

A COSMOPOLITAN PUBLIC SPHERE:

JÜRGEN HABERMAS' PUBLIC SPHERE, MUTUAL HUMAN OBLIGATIONS AND ONLINE MOVEMENT

Edith Schellings

3138062

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Prof. Dr. Paulo De Medeiros

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a study dedicated to cosmopolitanism. As a supporter of cosmopolitanism - defined as a notion that ascribes certain mutual obligations to human beings, based on the simple fact that we all are humans - I am looking for initiatives towards a more cosmopolitan attitude among human individuals, a less negative view on its realization in general and, in line with this, I try to define what is already there. I have started writing this thesis with the supposition that the current prevailing view on cosmopolitanism is too pessimistic. I will not deny that cosmopolitanism is a complex concept accompanied by a lot of difficulties in its practical realization. The result is that cosmopolitanism often is being considered a utopia and therewith, abandoned completely as an ethical basis for human action. Still, this is a serious misconception. It only bears witness of the fact that, in general, cosmopolitanism is not being taken seriously enough. It presents cosmopolitanism as something that should immediately and in total solve global human conflict and injustice and does away with it at the same time, because it cannot live up to that expectation. This is highly unfair, because what ideology, ethical basis or conviction can live up to this description? It might be clear that a cosmopolitan society will not be a society free of conflict and injustice, but one that is dedicated to these goals and constantly is attempting to approach these. In short, the utopia, just like its counterpart, the dystopia, is often characterized as an extreme. Yet, if there is one thing that cosmopolitanism could never be, it is extreme. It is, and always will be, a process of negotiation between the local and the global, between the particular and universal, between the ideas of self and other.

The negative view on cosmopolitanism is, however, characteristic of our time. I believe it can be explained by two, closely connected, phenomena. The first is the ongoing process of globalization and its negative aspects that are getting visible more and more: the economic world crisis; the intertwining of political and economic interest that limit the willingness and possibility of supra- and international institutions to intervene in international affairs; the same intertwining interests that complicate international cooperation in countering the environmental deterioration; the growing economic inequality within states caused by a world economy dominated by

multinationals;¹ and the upcoming national and local protectionism resulting from the fear of cultural homogenization and the loss of national, regional and local identities supposedly caused by the mingling of cultural influences through immigration, commodities and cultural products.²

The second phenomenon is the individual's experience of impotence to significant action within the global context. Marshall McLuhan may well have stated that through globalization the world has become a 'global village', but for the individual the ruling experience is that of a world that is getting too big to handle. As the German philosopher Rüdiger Safranski argued in his book *How much globalization can we bear?*³ the individual's range of action is not capable of dealing with the amount of stimuli that the global information industry is providing. On television, via news-papers and the Internet the individual is continuously presented with an enormous amount of information about the world we live in. But a large part of this information, though it is instinctively being experienced to require personal action, in reality seems to be something the individual has no power over. The concerning issue is considered to be too far away, or too big to deal with, so the stimulus remains unprocessed. According to Safranski, over time, this accumulation of such unprocessed stimuli results in a state of unrest. It is then our mental protection mechanism that interferes by making the individual less sensitive to such stimuli. In other words, the processing of stimuli requires personal action, but in the case of many stimuli the range of action is insufficient. So the individual cannot process the stimuli and, in order not to avoid mental chaos, becomes numb and indifferent towards such stimuli.⁴

The phenomena above explain much of the pessimistic attitude towards globalization and, more specific, cosmopolitanism. In the introduction to his book *Ill fares the land*⁵ Tony Judt describes the same kind of sentiments, but then more focused on the functioning of Western democracies and the frustration of the generation of the eighties and nineties in doing something about such dissatisfactions.⁶ The individual feels neglected by democracy and Judt argues for the 'urgency of a return to an ethically informed public conversation'.⁷ The motivation for this

¹ Tony Judt, *Ill fares the land*, (London: Penguin, 2010): 11-21. Robert Tignor et al., *Worlds Together Worlds Apart: A history of the world Vol. 2*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011): 831-832, 840-841.

² Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). 32-42.

³ Rüdiger Safranski, *Hoeveel globalisering verdraagt de mens?* trans. Mark Wildschut. (Amsterdam: Atlas, 2003): passim.

⁴ *Ibidem*, passim.

⁵ Judt, 1-9.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 3-4.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 9.

urgency is, in Judt's case, primarily derived from the socioeconomic abuses in contemporary European, and more, United States' society. Although Judt's book is limited in its focus (and does not really provide any solutions), his urge for an ethically informed public conversation, does hit the point. Firstly, a public conversation means inclusion of 'the normal human being' so it can empower individuals that feel powerless within (global) society. In this way it could broaden the individual's action radius. Furthermore, *public* means, not limited to a certain audience, but open to every individual willing to participate. In this sense a public conversation is, at least in theory, cosmopolitan in form. Secondly, this public discussion is concerned with *ethics*: what is right and wrong, what is just and unjust, and what norms and values we should adhere to. (One might argue that the problem is often not that we do not know what is right and wrong, but that it is difficult to solve the wrongs in our society. Yet, this is only partly true, as these difficulties often are the cause of the unclarity of what has to be prioritized over what and the unwillingness of both political and private institutions as well as individuals to comply with norms and values as soon as other interests are at stake.) As will become clear in the first chapter, I contend that such an ethical basis for human action should be a cosmopolitan one. In that sense I not only argue for a public conversation that should be cosmopolitan in form, but also in its content.

Though ethics lies at the basis of our society and should be the incentive for our daily acting, in practice it often does not work like that. Especially on a global level there are many inequalities and incongruities between different people, which are often left unhandled. But especially in our present globalized world it is high time to end the prioritization of national and regional interests over global ones. Therefore we should make sure there is a clear universal ethical basis that does function as the incentive for both institutional (political) and individual action. My hypothesis is that an ethically informed, preferably cosmopolitan, public conversation has the potential to check and correct institutional and human action to make sure that the agreed ethical basis is indeed honored worldwide.

Yet the performance of a public conversation, especially on cosmopolitan scale, is not unproblematic. Where would we find such a public conversation? Naturally, the most famous theory on public discussion is that of Jürgen Habermas' *public sphere*. Nevertheless, this theory was written on an eighteenth century bourgeois context and was not only praised but also critiqued a lot. On the other hand this theory has regained importance during the last fifteen years

with the emergence of the Internet. As I expect to find something that closest approaches a cosmopolitan public conversation on the Internet, to me these new interpretations of Habermas' public sphere are highly relevant. Therefore in this thesis I will study Habermas' concept of the public sphere as described in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*,⁸ and analyze its applicability to a contemporary cosmopolitan, online context. My research question thus sounds: *How is Jürgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere applicable to a contemporary cosmopolitan, online context?*

I phrased the question like this because I see a huge potential in today's social media on the Internet. I refer to 'Twitter' and 'Facebook' (among others), but more in particular to online action groups of which I believe 'Avaaz.org' is currently the most active and successful. Avaaz is an online global movement that, by the means of emails, informs their members about, mainly, sociopolitical abuses around the globe. In the emails Avaaz invites its members to sign digital petitions, attend real-life gatherings and give donations for specific goals. The movement is constantly growing, because members can invite new members by email. Currently the membership rate is over nine million and its members are from 193 countries in the world.

This thesis is structured according to sub questions that are divided over three different chapters. The first chapter can be seen as an extended introduction and will provide an answer to the question *What is cosmopolitanism?* and *Where do we stand in de cosmopolitan discourse?* The first question will be answered by a limited discussion of some of the most important cosmopolitan thinkers. The second question will lead to an evaluation of the cosmopolitan discourse and its central problems. The second chapter is a thorough investigation of the concept of the public sphere, which will be guided by the following questions: *How did Habermas describe the rise of the public sphere? How did it function? Why did it structurally transform? What are the most important critiques on Habermas' concept of the public sphere? What are the most important ideas on the Internet as a public sphere? How could a decontextualized public sphere be defined?* Each of these questions will be discussed in a separate section. Finally in the third chapter I will perform a case study of the Avaaz movement. The central questions in this section will be: *What is Avaaz.org and how does it operate? How cosmopolitan is Avaaz? Can Avaaz.org, and if so, to what extent, be considered a public sphere?*

⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. 1962. Transl. Thomas Berger and Frederick Lawrence. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

In this thesis textual analysis is combined with a case study of the website of Avaaz.org. The chapter on cosmopolitanism is a more historiographical chapter. The chapter on the public sphere will provide an analysis of the core theory. In the first paragraphs of the second chapter Habermas' public sphere I will be analyzed as a primary source. In the later paragraphs this analysis is combined with the analysis of secondary sources on the work of Habermas. Then, in the last paragraph of this chapter a new framework for the analysis of the case study will be provided. The analysis of Avaaz.org will be primarily focused on the information from the website.

With this thesis I hope to contribute to the cosmopolitanism discourse and practice in a positive way. Further, I hope to explore the contemporary relevance of Habermas' theory on the public sphere and to theory on the Internet as a democratic institution. Finally, I hope to answer to those individuals that feel frustrated and neglected by or dissatisfied with political rule by showing that there is potential for the empowerment of the individual in creating a more just society. Although this thesis is prompted by personal interests and ideals, I have tried to be as aware of my personal position as a researcher as I could. I have aimed to reflect and to some extent transcend this subjective position in order to reduce biases and look upon matters from a supposed 'universal' perspective, which for the topic of this thesis is particularly relevant. Nevertheless, this is only possible to a certain extent and of course there might be things that I have overlooked. Therefore I would like to emphasize that in this thesis I do not claim to speak for all individuals, when talking about cosmopolitan ethics, for instance, but have attempted to explore what could be universally shared.

COSMOPOLITANISM

In this chapter I will introduce both the start and terminus of this thesis: the notion of cosmopolitanism. Where the public sphere can be treated as the core theory of this study, cosmopolitanism represents both its motive and objective. It is, in this sense, both idealistic and normative. I am aware that this statement might raise some doubts and worries about the potential biases these features could cause. To such claims my answer is twofold: on the one hand it is my conviction that the best science is practiced when the necessities are highest and that good science therefore, never is free of engagement. On the other hand, in order to be convincing about my statements, my argumentation has to be reasonable and logical. So what I am aiming at in this chapter is first to explain what cosmopolitanism actually is. I will do this by means of a critical discussion of some of the most important opinions about cosmopolitanism. My guiding question will be: Where do we stand in de cosmopolitanism discourse? In other words: What are considered to be its most important features and what is their value? Then, I will discuss why cosmopolitanism is relevant to, or even desirable in, contemporary society. Why should we look for a contemporary cosmopolitan context? In answering these questions I aim to defend cosmopolitanism as both the motive and objective of this study, and use these as the guidelines for the following chapters.

THE COSMOPOLITANISM DISCOURSE

The earliest known scriptures on cosmopolitan thought lie with the Egyptians. Around 1526 BCE Anhnaton claimed that ‘all human beings have moral duties to one another beyond their immediate communal spheres.’⁹ Other early approximations of cosmopolitan thought can be found in ancient works of Chinese, Ethiopian, Assyrian, Persian, Hebrew and Phaeacian thinkers.¹⁰ The first thinker to mention the term ‘cosmopolitan’ however, was the Cynic Diogenes of Sinope (400-323 BCE):

⁹ Garret Wallace Brown & David Held, “Editors Introduction” in *The Cosmopolitanism Reader*, red. G.W. Brown and D. Held (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010): 3.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 4.

‘By insisting that he was a universal citizen (kosmopolites), Diogenes was suggesting that “the morally good are all friends,” that we are all part of a fraternity of mankind and that as a member of the *cosmos* he could not be defined merely by his city-state affiliation. As a consequence, Diogenes held that all human beings are owed certain positive duties of hospitality and brotherly love, *as if they were* common citizens.’¹¹

Diogenes influenced other Cynic thinkers, and these again had their influence on the founder of Stoicism: Zeno of Citium (334-262 B.C.E.). Zeno interpreted the Cynics thought in a more positive sense by arguing for ‘a universal “city under one law”’ and ‘establishing a humanist brotherhood.’¹² In his turn, Zeno influenced following Stoic thinkers such as Marcus Cicero (106-43 B.C.E.), Seneca (4 B.C.E. – 65 C.E.) and Marcus Aurelius (121-80 C.E.). As becomes clear from these dates, the Stoic tradition was spread over almost half a millennium and is therefore hard to summarize. Nevertheless, in their introduction to *The Cosmopolitanism Reader*, Garrett Wallace Brown and David Held – Brown is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Politics at the University of Sheffield and Held is Graham Wallas Professor of Political Science at London School of Economics and Political Science – have distinguished three main features of the Stoic cosmopolitan thought. To begin with, many Stoics believed that human beings ‘share a similar capacity for reason and that this universal trait [...] establishes a basic foundation for human fraternity and universal community.’¹³

Further, they argued that because of this capacity for reason and, inextricably related with that, moral consciousness, human beings are part of one moral and political community. So every human being is part of two communities, one is that of the local community in which one was born and the other is that of whole humankind. Despite critiques, the Stoics and cosmopolitans in general, do not deny the importance of this first local community. As it is our place of birth we will always feel some sort of bond to this local community, but the fact remains that ‘from a moral point of view, there is no reason why one particular community has more intrinsic value than another.’¹⁴

¹¹ Brown & Held, 4.

¹² Ibidem, 4.

¹³ Ibidem, 4-5.

¹⁴ Ibidem, 5.

As we share this capacity for reason and the consequential moral and political traits, ‘we also share duties and obligations to other human beings as co-members of an earthly *cosmos*.’¹⁵ Then, arising from these ideas is the last common feature, which includes that ‘human reason should be in harmony with natural universal laws.’¹⁶ These were thought to be the teleological purpose of the universal capacity for reason, and when properly distilled, should be universally and eternally valid for the whole of human society.¹⁷

During the Middle Ages cosmopolitanism did not disappear but cosmopolitan thought and ideas about natural law were inspired from religion. In the Enlightenment, however, cosmopolitanism sees a true revival, in particular in the work of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). As Kant not only ‘offered a more sophisticated and practically oriented form of cosmopolitanism,’¹⁸ but also inspired the more contemporary writings on cosmopolitanism, I will continue the discussion with Kant here. His starting point on cosmopolitan thought was guided by the hope that, despite the ‘folly and childish vanity, and often childish malice and destructiveness’¹⁹ that seems to characterize humanity as a whole, that there is some underlying, guiding principle, unconsciously and indeterminately progressing humanity in general.

‘The only way out for the philosopher, since he cannot assume that mankind follows any rational *purpose of its own* in its collective actions, is for him to attempt to discover a *purpose in nature* behind this senseless course of human events, and decide whether it is after all possible to formulate in terms of a definite plan of nature a history of creatures who act without a plan of their own.’²⁰

Kant starts then by stating that all natural capacities of a creature are there for some kind of purpose. As human beings possess the natural capacity of reason, this reason must have an end, which eventually will be achieved. This capacity, however, cannot be fully developed within the individual, only within the species as a whole. By practicing reason and passing on knowledge from generation to generation, the human species will finally reach that degree of enlightenment

¹⁵ Ibidem, 5.

