AN OVERVIEW OF THE FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract

It is certain that today's contemporary global scenario has significantly restructured the public sphere. It becomes increasingly clear that an urge to overpass the nation-centered as well as the patriarchal public sphere theories has to be a tying task for whoever wishes to offer a contribution to the understanding of today's status of the public sphere. Within this paper, we will track down the feminist critiques regarding the limits of the Habermasian liberal-bourgeois public sphere. Within this type of public sphere, only certain groups and interests seemed to be represented while others were excluded. The feminist critiques of the Habermasian theory noticed and strongly opposed especially to the exclusion of women and of their interests and concerns from the structure of the public sphere. The aim of our paper is to analyze the contributions made by the feminist theories concerning the issue of the public sphere in reforging and reshaping a public sphere that would be more suitable for the contemporary society.

Keywords: public sphere, Habermas, Arendt, feminism, critique, globalisation

1. Introduction

The appearance of a new, transnational model within the contemporary society has once again arose the question regarding the shape and status of today's public sphere. Moreover, this societal conversion has entailed a need for a change-over of the obsolete modes of social or political exclusion. But it would be quiet narrow to consider that this transnational turn is the only, or even the most important, cause of the fact that today's public sphere had to assume a much broader paradigm of inclusion. On the contrary, I would dare to say, the fact that feminist theories of the second half of the last decade of the XXth century have started an era - that of the conditions of women's access to the public sphere - has had, perhaps, the largest impact upon today's conceiving of the public sphere.

Any analysis which focuses on the current transformations of the public sphere, has to be guided at first, by a survey of the paradigms which could best explain the need for change, and, secondly, it has to follow the question regarding the theoretical models that could give evidence to the change and

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could record what has modified in the meanings taken by today's new concept of public sphere. From this perspective, a relevant first step of such an analysis seemed to be that of identifying the limits of contemporary theories (XXth century) concerning the public sphere. Thus, if in some of my previous works [1, 2], I have tried to explain the ways in which today's discourse upon the public sphere could appeal and make use of contemporary theories developed around the discussed issue, namely of the critical models coined especially by John Dewey and Hannah Arendt, but also of Jürgen Habermas' normative model of public sphere, in this paper I will try to demonstrate how the feminist critiques of the public sphere theories succeed to be more like a turning point in the last century's debate about the public sphere.

In other words, following some of the arguments developed initially as simple reluctant reactions to the notoriousness enjoyed by Habermas' theory, I will try to show that the contributions of feminist theories to rethinking the idea of public sphere, in widening the debate about the public sphere and to the restructuring of today's public sphere are critical.

2. Feminist approaches of the history of the public sphere

Once with the first real positive shifts encountered by the feminist movement especially in the last decade of the XXth century, changes loomed as gender studies entered the academic sphere, as fighting against (gender) discrimination started to be advocated by most western (democratic) states, as some of these states engaged in preventing (gender) discrimination through financially supported programs, as the enactment of pro-egalitarian measures entered the political as well as administrative and institutional agendas [3], feminism also became more and more a field of academic research. Thus, a notable part of this feminist academic discourse focused on emphasizing the necessity for enhancing women's access and participation to the public sphere. An entire discourse, focused on the feminist perspective upon the relationship between public and private, came to the fore.

Consequently, one direction followed by the feminist discourse about the public sphere is that of a critical analysis of the status that each of the two categories i.e., the public sphere and the private sphere enjoyed throughout history.

From the perspective of the feminist critical analysis, the public-private split has historically encompassed a gender bias and, hence, what was at stake was to show, to demonstrate how neglected, even subordinate, were both the political and the social condition of women throughout the ages.

In short, when articulating the public-private divide, feminist research takes, most of the times, a higher stake than the pure interpretation of the historical significance of each of the two concepts, even though, adjacently, it also succeeds to capture their multiple inflections. By exploring the public-private split from a gender perspective i.e., through the lens of the relation historically established between the roles assumed by masculinity and by

femininity, the more or less explicit purpose of these critical feminist analyses was to balance gender hierarchies that occur in each of the two spheres. Certainly, these accounts could be, at their turn criticized, for using the public-private split for rather ideological purposes.

