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Publicness beyond the public sphere

Publicidade para além da esfera pública

Abstract:

This paper contends the public sphere is a restrictive approach to public action. Despite the dysphoric development of the public sphere in post-modern societies, public action and communicative activity can easily be discerned if one recognizes that rational-critical deliberation is not the exclusive means to exercise it.

I propose to separate what is an historical and idealized construct – the public sphere – from the socio-anthropological principle – publicness.

The former consubstantiates a specific normative principle of legitimate political decision-making, as well as a peculiar space of communication and an ensemble of specific publics. The latter cannot be reduced to the strict formulation of the public sphere. Publicness is, first of all, a matter of cohesion and consensus on values in a society, reached through a communicative process that occurs in almost every social interaction. It does not absolutely depend on a capital Public or on a public sphere model to emerge and be felt by all members of a society.

By tracing a brief panorama in the three main models of the public sphere (Habermas, Arendt, Negt & Kluge's models), the paper suggests going beyond the public sphere by envisioning publicness as a socio-anthropological principle characterized as being an empirical reality, as being pre-political and pre-institutional, as well as a process linked to social imaginaries.

Keywords: Publicness; public sphere; social imaginaries; public.

Resumo:

Este artigo afirma que o conceito de "esfera pública" representa uma abordagem restritiva da ação pública. Apesar do desenvolvimento disfórico da esfera pública nas sociedades pós-modernas, a ação pública e a atividade comunicativa podem ser facilmente discernidas se se reconhecer que a deliberação racional-crítica não é o meio exclusivo para a exercer.

Proponho que se separe o que é uma construção histórica e idealizada – a esfera pública – do princípio sócio-antropológico – a publicidade.

A primeira consubstancia um princípio normativo específico da legítima tomada de decisões políticas, bem como um espaço peculiar de comunicação e um conjunto de públicos específicos. O segundo não pode ser reduzido à formulação estrita da esfera pública. A publicidade é, antes de mais, uma questão de coesão e consenso de valores numa sociedade, alcançada através de um processo comunicativo que ocorre em quase todas as interações sociais. Não depende absolutamente de um Público sujeito ou de um modelo de esfera pública para emergir e ser sentido por todos os membros de uma sociedade.

Ao traçar um brevíssimo panorama dos três principais modelos da esfera pública (Habermas, Arendt, Negt e Kluge), o trabalho sugere que se vá além da esfera pública, perspetivando a publicidade como um princípio sócio-antropológico caracterizado como sendo uma realidade empírica, como sendo pré-política e pré-institucional, bem como um processo profundamente ligado aos imaginários sociais.

Palavras-chave: Publicidade; esfera pública; imaginários sociais; público.

Introduction

Becoming known to each other is as old as the human being. Publicness has not emerged in the modern world even if a critical and rational publicity (conceived as a public sphere) is something that rose with Enlightenment (Habermas, 1989). Being before the eyes of our fellows is as old as social life itself (O'Donovan, 2000, p. 18) but a coinage with political dimensions only emerged in the late eighteenth century.

The structural transformations of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989) entail multidimensional transformations that simultaneously prevents us to see them as a simple unidirectional degradation but as a complex mutation. The public sphere is today related to the increasing diversity and overlapping of publics that may – or may not – be in conflicting relations. But also, to the expansion of social life that mass media (both electronic, analogic and digital) brought and its potentialities for the virtualization of the public sphere (Ferreira, 2019). On other hand, the processes of both globalization and glo*cal*ization (Robertson, 2003) encompass the

possibility of transnational public spheres (Fraser, 2014). They are separated but in connection with national, local publics (Bohman, 2007) as well as subnational publics and sphericules (Gitlin, 1998). There are signs that the characteristically dynamic tension between the public and the private is now largely politicized (Livingstone, 2005), and is the object of intense contestation and redefinition (Fours, 2008, p. 96). Lash (1979), for instance, advances a "tyranny of intimacy" and "public narcissism" to describe the coincidence of the terms, while Mateus (2010) calls for the oxymoron "public intimacy".

