

Islam in the Public Sphere

What one can and cannot gain
from the Habermasean concept
of the public sphere

Communication is key

- Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929):
- 1. All speech acts have an inherent *telos* (the Greek word for "end") - the goal of mutual understanding;
- 2. Human beings possess the communicative competence to bring about such understanding;
- 3. Thanks to this peculiarity of human behavior the world can be transformed; the ultimate goal of this transformation is to create a more humane, just, and egalitarian society.

Habermas' advocacy of modernity and civil society (based on the idea of mutual understanding among various participating actors that is made possible by their communication in the "public sphere(s)") has been a source of inspiration to many modern thinkers and scholars.

Two conditions

For a public sphere to be effective in the political and social realms two conditions should be met:

1. The objectively possible minimizing of bureaucratic decisions;
2. The resolution of structural conflicts of interest (“the plurality of competing interests”) according to the standard of a universal interest that everyone can acknowledge (“universal and binding criteria”).

These conditions can be realized through the medium of public discussion (“critical publicity” in the “public sphere”)

J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, pp. 234-235.

Obstacles to achieving these conditions

- Publicity is staged by certain political actors for manipulative purposes and is thus degraded into an ideology that legitimizes the state (or the ruling establishment) and its practices and values/ideologies.
- The efforts on the part of the state to control and shape the totality of expressions and articulations of the “common/public good.”

How the “bourgeois” public sphere has come to be

- At a certain stage of historical development of West European societies the state-owned public sphere was appropriated by the public of private people (“property owners”) who made use of their reason to argue about and debate what constitutes the “common good” and to criticize the “powers-that-be” (state authorities).
- The public sphere can thus be construed as the “third estate” alongside the political and economic spheres of human life, both of which are controlled and dominated by the state and the ruling establishment (bureaucracy) associated with it.
- The public sphere can also be seen as the realm of alternative public spaces and alternative (“unofficial”) publics engaged in a contest with the state and its ideological apparatus.

All things to all people

- Habermasean ideas have been interpreted and appropriated in a wide variety of ways, sometime almost incompatible.
- Ours is just one more attempt at “interpreting the interpreter” (to use the title of a famous treatise of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, 1839-1897).

Adjusting Habermas' ideas to the study of Islamic societies

- For Habermas the “public sphere” is part and parcel of “secularity” (although later in his career he tried to integrate religion into his conception of the public sphere by acknowledging the role of Christianity and Judaism in shaping modernity and its styles of communicative action).
- Sociologists Armando Salvatore and Mark LaVine, who consider the religious aspect of the human condition to be an essential part of all social processes, strongly insist that one should not and cannot detach religion (understood as values, moral convictions, ideas and practices) from the sphere of public debates over the direction and values of a given society.

Bonds that tie

- Both secularity and its apparent opposite, religion, are social/ideological bonds that tie.
- Both are equally at work (and ubiquitously so!) in societies that we consider “modern.”
- Re-valorization of the religious in Western social sciences over against the earlier rejection, ushered in by the European Enlightenment, of religion as a negative (i.e., oppressive and disuniting) factor in the construction and maintenance of human collectivities.

Explaining new forms of solidarity in Islamic societies by using Habermasian ideas

- New forms of “Islamic solidarities” have emerged which exist not through membership in tight, hierarchically organized social movements (e.g., the Muslim Brotherhood) but through “mediated communication” (Asef Bayat) or through “shared patterns of consumption (listening, reading, shopping) and forms of everyday life” (Peter Mandeville), e.g., Gülenis and some Salafi groups.
- Members of these groups “come to a consensus by imagining, subjectively constructing, common values and shared values between themselves.” Their imaginings (like various nationalist imaginings of a nation) may differ considerably (Bayat), making for a polyphony of aims and objectives as well as means of achieving them.

Traditions matter

- Traditional ideologies (“traditions” per Alasdair MacIntyre, b. 1929) remain valid and relevant in modern societies as long as they are malleable («ковкие»/ «гибкие»)
- They prevent the rise of excessive (irresponsible) individualism, understood as rampant selfishness, and “de-acculturation” of modern societies.
- They serve as rallying points of various types of solidarity and as “engines of rationalization of life conduct”.

MacIntyre (b. 1929) on various types of “tradition”

- Tradition is a set of arguments, concepts and practices that are valuable in and of themselves (not due to the utilitarian goals and material goods they promise to deliver).
- MacIntyre’s revalorization of traditions can be seen as his protest against excessive subjugation (“negative rationalization”) of human behavior to the provision of tangible material goods at the expense of everything else.

Habermas' contribution according to Armando Salvatore

- Habermas offers a helpful explanation of the connective tissue (similar, to some extent, to MacIntyre's "tradition") linking otherwise disconnected (atomized) social agents.
- This tissue is communication whose goal is to achieve mutually satisfactory understanding among various agents engaged in it.
- In the process of communication within the public sphere its agents acquire communicative competences that are essential not only for their mutual understanding but also for the functioning of the public sphere and society generally.
- As a result, new (alternative) communicative spaces are created outside the reach of the state.

The Islamic public sphere is a variant of the Habermasian “bourgeois public sphere” of Western Europe

- Since the formation of the public sphere is a process that is unique to each society (which is recognized by Habermas who discusses its British, French and German versions), multiple (variant) social spheres are possible and inevitable.
- Salvatore and LaVine extrapolate this idea to assert the notion of “multiple modernities” thereby decentering the dominant/hegemonic “European” concept of modernity.
- Diverse public spheres and communicating publics/agents that create and maintain them produce diverse (and unique) versions of modernity.

MacIntyre's idea of alternative "traditions" (i.e., non-utilitarian) is relevant to the task of "decentering"

- Traditions not only transmit, maintain and legitimize predominant patterns of authority, but can also be used to disrupt them.
- The role of religion/religious convictions: They help to stabilize and "de-rationalize" a given tradition (and the public sphere associated with it) by rooting it in moral-ethical principles which are unselfish, geared as they are to securing "the common good" and, in this narrow sense "irrational" (i.e., anti-pragmatic).

Possible Objections

- The universal notion of “religion” is questioned by Talal Asad: The definition of “religion” is historically situated (e.g., the Western notion of “religion” may not be necessarily applicable to Islamic societies where a different dynamic of the triad state/society/religion has prevailed).
- “The world of Islam” (if such a generalized notion is permissible) exhibits a different pattern of state-society formation/functioning than that found in European societies.
- Eurocentrism must be avoided and the specificity of the historical evolution of Muslim societies and the public spheres that they have produced must be examined on a case-to-case basis.
- This comparative analysis has the unstated goal of undermining the standard European conceptual toolbox and, indirectly, the European intellectual hegemony in general.

Thank you!

Questions and/or comments are welcome