The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe

JAMES VAN HORN MELTON

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The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe

James Melton's lucid and accessible study examines the rise of 'the public' in eighteenth-century Europe. A work of comparative synthesis focussing on England, France and the German-speaking territories, this is the first book-length, critical reassessment of what Habermas termed the 'bourgeois public sphere'. During the Enlightenment the public assumed a new significance as governments came to recognize the power of public opinion in political life; the expansion of print culture created new reading publics and transformed how and what people read; authors and authorship acquired new status, while the growth of commercialized theatres transferred monopoly over the stage from the court to the audience; and salons, coffeehouses, taverns, and Masonic lodges fostered new practices of sociability. Spanning a variety of disciplines, this important addition to New Approaches in European History will be of great interest to students of social and political history, literary studies, political theory, and the history of women.

JAMES VAN HORN MELTON is Chair of the Department of History at Emory University. He is author of *Absolutism and the Eighteenth-Century Origins of Compulsory Schooling in Prussia and Austria* (Cambridge, 1988), co-translator (with Howard Kaminsky) of Otto Brunner's *Land and Lordship: Structures of Governance in Medieval Austria* (Philadelphia, 1992), and co-editor (with Hartmut Lehmann) of *Paths of Continuity: Central European Historiography from the 1930s to the 1950s* (Cambridge, 1994).

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The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe

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To Barbara, Sarah, and Peter

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Introduction
What is the public sphere?

"Public" has a long history.[1] In Roman antiquity the adjective *publicus* could refer to a collective body of citizens or subjects (as in *res publica*) and its property. The Romans also contrasted *publicus* with the domain of the private household to denote public spaces like streets, squares, or theaters. *Publicum*, the noun form, had a more specifically political meaning and referred to the area, property, or income of the state. This association of public with the state gained renewed currency in early modern Europe, the classic age of dynastic state-building, and this link persists today: candidates run for public office, state agencies are housed in public buildings, state parks are public property.

Yet there is another, more recent meaning of *public*. We use it in the sense of audience, as in speaking of the public for a book, a concert, a play, or an art exhibition. Reading public, music public, theater public – such usages began to appear in the seventeenth century and had become common by the eighteenth. Unlike earlier meanings, these were unrelated to the exercise of state authority. They referred rather to publics whose members were private individuals rendering judgment on what they read, observed, or otherwise experienced. A burgeoning print culture provided one medium through which these publics made their opinions known; new or expanding arenas of sociability like coffeehouses, salons, and masonic lodges were another. These publics arose in the context of an expanding culture of consumption where cultural products were available to those who could pay for them, regardless of formal rank. The commodification of literature wrought by the popularity of the eighteenth-century novel, the cultural amenities available to patrons of fashionable resorts like Bath in England or Bad Pyrmont in Germany, the evolution of theaters from courtly into commercial institutions, the entertainment districts lining the boulevards of Paris or clustered in the pleasure gardens

[1] On the history of the term "public," see Lucian Hölscher, "Öffentlichkeit," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politischen-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, vol. IV (Stuttgart, 1978), 413–67.

of London's Ranelagh and Vienna's Prater, all exemplified the expanding networks of print and sociability characteristic of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. They heralded the arrival of "the public" as a cultural and political arbiter, an entity to which contemporaries increasingly came to refer as a sovereign tribunal. Friedrich Schiller wrote in 1782 that "the public is everything to me, my school, my sovereign, my trusted friend. I shall submit to this and to no other tribunal." London's *Theatrical Guardian* affirmed the public's sovereignty over the stage when it declared in 1791 that "the public is the only jury before the merits of an actor or an actress are to be tried, and when the endeavors of a performer are stampt by them with the seal of sanction and applause, from that there should be no appeal." In 1747 the French art critic La Font de Saint-Yenne, the first to call for the establishment of a public museum in the Louvre, justified his proposal on the grounds that "it is only in the mouths of those firm and equitable men who compose the Public . . . that we can find the language of truth." In the political realm "public opinion" acquired agency and legitimacy, even in the eyes of a theoretically absolute sovereign like Louis XVI, who wrote that "I must always consult public opinion; it is never wrong."[2]

