

The Notion of Public Sphere in Post-Totalitarian Times:
A Normative Account

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to discuss the relevance of classical normative accounts of the public sphere for the current historical situation. The point of departure is pragmatists' criticism of a metaphysically grounded notion of the public, which I take to be a fundamental criterion in my analysis, considering that what post-totalitarian societies need is an empirically oriented set of contextually adaptable norms, rather than a metaphysically based notion of collective identity. After scrutinizing the most elaborated models of the public sphere – that of Hannah Arendt, Charles Taylor and Jürgen Habermas – and pointing out the social norms that these theorists insist on and which are still crucial today, I suggest some directions for further reflection on the subject. In short, what qualifies as valuable acquisitions in these major theories are: a) the norm of political *participation* and the meaning ascribed by Hannah Arendt to the public (a sphere of discourse and action), which I take to be a very useful definition still, because it emphasizes the activity, rather than the locality of the public; b) Taylor's account of the *dispersed* character of public speech and action; and c) the idea of representativity (a crucial norm for newly democratic societies) and that of the interconnectedness between public and private, emphasized by Habermas, as well as his constant care for the consistence of theoretical norms with historical facts. What is still to be achieved is an empirical account of the emergence of a global (or transnational) public after the fall of totalitarianisms on one hand, and of the internal aspects of decentralization accompanying or following this event, on another. Indeed, the present essay is meant as an open door to further empirical research, for its author shares the pragmatist belief that the purpose of norms themselves is regulative, rather than foundational.

Introduction

The thesis that I am going to defend in this essay – namely that, for an account of public sphere to be appropriate for the current post-totalitarian situation, it must first, be free of metaphysical assumptions regarding the “ultimate cause” or “nature” of the collective identity and second, bridge normative and empirical approaches – is neither bold nor entirely original. Pragmatist thinkers like Dewey and Rorty argued for the former; Habermas illustrated the latter. My own endeavor is to prove that, while these two demands are *necessary* criteria (for the adequacy of theoretical accounts to practical circumstances) when taken separately, they only become *sufficient* when considered together. Let me begin with a few notes regarding my empirical interest in the topic of the public sphere and how it informs my rationale in this paper.

Anybody would agree that one of the first things which are needed in a newly democratic country (like Romania) is a civil society. The relation between the latter and the public sphere depends on the meanings that we assign to each of these terms. One might even argue that they overlap in their elaborated meanings. Because each of them can be taken in either a simplistic or a complex sense: civil society can mean a sum of NGOs or a self-organizing society (*Bürgergesellschaft*), whereas public sphere can be seen purely architecturally (as a public space), or as a socially undertaken activity. The respective latter meanings of the two terms converge, because in order to have an effective self-organizing civil society, one needs to have a sphere of public speech and action first.

The situation in post-communist Romania is the following: generally speaking, people still have an anti-political mindset, as a result of forty-five years of totalitarianism. This means not only indifference towards political affairs, but also reluctance to get involved in them. The kind of suspicion, distrust and even contempt for politics that have been induced into them during the period of dictatorship have a more serious effect than just passivity, namely anti-participatory behavior. This is the legacy of communism that a country like Romania must cope with. Moreover, there is another anti-democratic tradition there – namely the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, which, unlike that of the

Hapsburg one entails a tendency towards corruption instead of the rule of law.

What all these problematic empirical aspects mean is that we need to reconsider the notion of the public sphere in a *normative* way, because *facts* (like freedom and a public space) do not suffice to give it a full and positive account. Mass media, for instance, can be free but ineffective insofar as the process of political decision-making is concerned, in the absence of norms such as transparency and publicity. Therefore, what I intend to accomplish in this paper is to look into the existing theoretical models of public sphere and try to assess their success in combining the normative with the empirical dimensions of this topic.

One more thing needs to be made explicit before proceeding with the analysis of the three theoretical models, namely *why start with pragmatism*. This is a question that one who looks at the contents of my essay might ask, and which one who reads the first section (about the pragmatist critique) is definitely going to ask, because at the end of the first 15 pages it turns out that pragmatists do not even have a proper model of public sphere to offer. Their critique of a metaphysically grounded public is, however, essential (regardless of their success in proposing an alternative) because it shows why such an account of the public is not acceptable: it is either purely abstract (therefore, useless for our sociological purposes), or ideologically manipulated. The former is the case with Hannah Arendt's model: there is a metaphysical assumption within it (regarding the supposed "authenticity" of life in the public sphere as opposed to the "necessity" of life in the private sphere), which makes her account practically useless, although theoretically appealing.

In short, the pragmatists' critique is crucial because it emphasizes the distinction between a metaphysical and a normative notion of the public and demonstrates that the former is not only irrelevant for social-political research, but can even be dangerous, for one can do anything in the name of some supposedly final truths or values that would "ground" the collective identity that we call "public". Thus the extent to which the existing theoretical models are vulnerable to this critique becomes a reliable criterion for their adequacy to

the current post-totalitarian situation, where there is a need to abandon any ideologically imposed “universal” truths on the one side, and make the public discourse and action as politically effective as possible, on the other.

I. The Pragmatist Critique of a Metaphysical Public

I. 1. Dewey against Foundations

For John Dewey, the public is a sphere of discursive negotiation between individuals who have different opinions on socio-political matters, but who share a deep commitment to democracy. However, this public exchange of viewpoints counts, in Dewey’s opinion, not only as a form of democratic participation, but also as a warrant for the perpetuation of democracy – which for him is creative as much as it is institutional.

The major problem in John Dewey’s view of the public is a somehow overstated relation between the latter and state. The nature of this relation ranges from proximity (that is, an external relation) to identity, the latter case being, of course, particularly disturbing if one is looking for a model of the public suitable for post-totalitarian societies; it represents, in fact, exactly what one attempts to move away from when trying to define a post-communist public sphere. However, there are ways in which one could avoid this problem, if one really wanted to use Dewey’s view. One way would be to simply bracket out the idea of a relation between public and state, while focusing on the details of Dewey’s theory; that is on the content and functions of his public: a plurality of associations, respectively “conjoint, combined, associated action”¹. Another, more technical way would be to look into the fairly sophisticated and intermingled semantics of the two terms (public and state), which have much richer meanings in Dewey than we usually grant them. Dewey, in fact, begins his account of “the public and its problems” with an interrogation concerning the meaning of the state, and he lists no less than four definitions and three theories of it. Needless to say that what we have in mind when we

¹ John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, Athens: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1991, p. 34. All the references hereafter will be made by mentioning the page of the quotation, in the body text.

consider its association with the public as particularly ominous is only one of them – the state as “organized oppression, at once a social excrescence, a parasite and a tyrant” (pp. 4-5). The other three definitions are potentially illuminating – each in a different way – for the meaning of the public, not that Dewey assumes either of them.