¹⁶ Brown & Held, 5.

¹⁷ Ibidem, 5-6.

¹⁸ Ibidem, 7.

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History” in *The Cosmopolitanism Reader*, ed. Garret Wallace Brown and David Held (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010): 17.

²⁰ Ibidem, 17.

as intended by nature. Nature gave human beings free will, based on reason instead of innate knowledge (instinct), and therefore intended that humanity produces everything it needs by the means of its own learned knowledge.²¹ From this proposition again originates the idea that men are characterized by an ‘unsocial sociability’,²² which Kant explains as follows:

‘Man has an inclination to *live in society*, since he feels in this state more like a man, that is, he feels able to develop his natural capacities. But he also has a great tendency to *live as an individual*, to isolate himself, since he also encounters himself the unsocial characteristic of wanting to direct everything in accordance with his own ideas.’²³

It is this antagonism, given by nature, which finally would lead to a law-governed order. The most difficult task of men, however, is to design and live in a society that offers the greatest freedom possible (which is necessary for the development of natural reason) to all inhabitants, which means that this freedom at the same time must be limited in order to co-exist with the freedom of others.²⁴ ‘The highest task which nature has set for mankind must therefore be that of establishing a society in which *freedom under external laws* would be combined to the greatest possible extent with irresistible force, in other words of establishing a perfect *just civil constitution*.’²⁵

In his sixth proposition, Kant argues that establishing a perfect just civil constitution will be the most difficult and last problem to be solved by men, since men then has to prevent itself from acting in accordance to egoistic self-will in favor of a universal valid will, which is just the problem when men are naturally given to prefer their own ideas. Furthermore, in order to establish such a constitution, we should first have an idea of the nature of such a constitution, experience obtained through trial and error over generations and primarily the will to accept the findings of this experience. Our unsocial sociability first has to lead us to solve the subordinate problem of law-governed external relationship with other states, as with state laws, the problem of unsocial sociability is only displaced from in-between individuals to in-between states.²⁶ What

²¹ Kant, 18-19.

²² Ibidem, 19.

²³ Ibidem, 19.

²⁴ Ibidem, 20.

²⁵ Ibidem, 20.

²⁶ Ibidem, 21-22.

we really need, says Kant, is to enter ‘a federation of peoples, in which every state, even the smallest, could expect to derive its security and rights [...] from a united power and the law-governed decisions of a united will.’²⁷ The sophisticated way in which states already were interacting with each other encourages for Kant the hope that ‘the highest purpose of nature, a universal *cosmopolitan existence*, will at last be realized.’²⁸

Despite the teleological nature of this theory, Kant’s theory has proven to be valuable even for contemporary thinkers. The idea that the world had become more and more interconnected, ‘to the point where human contact is unavoidable, and to such an extent that “a violation of rights in one part of the world is felt everywhere”,’²⁹ is a particularly important base of present cosmopolitan thought. Interconnection, resulting from globalization processes, is the most important argument for asserting that human beings have mutual responsibilities and obligations towards each other. This idea again, is founded on the idea of a shared characteristic inherent to the human species, which according to the cosmopolitan tradition is reason. Yet today, in television commercials for instance, also characteristics as love, friendship, joy and grief are used to express human similarity and community. Regardless of their diversity, in the end, these characteristics demonstrate that all human beings around the world are part of the same species, and therefore are equal.

Following Kant, Martha Nussbaum contends that humanity is characterized by the possession of reason and moral consciousness and that ‘we should recognize humanity wherever it occurs, and give its fundamental ingredients, reason and moral capacity, our first allegiance and respect.’³⁰ Reason and moral capacity are features shared by all human beings and at the same time the reason why we should take into account, respect and care about the lives of these other human beings: ‘We should view ourselves as fundamentally and deeply linked to humankind as a whole, and take thought in our deliberations both personal and political, for the good of the whole species.’³¹

To take thought in our deliberations means that we have certain moral obligations towards all human beings. But as Kant already argued, that we know we do, does not mean we

²⁷ Kant, 22.

²⁸ Ibidem, 25.

²⁹ Brown & Held, 8.

³⁰ Martha Nussbaum, ‘Kant and Cosmopolitanism’ in *The Cosmopolitanism Reader*, ed. Garret Wallace Brown and David Held (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010): 31.

³¹ Ibidem, 30.

will live and act according to this knowledge, as our egoism is likely to prevent this. Therefore we need some external basis from by which we can install these obligations. For this purpose, Kant offers the categorical imperative which amounts to the idea that one should treat others as one would like to treat others oneself:

‘It is in regard to determining what are correct rules of moral action that the idea of morality metaphysically necessitates practical synthetic *a priori* judgments of the *categorical imperative* which states: “act only according to the maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”³²

As might be clear, the categorical imperative corresponds with the idea that freedom should always be tested on being able to coexist with the freedom of every other.³³ But in daily practice these precepts are difficult to apply, as not every individual has the same ideas about what he likes and dislikes and what is freedom and what is not. Hence, it is better to design a (universal) valid law, by which it is possible to monitor the compliance with it and to impose sanctions on offenders. For many contemporary cosmopolitans, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is such a universal law. Before, more fully focusing on this law, however, let me first explore some ideas on the practical realization of cosmopolitanism in general.

As Kok-Chor Tan emphasizes, there is a difference between institutional, moral, juridical and cultural cosmopolitanism. Institutional cosmopolitanism, in its most extreme form, can be described as the realization of ‘a world state and the subsequent outright rejection of national self-determination’.³⁴ This interpretation of institutional cosmopolitanism is, however, quite undesirable because its realization in a democratic design – which can be considered the form of governance that is most in line with cosmopolitanism – is very problematic due to its large scale. The individual would feel very insignificant and moreover, it would be very hard to make political decisions and reach agreements, because of the many different voices that have to be represented. Secondly, such a world state resolves all nations which goes against the human need for identification and security within a clearly defined structure to which the individual feels to

³² Garret Wallace Brown, “Kant’s Cosmopolitanism” in *The Cosmopolitanism Reader*, ed. Garret Wallace Brown and David Held (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010): 47.

³³ Garret Wallace Brown, 47.

³⁴ Kok-Chor Tan, “Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism” in *The Cosmopolitanism Reader*, ed. Garret Wallace Brown and David Held (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010): 182.

belong. Naturally, regional, local and for instance familial ties could serve this purpose, but the nation, just because it is politically self-determining, can work as an important identity marker that is essential to the identity of the individual, which is nowadays already under friction from globalization.

It is obvious that institutional cosmopolitanism should not take such an extreme form, even Kant argues for a federation of peoples in which separate states persist. National states should remain intact, but this does not mean that, next to this, there could and should be a universal form of law as well. Thus, we come to speak of juridical cosmopolitanism. Yet, this law must be based on a certain ethics so moral cosmopolitanism has to be involved first. To reach universal moral agreement, though it is essential, is extremely difficult. On the one hand we are tended to think that values are not as subjective as we might think, but on the other hand Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that facts are not as fixed as we might think either.³⁵ It is important to acknowledge that moral language contains an open texture and that it is essentially contestable. As it is not always possible to reach consensus about values and the sharing of certain values does not mean that the limits of application of these values are shared as well,³⁶ Appiah states that sometimes all we can strive for is getting used to each other's differing ideas.

As for cultural cosmopolitanism, Appiah argues for a universalism of pluralism,³⁷ in which cultural mixture, instead of cultural purity, is the starting point. In fact, he asserts, cultural purity is an oxymoron, because culture is a heterogeneous concept.³⁸ Appiah sees cosmopolitanism only possible in a world order of different republics that despite differences are connected through humanity. They do not have to share one equal identity, but can share the simple fact that they are part of humanity.³⁹ This does sound a bit naïve, but despite Appiah's notion of a universalism of pluralism, not all moral values have become relative. The author emphasizes that human beings have obligations to other human beings to make sure universal values are being protected. Not only because we are all human, but also because in this globalized society almost everything we do, has consequences for other people. The question is not *if* we owe something to strangers, but *how much* we owe to strangers. It is clear to Appiah

³⁵ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (London: Penguin Books, 2006): 1-44.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 60-67.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 144.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 113.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, 135.

that we have to help underdeveloped countries, in order to provide their citizens with decent lives. How much a person or country exactly should do to protect these universal values and help other people to the means for a decent life, depends upon what is within their power to do. Appiah suggests that the best way to help might be to look at the cause of the harm, and look at where it went wrong in the past, to make sure our efforts and financial aid are used in the best possible way.⁴⁰

Still, in practice Appiah's approach does not bring us much further in the agreement on universal values. Hence, it might be helpful to look at Jeremy Waldron who approaches the problems on reaching agreement on cosmopolitan values by looking at processes of (national) identity construction. The construction of national identities and national belonging, he argues, is often based on the accentuation of cultural differences. According to Waldron, this tendency is not advantageous for the realization of cosmopolitanism, because when, say, values are observed just because they are tradition (and not because their use can be explained in terms of qualitative features), they are non-negotiable. This will not be helpful when one has to come to terms with another on an international or cosmopolitan level.⁴¹ Besides, Waldron argues, "the "essence" of culture (if indeed that idea makes sense) need not consist in its distinctiveness".⁴²

A similar point is being made by Will Kymlicka, who argues that in international (and if realized cosmopolitan) politics the national interests will always precede and drown the cosmopolitan interests, as the

'legitimate authority of higher-level political bodies depends on this ongoing process of debate and consent at the national level. These decisions are made on the basis of what serves the national interest (and not on the basis of what serves the interests of, say, Europe as a whole).'⁴³

This point of critique certainly does not sound very strange to us. We all know, for instance from the United Nations, as from the more current treaties on the environment, and relative inactivity

⁴⁰ Appiah, 155-174.

⁴¹ Jeremy Waldron, "What is Cosmopolitanism?" in *The Cosmopolitanism Reader*, ed. Garret Wallace Brown and David Held (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010): 165-169.

⁴² Waldron, 167.

⁴³ Will Kymlicka, "Citizenship in an Era of Globalization" in *The Cosmopolitanism Reader*, ed. Garret Wallace Brown and David Held (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010): 441.

in the current political conflicts in the Middle East, that national interests often do get more priority than cosmopolitan ones. So there we are just where we began, despite the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the incentive for juridical cosmopolitanism (national self-interests still conflict with cosmopolitan, universal, interests. And this is exactly where the cosmopolitan discourse has stranded. Yet at the same time this conflict is exactly what makes cosmopolitanism so important.

NATIONAL SOVEREIGN STATES AND THE UNIVERSAL RIGHTS OF MEN

Seyla Benhabib – Eugene Meyer Professor of Political Science and Philosophy at Yale University – has explored this problem extensively. In her book *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens* as well as in *Another Cosmopolitanism* (2006) (which was based on a series of lectures at Berkeley, University of California), Benhabib discusses the relationship between national and universal legislation and the paradoxes and contradictions this relationship contains. First there is the paradox of democratic legitimacy, which results from the tension between liberalism and democracy. This means that the democratic sovereignty is at the same time based upon and constrained by universal rights.⁴⁴ We believe that we are all autonomous, free human beings and therefore have the right to vote, but at the same time this right is restricted to a certain group of people (to citizenship of a nation). The second paradox is the contradiction between state sovereignty on the one hand and universal rights on the other. Benhabib argues that the sovereignty of states often overrules universal rights. A good example is this:

‘[...], while right to seek asylum is recognized as a human right, the *obligation to grant asylum* continues to be jealously guarded by states as a sovereign privilege.’⁴⁵

In this way, universal rights do not function properly, as they still can be hampered by state sovereignty. Arguments of the state sovereign in defending its right to decide on the granting of asylum are often connected to notions of self-preservation. But of course the question is, when

⁴⁴ Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2004): 44-45.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 69.

opposed to the moral needs of others, what are legitimate reasons for self-preservation?⁴⁶ ‘Does the preservation of culture constitute a legitimate basis of self-preservation?’⁴⁷ When we treat culture and national identity as non-fixed, like Benhabib does, it certainly is not. Rightly she asks: ‘Why exactly is closure necessary to maintain the distinctiveness of cultures and groups?’⁴⁸ Indeed it might be obvious that (national) identity is never static, but always under construction. Moreover, as was mentioned by Appiah already, identity is not homogeneous, and contains internal differences and conflicts. ‘The other is not elsewhere.’⁴⁹

Building on the work of Hannah Arendt, Benhabib argues that because of the paradox between universal rights and the democratic sovereignty, refugees in a sense lose their right to have rights.⁵⁰ Democracies are bordered, in the sense that its laws are written by and apply to the people that belong to it. Therefore, there is need for the possibility of interferences in the operation of sovereign states and this can only be done by some sort of democratic institution that above all, is dedicated to the maintenance of cosmopolitan values, in other words an institution that checks political rule with the universal rights of men as its central focus.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, 36.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, 36.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, 120.

⁴⁹ Benhabib, 87.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, 49-69.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The public sphere is a concept particularly famous for its thorough discussion by Jürgen Habermas (1929), a German sociologist and social philosopher. In his ‘Habilitationsschrift’ *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit 1962), Habermas chose to study the history of the public sphere and its importance for the functioning of democracy.⁵¹ By focusing on the social category of the eighteenth century bourgeois societies in France, Germany and Great-Britain he makes a general analysis of the rise, fulfillment and degradation of the public sphere:

‘His aim is the exploration of the prerequisites for democracy, which for him is linked to the implementation of reason, truth, morals and justice in political life. In true enlightenment fashion Habermas finds the main support for such a democratic political culture in public political reasoning in an environment in which the individual can speak freely and arguments are not distorted by fear or political or social power. Thus, the chief purpose of the book was to understand and criticize the threat to democracy resulting from the decline of such a critical public sphere in late capitalist society.’⁵²

Nowadays *Structural Transformation* is known as a true classic, not only for sociologists and philosophers, but also for media and communication studies, historical -, cultural - and political studies, but just as well for liberation action groups. The concept of the public sphere has been the subject of debate ever since the publication of the book, and even more since its belated translation into English in 1989. In order to evaluate the value of the public sphere for contemporary cosmopolitan contexts, in this chapter I will provide an answer to the following questions: How did the public sphere come into being? How did it function? And why did it decline? What are the most prominent critiques on the public sphere? How does the public sphere relate to the Internet as a relatively new medium? And finally, how can we define the public sphere, when taken out of its eighteenth century’s bourgeois context?

⁵¹ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

⁵² Andreas Gestrich, “The Public Sphere and the Habermas Debate” *German History* 3(2006): 415.

