# Deliberative Democracy and Public Sphere Typology

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THE concept of *public sphere* is central to models of deliberative democracy, which are based on the idea that citizens and their representatives ought to publicly justify the decisions they make and the rules they institute in order to establish, through a dynamic process, a legitimately democratic bond (Benhabib, 1996; Bohman, 1996; Cohen, 1996, 1997; Cooke, 2000; Dryzek, 2002, 2004; Gutmann; Thompson, 1996, 2003, 2004; Habermas, 1992, 1996, 1997). The concept of public sphere – which has been constantly revisited by different scholars from various fields of knowledge – relates, in an obvious manner, to the notion of face-to-face democracy. Although forsaken for a long time by the majority of political thinkers, face-to-face democracy denotes the "most natural and simple [defensible] idea" of democracy (Fishkin, 1997, p. 33). Such idea refers to the gathering of small groups which, after consistent discussions, in which all matters are debated, and all sides of the conflict are heard, make decisions through a one-head-one-vote principle. There are in fact no guarantees that the decisions made will be well-informed, wise or just, and yet this is the most basic and defensible idea of democracy. Less obvious, however, is the way in which the public sphere can operate in contemporary large-scale and pluralist society, so that the ideals of citizen sovereignty and autonomy may be compatible with current democratic political practices and procedures. In other words, it is important to reflect upon the way in which claims in favor or contrary to collective decisions may be justified before the individuals submitted to such decisions, so that they can accept them after some reflection.

It is unrealistic to believe that citizens in complex and large-scale societies could gather in a single deliberative forum, as the image of the *agora* suggests. The debate process is inevitably scattered over a variety of forums. Moreover, one needs to know the degree to which citizens in contemporary societies are exposed to concurring viewpoints, considered by the participants of the public debate as being politically relevant. To what degree are citizens willing to weight and reflect upon the issues at stake? The focus of deliberative

politics is not the final act of voting, but the way in which opinion is formed within the public sphere, and how such opinion may influence the formation of the political will, which occurs within the formal decision-making arenas of the political system. The deliberative model takes seriously into account the context in which preferences emerge and are processed, both in the domain of the civic sphere and in the formal-institutional political sphere, with its separation of powers. It is important to examine not only the register of preferences that individuals hold at a certain moment, but also how complex discussion networks, moral debates and pragmatic negotiations, which superpose and interweave with one another, are constituted. Such framework represents a novel approach to rationalization and political participation, based on a public exchange of arguments, instead of on a direct participative relation (Cohen, 1996).

The purpose of this article is to explore the morphology and development of the concept of public sphere present in various of Habermas' works[1], as well as the main criticisms that accompany such concept, particularly with regards to: (a) the recognition of multiple publics and its implications for the defense of the critical processing of problems of common interest; (b) the construction of a public sphere typology and its theoretical consequences for the articulation of argumentative exchanges that occur in the domain of simple interactions, in various spheres of everyday life, in denser debates within civil society associations and, finally, through the dissemination of information by mass media. Finally, I will explore some difficulties regarding the institutionalization of contributions that derive from the public debate.

## On the concept of Public Sphere

The concept of public sphere refers to the realm of debate and open discussion on common interest issues among citizens who are considered equal from moral and political standpoints. It is the arena where collective will is processed and political decisions are justified. The formulations presented in the *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* on the constitution of this arena – where arguments are publicly exchanged, and wherefrom a rationalized public opinion,

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[1]In order to facilitate the presentation of Habermas' works, I will use the following abbreviations: STPS (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*); TCA (*Theory of Communicative Action*); FR (*Further Reflections*); BFN (*Between Facts and Norms*). PCMS (*Political Communication in Media Society*)

as well as the public's reciprocal enlightenment, derive – are too well known to be repeated here. Habermas (1984b) describes, from a historical perspective, the emergence of a civil society of citizens who gathered as private individuals in order to constitute a public, with the purpose of debating State issues and other matters of common interest. Gathering in the salons and cafeterias of the eighteenth century, and disseminating their ideas through political pamphlets and the small press, the bourgeois formed a public which, although deprived of power to govern, had the capacity to criticize and formulate recommendations to guide the exercise of political power. From a normative perspective, it is possible to say that a sphere of mediation between the State and private interests was thus constructed, and that such sphere produced, through rational and critical debates, a new source of power legitimation. Within the Modern State, critical debates aim at the "rationalization of domination", since democracy is understood as a consented form of domination, in which norms and decisions need to be justified and respected by the members of the political community.

The idea of a public sphere – understood as an open forum of debate among citizens holding equal political status within a political community – restricted to men of the bourgeoisie has been widely criticized. Scholars such as Ryan (1991), Fleming (1993), and Fraser (1992), protest against the exclusion of women from public life. Eley (1992), Aronowitz (1993), and Negt and Kludge (1993), highlight the deficiencies of the Habermasian explanation on the development of a proletarian public sphere. Habermas superposes the decline of the bourgeois public sphere to the widening of political participation (as an extension of universal suffrage), the universalization of education, and the institution of the Welfare State (Calhoun, 1992; Schudson, 1992; Boggs, 1997). He regards the period of limited democracy and liberal practices in the nineteenth century as a "golden age", thus leading his theorization to a dead end.

Regarding the characterization of mass communication, Habermas generally holds a reductive view of media, thus neglecting their potential (including that of alternative media) to generate critical reflection and facilitate the democratic participation of citizens (Stevenson, 2002: 60-61; Downing, 2002: 68). He tends to consider media monolithically, that is to say, as mere instruments for the reproduction of power relations, instead of as hybrid institutions, which are at the same time political, economic, cultural, and professional (Hallin, 1993; Curran, 1993: 36-38, Dahlgren; Sparks, 1993). Moreover, his approach to the press of the nineteenth century, the golden age of the public sphere,

seems rather anachronistic with regard to contemporary reality. In Dahlgren's words:

> The romantic notion of a public sphere composed of individuals speaking face to face or communicating via small-circulation print media is not of much utility. We live in the age of electronic media and mass publics (Dahlgren; Sparks, 1993: 7-8).