Focussing on England, France, and the German-speaking lands, this book is about the growing importance of "the public" in eighteenth-century life. Chapters 1 and 2 examine the political dimensions of this process, and serve as case studies of the importance that "public opinion" acquired in Enlightenment political culture. The succeeding three chapters on the evolution of reading, writing, and the stage investigate the possibilities as well as the dilemmas posed by the expanding audience for literary and theatrical works. Finally, Chapter 6 on salons, Chapter 7 on taverns and coffeehouses, and Chapter 8 on freemasonry, examine the new modes of sociability that accompanied the rise of the public in Enlightenment Europe. This book is necessarily selective in the kinds of publics it examines. I have not looked at other areas, such as painting or concert life, where contemporaries also accorded "the public" a new significance and wrestled with the question of how to shape or even define it.[3]

[2] Quotes taken from Friedrich Schiller, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. G. Fricke and H. Göpfert (Munich, 1959), V:856; Leo Hughes, *The Drama's Patrons: A Study of the Eighteenth-Century London Audience* (Austin and London, 1971), 5; Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven and London, 1985), 6; John Hardman, *French Politics 1774–1789: From the Accession of Louis XVI to the Fall of the Bastille* (London and New York, 1995), 232. On public opinion as "tribunal" see Mona Ozouf, "'Public Opinion' at the End of the Old Regime," *Journal of Modern History* 60 (1988), 9–13.

[3] These subjects have been examined recently in several stimulating works. On painting and the public sphere in the eighteenth century, see Crow, *Painters and Public Life*, as well as David H. Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London, 1992). On musical publics, see James

Nor, on the whole, does this work explore the public spheres of plebeian popular protest and sociability that social historians have done so much to illuminate.[4] To do so would entail writing a completely different book, and for the most part the public sphere treated here was inhabited by men and women with sufficient property and education to enjoy regular access to newspapers, novels, and other products of eighteenth-century print culture.

As a comparative work of synthesis, this book builds on a body of French, German, and Anglo-American scholarship that has grown enormously over the past two decades. Inspiring much of this scholarship is the work of the German philosopher and cultural theorist Jürgen Habermas. Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was published in 1962, and in a few years became one of the most widely discussed works of social and political theory on the West German intellectual scene.[5]

H. Johnson's *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1995), and John Brewer's *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1997), chapters 10 and 14.

[4] The works of George Rudé and above all E. P. Thompson were pathbreaking in this field. See Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730–1848* (New York, 1964); Rudé, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century: Studies in Popular Protest* (New York, 1971). For Thompson, see his *Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1964), as well as the essays republished in his *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York, 1993). On urban popular protest, see also William Beik, *Urban Protest in Seventeenth-Century France: The Culture of Retribution* (Cambridge, 1997); Günther Lottes, *Politische Aufklärung und plebejisches Publikum: Zur Theorie und Praxis des englischen Radikalismus im späten 18. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1979); Andreas Griessinger, *Das symbolische Kapital der Ehre: Streikbewegungen und kollektives Bewusstsein deutscher Handwerksgesellen im 18. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main, 1981). On both rural and urban contexts see Andreas Würgler, *Unruhen und Öffentlichkeit: Städtische und ländliche Protestbewegungen im 18. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen, 1995).

[5] Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zur einen Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Darmstadt and Neuwied, 1962). Habermas's book acquired an almost canonical status on the German New Left and was an important theoretical text for the German student movement of the 1960s. Its early reception can be understood in the context of German domestic politics of the period, above all disenchantment with the advent in 1966 of the so-called Grand Coalition between the two leading German parties, the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). The SPD–CDU coalition convinced many on the left that they had no oppositional voice in the German parliament, and that any authentic opposition had to situate itself outside existing governmental structures. Also important for the reception of Habermas's book was the media campaign waged against the German student movement by the Springer publishing house in the *Bildzeitung*, the sensationalist right-wing tabloid. The critique of the mass media developed by Habermas in his *Structural Transformation* resonated on the German New Left, because it seemed to provide a strategy for creating an autonomous, extraparliamentary sphere of political action outside the bureaucratic institutions of the state and immune to the manipulated consent of monopolized mass media. Habermas, however, grew increasingly uneasy with the violent drift he detected on the student left, and by the summer of 1968, as the German SDS became increasingly radicalized (and to Habermas, uncritically utopian), the break between Habermas and the radical left was open. For the debate between Habermas and the German SDS see Habermas, "Die Scheinrevolution und ihre Kinder," and Oskar Negt, "Einleitung," in *Die Linke Antwortet*