In short, according to these definitions, the state is: i) a socially “harmonized life lifted to its highest potency” (p. 4); ii) just one of many social institutions meant to mediate the conflicts between different social units (such as economy and the church); iii) a mere instrument “for keeping individuals from quarreling too much with one another” (p. 5). The reason why Dewey is not quick to embrace any of these definitions is principled, rather than argued for: he is simply reluctant to the idea that there is such a thing as “the State” in the first place because, he says,

The moment we utter the words ‘The State’ a score of intellectual ghosts rise to obscure our vision. Without our intention and without our notice, the notion of ‘The State’ draws us imperceptibly into a consideration of the logical relationship of various ideas to one another, and away from facts of human activity. It is better, if possible, to start from the latter (pp. 8-9).

Undoubtedly, this is the standard pragmatist attitude vis-à-vis any attempt to define social facts or mental representations. But in this case the reluctance goes deeper than that and the opposition to a strict definition is stronger, because it would entail much more serious practical consequences than other definitions. In order to understand that, we need to know that, for Dewey, to define something is to confine it to a supposedly fixed and limited ground which he calls (metaphysical) ‘foundation’ and which, by its claimed a priori legitimacy, can become a source of authoritarian views. If we want to account for the community life (be that of the state or any other form of association), Dewey says, we cannot begin by stipulating its hypothetically ultimate causes (like “man is a political animal”); instead, we should “start from acts which are performed” (p.12) and then look at the consequences of such acts. By pragmatist lights, this should count as a view that not only is legitimate enough (without being metaphysically pinned down), but which

could also help our sociological purposes, for its flexibility would make it easily adaptable to different historical contexts.

This is exactly the kind of relaxed theoretical view that Dewey has of the public. At times (p. 12), he sees it as whatever has to do with ‘the others’ than oneself, an account which is deprived of any political relevance. Some other times, he gives the public a strictly social content – namely, one that consists of all forms of associated behavior; in this sense, there is a fairly distinct sphere in which the private and the public overlap, for “many private acts are social” (p. 13) and have an associational character. Finally, Dewey identifies the public with the state – in which case its main characteristic “springs from the fact that all modes of associated behavior may have extensive and enduring consequences which involve others beyond those engaged in them” (p. 27). That is to say that when associations start to have an “extensive and enduring” influence, the *social* public becomes *political*, taking on new functions.

What could we conclude from this multifold scheme? Mainly that, while the private and the public definitely overlap in the social realm, it is unclear from Dewey’s account how they could converge when the latter is invested with political meaning and functions. For instance, when new forms of associated behavior emerge due to the technological progress, the “inherited political agencies (...), if elaborate and well institutionalized, obstruct the organization of the new public”; thus, “to form itself, the public has to break existing political forms” (p. 31). But this is a difficult task to accomplish otherwise than by revolution. How is, then, a pacifist public sphere (populated by private individuals) to become as influent as to qualify – according to Dewey’s criteria – as a political public? In other words, how is the hope for social reform to be fulfilled by private (philosophical) reflection and action? This is the challenge launched by Dewey, one that Rorty chooses to reject on grounds that the hope is completely unjustified.

I. 2. Rorty: No Politics, Just Literature

There are three main contexts in which Rorty employs the distinction between private

and public. The first (and more visited) one is *ethical*: it is Rorty's aestheticized ethic of private perfection. I won't insist on it because it has nothing to do with the public sphere, not even in the loose sense that Rorty gives to this notion. Another context in which he mentions the private/public dichotomy is that of *the metaphysical tradition* that he tries to deconstruct by calling into question its ontological and epistemological presuppositions. The argument is that one of the dreams of metaphysicians has always been to find an overarching element able to unify individual and public projects; or – Rorty says – this is not only unrealistic (given the contingency of our beliefs and languages), but also dangerous, because taking ideas like "the human nature" or "universal consciousness" seriously means investing too much power and authority into a single entity. Allegedly final truths can easily become sources of justification for ideologies – hence, the risk of violence, because one can do anything in the name of such 'ultimate', unquestionable truths.

The third context has to do with *hermeneutics* – namely, with the pragmatist kind of interpretation that Rorty himself uses, when he evaluates theories and ideas from the perspective of their possible effects at the private or public level. He says, for instance, that there are theories or notions more likely to generate ideologies than others; such is the case with Plato's view of the soul and of justice, or Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. What is important for the interpreter, he argues, is to focus his reading on *either one* of the two levels and not try to overlap them in a single - all mighty - interpretation, because then he would have private metaphors invested with public significance and power - hence, the risk of ideology. There are ideas / theories that teach us how to become more independent, confident, and original and which are, thereby, important for our private life; and there are theories that teach us how to become less cruel and more responsible, thereby important for our public life. Rorty illustrates this dichotomy with the insightful remark that there are sensitive killers and cruel or irresponsible poets in the world. And we need, he says, to keep them apart – not to invest our private beliefs with universality and turn them into general public norms, because if we did, we would compromise individual freedoms.

There are two things which are wrong with this picture:

Firstly, what the previous remark shows is only the *occurrence* of such a drastic gap between private and public, not its *necessity*. The fact that one can be original, creative and sophisticated (that is, have a rich private life) and be totally careless, cruel, or irresponsible in his/her public life does not mean that one is usually like this - or, even less, that this is perfectly normal and we shouldn't even be looking for a way to render our private and public lives coherent.

Secondly, there is a conceptual confusion about Rorty's view of private and public: namely, between what *he* calls 'public' and what *we* as social and political theorists usually understand by this term. Basically, Rorty's notion of public doesn't have anything to do with people engaging in deliberations about matters of common concern and trying to change them for the better. He only means the social behavior of an individual in abstract (that is, in isolation). For Rorty, cruelty – a key notion in his references to the public – is, for instance, what Nabokov's character does to Lolita. We have a name for it – pedophilia – and, although we ascribe it to the medical field and the punitive system, sociologically speaking it's still a private matter (just as the family), which is institutionalized to a certain extent.