The general perspective of the structural transformation of the public sphere is a pessimistic one (Bauman, 1999; Fenton, 2018; Pfetsch, 2018), emphasizing the negative sides of strategic action (Habermas, 1976; Murdock, 2018) over the normative one, rational and ethical dimension of the public sphere (Habermas, 1996; Blumler, 2018). It is well-known that Habermas (1989) presents the 20th century as a re-feudalization of the public sphere in which public opinion tends to be directed by

the technification of politics, at the same time citizens tend to be alienated from their prerogatives (Esteves, 2019). This distrustful approach[1] to democracy and the public sphere is indebted to key authors such as Lippmann, who, in his *The Phantom Public*, rejected the hypothesis of a well-informed and competent citizen in a mass society. According to him, the public is not fit to express its opinions but to align itself for or against a proposal. That's why a qualified understanding of public affairs should

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1 For clarity's sake, it should be stated that this distrustful attitude is characteristic of the first Habermas. As it is well known, Habermas (1996) later reconsiders the role of mass media and the public sphere through the notions of counterfacticity and plurality – as in, for instance, *Between facts and norms* (Habermas, 1996). What should be retained in this passage is the strong fragilities of the concept of the public sphere in a (post)modern world. This does not mean it is today irrelevant. In contrast, remembering the public sphere's difficulties, vulnerabilities and dangers is intended in this paper to emphasize how "short" and insufficient the concept still remains. That's why, one needs to look into publicness and not just to the public sphere. Failing to do so is to mistake the tree for the forest. Publicness is a forest of modelizations and articulations. The public sphere is the main articulation of the publicness but must not be confused with exhausting the whole publicness principle.

be left to specialists, and the role of public should be circumscribed to choosing among perspectives in a world where citizens are compared to a disenchanted and passive spectator (Lippmann, 1925). Similarly, in the same epoch as Lippmann, Schumpeter ascribes only a minor role to public participation since the "will of the people" could be manufactured and manipulated. Genuine public participation is an illusion (Schumpeter, 2010, pp. 54-72).

In brief terms, the transformations of economic, civic, political, cultural and technological life put in jeopardy the very foundations of the public sphere: a communicative forum accessible to as many as possible, where opinions can be freely expressed and debated through rational and critical discussion (Verstraeten, 1996, p. 348). This means that political choice is strongly dependent of the possibility of the public sphere. It offers clear insights in the issues and offer possible alternatives from which to choose (Murdock, 1992). Also, the public sphere is, from the start, a central element on the political communication process enabling

politics to be accountable and the public to critically check on government policies (Papadopoulos, 2010). Habermas (1989, 1996) had already identified two fundamental attributes of the public sphere: it functions as an institutional space for public opinion formation and criticism; and it operates as legal framework which normatively secures its autonomy from politics but that, at the same time, is aimed to extend public control over political decision-making (Rodger, 1985, p. 205).

Answering the challenges to a normative political theory of the public sphere, the Internet seems the mass medium most adequate to take on the institutional complexity and cultural diversity for democratic decision making (Dahlberg, 2007), and thus to renew the ethical and rational functioning of the public sphere and deliberative democracy (cf. Bohman & Regh, 1997).

It is presented as an extension of the public sphere (Budarick, 2016; Del Valle et al., 2020), a universal access medium that is based on networked – not hierarchical – relations, enabling the non-coercive expression

of a vast majority, operating outside political institutions, and promoting public opinions processes departing from online discussion in public forums (Buchstein, 1997; Batorski & Illona, 2018). In fact, digital media helped to create an informational abundance that broke up elitist domination in favour of open processes of knowledge dissemination by amplifying the diversity of contents accessible to citizens (Coleman & Blumer, 2009; Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005). Internet makes easier to build communication networks enabling collective action (Torres & Mateus, 2015). "With the advent of the Net, civic interaction takes a major historical step by going online, and the sprawling character of the public sphere becomes all the more accentuated" (Dahlberg, 2007, p. 149).

Nonetheless, there is empirical evidence supporting the fact that the Internet may not represent a new step towards the regeneration of the normative public sphere. Not all the problems of political communication were resolved given its structural insufficiencies (Hindman, 2008, p. 269). In fact, the universal access to virtual

public forums is not a sufficient condition to perform deliberative activities (Ferreira, 2019, p. 194). The diversity of voices in online environments *per se* does not guarantee true discussion and contestation of points of view (Esteves, 2019, p. 271). There may be technological opportunities to a strong normative public sphere, but it's the use citizens give to Internet that will determine its quality to foster communicative encounters (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Dahlgren, 2001). For example, Huckfelt and Sprague (1995), as well as Schäfer and Taddicken (2015) and Winter and Neubaum (2016) found that there is a tendency of people to interact preferentially with those with the same opinion. Concomitantly, an empirical study concluded that social media users tended to ignore contrary political arguments and concentrated their online interaction in posts that did agree with their own points of view (Hampton et al., 2014). There is, thus, the risk of social media to become no more of overwhelming platforms to gather information that do not necessarily culminates in dialogue and that favour private or particular processes of public opinion

