



Book Reviews

Habermas: Rescuing the Public Sphere

Pauline Johnson

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In *Habermas: Rescuing the Public Sphere*, Pauline Johnson seeks to save the endangered public sphere from the encroaching logic of the market and the state's anti-terrorist activities infringing upon the civil liberties of citizens. She defines the public sphere as an inclusive mode of association that provides individuals with the opportunity to establish their private concerns as potentially having generalizable significance and where collective aims can be built through deliberation and participation. The book is divided into 10 chapters. The first chapter situates the concept of the public sphere within sociological discussions that assert the necessity of the public sphere to democratic politics, but fear it is in a state of 'near terminal' decline because of the nature of advanced capitalism (p. 1). Johnson identifies Jürgen Habermas (along with Zygmunt Bauman and Alain Touraine) as one of the main theorists concerned to 'expose the "lie" at the heart of "neo-liberalism"' that the market denies us nothing important and is therefore able to provide for all our needs (pp. 7, 8, 11). The potential power of the public sphere becomes a fundamental resource in challenging this neo-liberal hegemony.

Johnson succinctly qualifies her aim to 'systematically' examine the concept of the public sphere in Habermas's work by arguing that this concept is at the 'top' of both his 'theoretical agenda' and his conception of critical theory, and also because the 'English speaking world have much to learn' from his work in this area (p. 12). This is certainly true of Britain where the dominant analytical approaches in political theory would benefit from engaging with Habermas's perspective to draw out the limitations of their approaches and to start addressing the sorts of questions that concern Habermas. She suggests that the analytical tradition has been more 'respectful' of Habermas's work rather than welcoming it with open arms because his 'oeuvre jars' with their 'empiricist scepticism and suspicion of grand philosophical systems' (p. 174).

In the following five chapters, Johnson traces the historical, philosophical and institutional basis of the concept of the public sphere in Habermas's work. Chapter 2 examines the concept of the public sphere from its inception in



Habermas's first book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. She locates his interest in the public sphere as potentially providing the foundation for a society premised on democratic principles (p. 19). Chapter 3 focuses on Habermas's theory of communicative action and here she demonstrates that 'action orientated to reaching understanding' is key to both the working of the public sphere and to the realization of Enlightenment rationalism. Chapter 4 explores Habermas's theory of 'discourse ethics' and his normative justification for tolerance. In Chapter 5, Johnson examines Habermas's discourse theory of law and democracy as expressed in *Between Facts and Norms*. She points out that this work reconnects with many ideas about the public sphere laid out in his first book, but through the conceptual framework of the theory of communicative action. Chapter 6 'Globalising the Public Sphere' outlines Habermas's recent work on European politics and his reflections on the effects of globalization. Throughout these chapters Johnson shows how the notion of the public sphere has shifted over the last four decades in Habermas's development from him initially trying to 'reconstitute' the 18th century ideas of the 'reasoning' public sphere to his more recent work where the notion of the public sphere becomes central in counteracting the imbalances of power characteristic of the effects of globalization. She covers a wide range of material and presents both Habermas's arguments and the arguments of his main critics in a comprehensive and accessible manner. However, the extensive scope of her engagement with the ideas of Habermas's critics are at times at the expense of providing a thorough analysis of the concept of the public sphere in the different episodes that characterize Habermas's work.

In Chapters 7, 8 and 9, Johnson examines the problems with the utopian dimension of Habermas's critical theory, as well as engaging with both his postmodern and feminist critics. She argues that the utopian dimension of Habermas's critical theory is at odds with his 'commitments to a democratized and transnational public sphere' (p. 123). In addition, she charts Habermas's waning confidence in citizens realizing the normative potential underpinning liberal democratic institutions (p. 124). Nevertheless, she shows how his commitment to the power of critical reason is as strong as ever. Johnson argues that Habermas is unsuccessful in his attempt to give philosophical justification for his universalizing principles of argumentation. Her insight here is that it is only by clawing back the universal dimension of Habermas's critical theory that the real power and achievements of his approach can be revealed. However, this begs the question that without this dimension what demarcates Habermas's position from his postmodern critics? In chapter 10, Johnson concludes with the suggestion that Habermas's influence upon international politics is widespread, and she says his main accomplishment is to systematically rethink the democratic emancipatory heritage of the Enlightenment



and to help us better appreciate the achievements of liberal democracy (pp. 172, 174).

Johnson's scholarship is impressive and she presents Habermas's ideas in a clear and accessible manner. This book is therefore valuable for postgraduates and researchers working in this area because it provides an exposition of the main developments in Habermas's work and an extensive outline of the arguments of his main critics. However, it is surely difficult to write a book on Habermas that adds a new and creative dimension to the extensive literature. What is interesting about Johnson's book is that she is both sympathetic and critical in her engagements with Habermas's 'radical reformist' ambitions for the public sphere and his aims in providing an emancipatory critical theory of society.

Indeed, Johnson fulfils her own aim of examining the notion of the public sphere in Habermas's development and by showing that he theorizes a more inclusive and participatory conception of public autonomy and private right than the one offered by various forms of liberalism. She makes it clear how important the notion of the public sphere is in the 21st century and how Habermas offers us an appreciation of 'what the stakes are' (p. 175). However, her book would have benefited from reconnecting Habermas's recent work with the theorists mentioned in the first chapter such as Bauman and Touraine and by providing practical or institutional suggestions about how the public sphere can be 'rescued'. Moreover, an examination of the changing nature of contemporary social movements such as the 'alternative globalization movement' and how these either fit into or challenge Habermas's framework would have strengthened her argument by focusing attention on the contemporary relevance of the public sphere as means of resisting neo-liberalism on a global setting.

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Multiculturalism without Culture

Anne Phillips

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Anne Phillips readily admits that the title of her new book is 'somewhat polemical' (p. 9). It is also to some degree misleading. She is not in favour of a politics of multiculturalism that does away with any conception of culture.