The Political Economy of the Public Sphere

From Enlightenment to Big Tech

Nikos Smyrnaios

DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND SOCIETY

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BY

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Introduction

'The middle classes being powerful by money only, cannot acquire political power but by making money the only qualification for the legislative capacity of an individual. They must merge all feudalistic privileges, all political monopolies of past ages, in the one great privilege and monopoly of money. The political dominion of the middle classes is, therefore, of an essentially liberal appearance. They destroy all the old differences of several estates coexisting in a country, all arbitrary privileges and exemptions; they are obliged to make the elective principle the foundation of government – to recognise equality in principle, to free the press from the shackles of monarchical censorship, to introduce the jury, in order to get rid of a separate class of judges, forming a state in the state. So far they appear thorough democrats. But they introduce all the improvements so far only, as thereby all former individual and hereditary privileges are replaced by the privilege of money. Thus the principle of election is, by property qualifications for the right of electing and being elected, retained for their own class. Equality is set aside again by restraining it to a mere "equality before the law", which means equality in spite of the inequality of rich and poor – equality within the limits of the chief inequality existing – which means, in short, nothing else but giving inequality the name of equality. Thus the liberty of the press is, of itself, a middle-class privilege, because printing requires money, and buyers for the printed productions, which buyers must have money again'. Frederick Engels, Letter III To The Editor, *The Northern Star* No. 438, 4 April 1846

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Abstract

This introduction explores the mediated public sphere, understood as the social space for political debate and communication where media plays a central role in shaping opinions and decision-making. It highlights the tension between the liberal ideal of a space for reasoned consensus on the common good and the reality of the public sphere as a battlefield where existing inequalities and hierarchies are reproduced. The text asserts that the modern public sphere is inseparable from capitalism and overdetermined by its logics, encompassing power relations and struggles for cultural and political hegemony. The functioning of the public sphere is significantly impacted by the unequal distribution of informational-communicational resources – material (infrastructure, technology) and immaterial (attention, agenda-setting) – which are contested loci of power. The current public sphere is shaped by the crisis of liberal democracies and the ubiquitousness of digitisation. Digital platforms, controlled by powerful oligopolies, are now central, influencing the public sphere through economic models based on extracting user attention, contributing to information overload and confusion, while also serving as platforms for emancipatory movements. The book undertakes a critical historical analysis of the political economy of the public sphere across different stages: the classical liberal era; the era of laissez-faire that leads to the rise of propaganda during the Great War; the period of Keynesian interventionism, monopoly capitalism and the Cold War; the impact of neoliberal deregulation; and the rise of the digital public sphere and its platformisation. Understanding these processes is crucial for analysing the present crisis and imagining alternatives.

Keywords: Political economy; public sphere; platforms; capitalism; history; media

Not a day passes without fresh reactionary polemic hitting the headlines, with insults flying: 'islamo-leftists', 'wokeists', 'extremists', 'feminazis'. Fabricated controversies are instigated daily, usually on 24-hour news channels, by political and media figures, and subsequently relayed and amplified on a multitude of digital channels by organised groups or spontaneous 'swarms'. They then spread to the mainstream media, leaving their mark on public opinion. In this way, such moral panics are now setting the agenda for the public arena. They spread fast, prospering in today's oversaturated, anxiety-inducing information environment, often accompanied by 'fake news' and sometimes deliberately fuelled by private agencies or state institutions.

Despite their superficial and often ephemeral nature, the cumulative effect of these repeated polemics can have a significant influence on our perception of important topics – from immigration to the welfare state, from the climate crisis to the COVID-19 pandemic. They therefore play a part in the diffusion of a narrow, conservative representation of the world, the product of an ideological amalgam of neoliberalism, authoritarianism and chauvinism opposed to emancipatory positions of any kind. Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter), TikTok and YouTube are among the favoured platforms for this political propaganda; likewise they are among the most popular for commercial advertising and communication, the driving forces of capitalism. These oligopolistic digital platforms, owned by powerful multinationals, control most of the services we use daily, and extract enormous profits by exploiting the activity and attention of hundreds of millions of users worldwide.[1]

The business models of these platforms are based on encouraging users to stay constantly connected, consuming ever more content, swiping and scrolling on their smartphones to the point of exhaustion. The information overload that goes hand in hand with the digital economy's techniques of value extraction accentuates the confusion that prevails within the public sphere. Some citizens find it very difficult to understand the issues in the world around them, to get a clear grasp of the actors involved and their respective positions, and to decipher the power relations and the interests at play.[2] For many, it becomes ever more difficult to formulate an informed opinion on public issues, which are themselves increasingly complex.