Its impact outside of the German-speaking world was belated, however, since French and English translations did not appear until 1978 and 1989 respectively. Hence in Anglo-American scholarship the book long enjoyed a kind of cult status, the exclusive preserve of a relatively small group of scholars able to read the German original. The publication of the 1978 French translation paved the way for its broader reception until finally, almost thirty years after it first came out, it appeared in English.[6]

Although *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is Habermas's most historical work, it addresses a question that would be central to his concerns as a philosopher: what are the conditions under which rational, critical, and genuinely open discussion of public issues becomes possible? For historical and theoretical insight he turns to the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the ideal of what Habermas calls the "bourgeois public sphere" arose in its classic form.[7] Habermas understood this public sphere above all as a realm of communication marked by new arenas of debate, more open and accessible forms of urban public space and sociability, and an explosion of print culture in the form of newspapers, political journalism, novels, and criticism. He acknowledged that the presumed openness and egalitarianism of the bourgeois public sphere were, from its inception, belied by class interest, and that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it would lose its critical function as it became absorbed into mass-consumer culture. Yet he still believed that the norms of the public sphere could be salvaged and remain a model for open, critical, and rational debate.

Habermas's bourgeois public sphere was the historical product of two long-term developments. The first was the rise of modern nation-states dating from the late Middle Ages, a process that went hand in hand with the emergence of society as a realm distinct from the state. The modern

Jürgen Habermas (Frankfurt am Main, 1968), 5–32. On the general political context see Robert C. Holub, *Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere* (London and New York, 1991), 78–98.

[6] The French edition was published as *L'espace public: Archéologie de la publicité comme dimension constitutive de la société bourgeoise*, trans. Marc B. de Launay (Paris, 1978). The English translation: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

[7] For a discussion of Habermas's concept of the public sphere, a good place to begin is Craig Calhoun, "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere," in Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1992). Insightful analyses can also be found in Dena Goodman, "Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime," *History and Theory* 31 (1992); Margaret Jacob, "The Mental Landscape of the Public Sphere: A European Perspective," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 28 (1994); and Anthony J. La Vopa, "Conceiving a Public: Ideas and Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe," *Journal of Modern History* 64 (1992).

state, with its monopoly of force and violence, would become the sphere of public power, while society came to be understood as a realm of private interest and activity. The Middle Ages had known no such distinction, for the medieval "state" did not exercise anything like sovereignty in the modern sense. The administrative, military, judicial, and fiscal functions we associate with the modern state were instead exercised at various levels by seigneurs, towns, the church, guilds, and other "private" individuals or corporations. Seigneurs, for example, were not merely private landowners, since their rights of property included rights of administration and jurisdiction over their peasants. The relationship between seigneurs and their peasants was thus both political and social in nature. But as territorial states consolidated their authority during the early modern period, they steadily absorbed many of the political functions that had previously been exercised as rights of lordship by nobles, towns, ecclesiastical corporations, and so forth. These powers were now carried out by a sovereign state whose authority was more sharply defined *vis-à-vis* its subjects. This consolidation of state authority was most visible in the absolutist regimes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, where sovereignty found symbolic expression in what Habermas calls the "representative publicness" of court ritual and display. The pomp and grandeur of the absolutist court sought to underscore the distance between sovereign and subject and focus attention on the ruler as the sole embodiment of public authority. But just as court ceremonies were meaningless without an audience to observe them, so did the absolute monarchy's claims of *public* authority presuppose a *private* body of subjects under royal rule. In making the *state* the locus of sovereign power, absolutism also created *society* as a private realm distinct from it. It was within this private social realm, the embryo form of modern "civil society," that the bourgeois public sphere would emerge.