The reason why Rorty doesn't have a notion of the public is simply because he is not truly interested in it. He just ignores all the ethical-political concerns from the theories that he interprets: "His readings of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and Freud are not simply 'strong': they are ruthlessly violent. For he wants to excise all the passages in their works which do bear on our public lives."² In other words, Rorty constantly emphasizes the private aspects of life; the public political sphere is missing, but he assumes it, he acts as if it were there, when he talks about the ethical and political ideals of solidarity and social hope. There is simply no way to achieve such goals without first, assuming the possibility of commonly shared vocabularies (that is, sets of basic beliefs and values) and second, giving a minimal sense of facticity. Since Rorty explicitly denies the former and ignores the latter, Richard Bernstein rightly accuses him of "leading us away from confronting

² Richard Bernstein, "Rorty's Liberal Utopia", in *Social Research*, Spring 1990, Vol. 57, Issue 1.

and ameliorating the concrete social forms of cruelty”]; moreover, he quotes C. Wright Mills to show that this is a problem of liberalism in general:

The detachment of liberalism from the facts of a going society make it an excellent mask for those who do not, cannot, or will not do what would have to be done to realize its ideals... if the moral force of liberalism is still stimulating, its sociological content is weak; it has no theory of society adequate to its moral aims.³

Regardless of the sustainability of this critique addressed to liberalism as a whole, it certainly stands in Rorty’s case. One good way of proving that Rorty’s notion of ‘public’ is no more than an empty signifier is to check his account of issues concerning multiculturalism: more often than once, *he doesn’t have one*. Take the issue of “cultural recognition”, for instance: he simply rejects the concept altogether (considering that we should concern ourselves with the “economical redistribution” instead)⁴, because he doesn’t have the tools to approach it with. Or take the issue of “intercultural consensus”⁵, which is just as poorly addressed by Rorty as the previous one: all he can say is that consensus should not be based on abstract principles (derived from assumptions regarding human nature), but on a continuous process of mutual adjustments from the part of each cultural group. But how would such a chain of mutual adjustments come about, when Rorty wouldn’t even grant the conflicting parts a common ‘vocabulary’ (that is, a set of basic beliefs or concerns that would make the dialogue possible)?

Another big confusion in Rorty’s view is that between liberalism and democracy. When he invokes “The Priority of Democracy Over Philosophy”⁶, he actually means the priority of liberalism (or at least of liberal democracy) over its philosophical sources. Otherwise it wouldn’t make sense to talk about philosophy constituting a danger for democracy: trying

³ C. Wright Mills, quoted in *Ib.*

⁴ See his exchange with Nancy Fraser: R. Rorty, “Is ‘Cultural Recognition’ a Useful Concept for Leftist Politics?”, and Nancy Fraser, “Why Overcoming Prejudice Is Not Enough: A Rejoinder to Richard Rorty”, in *Critical Horizons*, Feb. 2000, Vol. 1, Issue 1.

⁵ See Rorty’s exchange with Jean-Francois Lyotard on this issue, in *Critique*, 41: 456, 1985.

⁶ In *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1: *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*.

to impose a certain truth can be a threat to one's private freedom (of thought or expression), not for the public one. In fact, as Agnes Heller puts it, "of all forms of governance, it is only liberal democracy that has so far called for philosophical legitimation."⁷

Finally, there is a whole set of philosophical assumptions that Rorty makes, and which are simply wrong or unjustified because they represent oversimplifications of the traditional theories. For instance, the distinction between Kant's "universalism" and Hegel's "historicism" is forced; if we were to accept it, we ought to put into brackets a whole series of "historicist" ideas in Kant (such as that of *sensus communis*, which Hannah Arendt builds a lot on⁸) and of "universalistic" notions in Hegel (the Mind, the Absolute). But what is even more serious than the oversimplification of traditional theories is the fact that Rorty uses these oversimplified versions as labels or blueprints which he attaches to the views of various political theories, in order to refute them. (This is like rejecting a solution to a mathematical problem because it involves using the theorem of Pascal, whose religious convictions we don't like.) For instance, he criticizes Taylor and Sandel for believing that democracy needs a philosophical back-up (i.e. that political institutions presuppose a theory of human nature and its historicity), by automatically associating this belief with the Enlightenment. Or, as Marcin Krol puts it, the latter has nothing to do with democracy – though it might have something to do with liberalism. The confusion becomes even more obvious when Rorty argues against Sandel's claim that Rawls is trying to found liberal politics on metaphysical grounds (namely, on a Kantian theory of the moral subject seen from a non-historical perspective), which is justifiable regardless of Rawls' intention: the metaphysical assumption regarding the universality of justice *is there* in Rawls, even though he does not develop it, but only takes it as a back-up of his political view.

⁷ Agnes Heller, "What Is and What Is Not Practical Reason", in David Rasmussen (ed.), *Universalism vs. Communitarianism. Contemporary Debates in Ethics*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, p. 164.

⁸ It is the most significant political topic that she finds in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. This is how she explains it: "Under the *sensus communis* [or 'collective reason of humanity'] we must include the idea of a sense common to all. This is done by comparing our judgment with the possible judgments of others, and by putting ourselves in the place of any other man, by abstracting the limitations which contingently attach to our own judgment." (H. Arendt, *Lectures...*, quoted by Patrick Riley, "On DeLue's Review of Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*", in *Political Theory*, August 1984, p. 435.)

Coming back to the private / public distinction, we can conclude that what we have in Rorty is, at the very best, too of a rigid separation between the two, which Richard Bernstein labels as a “logic of apartheid”⁹ leading to violent consequences at both theoretical and practical levels: oversimplifying interpretations, respectively a bracketing out of political issues. The alternative is even worse: not just a neglected public (because of the emphasis on the private), but a totally absent one, or a fake one that has nothing to do with real communities of individuals getting together and involved in the social-political life.

There are several ways to prove the lack of a consistent notion of “public sphere” in Rorty. One argument is that the very concept of the self that he works with is not fit for debates concerning public matters. The way he describes it, a Rortyan “self” not only doesn’t have a “nature” or a core, a set of stable features that would ensure its substantial identity; it also doesn’t seem to have a body. Not once does Rorty mention the facticity or temporality of the self in an empirical sense; he is only concerned with its historical situation, beliefs, and language. And the only evaluative criterion that he mentions (for assessing the individual’s autonomy and self-creation) is *novelty* – namely, that of his/her vocabulary. In other words, the only basic feature of the “self” is its ability to re-describe things – obviously, a purely mental capacity.