In *Between facts and norms*, Habermas grants the concept of political public sphere an ampler and prominently practical meaning, and develops a theoretical framework that is more congruent with contemporary reality. In seeking to construct the concept of public sphere in a heuristic, ahistorical, and undated manner, as an "elementary social phenomenon" (BFN: 360), Habermas ends up widening it considerably.

> "Every encounter in which actors do not just observe each other but take a second-person attitude, reciprocally attributing communicative freedom to each other, unfolds in a linguistically constituted public space" (BFN: 361).

The author asserts that the public sphere, as *locus* of debate, cannot be understood as an "institution" or "place", since it refers to the use subjects make of the communication process, particularly with regards to the exchange of viewpoints.

> Rather, the public sphere distinguishes itself through a *communication structure* that is related to a third feature of communicative action: it refers neither to the *functions* nor to the contents of everyday communication but to the *social space* generated in communicative action (BFN: 360).

Here it would be interesting to imagine an ideal debate situation, in line with Habermas' "ideal discourse situation". In such condition, all arguments and viewpoints would receive consideration, and participants would be willing to review their initial preferences in light of "better arguments", as well as to argue and counter-argue without making use of coercion, blackmail or threats, in order to reach reciprocal understanding and eventual agreement. Furthermore, debate would be free from time-constraints and from the practical need of decision-making. In the real world, however, debates are subject to all kinds

of restrictions. For instance, participants frequently hold unequal status, are unprepared to ponder and reflect upon collective interest issues, and unwilling to listen to others carefully. They also tend to lie, blackmail, threat, and be reluctant to alter their own viewpoint. Besides, one cannot ignore what economists call the "costs of decision" – that is to say, the time and effort it takes to reach and agreement –, as norms have to be decreed in parliaments, verdicts announced, and policies formally implemented in administrative organs.

In setting too high a standard for the "ideal discourse situation" several forms of "incompleteness" will be perceived as we move towards more realistic debate settings. In that sense, all decisions taken and all agreements reached in real situations will be considered precarious and transitory, since they will always be deficient. No measure of democratic reform would be sufficient to attain these ideal conditions. Still, the definition of rules or conditions for the deliberative debate is relevant, in the first place, to distinguish between debate processes that are more "deliberative", legitimate, and just, and those which are less deliberative, illegitimate or unjust. Secondly, apart from the fact that a considerable degree of "precariousness" can be tolerated in practical debate processes, several changes can still be made in order to improve deliberation and thus minimize the inequality of resources, capacities, and opportunities among participants. Such changes include neutralizing oppressive potentials and power asymmetries, and stimulating citizens' and representatives' interest, information level, and commitment to public debate. Various paths can be followed, and several modest changes can be made that will lead to better informed, more ample, and more democratic debate processes (Fishkin, 1991, 1997; Fung, 2004; Coelho; Nobre, 2004; Fung; Wright, 2003; Wampler; Avritzer, 2004).

Although Habermas has been engaged in reconstructing the rational and intersubjective elements of the use of language, in his well-known *Theory of Communicative Action*, he does not explore, at least explicitly, the political implications of his formulations to democratic theory. Only recently, in *Between Facts and Norms*, he came to establish links between, on the one hand, the foundations of his communicative action theory and his discourse ethics and, on the other, the conditions needed for the occurrence of an effective deliberation. For our purposes, it will be important to explore Habermas' notion of multiple publics in contemporary society, and what I consider as his public sphere typology, as well as the main controversies that accompany such ideas.

## Multiple Publics

In *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas replaces the bipolar model of state-civil society, adopted in his well-known *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, by the network metaphor, in order to highlight the public sphere's decentralized and reticular configuration, and the fact that it derives from discursive arenas spread throughout civil society (Taylor, 1995; Hauser, 1998).

> The public sphere ... represents a highly complex network that branches out into a multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local, and subcultural arenas. Functional specifications, thematic foci, policy fields, and so forth, provide the points of reference for a substantive differentiation of public spheres that are, however, still accessible to laypersons". (BFN, 1996: 373)

What is at stake, therefore, is not the idea of a single and totalizing arena, where a single large public (as a macro-subject) discusses all issues concerning public life, but rather the notion that different publics come together to debate specific collective interest issues. Thus Habermas abandons the restrictive perspective adopted in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, where he considers the bourgeois public as "the public" that reflects on politics and openly conveys its thoughts with the purpose of rationalizing domination through rational justification of binding rules.

In *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas refers to "literary", "ecclesiastic", "artistic", and "feminist" publics, as well as to "publics concerned with health-care issues, social welfare, or environmental policy" (BFN, 1996: 373-374). This broader perspective has profound implications. The author sticks to the basic idea of democratic theory that the collective judgment of citizens is the source of legitimacy for the exercise of political power. Nevertheless, his current conception of sovereignty "is no longer embodied in a visibly identifiable gathering of autonomous citizens ... no longer concentrates in a collectivity, or in a physically tangible presence of the united citizens or their assembled representatives" (BFN, 1996: 135-136). Rather, popular sovereignty "takes effect in the circulation of reasonably structured deliberation" that occurs in forums, associations and corporations (BFN, 1996, p.136). Thus, "it pulls back into the, as it were, 'subjectless' forms of communication circulating through forums and legislative bodies" (BFN, 1996: 136).

