CLASSIQUES GARNIER

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RÉSUMÉ – Nous présentons ici les contributions réunies dans ces actes de colloque, en dégageant les points communs entre elles ainsi que les principaux thèmes du volume. L'ouvrage fondateur d'Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, constitue le cadre historiographique et conceptuel de cette étude mais les auteurs s'appuient également librement sur les critiques d'Habermas ayant émergé dans les années 1990. Notre préface couvre la réception française du texte au XVIII^e^ siècle.

MOTS-CLÉS – Habermas, sphère publique, opinion publique, historiographie, ouvrage

PRÉFACE

Qui dit opinion publique dit Habermas

It is a tribute to Jurgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (*SFPS*)–its capacity to generate discussion, the quality of its reflection and the timeliness of its intervention into public discourse– that its spirit hangs over the discussion of power and public opinion in this volume, *Le pouvoir en procès. Opinion publique et légitimité politique des Lumières au Premier Empire*. *SFPS* has been an urtext for any discussion of these issues in France and more generally for around half a century. Originally, it was something of a slow burner: published in German in 1962, its influence outside Germany grew only after rather belated translations: into French in 1978 and into English as late as 1989[1]. Despite this slow start, the book's impact was dramatic. In the study of the French Enlightenment and Revolution, its adoption as a frame of reference by Keith Baker, Roger Chartier and Tom Crow in the late 1980s provided heavyweight endorsement and the Habermasian schema became almost at once an inescapable presence in the Enlightenment and French Revolution historiography[2].

This impact owed much to the fact that Habermas was the first to provide an analysis for the concept of public opinion for the early modern period that seemed both pertinent, robust and empirically grounded. Picking up on use of the term by Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau,

1 Jurgen Habermas, *Struktur der Öffentlichkeit: untersuchen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, 1962; id., *L'Espace public: archéologie de la publicité comme dimension constitutive de la société bourgeoise*, 1978; id., *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger, 1989. For an excellent introduction to the work, see Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 1992 (including important essays by Keith Michael Baker and Nancy Fraser).

2 I will focus my remark in this essay on the impact on writings on the French eighteenth century. Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, 1985; Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, 1990; Roger Chartier, *Les Origines culturelles de la Révolution française*, 1990.

Necker and others, Habermas highlighted the way the concept was constructed in such a way as to give it status of a tribunal of rational judgement against which the organisation and legitimacy of society and state could be measured. Government policies were thus perennially "on trial". It also served as a mobilising agent, bringing the voices of free and equal individuals into the debates in ways that gave a democratic charge to societal discussions and debates.

Habermas career started in a Marxist milieu. The book was a version of his *Habilitation* thesis submitted under the tutelage of his supervisors, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer of the neo-Marxist "Frankfurt School". In keeping with this provenance, the thesis ties in the construction of the bourgeois public sphere with the then conventional Marxist view of the eighteenth-century France that sought to trace the rise of the bourgeoisie and the transition from feudalism to capitalism in the Revolution. The book was published just at the very moment that this class-based version of the period was starting to come under severe challenge from first Revisionist then post-Revisionist critique of what François Furet was to call "the Jacobino-Marxist vulgate"[3]. This eventuated in the full-scale abandonment of a class-based analysis of the eighteenth-century. Scholars who have sought to resituate the Habermasian thesis within changing views of the rise of capitalism have been few and far between–my own 1996 article on advertisement and William J. Sewell's 2022 monograph are very much exceptions here[4]. The rise of global history has, however, provided a more congenial and promising context for re-linking intellectual with economic history, and the recent emergence of what might be called a "Chicago School" has been welcomed[5]. In very large part, however, most scholars of

3 Alfred Cobban's inaugural lecture at the University of London was published as *The Myth of the French Revolution*, 1955, but seems not to have circulated vert widely. His more influential *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, 1964, came out two years after Habermas's first publication. The post-Revisionist charge was led by François Furet, *Penser la révolution française*, 1978.

4 Colin Jones, "The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere, and the Origins of the French Revolution", 1996. See too id. "Bourgeois Revolution Revivified: 1789 and Social Change," Colin Lucas, ed., *Rewriting the French Revolution*, 1991. William J. Sewell, Jr, *Capitalism and the emergence of civil equality in Eighteenth-Century France*, 2021.

5 *French History*, Special Issue, "Beyond the Dual Revolution: Revisiting Capitalism In Modern France", 2020. Besides contributions by Oliver Cusse, Tyson Leuchter, Elizabeth

eighteenth-century France have ignored or else denied the validity and relevance of Habermas's efforts to link the ideological changes with the underlying growth of capitalist relations of production–chopping Habermas off at the knees, so to speak.