Such studies [4], which follow, from a historical perspective, the changes occurred in defining, at different moments along history, the categories of public and private, selectively disclose political and social systems that seem to have maintained what was considered to be the 'traditional', or 'natural' hierarchy, i.e., male supremacy in gender relations, both in the public as well as in the private space. A twofold process of 'masculine coding' seems, therefore, detectable in the long history of the public-private relation.

According to these feminist critiques, the first 'masculine codification' overlapped the entire period in which the public sphere was conceived exclusively as a space of public, respectively of social or rather political performance of men. All along this period, the public sphere was designed as opposed to the private space assigned for women and viewed exclusively as the domain of the household, of reproduction of life and of intimate or sentimental manifestations. This opposition seems to have availed, historically, for the first 'exile' of women exclusively in/towards private space.

The second purely 'masculine coding' occurred once with the reinterpretation and transformation of the roles assumed, both in the public sphere, and in the private sphere in turn, by each gender category.

When those who traditionally animated the public sphere no longer limited their actions to the public display within the sphere destined exclusively for political decisions, when men no longer restricted themselves to being agents within the public space - which, historically, meant the city or the state – when they began to reconsider the private sphere and interpret it, this time, not only as a domestic space for subsistence or as a domain addressed especially for women, but also in an economic sense, as "private property, market and civil society" [4, p. 57], a second limitation of women's freedom of manifestation has occurred. Thus, although the political (the public sphere) was originally conceived as different or even opposed from/to the economic (the private sphere), both the political and the economic sphere have eventually come to be coded as exclusively masculine domains [5].

Therefore, what is most interesting is that, although the second reinterpretation of the public-private split is one that overlaps modernity and, at least for this reason one expected it to have restored the historical relation between masculinity-femininity by rebalancing the feminine voices in relation to the masculine ones, through that 'trick' of extending the meaning of private sphere with the new significance of private property, modernity seems, on the contrary, to have deepened the phenomenon of 'exiling' women by further depriving them of any control over the private sphere or of 'free', autonomous manifestation, at least in that particular space.

Therefore, seeing the issue from this angle, these feminist guidelines had legitimized, through indirect theoretical critique, a deeper ideological purpose to signal the need for restoring or, rather enacting, women's rights. But this ideological purpose is not always explicit, even though the complex relation between the public and the private sphere is connected to reality as much as it is related to an order of discourse. Therefore, for feminists, the public-private relation becomes the perfect borderline between theoretical (academic) discourse and ideological intent.

3. Overcoming two exclusive models of the public sphere: feminists beyond Arendt and Habermas

In the mapping of the feminist discourse upon the public sphere, a second orientation occurred concomitantly with the theory of the two folded 'masculine coding'. This second discursive orientation which can be traced in the years that followed the late English translation of Habermas' book entitled *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* [6]*,* represents a response to the Habermasian theory, or its unfaithful echo. Although the English translation of Habermas' work is issued inexplicably late, nearly thirty years after the German edition was published (the English version of the book is issued in 1989, as long as the work was originally published in 1962), yet, the scholarly milieu, but also the larger Anglo-Saxon public, seems to have subsequently suffered what might rightfully be called the 'Habermas effect' [7, 8], i.e., an obsessive return to the Habermasian model, whenever one dares to discuss about the idea of the public sphere, thus simply neglecting previous theories upon the same issue, and, perhaps with no regard to the fact that these anterior theories could be at least as relevant or conclusive. Expectedly enough, in such a context in which the work of a masculine voice comes into focus with such authority, the feminist voices reacted critically, yet, proportionally increasing the notorious character of the work. It is interesting to note here that in April 2004, *Time Magazine* provided a list of the most influential people in the XXth century and Habermas was listed among them. But not so much the popularity of a masculine voice seemed to worry - though this could have been, itself, considered a sign of masculinization of the auctorial authority – but the fact that contemporary discourse about the public sphere seemed to remain exact because of the model discussed by Habermas, tributary to an ideal, paternalistic model of the public sphere. Thereby, the public sphere was likely to be reshaped and to be (re)founded, at the end of the XXth century, on the same exclusive and discriminatory principles, according to which it had been traditionally divided along history.