THE RISE OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Habermas describes the rise of the eighteenth century's public sphere as a consequence of socio-economic developments. As I have mentioned, his work is focused on Great-Britain, France and Germany in which politics have developed very differently, but the economic developments were quite alike.⁵³ Habermas begins his argument by claiming that during the Middle Ages a division within society, between 'the public' and 'the private', did not exist. The only form of 'publicity' that existed, was, quite literally, being embodied by the king. The lordship was represented *before* the people. Habermas calls this feudal form of publicity the 'publicity of representation' or 'representative publicity' and describes it as a mere status attribute:⁵⁴

'He [the king/lord] displayed himself, presented himself as an embodiment of some sort of "higher" power. [...] Representation in the sense in which the members of a national assembly represent a nation or a lawyer represents his clients had nothing to do with this publicity of representation inseparable from the lord's concrete existence, that, as an "aura," surrounded and endowed his authority. When the territorial ruler convened about him ecclesiastical and worldly lords, knights, prelates, and cities (or as in the German Empire until 1806 when the Emperor invited the princes and bishops, Imperial counts, Imperial towns, and abbots to the Imperial Diet), this was not a matter of an assembly of delegates that was someone else's representative. As long as the prince and the estates of his realm "were" the country and not just its representatives, they could represent it in a specific sense. They represented their lordship not for but "before" the people.'⁵⁵

In the eighteenth century, when the estates split up in private elements (the court and the church) and public elements (the bureaucracy, the military and to some extent the administration of justice,) the modern state comes into being and a division between public and private starts to take shape.⁵⁶ 'Out of the estates, finally the elements of political prerogative developed into

⁵³ Habermas, Chap. 1.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, 7.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, 7-8.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, 11.

organs of public authority: partly into a parliament, and partly into judicial organs.⁵⁷ These represent the new publicity, that of public authority. In opposition to this depersonalised state authority, a domain of private autonomy based on occupational status came into being. This domain then represents the rise of civil society and along with it the emergence of the private domain.⁵⁸

According to Habermas the emergence of early finance and trade capitalism, starting from the thirteenth century, contributed to the evolvment of this new social order. In fact, the introduction of traffic in commodities and news, centered in towns and local markets as characteristic elements of the new commercial relationships of early capitalist long-distance trade, directly contribute to the realization of a public sphere.⁵⁹

From the thirteenth century on, a horizontal network of economic dependencies begins to take shape, next to the vertical regulation of the commercial exchange by the estates, as travelling merchants, in order to be successful in their trade, become dependent on information from elsewhere. Starting as letter carrying by merchants themselves; via the rise of official letter delivering guilds; to postal services, and finally, at the end of the seventeenth century, with the emergence of commercial press institutions, a regular communication system comes into being. Commercial towns then not only are connected by trade routes, but also by continuous communication concerning economical affairs. Initially, these news items were solely meant for merchants and traders, but from the end of the seventeenth century the news becomes accessible to the general public.⁶⁰

In the form of weekly published political journals, a residual part of the actual news, which was not considered important by the merchants (who still kept their own private newsletters) or censored by the government, reached the public. The news items presented were not exclusively commercial by nature: also news from abroad, from the court and more traditional news about ‘miracle cures and thunderstorms, the murders, pestilences, and burnings’⁶¹ was presented. These journals were often published by the same companies that were

⁵⁷ Habermas, 12.

⁵⁸ Ibidem, 12.

⁵⁹ Ibidem, 14-15.

⁶⁰ Ibidem, 15-17.

⁶¹ Ibidem, 21.

specialized in the correspondence in the more exclusive newsletters, and saw commercial potential in the publication of news to the general public:⁶²

‘Each item of information contained in a letter had its price; it was therefore natural to increase the profits by selling to more people. This in itself was already sufficient reason periodically to print a portion of the available news material and to sell it anonymously, thus giving it publicity.’⁶³

In the seventeenth century news thus becomes a commodity of its own. But, as Habermas emphasizes, with this development the rise of a critical public sphere is not yet complete. What was even more important, is the way in which new state authorities began to make use of the press for administrative purposes. By the means of ordinances and instructions the authorities ‘sold’ their administrative measures under the guise of public interest.⁶⁴ However, the result of such proclamations was not only a better facilitation of their administration. By explicitly informing the public, which now came to refer to the population in general, the authorities made their administration a public affair. And doing this, quite unintended as Habermas seems to suggest, resulted in critical evaluation of this administration by the public. What had happened is that the authorities, by proclaiming their administration as beneficial for the general public, they automatically solicited for the criticism of it, by the general public.

Although the authorities addressed their promulgations to the public in general, so, to all subjects, it were merely the educated classes that received the news. The bourgeoisie, or middle class, which had arisen along with the modern state and consisted of officials, doctors, pastors, officers, professors, scholars, schoolteachers and scribes but also of ‘capitalists’, like merchants, bankers, entrepreneurs and manufacturers, occupied a central position within ‘the public’.⁶⁵ Not only was the bourgeoisie an educated group of people, and consequently a reading public, but also, a large part of its people belonged to those occupational groups that had most to do with the authorities’ regulations and control. And although the authorities’ measures also had their influence on the life of every consumer, and thus affected a much broader audience, it is not

⁶² Habermas, 21.

⁶³ Ibidem, 21.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, 21-22.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, 22-23.

strange that these ‘taxes and duties and, generally, official interventions into the privatized household finally came to constitute the target of a developing critical sphere’⁶⁶ centered in the bourgeoisie:

‘In this stratum, which more than any other was affected *and* called upon by mercantilist policies, the state authorities evoked a resonance leading the *publicum*, the abstract counterpart of the public authority, into an awareness of itself as the latter’s opponent, that is, as the public of the now emerging *public sphere of civil society*.’⁶⁷

From the above it becomes clear that the public sphere was a sphere of critical opinion formed by the bourgeois public against state authority. Furthermore, and more significant even, Habermas defines the public sphere as a critical sphere because ‘that zone of continuous administrative contact became “critical” also in the sense that it provoked the critical judgment of a public making use of its reason.’⁶⁸ So the use of reason is what makes the public sphere truly a critical sphere.

For now, however, it is important to emphasize that this critical public sphere was facilitated by the press. The same press that had opened up public affairs to society. All the bourgeois public now had to do was slightly adjust the function of the press, so that it would not only inform them, were it about economical or administrative topics, but also would provide space for criticism.⁶⁹ And accordingly it evolved at the last third of the seventeenth century, when ‘journals were complemented by periodicals containing not primarily information but pedagogical instructions and even criticism and reviews.’⁷⁰ Still, this was not such an abrupt turning point as it seems. For, originally these learned articles, as they were called, were closely linked to the authorities’ instructions, and scholars had to write what was assigned to them. But as Habermas continues: ‘In this instance the bourgeois writers still made use of their reason at the behest of the territorial ruler; soon they were to think their own thoughts, directed against the authorities’.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Habermas, 24.

⁶⁷ Ibidem, 23.

⁶⁸ Ibidem, 24.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, 24.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, 24-25.

⁷¹ Ibidem, 25.

Apart from the emergence of public and private domains, and the development of the commercial press, Habermas argues that the rise of the public sphere was facilitated by, what he calls, social structures. The first social structure is that of the bourgeois family, and the role of the individual within it and the second is the development of the so called 'literary public sphere' or 'the public sphere of the world of letters'. Both these structures intertwined as '[f]or example, early novels helped to circulate a vision of intimate sentimentality, communicating to the members of the literary public sphere just how they should understand the heart of private life.'⁷²

The bourgeois family, originating from the capitalist economy, characterized by the fact that it owned property, was protected from interference from the state by private law and consequently considered itself to be autonomous. Because the bourgeois family was economically speaking relatively independent (and secure), the necessities of life were but a peripheral matter and intimate family life became the focus. Inspired on novels read by individual bourgeois family members and discussed in the literary public spheres in salons, table societies and coffee houses, family life was ideologically concerned with the experience of humanity. Despite its patriarchal structure, individual family members now were able to identify themselves on the basis of their humanity for they believed 'that there was something essential to humanness that economic or other status could not take away.'⁷³ This belief would later be the most important critique on the exclusivity of the bourgeois public sphere.

What is important here, however, is that the bourgeois individual did not only experience itself to be economically autonomous (which in fact was not the case because the bourgeois family was subjected to the rules of the market), but consequently also experienced itself to be autonomous as a human being. The intimate sphere of the family provided the individual with self-definition of its subjectivity within the family, nurtured by the literary public sphere, but also as an individual within human society as a whole. There, the bourgeois individual was not only property owner but also a human being. Political emancipation (due to the protection under private law) was being identified with human emancipation, which later provided the bourgeoisie with legitimization to speak for the public in general.⁷⁴

⁷² Craig Calhoun, 'Introduction' in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992): 10.

⁷³ Calhoun, 11.

⁷⁴ Habermas, 28-29, 55-56.

Hence the literary public sphere, in combination with the conjugal family, contributed to a new definition of the self as a human being: a matter of content. But the literary public sphere contributed to the rise of the ‘final’ political public sphere in two matters of form as well. The first is the so called ‘audience-oriented’ subjectivity that arose from ideal types offered by the sentimental literature read in the public sphere of the world of letters. As the whole family could read books, and, for instance in France, women could participate in the literary salons as well, these ideal types could be discussed within the intimate sphere and played out and staged before the other family members.⁷⁵ This audience oriented subjectivity provided the bourgeois individual with a sense of self that would also define the later political public sphere:

‘To be sure, before the public sphere explicitly assumed political functions in the tension-charged field of state-society relations, the subjectivity originating in the intimate sphere of the conjugal family created, so to speak, its own public. Even before the control over the public sphere by public authority was contested and finally wrested away by the critical reasoning of private persons on political issues, there evolved under its cover a public sphere in apolitical form – the literary precursor of the public sphere operative in the political domain.’⁷⁶

As I have mentioned above the literary public sphere was characterized by the bourgeois individuals who went to theatre performances or concerts, read books and periodicals and then discussed these with others in the French salons, English coffee houses or German table societies. Accordingly, it were these institutions that represent the second formal contribution to the public sphere, as all became forums for art and literary criticism. By promoting the use of public reason in exercising these forms of criticism, they functioned as a preparation for the later political public sphere:

‘The process in which the state-governed public sphere was appropriated by the public of private people making use of their reason and was established as a sphere of criticism of

⁷⁵ Calhoun, 11.

⁷⁶ Habermas, 29.

public authority was one of functionally converting the public sphere in the world of letters already equipped with institutions of the public and with forums of discussion.⁷⁷

Habermas describes the true, political, public sphere as evolving from the literary public sphere. This happened in the eighteenth century first in Great-Britain, then in France and even later in Germany, when public discussions started to deal with 'objects connected to the activity of state.'⁷⁸

THE POLITICAL FUNCTIONS OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

'The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar reason (*öffentliches Raisonement*).⁷⁹

Despite their different composed and sized publics, organization, topics of discussion and the style of their debates,⁸⁰ the salons, coffeehouses and table societies that were at the basis of both the literary and political public sphere, all had three criteria in common: firstly, they 'disregarded status altogether'⁸¹ in order to make sure that the only way to gain authority was through the arguments presented; secondly, its discussion involved areas that before were never touched upon by the public (only by the authorities and aristocracy); thirdly, the public was seen as, in principle, inclusive.⁸²

As Habermas admits, in practice the public sphere was not inclusive at all. Although in the literary public sphere, as opposed to the political one, women had their share in the salons, still a large part of the population was excluded. People without property were not considered to be

⁷⁷ Habermas, 51.

⁷⁸ Jürgen Habermas, 'The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article' (1964), trans. Sarah Lennox & Frank Lennox, *New German Critique* 3 (1974): 50.

⁷⁹ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 27.

⁸⁰ Ibidem, 36.

⁸¹ Ibidem, 36

⁸² Ibidem, 36-36.

autonomous and uneducated people were just not equipped for the discussion. Not surprisingly it is the lack of true inclusiveness that will finally prove to be problematic for the preservation of an active public sphere. But before plunging into that discussion it is important first to look at the central issues discussed in the political public sphere.

The topics of political discussion were not just political matters as those known to be discussed before, but concerned questions on the legitimacy of domination by an absolute ruler. An important aspect of this discussion was the possibility of constitutional law as opposed to absolute sovereignty. Law was thus seen in a new light: '[it] guaranteed not merely justice in the sense of a duly acquired right, but legality by means of the enactment of general and abstract norms'.⁸³ Rule should be based on what was just in a universal and permanent (or general and abstract) matter. The criterion of the ignorance of status and consequently the rule of the better argument made the public sphere the ultimate context for the practice of 'that morally pretentious rationality that strove to discover what was at once just and right'.⁸⁴ Moreover the public sphere was based on the use of reason and publicity, which stood opposed to the arbitrariness and secrecy that characterized the creation of laws by princely authority.⁸⁵

Here as well, the press played an important part in the public sphere by the means of critical journals which not only facilitated the discussion, but also displayed the public opinion, which more and more tried to legitimate itself in order to become the source of law: '[...] *opinion publique* alone had insight into and made visible the *ordre naturel* so that, in the form of general norms, the enlightened monarch could then make the latter the basis of his action; in this way they hoped to bring rule into convergence with reason.'⁸⁶ Naturally the authorities did respond to these criticisms by the means of censorship. That is why Habermas claims that 'the elimination of the institution of censorship marked a new stage in the development of the public sphere',⁸⁷ as only then the public was informed enough to form a considered opinion.

More important for political functioning of the public sphere, however, is the liberal economy by which the privatization of civil society was completed, and the bourgeois society reckons to be truly autonomous.

⁸³ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 53.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, 54.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, 53.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, 55.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, 58.

‘According to civil society’s idea of itself, the system of free competition was self-regulating; indeed, only on the presupposition that no extra-economic agency interfered with the transactions in the market did the latter promise to function in a fashion that ensured everyone’s welfare and justice in accord with the standard of the individuals capacity to perform. The society solely governed by the laws of the free market presented itself not only as a sphere free from domination but as one free from any kind of coercion [...].’⁸⁸

After liberal economists, the laws of the market were considered a natural order, which made civil society (being dependent on this market) a neutral category regarding power and domination.⁸⁹ The participators of the public sphere could now claim, because they saw themselves as a neutral factor regarding power and domination, that they were justified to supervise and criticize dominating power, the public authorities. In order to do so, they demanded that administrative proceedings were made public. Therefore, they did not claim power for themselves as such, but they transformed the nature of power by tying it to the principle of publicity.⁹⁰ It is then, in the nineteenth century’s bourgeois constitutional state, as Habermas argues, that the public sphere finally reaches its complete (but temporary) realization, when state functions are bound to general norms, like that of publicity, and civil liberties like ‘freedom of opinion and speech, freedom of press, freedom of assembly and association, [...] right of petition, equality of vote, etc.’⁹¹ are guaranteed by the means of bourgeois civil law.⁹² This civil law can be treated as a translation of the laws of the liberal economy towards the political realm because it ‘was to be equally binding for everyone; in principle, no one was to enjoy a dispensation or privilege’.⁹³

By accepting a bourgeois civil law the authorities tried to eliminate accusations of domination, because ‘a legislation that had recourse to public opinion thus could not be explicitly

⁸⁸ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 79.

⁸⁹ Calhoun, 16.

⁹⁰ Habermas, ‘The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article’, 52.

⁹¹ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 83.

