

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

ed. by Massimo Rospocher, Bologna-Berlin, 2011
ISBN : 9788815240286

LUCIO BIASIORI
Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa

Beyond the Public Sphere. Opinions, Publics, Spaces in Early Modern Europe deals with a topic that is becoming increasingly central to recent historiography: political communication, the circulation of news, the making of an early modern public opinion. The notion of the public sphere is inextricably bound to the name of Jürgen Habermas. With his *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962) the German philosopher and sociologist outlined the ideal-type of a discursive space between state and civil society, where people excluded from power found an arena for speaking, discussion and criticism. First shaped by British coffeehouses, literary salons and newspapers, the public sphere spread later to other countries (mainly France and Germany). In much the same way as the historical concept of the public sphere itself, so too has the historiographical one had a broad European fate, as the translations of the very title word *Öffentlichkeit* testify: public sphere, *opinione pubblica*, *espace public*, *opinion y vida pública*. As Rospocher rightly points out in the introduction, historical contexts where Habermasian work was read are decisive. Two turning points can be identified: on the one hand the protest of the student movements of the '60s and '70s, with their emphasis on the self-determination of the various political galaxies they were composed by. On the other, the fall of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the complex desire for political freedom it aroused (the same could be said today for the "Arab Spring"). Despite - or maybe just because of - this success, the notion of the public sphere has encountered many, sometimes very harsh, opponents.

The first section, *Theory and Practices*, is mainly devoted to the criticism leveled at the Habermasian model. A theoretical alternative to Habermas is represented, according to Andreas Gestrich and Angela De Benedictis, by the sociologist Niklas Luhmann. The terms of their disagreement are well known (Luhmann and Habermas were constantly at odds: see J. Habermas, N. Luhmann, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie. Was leistet die Systemforschung?*, Frankfurt a. M. 1971). The articles by De Benedictis and Gestrich nonetheless provide a solid and accurate update on the debate. According to Gestrich, the main shortcomings of the Habermasian model (its applicability to 18th-century England alone, the little attention paid to the complexity of the relationship between rulers and the wider public, its Hegelian roots in establishing the public sphere as an autonomous place between the individual and the state) can be clarified through a more functional approach, more concerned with mechanisms of communication than with its contents, and going deeper into the plurality of public spheres and the media system they were connected by. Since "the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries were times of intensified functional differentiation in many fields, what happened to the political public sphere in this period should be seen in this context" (p. 51). Angela De Benedictis reads some

classical works of Luhmann (*Soziologische Aufklärung, Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaften, Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik*), pointing out that, because of the absence of any “great narrative” and thanks to a more functional concept of communication, they are more useful for the historian than the Habermasian model of the public sphere. De Benedictis explains very thoroughly the historiographical debate on the topic, and in the final pages she also gives two accounts drawn from her own research (about the resistance against papal interdicts during the Renaissance and about the *crimen rebellionis*), aimed at reconstructing, in Luhmannian terms, a “semantic of disobedience”.

Through a comparison between Habermas’ *Strukturwandel* and Reinhardt Koselleck’s *Kritik und Krise* (1959), Francesco Benigno explains some of the reasons for the success of the Habermasian model of the public sphere. Habermas carried out, in Benigno’s opinion, a “deformation” of the *Ancien Régime* as a ceremonial stage for the aristocratic classes, in order to underline the novelty of bourgeois public opinion, rationally led and independent from a monolithic and absolutistic state. What remains excluded from the Habermasian picture is a pluralistic view of the state and, most of all, the very roots of public opinion, which are not to be seen in a sort of vacuum, but together with the debate and the clashes within government, rather than in “the privacy of bourgeois intimacy”, or in “Masonic secrecy”.

The second cluster of essays (*Space, Voices, Humors*) is opened by Massimo Rospocher and Rosa Salzberg, who describe the “evanescent public sphere” that emerged in Venice during some traumatic facts (most of them related to the Cambrai League and the defeat of Agnadello in 1509). Paraphrasing the tripartite structure of the volume’s subtitle, the authors shed some light on the spaces (Rialto, Piazza San Marco, some sacred spaces), the publics and the voices (the last one is not necessarily to be conceived as a metaphor) that shaped the political debate around events experienced by the *Serenissima* in the years of the Italian wars. “Difficult to capture because of its fleeting nature” (p. 113), this fragmentary form of political communication played an important role in civic political culture. One striking example is represented by street singers, before whom gatherings of people shared the common experience of hearing and discussing news of Venetian political and military developments.