This development is understandable in the broader context of the period from the late 1980s onwards, when the work entered the bloodstream of Anglo-French historiography. The end of the Cold War and the fall of Communism and then the growing impact of the Internet from the 1990s onwards made the early history of commercial capitalism that Habermas offers of less urgency and relevance that his view of the public sphere as the cradle of democracy. His discussions in *SFPS* of voluntaristic sociability and democratic accountability were suddenly of-the-moment precisely because it seemed possible to un-moor them from their material pre-conditions. As Habermas himself put it in 2004, the state of a democracy could be assessed "by listening to the heartbeat of the political public sphere[6]."

This uncoupling of the public sphere from a material base has allowed *SFPS* since the 1990s to last long and travel widely. Historians have found Habermas a useful referent back to Antiquity, through the Middle Ages, as well outside western Europe, while the concourse of sociologists and political scientists and commentators has added to the work's contemporary relevance[7]. The pertinence of the Habermasian model in debates on democracy–wherever there seemed to be such a debate in whatever kind of society–has afforded it a kind of modular existence which has allowed it to be slotted into numerous contexts.

Paradoxically, however the extreme portability and wide acceptance of the Habermasian schema outside the eighteenth-century context has been matched by considerable critique of it within the field of eighteenth-century studies. In 2011, Stephane Van Damme even posed the question, whether the time was not ripe to say "Farewell, Habermas?[8]"

A. Heath and Thomas Dodman, see esp. William J. Sewell, Jr, "The Cultural History of Capitalism in France" (with a Chicago touch).

6 Michael Hofmann, *Habermas's Public Sphere: A Critique*, 2017, p. 1.

7 See, for example, Patrick Boucheron & Nicolas Offenstadt, éd., *L'Espace public ay Moyen Âge: Débats autour de Jurgen Habermas*, 2011–a work that in fact ranges more widely than the Middle Ages.

8 "Farewell Habermas? Deux décennies d'études sur l'espace public" in Boucheron& Offenstadt, *L'Espace public.* A draft of the article had appeared in 2007 in the online journal, *Cahiers du GRIEHL.*

As it has turned out, over ten years later the death certificate still seems some way off and the model as resilient as ever, Yet the work is generally seen as offering a rich and helpful heuristic rather than a state-of-the-art description and analysis of eighteenth-century developments. Critiques of Habermas have, however, had a positive effect in such that scholars working–as in the present volume–on the Habermasian themes of public space and sociability and on public opinion do so in a field that has been enormously enriched by scholarly correctives highlighting shortcomings in the original Habermasian model.

An early feminist critique, for example, launched most powerfully by Dena Goodman in her work on salons, while accepting much about the heuristic potential of the public sphere, pointed out that this supposedly universalist public opinion being forged there almost entirely excluded women[9]. This angle of approach view was bolstered by Arlette Farge, whose work on ordinary Parisians highlighted how much the working population of French cities was similarly excluded from the primary institutions of sociability. In fact, Habermas has specifically defined his bourgeois public sphere in terms of the non-inclusion of the state and of the common people. But Farge's point was that he wrote as though his "bourgeois public sphere" somehow filled up public space, ignoring the possibility of alternative sub-forms. She went on to sketch the elements of a "plebeian public sphere"[10].

Issues of inclusion and exclusion emerge as a key issue in Susan Maslan's chapter in this volume on the political uses of *tutoiement* during the period of the French Revolutionary Terror. She sees the call for use of the second-person singular as a form of individual address as expressing a political wish to forge new, more egalitarian social bonds in what contemporaries referred to as the "Year II of equality" instituted with the declaration of a republic in 1792 (and replacing the "age of liberty" established in 1789). Maslan focuses on plays staged in the theatre–a Habermasian locale–that proselytised for the adoption of the practice. The plots revolve around seeking to encourage the use of *tutoiement* in women (as regards fathers and husbands) as and servants

9 Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters. A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment*, 1994. See too id., "Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime", 1992; and Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, 1988.

10 Arlette Farge, *Dire et mal dire. L'opinion publique au* XVIII*e siècle*, 1992.

(as regards their masters). Yet this was intensely ironic: for women and servants thus invited into the new social and emotional bonds were specifically excluded from political participation. The new constitution of 1793 instituted "universal" suffrage–but only for men, and the regime silenced feminist voices, as Olympe de Gouges knew to her cost. In point of face, the "universal" male suffrage instituted by the radical 1793 Constitution did not even include all men: it specifically excluded male servants from voting rights.

The issues of inclusion and exclusion evident in Maslan's revolutionary dramas, in Goodman's salons and in Farge's "plebeian public sphere" chime sonorously with Christy Pichichero's chapter in this volume which poses what she calls a "black epistemological approach" to the issue of public opinion in the late Ancien Régime and Revolutionary era. For her, it is not merely a question of noting the exclusion of slaves and Blacks from the opinion-forming institutions of the public sphere (including those across the Atlantic), largely overlooked though this issue has been. In addition, scholars should adopt a more symptomatic or rhizomatic approach that analyses meaningful silences and underlying (but not overtly voiced) presuppositions[11].