⁹² *Ibidem*, 79-80.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, 80.

considered as domination'.⁹⁴ The problem for the bourgeois public was, however, that the obvious struggle for this legislation they had finally won from the old powers made them the new dominators for two reasons: firstly, the public sphere and the constitutional bourgeois state were confined to a select few of the total population, but claiming to represent 'public opinion'. This ran counter to the central objectives of the public sphere, which was inclusive in principle and argued against any form of inequality.⁹⁵ Secondly, the bourgeois public was not neutral at all, as the bourgeois were property owners with the private interests. Although the state now had no say in the market, the laws of the market are never natural but always bound to private interests. So despite the idea of the bourgeois that participates as a human being, the property owning part of this double role in the public sphere could not be ignored.

The public sphere's general defense would be that the liberal economy, in principle, provided the opportunity for every individual to become a property owner and thus become a part of the public sphere. The public sphere was said not only to be inclusive because of the representation of general, abstract interests that would benefit the human being in common, but also because every individual was believed to have a chance to become a participant, a belief based on the laws of the liberal economy.⁹⁶ Of course this argument is not considered to be credible today, nor was it at that time as soon attempts were made to make the public sphere more inclusive. With the introduction of general suffrage and the development of the social welfare state, the public sphere loses its coherence, because many different interests are now competing with each other. The constitutional bourgeois state that fully realized the public sphere is at the same time the beginning of its transformation and consequent degradation.

THE STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

As I have noted before, the most important characteristic of the public sphere was its use of reason in critical discussion. This meant that public opinion was achieved under the incentive of rationality, which guaranteed the moral validity and universality of its outcome. Habermas bases this description of the public sphere on several intellectuals of which Immanuel Kant occupies the most important position. Kant connects the acquirement of 'enlightenment' to only one

⁹⁴ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 82.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, 82.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, 85-87.

condition, which is freedom. Freedom makes it possible for individuals to come together as a public, which is beneficial for the acquirement of enlightenment because, as Habermas quotes Kant:

‘For any single individual to work himself out of the life under tutelage which has almost become its nature is very difficult. ... But that the *public* should enlighten itself is more possible; indeed, if only freedom is granted, enlightenment is almost sure to follow. [...] Certainly one may say, “Freedom to speak or write can be taken from us by a superior power, but never the freedom to think!” But how much, and how correctly, would we think if we did not think as it were in common with others, with whom we mutually communicate!’⁹⁷

The use of public reason is, according to Habermas however, exactly what is lacking within what is left of today’s public sphere. The disappearance of rational-critical public debate has to do with several social-structural transformations in the public sphere. The first change is what Habermas calls the process of ‘refeudalisation’ of modern society. From the last quarter of the nineteenth century the state increases interventions in the economy and society. This ‘neomercantilist’ policy went accompanied by society taking over functions of public authority.⁹⁸

‘The new interventionism of the waning nineteenth century was embraced by a state that in virtue of the constitutionalization [...] of a political public sphere tended to adopt the interests of civil society as its own. As a result, the interventions by public power in the affairs of private people transmitted impulses that indirectly grew out of the latter’s own sphere. Interventionism had its origin in the transfer onto a political level of such conflicts of interest as could no longer be settled within the private sphere alone. Consequently, in the long run state intervention in the sphere of society found its counterpart in the transfer of public functions to private corporate bodies. Likewise, the opposite process connected to the extension of public authority over sectors of the private

⁹⁷ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 104.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, 141-142.

realm. Only this dialectic of a progressive “societalization” of the state simultaneously with an increasing “stateification” of society gradually destroyed the basis of the bourgeois public sphere – the separation of state and society.’⁹⁹

With this mutual infiltration of the public and the private, state and society, the ultimate conditions for the realization of a public sphere – that is, a separation of the public and the private – were made being undone. These changes in the social structures of the public sphere, Habermas argues, have caused the downfall of the public sphere. As the relationship between the public sphere and the private realm have transformed, the political functions of the public sphere have started to shift as well, to the point where we might even no longer speak of a public sphere (in the Habermasian sense) at all.¹⁰⁰ But before focusing on the political-functional changes, there are some more changes in the social structures to discuss.

With the development of large industrial enterprises the world of work and organization, which used to be a realm of private control for the bourgeois family, now becomes part of the social domain. The occupational sphere becomes independent and reduces the private sphere solely to the intimate conjugal family. But the private sphere in reality is no longer private, because with the loss of property ownership to individual incomes, the family lost the possibility of self-support and self-provision. These functions are taken over by the state, so instead of the family that takes care of itself, the individual is protected publicly. The individual now not only receives financial support, but also educational support, healthcare and guidance in upbringing. With the disappearance of the production from the bourgeois family, the modern bourgeois becomes consumer in two ways: first as individual receiver of income and leisure time and second, as individual receiver of public compensations and support services.¹⁰¹

Habermas is critical of this transformation because the intimate sphere is only private in illusion. The domestic domain is no longer institutionally protected, as it was under the name of private property rights during the liberal era, but directly influenced by semipublic authorities.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 142.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, 142-143.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, 151-156.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*, 159.

‘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.’¹⁰³

‘Today, instead of this, the latter [the public sphere in the world of letters] 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.’¹⁰⁴

With the loss of its role as property owner the bourgeois individual also loses its role as a human being, because it was exactly the autonomy resulting from its property ownership that made it possible for the bourgeois to identify with the idea of the natural person, the human being as part of a public of private people.¹⁰⁵ As this autonomy disappeared, the participation of the bourgeois in the public sphere was replaced by passive, uncritical consumption:

‘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.’¹⁰⁶

Nevertheless, rational-critical debate did not disappear as a whole, but became itself a consumption product. In the form of staged debates, panel discussions and round table shows, the (late) modern consumer is presented by the media with a pre-selected range of arguments, bound to certain rules over which it has no control. ‘Critical debate arranged in this manner certainly fulfills important social-psychological functions, especially that of a tranquilizing substitute for action; however, it increasingly loses its publicist function.’¹⁰⁷ These words by Habermas not only imply a passive consumer, but also the disappearance of transparency and

¹⁰³ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 159.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, 162.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*, 160-161.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, 163.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, 164.

supervision: publicity is being replaced by the will of the mass media that is surrounded by secrecy. Therefore, also in this sense we could speak of a process of refeudalization, for power over information is now based on the arbitrary will of certain media institutions, instead of being based upon publicity that guarantees rationality.

Another change is the influence of the market on the content of cultural products. Where before cultural products were indeed selected and distributed by the workings of the market, now the content of many cultural products is adapted as well, in order to make the products attractive to a larger public.

‘Indeed, mass-culture has earned its rather dubious name precisely by achieving increased sales by adapting to the need for relaxation and entertainment on the part of the consumer strata with relatively little education, rather than through the guidance of an enlarged public toward the appreciation of a culture undamaged in its substance.’¹⁰⁸

This practice stands opposed to the eighteenth century when ‘[t]he “people” were brought up to the level of culture; culture was not lowered to that of the masses’.¹⁰⁹ It began with the commercialization of cultural products that resulted in low prices and thus economic availability for everyone. The downside of it was that the masses, now economically able to purchase, for instance, newspapers, were not intellectually equipped to understand these. So the entrance requirements were also transformed in a psychological fashion ‘[...] with the depoliticization of its content – by eliminating political news and political editorials on such moral topics as intemperance and gambling.’¹¹⁰

The role of the new media, at the time of Habermas’ writing limited to, radio, film and television, is asserted to have been even more important for the disappearance of critical discussion, because the little distance that still existed between the printed letter and the reader, was reduced to a minimum.¹¹¹ Their consumption is characterized by such a high level of immediacy that the receiver is not able to transcend its content and to look at it more critically,

¹⁰⁸ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 165.

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem, 166.

¹¹⁰ Ibidem, 169.

¹¹¹ Ibidem, 170.

but is immersed in it, penetrated by it and placed ‘under “tutelage,” which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree’.¹¹²

‘The critical discussion of a reading public tends to give way to “exchanges about tastes and preferences” between consumers – even the talk about what is consumed, “the examination of tastes,” becomes a part of consumption itself.’¹¹³

This leads Habermas to conclude that ‘[t]he world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only’.¹¹⁴ What truly happens in this new quasi-public sphere is that it is used to manipulate the public, instead of informing it and stimulating rational discussion. This results in public opinion that in essence is nonpublic, because it is created, fake and manipulated by private interests of economic and political powers.

‘Originally publicity guaranteed the connection between rational-critical public debate and the legislative foundation of domination, including the critical supervision of its exercise. Now it makes possible the peculiar ambivalence of a domination exercised through the domination of nonpublic opinion: it serves the manipulation *of* the public as much as legitimation *before* it. Critical publicity is supplanted by manipulative publicity.’¹¹⁵

Now, as the press was the facilitator of not only the literary but also the political the public sphere, changes in its functioning logically result in a transformation in the political functions of the public sphere as well. As these are an extension of the changes in the literary public sphere, I can be rather short about them. What Habermas emphasizes, is that the political public sphere is being controlled from the outside, instead of, from the inside. Public relations, the political variant of advertising, have become the tool to manage public opinion.

‘It bestows on its object the authority of an object of public interest about which – this is the illusion to be created – the public of critically reflecting private people freely forms

¹¹² Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 171.

¹¹³ *Ibidem*, 171.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 171.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 178.

its opinion. “Engineering of consent” is the central task, for only in the climate of such a consensus does “promotion to the ‘public,’ suggesting or urging acceptance or rejection of a person, product, organization, or idea,” succeed. The awakened readiness of the consumers involves the false consciousness that as critically reflecting private people they contribute responsibly to public opinion.’¹¹⁶

What is worrying about this development is that opinion management has been taken up by the state itself. Instead of political parties treating the people as citizens, they are treated as consumers. ‘The parties are instruments for the formation of an effective political will; they are not, however, in the hands of the public but in the hands of those who control the party apparatus.’¹¹⁷ Political parties again are heavily influenced by special-interest associations. As a result politics, and what is left of the public sphere, are reduced to the presentation and justification of party lines and policies, while the opposition attacks these. Both try to win the public, by manipulating them by the means of their public relations. This all happens, instead of a politics characterized by a debate, open to publicity, focused on what was good for society in general that remained transparent and ‘the public’ critically could control it.¹¹⁸

Habermas finally concludes by posing that modern public opinion is not the same as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’ public opinion. Today public opinion is based on manipulative publicity, instead of critical publicity, so it is in fact non-public.¹¹⁹ How we should make public opinion rational-critical again, and thus truly public, Habermas is quite vague:

‘Institutionalized in the mass democracy of the social-welfare state no differently than in the bourgeois constitutional state, the idea of publicity (at one time the rationalization of domination in the medium of the critical public debate of private people) is today realizable only as a rationalization – limited, of course, because of the plurality of organized private interests – of the exercise of societal and political power under mutual

¹¹⁶ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 194.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 203.

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 203-206.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 236-244.

control of rival organizations themselves committed to publicity as regards both their internal structure and their interaction with one another and with the state.’¹²⁰

But why these organizations, with which Habermas refers to parties, parastatal agencies and bureaucracies,¹²¹ would be committed to publicity in the first place, and how this publicity in specific terms would function, remains unclear.

CRITIQUES ON HABERMAS’ PUBLIC SPHERE

Although Habermas’ complex discussion of the transformation of the public sphere is considered to be a classic work and still relevant for both study and research purposes, at the same time it has raised tremendous critiques. As I will not be able to capture this complete body of critique in this thesis, nor would it be relevant, I will limit the discussion in this section to three topics. These topics are idealization, structure-agency and exclusiveness. I have chosen these because they were among those critiques most discussed in articles on Habermas’ public sphere, but more important, because they are relevant for a discussion of the possibility of a contemporary public sphere, which I will set out in the next chapter.

Let me begin with the topic of idealization. In his article ‘The Public Sphere and the Habermas Debate’ (2006) Andreas Gestrinch – former professor of modern history at Trier University and currently director of the German Historical Institute London – discusses the most formulated critiques on Habermas, and the consequential new interpretations on ‘the historical forces that transformed political public spheres in western Europe’¹²² in order to ‘open up perspectives for a new comprehensive framework of interpretation that is less at odds with wider historical developments and contexts than Habermas’s own account’.¹²³ Although one can argue whether Gestrinch does succeed in this last objective, his description of Habermas’ idealization of the bourgeois public sphere is very plausible. Naturally, when reading Habermas’ description of the public sphere – and his slightly depressing exposition of its decline – it is not hard to experience some reluctance towards this apparently perfect eighteenth century’s social category.

¹²⁰ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 210.

¹²¹ Calhoun, 28.

¹²² Andreas Gestrinch, ‘The Public Sphere and the Habermas Debate’: 414.

¹²³ *Ibidem*, 414.

Gestrich, however, takes the argument a step further by explaining this ideal type as the result of a ‘mirror image construction,’¹²⁴ that constructs the bourgeois public sphere against the rather negative description of the modern public sphere. ‘In order to support this analysis of the contemporary corruption of the public sphere, Habermas constructed as a counterpoint an ideal type which he named the bourgeois public sphere’.¹²⁵ By using terms like neo-mercantilism and more important refeudalization, Habermas creates a parallel between pre-bourgeois and post-bourgeois public spheres, where things are presented *before* the public, instead of *for* the public, and even the slightest trigger for critical debate was lacking.¹²⁶ This parallel projects an idea of backwardness on modern society, as opposed to the liberal era in which society was freed from mercantilism and feudalism.

A consequence of this ideal typical characterization of the public sphere is that, as Gestrich asserts, Habermas overlooks the existence of ‘an active political public’ before the realization of the bourgeois public sphere when the absolute ruler and his actions were being discussed by the population and action was undertaken by the means of revolts.¹²⁷ Gestrich also points to the academic world in which political affairs became the topic of discussion. Learned journals covering these topics were seen as vital for academic debate. Academics often worked for the government, but also published unofficial pamphlets that very well could have been read by the urban elite and were produced before the realization of Habermas’ public sphere.¹²⁸

Craig Calhoun – professor of social sciences at New York University and president of the Social Science Research Council – addresses a similar critique in his introduction to *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (1992). ‘A central weakness is that *Structural Transformation* does not treat the “classical” bourgeois public sphere and the [post-transformation] public sphere of “organized” or “late” capitalism symmetrically.’¹²⁹ Habermas uses double standards in his comparison of both spheres, as he judges the classical public sphere by intellectuals like Hobbes, Kant and Marx, and judges the late public sphere by ‘the typical suburban television viewer’.¹³⁰ By doing this, Calhoun argues, Habermas omits the intellectual history of the twentieth century and does not seem to take it very seriously. On the other hand however, Habermas neither takes

¹²⁴ Gestrich, 414.

¹²⁵ Ibidem, 415.

¹²⁶ Ibidem, 416.

¹²⁷ Ibidem, 124-125.

¹²⁸ Ibidem, 126-127.

¹²⁹ Calhoun, 33.

