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WHERE IS THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN POLISH HISTORY?

Abstract

Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere has provoked a massive reaction in European historiography in the last thirty years. However, methodological debates driven by the new questions that it inspired in Germany, England, or France had no equivalent in Poland and more broadly in Eastern Europe. This essay suggests why this might have been the case and argues for the deeper engagement of Polish historians with the Habermasian theory. In the text, I reintroduce the aims of the theory of the public sphere and look for the possible roots of its lacklustre reception among Polish historians in the idea about the Polish case's supposed incompatibility with the course of modern history assumed by Habermas. I argue against this view, emphasising the flexibility and open-endedness of the main Habermasian concepts, as well as underlining the necessity for a specifically Polish answer to Habermas' theoretical enterprise. In the final part, I present the opportunities brought by adapting the theory to the Polish case, claiming that the original history of the Polish public sphere could be a prospective topic for both Polish historians and other historians of the public sphere.

Key words: Habermas, public sphere, public opinion, Polish historiography

Słowa kluczowe: Habermas, sfera publiczna, opinia publiczna, historiografia polska

To a reader acquainted with the scholarly debates of the last thirty years, the question in the title of this article might seem naïve or at least outdated. After all, it is rare today to consider the Habermasian concept of the public sphere as descriptive of a situation that did or did not appear in the particular historical



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conditions. This way of thinking has appeared in the first years of the English reception of the German scholar's *Habilitationsschrift*, which greatly contributed to its global dissemination and affirmed its significance in the academic world¹. Since then, the concept of the public sphere has been debated and variously revised a number of times to finally falter under the pressure of subsequent waves of criticism, many of them waged by historians. Currently, it is rare to adapt the theory without having made at least significant caveats if not reworking it altogether². Nonetheless, it is impossible to deny Habermas' theory a timely discernment of topic and, indeed, an extraordinary insight. By bringing attention to new connections between culture, history, democracy, and the media, it enabled the emergence of successive research methods and theoretical approaches that to a great extent defined contemporary, twenty-first-century historiography³.

However, there is an important reason to ask the title question despite its potential naivety. Unlike German academia since the nineteenth century and the broader academic world since the 1990s, Polish historiography has not undergone the stages of considering the theory as mentioned above. In fact, there has been a strange silence from Polish historians when it comes to the history of the public sphere. Considering the global relevance of the topic, it is necessary to understand why this has been the case and to push the historians towards some reaction – or, if one wills, to make a “critical intervention”⁴ in the current state of Polish historiography. The task is even more urgent since Polish historiography has already started to import and adapt some methods that have been bred on the grounds of the Western discussions of the Habermasian theory. For these research trends to find sensible reception, it is necessary to outline their roots and explain the consequence of their (mis)applications in the context of Polish history.

¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), org. *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1962).

² Perhaps a telling instance in this regard is that Habermas himself published a number of essays completing and updating the theory. For one of the most recent ‘epilogues’ like this, see: Jürgen Habermas, “Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Have Epistemic Dimensions? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research,” *Communication Theory* 16, i. 4 (2006): 411–426.

³ For a summary of Habermas' impact on historiography, see: John Nerone, “The Future of Communication History,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, i. 3 (2006): 254–262; Hanco Jürgens, “Habermas for Historians: Four Approaches to his Works,” *Forschungsberichte aus dem Duitland Instituut Amsterdam* 5 (2009): 158–170; Stéphane Haber, “Pour historiciser *L'Espace public* de Habermas,” in *L'espace public au Moyen Âge: Débats autour de Jürgen Habermas*, ed. Patrick Boucheron, Nicolas Offenstadt (Paris: PUF, 2011), 25–41.

⁴ In accordance with the established tradition in critical theory and somewhat similarly to: Douglas Kellner, “Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention,” in *Perspectives on Habermas*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2000), 259–288.