One way to intercept this ephemeral public opinion is to try to see its transfiguration in the work of an acute observer of the contemporary political scenario. This is the case of Machiavelli’s *Florentine Histories* analyzed by Sandro Landi. After having persuasively read Machiavelli’s political works (especially the *Discourses on Livy*) as an effort to decipher the non-discursive public opinion in Florentine Renaissance (see his book *La naissance de l’opinion publique*), Landi offers a re-reading of Machiavelli’s most important historical work. Reacting against a recent tradition, which tends to dismiss his merit as an historian, Landi rightly points out that “Machiavelli is certainly a careless historian, especially with respect to philological competence, but it is difficult to deny that it is because of this “modification of scale”, with the aim of bringing back into view the gaps and omissions in official historiography, that he is able to see things that his predecessors could not” (p. 139). One of these things is exactly the role of concepts such as *fama*,

humor, rumor, neglected by a strictly discursive conception of public opinion and “made opaque by historiographical consensus”, but “seen as a vital element in the public sphere by a political actor of the sixteenth century” (p. 163).

Filippo De Vivo offers a summary of the structure of his *Information and Communication in Venice. Rethinking Early Modern Politics*, Oxford 2007 (enlarged Italian translation *Patrizi, informatori, barbieri. Politica e comunicazione a Venezia nella prima età moderna*, Milan 2012). “Rather than as a mono-directional movement, from the top down (such as propaganda), or from the bottom up (as public opinion)”, he argues, “we should think of political communication in early modern European cities as a tense, at times creative, interaction between multiple actors loosely organized around three poles, which can be identified with three levels of political and social system and with three sites in the urban spaces: the authorities, the political arena, and the rest of the city” (p. 123). The first mechanism (significantly known in Venice as *comunicazione*) received the news and decided what to convey to larger assemblies. The second pole, the political arena, was a socially heterogeneous one, whose only common element was treating political communication as a profession. Finally the Venetian populace, despite its exclusion from power, had many possibilities of acquiring and re-elaborating - albeit often in an oral way - political information. In De Vivo’s view, the *triangle* is a more suitable metaphor than the *sphere* to characterize the publisizing of news and its relationship to early modern politics. The advantages of De Vivo’s model (we can use this word although he correctly claims not to “force a model onto a reality that was extremely complex” (p. 136) and sheds light on the frequent interactions between the three levels) are several. The first is to offer an alternative model capable of holding up not only from a theoretical point of view but also historically. The second is its comparability (De Vivo gives some interesting accounts in relation to Paris and London). The third is that it is an alternative not only to the Habermasian approach (rightly criticized for being abstractly egalitarian, unconcerned about the material conditions of political communication, and for making too sharp a separation between state and society) but also to the thesis of Foucault, which reduces all communication to propaganda and treats language as a factor of merely power relations. In early modern political communication there was certainly exclusion, as Foucault put it, but the conflict did not rule out the possibility even for the lower strands of the population to participate in political communication “without the invitation necessary for salons or the money required in coffehouses” (p. 133).

Another engraft of the theoretical implications offered by the discussion about the public sphere onto a historical trunk is provided by Silvana Seidel Menchi. Her portrait of Erasmus as an “avid collector of news” (p. 191) is not only a way of showing another side of the great humanist or painting him “as the focus of two circuits of communication, an open circuit and a closed one”, but also a concrete philological tool to ascribe to him the paternity of a highly controversial work, the *Iulius exclusus e coeliis*, a violent attack on Pope Julius II written and printed between 1514 and 1517. According to Seidel Menchi, a revealing error made by Erasmus, that is, to present the battle of Ravenna as a defeat for the French King, puts the reader on the track of *Iulius*’ real author. As a matter of fact, turning the French victory at

Ravenna into a defeat would not have been possible either in France or in Italy, where the effects of the “*furia franzese*” were evident. Therefore, the two other possible attributions, the Italian Fausto Andrelini (a courtier at the court of the King of France) and Richard Pace (in Rome at the time) are improbable. The only place where the theme of the battle of Ravenna might have been considered a pyrrhic victory for France was England, where Erasmus lived when the *Iulius* was written. “From this point of view”, Seidel Menchi convincingly concludes, “disinformation is as valuable a coordinate as information” (p. 203).

