

## Analysis on the Transmutation of Concept of Public Sphere

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**Abstract.** "Public sphere" is a hot concept in the research field of communication. Dozens of studies have been published in recent decades since Habermas put forward the "public sphere" in 1962. The different interpretations of the concept of public sphere in different historical periods by important scholars are mainly investigated in this paper.

### Introduction

The public sphere is a complex and changeable political concept, and there is no universal definition for it. Neither Hannah Arendt nor Habermas endowed a clear and definite definition in respect of the concept of "public sphere". But what is certain is that the public sphere in academic category is the object that is attached with many external attributes and different from specific physical space rather than a definite public place, that is, the entity space with fixed boundaries. The concept of "public sphere" involves multitudinous subjects such as politics, sociology, communication, ethics, and literature and art; Chinese and foreign scholars have conducted extensive and in-depth discussions on the concept of public sphere from different disciplines. And the concept of public sphere can only be nattered with the highlights from the perspective of communication due to my limited knowledge, thus it is difficult to explore the concept of public sphere from the perspective of multiple disciplines in the short term.

### Hannah Arendt: Opening the Endianness of the Study on "Public Sphere"

It is generally believed that Hannah Arendt, an American German-born scholar, who first provided the speculative resources and basic framework for the theory of public sphere, initiated the idea of public sphere. Ahrendt interpreted the public sphere as the sphere where people interact and cooperate, and people can express themselves through words and actions in this sphere" in her work "human condition".

Ahrendt's political and philosophical thoughts are closely related to the value of human beings; the public sphere she put forward is derived from the public life of ancient Greek. In ancient Greek, man thought "the witness existed supremely they would act in accordance with it" and they viewed the "supreme existence" of God through speech. Speech is a form of political practice mode; citizens speak, act, share and participate in polis, and human life is the public life in the polis. Ahrendt holds that man has both social attribute and the political attribute. The public sphere appears with the development of society. Ahrendt's thought basically inherits the political practice of ancient Greek and Aristotle's philosophy; she believes that the three basic forms of human life activities are exactly the labor, work and action. The purpose of labor and work is to maintain the existence and reproduction of human beings, which basically belongs to the category of "private"; while action is the most initiative and active activity of human beings, and it's the only activity that doesn't depend on material intermediaries for personal communication, which belongs to the category of "public". Ahrendt gradually forms the two concepts of "private sphere" and "public

sphere" on basis of the basic distinction mentioned above. The "public sphere" she proposed is also called as the "classical public sphere" since her academic thought originates from the political life of ancient Greek. The political community of ancient Greek polis was composed of equal interaction of all free citizens, there is no relationship between rule and ruled; it was just a political organization that existed through the conversation and dialogue among citizens. Thus it's a typical public sphere.

Ahrendt with the Jews pedigree exiled to Paris during World War II and she moved to American later. Such experience enabled her to maintain the high vigilance and in-depth observation for "propaganda" and "totalitarianism"; she gave the negative criticism on the modern important organizational systems, such as the sovereignty, market economy, liberal ideology and civil society. Therefore, she had no intention of focusing on the mass media with the modernity as an important representation, and she didn't touch upon the practical relevance between public sphere and mass media.

### **Habermas: Enabling the "Public Sphere" to be Contiguous to Modernity**

Ahrendt's concept of "public sphere" is an important heritage she left to Habermas; and Habermas basically inherited Ahrendt's distinction between public and private spheres in ancient Greek; his innovation is based on a historical review of the public sphere compared to Ahrendt's concept of "public sphere", which provides a critical model and theoretical paradigm for contemporary liberal democratic politics.

Habermas pointed out in the book "structural transformation of the public sphere" that the "public sphere" he put forward was a specific historical category, it was an ideal political type illustrated based on the historical context of the three countries of Britain, France and Germany from the eighteenth Century to the early nineteenth Century; specifically, it referred to the bourgeois public sphere composed of the "private" with critical spirit, and subject of this public sphere was the public. In the public sphere, the public as private freely assemble and express their opinions by discussing the issue of universal interest, and gradually the public opinion forms and competes directly with the public power. The exchange of information between the public needs a certain means of communication and influence once the public in the public sphere gather to a certain scale. At this point, the mass media becomes a medium serving for the public sphere.

The essence of "public sphere" put forward by Habermas is the communication network constructed by newspapers and the mass media later. The historical period of 18th and 19th centuries is the rising stage of capitalism. Magazines handed down and printed in this term became the public criticism tools; first of all, the "moral weekly" played a vital role, which was raised in Britain and then popular throughout Europe around 1750. The bourgeoisie has a wide representation in society; therefore, the bourgeoisie and the public sphere along with the mass media under its control have a very wide range of publicity. The early bourgeois small-scale newspapers aggregated the "private" into the public, and the public also conducted the open discussion on the public affairs with the newspapers and forum as platform, thus the public opinion formed. Habermas called the newspapers as "the most typical mechanism of public sphere". In his discourse, the public sphere with political function first appeared in England in the early eighteenth century. At the end of the seventeenth century, the abolition of the news censorship marked that public sphere has developed to a new stage, which enabled the spirit of rational criticism to enter the press and made it become a sort of tool so as to submit the political decision to the new public forum.