In order to establish the foundations of a more rational politics, Habermas tries to escape two dilemmas. One the one hand, he distances himself from

liberal perspectives, which assume that a strong rationality dwells in the individuals themselves, who are in turn responsible for defining interests privately and for articulating them in a coherent set of preferences. According to such perspective, the rational formation of the will is sought only at the individual level of the motivations of isolated actors, which leads to the denial of any undifferentiated popular sovereignty. On the other hand, Habermas also avoids communitarian perspectives, which overburden the individuals with civic demands by assuming that they should be virtuous enough to engage in issues of common interest, and solidaristic enough to constitute public life. From that perspective, it follows the need to defend a shared *ethos* (related to the community's traditions) for the expression of the common will. Habermas, instead, conceives sovereignty within large and complex societies as a result of a practical argumentation process, which derives from a variety of discourses that superpose and intertwine with one another. He claims that the individuals' preferences and the choice alternatives they face cannot be treated as given, since both are subject to change through public debate in the political process itself. Thus the "the source of legitimacy is not the predetermined will of individuals, but rather the process of its formation, that is, deliberation itself." (FR, 1992: 446).

Habermas' contemporary perspective demands, therefore, that attention be paid to the different publics that participate in the various debate arenas existing in society. This is a controversial issue. For instance, when drawing attention to the diversity of contesting publics that exist in contemporary society, a stream of thought uses the expression *counterpublics.* In a well-known quote, Fraser defines *counterpublics* as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs"(Fraser, 1992: 123). Similarly, Asen and Brouwer argue that "Counterpublic spheres voice oppositional needs and values not by appealing to the universality of the bourgeois public sphere but by affirming specificity of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or some other axis of difference"(2001: 7). Such ideas led to the emergence of a vast field of investigation on associations, marginalized groups, and social movements (Lemish and Barzel, 2000; Meehar, 1995; Palczewski, 2001; Squires, 2002).

Not infrequently, the term *counterpublics* is granted too vague a meaning.[2] In the majority of cases, it is used in investigations of minority groups and identity issues. Thus *counterpublics* refers to disadvantaged, subordinated, or explored groups, which seek to affirm their identities, which were suppressed or distorted by oppressive regimes. In some of these cases, the public sphere is qualified as "black public sphere", "feminist public sphere", "gay public sphere" – names that suggest, quite ambiguously (and erroneously) that the debate process takes place in isolation from the rest of society, i.e., without the cooperation of particular groups, including oppressive and inimical ones, or even of wider groups of citizens. By insisting in the contentious character of marginal identities, several studies underestimate the dialogical activities through which minority groups seek to negotiate their stances and perspectives. Such negotiations are carried out not only to challenge institutional and cultural patterns of domination, but also to build solidarity and mutual understanding with majoritarian social groups. This ends up enlarging minority groups' opportunities to express, in different social domains, their identities and new experiences. Furthermore, in considering only the opposition among groups, such studies tend to focus almost exclusively on marginalized discourses, thus ignoring the means through which dominant discourses become, publicly, peripheral or even irrelevant.

Despite the importance, within contemporary society, of identity problems and cultural discourses of self-understanding, the public sphere is by no means limited to such issues. On the contrary, all matters are considered debatable within the public sphere, as long as they achieve the political status of a "general interest matter". The publics may promote debates on the content, design, and effects of government projects, strategies or programs; they may exchange their viewpoints on problematic issues, such as the ones that relate to the environment, criminality, the risks involving genetic engineering etc.; furthermore, they may submit to collective scrutiny the actions of political representatives and public organs, thus unleashing accountability processes.

Given the enormous variety of controversial issues that are brought into public debate, it seems more appropriate to use, in accordance with a line of theorization of more generic scope, the term "critical publics" (Bohman, 1996;

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[2] The term "public" has several meanings, being employed in reference to different phenomena, such as: a) something potentially open and accessible to all (visibility as opposed to secrecy); b) something that concerns potentially everyone (of common as opposed to particular interest); c) as a gathering of people (audience). On these definitions, see Asen e Brouwer (2001) e Weintraub e Krishan (1997).

Dryzek, 2002). In line with this perspective, the critical character of publics would be measured by their capacity to recognize, resist, and negotiate with dominant discourses or ideologies, frequently penetrated by social and economic forces. At stake is the subjects' capacity to deal with various constraints, so as to modify their social and physical environment, including the subjacent resources that influence and mold the capacity of action itself, so as to allow them to become what they would like to be (Cooke, 2000: 954).

Habermas' perspective acknowledges the plurality of publics, but it does not go so far as to suggest a theorization on the details of civic association models, or of institutional designs for effective public deliberation. Scholars concerned with strengthening the degree of organization and capacity of associations to improve democratic governance have sought to advance such issues (Macedo, 1999; Young, 1996, 2003; Warren, 2001; Fung; Wright, 2003). For the time being, it is important to highlight that the public sphere does not have a fixed domain. It encompasses numerous problematic situations, such as the definition of common rules and pragmatic goals, considerations on justice, problems of identity and cultural self-understanding, processes for monitoring authorities and for holding them accountable, among others.

## Public Spheres Typology

Based on his dual theory of society – understood as both system and lifeworld – Habermas no longer conceives the public sphere as a domain intermediating society and State. Rather, he suggests that:

> In complex societies, the public sphere consists of an intermediary structure between the political system, on the one hand, and the private sectors of the lifeworld, on the other (BFN:373)

In order to adjust the notion of public sphere to the conditions of contemporary society, Habermas contrives a typology of different modalities of public sphere, named in accordance with "…the density of communication, organizational complexity, and range" (BFN, 1996:374).

Thus he comes close, to a certain degree, to Keane's idea of conceiving spatially differentiated public spheres, such as "micro", "meso", and "macro" public spheres (Keane, 1997; Hendriks, 2006). According to Habermas, there are:

*episodic* publics found in taverns, coffee houses, or on the streets; through the *occasional* or 'arranged' publics of particular presentations and events, such as theater performances, rock concerts, party assemblies, or church congress; up to the *abstract* public sphere of isolated readers, listeners, and viewers scattered across large geographic areas, or even around the globe, and brought together only through the mass media (BFN, 1996: 374)

By making use of such typology, Habermas devises a theoretical framework flexible enough as to encompass different modes of articulation of argumentative exchanges. Such argumentative exchanges may take place in rather informal meetings, occurring in different domains of everyday life, or in more complex discussions, carried out by civil society associations of diverse natures and formats, or, finally, through the dissemination of information and arguments by mass media. Thus a diversified space for reflexive forms of communication is conceived – something that is a prerequisite of public deliberation in complex societies.