formation (Ferreira, 2019, p. 198). Besides, Internet supports anonymity minoring the responsible expression of opinions that tend to replace truth and objectivity as core values of public discussion – ultimately ending in fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Dean (2003, p. 95) is much clearer on this dysphoric perspective on Internet as the promised mass media that would reconstruct the political public sphere and democracy: "I argue that the notion of the public sphere is not only inapplicable to the Net, but also and more importantly, that it is damaging to practices of democracy under conditions of contemporary technoculture".

So, despite the euphoric promises of Internet making possible the return of the strong, ethical and rational functioning of political communication, the public sphere theory (Jacobson, 2017) still faces difficulties to found it in today's world. It seems Internet's restoration of the ideal of a public sphere is a failed promise.

So, one question imposes itself: given the degeneration of the public sphere, is this concept still valid to describe political communication today

given the discrepancy between facts and norms, between what is the public sphere ant it should be? As an ideal, the answer is undoubtedly yes. Yet, from the empirical perspective there is more scepticism, as we have just seen.

But the great question the panorama now traced raises is about the exercise of public activity. Can all the public communication be surmised in the public sphere? Is publicity the only way we have to describe broad phenomena concerning public action?

This paper analyses and characterizes the possibility of public action by separating publicness (as the public quality) and publicity (as a political form of publicness). It is focused on publicness instead of publicity or the public sphere. The public sphere does not exist as a tangible, concrete, determined reality (McGuigan, 1996). And trying to fix it in a historical point is an unfortunate task doomed to failure as several works have demonstrated (Calhoun, 1992; Fraser, 1992; Baker, 1992). The "public sphere" is a *constructum*, more of a process of guiding political communication according to the democratic ideals inherited from the Greeks and

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from modern philosophers like Kant, Tocqueville or Dewey.

Agreeing with Dean (2003, p. 101), I suggest one good way to fully assess what the concept of public may give us in social theory (and not just in political theory or political communication) is to treat the public sphere as an ideological construct having inclusivity, transparency, visibility and accessibility as its core values. And it is because publicness was historically constructed[2] as a public sphere that the confusion between publicness and publicity arises. Indeed, from the fact of locating the category of the public sphere in specific institutional practices and political processes does not follow that the whole scope and meaning of public action is menaced. If the public sphere as a construct may be difficult to discern, the same does not hold true for publicness to remain a central category for social action and communicative activity in all societies.

Today, publicness has to shift into a definition that allows us to go beyond a (mainly) political and philosophical abstraction and help us

grasp the seminal meaning contained in the universal idea of publicness. In the first section I trace a (very) brief panorama in the three main models of the public sphere[3]. In section two, I go beyond the public sphere concept by envisioning publicness as a socio-anthropological principle. In the last section, I depict and characterize the principle of publicness.

Public sphere: a restrictive approach to publicness

Going beyond the public sphere requires, first, that one establishes exactly in which elements publicness

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2 In other words, subject to modelization.

3 This paper is not about the public sphere, a key topic profusely written about and debated. It is about the enlargement of the meaning of publicness in contrast with the model of the public sphere. Going beyond the public sphere has, here, the meaning of acknowledging that publicness can be (politically, scientifically, etc) operated in many distinct forms of public action. The politically deliberative, democratic public sphere is just one of the possible articulations of the publicness principle, but one that risks irrelevance both empirically and conceptually vis-à-vis social action. In other words, the public sphere is a political modelization of publicness that is composed by three main models: Habermas', Negt and Kluge's and Arendt's models of the public sphere.

departs from critical and rational publicity model of the public sphere (cf. Gripsrud et al., 2010).

So far, we have three main models for the public sphere: The Habermasian's model centred in the bourgeois public sphere; Arendt's model centred on an agonistic public sphere; and Negt and Kluge's proletarian public sphere model.

