

Of public spheres and coffee houses

Notes on: Habermas, J., 1989, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, translated by T.Burger with the assistance of F.Lawrence (Polity Press, Cambridge), originally *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1961)

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Transformation and its historical geography

Habermas's basic focus is neatly explained in Thomas McCarthy's introduction (pp.xi-xiv) to the book:¹

As a sphere between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussion of matters of general interest was institutionally guaranteed, the liberal public sphere took shape in the specific historical circumstances of a developing market economy. In its clash with the arcane and bureaucratic practices of the absolutist state, the emergent bourgeoisie gradually replaced a public sphere in which the ruler's power was merely represented *before* the people with a sphere in which state authority was publicly monitored through informed and critical discourse *by* the people. (p.xi, emphases in original)

The 'bourgeois public sphere' – bound up with the rise of the bourgeoisie, understood as a middle-class dependent on its own endeavours for wealth-creation, rather than inheritance and land-ownership² – is taken by Habermas to express "the sphere of private people come together as a public" (p.27). It entails 'private individuals', in the sense of individuals and their historic concerns for the affairs of family and hearth, acquiring a collective character, and in so doing reorientating their attention to a host of matters with a measure of generality (whether cultural-literary or, later, broadly political) to be debated at length with others. The point is less that these individuals might hold positions of 'power' within society which *require* them to take seriously such matters, and more that they *elect* to do so, choosing to spend time with others in the mutual consideration of issues that in earlier centuries, arguably, they would not have tackled. Thus, whereas previously there were people holding recognisable roles within the apparatuses of the absolutist state, or perhaps tied into it through the Church or particular forms of business (notably trading) activity, most private individuals had a very limited window on the concerns of such functionaries. They

¹ McCarthy also elaborates the complex mix here of "materials and methods from sociology and economics, law and political science, and social and cultural history" (p.xi) that comprises the book. Particularly interesting is the yoking together of empirical historical description, necessarily sensitive to the specificities of time and space, and a (Marxist version of) functional sociology that is more 'universalising' in its ambitions. Habermas comments in his preface (pp.xvii-xix) on the methodological 'peculiarity' of "having to proceed at once sociologically and historically". Thus, the bourgeois public sphere "cannot be transferred, idealtypically generalised, to any number of historical situations that represent formally similar constellations" (p.xvii); and yet Habermas accepts the influence of 'structural-functional theory' which offers "the structural analysis of the interdependencies at the level of society as a whole", and does tend to treat empirical detail as "cases that can be interpreted as instances of a more general social development" (p.xviii).

² Habermas narrows his focus to "the *liberal* model of the bourgeois public sphere", differentiating it from "the *plebian* public sphere" associated with the French Revolution, "the Chartist movement and especially in the anarchist traditions of the workers' movement on the continent", even if in various ways this sphere "remains oriented towards the intentions of the bourgeois public sphere" (p.xviii) – addressing itself in many regards to the latter, in effect wishing to enter into its debates and to capitalise upon its potential for securing genuine political advance.

would not have been discussing such concerns, or at least not in any kind of systematic fashion with other ‘private individuals’, and certainly not with any expectation that their views – as crystallising out of public debate, as comprising ‘public opinion’ (another key concept for Habermas: see Chap.VII) – would then circulate and maybe have some effect upon the workings of the state. Yet, by the mid- to later-eighteenth century, this was exactly what *had* become the norm, so Habermas claims, meaning that the big questions of culture and politics, including the very basis and machinations of state power, had become the stuff of (bourgeois) public debate, or public opinion, even to the point of influencing state policy.

This, then, is the transformation of the public sphere at the heart of Habermas’s book, something to be explored empirically and theoretically, and also subjected to sustained critique (and an irony of sorts is that Habermas both sees this transformation as a ‘good thing’, but that, with Marx – esp. in Chap.IV – he also sees many pitfalls inherent in the monopolisation of the public sphere by the bourgeoisie). It is a big story energised by grand theory, and a sizeable subtext is the extent to which this development was also tied up with an extension of Enlightenment Reason, the growing codification of rational principles in debate, inquiry and policy, throughout the social body.³ There are important subtleties in the account that must not be overlooked, however, both within the two-hundred years or so when the public sphere first emerged *and* when it gets further transformed as we reach closer to the present. These more subtle moments in the overall chronology are actually crucial for us in thinking about the status of the coffee-house or café in the ongoing transformation of the (Habermasian) public sphere. In what follows attention will be paid to both moments, but with perhaps more attention than anticipated paid to the more recent period of Habermas’s narrative, given that there are key assertions here – reflecting his views on a retreating or dwindling public sphere, as set against his portrayal of this sphere in earlier years – that prompt a number of explicit research questions to be asked about the public sphere and the coffee-house (and the café) in the present day.