Moreover, the problem in question does not seem to be specifically Polish. Rather, it is symptomatic of the lack of engagement with the Habermasian theory in Eastern Europe more broadly⁵. This absence comes against the local backdrop of relative underdevelopment of media and communication studies, the framework that has been largely received from the West after the fall of the Soviet Union and remains under the impact of Western universalism⁶. In other words, we know little about Eastern Europe's history of communication, we tend to identify its course with that of the Western developments studied by Western scholars, and much of this problematic identification stems from our uninspired treatment (or from the lack thereof) of works such as the ones written by Habermas. In a way, this is a double gap, as much of the current Habermas-inspired scholarship could certainly use the perspective and the historical data such as the Polish one to create more comprehensive histories of the public sphere, especially when approached from the point of view of international or global history. All this makes it especially worthwhile to publish an article discussing our regional problems in this regard in English, the lingua franca of modern academia, and to communicate the problematic issues to the broader audience.

The following article seeks to alleviate this situation at least partly by opening a discussion about the potential history of the public sphere in Poland. Its aims are exploratory and introductory rather than substantive and directed at general observations rather than at specific research problems. Namely, I intend:

- to explain the reasons for the silence about the history of the public sphere among Polish historians and show them to be misguided,
- to show that the problems the theory entails are to some extent unavoidable,
- to outline the possible applications of Habermas' classic theory to Polish history and discuss their relevance to the field,
- and to argue for the benefit of applying Habermasian concepts to Polish history as expository of some blind spots and as providing new opportunities in the current state of post-Habermasian studies.

This way, I hope to draw a rough map of how the concept of the public sphere might fit into Polish history.

⁵ This is, at least in accordance with my research in Czech, Slovak, and Hungarian scholarly literatures and consultations with scholars better acquainted in these national traditions.

⁶ Zrinjka Peruško and Dina Vozab, "The Field of Communication in Croatia: Toward a Comparative History of Communication Studies in Central and Eastern Europe," in *The International History of Communication Study*, ed. Peter Simonson, David Park (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 213–234.

PART 1: THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Since its original publication in 1962, and later in the English translation in 1989, so much has been written about Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere that it is intimidating to summarise it⁷. But it is impossible to discuss it without at least giving it a try.

Habermas set out to create a philosophical work of historically informed political theory. He was interested in the category of the public, which he understood as a social realm where rational discussion and political action were possible. His goals were mainly genealogical: in the introduction to the book, he explained that he aimed to trace the roots of the “structures of this complex that today, confusingly enough, we subsume under the heading ‘public sphere’.”⁸ As a student of the Frankfurt School's iconic Marxist scholars, Habermas tried to conceptualise these structures in terms of a historical dialectic, where he identified a crucial transformation having to do with the emergence of the type of communicative sphere characteristic of the “bourgeois society”. He called this realm the “bourgeois public sphere”, which appeared – as a concept or a “principle”, as well as its numerous material realisations – in contrast to a number of other forms of publicity and public-ness, including the “literary” and “representational” public spheres⁹. However, it was this sphere, in its volatile existence and eventual collapse, that was of special interest to him as the key to his ideological critique of bourgeois society underlying the Western project of modernity.

Habermas' genealogy aimed to distil the “basic blueprint” or the perfect formulation of the public sphere from the historical variance it analysed. In principle, the bourgeois public sphere indicated “an area in social life where individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action”¹⁰. It was “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” in the form of “something approaching public opinion”¹¹. The public sphere was open to all citizens; it disregarded status and focused on the debate over general rules governing social relations.

While at times Habermas reached to ancient and mediaeval examples, the main point of his work focused on the modern and early modern era. In particular, he saw the eighteenth century as the time of the key shift, when the representational public sphere associated with the feudal social order gave way to the bourgeois public sphere that thrived in the era of early capitalism. Habermas underlined how in mediaeval and early modern Europe the category of the public was originally “coextensive with public authority” in contrast to a limited private

⁷ Thomas Gregersen of www.habermasforum.dk has meticulously collected and publicised a bibliography of all the articles and books on Habermas published since 1992.

⁸ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 4–5.