## Episodic Public Sphere

That which Habermas names the *episodic public sphere* – i.e., meetings among friends, relatives, colleagues, and even strangers – is based on simple interactions, and gives birth to argumentative exchanges that might be ephemeral or short-ranged. In such arenas, argumentative exchanges are generally not so dense, involve few participants, encompass few viewpoints, and are usually characterized as "naïve communications", to use Habermas' words.

To our purposes, it is important to underline that such environments, by escaping both political and administrative controls, open up the path for the thematization of experiences, and personal and social problems, from the viewpoint of those who have been affected by them. It is from their experience in the lifeworld that citizens form the values and perspectives they use to criticize operations of power, prejudice, exploitation, and authority, as well as to discuss government agenda and public policies, and matters which are considered by citizens as value-charged, such as abortion, affirmative action, and sexual orientation.

Several scholars have stressed the importance of daily conversation –which is not always reflexive, self-conscious, or directed at decision-making – to the interpretation of interests and necessities (Conover, Searing and Crewe, 2002;

Kim, Wyatt, Katz, 1999; Fishkin, 1991, 1997; Gamson, 1993; Mansbrige, 1999; Scheufele, 2000). The word "interest" should not be narrowed down to material interest, i.e., values or objectives of "material" nature; rather, it shall encompass all resources and aptitudes that allow "self-affirmation" (Cooke, 2000; Habermas, 1997). Daily conversations are fundamental for the processing of the matters which the public "should discuss" – such as government agenda, and the virtues and shortcomings of public policies. A democratic political community, in Barber's words "will leave room for the expression of distrust, dissent, or just plain opposition, even in lost causes where dissenters are obviously very much in the minority" (Barber, 2003: 192). In speaking and hearing one another, people produce a constant re-conceptualization of public issues and of the idea of public itself. They decide which policy they want, in conformity with their interests and basic values.

Moreover, daily conversation is fundamental for the processing of personal and social problems that emerge in highly informal, unplanned, or unintentional ways. It is through dialogue – speaking, answering questions, and considering the viewpoints of others – that people frequently give meaning to their own condition. They are able to connect their personal experiences, or the experiences of a group or category, to a more general principle (Dalhberg, 2005, p. 119; Dryzek, 2004: 51). In this way, a thematization or narrativization of common situations is constructed – not as accidental or contingent experiences in the lives of each person, but rather as situations that derive from conditioning forces of the social structure. Daily conversation opens up the path for people to change their preferences, appraise general issues with reference to practical experiences, or arrange, more or less coherently, their preferences (Benhabib, 1996: 71-72). Through everyday talk, "people come to understand better what they want and need, individually as well as collectively" (Mansbridge, 1999: 211).

In environments impervious to publicity, such as in small groups of friends, work colleagues, or relatives, people may feel more comfortable to reveal their opinions, express their anxieties, fears, feelings, and disappointments, without inhibition or fear from being ridiculed. In these situations, however, conversation is more subject to the open expression of hate, and the prejudices and hostilities that people or groups may nurture against one another. Thus one of the purposes of deliberation in arenas with a larger degree of publicity, i.e., directed at ampler audiences, is to filter irrational preferences or viewpoints

that are morally repugnant. This would consist of a non-paternalistic means to select topics for public debate (Baynes, 1995: 216).

Nevertheless, regardless of the nature of communication, it is important to underline, for our own purposes, that such contexts are configured as "discovery contexts", to use Habermas' terminology.

> Here [in informal contexts of unrestricted communication] new problems situations can be perceived more sensitively, discourses aiming at achieving self-understanding can be conduced more widely and expressively, collective identities and need interpretations can be articulated with fewer compulsions than is the case in procedurally regulated public spheres (BFN, 1996: 308)

One may consider that "the public sphere draws its impulses from the private handling of social problems that resonate in life stories" (BFN, 1996: 336). Social problems or social systems' dysfunctions can be perceived in the personal life experiences of individuals. Thus, "such experiences are first assimilated 'privately', that is, are interpreted within the horizon of a life history intermeshed with other life histories in the contexts of shared lifeworlds" (BFN, 1996: 365). The kind of communication that develops in this case is generally fluid, with no direct decision-making purpose. It aims, instead, at the cognitive and moral-ethical processing of issues in which subjects understand themselves and their legitimate interests (BFN, 1996: 386).

However, in order for pre-political interpretations on demands and value orientations to gain political *status*, they need to be publicly acknowledged. Interpretations that come into being in small-sized environments – such as in small groups, voluntary associations, or particular localities – need to be appraised by ampler publics and processed in "justification contexts" (BFN, 1996: 307).

## Public sphere of organized presence

The second kind of public sphere refers to *meetings of organized presence*, where communication develops in accordance with certain formal procedures – for instance, the predefinition of topics, debate rules, and stance and resolution definitions. The construction of a "we" and the engagement in collective action – both of which are part of the associational life – are prerequisites to gain access to the public sphere and acquire deliberative capacities. The latter

include the ability to convey interests and demands in a public language that is understandable to others and, moreover, capable of being accompanied by an effective listening and of evoking answers from the others. Within the sphere of civil society, we can think particularly of discussion arenas of voluntary associations, free organizations (non-governmental and non-profit), or social movements. Cohen and Arato (1992: 531) and Habermas (BFN, 1996: 357-8) consider voluntary associations as having the following functions: (a) to apprehend social problems which resonate in private spheres, presenting them as general problems; in other words, to politicize issues so that they may acquire a general interest status; (b) to convey such issues to larger arenas of political discussion within society, thus giving birth to or supporting a wider and continuous public debate; (c) to exert pressure in favor of certain policies in formal decision making *loci* within the political system (such as the Houses of Congress, the courts, and administrative government branches); (d) to organize knowledge and programs that contribute to an active search for solutions.

