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Beyond the Public Sphere
Opinions, Publics, Spaces in Early Modern Europe

edited by
Massimo Rospocher

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Introduction

Beyond the Public Sphere: A Historiographical Transition

by *Massimo Rospocher*

I. HABERMAS GOES TO HELL?

Among the latest scholarship dedicated to the work of the last great exponent of the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas¹, titles such as *After Habermas*, *Farewell Habermas?*, and *Habermas Goes to Hell* are conspicuous². Almost every conference and publication in recent years dedicated to the history of communication has maintained among its theoretical premises an emphasis on the obsolete character of the public sphere and the necessity to move beyond it.

A common thread in contemporary historiography is an anti-teleological orientation toward the deconstruction of epochal narratives; Habermas's, therefore, like other great narratives in the social sciences of the twentieth century, has been subject to a process of demystification and deconstruction. Historians have suggested that Habermas's outlook was a «deformed» vision of the Ancien Régime (Benigno); his abstract model has failed to withstand the progression of historiographical development. Many of the tenets on which it was founded have

¹ The number of recent intellectual biographies is impressive: D. INGRAM, *Habermas. Introduction and Analysis*, Ithaca NY 2010; M.G. SPECTER, *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography*, Cambridge 2010; L. THOMASSEN, *Habermas: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London 2010; W. OUTHWAITE, *Habermas. A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge - Malden MA, 2009²; H. BRUNKHORST, *Habermas*, Firenze 2008; S. MÜLLER-DOOHM, *Jürgen Habermas*, Frankfurt a.M. 2008.

² S. VAN DAMME, «Farewell» *Habermas? Deux décennies d'études sur l'ancien régime de l'espace public*, in P. BOUCHERON - N. OFFENSTADT (eds), *L'espace public au moyen age. Debats autour de Jürgen Habermas*, Paris 2011, pp. 43-62; J. KUZNER, *Habermas Goes to Hell: Pleasure, Public Reason, and the Republicanism of Paradise Lost*, in «Criticism», 51, 2009, 1, pp. 105-45; N. CROSSLEY - J. MICHAEL (eds), *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*, Oxford - Malden MA 2004.

proven precarious, such as the traditional concept of the state³, the role of the press in the process of modernization⁴, and the repressive effects of censorship.

Nevertheless, despite the heralding of a post-Habermas era; despite the fact that some historians have mused over a possible—and in the minds of a few even desirable—total eclipse of the Habermasian doctrine; despite that the man himself has been allegorically confined to «hell»; Habermas's model still boasts a significant scholarly vitality almost half a century after the publication of his seminal work *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*⁵.

Within the field of historical studies, Habermas's theory has been the catalyst for debate about public opinion and has been recognized as an interpretative paradigm of the development of Western modernity. To question the validity of the paradigm means to challenge the epistemological function of the concept itself⁶. If one considers the paradigm not as a 'positive' historical reconstruction, but rather as an «analytical instrument» whose function it is «to construct and to render intelligible an entire and broader historical-problematic context»⁷, the ideal-type of the public sphere retains its heuristic value intact in the interpretation of Ancien Régime society. Deprived of its normative character, the public sphere is still functional as «a paradigm for analyzing historical change»⁸.

³ G. CHITTOLINI - A. MOLHO - P. SCHIERA (eds), *Origini dello Stato. Processi di formazione statale in Italia fra medioevo ed età moderna* (Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento. Quaderni, 39), Bologna 1994.

⁴ D. MCKITTERICK, *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order*, Cambridge 2003.

⁵ J. HABERMAS, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, Neuwied 1962 (new ed.: Frankfurt a.M 1990); Engl. trans. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge MA 1989.

