

Conceptualization of public sphere and public interest

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Abstract The article deals with the problem of conceptualization of public sphere in the context of history of socio-political thinking. In this article we show a connection between the concept of "public sphere" and "public interest" and we also list two basic approaches related to this subject. The first approach is connected with the German philosopher J. Habermas and his 'end-oriented theory' of public sphere. The second approach is presented by the American philosopher N. Fraser and her 'act-oriented theory' of public sphere. In conclusion we state that Fraser's theory of public sphere offers us reasonable background for understanding of 'public interest'.

Key words Public sphere, Private sphere, Public interest, J. Habermas, N. Fraser.

1. INTRODUCTION

The distinction between public and private has been present in socio-political thinking for a long time. This distinction led to the creation of two realms - public and private, whose status, importance and role have been subject to historical transformations. The idea of a public sphere played an important role especially in the 16th and 17th century, which was associated with the emergence of nation states and theories of sovereignty. Later, the idea of the public sphere has become an essential requirement for modern states on their journey towards democracy. Its role is still of high importance even today.

Despite the importance of the idea of the public sphere and thus derived concept of "public", it is difficult to grasp it from the conceptual point of view. This is in relation with the fact that the concept of the "public sphere" is not static; it is embedded in specific social, cultural and historical context. The importance of the conceptualization of the "public sphere" is in the number of concepts that derive out of it. These concepts are fundamental pillars of political theories and various sociological concepts. One of these concepts is the "*public interest*", which is a fundamental principle of the legitimacy of public power exercise in modern democracies.

In this article we show a connection between the concept of "public sphere" and "public interest" and we also list two basic approaches related to this subject.

2. PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE SPHERE

The definition of "public sphere" is closely related to two dimensions of this concept (Kocan, 2008). The first dimension of this concept refers to some kind of a "*relationship*". These relationships are socially and politically constituted, created at a certain time and in certain space. An example here concerns relations between people who share a common set of traditions (laws, institutions, language, experience...). The second dimension is the fact that the public sphere is a kind of an "*idea*". This means that public sphere has been developed in connection with the notion of some higher good that is woven into the network of political relations, social practices and historical institutions. In this sense, the concept of the public sphere has strong axiological dimension - different political values and social practices generate different concepts of the public sphere. Ideological and relational contexts are the essence of what we call the "public sphere".

The essential problem with defining the "public sphere" is to determine its relation to the "private sphere". The relationship between public - private has a long history in which the presentation of these two concepts have overlapped and changed considerably. It is also the understanding of the historical process that helps us to conceptualize the public sphere. The problem of blurred boundaries between the public and private sphere has its consequences in the theory and in practice alike (the issue of unclear borders and its implications for the theory and practice are handled for example by T. Čana (2008, 17-24, 88-91)).

The difference between public and private has had a fixed place in the society since the ancient times. Antiquity was based on a precise differentiation between (1) the public sphere, and (2) the private sphere. It was the ancient philosopher Aristotle who as a first philosopher justified the difference between the two realms. The essence of socio-political thoughts in ancient times was the existence of "good", which was the aim and purpose of life of every citizen of the ancient polis. This feature had already been typical for Plato. However, Plato was thinking about the unified form of good. He failed to take into account various forms of Good. Nevertheless, he also understood the ancient polis as a homogeneous whole, where everything was shared. Aristotle realized that each person has its own goals, and therefore the actual reflection on the good requires consideration of these differences: „It was not possible to conceive the good of the state without considering at the same time whether each citizen or the majority or, at least, some people individually

were pursuing their own personal good" (Aristotle, 1264ab). Aristotle's polis image is thus considerably more complicated than that of Plato's. Aristotle distinguishes between (1) the public sphere (sphere of citizens and municipalities) and (2) the private sphere (sphere of slaves, women, families), and emphasized that the difference between them is still matter of debate. The link between the two spheres was a *public forum* (agora). Polis needs a public forum that is accessible to everyone and at which each citizen may, through their social experience, reasonably and critically address policies of the municipality. The emergence of public forums was of great importance for the further building of democracy (Kocan 2008, 5-6).