It is important to highlight the fact that a considerable part of the studies on associativism focuses only on the positive outcomes of association. Scholars such as Robert Putnam (1993) and Verba, and Schlozman and Brady (1995) sustain that voluntary associations are likely to foster habits of cooperation and solidarity, as well as the growth of public spirit, among their constituencies, since participation makes clear to everyone that the good-life depends on the existence of public goods and public life in general. Iris Young (1996, 1997, 2003) and Martha Minow (1997) argue that associations and social movements, contrarily to interest groups, contribute to the promotion of civic education and to a democratic negotiation of differences among groups. Joshua Cohen (1996) and Archon Fung and Erick Wright (2003: 35) claim that secondary associations may sustain democracy by making information available, and promoting equality of representation, citizens education, and power sharing in processes of political decision making.

Some caution is necessary in order to avoid the belief that all associations are virtuous and animated by public spirit and democratic purposes. Some associations, such as the *skin heads*, xenophobic groups, secret organizations, and those that aim at acquiring social prestige and deference (for instance, those favoring private education), are not guided by principles of tolerance and reciprocity. Moreover, they are neither engaged in counterbalancing majority rule, by granting individuals the opportunity of public speech, nor in supporting policies that may stabilize democracy. Finally, it is important to note that

some non-liberal and religious associations opt for an authoritarian agenda and an undemocratic trajectory.

Because the sphere of associativism is so complex and plural, each kind of association, as well as its purpose and local structure, ought to be analyzed in its particularities, and related to the multiple designs demanded by democracy: democratic self-rule as autonomy, developmental effects on individuals, public sphere effects and institutional effects (Warren, 2001). In this sense, it is important to consider whether individuals or groups' communicative procedures promote or impede civic equality, equal freedom, and opportunity. Democratic deliberation procedures, advanced by scholars such as Cohen (1996) and Habermas (1997), are useful to the production of important distinctions within this field. Evaluating the patterns of the communicative interaction may help in the search for the motivations and desires that lead actors to "question authority", and to engage in public debate, sustaining (or not) non-tyranny, reciprocity, inclusion, and the possibility of revising opinions. The attempt to arrive at an understanding is important, particularly when one inquires about "what shall be done" in conflict situations. Thus, the exchange of reasons is fundamental for the non-violent solution of conflicts that cannot be solved without the cooperation of those involved in them (Bohman, 1996; Dryzek, 2002).

In this sense, the "publicity test" is an important condition for the development of a successful communication in the public sphere. In order to achieve this goal, critical actors need to: (a) convey their understandings – interests, needs, and desires – in a way which is intelligible to other groups or collectivities of society; (b) effectively engage in dialogues with other subjects and groups of society, in public arenas of various formats and degrees of organization. In such dialogues, it is expected from critical actors that they listen to one another and be accountable for what they say. It is expected that through debates which do not leave out relevant information and viewpoints, it will be possible to arrive at better informed and more just results, which are likely to be accepted by all, even if for different reasons (Bohman, 1996; Fishkin, 1991, 1997; Gutmann; Thompson, 1996, 2004).

Besides the dialogic and argumentative patterns taken up by the agents in the public sphere, it is important to appraise the effects of this type of communication in terms of its capacity to assist and inform representatives, as well as to nourish partnerships and alternative forms of governance. A growing number of scholars are now devoted to the study of the roles played by participatory institutions and civic councils, and by NGOs which, in partnership

with State organs establish an institutionalized basis that allows them to participate in decisions related to public policies and to implement an effective control upon such policies (Fung; Wright, 2003; Dagnino, 2002: 283; Fung, 2004; Wampler; Avritzer, 2004). Archon Fung carefully describes the different types of mini-publics in public deliberations organized in a self-conscious manner (Fung, 2004: 174-6). These are experiences with distinct purposes and patterns of configuration, each of which contributes, in its own way, to strengthen civic engagement and democratization processes. The latter include the choice of representatives, the solution of controversial momentary issues, in decision-making processes of a more permanent basis of power sharing, or in the monitoring of State action and State employees' responsiveness.

## Abstract Public Sphere

The third kind of public sphere, named by Habermas as the "abstract public sphere", is produced by media, which connects singular and globally spread readers, listeners and spectators (BFN, 1996: 308). In the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Habermas conceives the small press as an important institution for the conveyance of ideas and the establishment of the rational political debate within bourgeois society. In diagnosing the upsurge of market-oriented mass communication organizations, molded by the logic of the cultural industry, he concludes that the public sphere came to be completely dominated by political and economic powers. In later writings, however, Habermas reformulates this viewpoint. For instance, in the *Theory of Communicative Action*, he no longer conceives media as mere instruments of the reproduction of the social order, as manipulation agents or as the voice of powerful groups, hostile to democratic participation. Instead, he acknowledges the ambiguous potential of the mass media:

> The mass media belong to these generalized forms of communication. They free communication processes from the provinciality of spatiotemporally restricted contexts and permit public spheres to emerge, through establishing the abstract simultaneity of a virtually present network of communication contents far removed in space and time and through keeping messages available for manifold contexts (TCA, v. II, 1987: 390)

Media remove the communicative process from specific contexts and, differently from what is the case in simple interactions of the face-to-face type, it

creates a peculiar kind of audience: a non-simultaneous public of listeners, readers and television spectators. Media production is, by definition, developed for a diffuse, diversified, and potentially unlimited public (Thompson, 1995; Braga, 2001). That which the media make available for public knowledge may be extended to a variety of contexts and, at all rates, new interpretations may emerge by means of distinct temporal and spatial dimensions. In the *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas begins to sustain the possibility that the media's content might engender a reflexive critical process on the part of the audience.