¹³⁰ Ibidem, 33.

into account the non-rational-critical branches of the press in his treatment of the classical period.¹³¹ 'The result is perhaps an overestimation of the degradation of the public sphere.'¹³²

In line with this first critique we can look at the topic of, or should I say ever continuing debate between, structure and agency. Douglas Kellner – specialized, among many other subjects, in the critical tradition of the Frankfurt School and currently holding the George F. Kneller Philosophy of Education Chair at UCLA – notes in 'Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention' that Habermas in his later works tends to explain his theory in dualisms such as system-lifeworld and production-interaction, which result in too rigid distinctions.¹³³ Yet, in my opinion, these dualisms already are present in *Structural Transformation* as well. When Habermas describes how the public sphere structurally transforms, he strongly emphasizes the role of the media as a manipulator of opinion. I do not deny that the media can be and are being used to manipulate audiences, but this certainly is not their only function. The media are also there to entertain, educate and inform and it depends on the individual in question what is done with this content. The way Habermas describes it, the modern individual takes for granted everything it reads and sees, without thinking about it. This interpretation gives way too much credit to the influence of the media, the structures, and underestimates the capacity of the individual, the agency.

Admitting that not every individual is the same and that some individuals are more sensitive to media messages, because of their personality, upbringing, intellect, education or whatsoever, still, we may assume that every individual is at least aware of the fact that the information it receives is but a part of what is actually available. The media consumer is an active consumer in the sense that the major part of its media consumption is the result of personal selection, by the individual itself. The consumer chooses what to receive and, thereafter, thinks something about the received content. In other words: the consumer forms an opinion. This opinion certainly not always has to correspond with what is consumed and when it does this is not necessarily the result of a passive, uncritical process. The consumer, as it is a free, rational human being, has the potency to actively, though perhaps semi-unconsciously, compare and relate to other opinions originating from earlier media experiences and other people, or just to

¹³¹ Calhoun, 33.

¹³² Ibidem, 33.

¹³³ Douglas Kellner, 'Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention' [n.d.] *Douglas Kellner, George F. Kneller Philosophy of Education Chair, UCLA* – July 26, 2001 http://gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/2009_essays.html: 23.

decide on the basis of personal preference or instinct. Moreover, new media like television and radio, are often ‘consumed’ in the company of other people, which, in opposite of what Habermas contends, makes it easier to discuss the content. Watching the news or a television show together is by far more likely to end up in spontaneous conversation, than individual reading is. Certainly, this does not mean that such conversations will always lead to rational-critical discussion, but the consumer is absolutely not the passive receiver Habermas seems to suggest. Reception studies, a research area dedicated to audience reception, finds itself in a very difficult field, as knowledge of cognitive processes like that of perception and interpretation has remained obscure. What we do know, however, is that cognitive processes are indeed very complex. This should at least be reason enough to believe that media consumption is unlikely to result in unhampered adoption of its content. Hence again, the consumer should thus be granted with more agency than Habermas gives it credit for and the media are less structurally manipulating than the sociologist claims them to be.

The third point of critique and probably the one most often verbalized is that of the exclusiveness of the public sphere. As many intellectuals have argued, the eighteenth century public sphere was not characteristically a bourgeois sphere, but made up out of elites, civil servants, academics, priests and only small group of bourgeois.¹³⁴ As newspapers were often read out loud in taverns or coffee houses people who were illiterate could still enjoy the news and take part in public debate. This public was ‘by no means restricted to nobility’.¹³⁵ Furthermore, ‘[a]s Habermas’ critics have documented, working class, plebeian, and women’s public spheres developed alongside of the bourgeois public sphere to represent voices and interests excluded in this forum.’¹³⁶ In response to accusations of neglecting these public spheres, Habermas later has admitted that indeed a plebeian public sphere collided with the bourgeois one, and that this was an aspect that he had underestimated.¹³⁷ ‘Hence,’ as Kellner, among many others, concludes ‘rather than conceiving of one liberal or democratic public sphere, it is more productive to theorize a multiplicity of public spheres, sometimes overlapping and sometimes conflicting.’¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Gestrich, 417.

¹³⁵ Ibidem, 421.

¹³⁶ Kellner, 7.

¹³⁷ Jürgen Habermas, ‘Further Reflections on the Public Sphere’ in *Habermas and the Public Sphere* ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1992): 430.

¹³⁸ Kellner, 7.

In his defense of the critiques above, Habermas has argued that his analysis of the public sphere was ideal typical and that it from the beginning was his aim

‘to derive the ideal type of the bourgeois public sphere from the historical context of British, French and German developments in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The formation of a concept specific to an epoch requires that a social reality of great complexity be stylized to give prominence to its peculiar characteristics.’¹³⁹

Indeed, in his preface to *Structural Transformation* which is not a later adaptation but just a literal translation of the preface dating from 1961, Habermas already mentions that his investigation presents a stylized picture.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, we must not forget that, in line with the critical tradition of the Frankfurt School, it was his aim to criticize the twentieth centuries’ democracy and culture. Habermas did this by using ‘the earlier model of bourgeois democracy to criticize its later degeneration and decline, and thus develop a normative concept of democracy which could be used as a standard for an “immanent critique” of existing welfare state democracy.’¹⁴¹ The fact that Habermas describes his analysis as an ideal type, should have made it clear that this normative ideal was primarily a tool to critique modern democracy, and not something to be literally recreated.¹⁴²

This being said, we cannot deny that the ideal type of the public sphere is highly inspiring for us today as people strive to make democracy more democratic. The critique of the exclusiveness of the public sphere is therefore not only focused on the existence of other participants and spheres at the time of the ‘classical’ public sphere, but also at the norms inherent to the public sphere. Difference democrats, as Lincoln Dahlberg – research fellow at the School of Journalism and Communication at University of Queensland, Australia and specialized in new media and democratic theory – calls them in ‘The Habermasian public sphere: Taking difference seriously?’ (2005), argue that ‘the promotion of a singular idealized form of the public sphere as normative acts to promote particular voices while marginalizing others.’¹⁴³ They, for instance,

¹³⁹ Habermas, ‘Further Reflections on the Public Sphere’, 422.

¹⁴⁰ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, xix.

¹⁴¹ Kellner, 2-3.

¹⁴² Kellner, 7.

¹⁴³ Lincoln Dahlberg, ‘The Habermasian public sphere: Taking difference seriously?’ *Theory and Society* (2005) 34, 113.

contended that the ideal typical description was exclusionary because not all topics, like domestic affairs, were to be discussed within the public sphere. Dahlberg refutes this critique by claiming that Habermas, in his later work on the theory of communicative action, defines the public sphere not on the basis of content, but on its communicative form:¹⁴⁴

‘The public sphere is constituted wherever and whenever any matter of living together with difference is debated. When talking of *the* public sphere, Habermas is not talking about a homogenous, specific public, but about the whole array of complex networks of multiple and overlapping publics constituted through the critical communication of individuals, groups, associations, social movements, journalistic enterprises, and other civic institutions. By *the* public sphere, Habermas is also referring to the universal public appealed to in moral-practical claims about justice.’¹⁴⁵

But the ‘difference democrats’ have criticized the form of discourse required within the public sphere as well. The rationality, reflexivity, impartiality and the force of the better argument are said to exclude certain groups from participating in the public sphere because this form would ‘draw directly upon the style of communication valorized within modern Western philosophy’,¹⁴⁶ and stand in opposition to and exclude aesthetic affective styles of expression like ‘multiple modes of everyday communication such as rhetoric, myth, metaphor, poetry, theatre, and ceremony.’¹⁴⁷ This would result in the privileging of white middle class men and the marginalization of women and non-Western persons, who are considered to use more aesthetic-affective language (to be more exited in their speech, to make use their bodies more frequently and heavily and to value expression of emotions more.)¹⁴⁸ ‘By hiding exclusion and domination behind a claim to neutrality and rationality, the conception acts ideologically to promote the interests of already powerful social groups. All this clearly undermines the conception’s validity as a democratic form.’¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ Dahlberg, 112.

¹⁴⁵ Ibidem, 113.

¹⁴⁶ Ibidem, 113.

¹⁴⁷ Ibidem, 114.

¹⁴⁸ Ibidem, 114.

¹⁴⁹ Ibidem, 114.

Dahlberg, in his article dedicated to the defense of the public sphere, meets this criticism by asserting that rational-critical discourse cannot do and need not to do without aesthetic-affective language. To begin with, semiotic and symbolic expression cannot be separated from each other. Moreover, rational argumentation is often more convincing when presented in rhetorical fashion. The ideal typical rules of rational-critical discourse like ‘reflexivity, impartiality, and the reasoned contestation of validity claims – are not only complemented by requirements that embrace difference (inclusion, equality, mutual respect) but in themselves do not exclude the aesthetic-affective dimensions of interaction.’¹⁵⁰ Impartiality, for instance, does not draw on a ‘non-empathetic, disembodied, judgment’, but on ‘an ethic of “fairness”.’¹⁵¹ Yet, it is important, according to Dahlberg, to make a distinction between ‘forms of discourse that contribute to greater understanding and ones that are coercive’,¹⁵² as strongly passionate styles, just like narrow subdued deliberative forms, have the potential to suppress difference.¹⁵³ And that is exactly what the formative requirements of public discourse do:

‘They judge in favor of forms of discourse, whether abstract logic or strongly passionate storytelling, *to the extent* that they enhance democratic participation aimed at reaching understanding. The criteria if ideal role taking act to exclude or repress coercive forms of discourse such as propaganda, deception, strategizing, dogmatic ranting, and emotional blackmail. The application of such rules of discourse, although here posed as idealizations for critical evaluation, have been found in practice to be necessary to sustain inclusive deliberations and “contain affect,” and have proven successful even in the most volatile situations involving strong difference and disagreement. Thus, the public sphere is defined by rational-critical discourse, a form of communication that does not devalue desire and passion but rather sets the criteria for their communicative expression.’¹⁵⁴

Where this line has to be drawn exactly is deliberated on within the public sphere itself, again by the means of rational-critical debate. ‘The circularity here is not a problem, as it may seem,’ says Dahlberg, ‘but is in fact the very essence of democratization: through the practice of democracy,

¹⁵⁰ Dahlberg, 116.

¹⁵¹ Ibidem, 117.

¹⁵² Ibidem, 120.

¹⁵³ Ibidem, 120.

¹⁵⁴ Ibidem, 120.

democratic practice is advanced.’¹⁵⁵ While discussing and criticizing coercion and domination by, say state authorities, participants can also learn to recognize and remove coercion and domination from within the public sphere based on agreements that are achieved by the means of ‘intersubjective rationality’.¹⁵⁶ The agreement by multiple individuals brings us to the ‘difference democrats’ final point of critique (still part of my more general category of exclusiveness): namely, the way consensus or public opinions produced within the public sphere exclude difference from the public sphere.

‘Consensus, they argue, can only result from a disciplining of difference that suppresses the “true” agonistic nature of politics. Consensus through discourse is “equated with a collective subjectivity that is inherently totalitarian” or “a type of disciplinary action (consensual disciplines) aimed at taming and bringing order to a world of unruly difference.’¹⁵⁷

Though this exact formulation may sound a bit radical, the issue of consensus and public opinion within the public sphere, and democracy in general, seemed quite problematic to me as well. As Habermas characterizes the ideal type of the public sphere as an ‘intersubjectively shared space’ in which communicative rationality, or rational-critical discourse, contributes to the creation of understanding (instead of the calculation of egocentric gain),¹⁵⁸ the individual participant only becomes empowered as long as its subjective arguments are supported by a majority of the group. The political public sphere could become an authority exactly because it represented the opinion of a large group of people. The more people share this consensus, the more powerful this public opinion gets, precisely because public opinion legitimates its authority by representing the opinion of a large group of people, ‘the public’, instead of the opinion of a few individuals. Democracy, as a system of rule, works according to the same principles of majority and consensus. For democratic systems of rule counts as well that individual opinions can only be empowered when they are shared by others. The more individuals that share an opinion, the more empowered the individuals will become. But when people are part of a minority, or have

¹⁵⁵ Ibidem, 124.

¹⁵⁶ Dahlberg, 124, 121-125.

¹⁵⁷ Ibidem, 126.

¹⁵⁸ Ibidem, 111.

opinions that are not considered to be priority, they can feel, as individuals or as a group, neglected by or excluded from democracy. Democracy is supposed to represent the citizens of, say a nation and to govern by their will, but democratic rule can never satisfy everyone's needs and wishes. In light of the main focus of this study, the exploration of a cosmopolitan public sphere, I wondered whether this made a public sphere, or democracy, reprehensible as cosmopolitan tools. Or even, if it might eliminate democracy – in the first chapter labeled an essential feature of cosmopolitanism – as a decent principle of rule?

Fortunately, Dahlberg again proves these critiques, at least partially, wrong. To begin with, he argues, Habermas himself is not uncritically advocating consensus, since he warns for the dangers of *false consensus*. In line with his critiques of the mass media, public relations and opinion management, Habermas states that false consensus can both be the result of explicit coercion, domination and exclusion, and from 'the dominance of certain understandings and practices that close off critique and discussion of alternative positions',¹⁵⁹ which are harder to recognize. Further, in the case of public spheres, but to a lesser extent in the case of official (democratic) systems of rule, there is no direct need to reach a final decision.

'In practice, public opinion is always in the *process* of formation. [...] Deep seated difference and strong disagreement are part of pluralist societies that must be taken into account in any legitimate model of strong democracy. [...] Rather than a consensus of pre-discursive wills or hearts, public opinion formation occurs through an ongoing *process* of rational deliberation that respects difference.'¹⁶⁰

On the one hand, the ideal of consensus is the aim of public discourse, as it is the way to empowerment. On the other hand, the differences, pluralisms and disagreements require that this consensus is the object of constant, rationally informed, deliberation. This indefinite continuation of rational-critical discussion benefits the quality of the public sphere, as 'private individuals are transformed into public citizens through the *learning process* of deliberation, developing public opinion(s) that can hold government accountable.'¹⁶¹ As I said, this all will be less the case within official democratic systems of rule, but that is why public spheres – I am using the plural

¹⁵⁹ Dahlberg, 126.

¹⁶⁰ Ibidem, 127,129.

¹⁶¹ Ibidem, 128.

here as I agree with Kellner and others that it is indeed better to think of multiple, sometimes overlapping and sometimes conflicting public spheres – are interpreted by Habermas – not only an academic but also ‘political animal and fighter for democracy’¹⁶² – as a significant supplement to democracy.

