ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Being a master of metaphors

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In his political interventions, Jürgen Habermas is a first-class rhetorician. His writing style is eloquent, polemical, rich in aperçus and metaphors, and often affective, especially angry (see Möllers, 2021, p. 85). But there are also many metaphors in his contributions to philosophy, social theory, and political theory in which he clearly restrains himself rhetorically. Metaphors appear at crucial points in his theory formation. Formulations like the dialogical give and take of reasons "*in kleiner Münze*" (small coins), the discursive "*Verflüssigung*" (liquefaction) of traditions, the "colonization" of the lifeworld, the "center and periphery" of modern democracies, or their institutional "sluices"—a metaphor he has adopted from Bernhard Peters—create suggestive images in the minds of his readers. The author, who insists on the strict differentiation between day-to-day language, literary language, and the language of the social sciences (see Habermas, 1990a), and whose philosophical self-understanding insists on the "unforced force of the better argument" is a master of evocative metaphors. This attribute alone makes it a pleasure to read his texts.

The German edition of his new book does not disappoint those readers in search of metaphors either. In the Marxist tradition (see Marx, 2011), a number of metaphors are borrowed from the sphere of geology: "segments" (p. 33)[1] of the population, "erosion" of democracy (p. 87), normative "slopes" (p. 15), the "crumbling" of the political system (p. 109), or the "solidified lava" of anti-authoritarianism in Silicon Valley (p. 46). Some of the metaphors are nautical like normative "anchors" (p. 16), or from the theatre, like the "grimace" of libertarian political thought (p. 46). Only a few of them belong to organic life: the "root ground" of political culture (p. 32), the "*Gleichursprünglichkeit*" (co-originality) of democracy and the rule of law (p. 90), or the "nesting" of normative expectations (p. 14). Most of Habermas' metaphors belong to the vocabulary of the technical world: the "building" of modern democracy (p. 9), "centrifugal" forms of communication (p. 43), the "architecture" of constitutional democracy (p. 32), the "net of historical memory" (p. 30), the "*Sollbruchstelle*" (predetermined breaking point) of political rights (p. 92), the "web of attitudes" (p. 30), the "social bond" (p. 31), civil society as an "early warning system" (p. 80)—and again the "flow chart" of the political system and its "filters" and "sluices" (p. 24, 100). One has to wait until the last paragraph of the book to find a military metaphor. Now is the time "*den Spieß umzudrehen*"[2] (p. 109) and fight the coalition of conspiracy theorists and right-wing populists.

Taking Habermas' preference for technical metaphors into account, it comes as no surprise that he has speaks of "echo chambers" (p. 45) and "fragmentation" (p. 45) in his critical analysis of the digital public sphere. The spatial metaphor of *öffentlicher Raum* (*Raum* can literally be translated as unlimited space and as clearly limited room) is combined with the technical vocabulary of systems-theory when he mentions the "input," "throughput," and "output"

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components of the institutional infrastructure of the public sphere (pp. 38–39). In one passage of the book, Habermas even addresses the problems of metaphorical writing and states that his metaphor *Raum* "must not be overstated" (p. 60). He may have written this sentence from an unfortunate experience. More than once he has become the victim of his metaphor-rich writing style as critics have claimed that formulations like the "colonization of the lifeworld" are too vague to have real analytical power in the field of social research.

Another example is the term "ideal speech situation." Habermas originally developed the ideal speech situation 1970 in *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction* as an epistemological tool used to test the validity of what is essentially true or actually the case (see Habermas, 2001). In this new book, Habermas once again pushes back vehemently against the "stubborn misunderstanding" (p. 69) about this term. First, he points out that he has not used "this misleading expression" since his 1972 essay on theories of truth. Second, the catchy formulation was never meant to be a blueprint for political institutions, but as a metaphor for the bundle of pragmatic assumptions that we actually always have to start from when we enter into a discourse about validity claims.

Nevertheless, some early advocates of the digital revolution in the first half of the 1990s like Howard Rheingold, Nicolas Negroponte, or WIRED magazine authors like John Katz used Habermas' notions of the ideal speech situation and the unrestricted flow of communication in the public sphere as justification for their dreams of a new virtual democracy.[3] According to them, the World Wide Web was the technical incarnation of the ideal speech situation. In their view, the Internet matches all basic requirements of a public sphere that comes as close as possible to the normative core of deliberative democracy: The World Wide Web as the communicative infrastructure for open, unlimited, universal, anti-hierarchical, and complex political interaction. To the radical techno-optimists of those days, the Internet created a new political model, since it offered universal access, freedom of expression, unrestricted agendas, uncoerced communication, and political participation outside of traditional political institutions.