Moreover, simultaneously with the emergence of a rather descriptive-demonstrative direction of the feminist discourse about the public-private relation depicted above, a next step in the reparatory effort to readdress and/or to acknowledge these historical weaknesses has amounted to a critique of the theories that seemed to have emerged as landmarks in coining and forging the notion of the public sphere. Thus, along with the Habermasian model of the

public sphere, one of the first conceptualizations that fell under the incidence of the critical usage and interpretation of feminist theories is to be found in the arendtian model of public space. Capturing both Arendt's model of the public space and Habermas' description of the liberal public sphere - which was offered as an example to emphasize the structural changes suffered by the modern public sphere – into an agonistic [9] 'typology' [4, p.59] of the various shapes of the public-private distinction, feminist critiques of the XXth century discourse on the public sphere identify at least two of the vulnerabilities of these models.

Firstly, besides the fact that both theories are articulated on an idea of a public sphere founded on exclusion principles such as ''citizen - non-citizen'' [10] (this is a distinction which seems to be conceived as a natural follow-up of a dichotomy deeply rooted in the ancient tradition 'citizen – barbarian') or 'bourgeois-proletarian' [11], both in Arendt's construct and in Habermas' theory, this type of exclusion principles are doubled by *gender* exclusion rules such as 'masculinity versus femininity'. Secondly, feminist critiques focus on examining the implications of the ways in which each of the two authors conceive the role of public debate in an ideal democratic society. For Arendt, the public space was conceived following the ancient Greek model. Therefore, the public debate meant a polemical dialogue focused on establishing what the really valuable public actions meant, according to strictly performative criteria that rose from public accounts of citizens' competitiveness or of their heroic acts and deeds. Thus, the role of the public sphere was clearly regulatory. Arendt's model of public sphere also rated the content of public debate, thus excluding all those actions that appeared as insignificant or non-heroic for lacking public relevance and public worth. On the other hand, the liberal model of public sphere, offered as an example by Habermas, established the public debate as a rational deliberative process focused mainly on topics of common interest. In simple words, the agents which entered the public were the ones who decided which topics could enter public discussion on the simple criteria that a compromise between public agents had to be reached, when discussing these issues. Therefore, this model involved at least three limitations: an *epistemological* one, that set the limits of public knowledge, and predetermined how far knowledge could extend within the public sphere, so that public agents could still arrive to a consensus (the epistemological limitation established what type of information was needed to reach a consensus), a *discursive* one, that aimed not only at the selection of topics that entered public debate, or at deciding which topics should be ruled out in virtue of the formation of consensus, but, above all, this discursive limitation aimed at preordaining the form in which the topics accepted for entering public debate had to appear in order to better fit the this public deliberation. Hence, this discursive limitation most often excluded potentially conflicting perspectives i.e., those that could not stand as the object of a general consensus, such as personal views/principles regarding values, personal interests or issues related to privacy. The third limitation is a *social* one, as it exiles towards the private sphere the debates around interests considered as pertaining to marginal or private groups [12].

4. Towards an integrative model of the public sphere. Feminist contributions to the contemporary notions of the public sphere

But the question that may well and immediately rise in one's mind, when encountering such a synthetic mapping of feminist theories about the public sphere could regard its usefulness.

When confronted with such a synthesis, one is entitled to think that it is too simplistic and, therefore, insufficiently nuanced, not to mention other deficiencies that could be mentioned about this type of approach, namely that it is repetitive, non-reflexive, lacking innovation, in short, unoriginal. Yet, all these seem to be the main traits of any synthetic approach. But, at least in this case, this synthesis has a dual function: it indicates/and offers an account of the vaguely reflexive character of the feminist critiques on the public sphere i.e., of the fact that they appear as rather disparate studies of certain feminist authors such as Susan Gal, Gail Kligman, Nancy Frazer or Seyla Benhabib and are not so visibly subjected to a feminist agenda. Neither do these critiques seem to be the subject of an ideology. On the other hand, only viewed in a synthetic manner, one is able to give account of the constructive character of these theories about the public sphere. Otherwise, a disparate look over these feminist works, representative for late XXth century discourse upon the public sphere, would leave out exactly this positive constructive character.

