

Beyond Rationality: Reimagining Habermasian Public Sphere As A Pedagogical Foundation For Communicative Competence

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Abstract. This study aims to examine and integrate Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action within contemporary pedagogical frameworks to address the crisis of the modern public sphere. It seeks to provide a theoretical basis for cultivating leaders who possess not only spiritual integrity but also robust critical reasoning and an inclusive disposition towards social reality. The research employs a qualitative-philosophical literature review, specifically analyzing Habermas's concept of communicative rationality. This framework is further enriched by integrating the existential ethics of Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Buber to broaden the understanding of human interaction within discursive spaces. The results indicate that reimagining the public sphere as an egalitarian arena, modeled after the historical "Coffee House", allows for the flourishing of theological, philosophical, and socio-political discourse free from the constraints of hierarchy or dogma. The study finds that authentic communication must transcend mere rational argumentation, evolving into a profound site for the recognition of human dignity and the "Face" of the Other. This research recommends a fundamental transformation of educational institutions by implementing a "Habermasian Philosophical Coffee House" as a socio-educational laboratory. Such an initiative is instrumental in fortifying critical thinking, fostering ethical empathy, and equipping the younger generation with the communicative competence necessary to navigate social plurality and serve as transformative voices in a globalized, digital era.

Keywords: Coffee House; Communicative Action; Public Sphere; Transformative Education; Communicative Competence

1 Introduction

Have you ever imagined a place, perhaps like a bustling coffee shop, an online forum, or even just a casual chat in a crowded public hall, where everyone can sit together? They come not to flaunt power or status, but to discuss openly and rationally about the issues that affect our lives. It is there that a significant shift in intellectual paradigms is taking place. Various crucial issues that shape life are dissected and discussed in depth: ranging from the dynamics of community life, the struggle for human rights, democratic freedom, and the impact of media digitalization, to innovative concepts such as *deep learning* or *independent learning education*. The public

sphere is a place where ideas are contested, arguments are constructed, and public opinion is formed through the power of reason, rather than coercion or manipulation.

Habermas, born in 1929 and a critical philosopher as well as a sociologist behind the profound tradition of "critical theory" and pragmatism, argues that it is in these places that individuals from various backgrounds gather, especially from the rising middle class (bourgeoisie). They come not to be entertained, but to elaborate rational thoughts on issues that were highly sensitive at the time: matters regarding the government, hidden conspiracies between the bourgeoisie and the Church that controlled society, the rights of marginalized groups, and the importance of freedom of speech and democracy. It is this place that the prominent German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, refers to as the "public sphere." One of his most influential works, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, truly opens our eyes to how crucial this space is[1].

The primary strength of this idea lies in its ability to encourage active participation in the act of generating innovative alternative ideas and constantly opening up new constructive spaces. Within the public sphere, individuals exercise their rational consciousness. This means they do not merely voice opinions based on emotion or prejudice, but on logical and accountable arguments. It is through this rational discussion and communication that various views and perspectives can be accommodated, tested, and even criticized. The result? Individuals have the potential to significantly influence various public actions and policies. In public debates, they may affirm or negate the diverse thoughts of other individuals. This is the foundation of a healthy democracy, where policies are not imposed from above but instead grow from dialogue and mutual understanding among citizens.

Historically, Habermas notes how public power was previously often associated with the 'representation of authority'—kings, nobility, or the Church, who displayed their power directly before the people (for instance, through grand ceremonies, trials, or dogmas). They were the 'rule-makers' whose positions were unshakeable. However, with the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere, the meaning of 'the public' itself began to shift. 'The public' no longer referred to the imposition or presentation of authority by a select few. Instead, it began to refer to the legitimacy of state policymakers that must be obtained through public consent and discussion. This means that power is no longer legitimate simply because it is inherited or divinely ordained, but because it is justified by reason and the consent of the people discussed within the public sphere.