Habermas reminds the readers of his new book of the big "emancipatory promise" of the "egalitarian and unregulated" (p. 45) communicative relationships that were propagated at the beginning of the digital age. And indeed, the positive qualities attributed to political communication in the Internet by Rheingold and other optimists of electronic democracy in the 1990s strikingly resemble Habermas' vocabulary (see Buchstein, 1997, pp. 250–251). In his book *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas defined the public sphere as "a virtually present network of communication" (Habermas, 1987, p. 390) that is freed from any spatiotemporally restricted context. Ten years later, in his outline of the deliberative democratic ideal, he advocated a "decentred society" in which "subjectless forms of communication [...] regulate the flow of deliberations" (Habermas, 1994, p. 7). According to him, "technologies of communication [...] make possible a highly differentiated network of public spheres" (Habermas, 1990b, p. 360), The public sphere should consist of an "open and inclusive network of overlapping, subcultural politics having fluid temporal, social, and substantial boundaries" (Habermas, 1998, p. 306). In such a "discursive structuring of public networks and arenas," popular sovereignty "becomes anonymous" (Habermas, 1998, p. 171).

In his new book, Habermas describes digital technology as a third evolutionary stage in the development of means for communication, following the writing of the spoken word a couple of thousand years ago and the introduction of the mechanical printing press at the beginning of early modernity. Despite the "revolutionary" (p. 41) change caused by digital technologies, he insists (again) on the social and political neutrality of new technologies. This position—already taken in the late 1960s by Herbert Marcuse—distinguishes Habermas' argument from two rival positions within the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. On the one hand, it departs from the optimistic positions taken by Walter Benjamin in his famous 1936 essay about the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction or Hans-Magnus Enzensberger's *Baukasten zu einer Theorie der Medien* (1970). On the other hand, it also distances itself from Theodor W. Adorno's critique of alienated consumer culture and the thesis that the essence of the public sphere has been liquidated in the system of mass media in post-liberal societies.

Habermas stated in 1992 that the strong influence of Adorno's theory of mass culture was not difficult to discern in the first edition of *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* 30 years ago (see Habermas, 1992, p. 438). There is an element of coquetry in this retrospective statement because already in the early 1960s he had made the point that the consumerist public sphere in a capitalist society should and could be transformed into a more democratic postbourgeois public sphere. The solution he offered in a less known Encyclopedia article from 1964 was a call for political intervention in order to create "a rational reorganization of social and political power" (Habermas, 1974,

p. 55). The public sphere should be brought "under the mutual control of rival organizations committed to the public sphere in their internal structure as well as in their relations with the state and each other" (Habermas, 1974, p. 55). This sounds like an early neo-corporatist expansion of the way public TV was organized in West Germany in those days. Based on his neutralist position, Habermas already in the very beginning of his work about the public sphere more than 60 years ago subscribed to a strategy of state intervention in order to re-regulate the media system.

His considerations in *The Theory of Communicative Action* of 1981 followed the same pattern. Relying on empirical research, he argued—explicitly against Adorno—that even in shifting from writing to images and sounds, electronic media—movie, radio, and TV—have not turned mass media into an apparatus that completely dominates and permeates the language of everyday communication. Instead, he emphasized the "ambivalence" (Habermas, 1987, p. 390) of modern mass media. But the "unleashing" of the "emancipatory potential," which is "built into communicative structures themselves," (Habermas, 1987, p. 390) in the mass media has to be set into action by political measures. Habermas even mentioned Hans Magnus Enzensberger's vision of "video pluralism" and "television democracy" as attempts to overcome the centralizing media networks in this context. Since then, Habermas has stated repeatedly that modern mass media could both strengthen or undermine the rationality of political communication, depending on the way the infrastructure of the public sphere is regulated (see Habermas, 1992, p. 437). Thirty years after Habermas first published his seminal book about the public sphere stated that there was "cause for a less pessimistic assessment" (Habermas, 1992, p. 457) of it and of the future of democracy itself. Another 30 years later, Habermas seems to have returned to pessimism.