The rise of capitalism, the second development framing the formation of the bourgeois public sphere, further disjoined state and society. Society, though subject politically to the state, acquired growing autonomy and self-awareness through the integrating forces of mercantile capitalism. The expansion of national and international markets hastened the flow of information as well as the circulation of goods, as communication networks grew wider and denser through improvements in transportation, the growth of postal services, and the newspapers and commercial sheets circulating in response to the heightened demand for information relevant to foreign and domestic markets. Although governments themselves promoted these developments in the interest of fostering trade and enhancing revenue, the social and economic integration created by expanding networks of communication and exchange reinforced the growing

independence of society. In the eighteenth century this new sense of autonomy found expression in the emerging science of political economy, with its idea of market society as an autonomous sphere of exchange subject to its own laws. It reached fruition in the early nineteenth century in the Hegelian antithesis of state and society, which distinguished between a political realm dominated by the state and a private one in which individuals associated freely and pursued their own interests.[8]

At the same time, argues Habermas, as the market replaced the household as the primary locus of production and exchange, the sphere of family and household changed accordingly. The eighteenth century saw the emergence of the new, bourgeois conception of the family as a sphere of intimacy and affection. Aristotle's classical model of the household had viewed it as a sphere of coercion and necessity, inferior to the freedom exercised by the male citizen in the polis. The Aristotelian household was coercive owing to the absolute authority exercised by the patriarch over the women, children, and slaves who made up the household. It was a sphere of necessity since its chief function was to provide basic needs, namely biological reproduction and the production of goods, which in turn provided the male citizen with the leisure and independence necessary for his full participation in the political life of the polis. In the Middle Ages the noble household retained a similarly broad range of functions, since the rights of property comprised in noble lordship included dominion over one's peasants. The noble household was a unit of production but also a sphere of domination.

In the early modern period, however, capitalism and the rise of the state began to strip the household of these older functions. As the market replaced the household as the primary site for the production of goods, and as the territorial state increasingly absorbed administrative and judicial functions once exercised by the household, the household was increasingly privatized. Although losing many of its coercive and productive functions, it also gained greater autonomy *vis-à-vis* the state and the world of labor. What resulted was the new model of the bourgeois family, for which the domestic sphere was primarily as a sphere not of production and domination but of intimacy and affection. Private and thus shielded from outside intrusion, a refuge from the coercion of the state and the necessities of labor, the bourgeois family was conceived as an enclave of humanity distinct from the hierarchies of birth and power that governed

[8] On this process see more recently Marvin B. Becker, *The Emergence of Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century: A Privileged Moment in the History of England, Scotland, and France* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994). Habermas's own analysis draws on the theoretical insights of the Austrian medievalist Otto Brunner. See Brunner, *Land and Lordship: Structures of Governance in Medieval Austria*, translated with an introduction by Howard Kaminsky and James Van Horn Melton (Philadelphia, 1992), especially ch. 2.

social and political relationships outside it. Its ideals of companionate marriage prescribed bonds between husband and wife that were emotional and not simply economic in nature. It deemed children as objects of love and nurturing, with the family as a nursery for the acquisition of moral education.

Habermas recognized that these ideals were to some extent an ideological construct. More recent historians of marriage and the family have been relentless in highlighting the gendered dimensions of "bourgeois domesticity," and the eighteenth century no doubt had its share of tyrannical middle-class fathers ruling over dysfunctional middle-class families.[9] Coming out of a Marxist tradition that was still relatively unconcerned with matters of gender, Habermas at any rate focussed instead on property relations as the main source of inconsistency in bourgeois ideals of the family. On the one hand, argues Habermas, the norms of intimacy and love that developed within the privacy and autonomy of the bourgeois household were universal ideals, human qualities that transcended rank and class. On the other hand, because the protected sphere of the bourgeois family owed its relative autonomy to the possession of property, the exclusion of the unpropertied belied the universality of bourgeois domestic ideology. This contradiction would later emerge in the tension between the bourgeois public sphere's universal ideals of openness, inclusion, and equality, and its *de facto* exclusion of those who lacked the property and education to participate in it.

