

RVP International Seminar 2026

*Self, Solidarity, and Civility**

Meeting Information

- **Date:** August 31, 2026
- **Session:** 7th session of the RVP International Seminar 2026
- **Duration:** 3 hours
- **Facilitator/Host:** João J. Vila-Chã, SJ
- **Attendees:** João, Ravi Vincent, Maduabuchi Dukor, Mohan, Dian, Mark, Zhao Xin, Lidia, Nubong, Michał, Franklin, Shiva, Adrienne, Hu Yeping, Wang En

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Key Outcomes

The session opened with an extended roundtable on global current events — centered on the Nepal flood disaster, political developments in Indonesia, Cameroon, Iceland, and Peru — before transitioning to the primary academic agenda: three presentations on Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). Participants shared largely enthusiastic first impressions of the text, with notable critical interventions from a South Asian perspective challenging whether Habermas describes genuine transformation or merely historical transition. The group agreed to continue with Habermas for one more session (Wednesday), with three new presenters assigned. A final session on Friday will address Habermas' last book, in which he critically revisits the public sphere concept in the context of digital media and social networks.

Global Current Events Roundtable

Nepal Flood Disaster

- Catastrophic floods in Nepal described as unprecedented in scale, caused by a combination of ice melt, seismic activity, and other fluids — not water alone.
- The disaster occurred at a border area between Tibet and Nepal, a site with mystical significance where both locals and foreigners gather.

* Document elaborated with the Assistance of AI under the Supervision of Prof. João J. Vila-Chã. Before being distributed, the document was submitted to the revision/approval of the Participants in the Seminar.

- Over **80 Americans** reportedly perished, including **22 people from Tennessee**, many connected to a trip organized by the **Lisa Foundation** associated with Sadhguru.
- Death toll remains uncounted; the government has launched an inquiry.
- Mohan published an article in three newspapers framing the disaster through an **environmental lens**: Nepal's emission rate was only **0.23**, yet it bore the consequences of global ecological damage caused elsewhere — illustrating the principle that interference with nature's laws produces reactions in unexpected locations.
- Mohan's argument: human greed and the failure to reduce global temperatures (targets of 2.0°C or lower, ideally 1.5°C) are driving increasingly violent natural events worldwide — including European heat waves, North American extremes, and simultaneous floods and droughts in different parts of India. 56
- Adrienne added that nature should be regarded not merely through a cause-and-effect lens but as a **living being deserving a sacred relationship**, akin to how we approach persons — “nature is our mother.”
- Maduabuchi connected the disaster to a broader pattern in Nigeria of **neo-paganism** among youth, who, rather than seeking scientific explanations for disasters, resort to oracular consultation — drawing a parallel between India's mysticism and Africa's neo-pagan tendencies, and invoking the need for **epistemic solidarity**.

Indonesia — Land Fires and Muslim Congress

- Land fires reported in **Kalimantan** and **Maluku**.
- Indonesia's largest Muslim organization held a **congress** over the weekend; results were contested, with many participants dissatisfied due to allegations of **political strategies involving money for elections** (suspected corruption of the electoral process).
- Dian expressed surprise and delight upon learning that other seminar members attended a **Shia Mawlid al-Nabi** (birthday of the Prophet) ceremony.

Mawlid al-Nabi Celebration (Lorton, USA)

- Mark, Xin, and Lidia attended a **Mawlid al-Nabi** ceremony in Lorton — a first experience for all three.
- Mark was particularly struck by the **vows (AUM) being enunciated**, describing it as “incredible.”

- Xin reflected that the songs transported her to “ancient times,” evoking a sense of deep history.
- Lidia emphasized the **hospitality** of the community, the novelty of witnessing a religious birthday celebration, and the expansion of her knowledge about Islam.
- Dian confirmed that Sunni Muslims celebrate the Prophet's birth over **12 days**, with the peak on day 12 — making the event a **global celebration** with some variation in timing and duration across traditions.