In his new book, Habermas repeats older statements about the importance of an accommodating, enlightened liberal political culture as the necessary condition for the existence and further development of a democratic political order. His optimism about the further development of western democracies when he published the book *Between Facts and Norms* in 1992 was still based on his hypothesis about the long-term trend toward a rationalization of the lifeworld. Thanks to the support of post-conventional socialization patterns, families and groups of citizens enter a higher stage of cognitive and moral rationality within their everyday face-to-face communication that also radiates into political communication. As is well known, he adopted the concept of civil society from Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen and turned it into the institutional source for progressive changes of reasons, values, and topics that get transmitted via mass media to the center of the political system. He described civil society as a context of discovery of morally relevant questions arising from the lifeworld. He thus assumed that the lifeworld had a rational advantage in the perception of social problems that were to be transported via social movements and the voluntary associations of civil society into the public sphere.

Habermas' overly positive evaluation of social movements and civil society in *Between Facts and Norms* ignored the fact that a number of voluntary associations already at that time pursued conservative, reactionary, populist, and militant right-wing political goals (see Buchstein, 1994, pp. 107–108). He restricted his considerations about civil society to the question of whether, and to what extent, a public sphere dominated by mass media could provide a realistic chance for the members of civil society to bring about political changes. In *Between Facts and Norms*, he was relatively optimistic about the possibility of further democratization. In his new book, Habermas is less optimistic. He puts more emphasis on the "vulnerability" (p. 30) of the results of socialization patterns and the precarious status of liberal democracies. He states "political regression" (p. 41) of liberal democracies around the world seems to have less confidence in the rationalization of the lifeworld.

There is a reason for this growing pessimism that has nothing to do with the current *Zeitgeist*, but follows from a subtle change in Habermas' theory. At first glance, it seems that he is only updating his considerations about the organizational structure of the new media in order to make his argument about the new structural transformation. Both the neutralist position and the state-intervention strategy for a politics of reform and regulation can be found in his book again. Once again, he frames his reflections about the public sphere within his theory of deliberative democracy. He argues that the democratic legitimacy of modern democracies is based on the inclusiveness of the political public sphere. Mass media have an indispensable function, as they ensure the participation of citizens in a common, albeit anonymous, mass communication. Political opinions can only condense into effective public opinions and thus have a

targeted influence on political decisions via the publicity of the mass media. Thus, it is imperative that the mass media have an "enlightening quality" (p. 23). The centrifugal dissolution of the limits of the simultaneously accelerated political communication to any number of participants at any distance has an "ambivalent explosive force" (p. 43). Referring to results of empirical research, Habermas notes that the deliberative quality of political communication in the internet is still an "open question" (p. 40).

According to Habermas, the "platform" (p. 44) character is what is "actually new about the new media" (p. 44). In other words, they enable all potential users to participate in the public sphere as independent authors with equal rights. Political communication no longer depends on traditional journalists or any other expert or institution for professional selection and discursive examination. But the services produced by new, privately owned social media platforms are "in no way neutral services" (p. 53). They are driven by the capitalist logic of profit-making that also puts pressure on the "old media" to adjust to the new format. According to Habermas, the emancipatory potential of the digital public sphere today is "*übertönt*" (p. 45, in the sense of dominated) by "fragmented publics" (p. 45), "bubbles" (p. 62), and "echo chambers" (p. 45). Both the basic standards for a rational debate and the inclusiveness of the public sphere are threatened to be lost. The stakes are high: the political integration of modern democracies is at risk.

It looks like a reminder of the final paragraphs of his first book on the public sphere and to his Encyclopedia article from the 1960s, when Habermas presents a strategy that includes three proposals to overcome this (newly) alarming decline of the public sphere. The first strategy counts on civic education: Citizens have to learn how to deal with this new technology in a reasonable way; and this may take some time (cf., pp. 46–47). The second strategy consists of strong state regulation of the mass media, for example, to force private owners of platforms in an effective way to correct false information or to prevent hate speech. Finally, the third reform strategy is to provide alternatives to the media power of privately owned companies. He proposes an expansion of financial support for state-funded and democratically controlled TV and radio stations (cf., p. 51 and 67), and even for (printed and digital) newspapers that fulfill certain quality standards (cf., p. 67).[4]

This reform agenda is conservative in that it attempts to carry the media organization of the 1970s into our digital age. In his 1962 book, he glorified the bourgeois public sphere. In his new book, he is again glorifying a media system of the past. I have listed his threefold political reform agenda because it provokes a non-trivial question: How is it possible to regulate the structures of political communication in a way that strengthens enlightened discussions via legislative measures, when such regulations (at least in democracies) have to be the result of (less enlightened) political communication?