⁹ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 5–14.

¹⁰ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 27–31.

¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopaedia Article,” *New German Critique* 3 (1974): 49–55, at 49.

sphere¹². However, the representational culture, where monarchs projected their images onto their subjects in an overwhelming and one-sided manner, was ultimately overturned by the public sphere operating outside the control of the state. This change was in a large part due to the impact of new media and manners of association that allowed for interactive exchange of views and knowledge. Thus, the common connotation of the theory with forms of social interaction that became commonplace in the eighteenth century: newspapers, journals, theatres, reading clubs, masonic lodges, and coffeehouses. These new spheres fostered discursive relations focused on “debating and deliberating rather than buying and selling” and contributed to the emergence of new phenomenon of public opinion, which soon became considered a regulatory institution against the authority of the state¹³. A political theorist at heart, Habermas saw the best realisation of the principle of the public sphere in a bourgeois liberal constitutional order centring on the idea of participatory democracy the characteristics of which he identified in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in England, France, and Germany. Late in the nineteenth century, the public sphere to which these societies aspired started decaying for the sake of a new social realm dominated by commercial mass media, as the distinctions between the state authority and society were blurred due to the emergence of the welfare state.

PART 2: THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN POLAND

Habermas’ theory made no big splash with historians in Poland. It was discussed mainly among sociologists, cultural theorists, and political and media scholars who engaged in little to no historical reflection on the topic¹⁴. Internationally, there developed a sociological discussion about the *Solidarność* movement and the events of 1989 as considered in Habermasian terms, seemingly the farthest in the past that scholars were ready to venture¹⁵. However, there has been no significant debate about the broader history of the public sphere in Poland or about the possible theoretical consequences of adapting the Habermasian model as part of historical methodology. Though often cited, Habermas has tended to

¹² Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 30.

¹³ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 27.

¹⁴ Apart from some noble exceptions in the 1980s, most of these studies have found widest reception only about the publication of a Polish translation in 2007. See: Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturalne przeobrażenia sfery publicznej*, tłum. Małgorzata Łukasiewicz, Wanda Lipnik (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2007); Jolanta Itrich-Drabarek, “Problem sfery publicznej,” *Studia Politologiczne* 14 (2009): 70–83; Krzysztof Jaskułowski, “Koncepcja sfery publicznej Jürgena Habermasa,” *Spotkania Europejskie* 3 (2010): 69–86; Kaja Gadowska and Jan Winczorek, “Sfera publiczna – funkcje, dysfunkcje, normy oficjalne i nieoficjalne,” *Studia Socjologiczne* 1 (2013): 5–18.

¹⁵ See e.g.: Leszek Koczanowicz, “Civil Society as an Ethical Challenge (Paradoxes of the Creation of the Public Sphere in Post-Totalitarian Poland),” *Human Affairs* 1 (2003): 20–33.

appear as a footnote reference rather than as a serious basis for evaluation, assessment, or comparison.

This silence became noticeable especially when Polish history was being confronted with concepts that gained their final shape during Western discussions about the public sphere. For instance, in his pioneering 2012 study of the Warsaw public space in the first half of the nineteenth century, Aleksander Łupienko mentioned the theory, but made no analytical use of it, nor did he engage with the critical state of the art. Considering the extent to which his central term has been embedded in post-Habermasian conversation about the distinction between the public and the private, this omission was seen by some as a missed opportunity¹⁶.

It was only Wiktor Marzec's 2016 *Rebelia i reakcja*¹⁷ that directly applied the notion of a public sphere to Polish history, although this observation must be met with some reservations. Firstly, Marzec's background as a historical sociologist rather than a historian makes his engagement with the theory perhaps less representative of Polish historiography as a whole. Secondly, the public sphere that Marzec talked about was not exactly the one imagined by Habermas. *Rebelia i reakcja* described the political experience of Polish workers at the brink of the 1905 revolution, including their participation in the emerging "proletarian public sphere". This idea refers to the work of Habermas' students, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, who revised the original concept in the light of class division: while the "citizen" or "bourgeois public sphere" conceived by Habermas was related to the logic of capital, the "proletarian public sphere" was to be embedded in the logic of production.¹⁸ Interestingly, the two kinds of public sphere were supposed to be in a dialectical relationship, as the proletariat one emerged in reaction to its bourgeois counterpart. Thus, by deploying the concept in the study of 1905 events in Poland, Marzec seemed to implicitly accept the Habermasian thesis, at least as considered by Negt and Kluge, to also apply to earlier Polish history¹⁹.