The most influential and cited model of publicity is Habermas' public sphere in which he tries to identify the normative ideals of modernity (rationalization of society) and the liberal model of democratic will formation (Calhoun, 1992, p. 40). The public sphere designates the political use of publicness and it is considered a metaphorically space[4] (Houssay-Holzschuch & Teppo, 2009), or realm, that would realize those modern principles of critique and public dialogue. In the public sphere, society participates in political decision and shapes democratic procedures. Habermas, in his wide-ranging works on this subject, always considers participation in articulation with communication so that citizen's interests reflect a rational-critical nature of their decisions. Habermas' study on the early bourgeois public sphere (1989) demonstrates the process in which institutions that established legal and normative constraints upon arbitrary power emerged from the clash between the absolutist state and economic individualism (Rodger, 1985, p. 205). The public sphere was a space inside civil society, between private individuals and the state, that institutionalized criticism, public discussion and debate through which the Public demanded political actors to legitimize their decisions. This model was further developed by Habermas (1984, 1987, 1991, 1992, 1996), trying to answer all the historical, feminist and social theory criticisms. In these works, he gives additional commentaries to the *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, namely, the existence of a cultural public sphere (McGuigan, 1996) differentiated from the political public sphere, as well as some fundamental remarks on how to see the public sphere in its relation to social movements. This is not the place to engage with the topic of social movements nor the cultural and the political public spheres. While there are several advances in Habermas' theory, they all reiterate the rational-critical model of the public sphere[5].

The Habermasian perspective converges in many aspects with Arendt's model of the public sphere. She, too, ponders the changing relations between the public and the private sphere although inspired by Ancient Greece, instead of 18th

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4 The idea of the public sphere as physically space has been properly criticized (Baker, 1992; Belina, 2011) and even distinguished (Low, 2017).

5 Indeed, by inheriting the legacy of Critical Theory, Habermas tends to conflate the functioning of the public sphere to reason and make reason and critique a crucial dimension of the public sphere and sociability. The public sphere is defined by Habermas as "the public of private individuals who join in debate of issues bearing on state authority" (Calhoun, 1992, p.7) and it entails three forms of critiques: (a) the critique of the absolutist state, (b) the critique of the democratic state, and (c) the critique of the public sphere as a mediating force between state and society (Habermas, 1989, p. 9). It is also very inspired by Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*: "Our time is the time of criticism, to which everything has to be submitted. Religion, for its holiness, and legislation, for its majesty, also want to subtract themselves from it. But then they rightly arouse suspicion against them and cannot aspire to the sincere respect which reason grants only to those who can sustain its free and public examination" (Kant, 1997, p. 5).

century bourgeois European societies. And like Habermas, Arendt identifies a crucial force of social transformation: the rise of the social in which labor and work became a public matter. Similarly, to Habermas' re-feudalization of the public sphere, the rise of the social has a negative meaning to Arendt since it leads to a loss of the original meaning of political action. As private and public became blurred, so participatory democracy is menaced.

The main difference comes from the agonistic spirit of the public sphere in which individuals try to excel and distinguish themselves through unique achievements. In contrast to Habermas' model, the public sphere is not part of the civil society. The praxis that makes politics possible does not belong to the private sphere but to the public sphere. Power emerges from the common action. The public is, therefore, the space where to realize the full potential of human existence (Arendt, 1998) and the great opportunity of political action.

Arendt's claims an epiphanic model of the public sphere, where individuals stand, in the *agora*, before the eyes of their peers in order to affirm themselves. The public relates to a desire to appear before the eyes of others, opening up an important connection between appearance, visibility and publicity. To act among men means to step into the public realm. To be in the world is to appear, to make visible and be reciprocated in that visibility. Appearance is, in this model, the directing principle of the public sphere. This is the stage to self-display and, concomitantly, political recognition. The reign of personal liberty is precisely situated in the public realm. The public man is an interested man (*inter-esse*) needing to be acknowledged.

The third chief model of the public sphere belongs to Negt and Kluge (1993) who developed a strong critique to Habermas' model of public sphere.

They accuse him of idealizing the bourgeois public model and ignoring other public spheres. Hence, they stress the existence of proletarian public spheres that operate as a counter-public in distinction to the bourgeois public sphere. They underscored of the public sphere does not possess a unified structure, being composed, instead, by several particular spheres. To Negt and Kluge, the shortcoming of bourgeois model of the public sphere is to hide the substantial interests of a great majority of society while claiming to represent the whole society (Negt & Kluge, 1993, p. 136).

This third model of the public sphere is also a political one and denounces the limited sphere of the bourgeois public sphere in which, according to its proponents, social unity and power are shaped by interests of particular social groups. This is a Marxist proposal (trying to understand the life conditions in capitalist societies) that re-designs the model of the public sphere in a structural way: first of all, it moves the emphasis of the public sphere from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat, establishing a demarcation between a public sphere and counter-public spheres.