There is a clear historical-geographical narrative within the book, with the suggestion being that an initial version of the public sphere – arising in parts of seventeenth- and

³ Upon introducing the ‘basic blueprint’ of the bourgeois public sphere in Chap.II, he insists that “[t]he medium of this political confrontation,” meaning private individuals collectively debating the basis for public authority over the likes of commodity exchange and social labour (see below), “was peculiar and without historical precedent: people’s public use of their reason (*offentliches Rasonnement*)” (p.27). Repeated reference is made subsequently to “rational-critical public debate” (eg. p.28), as the vehicle for the bourgeois / educated public to make its claims in the face of dominating power; and there is a hint of reason being mobilised against inappropriate deployments of power, such as that of the *ancien regime*, rather than, as in many more recent critiques, of reason being wholly complicit with the establishment’s wants and whims. The broader context in this regard is obviously the differing stances on Enlightenment displayed by Habermas and more post-structural or post-modern critics (eg. Foucault).

eighteenth-century Europe (more specifically, Britain, France and Germany) – appeared as a predominantly cultural-literary realm: the ‘public sphere in the world of letters’ (*literarische Öffentlichkeit*). Subsequently, and of most interest to Habermas, is how this development paved the way for the emergence of ‘the public sphere in the political realm’ (*politische Öffentlichkeit*), during the later-eighteenth century and into the nineteenth and beyond. As he writes, “[t]he public sphere in the political realm evolved from the public sphere in the world of letters” (pp.30-31), and in the process created that realm of ‘public opinion’ which, in a deceptively simple sense, he suggests “put the state in touch with the needs of society” (p.31). He is concerned to elucidate “the historical and social location in which this self-interpretation developed” (p.85), meaning the times and spaces carrying the growth of this public opinion through which the bourgeoisie – the “bourgeois reading public” (p.85), informed through its reading – came to know (and to represent) itself and its cultural-political concerns. Initially, it surfaced in the family home – as will be explained further in a moment – but, more significantly, certainly for the present project (<http://web.geog.gla.ac.uk/~elaurier/cafesite/index1.html>), it flowed out into more public spaces, as in ones where individuals could meet and discourse with one another outwith the family home. As will be elaborated in a moment, the coffee house, as one amongst a number of such public spaces, was central to the workings of the public sphere in the world of letters; yet it also entertained the seeds of more political debate, about the intrigues of court, in the traditions of the *ancien regime*, but increasingly about the practicalities of government and its relations to business, trade and overseas intercourse (in short the mechanics of the state in its more modern guise). Within the historical geography of the transforming public sphere, as narrated by Habermas, the coffee house hence played a key part in both the making of the world of letters and its gradual accretion of a more political (politicised hue).

The the world of letters, the political realm and the coffee house

In his Chap.II Habermas details the ‘Social structures of the public realm’, and in so doing uses a simple diagram or “schema of social realms” (p.30: see diagram below) that rather scrambles received theoretical wisdom about the separation of public and private realms by positioning as ‘private’ the goings-on of ‘civil society’. As he explains:

Included in the private realm was the authentic ‘public sphere’, for it was a public sector constituted by private people. Within the realm that was the preserve of private people we therefore distinguish again between private and public spheres. The private sphere comprised of civil society in the narrower sense, that is to say, the realm of commodity exchange and of social labour;

imbedded in it was the family with its interior domain (*Intimsphere*). (p.30)

Commodity exchange and social labour, while normally taken as activities played out on a broader (public) canvas, are here regarded as essentially the concerns of the private

**Private Realm
Authority**

Sphere of Public

<p>Civil society (realm of commodity exchange and social labour)</p> <p>Conjugal family's internal space (bourgeois intellectuals)</p>	<p>Public realm in the political sphere</p> <p>Public sphere in the world of letters (clubs, press)</p> <p>(market of culture products) 'Town'</p>	<p>State (realm of the 'police')</p> <p>Court (courtly-noble society)</p>
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(Habermas, 1989, p.30)