This is, in fact, why Rorty is so quick to justify the tendency of intellectuals and artists to isolate themselves from the public¹⁰. It is because, given how rich their inner life is, they don’t identify with their community. But this – he argues – does not make them socially irresponsible. They are just different – the same way in which “escaped slaves” or “the tramps from under the Berlin’s wall” are different: not by their nature, but by the kind of world they live in.

The only “public” that Rorty does account for is the so-called “liberal community”

⁹ R. Bernstein, *Op. cit.*

¹⁰ See his essay on “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism”, in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1.

populated by poets and revolutionaries¹¹, where being a “poet” means being original and creative, concerned (unlike metaphysicians) with language rather than with reason. Even the civic ideal of “solidarity” has a particularly private aspect attached to it: for Rorty, solidarity means the capacity to identify oneself with the contingencies of other people’s lives – and nothing more. This only requires an ability to put oneself in the place of another, to empathize with his / her own *private* situation, which doesn’t tell us anything about the possibility of transcending the sphere of private matters, and reaching another level, where communication would have public and even political functions (deliberation, critical debate, opposition, or disobedience). In other words, even when the aim of the individual is a public one (like solidarity), it looks like all that he/she needs to do is empathize with other individuals privately; no positive public action is expected from him/her. With such poor normative demands, no wonder that all Rorty can do is separate the two realms (private and public), assign a major task to be achieved in each of them (autonomous self-creation and social responsibility), and stop there. He has nothing to say about how the two relate to, or reinforce each other. “He thinks liberal democracy has won for us the ability to leave the private and the public unfused. We do not look at socialization (as did Aristotle) as the use of the private sphere to prepare one for the public life of the citizen.”¹² Of course that in principle this is correct: individuals living in a liberal democracy are indeed free to be “as privatistic, ‘irrationalist’ and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time – causing no harm to others”¹³. But this only means that they are free to remain quarantined in their private ivory towers if they want to – and not get engaged publicly or politically at all, not that such a separation is necessarily the case in liberal democratic societies. Or, this is exactly what Rorty seems to suggest. Moreover, he thinks that we (as liberals) ought to suspect any kind of consensus, simply because it might have something to do with the old metaphysical obsession of searching for an objective, universal, God’s-eye view of things. (Once again he employs the same not exactly fair-play strategy of rejecting a theory by attaching a metaphysical label to it, in virtue of an alleged metaphysical assumption that might or

¹¹ See his *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, ch. 3.

¹² David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty. Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 110.

¹³ R. Rorty, *CIS*, xiv.

might not be there.)

The only thing that we can come up with as a possible bridge between Rorty's private and public is the literary activity:

Rorty addresses the problem of the appropriate balance between the private and the public spheres, in a rather oblique manner, by noting the purposes served by intellectual activities such as the reading of books. One reads books in order to extend and develop the stable, widely used vocabulary associated with both private and public purposes. Secondly, one may read in order to work out some *new* vocabulary relevant either to the private or public sphere (...). This is the essence of Rorty's 'postmodernist' bourgeois liberalism.¹⁴

If that is so, then this is nothing else than a postmodernist description of the bourgeois literary public from the 18th and 19th centuries. Indeed, the only kind of activity undertaken by Rorty's "poets and revolutionaries" who are supposed to act as "agents of change" within the liberal community seems to be the artistic one. Their 'protest' will only take the form of creative expressions of the imagination.

I. 3. Shusterman's Amendments

One of the sharpest critiques of Rorty's private/public dichotomy comes from one of his pragmatist fellows, Richard Shusterman. There are at least three lines of argument that Shusterman uses when he refers to this topic: the first has to do with how it relates to other theoretical accounts of Rorty's (for instance, his theory of interpretation or his ethical project), the second builds on the intrinsic logic of the distinction itself. The last one refers to the project of private morality. I'll give a short account of each of them.

When looking closely at how does the sharp distinction between private and public fit with Rorty's account of interpretation (especially with his relativistic view of the latter's

¹⁴ *Ib.*, p. 111.

object), Shusterman sees a contradiction there – namely, between the emphasis on the private, on the one side, and that on linguistic practices (inherently public) on the other. The reason why Rorty needs the latter is because he is trying to find another way to account for the identity of the interpretive object than the realistic one (which involves an assumption regarding the ‘nature’ or the ‘substance’ of it). And the solution that he comes up with is the Wittgensteinian one: the texts or other kinds of objects that we interpret are what they are in virtue of their reference to a set of linguistic practices that we all share. But this, Shusterman argues, involves a public discourse, that is a common language – which Rorty doesn’t grant, because he constantly emphasizes the need for linguistic diversity and novelty. Rorty insists that our main goal in the use of language should be neither the realistic one (the search for ‘truth’), nor the Habermasian one (solving problems together, by promoting a consensus about our beliefs). Instead, it should be the ethical aim of private autonomy and self-realization, which presupposes a constant attempt to innovate our world and the way we describe it – in permanently renewed vocabularies that help us free ourselves from the oppression of inherited descriptions (that is, beliefs and worldviews).

But to claim that all we need is linguistic imagination, instead of the common language used by literary critics¹⁵ is to give up any hope for a linguistic agreement – which is self-refuting. As Shusterman puts it, “in denying such common language, Rorty seems to deny the very conditions of propositional agreement which, by his own account, allow him to talk about texts (or indeed any objects) at all.”¹⁶

The second line of argument that Shusterman uses in his critique of Rorty’s dichotomy refers to its very basis – the claim that there can be such a quarantined private sphere as Rorty describes it. In short, Shusterman argues that what Rorty calls private vocabularies and interpretations are not, in fact, that private – because firstly, in order to achieve them, we need to start with a common language and with already existing interpretations and secondly, our own allegedly private interpretations will be, in turn, made public.

¹⁵ This is what Rorty claims in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 158.

¹⁶ Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics. Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd ed., Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, p. 102.