According to Habermas, the public sphere is a place where common sense meets the aspirations of society. When citizens are actively involved, weighing arguments, and voicing their views on solid ground, they become not only spectators but also decisive actors in forming fairer and more relevant policies. This is the core of a healthy and participatory democracy, where true public power stems from free and informed discourse. Habermas himself is highly critical of the modern condition, which he views as having 'refeudalized' the public sphere, where mass media often becomes a tool of manipulation rather than a catalyst for rational discourse.

Therefore, he advocates for deliberative democracy, “a form of democracy in which political decisions are made through a process of public discussion that is rational, argumentative, and inclusive.”

2 Method

This study employs a qualitative-philosophical research method utilizing a literature review approach. Moving beyond a mere description of phenomena, this philosophical inquiry seeks to synthesize Jürgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action with contemporary pedagogical challenges. The data collection process involves an extensive analysis of primary and secondary sources, including seminal books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and philosophical lexicons relevant to the discourse on the public sphere and communicative competence. The analytical framework is grounded in philosophical hermeneutics to critically examine Habermas’s communicative rationality.[2] [3]This approach enables the author to bridge the gap between secular social theory and the ethical-philosophical landscape of Indonesia, ultimately formulating a transformative socio-educational theory designed to address both current and future societal complexities.

3 Finding and Discussion

3.1 Coffee Houses: Spaces For Critical Discourse

Eighteenth-century coffee houses serve as an inspiration for discussion spaces where ideas are exchanged without fear; they are the heart of any society that wishes to maintain its democratic essence and resist all forms of domination. Habermas's concept of the public sphere consistently focuses on the relationship between norms and facts concerning the public and democracy, relying on the power of reason to mediate between the two. This is an enduring lesson on the importance of honest and open conversation in shaping a collective future. In the vortex of contemporary discussion, there is one fundamental correlation we cannot ignore: the close link between civil society and public life. Amidst the torrent of information and polarization, we must consider how to ensure the public voice is truly heard and influences the direction of specific policies. Furthermore, Habermas observed that during the same period (the 18th century), amidst the emergence of the bourgeoisie (the prosperous middle class), a concerning phenomenon arose: a lack of responsibility toward the "victims" or the common people. Those who now possessed economic and intellectual power often felt superior and lacked the social impetus to provide aid to marginalized populations.

We often hear the term "critical thinking," but what does it mean in practice? According to the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, critical consciousness always drives us to look beyond the surface, to question the phenomena around us, be it a decision or policy, a media narrative, or deeply rooted social norms. Interestingly, this critical consciousness is closely linked to how we

communicate. Habermas emphasizes the importance of what he calls "communicative action without domination." Imagine an ideal conversation: no one imposes their will, no one exerts pressure, and every participant aims to understand one another. Its essence is rational argumentation, the ability to convey opinions with logical reasoning, listen to counter-arguments, and be willing to change one's view if presented with a stronger argument. Habermas disagrees with the "anthropological pessimism" of his predecessors in the Frankfurt School, such as Adorno and Horkheimer. He rejects the notion that the only path to emancipation is through "definite negation" and believes that the emancipatory potential of modern reason can still be realized[4].

In the public sphere, where individuals are free to discuss and debate, every participant is 'required' to employ rational thinking. The objective is simple: to find the best outcome for all, achieving consensus and harmony in socio-political life. However, what happens if a consensus is not reached? This is where criticism plays a vital role.

Criticism is not merely complaining or denouncing. On the contrary, it is a significant segment in developing communicative action. Criticism arises when there is a discrepancy or injustice that needs to be uncovered. Moreover, this criticism possesses an emancipatory character, it is liberating. It seeks to dismantle and deconstruct specific ideologies or worldviews that may have unconsciously hindered individuals from participating fully, voicing their rights, or developing their potential within society. These ideologies may take the form of prejudices, stereotypes, or belief systems that justify injustice.

According to Habermas, the power of rational argument and the spirit of criticism lie in their validity. This means that every claim, every argument, and every critique must be accountable, based on solid reasoning, and open to being tested. Through this process, we can continue to engage in dialogue, learn, and move forward toward a more just and rational society. The validity of a claim is no longer based on how sacred or ancient its source is, but on how logical, coherent, and open it is to be tested and debated rationally within an equal dialogue. Consequently, a person's existence is no longer measured solely by adherence to dogma, but by their ability to participate in public reason and contribute to the formation of a rational consensus.