⁶ On the use and function of paradigms in the social sciences, see G. AGAMBEM, *Che cos'è un paradigma*, in G. AGAMBEM, *Signatura rerum. Sul Metodo*, Torino 2008, pp. 11-34.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸ P.U. HOHENDAHL, *Critical Theory, Public Sphere and Culture. Jürgen Habermas and His Critics*, in «New German Critique», 16, 1979, pp. 89-118, here p. 92. For an excellent summary of the «Habermas paradigm», see L. SCUCCIMARRA, *La trasparenza del politico. Habermas e il paradigma della sfera pubblica*, in «Giornale di Storia Costituzionale», 6, 2003, 2, pp. 35-59, especially pp. 41-46.

Some of the answers that the German philosopher supplied have turned out to be inaccurate, but for historians the bigger questions that he posed remain relevant: how—and when—was the critical power of public discussion born? How are ‘the public’ and ‘public spaces’ defined? What is the relationship between public discourse and authority? What, ultimately, is the power of communication?

II. THE MODEL

The concept of the public sphere has a complex genealogy and Habermas’s is far from being its only theoretical model. Those of Hannah Arendt⁹ and especially of Habermas’s contemporary Reinhart Koselleck, *inter alia*, also deserve mention¹⁰. Nevertheless, the Habermasian notion has proven dominant and has become a paradigm in academic debate¹¹.

In his ground-breaking work of 1962, which was adapted from his *Habilitationsschrift* at the University of Marburg, Habermas formalized the ideal-type of the public sphere. This was a discursive meta-topical space situated halfway between state and civil society, but also a space endowed with a certain social homogeneity, by virtue of its bourgeois nature. Within the public sphere, private citizens (readers, spectators, and listeners) who were excluded from the administration of power found a common arena of critical reflection and political action directed toward the state. Such a space of mediation between authority and the individual, but existing outside of the sphere of the state, would

⁹ H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, Chicago IL 1958.

¹⁰ R. KOSELLECK, *Kritik und Krise: Ein Beitrag zur Parthogenese der bürgerlichen Welt*, Freiburg i.Br. 1959 (also translated into English one generation later: *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Parthogenesis of Modern Society*, Oxford 1988). For a comparison between Habermas and Koselleck’s two versions of the public sphere, see K. WETTERS, *The Opinion System: Impasses of the Public Sphere from Hobbes to Habermas*, New York 2008, pp. 88-100.

¹¹ In German intellectual debate Habermas’s contribution is just one among many on the topic of «Öffentlichkeit» in a long tradition going back to Idealism of the nineteenth century, when the term appeared for the first time in the German language. For a critical analysis of the history of the concept, see P.U. HOHENDAHL (ed.), *Öffentlichkeit: Geschichte eines kritischen Begriffs*, Stuttgart 2000; see also L. HÖLSCHER, *Öffentlichkeit*, in O. BRUNNER - W. CONZE - R. KOSELLECK (eds), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, vol. 4, 1978, pp. 413-467.

first take form in the eighteenth century (initially in England, then in France and Germany) through verbal communication within bourgeois social institutions (coffee houses, literary salons, Masonic lodges, etc.) and through the written word in the form of books and periodicals. Opinions emerged from the private dimension of bourgeois life—which Habermas defined as the «intimate sphere»¹²—to become public opinion, the collective subject that is the historical outcome of the liberal, enlightened public sphere.

For Habermas, the rise of the public sphere epitomized the teleological narrative of the advent of political modernity, succeeded then by a period of decline with the loss of its critical role in a capitalist mass-media society, where communication aims to manipulate consciences. With this book—the first chapter of an articulate critical theory of society developed throughout his entire oeuvre—Habermas constructed an ideal model as a positive counterpart to the decadence of the late-capitalist world in which he lived¹³. This was a pessimistic vision of the present—a now-obsolete present—that post-war European history, with the protest movements of '68 and the revolutions of '89, would help to diminish.

The first part of the book is thus a philosophical work of Kantian and Enlightenment inspiration that represents the foundation on which Habermas bases the socio-political analysis of the latter part. Early modern historians have focused most of their attention on the initial section, especially attempting to verify its historical credibility and to contest the proclaimed absence of a sphere of public debate between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries¹⁴.