In the context of this question, it is striking that face-to-face communication gains more relevance in Habermas' theory than before. It is a subtle change. But it has the potential to produce more than just subtle changes to Habermas' final evaluation of the prospects for political reform of the public sphere. In his characterization of elected parliaments Habermas notes that their members "deliberate and decide *together* [emphasis in original] according to democratic procedures" (p. 24). I will not discuss the problematic theory of parliamentarism in the context of this article, but I do want to point to his formulation "deliberate *together* [emphasis in original]." In my understanding, this formulation indicates a normative preference for political communication in social face-to-face constellations, which is typical for interaction in the lifeworld. In a different section of the book, Habermas explicitly praises the deliberative quality of parliamentary decision-making because decisions are made "*face-to-face after democratic deliberations* [emphasis in original]" (p. 102). He also attests to the courts "comparatively high level of rationality" (p. 78), which seems not only to be the result of its legal institutionalization but also due to the fact that court hearings and deliberations are held face-to-face. Finally, in his characterization of social movements and a vibrant civil society he emphasizes their "face-to-face encounters" (p. 39) in everyday life and public events.

In one of the most intriguing sections of the book, Habermas speculates about a changing perception by the users of social media in which the separation between public and private communication is abolished. According to him, a significant part of digital communication today should be understood neither as public nor as private. Rather it is a sphere of communication, which has been reserved until then for private correspondences by letter, that has been bloated to a public existence. It produces a "peculiar anonymous intimacy" (p. 62) which Habermas coins a "*Halböffentlichkeit*" (p. 65—semi-public sphere) of echo chambers and filter bubbles.[5]

However, this speculation puts Habermas in a dilemma. The lifeworld in Habermas' theory is conceptualized as a linguistically organized and culturally transmitted stock of interpretative patterns which form the symbolic core of a society. He introduces the lifeworld as a necessary correlation to the notion of communicative action (see Baynes, 2016, pp. 64–70). The dilemma is the following one: On the one hand, Habermas continues to base the considerations in the book on the assumption of the rational potential of the lifeworld, in particular of face-to-face communication even in different social settings. On the other hand, his speculation provides the plausible assumption that under the conditions of the current digital communication infrastructure, there will be a massive unlearning of cognitive and moral competencies among users.

In his 1962 book, Habermas argued that with the growth of mass media, the laws of the capitalist markets eventually extend and penetrate "into the substance of the works itself" (Habermas, 1989, p. 165). This criticism was compatible with a neutralist position about new technology. In his current critique of social media, he can no longer maintain his neutralist position because he combines his observations about the semi-public sphere with the speculation that communication in such hybrid forms has the regressive effect of limited and "identity-preserving" (p. 61) moral and cognitive horizons for its users. This reduces the chances for Habermas' reform agenda. The longer we wait for radical political reforms of the digital infrastructure, the less likely it is to win the support of democratic majorities (not to mention the problems of having to enforce them on a global scale). If we follow this line of argument, we end up with a much more pessimistic outlook than Habermas himself. But before taking Adorno's books on regressive mass culture from the shelf again, we should give empirical research a second look because there are reasons for moderate optimism. Could it be the case that Habermas is trapped in his analysis in the metaphorical language of "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles"?

Habermas' metaphorical use of the term *Strukturwandel* (structural transformation) is also problematic. He did not invent this term for modern democratic theory. In 1932, Otto Kirchheimer spoke of the *Strukturwandel* of legitimacy in his criticism of Carl Schmitt's book on legality and legitimacy (see Kirchheimer, 2017, p. 381). And in the early years of the Federal Republic of Germany, *Strukturwandel* of democracy was used as a concept by constitutional lawyer Gerhard Leibholz to justify state financing of political parties (see Leibholz, 1958, pp. 79–129). Habermas' original use of the term dates back to the late 1950s (see Yos, 2019, pp. 429–433). In his case, it was a transmission of Franz L. Neumanns's term *Funktionswandel* of 1937. Neumann had used the phrase to describe the decline of liberal rule of law in capitalist society (see Neumann, 1937). In his consideration of the public sphere, Habermas also dealt with a history of decline, but he substituted structure for function. Both *Funktionswandel* and *Strukturwandel* share the methodological approach to reconstruct historical changes in the development of capitalist societies as a unilinear sequence of clearly distinguishable stages.