Still, Habermas refused to dismiss the norms of the bourgeois family as an ideological fiction. Their universality provided the moral basis for the ideal of a socially transcendent public that would challenge the legitimacy of the hierarchical, asymmetrical relationships on which the social and political order of the Old Regime was based. Originating in the privacy and "interiority" of the bourgeois family, these norms entered the broader public arena through the eighteenth-century literary market. This literary public sphere, at least in the beginning, was fundamentally a-political. Exemplified by periodicals like the moral weeklies of Addison and Steele and later by the sentimental novels of Samuel Richardson, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the young Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, it mapped out an autonomous private realm through its preoccupation with the world of family, love, courtship, and sociability. The literary public sphere developed in tandem with institutions of sociability like coffeehouses, reading clubs, and salons. As an arena

[9] Lynn Hunt has observed that French novels of the mid-eighteenth century "portrayed a family world in disarray, whether in novels by women in which wives confronted the abuses of husbands or in novels by men in which tyrannical fathers were opposed by rebellious or sacrilegious sons." *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1992), 23.

where private individuals engaged in rational and critical discussion, it soon moved beyond a non-political literary world and extended its purview to political matters. Habermas views this process as having occurred first in England, where he finds evidence of a politicized public sphere already in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Variants then developed on the continent, epitomized by the publication of the *Encyclopédie* in France (1751–72) and the emergence of political journalism in the territories of the Holy Roman Empire during the 1770s. By the eve of the French Revolution, enlightened journalists and critics throughout Europe had assumed the mantle of "public opinion" (*opinion publique* in France, *Publizität* or *öffentliche Meinung* in Germany) in demanding a fundamental transformation of the old order.

The bourgeois public sphere, then, arose within the private domain of the family but would ultimately acquire a political charge. As a realm of discourse and debate, argues Habermas, the public sphere rested on three assumptions. First, the dictates of reason and not the authority or identity of the speaker (or writer) were held to be the sole arbiter in debate. As a realm of communication that claimed to disregard status, the public sphere was in principle inclusive: membership was not based on rank, though it did presume education since full participation depended on one's ability to engage ideas presented in books, periodicals, and other products of print culture. Second, nothing was immune to criticism. In its mature form, the public sphere claimed the right to subject everything to scrutiny – art, music, and the world of letters, but also religious beliefs, the actions of government, or the privileges of elites. Hence for Habermas the public sphere was inherently oppositional in its thrust, since its critical range extended inexorably to individuals and institutions traditionally exempt from scrutiny. Finally, the bourgeois public sphere was hostile to secrecy. Publicity was a cardinal principle of the public sphere, and it ran counter to the absolutist notion of politics as an *arcanum*, a "secret" or "mystery" to which none but rulers and their ministers should be privy. The Prussian King Frederick II affirmed the absolutist principle of secrecy in a decree from 1784:

> A private person has no right to pass *public* and perhaps even disapproving judgment on the actions, procedures, laws, regulations, and ordinances of sovereigns and courts, their officials, assemblies, and courts of law, or to promulgate or publish in print pertinent reports that he manages to obtain. For a private person is not at all capable of making such judgment, because he lacks complete knowledge of circumstances and motives.[10]

[10] Quoted in Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 25. On secrecy and absolutism see Andreas Gestrich, *Absolutismus und Öffentlichkeit: Politische Kommunikation in Deutschland zu Beginn des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen, 1994), 34–74.

For Frederick, the affairs of government were necessarily opaque and incomprehensible to everyone outside the king and his inner circle (he himself went so far as to arrange the abduction and beatings of foreign journalists who thought otherwise). The ideology of the public sphere, on the other hand, assumed that private persons could deliberate rationally on public affairs and that indeed, the collective judgments of "public opinion" could make government more rational. But for public opinion to be rational it had to be informed, and an informed public opinion depended on a greater degree of transparency in government. It also required that debate on public affairs be open and relatively unconstrained by censorship.