Cameroon — Femicide and the “War of Conscience”

- Legislative elections are approaching; most current MPs are from the opposition.
- **Joshua Osin**, chairman of the **SDF party**, publicly addressed ongoing **femicide** in Cameroon, but framed it as an electoral pitch (“vote for me to resolve this”), which Nubong criticized as reflecting a general **decline in political civility**.
- More significantly, Nubong shared a developing **philosophical concept**: the “**War of Conscience**” — a metaphysical and ethical struggle where authentic personhood, guided by conscience and responsibility for the other, resists dehumanizing forces of the global impersonal world order.
- Nubong described this as an **ontological, spiritual, and ethical** struggle for the soul of humanity in the 21st century, and linked it to a book he is actively writing, structured around chapters developed during the seminar.

Iceland — EU Referendum

- Iceland voted in a **referendum against joining the European Union**, with the Prime Minister (a social democrat) declaring the discussion closed.
- Michał framed this as a significant geopolitical development given Iceland's location between Great Britain and Greenland, with implications for regional security.
- João's analysis: Iceland's real motivation is protecting **exclusive access to its maritime fisheries** — the EU would require opening territorial waters to other member states, which Iceland's economy (population under 500,000, heavily dependent on the sea) cannot afford to sacrifice.
- João expressed personal regret at the decision, noting Iceland already enjoys most EU benefits without contributing reciprocally — drawing a parallel to **Brexit**, where many British voters now regret leaving.
- Michał countered that Iceland's decision reflects legitimate democratic self-determination and that the Scandinavian countries have built their own effective regional union (Norway, Finland, Sweden, etc.) from the grassroots.

- João raised a long-term security concern: if the US moves to annex Greenland, Iceland could be vulnerable with no protective alliance.
- Broader reflection on the **European Union** as arguably the most successful political project of the last thousand years, with Portugal and Poland cited as countries that benefited enormously from EU infrastructure investment and economic assistance during their development phases.

Peru — New Government

- Franklin reported no significant news; the new government has just completed its **first month** in office.
- Franklin expressed personal skepticism (“I don't see too much vision”), but acknowledged it is too early to judge.
- João invoked **Saint Ignatius' principle of giving the benefit of the doubt** — until evidence compels otherwise.

Sri Lanka — April New Year Celebration

- Shiva highlighted Sri Lanka's unique **New Year celebration in April** (not January), observed by both the **Sinhalese and Tamil** ethnic communities, based on a separate cultural calendar.
- The government declares nearly a full week of public holidays for the occasion.

First Impressions of Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*

Participants were asked to share feelings and impressions before the formal presentations began.

- **Ravi Vincent:** Found the book “gripping”; drew parallels to Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* and Stuart Hall's cultural studies work. Noted Habermas' treatment of **epistolary novels** (e.g., Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*) and how meaning evolves across historical periods. Cited Harold Bloom: “every reading is a misreading.”
- **Franklin:** Found the book “extremely powerful” and “inspiring,” but noted it predates the internet era by over 50 years. Described the current media landscape as a **“war of the public sphere”** — not just national but global — due to streaming, YouTube, and social media platforms producing an overload of information.

- **Nubong:** Found the book “quite stimulating”; argued that applying Habermas' concept of the public sphere to contemporary global society has significant potential for **human progress and transformation**.
- **Maduabuchi:** Described Habermas as a long-standing intellectual hero; came to Habermas through prior study and found all the assigned materials stimulating and interconnected. Devoted significant preparation time to the readings.
- **Xin:** First-time reader of Habermas; read the English translation and felt something was “missed” in the Chinese translation. Found the logic “clear and intertwined,” with a strong desire to re-read and enter the text more deeply.
- **Lidia:** Described *Structural Transformation* as her **favorite Habermas book**, praising his ability to combine philosophical reflection with historical analysis — providing not an abstract vision of democracy but concrete material sources.
- **Yeping:** More reserved; found the first 20–30 pages largely historical and sociological background with significant overlap with Elias and Davetian, and limited philosophical analysis in the opening sections.
- **Michał:** Approached Habermas through his biographical context — born before WWII in a family with NSDAP ties, witnessing postwar German democratic reconstruction. Raised critiques including Joseph Ratzinger's challenge about the **lack of metaphysics**, the “utopian” nature of the ideal speech situation, and questions raised by Habermas' later works on liberal eugenics and “detranscendentalization of reason.”
- **Dian:** Found the reading challenging but intriguing; it prompted reflection on whether the public sphere is truly **open and equitable for everyone**.
- **Shiva:** Has prior familiarity with Habermas through dissertation work; found key terms and translations difficult but manageable. 40