¹² On the importance of the development of a private sphere in the creation of a public sphere, see M. MCKEON, *The Secret History of Domesticity. Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge*, Baltimore MD 2005.

¹³ Habermas creates a model 'for' society instead 'of' a model of society; cfr. J. HABERMAS, *Further Reflections on the Public Sphere*, in C. CALHOUN (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Boston MA 1992, pp. 421-461; see also J.L. BROOKE, *Reason and Passion in the Public Sphere: Habermas and the Cultural Historians*, in «Journal of Interdisciplinary History», 29, 1998, 1, pp. 43-67, especially pp. 61-62; W. PRIVITERA, *Sfera pubblica e democratizzazione*, Roma - Bari 2001.

¹⁴ A period for Habermas characterized by a «repräsentative Öffentlichkeit» (representative publicness); J. HABERMAS, *Structural Transformation*, pp. 5-14.

III. RECEPTION

Habermas's ideal-type still exerts an authority that extends well beyond its strictly sociological and historiographical dimension; some prominent contemporary philosophers, for instance, continue to reference Habermas's model of the public sphere¹⁵. Its influence in the last few decades has been such—and the studies dedicated to it so numerous—that it has given rise to an autonomous field of study with a truly interdisciplinary character, bringing together historians, literary scholars, political scientists, sociologists, and philosophers¹⁶.

Aside from the fact that it seemed to solve the «difficulties endemic to conceptual modelling in historiography»¹⁷, one of the reasons for the success of Habermas's model can be found in his holistic approach: his ability to compose an exceptional historical, philosophical, economic, and socio-political narrative while portraying the rise and fall of the public sphere, the very *Strukturwandel* («structural transformation») that is expressed in the book's title.

One must also keep in mind the historical contexts in which the work of the German philosopher was received. A focus on the nature of the public sphere crystallized in two fundamental moments: the first corresponded to the student protests of the '60s and '70s, during which the various movements generated interest in the political role of civil society; the second was at the end of the '80s, when the fall of the Communist regimes opened up the debate in the West about processes of democratic transition and gave new impetus to reflection on the transformation of the public sphere.

The reception of his work in these two contexts explains early modern historians' fascination with the first part of Habermas's book; the development of critical rational discourse during the Ancien Régime, a space of interaction between bourgeois society and the absolute state,

¹⁵ See C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge MA 2007, pp. 185-196; see also the recent collection of essays *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, New York 2011, with essays by Taylor, Habermas, and Calhoun.

¹⁶ For an overview, see the section «public sphere» of the website of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) at <http://publicsphere.ssrc.org/guide/>

¹⁷ C. CONDRON, *Public, Private and the Idea of the 'Public Sphere' in Early-modern England*, in «Intellectual History Review», 19, 2009, 1, pp. 15-28, here p. 15.

announced the arrival of political modernity. By showing that it was marked by emancipatory objectives, in respect to oppressive powers, many historians likened the public sphere in the early modern period to the democratizing role that the public sphere assumed at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The persistence of and cyclical return to Habermas's theory today are rooted in our present political reality, in a society dominated by the power of communication where technology has altered both the dynamics of sociability and of political participation and representation. Global protests taking place in Europe, in America and in Arab countries, invite us to consider the varied forms of civil engagement and new modes of political debate, on display. The insurrections of the «Arab spring», in particular, in which accomplices of the old regimes seek to lead the popular protests, force us to reflect on the intrinsically ambiguous nature of the public sphere.