3.2 Coffee Houses: Beyond Discourse From and For The 'Other'

In the modern era, coffee houses possess multifaceted meanings. They do not merely represent a "locus", a place where groups of people are required to meet face-to-face over a warm cup of coffee, but also serve as public encounter spaces in the virtual world (online) through digital media platforms. As a Habermasian public sphere, the coffee house is a vital arena for rational discussion and opinion formation. However, there is another hidden strength that can enrich this space: our ability to learn from the experiences, orientations, and motivations of others. In both the physical and virtual worlds, we encounter diverse human characters every day. Every

meeting is an opportunity. We meet not only "ideas" but also individuals with unique capacities; their wealth of knowledge, life experiences, and their existential essence as part of society. How can we maximize these encounters? The key is to approach others with a high sense of responsibility, rather than merely as interlocutors or sources of information. We can link Habermas's concept of discourse with the profound thoughts of philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Buber.

Levinas positions 'the other' not as an object to be classified, but as a force that disrupts the sovereignty of our ego. In discursive spaces, we often find ourselves trapped in an attempt to 'master' our interlocutor through logic, an act that Levinas regards as a form of intellectual violence. As emphasized by Lee, the encounter between individuals is essentially a convergence that transcends categories of subjective similarity or difference[5]. When we truly confront 'the other,' our entire system of argumentative defense collapses before a 'Face' that cannot be reduced to mere words. This 'Face' is not merely visual; it is an appeal that compels us to suspend our desire for victory and, instead, open ourselves to something entirely foreign and unpredictable. In this context, public discussion is no longer about the synchronization of ideas, but about the willingness to be disturbed by the presence of another whom we can never fully comprehend.

This relationship transcends mere social interaction; it embodies Martin Buber's 'I-Thou' framework, which has become increasingly vital as a counter-narrative to modern digital logic. Buber warns us against the 'I-It' relation, where 'the other' is reduced to data, an object, or a mere statistical category. The novelty of this perspective lies in our courage to deconstruct the interlocutor's identity: they are no longer a representation of gender, a political label, or a screen profile, but a complete and profound 'presence.' In such authentic dialogue, we are not merely extracting information; rather, we are entering an existential space where wisdom and constructive criticism are no longer perceived as threats, but as 'dialogical gifts.' Herein lies the transcendental dimension: when we cease treating humans as tools for our own ends, we encounter an inspiration and divine goodness that can only emerge in an equal, unmasked encounter.[6]

'The other' identifies their existence through their own unique situation. By encountering and learning from 'the other,' we do not only expand our intellectual horizons but also build a stronger community, based on the socio-educational power generated from discussion and, more importantly, ethical experience. Every individual has the right to manifest positive consciousness and the values of goodness, including within the realms of education or self-development. A truly strong, inclusive, and transformative public sphere can only be realized when we are willing to learn from the existence of 'the other' with an open heart and ethical responsibility. This is a call to view every dialogue not merely as an exchange of ideas, but as an existential encounter that has the potential to refine our mission and build genuine harmony.

3.3 The Power and Challenges of Publicity in the Public Sphere

Habermas originally described the public sphere as centered on physical encounters in coffee houses or salons, where individuals freely discussed social issues. However, the landscape has now shifted drastically due to digital media. Applications such as WhatsApp, Twitter (X), Instagram, Line, YouTube, and TikTok have created massive new public spheres, often without the need for face-to-face meetings.