These studies severely dent Habermasian claims as regards the public sphere as an inclusive site of rational exchange. In fact critics of Habermas have often accused him of presenting the Enlightenment public sphere as a kind of mythical Golden Age of rational debate partly in order to heighten the dialectical contrast with the state of opinion in the 1950s and early 1960s which was under the powerful influence of the capitalist press and advertising firms–a reminder that *SFPS* was a public intervention from the political left as well as a historical analysis. Ryan Brown's chapter in this volume neatly highlights ambivalence about the rationality of the eighteenth-century public sphere in the case of one of its most high-profile actors, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The latter's confessional urge which led him to present his character naked before the world was grounded in contemporary inquisitorial court procedures and based on the assumption that public opinion was indeed a supra-rational and impartial judge who would

11 Symptomatic reading is associated with the work of the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser and the rhizomatic with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guettari in their work, *Mille Plateaux*, 1980.

clear him of all charges against him. Yet the more he wrote, the more he became anxiously obsessed with the public metamorphosing into a horde of enemies and conspirators driven by hate and determined to do him down. In a related vein, Robert Morrissey's chapter in the volume underlines a dark side to the Enlightenment, as he traces the emergence of modern-day victim culture in Diderot's novel, *La Religieuse.* With neither an inscrutable deity nor the goddess Fortuna present in the Enlightenment worldview, only humanity remained to engender evil and suffering in the world.

Habermas's judgement on the rationality of debates within salons, one the most primordial spaces within his public sphere, has been strongly challenged by Antoine Lilti. His 2005 monograph on "the world of the salons" subverted Habermas's claim that the salon was a critical oppositional agent to the status quo, and showed the extent to which it was an extension of the aristocratic world of *mondanité*, and as such riven with special interests and rivalrous polemics[12]. Deliberate misinformation flowed as readily, it seemed, as rationally derived information through the capillary networks of the public sphere. The latter certainly harboured oppositional critiques of government, but they could also be used by the state for its own propagandistic purposes.

Three contributions to this collection highlight the weaponization of the public sphere by government. Raphaël Cahen's study of the legal advisers to royal courts on matters diplomatic shows these professionally trained experts having to widen their remit and add new rhetorical strings to their bow as they sought to work effectively on the court of public opinion. Thomas Ramonda's chapter shows Napoleon's government using the enlarged public sphere as a sounding board for its self-proclaimed philanthropic policies towards military veterans. Napoleonic rhetoric in fact uncannily echoes those made by Louis XIV at the time of the creation in 1674 of the *Hôtel des Invalides* in Paris[13]. Doina Harsanyi's chapter focusing on government uses of the public sphere in Napoleonic Italy. She finds Napoleonic administrators amusingly hoist by their own petard, their wish to use the public sphere to impress their authority and to gauge public opinion completely subverted by local elites seeking to

12 Antoine Lilti, *Le Monde des salons. Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIII^e siècle*, 2005; Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France*, 1968.

13 Isser Woloch, *The French Veteran from the Revolution to the Restoration*, 1979.

impress their overlords by insincerity and obfuscation. Frustratingly for government, rampant flattery serves as a "survival strategy"–we might say alternatively a "weapon of the weak", offering resistance within the public sphere[14].

The idea of the putative transparency and rationality of the public sphere being undercut by particular interests and emotions has been reinforced by more recent work by Antoine Lilti. In his *Figures publiques* (2014), he presents the Habermasian public sphere as the site on which the idea and practices of modern celebrity originated. These functioned in terms of powerful affective charges of love, hate, envy and other emotions that belied the rationality of public debate[15]. Lilti's arguments have found favour not simply because of their deep research and scholarly engagements, but also because he highlighted the intrusion of emotion into the somewhat desiccated Habermasian world. The surge of interest in the history of the emotions since the 1990s has in fact been particularly strong in eighteenth-century, highlighting an affective side to public debate of which Habermas hugely underplayed.

The history of the emotions–together with the related and highly dynamic field of the history of the body–are very much in evidence in the final two contributions to this volume considered here, by Maximilien Novak and Andrei Pop. Novak considers the web of metaphors surrounding public opinion through to the Napoleonic period and the technologically-assisted gauging of temperature through thermometers. The purpose of the thermometer was to gauge good health and to highlight dangerous temperature variation, and especially overheating and fever of public minds. Fevered opinion was adjudged to be informed by the passions and thus potentially dangerous and rebellious. Public opinion in this approach was very un-Habermasian.

Novak's use of caricature is taken further in Pop's chapter, which reminds us of the presence within public debate and opinion of visual material (of which Habermas took no cognisance). Representations of the severed head in a range of guises from patriotic emblem and gage of republican legitimacy through to object of horror, fear and wonder highlight how public opinion had a viscerality undreamt of in

14 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, 2004.
15 Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques: l'invention de la célébrité (1750-1850)*, 2014.

Habermas's philosophy. It is a reminder, too, that in this volume it is not only eighteenth-century public opinion but also the Habermasian public sphere that is "on trial".

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