Nonetheless, the worries about democracy and the power of the majority are not ill-founded. As in these times of supposed crisis parties like the U.S. Tea Party and the Dutch PVV led by the populist Geert Wilders use their democratic majority to attack minorities and try to avoid and reform laws that protect against such abuses of power. And such views are widely represented on the Internet, a platform of which it is even harder to check and balance such visions. How can we make sure the ‘wrong’ ideas are separated from the ‘right’ ones? This issue has proven difficult in the past, think only about colonization and slavery, and though we might have learned from that particular subject-matter, there is no guarantee for human beings to never err in their judgments on right or wrong again. Can public spheres, as organs that above all are about controlling democratic rule, make a difference? To what extent are public spheres, then different from democracy? As these questions are highly relevant, I will return to them in the next chapter. In the following section, however, I have to focus on new perspectives on the public sphere, originating from the new medium of the Internet.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE INTERNET

Before turning to a concluding section of how the public sphere could be defined when taken out of its bourgeois context, it is important to make one more exploration in advance. *Structural Transformation* was written in 1962, a time when even the Internet’s earliest precursors were still in their rudimentary phase. But in, approximately, the last twenty-five years the Internet has developed itself into one of the most dominant, if not the most dominant, media forms. The development of the Internet brought along new possibilities, and dangers, for exercise of public spheres. An aspect that is of major importance for these new perspectives is that the Internet allows for consumers participation. This feature is in particular interesting for defenders of the public sphere, as the Internet required active engagement and dialogue. ‘It encourages us to take part in debate and offers us the chance to ‘talk back’ to the media, creating dialogue instead of

¹⁶² Gestrich, 414.

passivity.’¹⁶³ Besides, it offers the consumer a chance to ‘publish’ its own opinions and visions, so even dissident, marginal and critical opinions can become public.¹⁶⁴

As I have hinted at, the potential of the Internet as the provider of a public sphere was at the same time heavily criticized and problematized. Jodi Dean – Professor of Political Science at Hobart and William Smith Colleges and Erasmus Professor of the Humanities in the Faculty of Philosophy at Erasmus University – author of ‘Why the Net is not a Public Sphere’ (2003) is among those intellectuals critical of an online public sphere. In her extremely critical article she argues that the Internet is the object of ‘communicative capitalism’,¹⁶⁵ by which she describes how political content becomes market capital on its own, as it is advertised and marketed just like other commercial products. This political content however, does not have anything to do with ‘official’ politics, but is just political outcome that is sold to the public, without really offering the public a chance to know what other options there are.¹⁶⁶

‘Access, information, and communication, as well as open networks of discussion and opinion formation, are conditions for rule by the public that seem to have been realized through global telecommunications. But instead of leading to more equitable distributions of wealth and influence, instead of enabling the emergence of a richer variety in modes of living and practices of freedom, the deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the world’s people. [...] Similarly, within nations like the US, the proliferation of media has been accompanied by a shift in political participation. Rather than actively organized in parties and unions, politics has become a domain of financially mediated and professionalized practices centered on advertising, public relations, and the means of mass communication. Indeed, with the commodification of communication, more and more domains of life seem to have been reformatted in terms of market and spectacle as if the valuation itself had been rewritten in binary code.’¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Martin Lister, Jon Dovey, Seth Giddings, Iain Grant & Kieran Kelly, *New Media: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2003):177.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, 177-179.

¹⁶⁵ Jodi Dean, ‘Why the Net is not a Public Sphere’ *Constellations Volume 10* (2003): 101-102.

¹⁶⁶ Jodi Dean, ‘Communicative capitalism and the democratic deficit’ (2005), *I cite: Communicative capitalism and the democratic deficit* – July 27, 2011 http://jdeanicite.typepad.com/i_cite/2005/01/communicative_c.html

¹⁶⁷ Jodi Dean, ‘Why the Net is not a Public Sphere’: 102.

This critique highly resembles Habermas' critique on public relations and opinion management, as he described this happening through printed media, radio and television. In the previous section I have commented on Habermas' statement that it is based upon the notion of an exorbitant passive consumer. The same goes for Dean's theory of communicative capitalism, and, in fact, even more so as Habermas was talking about media in which the consumer could not directly participate, but the Internet does allow for active engagement. It is not as if at the minute that we open our Internet browser bulks of manipulative content start to engulf us. As Internet users we actively go and search for content, and if we do not like it, or want more, want something else, something better, we continue our search. Dean states that the consumer is easily persuaded because it does not know what other choices there are, but, generally speaking, today's consumer should be the absolute opposite. Consumption society has taught us that there is always something better, something more appealing to our needs and wishes, and has made us aware that there are multiple options all competing with each other. In this sense, one could even argue that the consumption society has made us into more demanding and more critical consumers. This not only holds for material matters, but also for immaterial ones. And the Internet has provided us, consumers of products and content, with the tools to actively search for options. Even if we do not know what we will find, we know that there is always more to find. So much even, that we sometimes get overwhelmed by it (which brings us back to Rüdiger Safranski, but I will return to that later.)

Douglas Kellner, discussed before, holds a more positive vision of the Internet as an institution that could accommodate public spheres. New media, and in particular the Internet, 'have multiplied information and discussion, of an admittedly varied sort, and thus provide potential for a more informed citizenry and more extensive democratic participation.'¹⁶⁸ All the same, Kellner does acknowledge the risk of misinformation, which could undermine democratic information and discussion. This is a risk that can persist, despite the development of a more critical consumerism, but at the same time can be reduced by the means of public dialogue, as in the Kantian sense, people together are more likely able to overcome tutelage and manipulation, than on their own. Kellner also believes that new public spheres that have been created by new media, have the potential to invigorate democracy:

¹⁶⁸ Kellner, 17.

‘A new democratic politics will thus be concerned that new media and computer technologies be used to serve the interests of the people and not corporate elites. A democratic politics will strive to see that broadcast media and computers are used to inform and enlighten individuals rather than to manipulate them. A democratic politics will teach individuals how to use the new technologies, to articulate their own experiences and interests, and to promote democratic debate and diversity, allowing a full range of voices and ideas to become part of the cyberdemocracy of the future.’¹⁶⁹

Daresay, Kellner proves himself to be a true optimist about the ‘public sphere potential’ of the Internet. Even so, whether this cyberdemocracy refers to an actual representative, online, democracy or it is just an umbrella term to capture the collection of public spheres, does not become clear. Neither does the way he exactly pictures the online public spheres whose existence he already stated. No wonder that James Bohman – Danforth Professor of Philosophy at Saint Louis University and author of several works on democracy, public deliberation and cosmopolitanism – argues that ‘we still lack a clear understanding of how the Internet and other forms of electronic communication might contribute to a *new* kind of public sphere and thus to a new form of democracy.’¹⁷⁰

Yet, in the article ‘Expanding dialogue: The Internet, the public sphere and prospects for transnational democracy’ (2004), Bohman, does not really provide a concrete answer to this question himself either. He does, however, make some useful translations of the bourgeois public sphere’s apparent requirements to those of an online public sphere. First, he argues that the notion of a public sphere as a forum for face-to-face communication is too limiting.¹⁷¹ Communication is always mediated, not only within the public sphere by the use of printed media, but also just by the use of speech language. Discussions within the bourgeois public sphere not only took place in salons, coffee houses and table societies, but also in moral and political journals. They were not limited to face-to-face communication. One could argue that for the sake of the authority of the better argument, the mediation of arguments through written

¹⁶⁹ Kellner, 19.

¹⁷⁰ James Bohman, ‘Expanding dialogue: The Internet, the public sphere and prospects for transnational democracy’ in *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*, ed. Nick Crossly & John Michael Roberts (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004): 131.

¹⁷¹ Bohman, 133.

language, printed or online, is even fairer, because the argument is judged on its form and content and not directly on the person who wrote it. It could thus contribute to the observance of equality and impartiality. Objecting that not every person is able to express itself (convincingly) in written language is fair in general, but compared to spoken language and speaking in public one could argue the same. Besides, writing on the Internet is considered to be more accessible than writing for a journal or magazine and Internet does allow for spoken messages too (think about uploading videos on websites like You Tube and the performance of live conversations via Skype or MSN Messenger). If public discourse is to be limited to face-to-face communication it would only allow very small public spheres. To create a larger public mediation by external institutions is required. Especially, when looking for a transnational or cosmopolitan public sphere.

Second, Bohman argues that the idea of a dialogue modeled on one-to-one communication is misleading.¹⁷² The public sphere has always depended on a social space that fostered repeated and open-ended interaction, which again required technologies and institutions to facilitate this social space. The printed word was one of those institutions that opened up an indefinite social space. Later, radio and television worked according to a same principle of one-to-many communication. The Internet as an institution of social space provides the opportunity for many-to-many communication.¹⁷³ '[S]uch many-to-many communication with newly increased interactivity holds out the promise of capturing the features of dialogue and communication more robustly than the print medium.'¹⁷⁴ One-to-one communication, on the other hand, would restrict the addressing of indefinite audiences that allow for response in a 'a quite expansive spatial and temporal sense, in that someone in the indefinite future could give a response, without the speaker even conceivably having intended to address that hearer.'¹⁷⁵

DEFINING A DECONTEXTUALIZED PUBLIC SPHERE

In this chapter I have discussed Habermas' theory on the bourgeois public sphere thoroughly and extensively. Likewise, I have tried to discuss 'the afterlife' of *Structural Transformation*, by

¹⁷² Bohman, 133-134.

¹⁷³ Ibidem, 134.

¹⁷⁴ Ibidem, 134.

¹⁷⁵ Ibidem, 133-134.

focusing on general critiques and new perspectives. During this process I have demonstrated that Habermas' analysis of the bourgeois public sphere has to be treated as ideal typical and in that sense cannot be taken up as a reproducible normative ideal. What I would like to do here, however, is to take this ideal type out of its historical context and define its most general and essential characteristics so that it can function as a normative ideal, against which, in the next chapter, the social space I presume to be a public sphere, can be tested. Since the theory discussed above was both very complex and lengthy, and in the next chapter I will proceed as clear and concrete as possible, my aim is to define this 'decontextualized' public sphere as straightforward as possible.

The first characteristic that is essential to a public sphere is that it is a social space where individuals come together as a public. Second, they come together to get informed and to discuss, both critically and rationally. Third, the most fundamental basis upon which a public of individuals is formed is that of shared humanness. Fourth, the topics of discussion are concerned with the reduction of coercion and domination both on a primary level (within society) and secondary (self-reflective/Meta) level and the supervision of ruling powers in general. Fifth, the aim of this discussion is to form a consensus and to use this public opinion to control political rule and hold it accountable for its actions. Sixth, the condition for this supervision is publicity (thus transparency) of political institutions. Seventh, the public sphere is a social space in-between political institution on the one hand, and civil society on the other¹⁷⁶ and therefore independent in principle. Eighth, participation within the public sphere is based on equality, impartiality and mutual respect. Ninth, the public sphere is public, in the sense that there is no limit to the amount of participators. Tenth, there is not one public sphere but there are multiple ones, sometimes overlapping and conflicting with each other, all operating within the public domain (which concerns everything that is non-private and non-exclusive).

¹⁷⁶ Bohman, 137.

AVAAZ: A COSMOPOLITAN PUBLIC SPHERE?

In this chapter I will focus on a particular social space on the Internet, in order to test according to those properties set in the previous chapters, whether this could be considered a cosmopolitan public sphere. By doing this, I will at the same time define what a cosmopolitan public sphere actually is, and what it is not. Therefore, it is important to realize that this chapter is a case study, of which the results and their wider implications for the Internet, cosmopolitanism and the public sphere are yet to be discovered. What I am trying to do here, by the means of this case study, is to approach two ideals, cosmopolitanism and the public sphere, in a very specific way, so it can become clearer what in a particular case might already exist, what is yet to be achieved and what the limits to their realization are. This all, then could help to set the discourses on cosmopolitanism, the public sphere and the Internet, in a new, hopefully more positive, light.

In the first section I will explain what Avaaz, the object of this case study, is and how it functions. What are its objectives and what does Avaaz do to accomplish them? How did Avaaz come into existence? How is it organized? Who are its initiators and what is their role? To what extent do their members have agency within Avaaz? The second section will focus on the question of cosmopolitanism. How cosmopolitan is Avaaz in both form and content? Finally I will ask whether and to what extent Avaaz is a public sphere? To what extent does it share those essential features as determined in the last section of the previous chapter? What is there to win? And finally, where can we draw the boundaries of Avaaz as a cosmopolitan public sphere?

AVAAZ, THE ONLINE MOVEMENT

Avaaz – subtitled ‘the world in action’ – describes itself as a ‘global web movement to bring people-powered politics to decision-making everywhere.’¹⁷⁷ On their website, [avaaz.org](http://www.avaaz.org), its mission is formulated as: to ‘organize citizens of all nations to close the gap between the world we have and the world most people everywhere want.’¹⁷⁸ It claims to combine individual opinions into one ‘powerful collective force’ to ‘take action on pressing global, regional and national issues, from corruption and poverty to conflict and climate change’ and in that sense to

¹⁷⁷ Avaaz.org, ‘About Us’ *Avaaz – About us* (August 1, 2011) <http://www.avaaz.org/en/about.php>

¹⁷⁸ *Ibidem*.

empower individual effort.¹⁷⁹ Avaaz presents itself as a global civil society group that can help to facilitate and amplify public opinion:

‘Avaaz’s online community can act like a megaphone to call attention to new issues; a lightning rod to channel broad public concern into a specific, targeted campaign; a fire truck to rush an effective response to a sudden, urgent emergency; and a stem cell that grows into whatever form of advocacy or work is best suited to meet an urgent need.’¹⁸⁰

Avaaz was co-founded in 2007 by Res Publica,¹⁸¹ Moveon.org,¹⁸² – both public advocacy groups – and six ‘social entrepreneurs’ of which Ricken Patel is now the president and executive director of Avaaz.¹⁸³ It is an official non-profit organization and is (economically) independent: ‘We accept no money from governments or corporations and donations to Avaaz are not tax deductible, so our community alone decides what we do and what we say.’¹⁸⁴ Avaaz only accepts online donations from its members and the average amount donated is around twenty-five euros. According to the U.S. federal law, Avaaz has its finances annually checked by an independent agency. From the figures becomes clear that Avaaz spends approximately eighty-five percent of its funds for their campaigns. The remainder is used for management, fundraising, legal advice, accounting support, and infrastructure.¹⁸⁵ At the time of writing, Avaaz counts 9,774,400 members, and the number goes up almost every minute. These members are originating from 193 different countries with Brazil and France, home to more than one million members each, at the top.¹⁸⁶

Avaaz emphasizes their staff does not aim to shape public opinion or to set an agenda that should convince its members to follow their lead, but that it ‘listen[s] to [its] members and

¹⁷⁹ Avaaz.org, ‘About Us’.

