Essay on the Public Sphere Normative Theories

IE University

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Professor: RUTH PALMER

Alexia Funes Minutti

The Public Sphere: A Conflict Created by Semantics

Societies face many challenges by the simple fact of being ruled by human nature. The main one is of semantics. Terms that have come to use in order to describe a phenomenon, even as a synecdoche, are now treated as rules of nature. The public sphere being the most dangerous one. Nancy Fraser (2010) underscores how Normative theories contradict their core values, hindering the formation of egalitarian and just societies. In the contemporary world, the notion of a public sphere requires the separation of the state from the civil society, making the Representative theory the only viable democratic system.

Normative Criteria is based on the separation between democratic theories and the public sphere. While “democratic theory focuses on accountability and responsiveness in the decision-making process; theories of the public sphere focus on the communication of the public regarding this process”. (Ferree et al. 2002, p. 205) The main challenge with the Normative Criteria is the assumption that society is granted of equalitarian possibilities and resources, having every person with the same potential for impact; and, at the same time, it segregates people in charge of the decision-making process from the citizenry. (Fraser, 2010) The problem with having theories that regulate behaviour in both the state and civil society, while describing them as 2 autonomous bodies, is that the public sphere theories continue to develop as a narrative of the citizenry point of view, without having the power to change the state from the inside, but as a response.

Walter Lippmann showcases this contradiction in *The Public Phantom* (2010). How can one be expected to be informed, participate, and still be considered inferior just for the lack of expertise in the handling of diplomacy. If he considers himself a realist, it is because the breach between governments and people had enough distance that participation was only a result of what was already going on in society. John Dewey was quick to point out his “lack of political imagination” (p. 25) Nonetheless, when theorizing about the public sphere, how many creative liberties would it be moral to take? Is it correct to assume the possibility of direct impact in democracy, or should we stick to current situations and study solely the voice of society and “mass media discourse within the parameters of actual existing societies”. (Ferree et al. 2002, p. 205)

Jürgen Habermas explained this conflict of semantics as a concept that “shifts in each era and that this meaning is always tied to the nature of the broader political and social arena” (Gynn et al., 2004, p. #36) Habermas (1989) also states how the public sphere is, to some extent, the spoken collective thought. It is seen as a social construct that arrived with the creation of private ownership and a sovereign state and that creates a connection to the political sphere. However, this take fails to showcase the social disparities; it is blind to social classes and the, before obvious, segregation of powers. Fraser (2010) blames this failure on the absence of social equality. For his theory to truly represent society, a division of social powers should be brought to light, not only cease to bracket but highlight them.

In this way, Fraser’s update of concepts, is just that. Whether we are to define the public sphere as the whole spoken collective thought, accepting that there are more influential powers than others, or to segregate this divisions by creating different forums for each. The problem with the creation of more public spheres and the segmentation of these voices is that they become easier to hierarchize. It is the same conflict of semantics, by stating a difference between public and private, state and society, we create limitations in direct participation.

In consequence, a democracy can only be representative. Even if we talk about grassroot organizations, their purpose is to have a representative that englobes the member’s thoughts and that is closer to the government’s point of action. In a similar basis the creation of public spheres to fit the counter publics, is just a way of creating the illusion to be correctly represented. This is a chain reaction that comes from the fact itself of having a state, meaning that it should be apart from the people. The mere study of public opinion is clear evidence of this, regardless of the purpose or given usage.

Similarly, closure is a concept with a paralel phenomenon. Firstly, democracy has a given necessity for closure. If failed to come to the majority’s agreement and implement it, can it even be considered a democracy? If we pose eternal debate as the basis, we would be closer to anarchy than justice. The obvious connotation is that to “challenge established elites and dominant ideologies” we need to be “suspicious of calls for closure ". (Ferree et al. 2002, p. 214) But when seen as a process altogether, we cannot help but justify the need of authority to limit behaviour, especially regarding others. In the most successful democracies, we see clear laws being respected till they must be changed. The conflict here is of perception of time, and possibilities in minorities having a say. In the same way, Fraser (2010) states how a discursive society should seek problem solving. But what is closure if not that? Is it a problem with the connotations of the word or should all resolution be postponed for a possible future dialogue?

Moreover, these theories missed the most important concept of the contemporary society, globalization. In a world where whole countries can represent a social class and multi-governmental authorities have more control towards policies in a country rather than its citizens, how can we still define the limits of a society without it clashing with another? How can one limit the public sphere to a single related state? It is no surprise that contemporary societies come with countless challenges, but believing in any other democracy that is not Representative requires a denial of the industrial power toward the state. It is of essence to have a universal view of the world; Fraser has interesting concepts that can help develop a more connected social fabric, but we must be realistic and accept that we need the help of governments or organizations to make these desires viable.

Therefore, semantics play a tricky challenge when it comes to studying societal behaviour, and many of the treated concepts are an evolution of an effort to better represent contemporary society. Nevertheless, structures within society and the separation of the state from society signifies the necessity of a representative power, even if it is through organizations, but a democracy demands a power that assures the instauration of common will. We should not change the meaning to serve the concept, but the other way around.

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