Moreover, “Rorty’s so-called private readings exceed and violate the private in a more general way. Collectively, they create a field which structures and constrains the range of acceptable public response to texts, valorizing some as currently informed and up to date, while deprecating others as naïve and old-fashioned.”¹⁷ Finally, the last of Shusterman’s criticisms to Rorty’s dichotomy has to do with the contrast between private and public morality that it informs:

The distinction between ‘private morality’ and ‘public morality’ is a fairly common one and has recently been employed by Rorty in arguing for his own aestheticized ethic. Though the distinction can be useful, I doubt, for reasons discussed later, that the project of private morality is as clearly separable and independent from public morality as Rorty would have us believe.¹⁸

It is not only that Rorty separates the two domains so firmly, but he even claims that no philosophy or ethical theory could ever bring together the private goal of self-creation with the public one, of social solidarity¹⁹. Or, as Shusterman argues,

This claim could be challenged as the misguided product of our deeply entrenched liberal ideology and romantic aesthetics. Only when the former defines the self as essentially private and the latter regards aesthetic creation as, by necessity, radically individualistic do the making of the self and society seem inherently at odds. We must be careful not to interpret a given socio-cultural structure of division into an intrinsic philosophical divide.²⁰

In any case, even though in our liberal society it might be difficult to find a satisfactory way to synthesize the two ethical goals (private and public), and Shusterman grants this – we still need to rethink the model of aesthetic life that Rorty proposes in less private terms. The allegedly private self that he describes is simply a fiction, for in reality it is

¹⁷ *Ib.*, p. 104.

¹⁸ *Ib.*, p. 329.

¹⁹ See R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 27.

²⁰ R. Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, p. 255

always “the product of a public space; it is always already social and this is how it should be, since it has a language for its (private) thoughts”, as Shusterman argues. And then he goes on looking into the details of Rorty’s project of an aesthetic life, showing that there are public elements involved in the allegedly private modes of living of the two types of ethical esthetical agents described by Rorty – namely, the ironist and the strong poet. Their efforts are always affected by “the public ethos and pressures”, as Shusterman puts it. Moreover, “not only the ranges of viable life-style options, but the individual’s very awareness and choice are severely constrained and relentlessly programmed by societal forces that are usually far beyond his power (as individual) to resist, let alone control.”²¹

What Shusterman concludes from all these shortcomings in Rorty’s account of private vs. public is that his ethical project needs to be enlarged so as firstly, to be more permissive to the public sphere and secondly, to accommodate a larger variety of esthetic life-styles. The latter is a challenge that Shusterman takes on when he elaborates his own project of an esthetic ethic. But for the purposes of this research, what really counts (as a contribution to the rethinking of the public sphere) is the former.

As we have seen, Shusterman criticizes Rorty’s view especially on two grounds: the fact that he privileges the private sphere against the public and that he stresses novelty so much, as the sole criterion in both ethics and aesthetics. What Shusterman proposes, in the second chapter (called “Ethics and Politics”) of his book on *Practicing Philosophy*, is that we try to solve “the tension between philosophy’s devotion to care for the self and its need to care for others”²² – which would be nothing else than an attempt to bridge private and public morality. One way to do this is by reviving “the Deweyan faith in self-fulfillment through public engagement”, or “the Emersonian idea that the quest for a higher self not only aims at an ‘other’ self but serves as an inspiring example to others”. But Shusterman doesn’t settle for such a general account of possible ways to justify his hope that public and private morality can be rendered coherent. He goes further than that, analyzing Rorty’s arguments against such a hope (i.e., against making participation in the

²¹ *Ib.*, p. 257.

²² Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy. Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*, New York and London: Routledge, 1997, p. 12.

public sphere an essential part of personal self-perfection), and then explaining why is it that his account differs so much from Dewey's. The point of this comparison is not to take the side of one account while rejecting the other, but to "promote a better balanced liberalism", a middle-ground between "Dewey's radical liberalism" and "Rorty's conservatism" that could help us improve our response to socio-political problems, while at the same time enhancing our personal lives. Theoretically, this would imply

keeping the Deweyan hope for philosophically inspired social reform and more participatory democracy, along with the Rortyan sense of the limits and abuses of philosophy in treating our current social predicament. This, of course, includes our 'private' social predicament as philosophers seeking the best way to live.²³

But how we could actually apply this in our social every-day life is still not clear from Shusterman's account, especially after he explains how different Dewey's and Rorty's motives to reject any metaphysical ground are. He shows that, according to Rorty, any ontological 'given' that were considered to be the ground of individual liberty would, in fact, constrain it; so his reluctance to give it any philosophical justification is motivated by his "rapacious individualism", whereas Dewey's discontent with such justification is that it turns freedom into an abstract metaphysical given, rather than a concrete social good. By contrast, Rorty "is far more appreciative of negative liberty, defending it against its communitarian critics who share Dewey's emphasis on positive freedom and communal life."²⁴ In other words, one pragmatist pushes us away from amidst the public, whereas the other brings us back to it.

What the pragmatists can contribute to the attempt to reconstruct the public sphere ranges from a normative account of a philosophically reformed public (as in Dewey), to a firm separation of public and private with no hope for a public of individuals (in Rorty), to an unfinished attempt to bridge the gap between the two radical stances (in Shusterman). In any case, the pragmatist critique of a metaphysically grounded collective identity stands,

²³ *Ib.*, p. 69.

²⁴ *Ib.*, p. 70

regardless of how successful their own story of the public is. That is because they show us that we need a series of adaptive norms meant to regulate community life, rather than a set of supposedly final causes or truths meant to “ground” it, in order to make our account of the public sphere not only theoretically coherent, but also practically relevant. This is to say, the pragmatists provide us with an account of what would not qualify as good theoretical grounds for the notion of public sphere, thereby helping us to see what it is that we are looking for in our attempt to rethink the concept.

II. The Existing Models

II. 1. Taylor’s *Community*

There are two things that I would like to focus on in regard to Taylor’s view of the public (or the “common We”, as he calls it): first, to what extent is he exposed to Rorty’s critique and dismissal of a metaphysically grounded notion of the public and second, even if he were prone to such a framework, would it mean that his model is sociologically irrelevant?

