THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF MEDIATED PUBLIC SPACE, AS THE ENVIRONMENT OF MODERN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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Abstract: *The public sphere, a central habermasian concept, with capitalist origins, becomes the environment of political actors' participation that allows mass communication. This article describes in detail the dichotomy and the various perspectives of public and private space, including the modern implications of media, primarily TV, regarding the reconfiguration of public space (social and political). In the modern age, the new mediated public space brings new facets of communication situations, including the political side.*

Key words: *public sphere, mediated public space, mass communication, political communication.*

1. Introduction

The distinction between private and public has a long history in the social and political thinking. The development of the means of communication (*i.e.*, the media), especially television, turned the decisive nature of the public sphere. Any discussion about the appearance and / or the extension of the public sphere in the capitalist society, which is a specific product of capitalism structure, should be based on the works of Jurgen Habermas. It is often said that in contemporary societies the communication is generally mediated, which comes to include the habermasian "public sphere". Habermas (1989, 1998) described the public sphere as "the sphere of individuals meeting in public" that claims it (even if regulated by the authorities, its orientation is

against the power, being, in this way able to discuss with the power the general rules of trade). Public space becomes "the place of political participation, understood as an expression of interests and deliberations, decisions and power control". Reynie *apud* [4, p. 146].

2. Media and the dichotomy between the public and the private sphere

Mass media, which initially was the essential support for free public debate, has changed, especially after it began to be felt the hegemony of the television, becoming its removal tool.

According to Habermas [6, p. 168], the individual, as public actor on the political stage, was exiled in a uniform and isolated domestic space:

„the reduction of the private sphere in

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more intimate spaces of conjugal life, deprived of its role and with diminished authority (...) gave only the illusion of a perfect private personal sphere; because, as far as people, as private individuals, have withdrawn in their role of owners, which implies a certain social control, preferring neutral position as purely personal users of leisure time, entered directly under the influence of semi-public authorities, without the benefit of being protected by an officially protected family area"

The public - private sector dichotomy can be seen in two different perspectives:

1. The State vs. private economic activities and personal relationships
2. Visibility vs. concealment

The first sense of the dichotomy is related to the relationship between the field of institutionalized political power, (*i.e.* state and business area) and personal relations that are beyond and gets away from the direct political control (including civil society, in a first sense, because at some point it suggests rather a mediating character between the two poles even if it is a part of the private domain).

The second sense of the public - private dichotomy is the one that interests us in the first instance when we refer to the reconfiguration of public space (social and political). From this point of view, the "public" means "open" or "publicly available" Bobbio *apud* [11, p.119]. We will recognize that what is public, is generally considered to be visible, observable, acting in the front of the audience so that it can be known by all or many, and what is considered to be private, is seen as hidden to the public view because it is done in secret or a small circle. In this respect, Thompson believes that the public - private dichotomy relates to public versus private nature, the openness versus secrecy, the visibility versus invisibility. [11].

Feminist critique may represent another way of looking at things, into defining and understanding the two spheres. This perspective believes that the dichotomy of public - private is relative to other dichotomous pairs: State - civil society, political - personal, social - individual, work - household [7]. Feminist criticism has challenged this dichotomy theorizing upon „what is personal is political".

This phrase expresses concerns regarding the non-intrusion of the state in situations where it was evident that this intervention is needed as domestic violence; it also expresses the emphasis of a situation that marked women's participation in community life that is their association with private space. This aspect is very important because once circumscribed with the private sphere, women acquired the status of a subordinate, receiving only the power connected with home and children, while men manifested their actions in economic and political fields.

The public - private distinction is superimposed with the female – male distinction, while the public space was identified with technology and culture, and again with male-rationality features, neutrality, objectivity, calculation of interests, meritocracy, rights, competition; the private space was identified with nature and thus with female traits - emotions, irrationality, tenderness, care. [1], [7].

Public space was a place reserved exclusively for men regardless of social organization - policy:

"Of all the places, this is the only male one; in most pre-capitalist societies it was booked for warriors and priests, two occupations that were exclusively male;

in early capitalism it was booked again for the owners, associated exclusively with masculine status; modern capitalism brings the new professionalization of politicians and had to invent new mechanisms of exclusion." [10].

This exclusion is not so recent if we discuss the date factor, as in ancient Greece we can truly speak about the fact that in debates were accepted by all citizens, but citizens were only the male Athenians, not the women, which had the same status as slaves. From this perspective, the Greeks distinguished between the public sphere of the polis and the private sphere of *oikos*. In Rome things were approximately alike, women being perceived through the eyes of dowry and family care, the separation being provided between *res publicae* - regarding the community and *res privatae* – regarding the individual and family.

3. The political communication and participation in the mediated public sphere

With the proliferation of mass media, surveys and advertising, communication has participated at all the changes in the political field. Their development led to new forms of public mediated characters, others than the public nature of the traditional co-presence. Even though direct debates remain important, such as protest rallies and public meetings to support a candidate, we must remember that they are themselves exploited and extended by the media in public space.

Different analysis of this process varies between the regulatory function of destabilized social ties and the emergence of new ways of managing the social and domination forms.

Mediated public space diminishes substantially the social dialogue seen as a direct interaction, but allows, instead, the democratic access to knowledge of public interest. In the specific context of "mass democracy", the lack of the priority for direct interaction is the price paid for the right to information and knowledge of political action. Accordingly, the political communication appears to be the opposite of degradation of the politics, but also as a condition for the functioning of large public space [12].