If initially, feminist theories on the public sphere were rather critical, their argumentative core increasing against a unitary, impervious, normative model of the public sphere (a model that extends from antiquity to modernity), within the next stage, these theories take a constructive turn, thus overpassing the initial effort of simply 'repairing' the deficiencies brought forth by an entire 'classical' conception of the public sphere. Considered and labeled by Western academia as "postmodern, post-liberal conceptions about the public sphere" [13], these renewing theoretical directions succeed to outclass both the restrictions imposed by the ancient model of the public sphere and the narrow implications of the normative model of the public sphere. The postmodern epistemic positioning indulges in and even requires a new type of public sphere that asks for the openness and transparency of its borders. And this *opening* needs to be interpreted in several ways. Firstly, for such a comprehensive conception of the public sphere to occur, and in order to eliminate (and not just put into brackets) any type of systematic social inequality, for obtaining parity in participation to the public sphere, a break with the exclusive conception of the public sphere needs to be accomplishes [14]. Therefore, the first constructive idea, proposed by feminist critics of the theories of public sphere, consists in an *integrative, enlarged* model of public sphere. Then, the constructive feminist approach concerns the change, the amendment of decision-making and deliberative practices which are displayed in the public sphere. Thus, today, the sole purpose of forming a consensus, or even the practices of predetermining or setting forth the topics which meet the public agents' common interests cannot be decisive in structuring and shaping the content of public agenda and discussion; on the

contrary, what is of common interest, the character, the structure and the nature of those public metters, whether or not they need any change has to be decided upon, by way of a permanent and active, dialogue [15]. Consequently, the second model proposed within the constructive feminist paradigm of a new public sphere is a *contentious* or even *conflicting* one, which presupposes both a diversity of voices within the same public sphere and a multiplicity of public spheres able to contest each other. The concomitant appearance and simultaneous existence of such contentious public spheres go far towards mitigating inequalities, being, thus, able to guarantee the legitimacy of the requirements of marginal groups.

The break with the paternalistic, bourgeois perspective, which characterized precisely enough and supported the modern public sphere, involves a third model of public sphere, founded on the principle of figuring in or including into the public debate or deliberation issues which up to that point had been labeled as 'private' and treated as inadmissible [15, p. 128]. This trivialization of the public sphere [16], which literally means to count personal issues in the public domain, is the third step towards the accomplishment of a new public sphere. Natural enough, the emergence of the idea of 'trivializing' the public sphere seems to coincide with the XXth century last decade's programmatic introduction, in western academia, of the studies on sexuality as a part of gender studies.

5. Conclusion

To be sure, feminist theories of late XXth century have outdone, perhaps most strongly, in setting the notion of public sphere within a new paradigm, in emphasizing the constructive character of today's multiplication and expansion of the public sphere, and, equally, in broadening the inclusive meanings of the public sphere/spheres.

On the other hand, it is uncertain whether the sense and use of these feminist theories, which target a better construction of today's public sphere, have not been exhausted once with these contributions. Therefore, what seems to be really important and interesting today would be to try to determine to what extent feminist theories still have the resources to further assume a role in the 'improvement' or at least in the reshaping of today's public sphere. At the moment, equally relevant would be to prove that the role of feminist theories in what concerns the issue of the public sphere has not been somewhat consumed, and that feminist discourse will engage more actively in the delineation of the form and practices of a new model of global public sphere which looms once with the emergence of new mass media and technologies.

For, with the rise of digital media, one can hardly speak anymore of any order of topics/interests which fall within the public sphere, of any public agenda, or of any aesthetics of the discursive form. Neither can one say a word about any control over the groups which make up the *micro* public spheres or the counter publics that populate cyberspace. If, in a global public sphere, the only

principle that is required and strictly observed is that of transnational transgression, this model does not seem to necessarily ask for a gender perspective. Therefore, the question to be raised is to what extent does the virtual, global, transnational public sphere still need a feminist voice and contribution? A possible issue regarding the global public sphere that could be caught up with by feminist theorists as well as by feminist activists resides in the fact that a globalized (virtual) model of a public sphere can not ensure or certify the equal or at least fair representation of men and the women's voices. Conclusively, the role of feminist inquiry in determining the structure and/or either the current or the virtual form of the public sphere would be to assure parity in gender representation and to set up forums/boards whose explicit function would be to counter a gender biased representation of voices and to ensure equality of expression.

Acknowledgement

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