But, fundamentally, there is no such difference between these models given that we are still in a framework where competing social groups struggle for recognition and acceptance of their world-views. Negt and Kluge's model is, basically, the description

of an anti-bourgeois public sphere. Although it poses some important advances (such as the valorisation of the experience of everyday life), this model still frames publicity in terms of political revindication and emancipation. So, in this respect, it amounts to a re-formulation of the bourgeois public sphere, but with major aspects that frame publicity that are still the same – a revindication of political voice.

The listing of criticisms received by these three models of the public sphere is gigantic. Its idealized situation (Castells, 2008, p. 80), and its exclusionary nature on the basis of class and gender (Fraser, 1992), point to the serious limitations of these models with respect to the general principle of publicness.

First, publicity is here subordinated mainly to political communication. So, the public realm is described as a public sphere where citizens discuss and debate in rational-critical terms for influencing political institutions. Publicness as a concept of communion, openness and solidarity is reduced to publicity, that is, to an institutionalized communicative

exercise of expression of (political) public opinion[6] in the form of a rational critique. The public sphere is, in other terms, a critical theoretical model (Budarick, 2016, p. 10) that tends to be considered as homogeneous and frames public discourse. The concept of publicity, is, then, a frame that delimits a modern conception of public action. An action that assumes political aspirations through an extensive process of open and free discussion in exclusive terms of rational and critical communicative processes, ignoring, for instance, the power of emotions and other non-linguistic aspects of public expression (for instance, cartoons and graffiti's vindications).

Second, the degeneration of the political public sphere, brought by – among other factors – modern media, implied the loss of much of its original political character in favour of commercialism and entertainment. This represents a decline of

6 Even solidarity, consensus and recognition are bounded by this critical-rational understanding of the public sphere even if solidarity may be also conceived as an emotional binding form of sociality.

the very idea of publicity. With this deterioration, public action seemed to be, if not condemned, then, to be in peril. This is the portrait assumed in Sennett (1977), Habermas (1989), Negt and Kluge (1993) or Arendt (1998). And with the emergence of new media environment of a network society (Bruns, 2008), the unitary character of the public sphere tends to become an amalgam of sphericules (Gitlin, 1998; van Dijk, 1999, p. 164) in which the public and the private are becoming increasingly blurred (Splichal, 2018).

Still – and in contrast – there is a public dimension entailed by the very idea of publicness that does not depend on a political, rational-critical public sphere to exist. From this fact, the notion of the public sphere is struggling in today's world – as we have seen in the introduction. From the fact that political communication is dominated by infotainment and strategic communication it does not necessarily follow that all public activity is also doomed (Innerarity, 2010). Interestingly, Kee (2005) reminded us that the public sphere is an object of trivialisation,

commercialisation, spectacle, fragmentation, and apathy; but this is only one political-cultural dimension of publicness. Likewise, the fall of the public man (Sennett, 1977) does not equate with the fall of principle of publicness (Mateus, 2011a). Publicness is beyond the strict public sphere and does not focus just on social identities and political choices. The transformation of civil society may reduce or hinder the normative functioning of the public sphere but does not put in jeopardy the very principle of publicness. So, public action goes beyond institutionalized, rational and political action, and it is not limited by publicity. The arena of symbolic representations and opinions that forms, de-forms and re-forms society (Giddens, 1979) goes beyond the strictly publicity model.

Third, the public sphere dichotomizes public and private as two simply opposed symmetric entities (Brighenti, 2010, p. 18). But, in reality, this grand dichotomy of the western thought (Weintraub & Kumar, 1997) is a severe limitation, since lead us to associate the public with the visible and the private with the invisible (Koselleck, 2000), hampering our capacity to conceptualise public action in its complex forms of visibility (Mateus, 2017) and intersections.

Fourth, the public sphere, as a social space of communicative interaction, tends to be spatially and materially bonded, be it as *agora*, *forum*, literary societies or coffeehouses. The expression *l'espace public* (public space), in French, is a good illustration of this material and spatial delimitation. Even the media provide a kind of symbolic space of the public sphere further insisting in this material dimension. But public action exists also in discourses. It is symbolic. And although discourse have some kind of material substratum (e.g. text), it is much more fertile to look into non-spatial dimension of public action. Publicness does not depend on symbolic *agoras* or *foruns*: it depends rather on the symbolic articulation of collective action.

