

History and development of the public sphere in the 19th century



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Within the essay there will be firstly an explanation of the public sphere and the history of how it came into existence and evolved using the work of Habermas to explain how the public sphere served the public and created a good and fair society where true democracy could flourish using rational thinking and critical debate. The evolution of the term public will be looked at and how this term changed over time. Finally the changing nature of the public sphere towards the middle and end of the nineteenth century will be analysed looking at how the capitalism and protectionist market policy by the state degraded the public sphere and allowed the state and elites to take control of public opinion through the use of the press.

When looking at the changing nature of the public sphere during the nineteenth century it is important to understand how and why it came into existence - the public sphere emerged in the eighteenth century through the growth of coffee houses, literary societies and the growth of the press. Society was previously based on feudalism where there was no need for an outlet enabling discussion about society as life was simple; the average person needed only to concern themselves with the task at hand and was unable to have an impact upon society on a larger scale. The king or lord was the only public person and the rest of society was an audience therefore the public and private realms of the average person were not separate. There was almost no way for a private person to enter the public sphere in England until around the eighteenth century as industrialisation took place and society transformed. The press and its ability to reach a large audience due to the advances in technology such as rail systems and mail delivery

that the rail network allowed facilitated the spread of the public sphere to average people.

Ideas of what is public and what is private can be traced back much further than the eighteenth and nineteenth century to Greek city states. In ancient Greece there was a divide between the polis and oikos. Political life took place in the polis and the public sphere here existed as a place for discussion. The agora or gathering place was located in the centre of a town and is where displays of art, spiritual activity and politics could be seen and discussed. The agora developed into a marketplace and where all members of society would be exposed to the discussions and rulings of the council although they were unable to have any impact upon the decisions they were hearing about. In the political realm the only participants were free born male land owners. These agora's provided a similar role to that of the public sphere where coffee shops, theatre and the press provided a place for public discussion.

Before the rise of the bourgeoisie during the enlightenment period and the creation of the bourgeoisie public sphere the term public had a very different meaning prior to the aforementioned. The authority that a lord held was called public and referred to the public representation that lords were seen to hold. This public representation was stating their authorities over the people they governed rather than for the people. People were seen as more of a commodity who lived to serve the lords and kings. By the beginning of the nineteenth century feudalism and the powers of the church began to decrease which paved the way for the rise of the bourgeoisie society. The meaning of the word public changed, and public was no longer associated <https://assignbuster.com/history-and-development-of-the-public-sphere-in-the-19th-century/>

with the power and authority the representative court of a single person held. The word public now referred to the institutional systems and processes that provided governing powers. Members of society were encompassed by the state forming the public. (Mukerji, 2008, 398-401)

Habermas argued that the public sphere was a domain of social life within which public opinions can be formed. There are some key elements vital for a public sphere to exist; the public sphere needed to be open to all members of society with the citizens playing the role of a private individual who is not acting on behalf of business or other private interest but rather as a citizen discussing matters of general interest and as a place where members of a society can gather and unite to express their opinions. State power can be considered public power which is legitimised through the public in elections the overall public opinion must control the state and the authority the state holds in everyday discussions and using formal elections. Using assembly and dialogue the public sphere creates opinions and attitudes which either challenge or confirm and guide the affairs of the state, the public sphere was a source of public opinion that would give authority to a functioning democracy. As industrialisation continued towns replaced the functions of the medieval court and the coffee houses strengthened the role of the town by being the center of political criticism and exposed the new middle class to culture allowing debate about art and literature – this debate soon turned to politics. Without the public sphere, society would not be able to have an informed opinion.

As society changed during the nineteenth century the public sphere changed alongside it. The industrial revolution and the technology that came with it <https://assignbuster.com/history-and-development-of-the-public-sphere-in-the-19th-century/>

should have created an ideal public sphere but a hollowing out of the public sphere occurred as mass society and the social welfare state came to exist. Habermas argued that a successful public sphere depends on a number of attributes such as the extent of access being as close to universal as possible, having a degree of autonomy, the rule of law and a rejection of hierarchy - all people were equal when discussing the issues of society. Although the public sphere was still very much a male centric arena this reflected how society viewed the role women and certain groups were excluded from the debate that formed public opinion. As gender, ethnic and class restrictions were removed the public sphere approached this ideal although there was a deformation of the public sphere occurring at the same time. Large private interests began to corrode this ideal public sphere and large newspapers devoted solely to profit shifted the press into an agent of manipulation allowing private privileged interests to invade the public sphere. Habermas describes a refudalisation of the public sphere where the illusions of a public sphere is maintained to sanction the decisions of leaders. The misuse of publicity begins to undermine the public sphere. Citizens were once again being treated as an audience and public opinion was being manipulated by the state as they were in a position to control the public sphere. The press and mass media began to focus on non political events rather than having a focus on social and political events.

The manipulation of the press presented political and social issues but elite groups and the state were able to make it look like citizens were able to participate, although in reality they were treated merely as an audience where opinions of the everyday person had no voice at all. In just a century

the public sphere transformed massively as capitalism began to institutionalise and market forces began to dominate the foundations of the state. The press which was previously one of the public spheres main mediums became commercialised and was manipulated the state. The press and the means to produce newspapers and magazines were owned and operated by market elites.() This created interest groups that could trade their functions to the state allowing the groups to put forward their own interests and agendas as a result of this society was unable to tell what was true public opinion and what was manipulated opinion.

This refudalisation that Habermas spoke of occurred when the separation between society and the state disappeared. Another contributing factor was when capitalist societies abandoned free trade and took on a protectionist stance this stance protected a nations domestic industry and put high taxes on imports that came from foreign countries. Free trade was an important aspect of the public sphere as the foreign markets were places where citizens could gather ideas and agendas from other countries. The news and ideas gathered from foreign markets could enable the country to know of problems and injustices within their state when compared to that of a foreign country. Taxes on imports made it difficult for the average citizen to be exposed to other cultures and markets where the exchange and development of ideas could take place. The state became something of a watchman and functioned as a social welfare state within which the citizens had voluntarily given the state permission to intervene in their private lives in exchange for a number of societal benefits. With the public spheres under control by the state the state became more powerful as it had gained the

trust of the people by being a welfare state and this resulted in the separation that once existed between state and society collapsing and their mutual need for each other benefitting the state more than the public. The foundation of the public sphere was rational-critical debate which society failed to engage in – instead the public focused on satisfying their consumerist attitudes. The public's thirst for rational thinking and debate was outweighed by citizens wanting to be entertained and satisfied, therefore the public sphere lost the majority of its functions within democracy.

A clear change occurred during the nineteenth century as the press who are an important part of the public sphere took on agendas that served private rather than the public interests. The debate of the public sphere would be a problem for the elites and would not be productive for profit or the interests that they held. The public opinion was easily manipulated using newspapers and literature

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