

RVP International Seminar 2026

*Self, Solidarity, and Civility**

Meeting Information

- **Date:** September 2, 2026
- **Meeting Type:** Academic Seminar (Session 8, Week 3)
- **Duration:** 3,30 h.
- **Facilitator/Host:** João J. Vila-Chã, SJ
- **Attendees:** João, Xin (Zaoxin), Lidia, Adrienne, Mohan, Ravi, Maduabuchi (Dukor), Nubong, Shiva, Franklin, Yeping, Michał, Dian, Mark, Wang En.

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Key Outcomes

The Session VIII of the RVP International Seminar 2026 focused on Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), with three formal presentations covering pages 57–140. Presenters explored the political functions of the public sphere, the relationship between public opinion and Kant's principle of publicity, and the dialectical emergence of the bourgeois public sphere. Discussion ranged across the role of the middle class as a political actor, the capture of public space by media and capital, the shrinking of public space globally, and Habermas' unfinished project of modernity. The session concluded with assignment of three presenters for the next Friday meeting, which will cover the final sections of the 1962 book and Habermas' 2022 self-reflective article on the transformation of the public sphere in the digital age.

Opening: New York Trip Reports

- **Xin** shared highlights from a visit to New York: St. Patrick's Cathedral (noted for its white Gothic statues, contrasting with more colorful Chinese religious architecture), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (European masters including Van

* 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.

Gogh and Gauguin, medieval religious paintings, and Chinese instruments), and a view of the Statue of Liberty from the water.

- **Lidia** provided a complementary account: attended the US Open tennis match live for the first time, watching Polish player Iga Świątek win — described as a personal highlight; took a boat trip to the Statue of Liberty (full name: *Liberty Enlightening the World*, a gift from France, symbolizing freedom, democracy, and hope for arriving immigrants); visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art with Zhao Xin, gaining deeper understanding of Chinese artistic traditions and cultural context; walked Broadway, Times Square, and Fifth Avenue.
- Both Xin and Lidia noted that after two days, Washington D.C. felt more like home — quieter, more familiar.
- **Adrienne** (raised in New York) expressed affection for the city and humorously asked if they had shopped on Fifth Avenue; Lidia confirmed only a US Open souvenir cup was purchased.

Website & Community Feedback

- **Facebook page:** Several participants confirmed they had viewed the page and found it informative — Shiva noted it was “fantastic” and gave it a thumbs-up; Dukor described it as both entertaining and educative, providing insight into ongoing RVP programs and lectures.
- **Adrienne’s proposal:** Suggested that remote participants share photos of their own environments (home cities, universities, local places) to be posted on the CVR website gallery or Instagram/Facebook, fostering a sense of community intimacy across countries — specifically mentioning Cameroon, Peru, and other locations.
- **Website speed and usability:**
 - **Dian:** The new website is visually better but slower than the old one.
 - **Michał:** The old website made content — especially the online library — easier to find; the new one is more beautiful but requires more clicks to locate older material. Recommended prioritizing researcher accessibility.
 - **Nubong:** Despite network issues in Cameroon, downloads were fast and he accessed over 50 books he had never encountered before.
 - **Franklin:** Noted that the annual seminars section only goes up to 2024 — asked whether 2025 would be added.

- **Adrienne** clarified that the website has existed since the early 1990s and the current redevelopment is only about one quarter complete (four months of work).
- **Bio and photo submissions:** Two participants — Xin (Zao Xin) and Vincent — had not yet submitted their 250–300 word bios and photos; Xin acknowledged the oversight and committed to sending the material. João noted a technical glitch with the website’s attachment upload function and suggested sending materials directly by email.

Presentation 1: Political Functions of the Public Sphere (Pages 57–88) — Dr. Mohan

Core Argument

- Habermas defines the **public sphere** as a social space mediating between private life and state power — a forum where private citizens gather, freely exchange ideas, and engage in **critical rational debate** to shape political will.
- This mediating space allows every citizen to voice concerns and influence formal political institutions (executive, judiciary, legislature), which citizens cannot directly access.
- **Public opinion** formed in this space reflects diverse societal interests rather than the concealed private goals of the bourgeoisie or ruling class.
- The public sphere forces rulers and governing bodies to justify their actions before the public — functioning as a democratic check on power.