¹⁶ Aleksander Łupienko, *Przestrzeń publiczna Warszawy w pierwszej połowie XIX wieku* (Warszawa: Neriton, 2012). Despite the mention of Habermas, Łupienko's analysis was mainly inspired by urban studies. This was picked up in a review by Makary Górzyński in "Aleksander Łupienko, *Przestrzeń publiczna Warszawy w pierwszej połowie XIX wieku*, Warszawa: Neriton, 2012, ss. 184, ISBN: 978-83-7543-246-6," *Studia Historyczne* 54, nr 2 (2014): 270-275. Łupienko's work is especially worth mentioning here because it has been influential in terms of further studies of the public space in the period, e.g. in Mikołaj Getka-Kenig, "Rozwój monumentalnej architektury Warszawy na przełomie XVIII i XIX wieku a modernizacja przestrzeni publicznej," *Wiek Oświecenia* 35 (2019): 11-44.

¹⁷ Wiktor Marzec, *Rebelia i reakcja. Rewolucja 1905 roku i plebejskie doświadczenie polityczne* (Łódź-Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2016). Marzec himself underlined that he saw the proletariat public sphere as "alternative" to Habermas' ideas (51, 123-125). Marzec developed some of these concepts in his article written together with Kamil Śmiechowski, "Pathogenesis of the Polish Public Sphere. The Intelligentsia and Popular Unrest during and after the 1905 Revolution", *Polish Sociological Review* 4 (2016): 437-57.

¹⁸ Oskar Negt, Alexander Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung: Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973).

¹⁹ This was noted, and suggested to be wrong, in Borys Cymbrowski's "Wiktor Marzec (2016). *Rebelia i reakcja. Rewolucja 1905 roku i plebejskie doświadczenie polityczne*. Łódź –

Ironically, the lack of engagement with the theory of the public sphere in Poland tends to be justified precisely by its incompatibility with Polish history. There seems to be a tacit agreement among Polish historians that they did not react to Habermas' famous work because they considered it irrelevant in the local context²⁰. By being based on the conditions typical for Western Europe in early modern era, Habermas' theses are supposedly untranslatable to the situation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth or the Polish lands later.

While there has been no published critical assessment of the "Habermasian model" to the Polish case, one can easily imagine such a case being made. As any historian would be quick to remark, the Polish (or Polish-Lithuanian) historical situation between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries differed from that of countries such as England, France, or the German states. At the very least, Poland did not fit the pattern in terms of its social structure, economic system, and political development in the period. While Habermas paid attention to societies characterised by the strong position of the bourgeoisie and high levels of urbanisation that underwent some radical transformations, often from feudal and absolutist monarchies to constitutional and democratic systems, Poland remained largely agrarian and dominated by nobility. Here, the relationship with democracy was less linear and more complex, from the "noble democracy" of the Polish-Lithuanian state to Napoleonic reforms adapted variously in the Polish lands partitioned and occupied by its former neighbours.

These differences entail several problematic consequences. For instance, the partitions themselves complicated the relationship between the public, the nation, and the state – terms that the egalitarian public sphere presupposed as synonymous²¹. Key institutions that Habermas saw as most representative of the new public sphere – such as newspapers, salons, or Masonic lodges – had a much more modest impact on public life in Poland than in England or France and did not become the carriers of the public opinion to the extent that the German scholar ascribed to them²². One can doubt to what degree Habermas' Marxian use of terms such as "feudalism", "bourgeois", or "democracy" applied to local conditions²³. Habermasian dependence on the vision of a uniform "Enlightenment

Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego i Universitas (recenzja)," *Studia Krytyczne* 4 (2017): 169–174.