individuals who effect and experience them; in which case, these dimensions of civil society are tracked to the (inter-)personal relations, events and practices where they are ultimately 'real'. At this level, they parallel the more obviously private concerns of the family's 'internal space', to do with affairs of the heart and hearth, all being taken as essentially private matters, individualised and contained. Yet, in Habermas's schema, the point is that these private concerns *do* translate into the (emerging) public sphere, as the just-mentioned (inter-)personal relations and the like *become*, in effect, the subject-matter, or at the least the prompts, for public debate, whether in a more cultural-literary or more political (politicised) vein. A recurrent motif in the book is thus that the private concerns here effectively seek a public 'audience'. The impression is of private individuals starting to bring their concerns, about commodity exchange, social labour, heart and hearth, into the public debates, or rather into debates held collectively between such individuals in a range of 'sites' away from the family home. In the process, public opinion about such concerns is formed, abstracting away from specific instances to more generalised claims with wider relevance, and so the private is transformed into the public (as concerns are shared, pontificated over, solutions proposed, recommendations made). Thus a public sphere is constituted that, through being vocalised, circulated and in short 'publicised' (another key Habermasian concept), gains the potential to influence 'the sphere of public authority' (the state, together with its 'police' function).

As indicated, though, Habermas does indeed see all of this in an historical light: it was a process, with stages, checks and balances. There are the outlines of a longer-term history (Chap.I), detailing what the public, civil society and the like arguably

comprised in ancient, Medieval and Early Modern times, and more particularly charting how the fact of public authority, as in the rule of the sovereign publicly displayed *to* the people, was steadily supplanted by a sense of public concerns as ones to be debated (and even ultimately directed) *by* the people. There is also the hint (early in Chap.II) of a more particular progression – one with intriguing spatial ramifications – whereby ‘courtly-noble society’ gradually “became independent from the monarch’s personal sphere”, separating itself from the court (in the royal residences) and moving more to ‘the town’. Here, ‘in town’, so Habermas proposes, “[t]he bourgeois avant-garde of the educated middle class learned the art of critical-rational public debate”, precisely “through its contact with the ‘elegant world’” (p.29) of this relocating courtly-noble society. Furthermore, it is at this juncture that he first spells out the importance of coffee houses and other public spaces, and the equation here of ‘town’ and such public spaces, positioning them as urban phenomena, is itself instructive:

The ‘town’ was the life centre of civil society not only economically; in cultural-political contrast to the court, it designated exactly an early public sphere in the world of letters whose institutions were the coffee houses, the *salons*, and the *Tischgesellschaften* (table societies). (p.30).

Section 5 of the book (in Chap.II) then covers in some detail such ‘institutions of the public sphere’, and provides the most obvious point of reference for scholars specifically interested in the likes of the coffee-house in Habermas’s account.⁴

When discussing the British case, Habermas identifies a shift between court and town occurring after the ‘Glorious Revolution’ (ie. the Civil War and the removal, if temporarily, of the monarch). The former became “the residence of secluded royalty, pointed out from afar, difficult of access save on formal occasions of proverbial dullness” (p.32); and instead the locus of cultural life, and increasingly also that of political debate, shifted to the institutions of the town that supported the emergent public sphere (with its bourgeois underpinnings but ‘humanistic-aristocratic’ associations):

The predominance of the ‘town’ was strengthened by new institutions that, for

⁴ Habermas insists that there were important commonalities between and across the different public spaces mentioned here: “However much the *Tischgesellschaften*, *salons* and coffee houses may have differed in the size and composition of their publics, the style of their proceedings, the climate of their debates, and their topical orientations, they all organised discussion among private people that tended to be ongoing; hence, they had a number of institutional criteria in common” (p.36). Note the rather post-modern sounding reference here to publics, in the plural, which is potentially significant given certain ways in which he effectively downplays the differences between different clienteles of these spaces (wanting to stress a homogeneity to the emerging bourgeois public sphere, rather than identifying notable fractures in its constitution). See also further discussion below.

all their variety, in Great Britain and France took over the same social functions: the coffee houses in their golden age between 1680 and 1730 and the *salons* in the period between regency and revolution. In both countries they were centres of criticism – literary at first, then also political – in which began to emerge, between aristocratic society and bourgeois intellectuals, a certain parity of the educated. (p.32)

On pp.32-33 Habermas gives some empirical details about the British, or to be exact London, coffee houses, and it is worth recounting in full the paragraph in question:

Around the middle of the seventeenth century, after not only tea – first to be popular – but also chocolate and coffee had become the common beverages of at least the well-to-do strata of the population, the coachman of a Levantine merchant opened the first coffee house. By the first decade of the eighteenth century London already had 3,000 of them, each with a core group of regulars. Just as Dryden, surrounded by the new generation of writers, joined the battle of the ‘ancients and moderns’ at Will’s, Addison and Steele a little later convened their ‘little senate’ at Button’s; so too in the Rotary Club, presided over by Milton’s secretary, Marvell and Pepys met with Harrington who here probably presented the republican ideas of his *Oceana*. As in the *salons* where ‘intellectuals’ met with the aristocracy, literature had to legitimate itself in these coffee houses. In this case, however, the nobility joining the upper bourgeois stratum still possessed the social functions lost by the French; it represented landed and moneyed interests. Thus critical debate ignited by works of literature and art was soon extended to include economic and political disputes without any guarantee (such as was given in the *salons*) that such discussions would be inconsequential, at least in the immediate context. The fact that only men were admitted to coffee-house society may have had something to do with this, whereas the style of the *salon*, like that of the rococo in general, was essentially shaped by women. Accordingly the women of London society, abandoned every evening, waged a vigorous but vain struggle against the new institution. The coffee house not merely made access to the relevant circles less formal and easier; it embraced the wider strata of the middle class, including craftsmen and shopkeepers. Ned Ward reports that the ‘wealthy shopkeeper’ visited the coffee house several times a day, this held true for the poor one as well. (pp.32-33)⁵

A number of themes jostle together in this quote. It gives basic information about a growing coffee-house society; and it also suggests a mixture of inclusions, a certain equality between *men* of differing aristocratic and bourgeois ranks, and exclusions, the rarity of women as anything other than ‘servers’ in coffee-house society. Such inclusions and exclusions have numerous ramifications, some of which Habermas

⁵Here Habermas draws upon a secondary history of literature and society in eighteenth-century London, two German-language works on the coffee-houses (1924 and 1958), and also an account of ‘The clubs of London’ in the *National Review* (April, 1857, p.301) that neatly describes how “[e]very profession, trade, class, party, had its favourite coffee-house”. The detailed account here of different groups, their different concerns from law to literature, and the different coffee houses – as in distinctively different social spaces for their everyday interactions – frequented might be a useful counterpoint for the contemporary material in the present project (and see also below).

amplifies, and all of which play on the concerns of the present project.

Regarding the basic information about the coffee houses, it is clear that a geography of sorts is implied here. Anchored in a very large number of outlets spread along the streets and on the street-corners of London's townscape, coffee-house society was thereby constituted by numerous nodes set within an overall network, providing a quite distinctive spatiality to this emerging portion of the British bourgeois (and to an extent also aristocratic) public sphere. That there was a wider network, as well as the individual nodes, is itself empirically verifiable, as Habermas explains in a significant passage that binds together several different elements of his account (notably sites such as coffee-houses and early forms of literary and political journalism):

When Addison and Steele published the first issue of the *Tatler* in 1709, the coffee houses were already so numerous and the circles of their frequenters already so wide, that contact among these thousandfold circles could only be maintained through a journal. At the same time the new periodical was so intimately interwoven with the life of the coffee houses that the individual issues were indeed sufficient basis for its reconstruction. The periodical articles were not only made the object of discussion by the public of the coffee houses but were viewed as integral parts of this discussion; this was demonstrated by the flood of letters from which the editor each week published a selection. When the *Spectator* separated from the *Guardian* the letters to the editor were provided with a special institution: on the west side of Button's Coffee House a lion's head was attached through whose jaws the reader threw his letter.⁶

This passage does indeed imply a London coffee-house society with some measure of overall cohesion, a sense of patrons of these houses being bound together into a 'society of sorts even though many of them would only meet with their 'fellow' private citizens in the particular houses to which they resorted. The periodicals, the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, arose within this society, reflecting its concerns, and expressly giving the impression of being written *from* coffee-house tables after coffee-house conversations (see notes elsewhere). At the same time, they circulated around the coffee houses, being bought there, often read there and then commonly the subject of debate there, comprising a satisfying homology between form and content (between personnel, spaces, networks and the contents of things up for discussion and even decision).

Regarding the matter of inclusions and exclusions, Habermas states that the coffee houses and the like "preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether" (p.37). Social standing, political

⁶Tellingly, "the *Tatler* expressly addressed the 'worthy citizens who live more in a coffee house than in their shops'" (in the *Tatler*, 17th May, 1709): see Habermas (Footnote 36, p.260).

influence and economic power were all supposedly dismissed from the coffee-house debating chamber, such that the force of the superior argument was all that would 'carry the day', rather than anything extra-discursive. Revealingly, though, and perhaps paralleling his own thinking about the so-called 'ideal speech situation', Habermas admits as follows:

Not that this idea of the public was actually realised in earnest in the coffee houses, the *salons* and the societies; but as an idea it had become institutionalised and thereby stated as an objective claim. If not realised, it was at least consequential. (p.36)