Key Themes Developed

- Habermas’ method is fundamentally **intersectionality** — weaving together ethics, history, political economy, and sociology in parallel movements that converge.
- The **press** played a critical role: as it emerged, information trickled to the public and formal debate became institutionalized — but once institutionalized, the bourgeoisie increasingly controlled the public sphere through constitutional state structures.
- **Media capture:** Habermas foresaw how mass media would be captured by a small number of powerful actors (e.g., Rupert Murdoch); today, social media is similarly controlled by figures like Zuckerberg and Musk — approximately three to five tycoons dominate the public space.
- **Coffee houses and saloons** as historical public spaces: Mohan drew on Indian parallels — colonial-era coffee houses served the intellectual bourgeoisie and

dominant castes, while tea stalls served the common people and subaltern classes, representing a parallel but socially stratified public sphere.

- The **bourgeois public sphere** first emerged in Great Britain at the turn of the 18th century; the assembly transformed into the modern parliament over time.
- **Mercantile capitalism** and colonialism were intertwined — Habermas links the mercantile period to capitalist growth; in India, the East India Company exemplified this fusion.
- **Reflection on transformation:** Dr. Mohan's key critical point — Habermas graphically narrates *transitions* between phases but does not adequately theorize *transformation*; he questioned whether Habermas offers a direction for genuine structural change or remains descriptive.

Discussion Highlights

- **Adrienne** asked about the middle class: capitalism gave rise to a middle class with democratic voice — is this discussed? Mohan responded that the middle class is an *aspiring* class oriented upward toward capitalist ideals; it tends to support the status quo rather than become a vanguard of change, though conscious exceptions exist.
 - **Shiva** raised the concept of the **echo chamber** in Habermas' discussion of digital media — asked how social media positively and negatively impacts will formation and public interest; Mohan cited the June–July 2024 student protests in India (millions mobilized via social media against education policy, forcing the government to respond for the first time in 12 years) as evidence of social media's transformative power when used by educated, well-informed youth.
 - **Nubong** argued that Habermas' transformation is both structural and normative — institutions that once enabled critical debate were absorbed into economic and political power, turning public communication into a tool of influence rather than deliberation; also noted that from an African/Cameroonian perspective, authoritarian “puppet leaders” make the Habermasian project unrealistic in practice.
 - **Yeping** provided a textual clarification: the whole book traces the historical development of the **bourgeois public sphere** — composed initially of intellectuals (who possessed critical reasoning) and commercial commodity owners (businessmen), neither of whom belonged to the nobility; their power lay in the published word and press.
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Presentation 2: Public Opinion and Kant's Principle of Publicity (Pages 89–116) — Dr. Ravi Vincent.

Core Argument

- This section of Habermas is a historical-sociological account of how **opinion** transforms into **public opinion** as a norm of legitimacy — not merely what people think, but *how* a judgment was formed and whether it can withstand public criticism.
- Key terminological distinctions introduced by Habermas:
 - **Opinio (Latin):** Belief — uncertain, unproven
 - **Doxa (Greek):** Opinion/belief in Plato's philosophy, contrasted with *episteme* (justified, proven knowledge)
 - **Meinen (German):** Subjective individual opinion — Habermas paradoxically traces how this subjective view becomes transformed into objective public opinion over time

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Key Figures Discussed

- **Pierre Bayle** (17th–18th century French philosopher, lived in Dutch Republic due to religious persecution): Strong defender of religious toleration; argued that questions of truth should be subjected to reasoned criticism rather than religious, political, or institutional authority — his *Republic of Letters* is an early literary precursor to the political public sphere; described as “weaponization of reason against dogmatism.”
- **John Locke:** Introduced the *law of opinion and reputation* (from *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*) — distinct from divine law and civil law; a person avoids dishonor due to fear of social disapproval and loss of reputation.
- **Physiocrats** (French Enlightenment thinkers): Ambiguous — elevated public opinion as authority on one hand, but remained authoritarian (“enlightened despotism”) on the other; Habermas identifies them as occupying a *transitional position*, helping move political legitimacy from monarchical authority toward reason, knowledge, and public discussion.
- **Rousseau:** Habermas considers Rousseau's vision of general will a radical direct democratic alternative that ultimately *undermines* the bourgeois public sphere.
- **Kant:** Central contribution — *Enlightenment* means using one's own critical reason publicly (*sapere aude*); for Habermas, Kant provides the normative foundation of the public sphere; democratic legitimacy depends not on periodic voting but on a continuing process of free exchange of reasons, criticism of

government, formation of public opinion, and influence on political decision-making.