Fifth, all the three models of public sphere seem to possess a sociological and historical ground. But, trying to historically specify the public sphere (ex: bourgeois and proletarian public spheres) not only consubstantiates a fragile approach as well it tends to absolutize the very idea of public action. Publicness is an a-temporal notion present in every human society[7]. Although it can be modelled into a public sphere, and an historical Public could be recognized, publicness does not belong to a certain historical point or a given society (as implied by Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*). Publicness may be thought in different ways across time — and we have many examples of it in the different models of the public sphere — but a given historical or sociological degeneration of one model does not necessarily presuppose the decline of public action.

Sixth and lastly, the models of the public sphere tend to emphasize in different degrees a unitary and

7 This is an animating subject within Public Sphere Theory. Unfortunately, I cannot dwell on this a-temporal nature of the publicness principle in the space available here. It would probably take a full book to properly develop this assertion. Yet, publicness is not yet historically defined. As a principle of social action, we must, nevertheless, assume different configurations throughout history (e.g., the bourgeois or the proletarian public spheres).

homogeneous type of public (bourgeois, political or proletarian). Yet, as we have seen, contemporary explosions of digital media show how such unity is problematic. In fact, once we introduce the plurality of communicative arenas we have at our disposal, it is more and more difficult to refer to a capital Public. If the public sphere consists in a multiplicity of – possibly conflicting – publics, how can we speak of its unity? Where is the central core of the Public as a subject? Even consensus and deliberation – as ideal or normative outputs of the public sphere – cannot be subjected to a unitary approach. While public action demands consensus, the public sphere concept tends to centre around a capital (informed, evaluative, critical) Public, even as consensus-making as a goal of social action can be achieved in other informal, cultural or affective forms (Ahmed, 2004).

Furthermore, familiar public sphere models can only be treated through the abstract notion of the Public. However, communicative processes are ongoing and transient, sometimes, even ephemeral. Public life does not depend solely on a major critical-rational Public. Instead, it relies on a myriad of collective experiences that makes obsolete the relation between concepts such as the Public, counterpublics, and subaltern publics. The public is not an institution or a specific group of people:

> *Public discussion may as well be conducted in ritual ways without injuring possible compromises, polemics or transactions. In that case, the public may be, above all, a dispositive of social establishment of values, methods, rules and regulations authorizing a creation of a framework where people can collectively and spontaneously organize its social world. This evanescence suggests a new conception: the public assumes a modality of experience where an aggregate people share collectively the same presuppositions and sensations about a social issue.* (Mateus, 2011b, pp. 280-281)

By taking the public in small letters (*public* instead of *Public*), we avoid many apparent inconsistencies and exclusions of the public action. Not all public action depends on rational and critical communication, nor on the existence of such an institution as a capital Public. The public is a kind of social experience and sociability (Mateus, 2011b) that goes beyond the physical discussions entailed in the coffee-houses and *salons* or the institutionalized symbolic discussion in the press. There is public opinion (*doxa*) without necessarily the expression of the will of the people – the capital Public Opinion. The weakness of the public sphere consists precisely in its rationalist illusions concerning the circulation of public discourse (Fours, 2008, p. 98): the formation of public opinion or public action derived entirely from the public use of reason. But, as mass-media and digital media plainly demonstrate, we should treat public discourse not just as rational-critical discussion about the common good (the *res publica*), but also as the massive and sharable circulation of shared visions of the world, in both verbal or non-verbal forms.

Given these six instabilities on the core framework of the model of

the public sphere, we suggest going beyond the concept of "public sphere".

Simply, publicness

As far as a model of public sphere is difficult to apply in today's mass media and mass democracy societies (this is an undisputed assertion by the majority of authors), we need an alternative mode of explaining the central function of public action in society.

Publicness – as general principle of public activity – is a term that easily answers the need for a universal, encompassing and inclusive understanding of public action.

Parallel to the normative notion of public sphere, we encounter publicness: instead to be centred around the emancipatory capacity of Public Opinion – like the notion of the public sphere –, publicness is centred in communicative, symbolic interaction and in the emergence and dissemination of social discourses (political, cultural, economic, social, ludic, critical, entertainment, celebrity, etc.).

In face of the obsolete character of the public sphere (Rospocher, 2012,

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p. 9), we need to move beyond it. This paper suggests the etymological and primordial meaning of publicness can be the answer since it is not imbued of state, political power-relations but in the power of discourses (verbal and non-verbal, audio or linguistic, visual and multimodal).