These norms, argues Habermas, found mature expression in the critical spirit of the late Enlightenment (here he especially emphasizes the importance of Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy) and challenges to the traditional order unleashed by the French Revolution. They would become basic tenets of nineteenth-century liberalism and its ideal of civil society as a sphere of freedom. For Habermas, however, the "heroic" age of the liberal-bourgeois public sphere was relatively brief and ultimately fell victim to the social and political transformations of the nineteenth century. The impoverished masses of early industrialism, lacking the property and the education on which participation in the bourgeois public sphere was premised, highlighted the limits of its universal claims. Moreover, the ideals of the bourgeois public sphere presupposed a separation of state and society that proved increasingly untenable during the course of the nineteenth century. This separation was undermined on one side by the socially interventionist welfare state, and on the other by the growing power of corporations and unions that were ostensibly "private" but increasingly assumed a quasi-public character. As the boundaries between state and society eroded, the privacy of the family was steadily invaded by the intrusion of the state and quasi-public institutions. As the family lost its remnants of autonomy, it was reduced to a passive domestic domain subject to intrusion by outside forces and vulnerable to the manipulative forces of the mass media and the "culture industry." Just as the family shrank into an arena of passive consumption, so too did the public sphere lose its critical edge and surrender to the dominion of advertising, public relations, and mass-consumer culture.

Here Habermas's apparent pessimism followed in the tradition of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, his Marxist mentors who likewise emphasized the role of late-capitalist mass culture in fostering passive conformity and assent. Yet Habermas had somewhat more faith in the enduring critical potential of the bourgeois public sphere and the Enlightenment ideals on which it was based. In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), published amidst the rubble of war and genocide, Adorno and

Horkheimer had focussed on the darker side of Enlightenment rationality as a source of technocratic control and domination. Fifteen years later Habermas was more inclined to emphasize the democratic, emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment. Although recognizing that the public sphere of the Enlightenment had failed to live up to its own norms, he nevertheless believed it offered a model of open, critical debate whose moral promise transcended its ideological origins.

If historians, and especially historians of eighteenth-century Europe, have engaged the insights of Habermas's book with special vigor, this is in large part due to its ability to integrate seemingly disparate approaches to the field. The public sphere linked the private and the public. Its discursive range extended from the domestic realm to the literary marketplace, modes and institutions of sociability, and arenas of political debate. By exploring the public significance of private discourse and sociability, Habermas's model connects the social with the political. It encourages historians to link, say, discourses on family and marriage with those on government, or the communicative practices of reading societies and salons with social and political structures. For these reasons the quantity and range of scholarship inspired by Habermas's book has been broad, extending from intellectual and cultural history to the history of politics and institutions.

That said, it is also clear that important aspects of his interpretation must be modified and in some cases jettisoned outright. One is its chronology. It is difficult to sustain Habermas's view that the eighteenth-century public sphere of debate and criticism emerged first in the literary realm and was only later politicized. In England, political journalism was flourishing well before the sentimental novels and moral weeklies that Habermas associates with the literary public sphere had become popular, and in France the idea of "public opinion" as a sovereign political tribunal was already being articulated in religious controversies of the 1720s and 1730s.[11] This is not to deny the political significance of seemingly non-political literary practices, but rather to question the temporal priority Habermas assigned them.

More fundamentally, Habermas's model employs a rather conventional Marxist framework that most historians today would find dated. Few, for example, would assign the bourgeoisie of the Old Regime the kind of social cohesion and class consciousness that Habermas does. His emphasis on the bourgeois character of the public sphere works best for England,

[11] On problems with Habermas's chronology in the German context, see Gestrich, *Absolutismus und Öffentlichkeit*, 28–33.