¹⁸⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁸¹ See <http://therespublica.org/index.htm>

¹⁸² See <http://front.moveon.org/>

¹⁸³ Avaaz.org, ‘Avaaz facts’ *Avaaz- Press Centre – Avaaz Facts* (August 1, 2011)

<http://www.avaaz.org/en/pressfaq.php>

¹⁸⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁸⁵ Avaaz.org, ‘Avaaz Expenses and Financial Information’ *Avaaz.org – Avaaz Expenses and Financial Information* (August 1, 2011) http://www.avaaz.org/en/avaaz_expenses_and_financial_information

¹⁸⁶ Avaaz.org, ‘About Us: Our Community’ *Avaaz – About Us: Our Community* (August 1, 2011) <http://www.avaaz.org/en/community.php#memberstories>

suggest[s] actions they can take in order to affect the broader world.’¹⁸⁷ Their method is more bottom-up than top-down, which is also visible in the way their campaigns are selected. Not only most of Avaaz’s campaigns are claimed to be the result of the initiative of its members but also:

‘Each year, Avaaz sets overall priorities through all-member polls and campaign ideas are polled and tested weekly to 10,000-member random samples—and only initiatives that find a strong response are taken to scale. Campaigns that do reach the full membership are then super-charged by, often, hundreds of thousands of Avaaz members taking part within days or even hours.’¹⁸⁸

What happens next is that the staff members, a small core of fifteen fulltime campaigners assisted by thousands of volunteers, set up campaigns in fourteen languages. They do this by sending emails to their members: ‘Avaaz staff write email alerts to the Avaaz community the way that an aide briefs a president or prime minister: we have just a moment to convey the vital information the reader needs in order to decide whether to get involved, and the campaign hinges on that decision.’¹⁸⁹ In these emails members are informed about a certain issue and asked (but not manipulatively persuaded) to undertake action in the form of signing a digital petition, emailing, calling or any other form of direct action. Further, Avaaz funds media campaigns, organizes of offline protest and events, delivers the petitions and is active in lobbying governments. This strategy of ‘servant leadership’ serves, in Avaaz’s words, ‘to ensure that the views and values of the world’s people inform the decisions that affect us all.’¹⁹⁰

Part of its strategy is that Avaaz focuses on so-called ‘tipping-point moments’, the moments in politics in which crucial decisions are about to be made. Moments of crisis and opportunity in which a ‘public outcry can suddenly make all the difference.’¹⁹¹ Although Avaaz is not aiming for a general consensus, as it leaves it to its members whether to participate in a certain action, the set of values underlies Avaaz’s actions is one that proves to appeal to many people, of which only its every rising membership rate and the participation of its members in the campaigns are the evidence.

¹⁸⁷ Avaaz.org, ‘About Us’.

¹⁸⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁸⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁹⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁹¹ Ibidem.

‘[T]he conviction that we are all human beings first, and privileged with responsibilities to each other, to future generations, and to the planet. The issues we work on are particular expressions of those commitments. And so, over and over, Avaaz finds the same thing: that people who join the community through a campaign on one issue go on to take action on another issue, and then another. This is a source of great hope: that our dreams rhyme, and that, together, we can build the bridge from the world we have to the world we all want.’¹⁹²

Among some of the more recent campaigns that Avaaz set up is a petition action by 500,000 Indians in support of the seventy-three year old Gandhian activist Anna Hazare, that campaigned (by the means of an individual hunger strike) for an anti-corruption law. The petition added so much public pressure that India’s government felt obliged to sign a submission to all of Hazare’s demands. Likewise, with the help of donations from 30,000 members, Avaaz could start up a cooperation the leadership of democratic movements in Syria, Yemen and Libya to provide them with technical equipment (such as phones and Internet modems,) connect them with world media institutions like BBC, Al Jazeera and CNN, advise them in their communications, all in order to break the Middle-East blackout. Further, the persistence of 317,000 Avaaz members brought the Hilton hotel chain to sign a code of conduct on rape trade (as hotels are the place where this occurs the most) so 180,000 of their employees will be trained to spot and prevent sex slavery. And in Italy a 70,000 signatures strong petition and thousands of phone calls to the parliament, helped to prevent the passing of Berlusconi’s censorship bill. Idem, Avaaz contributed with almost a million signatures and extensive media attention, to pressure the South-African government to do something about the corrective-rape of lesbian women. A last example, – for further results I refer to the Avaaz website – is a petition by 600,000 Avaaz members that helped to block the building of a dam complex that would cause an environmental catastrophe.¹⁹³

As this all might sound wonderful it is nevertheless not unexpected that Avaaz also has received critique. A famous skeptic of Avaaz and initiatives similar to Avaaz is Micah White,

¹⁹² Avaaz.org, ‘About Us’.

¹⁹³ Ricken Patel et al., ‘Avaaz hits 8.2 million!’ *de.indymedia.org* | *Avaaz hits 8.2 million!* (August 1, 2011) <http://de.indymedia.org/2011/04/305240.shtml>

who argues that ‘clicktivism’ undermines real leftish activism by degrading political participation into the signing of online petitions.¹⁹⁴ ‘In promoting the illusion that surfing the web can change the world, clicktivism is to activism as McDonalds is to a slow-cooked meal. It may look like food, but the life-giving nutrients are long gone.’¹⁹⁵ This metaphor might indeed sound catchy, but White clearly misses the point here. To begin with it is not just an illusion that online petitions can change political decisions. Just as hand signed petitions in the past were used to make political difference, online petitions work today. The only difference is that with online petitioning a broader public can be represented as the signing of a petition is no longer dependent on physical presence and proximity.

Second, online petition signing is for no reason incompatible with further political action. Indeed, Avaaz even encourages and organizes participation in offline demonstrations, the calling of embassies and presidential offices, email offensives and passing on information about its campaigns by placing them on their personal Facebook and Twitter pages and by forwarding Avaaz email to family, friends and acquaintances. Further, discussions about whether or not to participate in certain campaigns are taking place on blogs and forums on different locations on the Internet,¹⁹⁶ people place reactions on You Tube,¹⁹⁷ and these discussions again often shift into offline conversations.

Third, because ‘clicktivism’ is accessible, it has the potential to stimulate those people that normally do not bother to undertake any form of political action, to become involved. Just because it is an easy step to sign an online petition, the strategy is likely to be successful, as it is the accumulation of separate clicks that leads to results. Clicktivism should of course not replace offline activism, but the two can work together. Besides, and that is to come back to Safranski and the issue of individual capacity to act in global affairs as discussed in the introduction to this

¹⁹⁴ Micah White, ‘Clicktivism is ruining leftish activism’ *Clicktivism is ruining leftish activism* / Micah White / *Comment is free* | *Guardian.co.uk* (August 1, 2011)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/12/clicktivism-ruining-leftist-activism>

¹⁹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁹⁶ For example: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/12/clicktivism-ruining-leftist-activism> | <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jul/20/avaaz-activism-slactivism-clicktivism> | <http://veelbeter.blogspot.com/2007/05/avaaz-verbetert-de-wereld.html> | <http://verbo.se/dont-sign-avaazorg-petitions> | <http://peterstormschrift.wordpress.com/2011/03/13/no-fly-zone-boven-libie-waarom-ik-avaaz-petitie-niet-teken/> | <http://www.fltoday.nl/20110607/avaaz-wappert-met-450000-handtekeningen-tegen-race-in-bahrein.html> | <http://www.stomverbaasd.com/avaaz-steun-de-dappere-egyptenaren-teken-de-petitie/> | <http://www.facebook.com/#!/apps/application.php?id=50824532548>

¹⁹⁷ ‘Re: Stop the Clash of Civilizations’ *Re: Stop the Clash of Civilizations – You Tube* (August 1, 2011)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEI9MCU2-m4&feature=related>

thesis, clicktivism is a very accessible but effective way of individual empowerment. It enlarges the individual's range of action, to respond to issues that formerly were beyond its hold. In that sense the individual's agency to do, or to not do, something about it is extended as well. This is exactly why the criticisms on such initiatives as Avaaz are largely overruled by praise in both newspapers and blogs.¹⁹⁸

Another critique by Micah White, however, is that online action groups exclude certain niches of society by focusing just on those campaigns that will find enough support.¹⁹⁹ Avaaz has responded by arguing that this is not true, as they are, in principle, open to any suggestions by their members and the topics of their campaigns are diverse. Yet, Avaaz also argues that it checks the support for each campaign with a test among ten thousand members.²⁰⁰ It thus prioritizes topics with a higher support, which is quite logical, as it is Avaaz's objective to amplify public opinion and the bigger the public involved, the stronger its voice. Whether this is a bad thing, depends upon the ethical basis of Avaaz's campaigns.

AN ETHICS OF COSMOPOLITANISM?

To ask what the ethical basis of Avaaz's campaigns is might sound a bit strange, considering that the content and the success of the campaigns is largely dependent on its members. Maybe, then I should ask what the ethical basis of Avaaz's members is? But this would be quite problematic as its members are almost ten million people scattered around the globe. Moreover, Avaaz does present an ethical norm itself. This norm becomes visible both on its website to attract and inform potential new members about what Avaaz does and why, but also in each and every campaign that is an expression of this ethical norm. Concretely, as passed by in an earlier quote, Avaaz describes its ethics as '[...] a set of values—the conviction that we are all human beings first, and privileged with responsibilities to each other, to future generations, and to the planet.'²⁰¹ This quote does have quite a lot in common with the cosmopolitan idea of mutual

¹⁹⁸ For example: Sarah Bentley, 'Can Avaaz change the world in a click?' *The Times profile of Avaaz and Ricken Patel, Feb. 9 2011* (August 1, 2011) <http://www.scribd.com/doc/48808533/The-Times-profile-of-Avaaz-and-Ricken-Patel-Feb-9-2011> ; 'Technology and protest A town crier in the global village' *Technology and protest A town crier in the global village | The Economist* (August 1, 2011) <http://www.economist.com/node/16943875>

¹⁹⁹ White.

²⁰⁰ Patrick Kingsley, 'Avaaz: activism or 'slacktivism'?' *Avaaz: activism or 'slacktivism'? | World News | The Guardian* (August 1, 2011) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jul/20/avaaz-activism-slacktivism-clicktivism>

²⁰¹ Avaaz.org, 'About Us'.

obligations. Even more so, when one takes into consideration that Avaaz claims to represent a *global* public. Furthermore, human rights are a high priority for Avaaz, which again corresponds with the central set of values underlying many visions of cosmopolitanism, among which that of Seyla Benhabib as discussed in the first chapter.

From this I conclude that Avaaz is, at least *as to the content* of its objectives and campaigns, cosmopolitan oriented. But is it also truly cosmopolitan *in form*? I have already phrased that Avaaz aims to represent global public opinion, but this does not mean they actually do so. When is a public (opinion) global? Does it really have to represent every individual on the planet? Or is a member of, say, every state sufficient? Or should it be a proportional representation of the population of each country? If so, should we differentiate between sex, ethnicity, occupational status and age as well then? To this last question the answer can fairly quickly be answered with a no. As cosmopolitanism treats human beings as equal, on the basis of their humanness, such categories have become irrelevant. Neither do I think a global public (opinion) has to represent literally every human being. In any case, this would be highly unpractical. I do however, believe that a forum for global public opinion should, in principle, be open and accessible to every human being that desires to examine or participate in it.



Avaaz membership

Source: [avaaz.org](http://www.avaaz.org), 'About Us: Our Community' *Avaaz – About Us: Our Community* (August 1, 2011)
<http://www.avaaz.org/en/community.php#memberstories>

In the case of Avaaz this means that every (adult) human being should have access to Avaaz's website and, if willing to become a member, an email account. At this very moment this is not the case as many people in developing countries, for instance, still do not have the resources to attain access to the Internet. Another possibility is that parts of the web are closed off or censored by the state, as is the case in China, Burma and North-Korea. Although Avaaz does argue that it has members in every country around the world, even in digitally censored ones like the above, one cannot deny there are great differences in membership rate. When looking at the map of the residency of Avaaz members (p.56), it becomes clear that they are not equally divided over the globe. The darkest shade of blue indicates those countries with a relatively high Avaaz membership, as opposed to the lightest ones, where Avaaz membership is relatively low. As the membership rates range from over a million to about fifty members per country, these differences are not easily ignored.

Advantageously though, the Internet is a medium that is vastly progressing as hardware, software and reception devices are ever improving. This development does not just result in better quality of Internet reception and speed, but also the prices for Internet reception have dropped enormously while its popularity is still rising. Therewith, the devices required to get access to the Internet are less expensive as well. Computers have become cheaper and Internet is now also available via mobile phones, which are even better affordable. Further there are the Internet cafés and libraries where people can enter the web for a small compensation. Today it is even so that diverse projects are set up to make Internet available in slums of large cities. Such initiatives are taken in slums in Africa, Latin-America and India.²⁰² And finally, phone use (often with access to the Internet) is starting to develop itself in both slums and remote areas as people judge these devices as very valuable for daily life and income, and have saved the little money they have to purchase one, sometimes with support from outside, and sometimes illegally.²⁰³

²⁰² For example: 'A Community Connection', *a-community-connection.com* >> *INTERNET IN TO THE SLUMS FOR FREE* (August 2, 2011) <http://www.a-community-connection.com/archives/category/internet-in-to-the-slums-for-free?submit=GO> | John Oywa, 'Links with UK turns slum pupils into Internet wizards' *The Standard* | *Online edition :: Links with UK turns slum pupils into Internet wizards* (August 2, 2011) <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/InsidePage.php?id=2000031231&cid=316&story=Links%20with%20UK%20turns%20slum%20pupils%20into%20Internet%20wizards> | Nelza Oliveira, 'Brazil: Internet access transforming slums' youth' *Brazil: Internet access transforming slums' youth* (August 2, 2011) http://www.infosurhoy.com/cocoon/saii/xhtml/en_GB/features/saii/features/main/2010/12/15/feature-02

²⁰³ For example: Nigel Scott, Simon Batchelor, Jonathon Ridley & Britt Jorgonson, 'The impact of mobile phones in Africa' *Full Report.pdf (application/pdf-object)* (August 2, 2011) <http://gamos.org.uk/couk/site/Projects/Docs/Mobile%20phones%20in%20Africa/Full%20Report.pdf> | 'Celebrating Slum Women and use of ICT' *Celebrating Slum Women and the use of ICT* | *Matharevalley* (August 2, 2011)

Still, it cannot be denied that Internet access and use is way more frequent in developed countries and that in extremely remote places and areas where survival is a daily struggle, the general use of Internet is far from reality. Consequently, the answer to the question whether Avaaz is a cosmopolitan online movement, is two folded. Content wise, the ethics underlying their campaigns can be considered cosmopolitan indeed. As for the form, the answer is slightly different. On the one hand, Avaaz's membership rate is but a small part of the world civilization and, more important, access to the Internet is not available for every person on earth yet. Moreover, the accessibility of Internet is unequally divided around the globe. On the other hand, the Avaaz community is made up of people from every country in the world and Internet access is progressing, though modestly, even in poorer and more remote areas around the globe.

One could thus argue that, although Avaaz today is not yet as cosmopolitan as it could be, it does have the potential to become more cosmopolitan, considering its form. As Avaaz is an action group that is committed to a fairer and more just global society, Avaaz itself is able contribute to this realization. What is more, even though Avaaz is not perfect as a cosmopolitan online movement, it is the best alternative so far, as it momentarily is the largest and most significant online, world scale, civil society group.

IS AVAAZ A PUBLIC SPHERE?