However, numerous emancipatory struggles have also been fought online. All of the progressive counter-hegemonic movements of the past few years have used online social media not only as an effective way to attract attention and influence public opinion but also as a platform for organising resistance.[3] Social media also allows each individual to express their subjectivity completely freely, to develop a wide range of social relationships and to seek out the most up-to-date

[1]Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019).

[2]Miriam Arnold, Mascha Goldschmitt, and Thomas Rigotti. 'Dealing with information overload: a comprehensive review', *Frontiers in psychology* 14 (2023): pp. 1–28.

[3]Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (Newhaven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

information, the most knowledgeable and informative experts, the most interesting discussions, and those media most committed to social justice, feminism, antiracism and environmental issues.[4]

This is one of the great paradoxes of our times: this public sphere, largely controlled by a powerful oligopoly at the forefront of techno-capitalism and by media conglomerates owned by billionaires, is home not only to manipulation and domination of every kind but also to pockets of resistance and reflection where political alternatives can develop. The aim of this book is to explore this paradox. This will involve going behind the scenes, through the looking-glass of the omnipresent screen, to critically examine the intellectual, socioeconomic and technical processes that have transformed the public sphere over the course of history. Only by understanding these profoundly political processes we will be able to deconstruct them, move beyond them and develop alternatives.

What Is the Public Sphere?

In addition to decision-making institutions such as parliaments, modern societies have a multitude of settings where political debate can take place. Together, these sites make up the *public sphere* – 'the social context within which free communication takes place, without the hindrance of censorship, where all matters relevant to the culture and community are opened up for debate'.[5] It is a sphere of communication and mediation between society and the state, and between a multitude of groups and organisations within society itself, in which the media plays a central role.[6] In the media space of the public sphere, a multitude of interconnected communications channels come together, and a great variety of public discourses are expressed by a host of different actors – each aiming to enhance their public visibility and influence. The concrete functioning of the public sphere therefore has an impact on how opinions are formed, on institutional decision-making processes such as elections, and, more fundamentally, on social representations.[7]

According to liberal theory, the existence of a public sphere in which citizens inform themselves, enter into discussion and, ultimately, make decisions together, is what makes it possible to resolve the central problem that lies at the heart of human society, as theorised by Aristotle in his *Politics*: how to reconcile the contradictory

[4]Sebastian Sevignani, 'Digital Transformations and the Ideological Formation of the Public Sphere: Hegemonic, Populist, or Popular Communication?' *Theory, Culture and Society* 39, no. 4 (2022): pp. 91–109.

[5]Nina Birkner and York-Gothard Mix, 'Qu'est-ce que l'espace public: Histoire du mot et du concept', *Dix-huitième siècle* 46 (2014): p. 285. Unless otherwise specified, all translations of quotations are our own.

[6]Jostein Grispurd, Hallvard Moe, Anders Molander, and Graham Murdock, eds., *The Idea of the Public Sphere: A Reader* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2010).

[7]Sandra Jovchelovitch, 'Social Representations in and of the Public Sphere: Towards a Theoretical Articulation', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 25, no. 1 (1995): pp. 81–102.

interests of its members in a fair way, without violence or domination. It is a question of developing what Kant calls a 'concurring and united' social will, peacefully, by way of the public use of reason. One of the greatest attractions of political liberalism is the idea that the discursive and deliberative processes at work within the public sphere make it possible to first determine, and then defend, the common good – defined as a fair synthesis of individual interests – with minimal use of coercion. In short, in liberal democracy, reasoned communication is supposed to take the place of violence. All that needs to be done is to guarantee freedom of expression for all and to put in place a framework for reasonable and equitable debate. With these conditions fulfilled, according to theorists of political liberalism such as John Stuart Mill and his followers, the natural interplay of discursive exchanges will make political debate self-regulating.[8] This conception of the public sphere rests upon a vision of society as made up of individuals who act as rational agents in search of the information they need and the opinion that best suits them within a market that offers different political options and a diverse range of perspectives on the world. This normative vision constitutes one of the founding pillars of modern democratic theory.