This attribution or self-image of the scrupulously egalitarian coffee-house ties in with what Habermas argues about "the principle of universal access" (p.85) to the public sphere, and he speculates that this sphere was taken as 'public' in the strict sense that "all human beings belong to it", or ought to be able to belong to it provided that certain conventions of rational argumentation were followed. In practice, of course, this ruled out the uneducated, and Habermas further glosses the reality of exclusions underlying the ideal of inclusions – at which point his Marxist credentials surface – by indicating that *de facto* criteria for admission to the public sphere (even to the coffee house), depending on education, could not fail to hinge as well on economic position: "for formal education at that time was more a consequence than a precondition of social status, which in turn was primarily determined by one's title to property" (p.85). At the same time, this was also a split of sorts between town and country, not just because the public spaces involved were predominantly urban-based, but also because the mass of the people in *both* towns but particularly the countryside were, at the time of the Enlightenment, still woefully poorly educated: hence, "In relation to the mass of the rural population and the common 'people' in towns, ... the public 'at large' that was being formed diffusely outside the early institutions of the public was still extremely small" (p.37).

In addition, and notwithstanding his nod to the common exclusion of women from coffee-houses, leading to a women's 'action' against their proliferation, Habermas does not elaborate further on this extremely significant exclusion from the bourgeois public sphere. Indeed, as is now known about many spaces of the Enlightenment, even the in some ways 'feminised' *salons* of the French Enlightenment (see notes elsewhere), it is evident that the bourgeois public sphere was predominantly male (and the assumed difficulty faced by women in utilising the tools of reason may also have a relevance here). Questions about access to the public spaces of the bourgeois public sphere, and particularly about whether or not the likes of the coffee-houses were genuinely 'democratic' spaces of equal exchange between many different portions of the wider populace, are especially germane to the current project: they

certainly help us to frame what we can ask back of Habermas *and* what we must also ask about the present-day coffee houses and cafés that we investigate. We will briefly return to this point later.

The loss of the public sphere in the modern world: no place for the coffee house?

Somewhat neglected in Habermas's book are the claims towards its close, notably in Chaps.V and VI on, respectively, 'The socio-structural transformation of the public sphere' and 'The transformation of the public sphere's political function', where he effectively rehearses the *loss* of the public sphere – as a terrain for public debate about both cultural and political issues *by* private individuals meeting together – from the late-nineteenth century onwards. Some of the arguments here are complex, debating issues to do with the state, property, law and changing forms of contractual relations (esp. Chap.V), but others seem strangely familiar, as when berating the rise of the mass media, complete with multiple forms of cultural and in effect also political 'advertising', for eroding more *pro-active*, non-directed, shared and maybe consequential cultural-political debate *by* the educated populace (esp. Chap.VI).

Taking the latter argument first, the hinge is what he argues about a shift "[f]rom a culture-debating to a culture-consuming public" (subheading on p.159). 'We' now just receive our culture – as well as debates about culture and, indeed, politics – in neat pre-formed packages, from the newspaper, the radio, the TV: we hence *consume* our culture and politics in a largely passive manner. In Habermas's terms, important structural links have been broken that previously made this culture and politics matter to us, because they were pregnant with pressing private concerns that could be ones of daily life and death, about which 'we' regularly discoursed in an informed manner with others in sites, spaces and networks *beyond* the home. In the current age, though, the point is simply that 'we' rarely debate in any deep, systematic and consequential manner the culture and politics that we receive. In short, the public sphere, as something spoken, collective and with repercussions has disappeared, if not entirely – the programmes that we watch on TV about culture and politics presumably count as a kind of public sphere – but certainly as one in which large numbers of us routinely engage (over the lingering smells of coffee shared with non-family others and even relative strangers). The spatiality has, in a sense, reversed:

The bourgeois ideal type assumed that out of the audience-oriented subjectivity's well-founded interior domain a public sphere would evolve in the world of letters. Today, instead of this, the latter has turned into a conduit for social forces channeled into the conjugal family's inner space by way of a public sphere that the mass media have transmogrified into a sphere of culture

consumption. The deprivatised province of interiority was hollowed out by the mass media; a pseudo-public sphere of a no longer literary public was patched together to create a sort of superfamilial zone of familiarity. (p.162)

Rather than a movement *out* from the clearly demarcated private world of the family (and its home) into the public world of letters and politics, the integrity of the former being the very condition of existence for the latter, the movement now is chiefly *back* to the family/home from an all-encompassing, all-seeing and yet curiously vacuous public realm of mass-mediated ‘debate’ (if it can be glorified as debate). Habermas voiced this complaint over forty years ago, and yet – in the light of, say, current reality and make-over shows on TV, together with the public obsession for much in the eighteenth century would have been regarded as fiercely private – his critical remarks about creating a ‘superfamilial zone of familiarity’ seem highly prescient.