Sharply put, if Taylor’s account of the public sphere is in any way metaphysical, than it is precisely *in a Rortyan way*, because of its appeal to linguisticity²⁵ as the ground of our common (public) space: “When we first engage in discourse we open up a common referential space. What is of interest then is the relation between this We-stance and the I-perspectives of the participants.”²⁶ This means that Taylor quickly moves away from the initial metaphysical stage (his appeal to our linguistic nature), becoming concerned with how individuals relate to the public sphere opened up by this common nature. Which is to say that not only does he escape Rorty’s critique, but he overcomes the latter by taking a step further and looking at what is actually happening within the public sphere. He talks, for instance, about an “individual contribution to this space” (p. 27) and notices that “the We-perspective itself requires an at least implicit understanding of the I-perspective” (p.

²⁵ For a critique of Rorty’s exaggerated focus on language see R. Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, ch. 9.

²⁶ Charles Taylor, « Language and Society », in Joas Honneth, *Communicative Action*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, p. 27.

28). In other words, Taylor is first and foremost interested in the dialectical movement between private and public, which, however, he usually accounts for in purely theoretical terms.

In any case, there is a second level in Taylor's account beside the theoretical one, which is more empirically oriented. It covers issues like applying public norms and carrying out the rituals of every-day life, which constitute "the specificity of social action" (p. 28). The only reason why Taylor doesn't pursue this line of thought is because his aim in this article is to comment on Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action*, rather than on *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. But elsewhere²⁷, he explicitly addresses the latter issue, defining the public sphere as one of the two major forms of civil society in the West (market economy being the other). And the way he introduces it makes it clear that his account has meanwhile been completely freed from any metaphysical assumptions:

I want to describe it as a common space in which the members of society are deemed to meet through a variety of media: print, electronic, and also face-to-face encounters; to discuss matters of common interest; and thus to be able to form a common mind about these. (pp. 185-6)

The only big problem one might have with this empirical account is that, after looking into the history, structure, and role of this public sphere, Taylor draws the conclusion that what it was and continues to be is "an extrapolitical, secular, metatopical space" (p. 199). In other words, this model of the public (seen as an arena in which members of society "exchange ideas and come to a common mind") has no political potential. Even though it could become a locus of common action, it has neither the will nor the institutional means to take a political stand and exert an influence at that level – for instance, to inform social movements of protest.

²⁷ Id., « Liberal Politics and the Public Sphere », in Amitai Etzioni (ed.), *New Communitarian Thinking. Persons, Virtues, Institutions and Communities*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995, pp. 183-217.

However, there is more to Taylor's view of the public than this explicitly non-political account. He openly admits that his attempt to describe "both public sphere and market economy in their ideal-typical forms, as existing quite outside the political domain" is a normative one – because "neither was ever integrally realized in this form"; moreover, "the very fact that these domains operate (...) by their own dynamic has been of crucial importance to the limitation of power" (pp. 199-200). And although he is skeptical about the possibility of giving a clear account of that implicit political influence, he provides us with a framework against which we could attempt such an assessment: he mentions two different paths within Western democracies (the liberal and the communitarian), focused on limiting the state power, respectively on the process of collective decisions making. In the eyes of those who support the former path to democracy, public sphere must remain "as clearly demarcated from the political as can be, constituted at the limit exclusively by media that claim total political neutrality", whereas for the latter camp "the public sphere plays not only a limiting, whistle-blowing role. It also can serve or disserve, raise or lower, facilitate or hamper the common debate and exchange that is an intrinsic part of conscious, informed collective action" (p. 200).

Obviously, the latter recipe seems more suitable for post-totalitarian societies, which need to consolidate their fragile democracies by forming a civil will able to counter the corrupted decision-making system. But Taylor does not substantiate at all the claim that such a political involvement is possible – nor does he have any suggestions about the institutional means that would make it possible. He does, however, account for the dispersed character of public discussion and action, which is something that Habermas will take so seriously in his later work, as to develop a new model of *publics*, instead of that of a unified public sphere. But before moving on to his view, let us have a look at the Arendtian notion of the public, which constituted the inspirational source for Habermas's early work.

II. 2. Arendt's *Treasure*

One might argue that, especially in post-totalitarian societies, the public sphere is one of

those "lost treasures" that Hannah Arendt considers that we need to recapture. It would be interesting to question how it relates to other lost treasures, such as "le fait de n'avoir su incorporer la Révolution Américaine dans la tradition révolutionnaire (...), une incapacité de mémoire avec des conséquences pratiques"²⁸ (the fact of not having known how to incorporate the American Revolution into the revolutionary tradition ..., an incapacity of memory that has practical consequences), especially since 'the public spirit' was one of the very principles that inspired the revolutionary tradition. But is it the public *spirit* (of open dialogue and critical reasoning) that we should try to recapture, or rather the *institutions* that can make it efficient and influential? According to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, it is the former that we should focus on; according to *The Human Condition*, it's the latter. Seyla Benhabib²⁹ calls these two Arendtian versions of the public sphere *agonistic*, respectively *associational*.

In her essay *On Revolution*, Arendt substantiates her claim about the loss of the revolutionary spirit with the remark that its normative core, the *political* freedom, has now been replaced by *civic* freedoms, and she sanctions this limitation of the political to the social. When she says that "la société avait accaparé ces principes, les avait pervertis en 'valeurs'", by 'values' she means only material, utilitarian values, which are the aim of a society more interested in its welfare than in the health of its political norms.

Coming back to "the public spirit" and its institutionalized forms, we should first realize that what Arendt means by it is basically *public opinion* understood as a political fact. As such, she claims, it used to come about especially during revolutionary times, but only the American revolutionaries managed to give it a lasting, institutional form: the Senate, a body of people chosen to mediate and filter the multiplicity of opinions³⁰. In addition to it, they institutionalized the faculty of judgment, in the form of the Supreme Court. By these two institutions, Arendt says, the revolutionaries restored the political function of two faculties of reason (opinion and judgment), which have been neglected by both

²⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Essai sur la Révolution*, Paris: Gallimard, 1990, p. 319.

²⁹ See her article "Models of Public Space. Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas", from Craig Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992.

³⁰ See *Essai sur la Révolution*, p. 336.

traditions – the political and philosophical one. Of course, she says, the basic motivation of the revolutionaries was not theoretical, but practical one: it was the need to give (institutional) stability to their political accomplishments.