> Mass media can simultaneously contextualize and concentrate processes of reaching understanding, but it is only in the first instance that they relieve interaction from yes/no responses to criticizable validity claims. Abstracted and clustered though they are, these communications cannot be reliably shielded from the possibility of opposition by responsible actors (TCA, v. II, 1989: 390).

In a recent article, the author comes to recognize that:

> "Notwithstanding the impersonal and asymmetrical structure of mass communication, the public sphere could, if the circumstances were only favourable, generate considered public opinions. I use the conditional here to draw your attention to the other obvious reservation: The power structure of the public sphere may well distort the dynamics of mass communication and interfere with the normative requirement that *relevant* issues*, required* information, and *appropriated* contributions be mobilized (PCMS, 2006: 418)

Media in itself cannot be understood as a public sphere, as Habermas ambiguously suggests, and some of his followers expressively reaffirm. Media play a crucial role in producing visibility and making expressions, discourses, images, and events publicly available. Thus, it is fundamental to distinguish between the "sphere of visibility" – i.e., that which is made available for common knowledge – and the "public sphere", which is the *locus* of argumentation (Gomes, 1999; Maia, 2007). Such a distinction is significant for 2 reasons. Firstly, it allows one to consider the multiples ways through which individuals and groups interact with mediated communication, in several circumstances

and settings of society. The symbolic goods available in media sphere of visibility – not only information, journalistic and documentary material, but also entertainment shows, soap operas, music, and advertisements – may nourish numerous interactions among individuals and groups, including politically relevant discussions (Stevenson, 2002: 68-74; McLeod; Kosicki; McLeod, 2002; Maia; Marques, 2003; Tufte, 1999, 2000). This process put into motion several interactions and struggles, within and among social agents, and interferes, in a dynamic manner, in the social relations themselves, and in the organization of debates outside media (Bennett; Entman, 2001; Correia, 2002; Esteves, 2003; Gamson, 2001; Gomes, 1999).

Secondly, the above distinction is central for regarding "mediated debates" as a specific phenomenon *within* media sphere of visibility. In contemporary society, many debates on specific matters unleashes through mediated communication itself. Through mediated communication, social actors refer to particular polemics, publicly justify their points of view, reciprocally consider and criticize each other's pronouncements and sometimes revise their own position before other participants. In this process, the media professionals play an active role in selecting topics, granting participants different access to media channels, ordering sources' discourses and framing meanings for audience interpretation. So far, mediated debates cannot be directly approached as face-to-face debates but ought to be explored through properly adapted analytical tools, derived from deliberative theoretical framework[3] .

Habermas (2006) has recently referred to media as a system, which has reached certain degree of differentiation and independence from other systems and has created its own mechanisms of self-regulation[4] . However, he has

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[3]To investigate how mediated debates take place, according to deliberation theoretical framework, one need to pay attention to issues such as: (a) *accessibility* – who gains access to the media's channels, becoming a source in journalistic productions; (b) *identification* – how social actors are presented in media narratives and the space/time devoted to them; (c) *use of critical communication* – how actors attempt to validate their expressed opinions and points of views; (d) *responsiveness* – if there is a dialogue or the possibility of mutual answers among sources with different claims or positions regarding the matters at stake; (e) *reflexivity* or *reversibility of opinion* – if the stances or preferences of a participant change after he is exposed to the arguments of the other participants (Bennett et al., 2004; Maia, 2007).

[4]Habermas (2006) has recently distinguished among the actors who make their appearance on the media. Besides professionals of the media – "especially journalists who edit news, reports and commentaries" – and politicians – "who occupy the centre of the political systems", there are: "(a) *lobbyists* who represent special interest groups; (b) *advocates* who either represent interest groups or substitute for a lack of representation of marginalized groups that are unable to voice their interest effectively; (c) *experts* who are credited with professional or

neither developed a more detailed and consistent theorization on the dynamics of the media system (Alexander 1988; Blumler; Gurevitch, 2000; Hallin and Mancini, 2004), nor on the social strategies involved in mediation processes to constitute public debates (Correia, 2002; Gitlin, 1980; Gomes, 2004; Mc-Combs; Shaw; Weaver, 1997; Reese et al., 2003; Porto, 2004). Decades of research on *agenda setting* and framing are part of a tradition in the field of communication which investigates the struggle among social actors to gain access to mass media channels, and thus be able to interfere in the production of symbolic goods, initiate presentation strategies, and acquire "resonance" before audiences (Gamson; Modigliane, 1989; McAdam, 1996; McCarthy; Smith; Zald, 1996; Meyer, 1995, Ryan, 1991). Studies which adopt the theoretical framework of deliberation to investigate the role of media to constitute mediated debates are more recent (Bennett et al., 2004; Pan; Kosicki, 2003; Maia, 2006; Santiago e Maia, 2005, Mendonça, 2006; Reis e Maia, 2006). In this sense, empirical researches have the task to investigate whether the actors expressing publicly along mediated communication ignore the considerations of the others participants, lie, and bring selfish motivation to the forefront, or, instead of that, they attempt to justify their position in a way intelligible and potentially acceptable to the others, and effectively listen to and respond the other participants' consideration. The degree of access, use of critical communication, responsiveness and reflexivity/reversibility of opinion through mediated communication are crucial indicators of the quality of deliberation in existing democracies.