Regarding the first set of claims, Habermas suggests that the state – and remember that he was writing before the real advances of neo-liberalism, and hence doing so in the shadow of a continuing Fordist-welfarist consensus – has removed many of “the classical risks, especially of unemployment, accident, illness, age and death” (p.155), ones that had previously been the staple private concerns of (bourgeois) family life, from the private realm to that of state activity. Similarly, matters of “upbringing and education, protection, care and guidance – indeed, of the transmission of elementary tradition and frameworks of orientation” (p.155) – have allegedly been transferred from the private to a broader societal realm. “Thus, in a certain fashion even the family, this private vestige, [has been] deprivatised by the public guarantee of its status” (pp.155-156). More polemically still, Habermas casts this development as ‘releasing’ the family from its traditional ‘economic tasks’, dissolving into a curious ‘pseudo-privacy’ much that had been the core of what had remained solidly private, if sometimes selected for address to a public audience, in the world of the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie. He thereby insists that older economic, we might say ‘(re)production’-based, imperatives of family life, ones historically the focus of sustained private debate, now become increasingly replaced by more ‘consumption’-based considerations linked into the disposal of income and the use of leisure time. Such consumption appears to be a very private matter of choice, preference and taste, notwithstanding the extent to which it is arguably ‘guaranteed’ by the state through the just-mentioned Fordist-welfarist consensus. Moreover, leisure appears increasingly central to Habermas in this context, given

... the extent that private people withdraw from the socially controlled roles as property owners into the purely ‘personal’ ones of their noncommittal use of leisure time ... Leisure behaviour supplies the key to the floodlit privacy of the new sphere, to the externalisation of what is declared to be the inner life. What today, as the domain of leisure, is set off from an occupational sphere that has

become autonomous, has the tendency to take the place of that kind of public sphere in the world of letters that at one time was the point of reference for a subjectivity shaped in the bourgeois family's intimate sphere. (p.159).

The overall implication is that the older dialectic between the private and the public is shattered, since the private is no longer the preserve of pressing matters that, in the eighteenth century model, ended up being translated into the agitations of the public sphere. As already hinted, Habermas envisages a definite spatiality to this development: a reversal of the movement between the private and the public which amounts, at the same time, to a corrosion of the internal coherence possessed by both. The private spaces of the home become both more and less important: more open to the outside, rendered more visible in all kinds of ways, but stripped of their integrity as a distinctive container of *important* private concerns. Habermas hence speaks about “[t]he shrinking of the private sphere into the inner areas of a conjugal family largely relieved of function and weakened in authority – the quiet bliss of homeyness – provid[ing] only the illusion of a perfectly private personal sphere” (p.159). Intriguingly, he devotes a few pages (pp.157-159) to the spatial dimensions of this shift, linking together the changing spaces of the private home to broader changes in the shapes of urbanism:

This surreptitious hollowing out of the family's intimate sphere received its architectural expression in the layout of homes and cities. The closedness of the private home, clearly indicated to the outside by front yard and fence and made possible on the inside by the individualised and manifold structuring of the rooms, is no longer the norm today ... (p.157)

Habermas enlists the insights of William H. Whyte⁷ to sketch out how suburbanisation, at least in its American form, has contributed to this shrinkage of a sealed-off private sphere:

Under pressure to conform arising from interaction with neighbours – prefigured in the laying out of common courtyards for several houses – there evolved in the socially homogeneous milieu of the prototypical suburb ‘a lay version of Army post life’. The intimate sphere dissolved before the gaze of the ‘group’. ‘Just as doors inside houses ... are disappearing, so are the barriers against neighbours. The picture in the picture window ... is what is going on inside other people's picture windows’. ... In proportion as private life became public, the public sphere itself assumed forms of private closeness – in the ‘neighbourhood’ the pre-bourgeois extended family arose in a new guise. Here again private and public sphere could not be clearly distinguished. (pp.157-158)⁸

⁷ Quotes in the following quote are from Whyte, W.H., 1956, *The Organisation Man* (New York).