This kind of account of the empirical institutional aspects of what would otherwise seem to be an idealized Greek notion of the public (seen as a space of memory rather than of political activity³¹) is always there in Arendt's essays. Therefore, it would be unfair to reduce her view to a philosophical nostalgic narrative. On the other hand, the empirical hints that she gives us are usually either too general (for instance, when she talks about the need for transparency in post-revolutionary societies threatened by the invasion of the public domain by private interests), or too dependent on a particular historical context from the past; the latter is the case of her insistence on the role of councils in the American republican tradition, with a specific reference to the Jeffersonian project of creating local governmental councils ("elementary republics"), meant indeed to divide and distribute the power by providing people with a real public space where they could exercise their political participatory rights on a daily basis and not just on the elections' day. Another similar example is the creation of professional associations (of workers, peasants, or soldiers) after each revolution – *die Räte* in Germany and the Soviets in Russia. These were "spaces of freedom" as she calls them, independent from the political parties, that could have become permanent organs of the government (through which average people could have participated in the act of governing), unless Marx and Lenin had annihilated them, once their incompatibility with the dictatorial one-party system became clear. What we can retain from these historical accounts is the fact that both the local political councils and the professional associations embodied the normative principle of "action and participation" (a federal one, taken seriously by the entire republican tradition), which Arendt contrasts with the socialist one of centralized

³¹ The idea is that in the public sphere (which isn't obviously tied to the state), individuals are disclosed in the stories told about them and this gives them a sense of identity and private autonomy as well. Therefore, Arendt argues, participation in the public life is a good in itself, not just a means to achieve public – that is social – goods, as it is for the moderns. For the republican tradition, unlike the liberal one, participation gives people a kind of happiness that cannot be acquired anywhere else; it is "the happiness of becoming manifest in facts and discourses unequivocally and without introspection" (*Essai sur la Révolution*, p. 417). In other words, Arendt argues that it is active participation and not isolation in an idealized private sphere that provides people's happiness.

“representation”³². But there is no hint in Arendt’s book as to how the former is to be embedded in the public practices of the post-socialist societies.

Returning to the more explicit accounts of the public sphere that Arendt gives in her first two books, we should notice that what they have in common is a critique of the liberal version of this dichotomy, which (she argues) is an ideological one, because it assumes an identity between politics, economics and society which makes political institutions no more than a façade for private interests. Individuals’ isolation from the political life is what causes both the evils analyzed in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and the shrinking of the soul exposed in *The Human Condition*. The only difference is a shift of focus – from the public *spirit* (revolutionary in character) highlighted in the first book, to its actual *manifestations*, or lack of – denounced in the second. The emphasis here (in *The Human Condition*) is on the social collective action – understood as a creative, spontaneous act occurring in the public sphere – rather than on the political struggle for the creation of public “spheres of freedom” that revolutionaries went through. According to Arendt’s latter view, the “human condition” itself consists of the relation between (public) *action*, private *labor* and the merely utilitarian *work*; the superiority of the first one can be translated in social-political terms as the priority of the public over private affairs – which we shouldn’t radicalize though, for Arendt was also concerned with the issue of rights and that of group identity. Overall,

The real importance of Arendt’s resurrection of the public / private dichotomy did not lie in the content of the dichotomy itself. In both its Greek and its later Victorian forms, the dichotomy was a self-serving tissue of clichés and deceptions. The real importance of her insistence on this dichotomy can be appreciated only when it is situated historically (...). First she used it – as state and society – to address the weak points in liberalism that had made totalitarianism possible. Then, in *The Human Condition*, she used it to demonstrate how pathetic and shrunken the social democratic conception of the human life was, and how much it thereby shared with the capitalism that it

³² See page 404 in *Essai sur la Révolution*.

claimed to transcend.³³

But the problem is that Arendt derives her conclusion regarding the “pathetic and shrunken” democratic view from metaphysical, rather than practically contextualized ethical judgments. By this, I mean that her dissatisfaction with the modern “rise of the social” comes from her commitment to a Heideggerian belief – namely, that life in the public sphere is *authentically* human (i.e., we manifest our “true nature” only through public speech and action), while life in the private realm is bound to mere *necessity*: “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world (...) This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work.”³⁴

In other words, the question remains: how can we work with Arendt’s view of public and private, so as to draw some insightful norms and suggestions for the new empirical situation? One could easily argue that it her view has more to do with (a metaphysically rooted) culture than with social-political strategically institutionalized realities. So it would be fair to say that the most illuminating and original aspect of Arendt’s account of the public sphere is its theoretical side, rather than the concrete analysis and empirical suggestions that it contains.

The former is based on two Kantian ideas that Arendt considers to be of most significance in Kant’s political philosophy: the notion of *sensus communis* (a socially engaged thinking or collective reason that embodies the standpoint of others) and that of *telos* – the idea that it is in people’s nature to have purposes that they strive to realize within the public sphere. We have lost both of these insights, Arendt argues³⁵ – just as we lost the sense of public participation for the sake of the political (which can enhance our self-realization) and not for the sake of our social welfare.

³³ Eli Zaretsky, “Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of the Public/Private Distinction”, in Craig Calhoun & John McGowan (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*, Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 223-4.

³⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998, pp. 176-7.

³⁵ See the section “The Ruin of Common Sense” from her article “Comprehension and Politics”, in *Partisan Review*, July – August 1953, vol. XX, pp. 377-392.

Summing up, while she provides us with a normatively rich concept of the public, Arendt fails, just like Taylor, to bridge the gap between this theoretical account and the empirical analysis, because she grounds the former on metaphysical assumptions, rather than on socially adaptive observations.

II. 3. Habermas's *Publics*

There are at least two points of convergence between Arendt's view of the public sphere and Habermas's. First, there is the issue of *the social*, which Arendt rejects as an ominous symptom of the loss of the political instinct in the modern state, and Habermas considers to be a better reference point for the public than the state. The difference is that, while Arendt deplors the rise of the social, Habermas mourns its decline.

The second is Arendt's and Habermas's concern with *institutions*. Here, their positions are more in tune with each other, in the sense that both of them value the process of institutions-building within the public sphere. But while Arendt focuses on the institutionalized action that would help recover the political aspect of public participation (constantly invoking the American Revolution as an inspiring pattern for the retrieval of that treasure), Habermas looks at the actual institutions within the (social) public sphere, which both constitute and transform it: literary associations, clubs, the mail, the press, the parliament and, finally, mass media in a commoditized culture.