IV. TRANSLATIONS

Part of the success and longevity of Habermas's notion of the public sphere can be attributed to published translations of his *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, and even more to the concept's relatively recent reception into the Anglo-American academic mainstream. The transposition of this concept into other languages represents a scholarly form of «transcultural transfer» that would merit its own examination in another forum. I will limit my remarks here to the semantic shift from the *Öffentlichkeit* of the original 1962 publication to the translated titles of editions in other languages. The expression «opinione pubblica» (public opinion) appeared in the title of the first Italian translation in 1971¹⁸, whereas the translator's preference for more comprehensive terms like «dimensione pubblica» and «carattere pubblico» (public dimension and public nature) is apparent in the text itself¹⁹. The 1978 French title *Espace public*²⁰ (public space) emphasizes the concept's topical

¹⁸ J. HABERMAS, *Storia e critica dell'opinione pubblica*, Bari 1971.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. XLVI.

²⁰ J. HABERMAS, *L'espace public. Archéologie de la publicité comme dimension constitutive de la société bourgeoise*, Paris 1978.

connotation, whereas it was accompanied by a subtitle, *Archéologie de la publicité comme dimension constitutive de la société bourgeoise*, which «managed to imply both a Foucauldian inflection to the book's intellectual history and a more directly class-based social history than it actually possessed»²¹. The 1981 Spanish title refers to the «opinion pública», which is followed by «vida pública» (public life) in the subtitle²²; in the text, however, the translator frequently opted for the term «publicidad» (publicity), judging it to be more faithful to the original concept of the German title²³.

But the evocative capacity of the metaphor of the «public sphere», as it has been rendered in English and widely accepted in the Anglophone world, especially after *Strukturwandel*'s 1989 American translation²⁴, has undoubtedly contributed to the definitive success of what has been termed the «Habermas of historians»²⁵. This semantic shift accentuates the descriptive character of the concept in its ability to simultaneously represent a discursive ethereal dimension and the physicality of the public spaces in which exchanges and discussions take place. Such a meaning is absent in the original «Öffentlichkeit», which has a complex etymology and cannot be precisely expressed in many other languages. The German term fuses different semantic variants that convey the ideas of publicity/publicness or openness/openicity²⁶, or even public culture/

²¹ J. ELEY, *Politics, Culture, and the Public Sphere*, in «Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique», 10, 2002, 1, pp. 219-236, here p. 220.

²² J. HABERMAS, *Historia y crítica de la opinión pública: la transformación estructural de la vida pública*, Barcelona 1981.

²³ See the translator's note, *ibid.*, p. 44. Manuel Jiménez Redondo chose to translate «Öffentlichkeit» with the formulation «espacio de la opinión pública»; see the translator's note in J. HABERMAS, *Facticidad y validez. Sobre el derecho y el Estado de derecho en términos de teoría del discurso*, Madrid 1998, p. 441.

²⁴ The expression «public sphere» appeared for the first time in English in 1974; see J. HABERMAS, *The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article* (1964), in «New German Critique», 3, 1974, pp. 49-55.

²⁵ H. MAH, *Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians*, in «Journal of Modern History», 72, 2000, pp. 153-182.

²⁶ A term coined by H.J. KLEINSTEUBER, *Habermas and the Public Sphere: From a German to a European Perspective*, in «Javnost-The Public. Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture», 8, 2001, pp. 95-108, for some interesting etymological observations, see esp. pp. 96-98.

public domain, rather than the now-conventional notion of the public sphere. Furthermore, the German word «Öffentlichkeit» describes more of a (communicative) process than a structure, whether topical or meta-topical, which the ambiguous syntagm «public sphere» appears to indicate²⁷.

V. EARLY MODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY: BEYOND THE PUBLIC SPHERE?

The most recent paths explored by historians of the Ancien Régime have consolidated the critical dialectic with this interpretive paradigm, but at the same time have led in a direction that goes beyond the public sphere. Given the enormity of the body of relevant research to date, it would be impossible to summarize it in its entirety; nevertheless, if we focus on what has been produced in the last fifteen years we can identify some general trends, all of which are borne out in the works of the contributors to this volume.

1. *Historicizing the public sphere*

An initial period in which Habermas's model was put to the test of historical experience in Ancien Régime society, especially in the works of historians of the eighteenth century, set the tone for the first few decades of historiography on the public sphere²⁸. The great studies on the cultural origins of the French Revolution by the likes of Baker, Chartier, Darnton, Ozouf, and Roche leant substance to Habermas's pioneering text and at the same time highlighted its historical *lacunae*²⁹.

