotional experimentation and emotional engagement.

McGuigan summarizes best the role played by the cultural public sphere in contemporary societies:

> Why should people be expected to treat official politics where they have so little power to influence what happens, with the same passion that they devote to their personal lives and lived or imagined relationships to others? In actual fact (…) keen popular engagement in something like a public sphere, (…) takes a predominantly affective mode, related to the immediacy of lifeword concerns, instead of the cognitive mode normally associated with experience of a remote, apparently unfathomable and uncontrollable system.
>
> (2005: 435)

Since the cultural public sphere accommodates for all categories of people, a legitimate question could be raised here, namely, what would be the best facilitator for all these human interactions? As Habermas himself admits:

> when the public is large this kind of communication requires certain means of dissemination and influence: today newspapers and periodicals, radio and television are the media of the public sphere.
>
> (1997: 105)

It is only in the mass media that vast populations of people can come together to exchange ideas. But the media leads to trivialization, spectacle and fragmentation of the public sphere (see McKee 2005: 5). If the media alone is said to erode "the adequacy of the public sphere" (van Zoonen 1991: 228), by opening the door to the affect into the cultural public sphere, fragmentation and alteration of the original concept would be final. At least, this is what the Habermasian preachers would have

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us believe. Distorted forms of communication, commercialization of feeling, pollution of rationality by issues of individual's identity, public expression of emotive secrets and emotional conflict would all render the public sphere as a form of uncensored spectacle. Furthermore, in the cultural public sphere of the mass public, open and rational debate of the traditional bourgeois public sphere has been entirely replaced by emotional expression and engagement.

2. Logical vs *emotional appeals in contemporary mediated debates*

As argued above, the media for the contemporary public sphere is mass media. It is mainly in the mass media that people can come together to exchange ideas, debate and deliberation. Nonetheless, people's interaction is no longer a face-to-face encounter. It is rather a virtual participation that involves mediated forms of communication. In Habermas's view, while critical journalism once raised people to debate, the today's media treat people as part of a media market and even administer the debate for them.

In this part of the paper I will deal in more detail with the pros and cons of emotional and, rational appeals in the public sphere. Then I would like to focus on the beneficial effects of affect if not in the procedures of deliberation, at least in the process of eliciting participation and debate.

Diachronically, it is easy to admit that Habermas is right when he claims that, in the public sphere, a decisive role is played by open and rational debate. In ancient times demagogues would often act as political agitators who appealed to the passions and prejudices of the mob in order to get the power to further his own interests (see McKee 2005: 113). Rational public debate is a defining feature of genuine democracies; it is the very move from absolute sovereign power to 'reason and persuasiveness' (Le Harpe, quoted in Habermas 1989: 96).

Calhoun (1996) identifies the 'critical' character of rationality and notes that "the best argument was decisive, rather than the identity of its proponents" (453). Habermas establishes an interdependent relationship between 'rational', 'critical' and 'public' and shows that only critical discussion can really be rational; only critical rational discussion can really be public (Habermas 1989: 248; Habermas 1997: 106).

There has been much academic debate concerning the emotional vs. logical appeals in public debate. Some scholars are in favor of public debates by spectacular forms of communication: visual, emotional or personal, whereas some other scholars, including Habermas, support the opposite, namely, that in public debates the forms of communication need to be logical, restrained and literate. As an example I would like to mention Copi and Cohen () who worry that using emotional rather than logical appeals in public debate enable propagandists and demagogues:

> The appeal to the emotion: argument *Ad Populum*. This common fallacy (…) (literally 'to the people' and by implication to the mob's easily aroused emotions) is the device of every propagandist and demagogue. It is fallacious because it replaces the laborious task of presenting evidence and rational argument with expressive language or other devices calculated to excite enthusiasm, excitement, anger or hate.
>
> (1998: 169)

Copi and Cohen mention Hitler as a common example in such arguments. More than that, "the Nazi had aestheticized politics with their glowy displays and affective appeal." (McGuigan 2005: 430) At the opposite site, there is another group of scholars, mainly popular philosophers, who look at the Nazi regime and warn

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against the dangers of 'unemotional' forms of public communication (see McGuigan ibid: 430-431; McKee 2005: 113-114). They look at the Nazi regime and see a warning about the dangers of logic devoid of human feeling. Such an ambivalent attitude towards emotion and logic in public debate stem from a fairly ambiguous taxonomy of the term 'rational'.