Communication plays an essential place in this new gear, and its forms have changed significantly. Thus, Gilles Achache noted the shift in political communication, from the dialogic and propagandistic frames to the dominant model of marketing [9, p.14].

Increased power of political communication correlates with the decline of the representation and of traditional exercise of state political activity and parties. The most important consequence, from this view, is that the electoral model based on representativeness is coupled with the model of surveys, which becomes a referential model.

Thanks to these features, the new public space is where power is divided between the traditional political system, political marketing consultants, sociologists, media and surveying institutes. The receiver is the general public or public opinion. Communication is direct or mediated through the media. This process is conducted in the public space. What changes in the new public space or in the extended public space is the prevalence of mediated communication.

Habermas's claim that media marketing and advertising led to a feudalization of the public sphere is denied by modern communication features in which enhanced visibility, the large number of

communication channels in direct competition, better educated voters (a retrospect on how the Romanian electorate presented itself in 2009 beside 1990 supports this last assertion) wide the range of action of those who send the message, but also the possibilities of resistance from the audience.

Thompson (2000) defines mass communication as "institutionalized production and widespread dissemination of symbolic goods by setting and transfer of information or symbolic content" [11, p. 30]. Mass communication has certain features:

- It involves certain technical and institutional means of production and distribution which shows us that is related to media industry development.
- It involves the conversion to goods of symbolic forms, because the media manufactured products are the subject to the economic valorization process; this is the weakest point because the continuous hunting for audience has direct implications upon the nature and the content of broadcast material (the sensational rush).
- It involves a split between the production and the reception of symbolic forms; their message recipients are in different contexts and can interpret the message differently.
- It involves the public circulation of symbolic forms which means that messages are available to a whole set of recipients, which means that they have public characteristics.

Regarding the pragmatic discourse, media practices extend the public space and hence social participation in public debate agenda. From this perspective we can speak of the function of preserving the democracy of mediated public space. By participating in the public arena through the media we are able to evaluate both those that we have chosen, and those that are invited by the media to represent or define the public interest and that are not necessarily voted are elected politicians. [2].

The problem at this level relates to the character of mediated communication. The channel, through which information is transmitted, is not simply a neutral medium. Regardless of what paradigm of communication we choose to present the process of influence, we find that effects can be detected. But these effects are implicit.

There is, however, another kind of influence, which I think in a way we must considered it as *a priori*. I speak here about the compositional effects that exist because the media is present (they influence us whether we buy and read newspapers or listen to radio or look at TV; by default, they influence us by reconfiguring the space, the reality).

Although the exposure is selective, and human motivations may be different to justify the same election, it is necessary to consider this latent component when building explanatory models.

As the vote, the access to mediated public space involves some "rules" of participation on which bases arises a particular social space that includes: "media class" (political actors, journalists, public figures), the public opinion and the public (as collective actors).

The field in which action is carried out (the electoral campaign) is "the new public space". What has in addition to the public space defined by Jurgen Habermas is the television and advertising plus the aggregation considered traditional among the public opinion, political actors and conventional media. Other elements that appear in addition - surveys and performance (Americanization) - are implicitly

present: from the 1996 election campaign the Americanization of Romanian public space was striking [5, p. 150].

The Americanization of politics had already been present in Western Europe [8], so the newly created field was inevitable not to move eastward. From the employment of American political consultants to surveys used to calibrate the campaign, disseminating the convenient results by media, television election ads and using "negative advertising" campaigns, all of these techniques generated similarities with the American model.

The electoral field is defined by interactions that occur in the public space during the election campaign (temporarily or permanently campaign) by specific political communication means.

The communication can take place directly or mediated at the level of public opinion. This is primarily a statistical design. With the use of political opinion surveys, social scientists can measure the popularity of an idea or public figure in relation to certain social groups.

In this sense, the public opinion is a collective character whose representativeness is constructed with statistical means. Many times, the public opinion segment is not statistically representative that means it may be stronger than the one indicated by opinion polls.

The most "dangerous" public opinion is the one that cannot be attributed to a specific character, a kind of "presence through absence" which has a great impact in public space because he does not seem to be anyone's construction. All the debates that exist around the concept of public opinion have developed as a starting point of its complex nature, the fact that the public opinion is always a "synthetic" construction. Therefore, the specific public opinion character must be explained through the mechanisms that produced it. [2].

By analogy with a computer system we could consider the public opinion similar to the "soft", to the running programs that change and respond differently depending on the configuration of the "hard", which implies the coexistence of different mechanisms of generating the public opinion.

If the public opinion is part of the "election soft", according to the programmable input into the system and its configuration, the political communication through its components: mass media, advertising, surveys, television or the show or Americanization, is the "election hard". It's different configurations allow the decryption mechanisms by which public opinion is divided and react.

The public is a social construction, a direct result of different practices of mediatization and indirect surveying studies. In terms of coverage, the public is a discursive construction, a "character" of a certain social "biography", which at one time has certain preferences in terms of media consumption. From the perspective of surveying research, the public is a social group with a certain sociological profile, a collective character that interprets media products.

The field of communication has, finally, a particularity: it is more influenced by external forces than any other field of cultural production because it depends very directly of market request, is immediately the subject of market sanctions (the vote, in this instance), perhaps even greater than the field that is contextual integrated, the electoral one. [3].

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