In the way Habermas uses the term *Strukturwandel*, it is more than a rudimentary, ornamental, or weak metaphor. But even a weak metaphor fulfills the cognitive function of evoking an analogy in the realm of thought.[6] Habermas' use of the term *Strukturwandel* conjures up two images. First, the image of design or assembly, which goes back to the Latin word *structuram*; structures are the basic elements that support a building or otherwise characterize the main pattern of an object. The second component of the word—*Wandel*—evokes the concept of more than slight changes; it means conversion. Thus, a structural transformation is not just any change, but a change in the essential elements of the construction giving it a novel quality. It is in this strong sense that Habermas understood his thesis of the structural transformation of the public sphere in his 1962 book. And he uses the same term 60 years later to claim a new stage in the development of the public sphere.

Hans Blumenberg has rightly argued that there is no such thing as a completely metaphor-free language (see Blumenberg, 1998). So, let us think about changing our metaphorical vocabulary when we deal with changes in the public sphere! What about—*pace* Marx—the geological metaphor of "tectonic shifts"? This metaphor paints a different picture. It evokes the idea of the simultaneity of different fundamental movements—after all, the tectonic plates are the foundations of our living environment. Tectonic plates move simultaneously in different directions. Their movements are sometimes smooth and therefore unnoticed. Sometimes, however, their movements cause violent disturbances that destroy old structures in one fell swoop. Tectonic shifts affect everyone, but in different ways.

Some institutions of the public sphere no longer seem to change successively today, but—to stay with the metaphor—as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. However, such massive changes may remain a locally disruptive phenomenon or may initiate a longer adjustment phase. Ultimately, question like these can only be answered by empirical research. Habermas himself was never reluctant to acknowledge the importance of empirical research for his political theory (see Buchstein, 2009, pp. 422–423). With regard to less dramatic normal cases of tectonic shifts—readers of this article probably have suggestions for much better metaphors—they are in accordance with current empirical findings about everyday digital media use in modern democracies. The findings of several researchers do not support Habermas' pessimistic conclusion about a new quality in the modes of political communication. "Echo chambers" and "bubbles" are exceptions rather than regular cases in today's political communication.[7] In addition, as Hartmut Rosa has convincingly argued, the fragmentation of online debates largely reflects the offline social fragmentation in late-modern societies (see Rosa, 2022).[8]

In 1992, Habermas wrote a self-critical comment about his seminal 1962 book: "My diagnosis of a unilinear development from a politically active public to one withdrawn into bad privacy [was] too simplistic" (1992, p. 438). Let us hope for the future of democracy that the diagnosis in his 2022 book is once again too unilinear and simplistic.

ENDNOTES

[1] The page numbers in brackets refer to Habermas (2022). All translations from the book into English are by the author.

[2] *Spieß* means pike; the English equivalent of this phrase is less militaristic: "to turn the tables."

[3] Among others from the euphoric community of internet illusionists in the 1990s, see Rheingold (1994), Katz (1995), and Negroponte (1995).

[4] Already in 2006, Habermas advocated strong state regulation of digital mass media in order to ensure access for mass participation and promote a diversity of independent quality mass media (cf. Habermas, 2006, p. 412).

[5] The assertion that the boundaries between private and public are blurred in the system of modern mass media stands already at the very beginning of Habermas' critical reflections on the public sphere. As early as 1958, he complained in his article *Zum Begriff der politischen Beteiligung* (On the Concept of Political Participation) that the public sphere had "lost its clear demarcation from the private sphere" (Habermas 1973, p. 30—my translation). In his 1961 polemical article *Die Bundesrepublik – eine Wahlmonarchie?* (The Federal Republic – An Electoral Monarchy?), he called West German political debates to be a part of a consumer culture for those with no interest in politics at all ("*Bestandteil einer Konsumentenkultur für Unpolitische*," Habermas 1961, p. 28).

[6] On different degrees of metaphorical force, see Schäfer (2012).

[7] See Dubois and Blank (2018), Barberà (2020), Kumkar (2022). Doubts about the novelty of the changes at hand of the media system are also raised in Bill Scheuerman's contribution to this symposium.

[8] Christina Lafont in her contribution to this symposium rightly emphasizes this aspect too.

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