²⁷ J. ELEY, *Politics, Culture, and the Public Sphere*, pp. 225-226. The expression has been 'approved' by Habermas himself: «The concept of the public sphere, *Öffentlichkeit*, is meant as an analytical tool»; J. HABERMAS et al., *Concluding Remarks*, in C. CALHOUN, *Habermas*, p. 462.

²⁸ H. JÜRGENS, *Habermas for Historians. Four Approaches to his Works*, in «Forschungsberichte aus dem Duitsland Insituut Amsterdam», 5, 2009, pp. 158-170; A. GESTRICH, *The Public Sphere and the Habermas Debate*, in «German History», 24, 2006, 3, pp. 413-430.

²⁹ For an exhaustive synthesis of the historiography on public opinion in eighteenth-century France, see F. BENIGNO, *Mirrors of Revolution: Conflict and Political Identity in Early Modern Europe*, Turnhout 2010; C. WALTON, *Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution: The Culture of Calumny and the Problem of Free Speech*, New York 2009, ch. 1.

In particular, some remarked on the absence of a feminine component in Habermas's public arena³⁰ or on the lack of consideration afforded to a popular *doxa*³¹ thereby restoring to center stage political actors who had been previously excluded. Habermas was also accused of overemphasizing economic factors and as a result, with the parallel decline of the Marxist perspective, the socio-economic dimension of the advent of the bourgeois public sphere was abandoned.

Recent historiography on public opinion in eighteenth-century France has revived the economic dimension of the public sphere as a subject of research, but this renewed activity has produced results that run contrary to Habermas's assertions. In the revolutionary era, for example, the parallel evolution of political and economic liberalism gave rise to a lively debate over the theme of economic justice, in which the state appealed to and attempted to influence public debate. The tensions that exploded in the Reign of Terror demonstrate that «the public sphere failed to function as a place where opposing opinions on these matters could be transformed into consensus» (Walton).

A revision of the notion of the public sphere also emerges from current research on eighteenth-century censorship. Overturning Habermas's vision, according to which modern public opinion was born from the dissolution of mechanisms of controlling ideas, scholars no longer view censorship and the government of opinions as contrary aspects in the category of public opinion, rather as complementary³². In the

³⁰ J.B. LANDES, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, Ithaca NY 1988; and more recently E. EAGER et al (eds), *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere, 1700-1830*, Cambridge 2001; for the role of women in French public life between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see also B. CRAVERI, *The Age of Conversation*, New York 2005.

³¹ Some of these critiques have been accepted and integrated by Habermas in the preface of the new edition of the book: J. HABERMAS, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (ed. 1990), pp. 11-50. In particular, he recognized the idea of a «plebeian public sphere», autonomous from the «bourgeoisie public sphere», as a consequence of the important works of early modern historians like E.P. Thompson and N.Z. Davis. This presence has been confirmed by subsequent studies; see, for example, A. FARGE, *Dire et mal dire. L'opinion publique au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris 1992; J.M. BROPHY, *Popular Culture and the Public Sphere in the Rhineland (1800-1850)*, Cambridge 2007.

³² E. TORTAROLO, *L'invenzione della libertà di stampa. Censori e scrittori nel Settecento*, Roma 2011; S. LANDI, *Il governo delle opinioni*, Bologna 2000; S. LANDI, *Stampa, censura, opinione pubblica nell'età moderna*, Bologna 2011.

eighteenth century, a functional ambiguity existed in civil censorship, an abyss between theory and practice that was occupied by a space of intellectual manoeuvring that allowed the negotiation of forms of «participatory liberty». Censorship appeared to be not only a repressive institutional actor of public discourse, but also a device through which to renegotiate the limits between what could become public and what had to remain secret (Tortarolo).