Critical Intervention — South Asian Perspective (Ravi Vincent / Mohan)

- Central critique: Habermas describes **transition**, not **transformation** — as capitalism evolved from mercantile to corporate to digital, the public and private spheres shifted correspondingly, but no genuine structural transformation occurred.
- From a South Asian standpoint, the boundary between public and private is not clear-cut: **Dalits and lower-caste individuals** are still excluded from temples (public spaces) in 21st-century India.
- Recent examples cited: friends denied entry to a Delhi exhibition for wearing chapels; a hotel refusing a man in traditional dhoti. The dominant castes continue to control both public and private spaces.

- Conclusion: Habermas has not provided a framework adequate to South Asian realities — his model assumes a European bourgeois subject that does not translate universally.

João's Assessment of Habermas

- Positioned Habermas as **one of the last great philosophers** in the Western tradition, ranking alongside Heidegger, Hegel, Marx, Schelling, and Spinoza — part of the philosophical pantheon, not above criticism but genuinely belonging to it.
- Habermas passed away in **March 2026**.
- His central contribution — the **communicative transformation of reason** — is described as an idea that will endure; the explosion of social networks is its technological manifestation, even though Habermas himself was deeply critical of digital media.
- Personal anecdote: João witnessed Habermas at the **1988 World Congress in Brighton**, where Habermas “demolished” a young Colombian student's question in front of ~2,000 people — illustrating both his intellectual rigor and his intolerance for imprecision.
- João acknowledged Habermas as “elitist” but argued that his systematic, formal writing style is a feature, not a flaw — each argument is interlocked so that demolishing one part risks the entire edifice.

Presentation Summaries

Presentation 1 — Shiva: Key Concepts and Origins of the Public Sphere (Chapter 1)

- Habermas employs an **interdisciplinary and historical-sociological method** combining sociology, economics, constitutional law, political science, history, and philosophy to investigate the bourgeois public sphere.
- **Greek origins:** The public sphere (*polis*) was the domain of free citizens discussing common interests (*lexis* = discussion; *praxis* = political deliberation); the private sphere (*oikos*) governed household and economic affairs.
- **Modern shift** (from 16th century): “Public” came to mean state/government officials and institutions; “private” referred to ordinary individuals outside government.
- **Bourgeois public sphere:** Historically specific formation emerging from educated, property-owning private individuals who gathered in coffee houses, salons, and newspapers to discuss common matters.

- **Liberal public sphere:** Distinguished by normative commitment to rational-critical discourse and the right of private citizens to publicly critique state authority.
- **Plebeian public sphere:** Alternative formation originating from the lowest social classes — workers, laborers, small producers — recognized by Karl Marx as a counter-sphere to the bourgeois model.
- **Representative publicness** (medieval): Kings and nobles displayed power through ceremony and symbolism; people were spectators, not participants. Habermas argues this does not constitute genuine publicness.
- Transition in 17th–19th centuries: Rulers became subject to public opinion; capitalism replaced feudal representation; educated elites and commercial classes challenged authority through rational justification.