Perhaps Nicholson summarizes best the binary meaning encapsulated in the word 'rationality'. Thus he speaks about

> an ambiguous legacy concerning (…) the meaning of Reason (…) reason in modern Western societies has been understood as a faculty exercised only by some, some of the time, when achieved by proper training, disciplining of the emotions and exposure to specific kinds of information. Ideally, one individual who is trained, disciplined and appropriately informed could practice reason in its pure form. This individual would then be in a position to access truth (…) At the other end (…) exists a view of reason as a much more mundane faculty (…) [and which] is exercised not all that differently by most human beings most of the time. According to this view, the biases that reflect the specificities of our respective locations (…) can sometimes function as a resource, providing a diversity of perspectives (…) the other non-rational parts of the psyche, such as the emotions (…) at times (…) even improve us.
>
> (1999: 10-11)

Reason and rationality have been identified by Habermas and his followers as the engine of democratic societies. Copi and Cohen claim that

> (…) non-rational grounds for judgment may prove catastrophic [for] (…) the success of democracy depends, in the end, upon the reliability of the judgments we citizens make, and hence upon our capacity and our determination to weigh arguments and evidence rationally.
>
> (1998: xix, xx)

Following this train of thought, Guttenplan (1997: 12) shows that, in the public sphere, rational arguments are to be preferred, even if they are not good instruments and prove less effective in persuasion.

Habermas has already drawn a clear-cut distinction between 'the better argument', which he favors and 'the argument which convinces a given audience at a given time' which he disapproves of due to its content-dependent content. The fallacy of argument ad populum, the appeal to the people, is to be avoided at all costs. In Habermasian thinking, it is wrong to use ad populum argument because it is too successful and persuades people too well, appealing to the masses 'easy aroused emotions'.

Douglas Walton (1989: 85-86) takes this argument further and claims that rational argument works best with 'the intelligent consumer', while 'an appeal to popular sentiment' works better for informally educated audiences. In public debates, rational argument must be the sole arbiter of any issue (see Calhoun 1992: 13) as it is the best form of communication, particularly for reasons of equal participation.

Going back to the cultural public sphere, a public sphere for the mass public, it is obvious that presenting logical and rational arguments is not enough. In order to bring people together, elicit debate and deliberation and, finally, help them with the opinion process formation, emotion needs to play an important part in the cultural public sphere.

As van Zoonen (2004: 39) points out, emotions are intrinsically linked to rationality and "lead – in concert – to 'affective intelligence'." In Popa (in press), I have tried to show that affective communication contributes to public participation and expression, and information diffusion in the particular case of cultural public sphere. In Romania, a country where capitalism and democracy are gradually

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regaining their pre-World War status, and where changes in political life call for a change in the hierarchy of values, soap opera emerges as a convenient vehicle for initiating reflexive thinking and affective communication. As long as today some Romanians may make their voice heard in the cultural public sphere, just like the bourgeoisie did in the press or the arts in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, we need to accept that such forms of manifestation, like the soap opera, are elementary in the achievement of equality and freedom of expression (ibid). It is also worth pointing out here that by problematising society and private life, the soap opera succeeds in making their problems visible.

Another specific genre of the cultural public sphere, equally controversial in status, is the talk show. Just like the soap opera, the talk show has often been dismissed as irrelevant and meaningless 'trash television.'

Livingstone and Lunt (1994) suggest though that talk shows are a candidate for an oppositional public sphere, emphasizing the expression of interested points of view that give voice to participants' perspectives and aim at compromise rather than consensus.

Gamson (1999), instead, suggests that we should be aware of the fact that talk shows provide an institutionally constrained space that nevertheless offers the opportunity for expression of original voices, just like in the case of the soap opera, I might add, that would otherwise not be heard in public:

> For those who have traditionally been defined as outside of public discussion, whose lives were, until recently, kept private by both choice and coercion – people marginalized on the basis of gender, sexual, nonconformity, economic status, educational status, physical ability, race, and so on – talk shows have been a crucial site of entry into public view and, at least to some degree, public conversation.
>
> (Gamson 1999: 195)

In fact, there is a growing body of literature dealing with the issue of the talk show and its affinities with everyday conversation (see Goffman 1981, Tolson 2001, Thornborrow 2001). Scholars in the field have already identified several different forms of talk shows. For instance, Lunt and Stenner (2005: 62) identify three different show formats: 1) shows that focus on public discussion of issues of concern; 2) shows that take an explicitly therapeutic approach to personal problems; 3) shows that focus on conflict and emotive secrets.