Liberalism in Crisis

However, reality never completely conforms to this irenic ideal type. The promise of a truly egalitarian and inclusive public sphere, a prerequisite for democracy to function in the way theorised by political liberalism, has never really been fulfilled. In practice, the public sphere is not so much a place where consensus is established in the service of a higher interest as a battlefield upon which existing inequalities and hierarchies tend to be reproduced. There is thus consistently a significant gap between liberal theory and real political behaviour in the public sphere. This fundamental contradiction has aggravated the political crises suffered by liberal democracies throughout history, including the one we are living through today.

The present crisis stems from the growing inequalities and injustices associated with the implementation of neoliberal policies. One symptom is increased scepticism about institutions, including political parties, the media, unions and intermediary bodies more generally. The result is a rise in voter abstention, a distancing of citizens from politics, disengagement and insularity, and the spread of a cynical individualist ideology based on widespread competition in all areas of social life. It also leads to the search for scapegoats and exacerbates nationalism and racism.[9] A corollary of this process is the rise in far right populist movements, and indeed the sliding of the centre towards an authoritarian liberalism that combines political authoritarianism with economic liberalism.[10]

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[8]Jill Gordon, 'John Stuart Mill and the "Marketplace of Ideas"', *Social Theory and Practice* 23, no. 2 (1997): pp. 235–249.

[9]Cas Mudde, *The far right today* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2019).

[10]Michael A. Wilkinson, *Authoritarian Liberalism and the Transformation of Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

What is more, the radicalisation of this paradigm, which has governed the organisation of society for more than 40 years now, has endangered the natural world.[11] This development brings to the forefront complex scientific questions concerning the environment and public health that were formerly absent from political debate.[12] Finally, geopolitical tensions in a now multipolar world have destabilised the post-Cold-War order.[13] This is producing new rifts and conflicts with unpredictable consequences (migration, economic crises, terrorism, war crimes, etc.) such as the invasion of Ukraine and the war in Gaza. It is in this context that this political crisis continues to deepen, particularly in Europe and North America, accentuated by the shortcomings and dysfunctions of the mediated public sphere.[14]

Analysing the Transformations of the Public Sphere

The public sphere in its current form is the result of the effects of this crisis combined with our increasingly digital society. Throughout history, there has been a dialectical relationship between the political economy and transformations in the symbolic and material space within which discourses, ideas and opinions circulate. The modern public sphere is inseparable from capitalism and is therefore overdetermined by its logics. Hence, it is subject to power relations, political struggles and the antagonistic relations between warring classes as they seek to acquire and maintain cultural and political hegemony.[15] These struggles involve the power to influence the dominant vision of the world, a power that is unequally distributed between the social groups vying against one another. Furthermore, simply expressing oneself in the public sphere, and taking part in the exchanges within it via various media, involves participating in the capitalist process of value creation and accumulation.

Nonetheless, despite its contradictions and successive transformations, the public sphere in liberal democracies under capitalism does offer opportunities for political expression and coordination. Social actors can criticise and even challenge hegemony, though this ability has varied in form and extent across history. There is therefore the potential for individual and collective

[11]Pierre Charbonnier, *Affluence and Freedom: An Environmental History of Political Ideas*, trans. Andrew Brown (Polity: Cambridge, 2021).

[12]Nikos Smyrnaios, Panos Tsimpoukis, and Lucie Loubère, 'La controverse autour de Didier Raoult et de sa proposition thérapeutique contre le COVID-19 sur Twitter: Analyse de réseaux et de discours', *Communiquer: Revue de communication sociale et publique* 32 (2021): pp. 63–81.

[13]Michael A. Peters, 'The Emerging Multipolar World Order: A Preliminary Analysis', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 55, no. 14 (2023): pp. 1653–63.

[14]Manuel Castells, *Rupture: The Crisis of Liberal Democracies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

[15]Chantal Mouffe, 'For an Agonistic Public Sphere', in *Radical Democracy: Politics Between Abundance and Lack*, edited by Lars Tønder and Lasse Thomassen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

emancipation, but this has never yet been completely realised. This book aims to elucidate this tension via a critical analysis of the historical transformations of the public sphere and how it has been understood. Identifying its characteristics, underlying structure, regularities and discontinuities will then shed light on the present situation.