2. *Deconstructing the public sphere*

A successive historiographical phase demonstrated the model's adaptability to earlier epochs and different socio-political contexts from those of the eighteenth century; they traced the concept of the public sphere—in one variation on the theme or another—back to the Middle Ages³³ and the idea of public opinion to Greco-Roman antiquity³⁴.

Inspired by the fundamental question of the relationship between power and communication in Early Modernity, one current of historiography has worked to deconstruct Habermas's paradigm. This has taken place in particular in the area of literary, cultural, and political history and in the history of publishing and the media, disciplines that have extended the geographic and chronological boundaries of the public sphere³⁵.

³³ L. MELVE, *Inventing the Public Sphere: The Public Debate during the Investiture Contest (c. 1030-1122)*, Leiden 2007; A.E.B. COLDIRON, *Public Sphere/Contact Zone: Habermas, Early Print, and Verse Translation*, in «Criticism», 46, 2004, 2, pp. 207-222; W. FAULSTICH, *Medien und Öffentlichkeiten im Mittelalter 800-1400*, Göttingen 1996.

³⁴ *Pubblica opinione e intellettuali dall'antichità all'illuminismo*, in «Rivista storica italiana», 110, 1998, 1.

³⁵ For England: P. LAKE - S. PINCUS (eds), *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, Manchester 2007; J. RAYMOND, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain*, Cambridge 2003; D. ZARET, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, Princeton NJ 2000; A. HALASZ, *The Marketplace of Print. Pamphlets and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, Cambridge 1997. For the German area: K. HRUZA (ed.), *Propaganda, Kommunikation und Öffentlichkeit (11.-16. Jahrhundert)*, Wien 2002; E.-B. KÖRBER, *Öffentlichkeiten der frühen Neuzeit: Teilnehmer, Formen, Institutionen und Entscheidungen öffentlicher Kommunikation im Herzogtum Preußen von 1525 bis 1618*, Berlin - New York 1998; A. WÜRLER, *Unruhen und Öffentlichkeit: Städtische und ländliche Protestbewegungen im 18. Jahrhundert*, Tübingen 1995. For Italy: M. ROSPOCHER, *Versi pericolosi? Controllo delle opinioni e ricerca del consenso durante le guerre d'Italia*, in D. CURTO et al. (eds),

Additionally, in the process of revision, scholars have attempted to restrict the paradigm's structural character in order to strengthen its functionality. In this sense, some have theorized a temporary or contingent public sphere, in contrast to a normative and permanent vision. A kind of ephemeral public sphere emerged in various historical and geographical contexts—the Protestant Reformation, the Italian Wars (Salzberg-Rospoche), the political conflicts in France and England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the religious debates regarding the Immaculate Conception in seventeenth-century Spain (Castillo), but also the rise of the early Iranian public sphere during the Safavid period³⁶—when exceptional events stimulated the birth of an intense public discussion whether briefly or over a longer period³⁷.

These numerous studies have undoubtedly expanded our knowledge of Ancien Régime society and have revealed the pluralistic nature of the public sphere, but are limited insofar as they have overlooked the possibility of a comparative approach from both a diachronic and a