⁸ Habermas continues here, echoing what has already been elaborated about his stance on the disintegrating public sphere: “The public's rational-critical debate also became a victim of this ‘refeudalisation’. Discussion as a form of sociability gave way to the fetishism of community

Note once again the historical specificity of when Habermas was writing: ie. before the rise of the ‘gated community’ phenomenon, arguably a stark re-sealing up of bourgeois private spaces from public ones, and demanding a reworking of his claims for the *fin de siecle*. What he does insist, though, is that it is not only suburban America which has witnessed this blurring of the private home with the wider urban environment. Drawing on H.P.Bahrtdt’s (1958) observations on Germany, he explains:

Bahrtdt has show this in the arrangement of ‘blocks’, which in former days, with their fronts toward the street and their backward-facing separate gardens and yards, made possible both a practical internal division of the dwelling and a meaningful ordering of the city as a whole. Today this arrangement has been overtaken, to mention just one factor, by changes in the function of streets and squares due to the technical requirements of traffic flow. The resulting configuration does not afford a spatially protected private sphere, nor does it create free space for public contacts and communications that could bring private people together to form a public. (p.158)

According to Bahrtdt, the individual person “no longer succeeds in getting an overview of the ever more complicated life of the city as a whole in such a fashion that it really public for [them]”; as a result, people withdraw into their “sphere of privacy which in turn is extended even further” (quoted on p.159). What this presumably means is that, in the absence of a wider sense of the public, people are thrown back on private concerns that they then take into a wider array of places, perhaps coffee-houses included, but in a manner that remains stubbornly *private* (marked off as private talk, non-committal and non-consequential rather than being orientated more purposefully to a public audience).

With these thoughts, what Habermas might infer about parallel changes in public spaces begins to gain clarity. Indeed, drawing out certain implications, it may be that for Habermas the public spaces of the coffee house, the salon and the like become more like the ‘superhomes’ of the ‘superfamily’ – that ‘superfamilial zone of familiarity’ – full of idle chit-chat, non-committal group encounters and the mass-mediated gobbets of culture and politics coming at us from the TV screens and radios (now so ubiquitous in coffee houses and the like). These are hence spaces some distance from the model of the eighteenth-century coffee house as a crucial node in

involvement as such: ‘Not in solitary and selfish contemplation ... does one fulfil oneself’ in the circles of the bourgeois public – private reading has always been the precondition for rational-critical debate – ‘but in doing things with other people ... even watching television together ... helps make one more of a real person’” (p.158). Habermas clearly does *not* agree with the latter claim: he sees the collective watching of television, whether at home or out in, say, the coffee house (see below), as corrosive of the possibilities for rational-critical debate, precisely because of how it blurs the boundaries between the private and the public.

that world of letters on the way to being a highly political public sphere. Habermas does not appear to say much along these lines, and to some extent the comments here are already an extrapolation, but what he does write is as follows:

When the family lost its link with the world of letters, the bourgeois *salon* that had complemented and partly also replaced the reading societies of the eighteenth century also went out of fashion. ... In the course of our [ie. the twentieth] century, the bourgeois forms of sociability have found substitutes that have one tendency in common despite their regional and national diversity: abstinence from literary and political debate. On the new model the convivial discussion among individuals gave way to more or less noncommittal group activities. These too assumed fixed forms of informal sociability, yet they lacked that specific institutional power that had once ensured the interconnectedness of sociable contacts as the substratum of public communication - no public was formed around 'group activities'. The characteristic relationship of a privacy oriented toward an audience was also no longer present when people went to the movies together, listened to the radio, or watched TV. The communication of the public that debated critically about culture remained dependent on reading pursued in the closed-off privacy of the home. The leisure activities of the culture-consuming public, on the contrary, themselves take place within a social climate, and they do not require any further discussions. The private form of appropriation removed the ground for a communication about what has been appropriated. (p.163).

The private as a bundle of pressing private concerns, ones kept behind closed doors unless a choice was made to derive from it nourishment for public debate, becomes eroded by a public 'colonisation' of how to deal with such concerns. As such, the private ceases to provide materials for translation into public debate by private individuals sharing (coffee) time together. The public sphere as the locus of this debate, opinion-forming and, at bottom, ideas in circulation around non-elite individuals, spaces and networks becomes eroded in the process. To put it another way, the coffee-house as the active site of such debate and the like is replaced by the coffee-house as just another point of consumption, of spending leisure time, with no commitments and no consequences flowing from any 'serious' discussion that does, however rarely, feature in the encounters across the coffee cups. The coffee house as a the "sounding board" (p.175) of an educated 'public' may not disappear completely, but Habermas implies that those coffee house frequenters today who *do* bring the powers of rational-critical debate to the (coffee) table, who meet and even do 'work' in the process, are simply "minorities of specialists who put their reason to use nonpublicly" (p.175). There is no wider debate, no meeting of different private individuals for the sole purpose of intercourse on matters of the day beyond their specialist fields; and so their concerns remain unshared, devoid of any potential for