Discussion Highlights

- **Lidia** offered a precise synthesis: Kant's critical move transforms opinion from a social fact into a norm of legitimacy; without free communication, there can be no enlightenment, no shared authority of law, and no credible connection between politics and morality; Habermas uses Kant to show how public opinion can be legitimized — though Kant's model remained socially restricted (women, workers, and those without property excluded).
- **Yeping** noted that Hobbes made consciousness, conscience, and opinion equivalent, while Rousseau argued public opinion is not reasoned or critical — Kant's contribution is precisely to insist on critical reasoning as the basis of public opinion.
- **Mohan** asked how Habermas uses Marx when it comes to transformation; Ravi responded that Habermas does address transformation — the public sphere and public opinion were meant to enable change, and he invoked Plato's ideal of philosopher-rulers.
- Exchange on whether the **middle class or the proletariat** is the true agent of change: Dr. Mohan maintained the middle class cannot be the vanguard (it is too embedded in capitalist aspiration); Dr. Vincent cited William Carey and Raja Ram Mohan Roy as bourgeois figures who nonetheless drove transformative social reform (e.g., abolition of Sati); Adrienne countered with US examples — the Civil Rights Movement and the suffrage movement both started from the grassroots, not the middle class, moving bottom-up.

Presentation 3: Dialectical Emergence of the Bourgeois Public Sphere (Pages 117–140) — Dr. Maduabuchi Dukor

Core Argument

- Habermas is an **apologist for modernity** — deeply concerned with modernity's crises (domination of nature, rationalization, capitalism, bureaucracy, mass society, decline of traditional authority, transformation of democratic legitimacy) but not seeking to abolish modernity, rather to *transform* it.
- Critical distinction: the **public sphere** (Habermas' normative target/project) vs. the **bourgeois public sphere** (a specific historical formation of the 18th–19th century Western Europe, characterized by proclaimed universality but actual restriction by property, class, education, gender, and social status).

- The bourgeois public sphere arose historically between the 17th and 18th centuries alongside early capitalism, commercial society, and print culture (coffee houses, salons); it stood between the state and civil society — neither purely governmental nor purely private.

Habermas' Appropriation of Key Thinkers

- **Hegel:** Civil society, family, and state; normative claim that public discussion should create conditions for opinions to be criticized and revised.
- **Marx:** Provides an indispensable critical instrument — bourgeois emancipation and material inequality are irreconcilable; abstract categories (freedom, equality) are meaningless without examining concrete social relations; the public sphere must be examined through the material conditions governing participation.
- **Mill:** Introduced the *tyranny of the majority* — democracy breaks down inherited barriers but expansion of participation is simultaneously democratic and problematic.
- **Tocqueville:** Agreed with Mill on tyranny of the majority; recognized the ambivalence of expanding participation.
- **Kant:** Public use of reason is essential to legitimate critical public opinion and thus to legitimate political authority.

Key Contradictions Identified

- Freedom ↔ Social exclusion; Equality before the law ↔ Material inequality; Public reason ↔ Ideological manipulation; Critical debate ↔ Mass conformity; Political participation ↔ Unequal access to communication; Independent civil society ↔ Economic domination; Universal citizenship ↔ Bourgeois class interests; Mass democracy ↔ Media manipulation. 69
- These contradictions, originating in 18th–19th century Western Europe, are **replicated in Africa and other postcolonial contexts** — Nigeria specifically cited as a case where the conflation of state, public sphere, and civil society remains unresolved.
- **Mutual infiltration** of public and private spheres is the byproduct of the dialectical emergence of the bourgeois public sphere — the goal of rational critical discussion cementing fragmentations has not been achieved.
- The **bourgeois citizen** who debated public affairs is increasingly replaced by the **mass consumer** who receives political messages through mass communication — this is Habermas' ideal of transformation after deconstructing the bourgeois public sphere.

Habermas' Unfinished Project

- Habermas did not join the Frankfurt School's turn toward postmodernism; he remained committed to transforming modernity rather than abandoning it — leading to the concept of **Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity**.
- Postmodernism, by contrast, recognizes all cultures including non-Western ones — Dukor argued this is a strength the postmodernists have over Habermas.
- Habermas failed to adequately address **the Other, the difference** — the Enlightenment's overemphasis on the ego/I excluded the other, enabling fascism, Darwin's evolutionary hierarchy, and colonial dehumanization.

