Publics and the Public Sphere

excerpt from my Master thesis project on

Computer scientists & their publics. On the construction of relevant groups in context of participatory design and research.

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Disclaimer:

This document is part of my work on my master thesis. At the time it reflects a subsection in my thesis, which should provide and overview of my framing on concepts like *public* or *public sphere*. It may provide a usable review that points at some crucial points for contexts that deal with or engage in public participation. My focus here lies on technosciences, especially Participatory Design. But it might be useful to other contexts too.

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Publics and the Public Sphere

A recent reader, put together by Jostein Gripsrud et al. assembles some of the most significant theoretical and historical texts on concepts of *public(s)* and *public sphere*, as well as their relevancy for democratic societies (Gripsrud et al. 2010). I will summarize some of them to contextualize my own understanding of publics. To some extent these (historical) debates also influenced participatory approaches in the computer sciences – but I will come back to that in chapter 4.

A first significant debate about the publics' status in an increasingly complex – or we could say: scientific – world is the so-called “Lippmann-Dewey Debate”, which was again widely discussed in media and communication studies in the USA through the 1980ies and '90ies (Schudson 2008). According to Michael Schudson this so-called debate was neither a debate nor was it adequate enough to critically engage with points made by Walter Lippmann, who was blatantly disregarded as anti-democrat. But whether he really was an anti-democrat or not, his thoughts point to crucial aspects that are also very vivid when we talk about science and public engagement. So let us shortly go through this 'debate'.

For Walter Lippmann, when he wrote *The Phantom Public* in 1925, the main problem seemed to be how an increasingly complex society could be organized and how issues of expertise and individual participation can be accounted for in a representative democracy. While standard textbooks for teaching citizenship in schools and colleges at his time drew a picture of democratic citizens who can, and indeed have to inform themselves about all public issues in order to partake in the democratic processes of society, for Lippmann there is an obvious omission:

> “But nowhere in this well-meant book is the sovereign citizen of the future given a hint as to how, while he is earning a living, rearing children and enjoying his life, he is to keep himself informed about the progress of this swarming confusion of problems.” (Lippmann 2010, 28)

Just to the contrary, Lippmann states that “the citizen gives but a little of his time to public affairs, has but a casual interest in facts and but a poor appetite for theory.” (ibid) Even today this might indeed be just a fact, as Lippmann termed it. But the crucial point that opens the debate perhaps then is: why is this so? As Lippmann does not question this, his 'democratic realist' stance of course has to become elitist – which means anti-democratic only in terms of participatory democracy, not so much in terms of representative democracy. But in fact, most of us in the globally hegemonic sphere are (still/again) living in some form or representative democracy. So, while Lippmann's account may be elitist, it still provides some crucial questions that are of relevance when it comes to public engagement in science. One of those is, that there is not just a single public that has to be addressed. The public is not “a fixed body of individuals” but “is merely those persons who are interested in an affair” (41). In some sense Lippmann's view of publics forestalls an agonistic model which will be discussed later.

In response to Lippmann's works, John Dewey wrote his book *The Public and Its Problems* in 1927. Whileas Lippmann focused on representation, Dewey much more focused on participation. Both could,

nevertheless, come to common terms on many issues. To say that Dewey's “conclusions are diametrically opposite” to Lippmann's (Gripsrud et al. 2010, 43) might be a bit misleading. In the end both argue in a framework of late capitalist industrialized democracies and it's (material) possibilities. Lippmann gives an adequate analysis of increasingly complex socio-political entanglements followed by a rather unimaginative solution. Dewey just provides different solutions for the same problem. Of course he then puts emphasis on different aspects of the problem. While Lippmann's concern are decisions, Dewey's focus much more lies on the processes how to come to those decisions. Consequently he is not at all opposed to the concept or use of experts. He just ascribes a different function to them and, respectively, to the publics:

> “But their expertness is not shown in framing and executing policies, but in discovering and making known the facts upon which the former depend. They are experts in the sense that scientific investigators and artists manifest *expertise*. It is not necessary that the many should have the knowledge and skill to carry on the needed investigations; what is required is that they have the ability to judge of the bearing of the knowledge supplied by others upon common concerns.” (Dewey 2010, 50)

So while for Lippmann it is much more the issue who has to decide, for Dewey it is the question how decisions are made. The former tries to find a model of how to find (representative) experts and what their competences are. The latter also accounts for constantly changing circumstances which are inevitable in a complex and contingent techno-socio-political environment: “The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public.” (ibid)

Both, Dewey and Lippmann, seemed to take certain democratic standards as granted. Their aim was just how to refine them to better fit an increasingly (scientifically) complex society. Both did so in the 1920ies in the USA. Of course the situation in Europe looked different. Especially with the rise of fascism and ultimately national-socialism, retrospectively a certain intellectual reservation about public opinion was understandable, especially in Germany and Austria. After the Second World War and the experience of the Shoah it seemed rather obvious to rethink concepts and agency of “the public”.

