



Jürgen Habermas and the Public Sphere

Critical Engagements

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abstract

The central theme of this thesis is the public sphere and its multifarious variations. Of specific interest is Jürgen Habermas' conception of the public sphere and its role in relation to other demarcated components of society. This thesis may be broken up into three main areas, each of which engages with Habermasian theory and applies it where possible to the Australian context. First, this thesis explores the way social movements have impacted upon the public sphere; second, the way new information technologies have altered human interaction in the public sphere, and also by virtue of this, changes in the nature of the public sphere itself and its democratic machinations. Last, I examine how the impact of different strategies of governmentality inform the construction and function of modern public space(s), and thus instruct social interaction and communication.

Traditional subsystem differentiation and public/private discourse has, in many ways, complicated the way we order our societies. This has resulted in a society largely demarcated by entrenched differences, both imagined and actual, like those originating from gender, class and race. Re-theorising traditionally separated subsystems is fraught with a number of specific complexities, which not only involves a renegotiation of public

and private spheres, but also a re-evaluation of gendered notions of public and private or in broad Habermasian terms, between the social and the systemic.

In one sense I argue that Habermas' theory not only of the public sphere, but also of his larger theory of society is good for emancipatory politics and for an understanding of society itself because of its increased separation of subsystems, or in other words, its recognition of social, political and economic complexity. On the other hand, I also conclude that Habermas' four-term model of public and private fails because despite its capacity for complexities in social relations, it remains entrenched in the modernist tradition and relies on universalist foundations. In other words, it remains a simplification of social structures.

I argue that further complexity arises as a result of what I refer to as 'the expansion of the social'. This development, I argue, has been the result of a combination of factors. Among other contributors, the augmentation of the social sphere is, in large part, a by-product of economic rationalism. The expansion of the social is the result of a marked decrease of government intervention in the market or economic sphere, and the subsequent increase of government in the private sphere of family relations. Such a process confounds traditional understandings of the role of an open public sphere and should be of particular concern for Habermasian social theory.