A deeper view into public and private spheres in antiquity and their importance for the contemporary socio-political thoughts is offered by the philosopher Hannah Arendt in her book *The Human Condition*. In this work Arendt states that in the ancient polis politics was considered to be a supreme activity. Life in the polis was a public matter marked by freedom. Conversely, household sector is apolitical and private, characterized by coercion and oppression.

The word "public" has, according to Arendt, two basic meanings (Arendt 1998, 50-53): First, it's everything that is shown, what may be perceived by other people in compliance with our view, and it is different from our internal indivisible world. What is shown within the human world is a matter of fact. The inner world of the individual is reflected through uncertain and shadow existence. Unless a person is deprived of his or her private world, the individual character cannot be publicly displayed. Secondly, the word „public“ indicates the world that is shared by all of us and differs from what belongs to us as a private property. The shared world is not nature or the earth, but rather it is a creation of human hands, the sum of all social interactions that take place between people. Public space, as a shared world, represents a sort of "public forum". On the contrary, the private sphere is an intimate sphere of human life. Arendt argues that what a "private person" does is meaningless.

According to Arendt the emergence and development of modern society can be characterized as covering the difference between the household and the polis, between the private and public sphere. In modern times the private sector (households) has lost its private status and began to pass into the public sphere. Although the private sphere slowly penetrates into the public sphere, the public will not accept everything what the private sphere brings. This does not mean that some private matters are irrelevant, but rather that some issues are doing better in the private sphere (love does not blossom in the public, the public life is more in a favor of friendship).

Penetrating into or wiping out the boundaries between the "private" and "public" sphere has its consequences. In modern times the private sphere began to dominate the public sphere. This means that the world is not ruled by only "one" but by the anonymous public interest represented independently from any person, thus no one is held responsible. In doing so, the rule of the public interest, which is also typical for contemporary democracy, proved to be much more tyrannical than any illegitimate tyranny linked to any ruler. The rule of the public interest, as a rule by "nobody", can be illustrated by the example of bureaucracy: bureaucratically led society requires its members to behave in a certain way based on the set of standards and rules. Everything that stands out is thus undesirable.

From Arendt's thoughts it follows that the loss of the demarcation line between the public and private sphere brings along at least two consequences: (1) the public sphere lost the ability to encourage people to gather (the public forum disappeared). If modern

democracies are based on the public interest that is to be a result of the public debate and this discussion is impossible, this concept needs to be reconsidered. (2) The difference between the public and private interests ceased to exist. If public debates enter into private interests, is the concept of public interest justified?

The aforementioned problems constitute a substantial part of the modern socio-political discourse of democracy. This paper lists two opinions on this issue. The first represents the opinion of the German philosopher Habermas, the representative of the so-called "*end-oriented theory*" of the public sphere. These theories form the teleological and consequentialist model. This means that before the communication process is initiated at public (public debate), it is necessary to accurately determine and identify goals that a discussion should achieve. Public debate is essentially about identifying methods and procedures by which that objective is to be achieved. The second approach is represented by the American philosopher N. Fraser who represents "*act-oriented theory*" of the public sphere. This approach emphasizes that public discussion is a continuous process leading to a consensus that is not predetermined, but is the result of a process.

3. HABERMAS' „END-ORIENTED THEORY“

German philosopher Habermas in his work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere - An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962) carried out a thorough examination of the historical and sociological transformations of the liberal model of civic society. A well-known follower of Habermas's philosophy C. Calhoun (1992, 1) writes that the question of setting social conditions for rational-critical debate on public affairs is one of the key issues of the democratic theory. Habermas therefore sets two basic objectives. First objective aimed at explaining the emergence of liberal civic society that can operate on the rules of rational-critical discourse. Second objective aimed to map the causes of the collapse of this form of civic society.