An important framework here was provided by Hannah Arendt in her 1958 book on *The Human Condition*. In it she defines the “public realm” as the “common”, the sum of common interests, issues and interactions. According to Arendt the term *public* signifies two things: 1) those things that “can be seen and heard by everybody and [get] the widest possible publicity.” (Arendt 2010, 104) 2) “the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it.” (105) This second meaning then refers to the artefactual and fabricated nature of the public realm, and how our public interactions are mediated by our (often scientific) inventions:

> “It is related, rather, to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common […]. The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over

> each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them." (ibid)

I think this passage might very well speak to debates about public engagement in technosciences. While the technosciences are a major contributor to the world of things between us that make possible our public interaction we[1] only very reluctantly design our inventions (whether material, symbolic, social or cognitive) to mediate our own immediate public realms, that is, the technosciences themselves. As long as we do not acknowledge this, we might keep falling over each other – which results in personal and political quarrel at its best and social and environmental catastrophy at its worst. To keep things together, and to make specific enterprises, like scientific endeavours, (socially) sustainable, we have to facilitate a public realm. Or as Arendt further writes:

> "Only the existence of a public realm and the world's subsequent transformation into a community of things which gathers men together and relates them to each other depends entirely on permanence. If the world is to contain a public sphere, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men." (106)

It might seem a bit tautological when we use "the publicity of the public realm" to ascertain the thriving of human endeavours, like scientific ones. But this lies in the specific definition of the public as something common to us all. The question then if these considerations can be applied to technoscience depends on our understanding of technoscience as something that should benefit society as a whole. In the end Arendt's conception points towards the fact that there is not just a single public, or a single harmonious interest, but that to have a common realm means to have differences and disputes. So it should not be about trying to come to some ahistorical consensus, but to enable constructive dispute that enriches our human public experiences. This might be a lesson especially learned from Arendt's analysis of totalitarian features in society, as is reflected in her following sentence: "The end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present in only one perspective." (108) This is another aspect that might be important to think about in scientific endeavours, especially where scientific objectivity might lead to moral objectivism and purportedly objective/logical research trajectories.

A very influential work then comes from Jürgen Habermas, who published his habilitation thesis *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* in 1962. In 1974 an encyclopaedic article, that provided a condensed version of it, was translated to English and published in *New German Critique*. Until his habilitation thesis was translated into English in 1989 (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*), this was the only English text by Habermas regarding the public sphere. Although it was very influential and inspired new debates about public participation,

1 The self-referential "we" is due not only to my former background in technical computer science but also signifies that we, as social scientists and especially STSers should not exclude ourselves from the realm of technoscience. Meanwhile we too are rather dependent on a range of complex technologies to do our work and to convey our findings. And we too design socio-technical settings and sometimes even devise certain artefacts to enable people to gather around an issue.

also in the technosciences, Habermas' conception of the public sphere is in some important aspects flawed – at least in its aim to facilitate emancipatory and integrative democratic processes. But before highlighting aspects of such a critique, let me present you the major points of this concept of the public sphere. By *public sphere* Habermas describes a realm of social life that is constituted by our social interactions – although in his concept it is restricted to only certain social interactions, namely those of citizens. But here I already forestall major critiques on Habermas' concept. So, let me quote just a short passage from the introductory definition, because it seems that most of the debate and critique then forms around what is hidden between those lines:

> "Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest." (Habermas 1974, 49)

From a critical perspective we just could take the first sentence and contest that there never was a public sphere. But this would be too blunt. So it has to lie in our understanding of *citizens*. Who are the citizens who are granted access to the public sphere? For a long time only white male middle-to-upper-class members fitted into this category. And indeed, the more formerly disenfranchised groups gained citizen rights, the more special interests where brought into the public sphere. This then seems to contradict the dictum of the "general interest". Although Habermas tries to provide a critical analysis of the burgeois public sphere he does not move beyond the picture of a single and uniting public sphere in which consensual processes of deliberation around some general public interest take place. He does not unmask the ideology of a public/private dichotomy. Analogous his emphasis on access and publicity only on a level of information and knowledge leads to a concept of a public sphere that is necessarily a hegemonic one, in which certain voices are never heard while others are widely distributed. The public sphere then is just another market place which is supplied by those with the means to produce and distribute relevant public information and knowledge, while all others might just consume the knowledge and information that is circulated.