²⁰ As an implicit assumption and not a fully-fledged argument, this conviction is extremely rarely expressed in print. However, the notes of it have been visible in the reviews of Lupienko's and Marzec's works. It also goes hand in hand with the idea that Polish democracy has historically had a 'peripheral character' as imagined in Zdzisław Krasnołębski, *Demokracja peryferii* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2003).

²¹ This relationship was greatly discussed in Craig Calhoun, "Nationalism and the Public Sphere," in *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on Grand Dichotomy*, ed. Jeff Weintraub, Krishan Kumar (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 75–102.

²² Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 31–42.

²³ To consider one aspect of the problem, the extent to which Habermas used a rather outdated Marxian conceptual framework is described in Agnes Heller, "Habermas and Marxism," in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, ed. John Thompson, David Held (London: Macmillan, 1982), 21–41.

project” and modernity had even bigger repercussions when one considers the broader differences between the West and the East²⁴. This is especially relevant in consideration of the fact that the eighteenth-century distinction of the very idea of “Eastern Europe” was based on differing visions of the public²⁵.

What I hoped to show by the above examples is that insofar as we treat Habermas’ work as describing the history of the public sphere in terms of an idiographic model, there are serious reservations to be made about relating it to Polish history. However, such an argument would rest on a false premise. This is because in fact, Habermas did not set out to create a purely descriptive model that would require its exemplifications to meet some fixed criteria of historical development, but rather to derive an outline of an aspect of the relationship between society and the state that characterised the modern era. Aware of this, critics liken the concept of the public sphere to an ideal type, a hypothetical construct best known from Weberian sociology, whose validity is measured not by its reproduction of reality, but by its adequacy to ascertain a number of cases²⁶. As an ideal type, the idea of the public sphere would have never been intended to be fully realised in any particular historical circumstances, including those described by Habermas, who highlighted a number of variances among his cases.²⁷

If the above theorisation is not vivid enough, consider another way the above-described argument misinterprets the concept of the public sphere. While the English phrase “public sphere” may suggest something stable and fixed like a place – e.g., a coffee house, a theatre, or a public square, already proverbially associated with Habermas – the original word the author used was *Öffentlichkeit*, which denotes a more abstract quality sometimes translated as “public-ness”²⁸. The problematic translation (which carried to the Polish rendition) may be somewhat responsible for too easily reifying the public sphere as a tangible institution or a space that “appeared” at some point in history. Actually, Habermas talked

²⁴ Brian Cowan, “Public Sphere,” in *Information: A Historical Companion*, ed. Ann Blair, Paul Duguid, Anja-Silvia Goeing, Anthony Grafton (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021), 713–717.

²⁵ Larry Wolf, “Voltaire’s Public and the Idea of Eastern Europe: Toward a Literary Sociology of Continental Division,” *Slavic Review* 54, i. 4 (1995): 932–42.

²⁶ The Structural Transformation mentions a ‘blueprint’ (Grundriß): Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 27. For a broader description of the ‘ideal type’ method, see: George Psathas, “The Ideal Type in Weber and Schutz,” in *Explorations of the Life-World*, ed. Martin Endress, George Psathas, Hisashi Nasu (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 143–169.

²⁷ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 57–66 and 67–73.

²⁸ Habermas mentioned the plurality of meanings related to *Öffentlichkeit* when determining the proper subject of his study as ‘structures of this complex that today, confusingly enough, we subsume under the heading “public sphere”’ (Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 4–5). The discussion about the meaning of Habermas’ central terms can be found in Cowan, “Public Sphere,” 713. Eduardo Mendieta explains that it ‘refers to a space or sphere within civil society, but also to a process, a logic that places society and the state, citizens and the law, the private and the public, inwardness and publicness in dynamic and contestational relations’ (see: Eduardo Mendieta, “Public Sphere,” in *The Cambridge Habermas Lexicon*, ed. Amy Allen, Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 356–63, at 356).

about *Öffentlichkeit* as to some extent an enduring, if not perennial, aspect of social relations whose “structural transformation”, mainly from “representative” to “bourgeois” publicness, was the proper subject of his study²⁹.