"Publicness is one of the most present regimes of social experience and contains the proper sense of the word: to publish is the action of making something collective and social. It embraces different behaviours and manifold manifestations: to print, to make visible, to distribute through the market, access to the public forum, make visible or knowable, or establish something as a communal, shared and cooperative concern" (Mateus, 2011b).

While in the public sphere models, political engagement is centred around relatively few issues and problems, publicness enables us to talk on an epi-societal movement of communicative action that is disperses, decentralized, and distributed across the whole

society. No one has the prerogative of publicness: every each of us access and use it without the need of an institutional apparatus such as a Public Opinion. Publicness is an attribute that is not dependent on political structures or even mass media; it does not take place in a distinct intermediary space which lies between institutions; it is not restricted to be an arena of politics and policy development. Instead, publicness presents itself as a shifting terrain that dissolves the formal and rigid boundaries of the public sphere models and extends participation to the very heart of everyday life. This means publicness is a pan-societal principle.

Mateus (2011a, p. 165) suggests considering publicness as a socio-anthropological principle and advances a provisional description. From a socio-anthropological standpoint, publicness is the social principle explaining the relation between singular meaning of individual and its plural sense (society), promoting the communicative operation of symbolic mediation, contributing to the production and reproduction of a community sense of belonging, working and updating the social bond uniting a society.

[Publicness] *is first of all a matter of cohesion and consensus on values in a society reached through a communicative process that occurs in almost every social interaction. It does not absolutely depend on a Public or a public sphere model to emerge and be felt by all members of a society. According to this perspective based on Noelle-Neumann's latent function of public opinion, publicness is about ensuring a level of collective compromise through a capillary circulation on society.* (Mateus, 2011a, p. 167)

In other words, publicness happens whenever and wherever two or more individuals – having previously acted singularly – assemble to interrogate and discern on their own interactions which are already embedded in wider relations of social power (Keane, 1984, p. 2). Publicness happens in co-presential contexts but also in mediatised contexts since media help to reconstitute space-time relations. Culture, as the social world, can only be developed from within – nor from outside or above.

A homogenous, externally produced, culture is a perspective. So is the case with a public sphere as the exclusive means for configuring public action. In each individual, culture is on the move, so much that publicness is always happening. Culture is not a contingent, formal and normative process of public sphere but a living one. So, to one to acquire publicness does not mean to be frozen into an assigned public role (citizen, insurrector, activist, etc.). The very condition of publicness is openness, so every social interaction, given a cultural context, can potentially be a public action, even before acquiring a critical stance.

In opposition to the public sphere models, communication is not a key principle of publicness.

It is the other way around: publicness is a general principle of communication. If to communicate is to make something shared, publicness is, then, the result of communicative practices, since to communicate involves public sharing. Of course, public and private assume in this case distinct meanings: the private is not here conceived as the individuals

opposing to the state. Public and private are modulations of social experience. Deliberation is not the exclusive means to exercise public action, nor critical and rational interchange is the main mode of being in the public.

As we observe today, just a few of communicative interaction may be discerned as a critical-rational communicative action. Most of social interactions happen in professional, ludic or everyday settings. This means that public action is much widespread than the public sphere models anticipated. Since the principle of publicness is not dependent on political philosophy, it encompasses a very wide range of symbolic phenomena that are traditionally excluded from the public sphere: trivialization (the blurring of the private and public), commercialization (how brands help shape public discourse), entertainment (television and radio programmes, podcasts, blogs), everyday encounters (casual dialogue and opinion exchange), visual discourse (posters, social enactments, pseudo-events, media events) and audio discourse (such as music, video-clips, chants and hymns).

A key assumption of considering publicness is that processes of public communication and opinion exchange are actively pursued by individuals (not necessarily engaged citizens), and that do not require formal criteria as the public sphere models (i.e. criticism and critical debate). Social interaction is potentially a public communication because there is the expression of particular opinions and points of view that make shareable and put into circulation (be it among two persons, be it among 20.000 social media followers). Public opinion is disseminated throughout the entire social fabric, and it can be observed beyond the political expression of the will of the People. Publicness understood as mediating symbolic process of social integration potentially affects all members of society[8]. It is disseminated by the so-

cial fabric in every social intercourse prompting fear of isolation and social ostracism if individual decides to oppose (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). So, the principle of publicness, recognized as process of social control and integration, is not primarily concerned with the rational quality of arguments made in everyday life (Mateus, 2011a).