In contemporary society, media decide on who may communicate with large audiences. The ebb and flow of viewpoints and arguments along media, by which subjects try to explain their stances and justify their premises, is important to the establishment of socially-shared meanings – which does not mean, however, that actors and social groups will necessary agree with one another. Besides, one cannot forget that the new forms of communication via internet make possible the construction of communication and action networks of global dimensions. With the new communication and information technolo-

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scientific knowledge in some specialize area and are invited to give advice; (d) *moral entrepreneurs* who generate public attention for supposedly neglected issue; and, last but not least, (e) *intellectuals* who have gained, unlike advocates or moral entrepreneurs, a perceived personal reputation in some field . . . and who engage . . . spontaneously in public discourse with the declared intention of promoting general interests" (italics in original, PCMS, 2006: 416)

gies, not only the nature, but also the environment of discussion and collective action become ampler and more complex.

## On the permeability of the frontiers among different types of public sphere

In order to apprehend the formation of public debates in today's context, it is necessary to observe the permeability of the communicative exchanges occurring among episodic public spheres, public spheres of organized presence, and the mediated communication that circulates through society. Adopting habermasian model of the circulation of political power, Mansbrigde (1999), Conover, Searing and Crewe (2002) have pointed out that the deliberative process can only operate effectively due to the articulation of different discursive arenas, organized around the center of political system. Hendriks (2006) argues that the deliberative system should not be conceived as concentrically organized discursive arenas. Instead of that, she suggests a model which displays different discursive arenas intersecting each other, to convey that such arenas do not always exert reciprocal influence on one another. The functioning of the deliberative system will depend upon constant interactions among formal and informal discursive arenas; the unrestricted communicative exchange among political representatives, members of political parties, lobbyist, pressure groups, and actors of civil society, advocates and militant of specific causes, intellectuals etc.

Dialogue and argumentation among critical publics does not occur in a methodical manner, as it is the case with discussions among the judicial branch of government or academic publics which seek to systematically question, defend or refute their theses. Instead, the discursive formation of opinion and will is, as previously mentioned, an informal, partial, and fragmented process. Habermas names it the "anarchical process": "taken together, they [currents of public communication] form a 'wild' complex that resists organization as a whole" (BFN, 1996: 307). Once detached from the viewpoints of concrete subjects, and from simple interactions of the face-to-face type, communicative flows become more generic, that is to say, free from words and expression exclusively used by some communities. Habermas speaks of a disperse and "subjectless communication" – as it does not yield to the interests, beliefs, and desires of particular individuals – which generates public opinion.

> Political communication, circulating from the bottom up to the top down throughout a multilevel system (from everyday talk in civil society, through public discourse and mediated communication in weak publics, to the institutionalized discourses at the center of the political system) takes on quite different forms in different arenas (PCMS, 2006: 415)

Benhabib names this process an anonymous public conversation "*of mutually interlocking and overlapping networks and associations of deliberation, contestation and argumentation*" [italics in original] (1996: 74). Bohman stresses that "such extended and decontextualized forms of communication can be generalized into a 'public sphere' that is open to an unlimited audience of communication" (Bohman, 1996: 43). Dryzek also defends the importance of deliberations which transcend individuals and consolidate themselves through publicly available "discourse competitions" (Dryzek, 2004: 51).

In this process, abstract communicative flows that are made available (for the most part through media) for public knowledge are re-appropriated in particular situations by concrete subjects, who maintain their own values, life histories and vocabularies. At any time or historical context, subjects may engage in a given discourse, altering or questioning it, and reformulating the understanding of a particular theme or issue. Such dynamics may produce varied effects and impact more or less the manifold domains of everyday life and associations and militant groups of civil society; it may even generate ampler repercussions, such as altering the collective understanding on issues at stake, and promoting cultural or institutional innovations.

Deliberative politics derives its nourishment from the informal constitution of opinion and public will. Thus, in order to gain some degree of political efficacy, demands processed through collective debate should be introduced in parliamentary agendas, discussed in formal state and juridical arenas and, eventually, be proposed as imposing decisions. Only regulations defined by law or through governmental acts are capable of intervening in private spaces, transforming formal responsibilities and existing practices. In *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas sustains that the formation of the political will and decision-making are different, yet interconnected, processes he highlights the dual or two-track relationship existing between political institutions and deliberative publics. The deliberative practice of citizens' self-determination can only develop through the interplay between, on the one hand, the institutionalized parliamentary will-formation along legal procedures to reach decisions

and, on the other, the informal opinion- and will-formation along public spheres of political communication (BFN 1996: 296-298).

On the one hand, the public depends upon state guarantees in order to exercise its communicative freedom. Such guarantees consist of civic and political rights, such as freedom of expression and association, press freedom, personal integrity protection, among others. In informal discursive arenas, organized by the public in a relatively autonomous manner, citizens may "thematize" their desires, interests, and priorities, and freely negotiate them with other social groups, so as to process the common good, and produce legitimate claims and public policy guidelines. This would form the context of the "discovery", identification, and thematization of common problems, as previously argued. Nevertheless, although public opinion exercises "influence", it cannot "govern" – i.e., its decisions cannot be enforced upon society.

> The popular sovereignty set communicatively aflow cannot make itself felt *solely* in the influence of informal public discourses – not even when these discourses arise from autonomous public spheres. To generate political power, their influence must have an effect on the democratically regulated deliberations of democratically elected assemblies and assume an authorized form in formal decisions (BFN, 1996: 371-371).

On the other hand, the Constitutional State's institutions, empowered to act in the name of the whole through the use of legitimate means of coercion, institutionalize the public use of communicative freedom and regulate the transformation of "communicative power" into "administrative power" (BFN, 1996: 177). In his model, Habermas suggests that the State maintains the traditional principles of the Constitutional State – i.e., principles of organization, sanction, and execution; and yet, it depends upon the communicatively produced power in the public sphere for the *legitimate organization* of rights, and for the *legitimate exercise* of its administrative power. In other words, the State creates conditions for the organization of egalitarian participation in legislative democratic processes, such as the political participation in parties, ballots, consultations, and decision-makings of parliamentary corporations. The State has sanctioning power in order to protect and develop the law in litigious cases; even when an imposing decision is made necessary. Finally, the State is capable of fulfilling the publics' demands, and implementing programs agreed upon, through its bureaucratic and public administration apparatus. In this mo-

del, however, "it is not the legal form as such that legitimates the exercise of governmental power but only the bond with *legitimately enacted law*" [italics in original] (BFN, 1996: 135). The only power capable of producing legitimacy is the communicatively produced power.