broader interest and effectivity.⁹

It will be fascinating to take these Habermas-inspired extrapolations about the ‘place’ of the coffee house in contemporary society – as a space largely devoid of rational-critical debate shared between private individuals putting aside their specialist backgrounds; as a space saturated by mass-mediatised representations of culture and politics that patrons either ignore or consume passively, certainly not as prompts to debates with acquaintances let alone with strangers; as a space which effectively becomes an extension of that ‘superfamilial zone of familiarity’, punctuated by the discussion of either private matters for which there is no intended public audience or ones preoccupied by issues of leisure and consumption; a space where debates that do arise out of the ‘chat’ remain ones demanding scant commitment, position-taking or concern for consequences from protagonists – and to hold them up as reference-points when examining the actual practices occurring within the actual coffee houses (and cafés) researched ethnomethodologically in the current project. It may be that Habermas is right, that today’s coffee houses cannot really be equated with those of eighteenth-century London in terms of their contribution to a wider public sphere (of letters or politics); but it may also be that things are not as simple as this, because aspects of what Habermas almost *wants* to find *are* there after all, albeit perhaps not quite in the form he might envisage, or because Habermas has mis-characterised the historic coffee houses and thereby overplayed the distance from their current counterparts. Particularly relevant in this latter respect is the extent to which the grounded reality of the historic coffee houses was much less the terrain of rarified rational-critical debate that Habermas supposes, a possibility suggested by the research of Markman Ellis¹⁰ (discussed elsewhere). Perhaps they always entertained much ‘bawdy tittle-tattle’ little different from that chatted about, and arriving through TVs, newspapers, mobile phones, e-mail connections, etc, in the daily round of today’s coffee-houses.

And, moreover, and again as hinted at by Ellis, maybe the historic institutions were compromised by numerous exclusions, notably of women (as Habermas himself briefly acknowledges) but also of other groupings, with there being a complicated timing and spacing to who was ‘allowed’ where and when – who was ‘in place’ or ‘out of place’ – on the coffee-house circuit. The extent to which coffee-house society could be inclusive, guaranteeing that universality of access and participation that

⁹ A critical thought here is that the eighteenth-century coffee houses were clearly distinguished one from another by their differing clienteles, which also varied during the course of the day, and so there were perhaps more divisions between different groups of ‘specialists’ – differing publics, as Habermas himself acknowledges in his historical account – with greater implications for the *non*-coherence of a singular public sphere (of letters or politics) than he allows.

¹⁰ Markman Ellis, *The Coffee-house: A Cultural History*, Weidenfeld Nicolson, 2004.

Habermas suggests was its ideal, if not what it could in practice always deliver, is hence an important check on whether or not the public sphere quite emerged in the fashion that he avows. Curiously, though, it may be that today's coffee-houses, as a general rule, *are* much more straightforwardly inclusive, with less of a penchant for excluding certain groupings (certainly not on gender lines) and fewer barriers, formal or informal, to entry and, in effect, to 'membership'. From in-depth research, it may be that strong claims can be made about today's coffee-houses as, indeed, 'democratic spaces', ones where communities of strangers can interact, civilly, politely and on occasion in a way suggesting genuine engagement and concern. It may be that this coming together is much more embodied, much more about a glance, moving a chair, an offer of assistance, a sympathetic touch, a shared laugh, or whatever, than about a sustained 'public' debate about affairs of weighty concern; but maybe there is still here a public sphere *as practised*, as accomplished in the face of the poignant counter-question of 'why should strangers get along?',¹¹ that is much closer to the spirit of what Habermas imagined 'romantically' than he conjectured 'politically'.

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¹¹ Yi-Fu Tuan's long-standing question about the status of how 'we' deal with 'strangers' in the city remains pertinent here; the amazing thing is not how alienating our cities have become, but just how easily large numbers of city-dwellers who are basically strangers to one another can basically 'get along', treat each other civilly, even enjoy one another's embodied co-presence (Yi-fu Tuan, *Segmented Worlds and Self: Group Life and Individual Consciousness*, University of Minnesota Press 1982). There are, to be sure, acute dangers of over-romanticising the city here; but there are also dangers of over-critiquing it, and of forgetting the remarkable 'companionship', opportunities for sharing our humanity with others, that *do* arise in countless public spaces such as coffee-houses, cafes and bars. This is not necessarily a talked-about, reflected-upon, particularly politicised companionship; rather, it is largely mute, taken-for-granted or not-even-acknowledged. Maybe there is, in such deliberations, the seeds for critiquing both a certain pessimism in Habermas's overall narrative *and* his prioritising of (what might be termed) 'serious speech acts' over 'inconsequential moments'.