The presence of digital media also influences the primary strength of the public sphere: publicity. This means that the results of debates, discussions, or opinions formed within this space must be accessible and known to the wider public. Publicity enables a group to share their arguments, thoughts, and perspectives with others, allowing for the dissemination of ideas and the formation of a broader public opinion. It is the core mechanism that allows rational and critical thinking, formed in limited discussions, to influence specific actions and policies on a larger scale[7][8]

However, in the modern era, the concept of publicity also carries negative impacts that cannot be ignored. Digital media, particularly social media, has drastically altered the landscape of publicity. While on one hand it expands access and participation, on the other, it is vulnerable to becoming a battlefield for the spread of destructive information, such as hoaxes, fake news, hate speech, and echo chambers. Digital publication media are no longer just communication tools; they have transformed into a kind of "constant technological presence" that faithfully accompanies us wherever we go. Globalization has brought this technology into every corner of life, even to the remotest villages. So penetrative is this modern technology that it has seemingly become a new idol of this century. It is "worshipped" for providing extraordinary convenience and satisfying an infinite thirst for information. Computers, with all their applications, offer immense ease in completing tasks and work. Similarly, the internet eliminates the boundaries of distance and time in communication, while presenting an expansive and unmanaged volume of information. It is no wonder that many people rely so heavily on, and even "worship", this technology.

Online public spheres are often politicized by various groups. With sophisticated algorithms and the ability to target specific audiences, certain groups can easily influence their readers or followers, even to the point of adhering to dangerous radical concepts. Most online public spaces, which should serve as arenas for dialogue, often transform into "echo chambers" where biased information circulates without filters, and healthy criticism is replaced by personal attacks.

Nevertheless, these challenges do not negate the urgency of the public sphere. On the contrary, they emphasize the need for a higher level of critical consciousness from every individual in filtering information and participating in discussions. We must consciously recreate and maintain spaces where rational arguments are still valued, where 'the other' is viewed as a dignified subject who can enrich our insights, and where freedom of expression is balanced with ethical responsibility.

Another weakness that emerges is the temptation of superiority or inferiority claims within the orientation of the public sphere itself. Ironically, amidst efforts to voice equality, some individuals or groups may view themselves as possessing higher rationality or influence. They tend to attempt to control the thoughts of others, transforming the public sphere, which should be free, into a politicized arena for the exclusive interests of a few. This constitutes an intellectual betrayal of the fundamental principle of discursive equality envisioned by Habermas.

Furthermore, amidst the idealism of public discussion, Habermas also recognizes the reality that modern humans care not only about public life but also their private lives. The quality of public life often presupposes the quality of individual life. That is, if individuals are not personally healthy (for instance, due to life pressures or insecurity), how can they contribute maximally to the public sphere? Sometimes, overly strict standards of rationality can also backfire, leading to discrimination against individuals perceived to have lower-quality rational arguments, even though they may hold important perspectives derived from life experiences.

Contemporary phenomena further complicate Habermas's views. In this modern era, we witness countless conflicts, such as war, terrorism, suicide bombings, persecution, and violence. Tragically, many of these are even supported by seemingly rational arguments from conflicting groups, or at least justified through systematic narratives. This situation, where rationality can lead to destruction rather than consensus, has made Habermas himself skeptical of glorifying rational argument as the sole primary recommendation for public life. If pure rationality alone can trigger conflict, then something is missing. Consequently, in the modern era, Habermas indirectly acknowledges that modern humans require the influence of religion and culture to create a better life and a more harmonious future. Rationality alone is insufficient. Spiritual, ethical, and communal dimensions sourced from religion and cultural wisdom may serve as the glue capable of overcoming the limitations of instrumental rationality. Habermas has refined his concept of the public sphere over time. The 1962 version, which focused on the bourgeois public sphere, was criticized for excluding the proletariat and women. In response, Habermas's revisions in the 1990s aimed to include those previously marginalized. His latest version between 2005–2008, in his book *Between Naturalism and Religion*, is designed to integrate religious citizens, demonstrating its potential for greater inclusivity[9].