where historians have in recent decades rediscovered the importance of the "middling sort" in eighteenth-century English social and cultural life. It is also true that participation in the eighteenth-century public sphere presupposed a relatively high level of literacy and education, which was most commonly the possession of those with sufficient property to afford it. But the fact that the propertied dominated the public sphere did not make it bourgeois. The readers of eighteenth-century novels and periodicals, the people who belonged to reading societies and masonic lodges, attended theaters, or sat in coffeehouses, included substantial numbers of nobles. And in France and the German-speaking lands at least, those members of the middle class who participated most actively in the culture of the public sphere were generally not the rising, economically dynamic bourgeoisie of Marxist lore. Most middle-class men of letters in France came from professional backgrounds, and their income derived not from manufacturing or commerce but from offices received or purchased from the crown. Similarly, middle-class German men of letters tended to be university professors, territorial officials, or pastors – professions tied more to a princely absolutist milieu than a commercial or manufacturing one. In this book, therefore, I have preferred the term "Enlightened" to "bourgeois" public sphere. The former conveys the historical specificity of the public sphere examined here in that it refers not just to any public realm, but to one arising out of conditions specific to the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Beyond the fact that nobles as well as members of the middle classes participated in the institutions and practices of the Enlightened public sphere, calling the public sphere bourgeois poses other problems.[12] It implies a certain teleology, at least in the context of the eighteenth century, by conjuring up images of a class struggling to burst the bonds in which absolutism and a feudal order had shackled it. In the process it assigns the public sphere a role that was implicitly oppositional and thus implacably hostile to the traditional society and institutions of the Old Regime. There is no question that the Enlightened public sphere had oppositional (or what Habermas would call emancipatory) features. It fostered more inclusive practices of sociability, and by widening the sphere of discussion and debate it did have the potential to challenge the prerogatives of traditionally dominant institutions and elites. But to focus solely on the subversive dimensions of the Enlightened public sphere overlooks the resilience and adaptability of Old Regime society and institutions, which

[12] For a discussion of this problem see the exchange between Keith Baker and Roger Chartier in "Dialogue sur l'espace public: Keith Michael Baker, Roger Chartier," *Politix: Travaux de science politique* 26 (1994), 10–13.

were quite capable of recognizing the communicative potential of the public sphere. Not just oppositional groups but also the crown and other traditional institutions appealed to "public opinion" to mobilize support. Moreover, if the practices of sociability nurtured in salons or masonic lodges tended to dissolve boundaries that had traditionally distinguished noble from bourgeois, the impact was not necessarily subversive. To the contrary, one might just as easily see the social intermingling of noble and bourgeois as having contributed to a process of social integration, fusing the propertied classes of society into a new elite by creating new criteria for social distinction and exclusion based on education and taste. In this respect the Enlightened public sphere betrayed a fundamental paradox: while bridging the social and cultural divide separating noble and non-noble, it simultaneously widened the distance between propertied and plebeian.

In a general sense Habermas was aware of this paradox, which he attributed to the tension between the public sphere's universal ideal of humanity and the system of property relations in which it was embedded. Yet despite his apparent recognition that the public sphere never really lived up to its own norms, those who have charged him with idealizing the public sphere have a point.[13] Part of Habermas's problem is that he takes his history from Marx but his moral philosophy from Kant, and it is sometimes difficult to know which hat he is wearing. Habermas the Marxist describes the public sphere as a process of bourgeois class formation; Habermas the Kantian enshrines it as a normative theory of communication. Habermas the Marxist identifies the public sphere with capitalist social relations; Habermas the Kantian adopts its norms as a moral imperative. Habermas the Marxist sees the public sphere as having been compromised by its bourgeois origins; Habermas the Kantian views it nostalgically as a kind of pure, prelapsarian condition only later corrupted by capitalist sin.

But if, as Habermas sees it, capitalism was the public sphere's pallbearer, it was also its midwife. Capitalist market relations pervaded the Enlightened public sphere, which evolved hand in hand with

[13] For an early critique see Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi *et al.* (Minneapolis and London, 1993), which originally appeared in German as *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung: Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1972). See more recently, Geoff Eley, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, who notes the failure of Habermas to explore sufficiently the existence of competing "counter-public" spheres (e.g., working-class publics).

commercialized forms of leisure and cultural consumption.[14] The developments in print culture that Habermas identifies with the public sphere, such as the growth of reading and writing publics, the rise of novels, newspapers and political journalism, or the emergence of literary criticism, were inseparable from the commercialization of letters. Similarly, the proliferation of public spaces where people socialized or sought entertainment – coffeehouses, pleasure gardens, public theaters, and the like – was marked by the kind of "culture-consumption" that Habermas associates with a later era. Accordingly, I have described some of the cultural tensions created by this process of commercialization and viewed them not as a later excrescence but as a constitutive part of the Enlightenment public sphere.