These points then are also reflected by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge in their 1972 work on *Public Sphere and Experience*. What they aim for is, besides their critique of Habermas' conception, to highlight examples of *counterpublic spheres*, or more specifically of a *proletarian public sphere*, which is in its basic features more process oriented than institutionally shaped. Their starting point is the observation that "real social experiences of huam beings, produced in everyday life and work, cut across such divisions" of private and public (Negt and Kluge 2010, 121). But despite their critical stance and their sensibility for the ambiguity of the concept *proletarian*, they do not see other issues of structural discrimination. Their proletarian public sphere is still a heterosexual, white, male establishment – as Suzanne Vromen confirms in a 1995 review:

> "Confined fantasy, identified for the proletariat, is not connected to women's emancipation. Heterosexual and ethnocentric assumptions, furthermore, are taken for granted and remain unexamined. By privileging the material relations of production in defining the proletarian public sphere, the authors miss the equal possibility of resistance within the consumption of cultural goods." (Vromen 1995, 119)

Although the process orientation of their concept then opens up other questions and the enactment of a proletarian public sphere could change its conception, from todays perspective it seems rather absurd that they did not reflect issues of heterogeneity, especially with their analysis at hand. But this might unite them with most of the other authors, that they argue from a socially privileged perspective[2].

A crucial critique then, that also opens up our focus on small and diverse publics that might be addressed in Participatory Design projects, comes from Nancy Fraser. The point of departure in her 1990 paper "*Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy*" is Habermas's conception of the public sphere. Fraser acknowledges it as an important, even indispensable conceptual resource if we want to investigate the limits of democracy in our late-capitalist society. This is her basic premise:

> "[S]omething like Habermas's idea of the public sphere is indispensable to critical social theory and democratic political practice. I assume that no attempt to understand the limits of actually existing late-capitalist democracy can succeed without in some way or another making use of it. I assume that the same goes for urgently needed constructive efforts to project alternative models of democracy." (Fraser 1990, 57)

But her interest then lies in an the reframing of this concept of a public sphere, in order to make available a basis for alternative models of democracy. She sees in Habermas's account an accurate analytical description of the rise and demise of the bourgeois public sphere, but although he himself highlighted that a new form of public sphere is needed, he did stop at that instead of "developing a new, post-bourgeois model of the public sphere." (58) So she then first sets out to juxtapose Habermas's account on the structural transformation of the public sphere by an alternative one, for which she draws on historical research that lays open several flaws in Habermas's analysis. First and foremost there is the claim of openness of the public sphere, which – as I also have mentioned before – was never fully realized. Habermas fully missed the irony of "[a] discourse of publicity touting accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies [that] is itself deployed as a strategy of distinction." (60) While the bourgeois publics celebrated their public debates as a gathering of equals, where status hierarchies are left aside, this only went to the cost of exclusion of women and other marginalized groups – just as in ancient Greek city states the public debates excluded women and slaves. Hannah Arendt also pointed to this when she wrote that

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2 That does neither mean that they could not do otherweise just because of being white males, nor that people in socially less privileged positions necessarily come to better conclusions. They could engage with other, less privileged standpoints, but it seems they have not done so. But we will come to issues of epistemological privilege in the section on feminist epistemologies.