Now that I have estimated that Avaaz is quite cosmopolitan, it is time for the final questions, namely, can, and if to what extent, Avaaz be considered a public sphere? In the previous chapter I argued that a public sphere is, to begin with, a social space where individuals come together as a public. As Avaaz is an online social space, individuals do not physically come together in this social space. There is no face-to-face communication. But, following Bohman, a restriction of the public sphere to face-to-face communication is neither realistic nor desirable; as such a public sphere would always be limited to physical presence. Rather, the individuals come together online, while visiting the Avaaz website, reading Avaaz email or discussing Avaaz

<http://matharevalley.wordpress.com/2011/02/27/celebrating-slum-women-and-use-of-ict/> | Adriana de Souza e Silva, Daniel M. Sutko, Fernando A. Salis & Claudio de Souza e Silva, 'Mobile phone appropriation in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil' *Mobile phone appropriation in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil* (August 2, 2011) <http://nms.sagepub.com/content/13/3/411.refs> | Joes Segal, 'Verbinden en concentreren: de stad in de wereldsgeschiedenis' Utrecht University, lecture world history, May 11, 2011.

topics and campaigns on blogs and forums outside of Avaaz's website. Significant is that the coming together in the case of Avaaz is defined by content more than by space as the boundaries of this space adapt as the content moves. But thinking about the bourgeois public sphere, this was not very different, as not each person that entered, say, one of the French salons was necessarily participating in the public sphere (think about servants for instance.) On the other hand, when the people participating in public rational discussion decided to continue the conversation outside, as the weather was so nice, this did not mean either that they had 'exited' the public sphere. The public sphere is constituted by a certain content that is being discussed in a certain (that is rational-critical) way, by certain people. Avaaz brings individuals together as a public, on the basis shared interests, contents of thought they have in common, with which they identify via their membership of Avaaz and participation in activities (both online and offline) that are linked to this membership. The members constitute Avaaz as a public by being a member, but even more so, every time they participate in one of the campaigns, since the participation in campaigns presents Avaaz as a public, with a shared opinion, to the outside world.

Secondly, I stated that a public sphere is a social space where these individuals come together to get informed and to discuss, both critically and rationally. With Avaaz, individuals get informed via the website and members also via 'alert emails'. Only, they do not discuss this information on the website or by emails as such themselves. In these emails and on the website, certain events are criticized and this critique is explained by the use of rational arguments for them. It is explained why things are wrong and why the members should come into action, on the basis of arguments that draw on (e.g.) human responsibility for others, the planet, future generations and justice. Links to further sources on the topic are provided and, naturally, the individual is free to search for more information if desirable. Then the individual takes a stand in this discussion by choosing to participate in the campaign, so signing the petition or calling the parliament, or by choosing not to participate. In this sense, the rational-critical discussion is quite limited and one sided. But, this discussion can be taken over to other spaces on the Internet, or offline. Especially, when the individual is highly inspired by the campaign or is not sure whether to participate, it is likely that the individual wants to inform or ask advice from other people. The downside is that it is not certain that these dissolute discussions will be based on rational-critical argumentation. One could argue that when the arguments from Avaaz's website and emails are

taken into account in such conversations, they might more likely be continued on the same rational-critical level, but as there are no checks on it, the quality of the discussion outside of Avaaz's social space cannot be guaranteed.

A third characteristic feature of the public sphere is that the public of individuals is based, at its most fundamental basis, on shared humanness. The participants of the bourgeois public sphere identified themselves not only as bourgeois or property owners, but also as human beings. This form of identification was based on a subjectivity derived from contemporary novels and led them to think of human beings as rational, thus autonomous and free, equal individuals. For Avaaz, it might be clear by now that this counts even more. As described in the section above, the ethical orientation of Avaaz can very well be described as cosmopolitan, for it acknowledges mutual responsibilities towards other human beings. It approaches the world population as one global civil society characterized by equality.

Fourthly, the topics of discussion within the public sphere have to be concerned with the reduction of coercion and domination both on a primary (within society) and secondary (self-reflective/Meta) level and the supervision of ruling powers in general. In the bourgeois public sphere this found expression in the criticism on absolutist power and the rise of democracy and the rules of discourse that helped to protect the public sphere from coercion and domination from within. On a concrete level the reduction of coercion and domination with Avaaz this finds expression in the defense of human rights, especially in those cases where national regimes threaten the universal rights of men. This is part of the supervision on governments in general, which Avaaz performs in almost every campaign by letting authorities know that a substantial part of the Avaaz public does not agree with a certain policy or political action. On a secondary level Avaaz works to reduce coercion and domination by its design. The fact that it is an independent, non-profit organization that is dependent on the participation and donations of its members for the success of its campaigns, with their strategy of servant leadership and aspiration to be as bottom-up as is practically possible, their subsequently open attitude towards members initiatives and their way of clearly and professionally (with help from specialists) informing their members without manipulating them to participate.

The fifth essential feature of the public sphere is that the aim of this discussion is to form a consensus and to use this public opinion to control political rule and hold it accountable for its actions. Where the bourgeois public sphere did this mainly by the publication of criticism, Avaaz

does this by the collection of signatures and the delivering of petitions to the corresponding authorities, encouraging people to make phone calls and send emails to presidential offices (and the like), setting up offline demonstrations and pitching media offensives that place incongruities under public attention (which can be interpreted as an extreme form of the publication of criticism.)

Then sixthly, the condition for this supervision by the public sphere is publicity (thus transparency) of political institutions. This does, nevertheless, not mean that this condition always was and is fulfilled. Neither in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as today, were political institutions completely transparent. Despite promises of transparency, in particular by democratic regimes, there is a lot of information being extracted to the sight of the public. Still, to check upon governments and their administration, it is important to know what happens behind closed borders and closed doors. Therefore, transparency remains to be not only a condition but also an objective for Avaaz's functioning.

Seventhly, the public sphere is a social space in-between political institution on the one hand, and civil society on the other and therefore independent in principle. Initially this was the case for the bourgeois public sphere (see chapter THE PUBLIC SPHERE). The bourgeois identification with shared humanness, as described at point three, at the same time helped them to legitimize their comparative exclusive public opinion as they argued to represent humanity in general. But, as soon as the bourgeois constitutional state came into being, this legitimization was not sufficient anymore for the bourgeois now definitely became politically privileged over the lower classes. The bourgeois public sphere had always argued against domination, but by getting institutionalized in the bourgeois constitutional state, they had become a dominator themselves. Avaaz, however, is a civil society movement that is independent. It is not linked to any political institution or economic power so its members are not privileged over non-members.

The position of a public sphere in-between political institution and civil society (which refers to economic power here) is essential for the functioning of a public sphere in controlling ruling powers. Not only in the case of dictatorial regimes, but also in checking and balancing the flaws of democracy. By offering carefully deliberated, rational arguments on why something is right or wrong and by using the rational capacity of a worldwide community to check and empower these arguments, 'dangerous' thought can be brought under attention and possibly lead the people involved to change their mind. I admit that in theory the victory of the enlightened

argument over uncritical thinking is easier than in practice. Reason might lead us to conclude that every human being should have the chances to lead a decent life, but personal economic and political gain, fear, lack of knowledge, sloth or indifference are but a few aspects that could all lead us to ignore this conclusion and even lead us to act not in accordance with it. But that is exactly what makes public spheres so important, as by their design, they are the ultimate tools to address uncritical thought.

Feature eighth, which says that participation within the public sphere is based on equality, impartiality and mutual respect. For Avaaz counts that equality within the discussion is pursued as each member has only one signature to give or hold back in online petitions. Next, impartiality is guaranteed by the fact that Avaaz does not accept donations from political institutions nor corporations, so there is no question of intertwining interests. For both of these objectives though, goes that they solely apply to the members of the Avaaz community. As for the daily managers and directors it goes that the public just has to trust in their ambitions to practice servant leadership and to let the public speak. This seems a bit much to ask, but an organization like Avaaz cannot do without a certain form of management. So the best option here is on the one hand, to have faith in the honesty of a team of people that has dedicated itself to ‘organize citizens of all nations to close the gap between the world we have and the world most people everywhere want,’²⁰⁴ and on the other hand, to check on the management of Avaaz and to make sure that this applies for the organization itself as well. Finally, the condition of mutual respect is not as relevant for Avaaz as it was for the bourgeois public sphere, since the discussion is taking place in a different context in which there is not direct dialogue, but where it is required (e.g. on texts on the website and in emails) it is prompted by the ethical norms of cosmopolitanism underlying Avaaz’s objectives.

The ninth essential characteristic of the public sphere – that the public sphere is public, in the sense that there is no limit to the amount of participators – proves to be quite problematic. As discussed in the previous section inclusiveness on the level of participation is remains difficult in practice. Although the conditions for participation in the public sphere are equal and thus inclusive, in principle, as they simply follow: access to the Avaaz website and an email account – in practice not every individual has the same chances to get this access. Participation might not be directly linked to socio-economic status (as was the case for the bourgeois public sphere) one

²⁰⁴ Avaaz.org, ‘About Us’.

could off course argue that it is linked indirectly, as the individual's socio-economic status has consequences for its accessibility to the Internet. Nonetheless, as I have argued in the previous section, there is potential for improvement there.

Therefore, let us continue with the tenth and last feature: there is not one public sphere but there are multiple ones, sometimes overlapping and conflicting with each other, all operating within the public domain. Despite the fact that in this study I have focused on one particular example of what seems to be a reasonable public sphere, there are many similar initiatives to be found on the web. For instance there is the earlier mentioned MoveOn.org, which has about the same objectives as Avaaz, except that it is focused on the United States. Then, though officially it has to be studied yet, it is likely possible that there are more online (and possibly even offline?) organizations that approximate the essential features of the public sphere quite close. As I said, to be sure this requires some new research, but the point I would like to make here, is that the existence of multiple public spheres, overlapping, competing and sometimes conflicting with each other, is essential for the quality of their functioning. For, they do not only help each other supervising political rule or make sure there is a public sphere suited for every individual, but more importantly, they can supervise each other and by rational discussion between different public spheres they can continuously keep reflecting on the functions and definition of public spheres on a higher level.

In answer to the question whether Avaaz is a public sphere I would give, despite some limitations, a positive answer. It meets the most important features of the public sphere that are the supervision of political rule by the means of an informed, rational-critical, public discussion. I do agree that Avaaz could stimulate rational discussion among its members even more by, for instance, opening a forum on their website or organizing online discussions via Skype. Yet, Avaaz's main objectives are not primarily in stimulating rational discussion, but in making a difference in political decision making. This means that Avaaz might very well be a public sphere, but the public sphere is not necessarily Avaaz. This again corresponds with the existence of multiple public spheres.

The most important limitation to Avaaz being a public sphere is that real inclusiveness is not a reality. And although Avaaz has come far and probably will progress even further in that ambition, the problem of inclusiveness for Avaaz as a public sphere is there to stay. It is not a fixed boundary to the public sphere, but it will probably always be an imperfection. To ask

whether this is such a bad thing is again resulting in a two folded answer. It might be obvious that for those people wishing but unable to participate in Avaaz, for a lack of resources, this inclusiveness is unfair and undeniably problematic. When knowing how large the Avaaz community already is and can become and the consequences for its functioning as a public sphere, however, it is a little less problematic. To put it all together, I assert that Avaaz is an imperfect public sphere and that it is the best we can momentarily hope for.

CONCLUSION

I have started this thesis by arguing that cosmopolitanism is not taken seriously enough and that this generally is caused by the experienced powerlessness and frustration of individuals to act in the context of today's global society. Then I suggested that an ethically informed public discussion, like a cosmopolitan public sphere, could make a difference, as individuals can become empowered by discussing and controlling institutional and human action. In this way it cuts both ways as individuals become empowered and cosmopolitanism ethics are checked. That is where I started out in search for a contemporary cosmopolitan, online public sphere.

I began this search by accentuating the main conflict within cosmopolitanism, that is, the incongruity between national sovereign states and universal rights. Despite the adoption of universal rights, in practice, as Seyla Benhabib, but Will Kymlicka as well, argues that the interests of national sovereign states are prioritized. This goes against cosmopolitanism most important feature, namely that local, regional or national interest are from a moral perspective by no means more important than global ones. As human beings are all equal, because they share the capacities of reason and moral consciousness, they all should have the same basic rights.

In the second chapter I have extensively discussed Jürgen Habermas' theory on the public sphere, the critiques and new ideas on it. I have argued that Habermas' theory on the structural transformation of the public sphere assumes today's audience to be too passive. As a true sociologist the structures dominate his vision of the world and leave little space for individual agency. This, of course, did not correspond with my ideas on individual empowerment by contemporary public spheres. By seeing potential in the Internet as a social space where public spheres can develop, and thus not a complete disappearance of the public sphere after the nineteenth century, I distanced myself from Habermas' ideas on the structural transformation of the public sphere. But his initial description of the social structures and political functioning of the public sphere remained relevant, and in the last section of chapter two I have used these to define the public sphere outside the context of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In the third chapter I have argued that the online movement of *avaaz.org* can be described as cosmopolitan in content, and to a lesser extent in form. Further my analysis, proved that *Avaaz* came quite close to my definition of a decontextualized public sphere. Imperfections were the problem of inclusivity that cannot be guaranteed, as access to the

Internet is not available equally within the world. Further the rational discussion is quite one-sided within the Avaaz space, and although discussion takes place outside of it, the degree to which this discussion still is rational critical cannot be measured. Against these downsides of Avaaz as a public sphere, can be said that Avaaz is a movement that is still growing, that Internet access is increasing globally and that the degree of rational discussion can be increased by changes to Avaaz's website.

So, in answering the question *How is Jürgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere applicable to a contemporary cosmopolitan, online context?* I would answer that it is firstly only possible in a decontextualized way. By moving out of the eighteenth centuries context, and more importantly, from the idea that the public sphere declined after the nineteenth century. Further, it was necessary to reinterpret some parts of the theory in order to make them fit for application on the web. So the answer seems to suggest that Habermas' theory is indeed applicable to a contemporary online context, but in slightly modified form. What I found striking however, is that cosmopolitanism and the public sphere seem to combine very well. In hindsight, this can be explained quite easily by the fact that both cosmopolitan thought and Habermas' theory on the public sphere, are to a certain extent both inspired by the ideas of Immanuel Kant on reason and universal law. As Kant asserted, human beings need a master to break the domination of self-will, but this again can only be found in human species itself.²⁰⁵ This proposition of Kant helps to explain the relation between political rule and public spheres and the interrelationship between public spheres. As multiple public spheres check upon each other and upon political rule, they are each other's master.

This conclusion does not only prove that theory on the public sphere is still relevant today (though in slightly modified form) but also that even Kant, despite is teleological interpretation of history, still can be used to describe contemporary practices. Furthermore, the public sphere has also proven to be cosmopolitan in a third sense (apart from form and content wise), as it answers to the problems as sketched in the first chapter, following Benhabib, because the controlling functions of public spheres, help to empower universal rights over separate sovereign states. In this sense, Avaaz does directly answer to the final sentence of chapter one.

Further, I believe that this thesis has shown that cosmopolitanism should be approached in a more bottom-up perspective. This helps to move away from institutional cosmopolitanism,

²⁰⁵ Kant, 21.

which often seems to be problematic, and focuses on daily, more concrete practices instead. By using a case study, the huge topic of cosmopolitanism became graspable. Yet, of course it remains for further research to take up again the results of this study and to see to what extent they are applicable on other cases and to see what the benefits and downsides are. And of course there might be a whole lot of ‘buts’ that could be put against this thesis, but for now, I am tending to interpret my results as quite positive and promising. As I have said, Avaaz is indeed an imperfect cosmopolitan public sphere, but is that not something valuable?

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