Presentation 2 — Nubong: Institutions of the Public Sphere (Sections 4–5, pp. 27–42)

- Central question: **Which institutions enabled private persons to become a critically reasoning public?**
- The bourgeois public sphere did not arise spontaneously — it required specific social arrangements bridging private life and political authority.
- **Social structure blueprint:** The public sphere was constituted by private people coming together as a public, claiming the sphere regulated from above against public authorities themselves, using **rational-critical debate** as the medium of political confrontation.
- The **town** (not the court) became the life center of civil society; key institutions were **coffee houses** (England, golden age 1680s–1730s), **salons** (France, regency to revolution), and **table societies** (Germany).
- **England:** Coffee houses made access to relevant circles less formal, embracing wider strata including craftsmen and shop workers. Women were largely excluded from coffee houses.
- **France:** Salons formed an enclave where nobility and grand bourgeoisie met on intellectual equal footing; the salon held the **monopoly of first publication** for new works.
- **Germany:** Fewer and less active equivalents; table societies and later lodges served similar functions, with the **Enlightenment lodge** practicing a dialectical form of reason that needed protection from becoming fully public due to its threat to relations of domination.

- Three defining features of the bourgeois public sphere's social intercourse: (1) **status disregarded** in favor of common humanity; (2) **problematization of previously unquestioned domains** (church, state, philosophy, art); (3) **culture as commodity** establishing the public as inclusive in principle.
- **Art criticism** emerged as a new profession; journals devoted to literary and art criticism were typical creations of the 18th century; **moral weeklies** (e.g., Addison's *Spectator*) were integral to coffee house discussions.
- Conclusion: The bourgeois public sphere depended on both **material institutions** (coffee houses, salons, print media) and **normative commitments** (rational debate, equality of participation); its fragility lay in constant threats from economic interests, social stratification, and political pressure.

Presentation 3 — Zhao Xin: Bourgeois Family, Literary and Political Public Spheres (Sections 6–7)

- **Historical turning point ~1750:** Public life shifted from aristocratic representation (kings and lords displaying power through court patronage) to bourgeois cultural institutions (theaters, museums, concert halls, coffee houses).
- **Two contrasting domestic models:**
 - *Aristocratic open house:* Family continuity based on title/name; spouses might maintain separate households; the institution of the mistress was socially accepted; governed by etiquette, not intimacy.
 - *Bourgeois conjugal family:* Sealed, self-contained household characterized by **permanent intimacy**; fundamentally different from both nobility and traditional artisan households where work and domestic life were merged.
- **Architectural evidence** (17th-century Britain): The communal Great Hall gave way to smaller, specialized rooms; the yard moved behind the house; three functional zones emerged — the *older color* (representative authority), the *living room* (sealed family intimacy), and the *salon* (formal reception for public debate).
- **Internal contradiction of the bourgeois family:** It understood itself as a pure sanctuary of affection, free from economic coercion, yet was profoundly dependent on the husband's success in the capitalist market.
- **Three elements of bourgeois family humanity:** voluntariness, community of love, and cultivation — an inner realm following its own laws, emancipated from external purpose.

- Habermas' dialectical position: family humanity is **ideology but not only ideology** — it contained a real element of truth, as individuals did experience genuine moments of affection and respect even within exploitative structures.
- **Letters and novels:** 18th-century letter-writing evolved from business transactions to emotional confessions; epistolary novels emerged from this culture; reading circles and subscription libraries after 1750 created a **shared interiority** among private individuals.
- **Greek vs. bourgeois public sphere:** Greek participation was agonistic (struggle for individual glory) and never designed to criticize the city-state; the bourgeois model used critical reasoning specifically to **challenge and restrain state power**.
- **Three-stage genealogy of public critique:** (1) absolutist state secrecy; (2) early constitutional contracts relying on noble estates; (3) bourgeois polemic demanding **open rational scrutiny of all state policies**.
- **Fictitious identity:** Habermas' central thesis — the bourgeois public sphere relied on the fiction that the *bourgeois* (property owner pursuing self-interest) and the *homme* (pure human being, moral actor) were the same individual. This identity was structurally exclusionary: women, servants, and unpropertied workers were legally disenfranchised yet were among the most active participants in the literary public sphere.
- Liberal philosophers like Locke defined government as preservation of property, quietly bonding life, liberty, and property together — presenting the economic interests of property owners as the **universal interest of all humanity**.