> “[t]he *polis* was distinguished from the household in that it knew only 'equals', wheras the houshold was the center of the strictest inequality. […] To be sure, this equality of the political realm has very little in common with our concept of equality: it meant to live among and to have to deal only with one's peers, and it presupposed the existence of 'unequals' who, as a matter of fact, were always the majority of the population in a city-state.” (Arendt 1958, 95)

This certainly was not so different from the bourgeois public sphere, with sexism and racism institutionalized in the newly formed western democracies. We just have to ask for the material conditions that permit so-called equals to meet and confer about their common agendas. To enable such productive meetings there always is a significant part of reproductive work to do. While we could think about modes of distributing the latter in a fashion appropriate for a democratic society, historically it was always fulfilled by marginalized groups, especially by women. So the emphasis on a constant *openness* of the public sphere for all *equals* may help to “explain the exacerbation of sexism characteristic of the liberal public sphere” accompanied by norms of feminine domesticity and a strict distinction between private and public spheres (Fraser 1990, 60). What Fraser also criticizes is that although Habermas acknowledges the (temporal) existance of other, competing public spheres like e.g. the “plebeian public sphere”, he disregards them in his analysis. Therefore he misses on the liberal public sphere's relation to those other spheres and necessarily misses the hegemonic functioning of the liberal public sphere. Here Fraser points, beyond others, to Mary Ryan who made visible examples of such other public spheres in her historical work on women in the US-american public in the period from 1825 to 1880 (Ryan 1992). Ryan then also addressed Habermas's work explicitly in a chapter of an edited volume on *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Therein she gives a condensed account of those historical to draw “a counternarrative to Habermas's depiction of the chronological decline from an idealized bourgeois public sphere.” (Ryan 1993, 262) Important for our own investigations then is what she concludes from her historical investigations:

> “Because everyday politics inevitably falls short of standards of perfect rational discourse, a chimera even in the heydey of the bourgeois public sphere, the goal of publicness might best be allowed to navigate through wider and wilder territory. That is, public life can be cultivated in many democratic spaces where obstinate differences in power, material status, and hence interest can find expression.” (286)

To rework the concept of the public sphere then in a way that also accounts for those many democratic spaces and the differences in power is what Nancy Fraser further aims at. Because even if the public sphere itself is the vehicle for its reformulation and Habermas's work was a vital impulse to do so, “[t]he official public sphere [...] was—indeed, is—the prime institutional site for the construction of the consent that defines the new, hegemonic mode of domination.” (Fraser 1990, 62) So she goes on to address the four central assumptions in the model of a bourgeois public sphere that have to be rethought. Those respectively fall into the following issues, which I will try to summarize shortly, because they are essential for our later observations of participation in technoscientific processes:

- open access, participatory parity, and social equality

- equality, diversity, and multiple publics
- public spheres, common concerns, and private interests
- strong publics and weak publics

For the first point, regarding the open access, we already know that this normative demand was never fully realized, as women where excluded on basis of their sex and plebeian men were excluded by property qualifications and additionally many women and men where excluded on racial grounds. To some extent this still is the case today in industrialized democracies, although usually on a more subtle basis. But although formal exclusions were eliminated over time, social and economic inequalities prevail. If such inequalities then are just bracketed out (to fulfill the demand for a gathering of freely deliberating equals), then "deliberation can serve as a mask for domination [that also does] extend beyond gender to other kinds of unequal relations, like those based on class or ethnicity."[3] (64) So, while bracketing of social inequalities does not foster participatory parity (just contrary to it's naive or liberal intention), "it would be more appropriate to *unbracket* inequalities in the sense of explicitly thematizing them" (ibid). This of course is just one aspect to be aware of, that has to be addressed when facilitating participatory processes. In the end "a necessary condition for participatory parity is that systemic social inequalities be eliminated" (65) – something we cannot encompass in our technoscientific research projects alone. So while on a general public policy level we might be able at least to some extent to work towards substantive social equality, this situation has to be addressed in (participatory) research projects in a way that partially counteracts unequal distributions of power in the research context.

For the second point, regarding equality, diversity, and multiple publics, Fraser addresses Habermas's normative assumption of a single public sphere as an ideal democratic situation, while a multiplicity of publics would signify a departure from democracy. Fraser therefore juxtaposes the potentials of a "single, comprehensible public versus multiple publics in two kinds of modern societies: stratified