3.4 Communicative Rationality and the Spirit of Openness

The coffee house as a public sphere represents a fertile ground for intellectuals, and indeed every individual, to work together in a spirit of love, harmony, and peace. It is here that suspicion and hostility should dissolve, replaced by a collective effort to create peace within our diverse identities. Within this space, every individual is encouraged to explore successful communication and share their experiences from various roles in everyday life. This is not merely about exchanging facts, but also about sharing stories, perspectives, and even their educational, socio-cultural, and political experiences with complete openness. Communicative

action can even overcome social pathologies.[10] Thus, Habermas essentially focuses on communicative rationality and rational discourse within the public sphere.[11]

Openness in this context does not mean accepting all policies blindly without criticism. More deeply, openness also encompasses a willingness to acknowledge our own vulnerability and "brokenness." It is an admission that we, as humans, never feel completely "at home" or perfect within ourselves. We are always in a process of becoming, always possessing room to learn and grow. It is precisely within this awareness of imperfection that an individual's deepest freedom lies, our ability to be creative and to accept responsibility for our existence in the world. Creativity becomes the way out of limitations, and responsibility is the compass that guides us to use that freedom for the common good. Genuine harmony and peace can be realized through the pluralism of identities.

To possess freedom means to have the right to express one's opinions or perspectives without coercion or fear. It is the right to have 'sincerity' of autonomy [12]; the ability to speak, think, criticize, and ultimately, determine one's own stance. Only when the freedom and autonomy of every individual are recognized can honest and productive dialogue take place. This creates an environment where ideas can contend on equal footing, rather than being dictated by authority or dominance.

For Habermas, our critical consciousness is always projected toward external phenomena. This means we are constantly driven to question and analyze what occurs outside of ourselves. The correlation between this critical consciousness and communication is explicit. Habermas emphasizes the significance of communication that aims not only to convey information but is also capable of renovating situations or mindsets for the better. His idealism suggests that through communicative action, we can achieve consensus and harmony in our collective life in the digital age[13].

Communication, in this view, is a highly substantial praxis. It opens the horizons of human critical consciousness to engage in dialogue and appreciate oneself without the 'chains of domination.' This means everyone has an equal right and opportunity to speak and be heard, overcoming the silence and fear that may still overshadow parts of society. Habermas develops a social pragmatics where the communicative use of language is a fundamental prerequisite for meaningful interaction.[14] In this type of communication, there are only active and responsive actions: speaking and listening. Every format of communication inherently possesses the intention to reach a consensus without coercion. The effort to achieve this consensus can only be realized if there is a paradigm of mutual respect within social life. For Habermas, the idea of rational consensus logically and chronologically takes precedence over violence. Violence is understood as a political failure, not as a means to achieve it. [15]

In the light of Habermas's ideas, our society or community will endure and flourish if it is built upon reciprocal communication that respects the freedom and equal status of every member. This respect opens the horizons of each individual's thinking, encouraging them to remain open to other perspectives and optimizing negotiation efforts to reach a common consensus. In this

context, it is essential to have the courage to relinquish something of value for the sake of something else that is rationally proven to be of greater value. This means we must be willing to correct our views or interests if rational dialogue demonstrates a stronger argument or a better solution. There is no practice of hegemony or coercion in this ideal communication; what appears is a relationship of partnership, where every voice carries equal weight.

The activity of expressing one's perspective must also be accompanied by an attitude of accepting external perspectives that are not one's own. However, what happens if perspectives clash and no consensus is reached? That is where criticism emerges. Habermas asserts that criticism is a natural response when consensus is not achieved. Criticism is a highly significant segment in building communicative interaction. It possesses social value and embodies an emancipatory spirit because it seeks to dismantle certain ideologies that may covertly negate the existence or rights of individuals within society. It is criticism that can uncover injustice, bias, or hidden assumptions. According to him, the potential for critique is not located outside of society (for instance, in individual consciousness) but is already 'inscribed' within everyday communicative practices that require discursive justification. Criticism is a practical competence possessed by all social actors.[16]