The most important formats for the particular case of cultural public sphere are the last two ones. In such shows, emotional expression plays an important role in authenticating the accounts of participants and, also, in revealing the debth of feeling necessary to therapeutic talk shows.

In the Romanian setting, talk shows like *9595* (Antena 1), *9409* and *1001* (both from Romantica TV) are shows that openly encourage, manage and reflect upon emotional involvement and expression in a public context. In these examples, however, emotionality is precisely rendered subordinate to a primarily communicative end in both the public discussion-based and therapeutic talk shows. Nonetheless, as Lunt and Stenner (2005: 64) note, "while emotional expression plays a key role in these agendas, there remains the constant danger that excesses will disrupt the communicative ends of discussion or therapeutic intervention." There is a different reason for concern as far as such emotion-based communicative manifestations is concerned, namely, their authenticity.

As Aslama and Pantti (2006: 170) rightly point out, there are instances during a talk show when "allegedly authentic displays of emotion emerge, confirmed by tears or other bodily signs of true feelings." Yet, more often than not, such displays are merely commodified emotive confessions "working to entertain and attract ratings."

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(ibid.) As a consequence, talk shows become a form of mediated public participation working by setting a scene with participants, pops and a script. Every step is 'taken care of': the taking of turns, the interplay between guests, the attitude and commentaries of the host and audience.

It is worth pointing out here that an important aspect of the bourgeois public sphere is that "it constitutes an elision of disinterest" (Lunt and Stenner 2005: 68). It means that private people would gather, conduct their conversations on public matters and then return to their private lives. Such limited encounters would therefore enable "relatively rational and impartial discussions of cultural and political issues." (ibid) The commercialization of the mass media, however, made it so polluted "by the twin need of promotion and the need to create a readership that they cease to provide a relatively neutral resource for the development of public opinion." (ibid: 69) It follows that publicity of both private and public interest have completely altered the potential for a mass-mediated public sphere in ideal Habermasian terms.

Final remarks

We live in a heterogeneous society that, in order to function properly needs to develop a nexus of several co-existing publics that could adapt to the ever-changing needs of evolving democracies. While, undoubtedly, critical rational thinking and debate would be, ideally, the path to follow, I have tried to briefly show that, emotion, plays its part in one of the parallel public spheres, namely, the cultural public sphere. Unfortunately free emotional expression does not come without a price. As shown above, it often involves amplification and exposure to private emotive secrets and emotional conflicts, institutionalization of public expression, questionable authenticity of interaction that may, at times, turn into certainty about the untruthfulness of interaction as a therapeutic mechanism and, last but not least, public sphere as a form of entertainment spectacle. This reminds me of Mestrovic's (1997: 87) statement: "Almost every hour of the day, Americans and other Westerners can tune into a television program that either offers some sort of self-help therapy or presents someone confessing how they engaged in or overcome drug abuse, rape, adultery, obsessions, psychotic symptoms, or whatever."

I would like to conclude by saying that although commercialization, privatization and trivialization of the mediated public sphere have often reached their limit, democracy, by definition, means social equality and a world governed by its people.

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Notes

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[2] Peters (1993: 542-543) and Warner (2002: 47) suggest that the phrase 'public sphere' is an unfortunate artifact of translation as the German *Öffentlichkeit* lacks the spatializing metaphor and suggests merely 'openness' and 'publicness'. It thus relates only to going public and not to public relations.

[3] It is ironic that the Habermasian conceptualization of the public sphere was far from being ideal or democratic as it did not include women or people from lower social classes, a point acknowledged by Habermas himself. Conversely, some scholars argue that even though we have now expanded the public sphere to include women and people from all social classes, we are left with a social system where the public does not matter. (see Elliott 1982, Carey 1995)

[4] The cultural public sphere is the term coined by McGuigan (2005) to refer to the articulation of politics, public and personal, "as a contested terrain through affective-aesthetic and emotional modes of communication."

[5] In his *Structural Transformation*, Habermas makes the distinction between the literary public sphere and the political public sphere. Although not completely separate from one another, their functions are distinct. Oversimplifying, we could say that whereas the political public sphere focused on transient news with instantaneous political impact, the literary public sphere was more concerned in reflecting upon the chronic and persistent problems of life and art.

[6] Due to the importance and value changes, there is a doubt that today we may still talk about genuine debates in our societies. (for a detailed account see Garnham 1990: 125, McKee 2005: 18)

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