3 Very illustrative on a concrete interactional level then is the following passage: "Feminist research has documented a syndrome that many of us have observed in faculty meetings and other mixed-sex deliberative bodies: men tend to interrupt women more than women interrupt men; men also tend to speak more than women, taking more turns and longer turns; and women's interventions are more often ignored or not responded to than men's. In response to the sorts of experiences documented in this research, an important strand of feminist political theory has claimed that deliberation can serve as a mask for domination." (Fraser 1990, 63-64) This illustrates the importance of a micro-level analysis of public deliberations. This then will be of importance for the construction of publics in technoscientific contexts. By quoting Jane Mansbridge, as en example for the mentioned feminist political theory, it becomes clear that this is not only a specific gender issue but a general phenomenon in political deliberation: "the transformation of 'I' into 'we' brought about through political deliberation can easily mask subtle forms of control. Even the language people use as they reason together usually favors one way of seeing things and discourages others. Subordinate groups sometimes cannot find the right voice or words to express their thoughts, and when they do, they discover they are not heard. [They] are silenced, encouraged to keep their wants inchoate, and heard to say 'yes' when what they have said is 'no'." (Jane Mansbridge. 1990. Feminism and Democracy. *The American Prospect*. no.1, Spring.; quoted after Fraser 1990, 65) These are phenomena we also regularly encounter in science studies, e.g. when we conduct focus groups or other methods aiming at engaging different actors in discussion about technoscientific issues.

societies and egalitarian societies" (66). By stratified societies she refers to all "societies whose basic institutional framework generates unequal social groups in structural relations of dominance and subordination" (ibid), while by "egalitarian, multicultural societies" she refers to such societies whose basic frameworks do not produce the mentioned inequalities. So far, this are of course hypothetical societies "without classes and without gender or racial division of labor" which nonetheless do not have to be culturally homogeneous (68). While in the former, that is in our actually existing democracies, participatory parity can never be fully achieved, we can at least try to find arrangements that approximate this situation. And here she suggests that "in stratified societies, arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensible, overarching public", because in the latter case "members of subordinated groups would have no arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives, and strategies." (66)[4] Also critical historiography shows that such groups repeatedly constituted alternative publics, which Fraser then calls "*subaltern counterpublics* in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs." (67)[5] So, in stratified societies, subaltern counterpublics provide on the one hand a space for "withdrawal and regroupment" and on the other hand function as "training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics". And it is exactly this dialectic that "enables subaltern counterpublics partially to offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies" (68). For our own investigation into the context of participatory technosciences this then is of analytical importance when we look to specific frameworks of participation and who is actually participating in it. Because even if in egalitarian societies there would just be one ideal public sphere, this is clearly not the case in our contexts. Apart from that Nancy Fraser also argues that a "socially egalitarian, multicultural society that is also a participatory democracy […] will necessarily be a society with many different publics, including at least one public in which participants can deliberate as peers across lines of difference

4 This argument directly follows from Fraser's previous section on "Open Access, Participatory Parity, and Social Equality". The crux lies in the ability to mobilize a prospective "we", under which all the members of a public are then subsumed and through which patterns of domination are masked. In single, comprehensible publics there is always an advantage for dominant groups to establish consensus in their own interest, because not coming to a decision would mean the proliferation of the actual circumstances, under which the dominant groups became dominant in the first place. Of course then subordinate groups may use different modes of conflict resolution, but at that point we leave the deliberative sphere.

5 Here, Fraser points to issues of separatism and that some subaltern counterpublics also are "explicitly anti-democratic and antiegalitarian, and even those with democratic and egalitarian intentions are not always above practicing their own modes of informal exclusion and marginalization. Still, insofar as these counterpublics emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they help expand discursive space. In principle, assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation will now have to be publicly argued out. In general, the proliferation of subaltern counterpublics means a widening of discursive contestation" (67). And because the concept of a counterpublic assumes a "*publicist* orientation" it also works against rigid separatism in the long run. Although subaltern counterpublics often are "involuntarily enclav*ed*", they are by definition not enclaves but public arenas in which its members aim to disseminate their discourses to wider publics.

about policy that concerns them all." (70)[6]