In this case, claiming that Habermas’ theses do not relate to Polish history creates more questions than it answers: does it mean that Poland-Lithuania maintained the representative mode of publicness throughout the entire early modern era? Or that no Habermasian category of publicness applied to local conditions at any time in the past? What, then, did the Polish equivalent of communicative action look like and what approach should describe its development in the context of Polish modernity? In other words, either way we are left with questions that should open, rather than stifle, an investigation concerning the use of Habermasian concepts to analyse Polish history.

PART 3: THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN POLISH HISTORY

Certain lines of inquiry are immediately obvious in this regard: the existence of representative culture and the associated kind of public-ness in late mediaeval and early modern Poland; the transformations of the public sphere in the eighteenth century in consideration of the local modes of sociability, deliberation, and political action, and the presence of the principle of the public sphere in Polish intellectual life of the time; the mediatisation and democratisation of society and culture in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Poland; the rising impact of mass culture on the ideals of public debate in their Eastern-European version. In assessing Polish history in Habermasian terms there is the potential for a book, and a long-awaited one, whose contents are as apparent as they are difficult to summarise in several sentences³⁰.

Incorporating this kind of perspective would bridge several gaps in Polish historiography and shed new light on some of the classical problems of Polish history. For one, it would connect the concepts referring to the theory of the public sphere with the actual conditions of Polish history; the works to which they were central, such as those produced by Łupienko and Marzec, could certainly build on the history of Polish publicness. The subject matter of such a book would have to enter the domain of existing histories, possibly bringing an organised and well-tailored framework into the studies of early modern political culture so far largely limited to the analysis of political discourse in terms of

²⁹ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 5–14.

³⁰ The closest outline can be found in Kazimierz Sowa’s discussion of the Polish civic society: Kazimierz Sowa, “Społeczeństwo obywatelskie a polityka – uwagi o historycznych uwarunkowaniach i perspektywach społeczeństwa obywatelskiego w Polsce,” *Państwo i Społeczeństwo* 8, nr 1 (2008): 5–24. To a degree, Polish society was analysed through the lens of concepts similar to the public sphere by German scholars of Eastern Europe. See: *Stadt und Öffentlichkeit in Ostmitteleuropa 1900–1939: Beiträge zur Entstehung moderner Urbanität zwischen Berlin, Charkiv, Tallinn und Triest*, ed. Andreas Hofmann, Anna Wendland (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002).

linguistic and intellectual history³¹. Serious engagement with Habermas could benefit the studies of Polish modernity, whose otherwise rich tradition has for some reason avoided the German scholar³².

While such a work would introduce an important frame of reference to Polish historiography against which more detailed research could be appropriately positioned, the current lack of it does not preclude scholars from engaging with selected Habermasian concepts. Indeed, after a number of criticisms and reinterpretations, the ultimate contribution made by Habermas' theory seems to have lain not in its direct application, but rather in the academic debates the axis of which it became³³. Today, the theory of the public sphere resurfaces not as a historical model, but rather as a "disciplinary aegis" for a number of research problems³⁴. The issues raised by the German scholar are increasingly often debated in a looser framework sometimes dubbed "post-Habermasian"³⁵. This is not at all to say that Habermas becomes less relevant, but to point to the fact that he does not have to be swallowed whole to be useful for Polish historians perhaps hesitant about engaging with his long-debated theory.