Decisions Made

- **Continue with Habermas** for one additional session (Wednesday, next meeting), incorporating critical and creative reflections from participants' own cultural and geographic contexts.
- **Wednesday session:** Three more presentations covering the remaining sections of *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.
- **Friday session:** Discussion of Habermas' **last book** (2022, title to be confirmed in English), in which he critically revisits the public sphere in the context of digital media and social networks — described as “the last word of Habermas” on the topic.
- Participants agreed that each presenter should be **faithful to the text first**, then conclude with their own critical position from their contextual perspective.

Action Items

- **Mohan:** Present **Section on Political Functions and Constitutional Institutionalization** (pp. 57–88) at Wednesday's session. 89
 - **Ravi Vincent:** Present **“Public Opinion and Kant on Publicity”** section at Wednesday's session. 90
 - **Maduabuchi:** Present **“The Ambivalence of the Liberal Public Sphere”** (covering Hegel, Marx, Mill, Tocqueville, and contradictions of the liberal model) at Wednesday's session.
 - **All participants:** Read the assigned pages (~60 pages total, up to p. 140) before Wednesday.
 - **All participants:** Test the **seminar website** (<https://www.crvp.org/>) before Wednesday — note loading speed, accessibility issues, and any suggestions for improvement, especially from Africa, India, and other regions with variable connectivity.
 - **Lydia and Xin:** Provide a **report on their travels and explorations** (to New York/Big Apple) at the next session.
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Open Questions

- Whether Habermas' framework can be meaningfully applied outside the European bourgeois context — particularly in South Asia, where caste-based exclusion from public spaces persists in the 21st century — remains a central unresolved debate for the seminar.
 - The adequacy of Habermas' concept of the public sphere for understanding contemporary **digital media, social networks, and the global information environment** was flagged as requiring attention — to be addressed in the Friday session on his last book.
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Division of Work for the Upcoming Session

Presentation by MOHAN: Political Functions and Constitutional Institutionalization

Reading: Part III, §§8–11, pp. 57–88

Central question: How did public discussion acquire political force and become institutionalized in the liberal constitutional state?

Core topics

- Britain as Habermas's model case
- Parliament, parties, petitions, the press, and organized opposition
- The political significance of struggles against censorship
- French and German variants of bourgeois development
- Civil society, private law, private property, and the liberalized market
- Constitutional rights as guarantees of public and private autonomy
- The contradiction between universal legal principles and class-based social conditions

Presentation by RAVI VINCENT: Public Opinion and Kant's Principle of Publicity

Reading: Part IV, §§12–13, pp. 89–116

Central question: How did “public opinion” become a political-philosophical concept, and why does Kant make publicity central to the relation between politics and morality?

Core topics

- The semantic prehistory of “public opinion,” *opinion publique*, and *öffentliche Meinung*
- Opinion as reputation, judgment, probability, and collective authority
- The transformation of opinion into reasoned public judgment
- Kant's use of public reason
- Publicity as a test of justice and legitimacy
- The relationship among autonomy, enlightenment, law, and republican politics
- The ideal of a rational order generated through public debate

Presentation by DUKOR: The Dialectic and Ambivalence of the Liberal Public Sphere

Reading: Part IV, §§14–15, pp. 117–140

Central question: How do Hegel, Marx, Mill, and Tocqueville expose the contradictions and dangers within the liberal model of publicity?

Core topics

- Hegel's critique of civil society and public opinion
- Public opinion as both truth-bearing and contingent

- Marx's critique of bourgeois emancipation and the property-owning public
- The conflict between formal universality and material inequality
- Mill and Tocqueville on expanded participation
- The tyranny of the majority, conformity, and the power of mass opinion
- The changing meaning of publicity when the public expands beyond the propertied bourgeoisie

Washington, 31/08/2026