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**THE NOTION OF PUBLIC SPHERE
IN POST-TOTALITARIAN TIMES:
A NORMATIVE ACCOUNT**

Abstract

Two questions guide us in this paper: first, to what extent are the existing models of public sphere vulnerable to the pragmatist critique of a metaphysically charged notion of the public and second, what can they provide in the context of the need to reconsider this notion in post-totalitarian times. We leave out the question of the two issues' interdependence, or at any rate do not assume that any view that accommodates a metaphysical belief is necessarily useless for sociological purposes. We note, for instance, that Taylor's account is a good example in this respect.

As to the actual contributions that the three existing models can make to the attempt to re-conceptualize the public sphere, we could sum them up as follows: Arendt's model is useful to redefine the concept (a sphere of public discourse and action) and emphasize its political dimension, as well as to establish its main goal: individuals' *participation* in the political life. Charles Taylor's model can help us envisage a metaphysically grounded notion of collective identity (which might be needed in traditionalist societies like those from Eastern Europe, where a common religion and dramatic past count as grounds for a kind of membership that goes beyond the individual free-will contract), but insofar as the degree of coherence between the philosophical underpinnings and the social application of such a view is concerned, things are not clear yet. With Habermas, we seem to come closest to a complete model of the public sphere, one that would be both normatively articulated and empirically tested.

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