Discussion Highlights

- **Franklin** asked for clarification on the normative vs. sociological dimensions of the public sphere vs. bourgeois public sphere; Dukor confirmed: the bourgeois public sphere is a specific historical class formation; the public sphere is Habermas' transformative normative project aimed at bridging the gaps between bourgeois, middle, and lower classes through rational critical debate.
- **Adrienne** asked whether Habermas addresses the Enlightenment shift to Newtonian mechanics and its effect on the self; Dukor responded that the Enlightenment's Age of Reason produced both great discoveries and a lopsided world — Descartes' *cogito*, Newton, and others promoted ego-centric philosophy that ultimately enabled fascism and colonialism; Habermas appreciated this problem, which motivated his reconstruction of the public sphere.
- **Mohan** raised the question of whether the subaltern can speak in the current global context — citing crackdowns on pro-Palestinian protests in the UK, US, and Germany; youth protest bans in India; and restrictions on food and dress choices — arguing that public space is **shrinking globally**, even in so-called democratic countries.

João's Synthesizing Remarks

- **Öffentlichkeit** (Habermas' German concept, present also in Kant) means fundamentally **critical accountability** — not spectacle or social performance, but the development of accountability in society.
- The public sphere is always **historically produced** — shaped by the emergence of the nation-state, the market, media, and cultural transformations; it is not an absolute and can be degraded or abolished.

- Fascism is the *consequence* of the degradation of the public sphere — appropriated by a small group; similarly, Stalinism triumphed not through public discussion but through violence and manipulation.
- The **bourgeois moment** is significant not because it is universal, but because it delivered something universalizable — Illuminism, Kant, Mill, Tocqueville, and Marx are all manifestations of that moment's contradictory but generative contribution.
- Habermas' later evolution (post-2004 debate with Cardinal Ratzinger at the Bayerische Akademie in Munich) marked a substantial transformation: from a strongly secularist, Marxist position to openness to religion as part of the public sphere; he dedicated approximately 2,000 pages to the history of philosophy from the perspective of faith and reason; became critical of radical laïcism.

Next Session Assignments (Friday)

- (I) **LIDIA** looks at the **Reconstruction of Public Opinion and reassesses the Whole Argument. Reading:** Part VII, §§24–25, pp. 236–250; revisit pp. 27–30 and 222–235. **Central question:** Can a normatively meaningful concept of public opinion be recovered after the structural transformation described in the book? Other **topics:** Public opinion as a constitutional fiction; The reduction of opinion to measurable attitudes in social psychology; The difference between public opinion and nonpublic opinion; Communication processes, institutional influence, and degrees of publicity; Habermas's sociological attempt to clarify the concept; The continuing normative force of rational-critical publicity; The book's overall movement: genesis, institutionalization, contradiction, transformation, and reconstruction; Major critical questions: exclusion, gender, class, colonialism, alternative publics, and the possibility of multiple or counterpublics.
- (II) **DIAN** looks at Habermas's renewed position on Democracy, Legitimacy, and the Public Sphere by presenting with care and detail pp. 145-156 of «**Reflections and Conjectures on a New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere**» (in the version hereby attached). The Presentation shall cover: Section I: normative and empirical theory; Section II: deliberative politics and the role of the public sphere; Section III: social, cultural, and economic preconditions of democratic stability. As background, please, take the following question: How is democratic legitimacy possible, and what background conditions make a deliberative public sphere sustainable?
- (III) **FRANKLIN** looks at how the Author understands Digitalisation and its effects upon the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere in our time and shall

cover pp. 157-168 and, thus, deal with the following issues: Section IV on media structure, platforms, and fragmentation; Section V on the empirical trends in media use; Section VI on platform capitalism, fake news, and distorted public-sphere perception. Please, consider answering the following question: How do digital platforms transform the media infrastructure of the public sphere, and what dangers does this pose for democratic opinion- and will-formation?

- (IV) All Participants are asked to read all the pages hereby assigned. In case of difficulty, please, make sure to read at least one of the two portions above indicated. – PS: I am also offering the possibility of reading the 9 pages of Habermas’ Interview on Deliberative Democracy. Franklin might consider introducing references to these pages in his presentation.**