From Florence to the Mediterranean and Beyond: Essays in Honour of Tony Molbo, Firenze 2009, pp. 381-407; G. CIAPPELLI, *Comunicazione politica e opinione pubblica nel Rinascimento: esempi e considerazioni*, in «Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico», 33, 2007, pp. 27-57; M. MESERVE, *News from Negroponte: Politics, Popular Opinion and Information Exchange in the First Decade of the Italian Press*, in «Renaissance Quarterly», 59, 2006, pp. 440-480. For Spain: J. AMELANG - A. CASTILLO GÓMEZ (eds), *Opinión pública y espacio urbano en la Edad Moderna*, Gijón 2010; F. BOUZA, *Papeles y opinión. Políticas de publicación en el Siglo de Oro*, Madrid 2008; J.M^a. PERCEVAL, *Opinión pública y publicidad (siglo XVII). Nacimiento de los espacios de comunicación pública en torno a las bodas reales de 1615 entre Borbones y Habsburgo* unpublished PhD thesis Barcelona, 2004; M. OLIVARI, *Fra trono e opinione. La vita politica castigliana nel Cinque e Seicento*, Venezia 2002. For France: D. ROUSSEL, *L'espace public comme enjeu des guerres de Religion et de la paix civile. Réflexions sur la notion d'espace public et ses métamorphoses à Paris au XVIe siècle*, in P. BOUCHERON - N. OFFENSTADT, *L'espace public au moyen age*, pp. 131-146; J.P. VITTU, *Instruments of political information in France*, in S. BARON - B. DOOLEY (eds), *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe*, London - New York 2001, pp. 160-178; J.K. SAWYER, *Printed Poison: Pamphlet Propaganda, Faction Politics, and the Public Sphere in Early Seventeenth-Century France*, Berkeley CA 1990.

³⁶ B. RAHIMI, *Theater State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran. Studies on Safavid Mubarram Rituals, 1590-1641 CE*, Boston MA - Leiden 2011.

³⁷ A. BRIGGS - P. BURKE, *A Social History of the Media. From Gutenberg to the Internet*, Cambridge - Oxford 2001, pp. 72-105; see also P. LAKE - S. PINCUS, *Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, in «Journal of British Studies», 45, 2006, 2, pp. 270-292.

socio-geographic point of view³⁸. The approach that intended to deconstruct and to reformulate the paradigm of the public sphere has nevertheless reaffirmed its epistemological value.

3. *Post-Habermasian perspectives*

In the historiography of the Early Modern period, recent lines of research have developed aspects neglected in the original formalization of the public sphere, thereby setting in motion a progressive abandonment of the model that unites them in a post-Habermasian perspective.

The notion of «public» as identified in the public of readers is essential in Habermas's work. Among those engaged in the study of the formation of «the publics» in Ancien Régime society the interdisciplinary research project *Making Publics* stands out³⁹. Referring to the theoretical elaborations of Bruno Latour and Michael Warner⁴⁰ and instead of concentrating on the 'structural' elements of the public sphere, this group has focussed on the actual ways in which the process of «public-making» occurs. This entails abandoning the conception of the public as passive recipient of cultural and political messages, in order to highlight «the active creation of new forms of association that allowed people to connect with others in ways not rooted in family, rank, or vocation, but rather founded in voluntary groupings built on the shared interests, tastes, commitments, and desires of individuals»⁴¹.

³⁸ Among the exceptions: L. LACCHÈ (ed.), *Opinione pubblica. Storia, politica, costituzione dal XVII al XX secolo*, in «Giornale di Storia Costituzionale», 6, 2003, 2; S. BARON - B. DOOLEY, *The Politics of Information*; J. VAN HORN MELTON, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, Cambridge 2000. The lack of a comparative approach to the study of the public sphere has been recently emphasized by A. KOLLER, *The Public Sphere and Comparative Historical Research. An Introduction*, in «Social Science History», 34, 2010, 3, pp. 261-290.

³⁹ <http://www.makingpublics.org/>; B. WILSON - P. YACHNIN (eds), *Making Publics in Early Modern Europe: People, Things, Forms of Knowledge*, New York - Abingdon 2009; A. VANHAELEN - A. WARD, *The Association of Space: Relations and Geographies of Early Modern Publics* (forthcoming); on the process of the formation of publics, see also B. BORELLO (ed.), *Pubblico e pubblici di antico regime*, Pisa 2009.

⁴⁰ B. LATOUR, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford 2005; B. LATOUR - P. WEIBEL (eds), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Cambridge MA 2005; M. WARNER, *Publics and Counterpublics*, New York 2002.

⁴¹ P. YACHNIN - B. WILSON, *Introduction*, in *Making Publics*, p. 1.