Habermas thought the development of the mass media in the late capitalist period already deviated from the principles and spirit of the public sphere: the late capitalist countries implemented the social welfare policies and monopoly policy in a large scale and transformed the affairs in past private sphere into the affairs in the field of public power, and on the contrary, the affairs of the country in the past now has become the private affairs. "Nationalization of society and socialization of state" makes the field of state power and the private sector from separation to integration; the civil society structure previously is very seriously damaged; the public sphere between the field of

state power and the private sphere has collapsed as a result; the capitalism loses its legitimacy for its survival; at the same time, the capitalist countries lose the essential rational power and public support from the public sphere.

Many scholars at home and abroad are still controversial with the existence of public sphere described by Habermas in the history; however, it is generally accepted by the academic circles that the "public sphere" proposed by Habermas is merely an ideal model derived from the reasoning of philosophers, and the purpose of it is to criticize the contemporary politics; it is an ideal type of social philosopher rather than historians' description of reality. In terms of Habermas's point of view, the individual in the society can enter into the category of "public" as long as they deeply concern about the "universal interest" of public and have the enthusiasm to participate in the discussion. But as far as reality is concerned, objectively, the "universal interest" considered by the individual is not necessarily universal; it is often closely associated with social and economic status. The "universal interest" talked in the reception room of noble is extremely different from the "universal interest" concerned by the common people in the streets and lanes in terms of the content and nature, and the constitution of the "public" is bound to be different. On the other hand, Habermas also ignored the vulgar publications without irrationality or criticism in the period of free capitalism as well as the tabloid newspapers that wantonly published scandals. Therefore, the "public" in the ideal state advocated by Habermas is quite different from the reality in history. In addition, Habermas's "public sphere" is open and fuzzy without clear border; he did not make a detailed list of the necessary conditions for converting the "private" into "public" and had no restrictions on issues discussed by the public in the public sphere.

### **Charles Taylor: Reconstructing the Model of "Public Sphere"**

Taylor, a Canadian scholar, held an attitude of approval on the concept of Habermas's concept of public sphere; however, he was more concerned with the issue that how the industrial society of public sphere to institutionalize. He tried to reconstruct the collapsed public sphere of Habermas under the condition of modern society, redefined the public sphere with the dimension of issues of social discussion and took the public media as the basic elements of the modern public sphere. [1]

The solution to the problem of reconstructing the already collapsed public sphere model urged Taylor to pay more attention to the problem of how to institutionalize the public sphere in modern social conditions, and the publicity of the modern media in the information technology environment was raised to the primary position. [2] Taylor drew lessons from the concept put forward by Anderson-"social imagination", it believed that the public in modern society was no longer the community that needed face-to-face communication, but the "imagined community of public opinion" which was integrated by mass media; while the public sphere was the "social imagination" that could remodeled the concept. Therefore, he was confined to the ideal norms of public sphere set by Habermas, instead, he redefined the public sphere with the issues of social discussion as the dimension and regarded the public media as a basic element of the public sphere. [3] Taylor believed that there was no need for the parties to enter in part of the public space in modern society; the emergence of electronic media, especially the Internet, provided a new public discussion place for citizens in the "global village"- Electronic Plaza. [4] In addition to face-to-face exchanges and small gatherings, members within the public sphere can communicate through different media (prints, electronic books); in which they can discuss issues of common concern, thus they can form a common opinion on these issues. In this public sphere, people almost never meet, but they still can be seen as the public that can be connected through the public space for discussion established through media. In eighteenth century, the books, pamphlets, newspapers, etc. were circulated among well-bred people, delivering a variety of themes, analysis, demonstration but mutually arguing and refuting. While in modern society, the public media, including newspapers, magazines, books and electronic media, constitutes a larger and invisible "imagined community of public opinion", which combines the strangers scattered all over the world as the modern public on the same topic. Therefore, this public sphere is a metaphysical space formed by the series of topics rather than a real physical space. [5] He was not limited to a fixed forum, but it was jointly

constructed by several discussions extended on the same topic at different times. This public sphere, Taylor called it as the element-proposition public space, and he thought that it was the real public sphere in modern society. In a sense, Taylor expanded and redefined the public sphere on the basis of Habermas. Some scholars in China agree with Taylor's "public sphere", for example, Peng Lan attributes the theoretical significance of "the forum powering the nation" to "public discourse space".

### **Summary**

If we eliminate the restricting catch of "bourgeois", then the public sphere as a goal to be realized will be closely bound up with people's survival; since it reveals the important position of politics in people's life, reminds people of caring about politics and actively participating in political activities, which has profound guiding significance for our nation to construct the socialist democracy nowadays.

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