For the third point, regarding public spheres, common concerns, and private interests, Nancy Fraser addresses what we have found just at the beginning of Habermas's definition of the public sphere, as already quoted above: "A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body." (Habermas 1974, 49) This part of the definition already contains an important aspect: that the public comes into being around certain issues. In context of our research interest here we can say that the public is constructed through issues and forms of engagement. And this construction may either be facilitated by initially external agents or this process may also be largely self-organized. The important objection Fraser makes here pertains the relation between *private individuals* and *public interests* (that are deliberated upon in public bodies). Both notions, as part of the definition, are problematic. Because "there are no naturally given, a priori boundaries here. What will count as a matter of common concern will be decided precisely through discursive contestation." (71) There are many examples of issues that were deemed as private matters until a significant counterpublic formed and made it to a public matter through ongoing discursive contestation. Prominent examples can be found in feminist movements, e.g. issues of domestic violence, sexual harassment and sexism in general. The crucial point here is, that there are certain issues that are deemed as private by a the majority of (influential) agents in the hegemonic public sphere(s). As long as only individuals contest, either because of their immediate experience or because the experience of others, these issues are easily dismissed by the larger public as (perhaps tragic) individual exceptions, which nevertheless leave the larger societal arrangement uncontested. Only after a significant number of individuals cooperate to publicly contest the problem at hand, the issue may be acknowledged as an important public issue and the solution of the problem then is framed as *of public interest*. To do so, the contestants create their own counterpublic sphere, which they can withdraw to, where they can regroup and coordinate and prepare their agitational strategies to shift the wider public discourse. So, to insist on the distinction of (a priori) private and public interests would mean to work

6 This is just to debunk the myth of an idealized liberal public sphere, of "an unrealized utopian ideal" worthy of working towards its implementation. Critically seen it is just a "masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule." (Fraser 1990, 62) As I have said, this appears to be not so relevant for the analysis of actually happening participatory (technoscientific) processes in our stratified society. Nevertheless I think it is important to understand this argumentation, because it might often happen in deliberative bodies that those people aware of the problems of stratification try to establish an environment in which the inequalities would not impinge on the participatory process. This of course then happens with a good intention to foster participation, but it does in fact only mask the inequalities, and we have to be aware of that when observing and analyzing participatory processes. Therefore I quote here the core of Fraser's argument regarding single versus multiple publics in an egalitarian society, because it is also instructive for our interpretative lenses on deliberative and participatory processes: "[P]ublic life in egalitarian, multicultural societies cannot consist exclusively in a single, comprehensible public sphere. That would be tantamount to filtering diverse rhetorical and stylistic norms through a single, overarching lens. Moreover, since there can be no such lens that is genuinely culturally neutral, it would effectively privilege the expressive norms of one cultural group over others and thereby make discursive assimilation a condition for participation in public debate. The result would be the demise of multiculturalism (and the likely demise of social equality). In general, then, we can conclude that the idea of an egalitarian, multicultural society only makes sense if we suppose a plurality of public arenas in which groups with diverse values and rhetorics participate. By definition, such a society must contain a multiplicity of publics." (69)

against “one of the principal aims of deliberation, namely, to help participants clarify their interests, even when those interests turn out to conflict.” (72) Also to assume a *common good* that is the sole subject of public deliberation would mean to mystify the relations between those groups that gain systematic profit in a stratified society and those groups to that are deprived of it. So we should be suspicious about “any consensus that purports to represent the common good in this social context […], since this consensus will have been reached through deliberative processes tainted by the effects of dominance and subordination.” (73) This certainly can be experienced in prominent public engagement exercises in technoscience too. Here we have to be aware of rhetorics of privacy that function in support of dominant interests to delegitimize interests of marginalized groups, e.g. that of lay participants in context of public engagement in science.

For the fourth and last part of Fraser's critique of Habermas's concept, we have to focus on the other part of the definition above, on the *private individuals*. In Habermas's conception there is the strong assumption that civil society has to be sharply separated from the state, and civil society in this case refers to an assemblage of associations that are nongovernmental and neither of economic nor administrative nature. These publics, then, do not themselves participate in decision-making but only formulate critical commentaries on decisions actually taken elsewhere. Fraser calls such publics *weak publics*, which are “publics whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation and does not also encompass decision making.” (75) But while for the classical bourgeois public sphere this delimitation might have proven feasible, at least since the formation of sovereign parliaments new publics emerged, which function as a “public sphere *within* the state”. In this case Fraser then speaks of *strong publics*, which are “publics whose discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision making.” (ibid) Fraser did choose these terms also to suggest an improvement of the public's status: strong publics strengthen public opinion, because such publics are empowered to “translate” public opinion into “authoritative decisions”. Strong publics of course don't have to consist only of such central democratic institutions like sovereign parliaments. We can envision, and in fact there are, diverse self-managed institutions that have significant authority in specific areas, especially because they are able to marshal and distribute material resources. For our purposes we only need to think of quasi-autonomous scientific funding bodies. Interesting questions then arise around issues of accountability: “What institutional arrangements best ensure the accountability of democratic decision-making bodies (strong publics) to *their* (external, weak, or, given the possibility of hybrid cases, weak*er*) publics?” (76) These questions then let us focus on global and local interdependencies and different forms of “self-management, interpublic coordination, and political accountability that are essential to a democratic and egalitarian society.” (ibid) This would not be possible with the bourgeois conception of the public sphere and its demand to sharply separate civil society from the state.