Habermas has also been criticized for ignoring the question of gender. The feminist critic Joan Landes has insisted that the norms of the public sphere were intrinsically masculinist, resting on gendered distinctions between a (male) public realm and a (female) private one.[15] She views the French Revolution as having marked the triumph of this masculinist discourse by enshrining in law a distinction between the public-political world as a natural male preserve and a private domestic sphere where women fulfilled their natural roles as wives and mothers. Revolutionary legislation did in fact withhold voting rights from women, and in the Terror political organizations like the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women were indeed suppressed. Hence Landes concludes that the public sphere, far from emancipating women, perpetuated a public/private dichotomy that sanctioned their political subordination.

[14] On the eighteenth century as a consumer revolution, see John Brewer, Neil McKendrick, and J. H. Plumb, eds., *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1982); Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford, 1987), 17–35; Daniel Roche, *The History of Everyday Things: The Birth of Consumption in France, 1600–1800*, trans. Brian Pearce (Cambridge, 2000), 54–80, 221–49. On the public sphere as a site for the development of a consumer culture, see Colin Jones, "The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere and the Origins of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 101 (1996).

[15] Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*; Landes, "The Public and the Private Sphere," in Johanna Meehan, ed., *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse* (New York and London, 1995), 91–116; Landes, "Introduction," in *Feminism, the Public and the Private* (Oxford and New York, 1998). For other works emphasizing the gendered nature of the public sphere, see, for example, Nancy Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender," in Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell, eds., *Feminism As Critique: On the Politics of Gender* (Minneapolis, 1987), and, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*; and Isabel V. Hull, *Sexuality, State, and Civil Society in Germany, 1700–1815* (Ithaca, 1996), 206–7.

Landes's critique was strongly argued and helped stimulate debate on the place of women in the eighteenth-century public sphere. But her view of the public sphere as necessarily masculinist has not, on the whole, won widespread assent. For one thing, such an argument tends to undermine its own premises: in claiming that Habermas's public sphere was by its very nature exclusionary, it implicitly invokes the standards of inclusiveness and universality that the ideology of the public sphere proclaimed.[16] Others have observed that Landes not only ignores Enlightenment writers like the French philosopher Condorcet, whose universalistic conception of humanity envisioned a society in which women would exercise the same political rights as men; her critique also rests on a fundamental misreading of Habermas.[17] The public sphere was not the sphere of political power, as Landes seems to assume, but a private social realm. Women did not of course gain political rights in eighteenth-century Europe – nor, for that matter, did most men. But as a sphere of sociability and discussion distinct from the realm of state power, the public sphere was characterized by a high degree of female participation. As readers and authors, as a conspicuous and sometimes dominant presence in theater audiences, salons, and debating societies, women had a role and visibility without which many practices and institutions of the public sphere would have been inconceivable. Legitimizing their participation were Enlightenment notions of sociability that considered the mingling of the sexes crucial to the progress of civil society. "It is not therefore arts, sciences, and learning, but the company of the other sex, that forms the manners and renders the man agreeable," wrote the Scottish physician William Alexander in affirming the historical role of women as a civilizing agent. Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel's *On Improving the Status of Women* (1792), a work that condemned the French Revolution for failing to grant political rights to women, asked rhetorically: "Where are those private social groups that can exist for any period of time without the company of women?"[18] In this

[16] Habermas makes this point in the preface to the 1990 German edition of his book, in response to Carole Pateman's feminist critique of contractual social and political theories in *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, 1988).

[17] On this point see Goodman, "Public Sphere and Private Life," 14–20. See also Keith Baker, "Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France: Variations on a Theme by Habermas," in Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public* Sphere, 202–3; Daniel Gordon, "Philosophy, Sociology, and Gender in the Enlightenment Conception of Public Opinion," *French Historical Studies* 17 (1992), 899–900; Lawrence E. Klein, "Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 29 (1995), 97–109.

[18] William Alexander, *The History of Women from the Earliest Antiquity, to the Present Time*, 3rd ed. (London, 1782), I:iv–v, as quoted in Sylvana Tomaselli, "The Enlightenment Debate on Women," *History Workshop Journal* 20 (1985), 121; Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel, *On Improving the Status of Women*, translated and edited with an introduction by Timothy F. Sellner (Detroit, 1979), 170.