The passage from horizontal forms of association among civilians – the sphere in which the informal constitution of opinion in the public sphere takes place – to vertical forms of organization – the domain in which "communicative power" translates, through legislation, into "administrative power"- requires not only argumentation, but also bargaining and commitment. This would form the context of "justification" through formal parliamentary procedures (BFN, 1996: 307). It is not possible here to present in detail Habermas' discussion; still, it is important to mention that, according to this thinker, when parliamentary processes are instituted for decision-making, through a minimal agenda for specific negotiations, a new "filtering" of contributions, themes, arguments, and information takes place, aiming at a cooperative solution of practical issues, including interest compensations. In this process, however, the political formation of the will is not reduced to the making of commitments. In Habermas' words, "so only the compatibility of all discursively achieved or negotiated problems with what is morally justifiable ensures that the discourse principle has been thoroughly applied" (BFN, 1996: 167).

Appropriating Fraser's (1992: 134) distinction between "strong publics" (representatives of the parliamentary houses and other institutions in the political system assigned with the task of making decisions) and "weak publics" (citizens assigned with the task of producing public opinion), Habermas attempts to demonstrate that decision-making processes do not bring to an end, once and for all, the debates developed in informal public spheres. The permanent exchange between formal and informal public spheres, between "weak" and "strong" publics, contributes to correct the mistakes that citizens and their representatives commit when making collective decisions. Such exchange supports what Gutmann and Thompson name "the economy of moral disagreement". Thus, "in politics as in much of practical life, decision-making process and the human understanding upon which they depend are imperfect" (Gutmann; Thompson, 2004: 6). Furthermore, a significant part of the decisions are not consensual, and when the conflicting parties expect to revert or modify the results in the future, they continue to produce arguments that support their viewpoints and stances.

Through the two-track model of the circulation of political power, Habermas seeks to demonstrate that a deliberative public is capable of interfering in decision-making processes, particularly in crisis situations – i.e., when the routine forms of problem-solving in the institutions fail. Various scholars condemn such model for granting the public only a power to recommend and a capacity to criticize. Dryzek (2004), for instance, criticizes Habermas' model for not giving enough attention to the fact that decisions which derive from the communicative power, once transformed into administrative power, may undergo quite obscure processes, and are subject to profound changes – something that may undermine their legitimacy. Bohman (1996: 185-189), in turn, suggests that political institutions themselves need to become more deliberative, meaning that they should grant civic sectors decision power, in order to produce an broader and more effective participation. In numerous cases, what is at stake is a democratic cooperation through institutionalized forms of public participation, and not a "circulation not of counter-power". In this line of reasoning, some critics claim that Habermas tends to treat empirical reality in abstract and styled terms, thus paying insufficient attention to the empirical findings of political science (Dryzek, 2002: 26). According to this view, he neglects the different modalities of aggregation and civic engagement, including deliberative meetings organized by the State's administrative agencies with the purpose of improving public policies (Fung, 2004; Fung and Wright, 2003, Wampler and Avritzer, 2004, Warren, 2001). The relationship between the State and civil society may be tense and permeated with conflict, depending on how much power each of them controls (Baynes, 1995: 225; Dagnino, 2002). For sure, Habermas' theorization is relevant to considering the kinship between participation and deliberation in diverse domains, since it establishes different analytic levels that explain how citizens may interfere in governmental processes. However, the highly abstract character of Habermas' project needs to be complemented with empirical investigations, in order to directly contribute to specific debates.

## Conclusion

The idea of a public sphere as the domain of public discussion – be such discussion characterized as the exchange of reasons in public, or as the exchange of public reasons – encompasses a variety of publics which contest public policies, operations of institutional and cultural power, and social injustices. In

order to free deliberative democracy from accusations of empty utopianism, its proponents need conceptual instruments to empirically discern among the different types of argumentative exchange, and the diverse conditions that sustain democratic debate within complex societies. Public sphere typology – encompassing casual and episodic meetings in everyday life, gatherings organized by social groups, as well as a myriad of civic associations, and argumentative exchanges through mass media – confers greater plausibility to the normative dimension of the public sphere. And yet, the speculative claims on the rational formation of opinion and political will need to be articulated with empirical studies on the ample spectrum of social struggles, and on the subsequent diversity of actual conflicts and forms of moral disagreements. In this context, one should not neglect civil society's heterogeneity, particularly with regards to the motivations that lead people and groups to engage in public discussion, the deliberative inequalities, and the asymmetries of power and access to resources.

In societies with a strong authoritarian tradition, the Constitutional State and political institutions are not as open and permeable as the Habermasian model seems to suggest. In the re-democratization process experienced by many countries in Latin America or in Eastern Europe, for instance, the State's institutional designs were not reconfigured in order to strengthen the demands of civil society (Avritzer, 2002; Alvarez, Dagnino, Escobar, 2000; Dagnino, 2002; Elster, Offe and Preuss, 1998). In civil society itself one may find "islands of authoritarianism"; hence a significant effort is necessary, on the part of democratizing associations, to gain the degree of public attention that is necessary to initiate a process of institutional innovation. Such difficulties are evident in the relationship established between, on the one side, representatives of the formal domains of the political system, specialists of functional systems, and civic actors, and, on the other side, agents of the media's system, in order to pre-structure the political public sphere and configure public debates. In this context, to investigate the means through which mass media contribute to the "public use of reason" and to the "public exchange of arguments", is particularly important.

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