From the historical point of view Habermas states that we can define three basic developmental stages of the public: (1) traditional representative public, (2) liberal civic public, (3) modern representative public. It should be noted that Habermas himself points out that the term "public" is closely linked with specific time-space circumstances. Therefore, these three most general forms of public cannot be applied everywhere.

Habermas's investigation goes back to the ancient world, paying attention to the difference between the public and private sphere. This distinction, although not always significant, persisted in subsequent periods. For example, in the Middle Ages prevailed the *traditional representative public*. During the European Middle Ages there did not exist the difference between the public and private sphere due to feudalism (Habermas, 1991, 5). The land was tied to the sovereign and the term "public" was used to describe only what was free to be used by everybody. Holders of public assets presented their social status in front of people, so we are talking about the *representative public sphere*. The representative public sphere in feudalism was not perceived as a social sphere but as a status. When Emperors, Princes or Counts meet, they did not represent anyone except themselves. They did not represent people, all they represented was their power. People were just observers who could only watch ceremonies performed by their rulers. There was no such a thing as a representative public sphere "for the people" but it was "in front of people." This form of public persisted until the late 18th century. At the end of the 18th century feudal power - the church, rulers, feudal lords - begin to decompose and polarize. Consequently, the power was divided into the two spheres - public and private (Habermas 1991, 11).

The process of disintegration of the representative forms of public gave rise to a new type of public - *liberal civic public*. Its emergence was supported by several major events, especially the separation of administration from the sovereign, thus contributing to the emergence of bureaucracy and institutions of public authority (parliament). An important role was played by developing capitalism that created the need for information exchange (business correspondence). This process began to shape the public sphere as a sphere of state power against which stands the public. As stated by Habermas, this created a society that opposes the state, clearly separates public and private sphere and lifts the lives of the citizens from the private households and makes them a subject of public interest (Habermas 1991, 24). This gave rise to a civic public as a "sphere of individuals in the audience" (Habermas 1991, 27). The aim of individuals in the audience is to create a kind of "healthy" counterweight to the public authorities. In order to fulfill its function the public must have the ability to lead a rational dialogue. It means that the public debate on issues of common interest should be guided by rational and critical arguments.

Such civic public was developed on the basis of the so-called *literary public*. With the development of the printing press and newspapers people gradually learnt how to lead critical discussion on non-political, mostly literary topics. Later on, this activity was popularized in cafés where it acquired its features of organized debate. Such activities developed the ability of the public to lead a rational dialogue and debate about public affairs. Such debates then gradually outmaneuvered church and state authorities from this domain (Habermas 1991, 37). This Habermas's concept of the public sphere was united and beared in itself politically engaged citizens.

Gradually, however, this ideal type of public sphere began to crumble, giving rise to the so-called *modern representative public*. The emergence of this form of public is typical for the end of the twentieth century and it is perceived as a response to the disintegrated liberal model of the civic society which, by its inclusive character, allowed all citizens equal access to the state. This Habermas' ideal model was based on public social order that respected the boundaries between the "citizen" and "owner", "state" and "market economy", "private" and "public" interests. If these boundaries are wiped out, there are no conditions for rational debate. Public debates are mixed with private interests, resulting in the creation of a number of mutually warring groups. Features that were typical for the public now pass to other organizations of mass character and print. Rational debate was replaced by public opinion manipulation and compromises between rival groups.

4. FRASER' „ACT-ORIENTED THEORY“

American philosopher N. Fraser in her work *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy* challenged some Habermas's assumptions and offered a modern theory of the public sphere. The concept of the public sphere offered by Fraser is not unitary but rather a pluralistic model. The starting point of her thoughts is the fact that the existence of the public sphere is an essential part of democratic theories: „Idea of the public sphere is indispensable to critical social theory and to democratic political practice. I assume that no attempt to understand the limits of actually existing late capitalist democracy can succeed without in some way or another making use of it.“ (Fraser 1990, 57).