More concretely, I shall provide an overview of the various theoretical accounts of the public sphere that have been put forward in the social sciences, as well as those formulated by political actors and communications and media practitioners, from the second half of the 18th century to its digital transformation at the turn of the 21, situating them within the specific context of each period. This will require untangling a mass of different factors – socioeconomic, technological and political – and taking a global approach capable of embracing the complex overall picture without overlooking the disparities and specificities of each particular situation, so as to avoid generalisation and oversimplification.

I will achieve this through the critical and historical study of the political economy of the public sphere. My intention is to identify and analyse both the mechanisms that lie at the origin of the unequal distribution of the informational-communicational resources that affect the functioning of the mediated sphere in which political activity takes place, and the way in which these resources are conceptualised and promoted. The resources in question include factors both material (infrastructure, technologies, the work of cultural production, etc.) and immaterial (the ability to attract public attention, to influence media agendas, to establish the journalistic framework for social realities, etc.). Such resources are contested because they are loci of power. In each historical configuration, the way the public sphere operates and the resulting political effects follow directly from the particular distribution of this power. A critique of the political economy of the public sphere needs to describe the power relations and interdependencies between the actors within it, as well as the different theoretical conceptions in play and their development over time. The historicisation and contextualisation of these relationships is essential for understanding why, in each particular circumstance, certain possibilities come to pass rather than others. This then also allows us to imagine other possible future configurations.

My approach is limited in a number of ways. First of all, this book addresses the media component of the public sphere only. This means that I exclude from my analysis the physical public sphere in which people interact and non-technologically-mediated social relations take place, the political importance of which is equally fundamental. Likewise, I make no claim to have provided an exhaustive inventory of theories and practices of the public sphere, which would be an impossible task. My analysis bears upon neither the operations of the political actors that participate in the public sphere (social movements, states, parties, various types of organisation, etc.), nor on the form and content of the discourses that they develop and disseminate. I shall concentrate instead on the *mediated* portion of the public sphere as embodied in instruments of mediated communication (print, audiovisual, internet), studying the development of the norms by which it functions, its overall form, the uses to which it is put, its economy, its critics, and its relations to the state, to capital and to

social movements. Finally, for practical reasons, my analysis will be limited to Europe and the United States, a limitation that is significant but necessary for the purposes of economy of argument. It goes without saying that, elsewhere in the world, other conceptions and practices of the media component of the public sphere exist or have existed that would also have merited in-depth analysis.

Stages of a Critique of the Political Economy of the Public Sphere

I shall critically describe and analyse the political economy of the public sphere in four stages. The first stage (Chapters 1, 2, and 3) focuses on the development of the principal categories and theories of the mediated public sphere in context. The first two chapters analyse the emergence and consolidation of the classic liberal public sphere and its critics between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 20th century. I first describe the influence of enlightenment philosophy upon the conception of the modern public sphere, then the political impact of the French Revolution and economic liberalism in a context where the dominant media was an elitist, opinion-led press. I then turn to the transformations of the public sphere in the 19th century under the effects of the Industrial Revolution, revolutionary movements and the industrialisation of the press.

I explore the two major critiques of the bourgeois public sphere: the liberal-conservative critique and the socialist critique, from Louis Blanc to Karl Marx. I then turn to the crucial period that extends from the end of the 19th century up to the 1930s. This period saw the consolidation of liberal democracy within a context of laissez-faire economics, the professionalisation of journalism, the concentration of press ownership and the development of new cultural industries including radio and cinema. I analyse the advent of propaganda as the dominant paradigm of the public sphere following the Great War, instigated by Bernays and Lippmann, and, in parallel, the birth of a revolutionary vision of propaganda as expressed by Lenin and Gramsci. In this section, I also examine the conception of the public sphere set out at the beginning of the 20th century by sociologists including Tarde, Weber and Park.

Chapter 3 outlines the conditions under which Critical Theory developed, in order to demonstrate how the latter shed light on the internal contradictions of liberalism in the context of the rise of fascism. I then describe the postwar era conditions of production that gave rise to a social liberal conception of the public sphere, in the context of Keynesian interventionism, monopoly capitalism and the Cold War. I explain how this model, first developed in the United States and influenced by administrative research and managerialism, was exported to Europe in the postwar years. I then show how the critique of this social liberal vision gave rise to Habermas's theory of the public sphere, but also to the radical contributions that came out of the social and countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s.