In order to get a grasp of what such an incorporation might look like, let us consider an example. Key for Habermasian theory, the idea of "public opinion" as the default effect of public deliberation was supposed to appear in Europe in the late Enlightenment. It applied as much to the very term and to the rhetorical tool that it quickly became as to the actual (or perceived) phenomena of the masses impacting decisions of political elites. This notion became the basis for a number of historical innovations, including the post-Habermasian studies of public-making³⁶. In French

³¹ I allude to a line of nonetheless brilliant studies of political discourse, including: Anna Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Dyskurs polityczny Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów. Pojęcia i idee* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2018); Irena Szczepankowska, "Prawo i wolność w dyskursie politycznym Rzeczypospolitej Przedrozbiorowej (podstawowe problemy badawcze)," *Poradnik Językowy* 8 (2008): 75–93; Małgorzata Dawidziak-Kładozna, "Związki językoznawczych badań nad wymową polityczną I Rzeczypospolitej z innymi dziedzinami nauk," *Biuletyn Polskiego Towarzystwa Językoznawczego* 72 (2016): 83–95.

³² For instance, Habermas does not prominently feature in Tomasz Kizwalter's well reputed work *Polska nowoczesność. Genealogia* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2020) nor in the more controversial book by Jan Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą* (Warszawa: Universitas, 2011).

³³ Cowan, "Public Sphere," 715–716 notes that "precisely because Habermas's arguments were chronologically imprecise, many scholars have quarrelled with the details of his historical narrative, in some cases going to the extreme of using the phrase but denuding it of any relationship to the broader historical vision of a transformation from representative to bourgeois publicity".

³⁴ See: Harold Mah, "Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians," *The Journal of Modern History* 72, i. 1 (2000): 153–182.

³⁵ Brian Cowan, "Making Publics and Making Novels: Post-Habermasian Perspectives," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, ed. James Downie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 55–70.

³⁶ See: *Making Publics in Early Modern Europe. People, Things, Forms of Knowledge*, ed. Bronwen Wilson, Paul Yachnin (London: Routledge, 2011); Cowan, "Making Publics and Making Novels."

and English historiographies, the idea was developed to a large extent and contributed to several insightful studies about the era, including an entire strand of writings considering the myth of public opinion as a “creative fiction” and a central instrument of revolutionary politics³⁷.

Conversely, in Polish historiography public opinion has remained an unnoticed problem. In fact, there is a common conviction about the era that the Polish public sphere was so underdeveloped that public opinion could not have played an important role in the political and social life of the nation³⁸. Ironically, some classic historical studies referring to the period between the 1790s and the 1830s have implicitly assumed it as a factor. For instance, in his consideration of the November uprising, Jerzy Łojek gave public opinion an important function in preparing the ground, causing, and impacting the course of the national rebellion³⁹. Because the idea has had such little credibility among Polish historians, Łojek did not study the concept or try to measure the phenomenon; instead, in his explanations he relied on ascribing significance to particular political decisions of important figures as reactions to their perceived state of the general will. In other words, he guessed the motivations of historical figures based on his impressions about public opinion of the time.

Adapting the Habermasian idea of public opinion to such studies would at the very least provide a systematic framework for analysing the scale and impact of opinions uttered in public. At best, it could relate the practices of public-making to political ideology and praxis. For instance, by considering first how public opinion was perceived by the elites and relating it to the local modes of public-making one could expose its role as an active myth and perhaps retrace its emergence from the word-on-the-street to salon talks to public speeches. This way, it could better help ascertain the awareness and the response that political decision makers could have actually had to hearing the news of the general will.

Conversely, for foreign historians of the public sphere, Polish history has the advantage of an original terra incognita. Its numerous original features promise a refreshed perspective on some of the classic tenets of the theory. For instance, consider the Commonwealth’s political system, based on the principles of Golden Liberty and the ideology of Sarmatism, in something approximating Habermasian terms. On first viewing, it might seem surprisingly progressive if not pioneering in claiming the equality of all citizens and potential inclusivity of all opinions already in the sixteenth century, in stark contrast to the old idea of Eastern European “backwardness”. Based on elective monarchy and popular citizen vote, it would be antithetical to the representative culture proclaimed by Habermas as typical of feudal societies of early modern Europe. The weak position of the king relative to Western Europe puts the basic tenets of representative culture into

³⁷ It is well summarised in Mah, “Phantasies of the Public Sphere,” 168–180.