Another important practice of communication, most of all of what early modern men and women could perceive as such, was the *album amicorum*. Bronwen Wilson highlights the importance of these repositories of manuscript, printed and figurative texts as public-making media that invited people to share the same interests. Far from being simple collections of names and pictures, *alba amicorum*, like contemporary hypertexts (p. 223), were open to a lot of choices and the order of encounters was different from the order of the book that recorded them. They finally represent “the potential of the material world to assemble the social” (p. 222). Some “preconditions for the making of a Habermasian public sphere” are sketched by Shankar Raman, whose contribution is devoted to explaining the “new, if idealized, understanding of rationality and, concomitantly, of publics that sought to reflect this understanding” (p. 167) through the examples of Philip Sidney’s *Defense of Poetry* and Descartes’ *Géométrie*. Raman’s highly analytical study tries to grasp the public sphere from two apparently “more removed and specialized sectors of public exchange”, showing that the reception of mathematics and poetry gave rise to a rationality that helped the birth of a public sphere.

The last section of the book concerns *opinions*. Among the merits of this part is the emphasis on an area often overlooked in the debate about the birth of the early modern public sphere: Spain and its empire. In the first essay on the topic, Antonio Castillo Gómez outlines three cases of political-religious crisis which gave rise to “*guerras de papel*” (wars of paper): the reign of Carlos II, the Portuguese and Catalan rebellions in the middle of the 17th century during the reign of Felipe IV and the controversy over the Immaculate Conception between the Dominicans and Franciscans. The last case is particularly relevant for the sacral foundation of the Spanish Monarchy (as shown by A. Prosperi, “L’Immacolata a Siviglia e la fondazione sacra della monarchia spagnola”, in I. Fazio and D. Lombardi (eds.), *Generazioni. Legami di parentela tra passato e presente*, Rome 2006, pp. 125-162), not only because both the actors and the core of the dispute seem to challenge a monolithic version of modernity, but also because it involved the New World, spread as it was to New Spain by another religious order: the Society of Jesus. A similar, “empirically driven” (p. 251) approach is shared also by Arjan van Dixhoorn, according to whom “historical public opinion as proposed here is the study of how people relate to one another and to their society through issue formation” (p. 253). The biggest issue taken into account is the making of the Spanish Inquisition into a controversial topic, especially during the efforts by the governess, Margareta of Parma, to abolish the anti-heresy laws (1565-1566) in order to mitigate the anti-Calvinistic politics of Felipe II. Two centuries later, in France, as Charles Walton shows, economic reform prompted extensive debate. When stopped in their efforts to strengthen French

agriculture, the Physiocrats reacted violently against their opponents among the *philosophes* (just think of Diderot's *Apologie de l'Abbé Galiani*). This tension continued also under the second liberalization supported by Turgot (1774-1775) and even during the Revolution. Then Jean Marie Roland, the founder of the Bureau of the Public Spirit (a notion - as perceptively noted by Walton - often juxtaposed by historiography with the liberal, modern, pluralistic concept of *opinion publique*), kept supporting the free market, promising punishment for wealthy farmers and merchants, who supposedly plotted against the people by exporting grain. This clash between economic liberalization and market regulation and between the last two and the freedom of expression became harsher in the course of the Great Revolution, when the Terror "gave expression to unresolved tensions over economic justice" and "the public sphere failed to function as a place where opposing opinions on these matters could be transformed into consensus" (pp. 286-287).

The volume is rounded off by Edoardo Tortarolo's conclusion, which contextualizes the complex balance between public and secret in the Enlightenment, a "project" and a "vision of the world in which what is public prevails not over what is private (which is, rather, recognized and reinforced as a part of the human overall advancement), but over what is kept secret" (p. 289). This dialectic is followed through the most important cultural and institutional turn of the time: the abolition of the Jesuit Order ("a consequence of continuous pressure from the Bourbon rulers joined with public opinion") that was "saluted as a liberation from a hidden and inscrutable power" (p. 292), the publication of the *Encyclopédie*, the abolition of the prepublication censorship in England (1695), a decision followed by no European country. "More than an abstract battle for freedom of the press, the century of Enlightenment demonstrates a continuous renegotiation of the boundaries between the secret and the public" (p. 294).

In conclusion we can say that the usefulness of this book depends not only on the richness of the case-studies presented, or on the vast update offered about such a broad topic. The overall tone of the book is its great strength. As a matter of fact, this book is particularly remarkable because of the awareness, emerging from every contribution and from the whole, that in historical scholarship all progress depends on a tradition, which must be renewed respectfully but without any sense of subjection. In this sense, the purpose of the volume, that is to go "beyond the public sphere", as conceived by Habermas, is brilliantly fulfilled. This is a useful lesson in times when a proclaimed iconoclasm toward old masters often corresponds to an actual lack of ideas.