Habermas asserts that the framework of argumentative criticism must lead toward validity claims. These are four universal demands that we implicitly make every time we communicate: the claim of *truth*, the claim of *rightness*, the claim of *sincerity* (or authenticity), and the claim of *comprehensibility*. In the context of the truth claim, Habermas identifies three moments of truth: the 'Platonic' moment (unquestioned everyday beliefs), the 'Hybrid' moment (fallible truth reached through discourse), and the 'Kantian' moment (unconditional truth that transcends justification). [17] An individual who successfully fulfills these claims in their communication is said to possess communicative competence. This is the key to creating productive dialogue capable of generating consensus and, ultimately, building a more just and harmonious society. In relation to local contexts, Habermas introduces the concept of 'Janus-faced' validity claims. These claims are 'context-bound' because they are uttered in the here and now, yet at the same time, they are 'context-transcending' because, as claims, they refer to an unconditional moment embedded within the process of mutual understanding. [18]

3.5 Education: The Foundation of Habermasian Communicative Competence

In the midst of rapid globalization and increasingly massive digital dominance, one fundamental skill has become increasingly crucial for every individual: communicative competence. The ability to interact, engage in dialogue, and convey ideas effectively is no longer merely an added value but a basic necessity. How, then, can this skill be intensively formed? The answer lies within the educational process.

Jürgen Habermas's inspiration regarding coffee houses, the public sphere, and communicative rationality, namely the ability to argue rationally and reach consensus through dialogue without

domination and violence[19], would be difficult to comprehend and realize comprehensively without proper channels. This is where education plays a key role. Education is not merely a transfer of knowledge, but one of the most significant elements in the life of a global society. A society will not flourish without a solid educational foundation. In fact, the benchmark of a country's civilization often lies in its consistency and commitment to the advancement of its educational system.[7]

Therefore, every nation in the world is constantly encouraged to refine its educational system to align with the developments of the era. Adaptive education allows for alignment with the rapid progress occurring in various fields of life, ranging from technology and economics to socio-political dynamics.

In essence, education always requires reform and transformation. Reform ignites the existence of education to constantly renew itself, striving for perfection in the delivery and relevance of its materials. One significant aspect is how to create a public sphere that enables critical discussion, the exchange of ideas, and mutual learning of characters while accepting differences. Education is not a closed space that must remain untouched by global secular issues.[20] On the contrary, education is an open space that allows all issues to be articulated straightforwardly, discussed, and analyzed for their significant essence in personal and social life. Meanwhile, transformation enables education to fundamentally change its learning methods. It is no longer about rote memorization, but about shaping the character of students to possess 21st-century skills, the 4Cs: Critical Thinking, Creative, Collaborative, and, of course, effective Communication. Education is expected to evolve through curriculum changes that seek the right format to produce human resources based on these 4C competencies.[21] [22]

Through these processes of reform and transformation, the educational system can actively shape individuals who are not only academically intelligent but also possess the communicative competence required to participate actively in the Public Sphere. They will become citizens capable of articulating rational arguments, listening to other perspectives, identifying biases (including personal prejudices), and contributing to constructive dialogue, the very foundation for the consensus and harmony envisioned by Habermas. Thus, investing in quality education that continuously adapts and transforms is a tangible investment in building a public sphere for a society that is smarter, more critical, and better equipped to engage in productive dialogue amidst the complexities of a global and digital-driven era.

4 Conclusion

Ultimately, the grand vision of the public sphere championed by Jürgen Habermas is not merely a utopian theory. It is a practical blueprint for a more just and rational society. However, this blueprint will never be realized without two essential bridges: education and our willingness to integrate it into every facet of life.

Furthermore, this idea offers a transformative call for educational institutions. By manifesting a "Habermasian Coffee House" within educational environments, we do more than just integrate theological discussion with contemporary issues; we shape a generation of future leaders who possess balanced intellectual and spiritual integrity. Students trained in open dialogue, constructive criticism, and the recognition of "the other" will become more relevant servants of society, capable of navigating the complexities of a pluralistic community.

Thus, from the 18th-century coffee houses to today's online spaces, the public sphere remains a mirror of our civilization's quality. Education is the key to ensuring that this mirror reflects a society that is not only intelligent but also wise, critical, and courageous enough to achieve harmony through dialogue.

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