³⁸ Jerzy Myśliński, “Prasa i opinia publiczna,” *Kwartalnik Historii Prasy Polskiej* 28, z. 4 (1989): 5–10.

³⁹ Jerzy Łojek, *Szansy Powstania Listopadowego* (Warszawa: PAX, 1986). Otherwise, the phrase has sometimes appeared in studies of the nineteenth century as an umbrella term for any published opinion, without consideration of its limits or morphology.

question: how could the monarch impose their publicity onto the audience if their subjects were by no means passive, but were legally protected against a perceived tyranny, and were mainly responsible for the election of the king? In the result, the scholarly literature trying to theorise the Commonwealth's political culture tended to idealise it, and at times suggested identifying it with Habermas' ideals of communicative reason⁴⁰. Of course, such an identification would have to first overcome some striking incompatibilities, among them the estate system limiting citizenship to the upper echelon of society and, in the light of it, its inadequacy as a democratic ideal; the deep saturation of the noble-democratic process with magnate interests through clientelism; the problematic rationality of its forms of deliberation, which posited virtue rather than reason at its centre, was driven by the idea of restoration rather than progress, and was contrasted with the Enlightenment movement in the eighteenth century⁴¹.

This account repeats some of the most important criticisms waged against Habermasian theory, especially concerning the public sphere's defining features such as rationality and inclusiveness⁴². But it also shows the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as an attractive subject of study in Habermasian terms: a society with a developed sphere of public deliberation in many ways situated between the "representative" and "bourgeois" modes of publicness. The early legal and ideological alignment of this kind of public sphere presents a certainly understudied example of communicative action within the state that was hardly a political outlier throughout the early modern era. And yet, the example has never been seriously deployed to inform the theory supposedly representative to the history of the entire West.

CONCLUSIONS

In 1992, Hungarian sociologist Elemér Hankiss published a provocative essay in which he emphasised the need for theory tailored to Central and Eastern Europe. Hankiss was concerned that following the fall of the Berlin wall and the rejection of communism in the region the opening to the influences from Western Europe in the form of foreign grants and academic advice might be followed by an unreflective adaptation of Western politics and theories by Central and Eastern European scholars. He jokily suggested that if the French or German academicians had really wanted to support the region, they should have stimulated the

⁴⁰ Such an identification is suggested in Sowa, "Społeczeństwo obywatelskie a polityka" and in Izabela Lewandowska-Malec, "Zapomniana demokracja. O demokracji deliberacyjnej w Pierwszej Rzeczypospolitej," *Studia Iuridica Toruniensia* 10 (2012): 123–146.

⁴¹ For a description of the typical features of the Commonwealth's political discourse, see: Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Dyskurs polityczny Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów*.

⁴² Compare to a number of essays included in the collective volume: *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

emergence of local geniuses or “send a Durkheim or a Habermas” who would have infused the local scholarship with its own originality⁴³.

Thirty years later, many of my Polish colleagues unwittingly echo the worries of Hankiss by often complaining about the young theoreticians who “evangelise about Western methods” or, contrariwise, about empiricists who distrust all theory. It is reflected in our attitudes to the concepts such as the public sphere that either simply assume it as default or reject its application altogether. This suggests that Hankiss’ message should be further emphasised in 2022. There is still a need for a robust revival of Central and Eastern European theory that goes beyond reception of Western ideas. Similarly, the Habermasian concept of the public sphere could be met with an appropriate Polish response that would critically assess and reframe it in the light of local conditions. But for that to happen, historians cannot be intimidated by the theory’s intricacy or its supposed inapplicability. Only this way may we, at some point, produce our own Habermas.

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⁴³ Elemér Hankiss, “Grants and advice? Thank you. But send us also a Durkheim or a Habermas,” *East European Politics and Societies* 6, i. 3 (1992): 359–363.

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