In the introduction Fraser states that Habermas' conception of the liberal public sphere is highly idealized and fails to mention illiberal, nonbourgeois and competitive public spheres – meaning that Habermas' concept of the public sphere is greatly simplified. Fraser criticizes mainly four assumptions: (1) the assumption that people debating in public debates are equal - according to Fraser

social equality is not a necessary condition for democracy; (2) the assumption that more competitors weakens democracy - Fraser argues that the opposite is true; (3) the assumption that the public discourse in the public sphere should be limited to topics of public interest - Fraser argues that such a restriction is undesirable; (4) the assumption that a functional public sphere requires a distinction between civil society and the state - Fraser rejects that (Fraser, 1990, 62-63).

The key to this work is precisely the point 3, in which Fraser calls into question Habermas's understanding of public discourse which lies in the discussion of public affairs or matters of public interest. Habermas argues that the decomposition of the liberal civic society was caused by discussing private affairs in public debates. Fraser writes: „Here the central questions are, what counts as a public matter and what, in contrast, is private?“ (Fraser 1990, 70). If we think about the meaning of the word "public", it is not entirely clear how we understand it: „Publicity, for example, can mean 1) state-related; 2) accessible to everyone; 3) of concern to everyone; and 4) pertaining to a common good or shared interest. Each of these corresponds to a contrasting sense of 'privacy'. In addition, there are two other senses of 'privacy' hovering just below the surface here: 5) pertaining to private property in a market economy; and 6) pertaining to intimate domestic or personal life, including sexual life“ (Fraser 1990, 71).

From a diverse understanding of the word 'public' it follows that it is normatively problematic to determine what is a matter of public interest. The true nature of the public debate lies in determining what is a matter of public interest and what is a private interest. There are no predetermined rules to determine what is a public interest. Essentially, democratic theory requires that private interest, even though it is in a minority representation, should be a topic of public debate. Each of the two spheres in a public debate shall have a space to work with their own arguments. This is necessary also because the very meaning of the word public-private is culturally and rhetorically conditioned: „In general, critical theory needs to take a harder, more critical look at the terms 'private' and 'public'. These terms, after all, are not simply straightforward designations of societal spheres; they are cultural classifications and rhetorical labels. In the political discourse, they are powerful terms that are frequently deployed to delegitimize some interests, views, and topics and to valorize others“ (Fraser 1990, 73).

5. PUBLIC INTEREST AS A PRODUCT OF PUBLIC

The modern theory of democracy is closely linked to the concept of dynamic citizenship, participative people, or the notion of vital public. This notion, modified throughout the history, has a central place in the late capitalism political theory. This requirement for the vital public actively involved in shaping public policy and decisions on public matters is hidden in the concept of public interest. Two key insights on the conceptualisation of the public sphere also bring us (at least) two views on the concept of public interest.

Habermas's concept of the public sphere perceives public interest as a product of rational and critical discussion conducted in the liberal civic society that is united and inclusive. This means that all actors of public debates are to be equal, are competent to make decisions on public issues, and there are no restrictions on public debate. This approach emphasizes that it is possible to set what should be the subject of public debate, how it should take place, who shall be a participant and what goal it shall achieve.

American philosopher N. Fraser reviewed Habermas' concept of the public sphere, and questioned not only the conclusions but also

outlets. Fraser correctly points out that in terms of historical research there has never existed a unified concept of public encompassing all people. There have always been competing forms of public while the access to public debates has been associated with many informal constraints (gender, property, education...). Fraser's opinion that the true nature of public debates determines what is a matter of public interest and what remains in the private sector meets the requirements of the modern democratic theory that democracy is not just about the rights of the majority, but also obligations towards minorities (O'Toole 2003, 113).

Fraser in her work reasonably pointed out the limits of normative definition of public interest. Public interest must be the result of a continuous process, a debate which respects fundamental human rights and other standards that are the basis of socially functioning society.

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