What is strikingly different about this Habermasian model of the public sphere, by contrast with those of Taylor's and Arendt's, is its complexity: not only is it not confined to one single sphere (be that private or public), because it comprises institutionalized forms of association at different levels (from family, through the literary activity, to the political public), but its analysis is also twofold: normative and empirical. Thus, one can use Habermas's normative principles of the public (autonomy, intimacy, humanity, critical reasoning, and publicity) as testing criteria for different historical backgrounds than the one explored by Habermas himself. One could focus, for instance, on the current situation in post-communist societies, and look at how (if at all) are these principles at

work within them. But before doing so, one should test the relevance of the principles themselves for the new historical context. For that, one must remember the major aim of rethinking the public sphere in this new context – namely, to encourage individual, effective *participation* in public and political action. To what extent do principles like autonomy or humanity entail such participation – compared, for instance, with those of publicity or critical reasoning? Such normative issues need to be revisited before applying Habermas’s first model of the public sphere to newly democratic societies.

Another rather theoretical matter regarding the epistemological validity of this model is that of its vulnerability to Rorty’s critique: are any of the norms mentioned above suspect of metaphysical charge? Rorty might argue so, at least insofar as “humanity”, “intimacy” and “publicity” are concerned; these notions, he might claim, contain metaphysical assumptions like that of human nature, subjectivity, respectively the dualism between self and the world. I will not discuss here the legitimacy of such a critique, simply because it is beside the point of the Habermasian model’s applicability. What is worth mentioning though is that the key-notion of this model – *the* public understood as a single, unified sphere – might be somewhat overstated. Habermas himself must have sensed it, when he decided to abandon it in his recent work, in favor of a much looser representation, namely that of a network of professional and institutional different publics. Needless to say that such a decentralization of the concept is very attractive for those who are interested in finding the best model of public sphere for post-communist societies.

Moreover, the new account’s normative assumptions are more suitable for a society in need for participation, and its empirical content is updated. The former becomes clear if one considers the two functions that Habermas ascribes to his re-envisaged public: to *signal* and to *influence the solving* of problems in the socio-political realm. He describes the public sphere

As a sounding board for problems that must be processed by the political system because they cannot be solved elsewhere. To this extent, the public sphere is a warning system with sensors that, though unspecialized, are sensitive throughout

society. From the perspective of democratic theory, the public sphere must, in addition, amplify the pressure of problems, that is, not only detect and identify problems, but also convincingly and *influentially* thematize them in such a way that they are taken up and dealt with by parliamentary complexes.³⁶

The latter claim, concerning the realism of the public's structure in Habermas's new version, can be substantiated by referring to his analysis of some problematic aspects of the public sphere, such as barriers and power structure, or the process of public opinion formation which, if associated with already existing political influence, can become oppressive, rather than liberating. The latter risk makes Habermas emphasize, over and over again, the importance of public *deliberative communication*, which must not be replaced by the already established authority / reputation of religious leaders, literary and scientific figures, or media stars.

As to the other major principle in Habermas's later view, that of the *representativity* in the public sphere, this is perhaps the most important norm in the context of post-totalitarian societies, for it not only ensures equal voice for the citizens, so to speak, but it also requires a large-scale participation in public and political action by "all those who are potentially affected" by it.

Finally, what characterizes Habermas's view in its recent version is a strong emphasis on the interconnectedness between public and private. He remarks, for instance, the intertwining of the literary and the political publics – and, thereby, the political function of art and churches (who have an existential language at their disposal, able to mirror the social problems in a more poignant way). He also argues that the two spheres are linked to each other in more actual ways, too: there are channels of communication and even middle-grounds between them; for instance, networks of social interaction can be found in families and in circles of friends or neighbors. This makes the line separating the private and public become much looser, "not marked by a fixed set of issues or

³⁶ J. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998, p. 359. Hereafter, the references to this book will be made in the body of the text.

relationships but by *different conditions of communication.*” (p. 366)

But the interconnectedness of public and private has yet another significant sense in Habermas, supported by the principle of legality: contrary to what liberals and republicans usually assume, the sphere of private rights and that of public participation are deeply connected to each other and mutually reinforcing. Actual participation would not be possible without secured civic rights and the latter would have no sense (or content) without the former. Moreover, “the defense and expansion of acquired liberties rests on the further democratization of the institutions of modern civil society and on their achievement of greater influence over the polity.”³⁷ This interdependence is particularly important for the post-communist public sphere, where neither the autonomy of civil society, nor the integrity of the private sphere should be taken for granted. (To mention just one problem in this respect: the law of private property has been changed 50 times in Romania during the last decade, and it is still not fully or accurately implemented.) Habermas implicitly notes that when he says:

The tight connection between an autonomous civil society and an integral private sphere stands out even more clearly when contrasted with totalitarian societies of bureaucratic socialism. Here a panoptic state not only directly controls the bureaucratically desiccated public sphere, it also undermines the private basis of this public sphere. (pp. 368-9)

To conclude, we can notice that Habermas’s revised view of the public is both more normatively suitable (for newly democratic societies) and richer in empirical suggestions than his previous view. Moreover, the constant balance and mutual reinforcement, within his latter account, between the normative and the empirical, make it much more relevant for the current sociological inquiry on the public sphere than the Arendtian or Taylorian could be, given their concern for metaphysical, respectively historical features of the public, rather than for the convergence “between facts and norms”.

³⁷ J. Cohen and A. Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992, p. 345.

Conclusion

Two questions have guided us throughout this section: first, to what extent are the existing models of public sphere vulnerable to the pragmatist critique of a metaphysically charged notion of the public and second, what can they provide in the context of the need to reconsider this notion in post-totalitarian times. For now, I think that we can leave the question of the two issues' interdependence open, or at least not assume that any view that accommodates a metaphysical belief is necessarily useless for sociological purposes. We noticed that Taylor's account is a good example in this respect.

As to the actual contributions that the three models can make to the attempt to reconceptualize the public sphere, we could sum them up as follows: Arendt's model is useful to redefine the concept (a sphere of public discourse and action) and emphasize its political dimension, as well as to establish its main goal: individuals' *participation* in the political life. Charles Taylor's model can help us envisage a somewhat metaphysically grounded notion of collective identity (which might be needed in traditionalist societies like those from Eastern Europe, where a common religion and dramatic past count as grounds for a kind of membership that goes beyond the individual free-will contract) but insofar as the degree of coherence between the philosophical underpinnings and the social application of such a view is concerned, things are not clear yet. With Habermas, we seem to come the closest to a complete model of the public sphere, one that would be both normatively articulated and empirically tested.

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