Those four cornerstones of Nancy Fraser's critique now point us to the importance of developing a new *postbourgeois* conception of the public sphere. For our own investigations of participatory approaches in technoscience, then, we can take those considerations to evaluate the diverse interpublic relations that are enacted through such participatory approaches. We even could interpret those approaches as specific examples of attempts to develop such new conceptions at different levels of societal

interaction. In any case those points of critique actually provide us with valuable concepts through which we can make sense of those experientially rich new entanglements of sciences and publics.

Another critique on Habermas's concept of the public sphere comes from Chantal Mouffe. In an article of a 1999 issue in *Social Research* she provided us with a condensed version of her critiques and, beyond this critique, with an alternative to models of deliberative democracy (Mouffe 1999). Her critique focuses on similar issues like Nancy Fraser's and we might interpret Mouffe's own model as such an alternative conception that Fraser requested. Yet in Mouffe's view we have to give up the idea of deliberative democracy at all, because it is an idealized myth that is fundamentally flawed by its neglect of “dimensions of power and their ineradicable character.” (Mouffe 2010, 274–275) This is also because “discourse itself in its fundamental structure is authoritarian since out of the free-floating dispersion of signifiers, it is only through the intervention of a master signifier that a consistent field of meaning can merge.” (274) This points to the fact that dominated actors always have to adopt to the practices of the dominant, at least if they want to be acknowledged (paradoxically enough) as equal participants in processes of discursive deliberation. As a consequence Mouffe proposes her model of *agonistic pluralism*, over that of *deliberative democracy* and she calls this a project of *radical and plural democracy*. A key distinction here is one between “the political” and “politics”, where the latter is the “ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimensions of 'the political' [which points to the inherent antagonism of human societies; AK]” (276). To accept an adversary's position in such a context means to shift ones own identity, which Mouffe sees analog to Thomas Kuhn's concept of the *paradigm shift* in technoscientific theories and practices (Kuhn 1996). Therefore her model urges us to focus much more on conflict and dissent than on rational deliberation:

> “Contrary to the model of 'deliberative democracy', the model of 'agonistic pluralism' that I am advocating asserts that the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to render rational consensus possible, but to mobilise those passions towards the promotion of democratic designs. Far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existance.” (Mouffe 2010, 277)[7]

With a model of agonistic pluralism then we might be more receptive to “the multiplicity of voices that a pluralist society encompasses, and to the complexity of the power structure that this network of differences implies.” (278)

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7 Although I think the point is made, I nevertheless want to also quote the following lines, to better illustrate Mouffe's agenda: “To deny that there ever could be a free and unconstrained public deliberation of all matters of common concern is therefore crucial for democratic politics. When we accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power and that always entails some form of exclusion, we can begin to envisage the nature of a democratic public sphere in a different way. Modern democracy's specificity lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian order.” (Mouffe 2010, 277)

While Mouffe proposes this model, that in her view radically breaks with models of deliberative democracy, Seyla Benhabib again makes a strong statement for revised versions of a deliberative democracy model – versions that also reflect the critiques brought forth so far. Benhabib refers to Nancy Fraser's work as one that aims at a reformulation but not a break with deliberative democracy (Benhabib 2002). When we look back up to Fraser's critique, we see its main focus not on the idea of deliberative democracy itself but much more on the concept of the public sphere as it was brought forth by Habermas. But it is not my intention here to close questions like "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?", as posed by Chantal Mouffe. What is important in Mouffe's critique is the focus on power and conflict. Especially when we use a framework of deliberative democracy we might inadvertently neglect such issues in favor of discourse. Of course discourse always also means power, but the strong assumptions of free and morally equal participants that are at the core of deliberative democratic models tends to disregard certain (material) power relations, especially if we as researchers ourselves are speaking from socially privileged positions.

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