Public action is re-appropriated and reinserted in everyday encounters and media life because it does not depend on conventional symbolic and spatial spheres. From this perspective, much of the behaviour that the public sphere models assume to be negative and passive acquire a new meaning. Passive audiences that seem to characterize media may only be passive from a critical and rational standpoint. Because a simple comment on a social media demonstrates that media audiences are actively coding and decoding messages. And although, Twitter's 144 characters seem awkward to express political

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8 Social integration does not exclude social differentiation, nor presupposes homogeneity nor dominance. By social integration I rely on Park and Burgess' idea of assimilation: "a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitude of other persons and groups and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life" (1969, p. 735). This means social integration does absorb dissident voices or

dissimilar opinions into the social structure without meaning to subjugate them. Publicness as an encompassing concept of common experience assumes diversity, differentiation, and dissidence as recurring processes of social action in a given society.

opinion from a public sphere model, President Trump's communicative behaviour certainly confirms that public action is not dead. In fact, a large part of the media agenda on Trump comes from its social media discursive productions.

What may seem like the decline of the political public sphere takes on a new dimension seen at the light of publicness. Contemporary phenomena such as social media political comments challenge traditional understanding of publicness delimited solely as a public sphere.

By acknowledging publicness instead of a public sphere, public action may be identified beyond formal politics (in its many forms of institutionalized and normative social action). But, more importantly, by accepting publicness as a principle encircling the public sphere models, one is allowed to answer the decline and obsolescence of the public sphere. Also, one admits that public action is not injured nor in risk of disappearing. If political communication is in risk, it is from a critical-rational standpoint based on the political and deliberative of the public sphere. Confining publicness

to a narrow a rational definition of the public sphere (consisting solely of well-reasoned discussion of "serious" topics) can lead to false conclusions (Verstraeten, 1996, p. 352).

Apart from a strict formulation of public action, publicness persists. It is "alive and kicking" because it cannot be reduced to the strict notion of "public sphere". Public action is much more diverse and inclusive than the idea of a public sphere cares to recognize. Even if the notion of the public sphere is subject to tremendous functionalist pressures (Habermas, 1996), it does not follow that a decline of communicative and public action happens unless conditioned by formal criteria of participation. In this light, the fall of the public man and public action was a premature claim. The declaration that public action was dead due to the factual decline of the public sphere was a hasty conclusion. It was an unreflective reaction to the structural transformations of the public sphere, namely its bourgeois and proletarian historical and sociological references. That assertion of decay cannot be applied to the general social principle of publicness since

the public sphere model is just one of its possible historical configurations.

The next section rethinks the concept of the public sphere by redeeming publicness and defining its key attributes. The public sphere may be degenerated but not publicness.

What is publicness?

From what has been described above, it should be pointed out that the concept of publicness should, on no account, be confused with the notion of the public sphere.

There has been a tendency to overlap public sphere and publicness because in German, Öffentlichkeit is either translated as public sphere and publicness. For instance, Adorno has been translated as referring to the public sphere with the word "publicness":

The concept of publicness itself was first conceived with the beginning of the bourgeois era, sometime in the seventeenth century. Since then, the Public-being (Öffentlich-sein) of all possible ways of thinking, ways of conduct, and actions has been conscious of itself as an

idea and has been threatened. Publicness is a bourgeois category, as Habermas succinctly formulated it in his ground-breaking book about its structural changes, to which I am very indebted. (Adorno, 2005, p. 120)

He even talks about "the disintegration of publicness" (Adorno, 2005, p. 121) clearly referring to the normative configuration of a public sphere. The same occurs when Fours (2008, p. 95) writes:

'publicness' refers here to the constitutive element of a politics as far as it transcends the play of mere instrumental concerns. 'Publicness' understood in this way embraces three analytically distinctive aspects or ingredients: first, a specific normative principle of the legitimate political decision-making, second, a peculiar space of communication, that is the public sphere and, third, an ensemble of specific publics.

What I am arguing is precisely the opposite: publicness does not confound itself with the modelized configuration of the public sphere.

Unlike the historical and sociological model of a public sphere, publicness, as a socio-anthropological principle, is not subject to disintegration. Publicness is a malleable principle that becomes what individuals do with it, be political revindication, be cultural change. The problems of the public sphere are not necessarily the problems of publicness. The performing of publicness does not depend on the existence of the public sphere. Public action could have historically, philosophically and sociologically, be ideal-typically configured as a public sphere but this does not mean all public action requires the existence of public sphere. The several public sphere frameworks of Habermas, Arendt and Negt and Kluge are possible apprehensions – and applications – of the publicness principle but do not subsume it.

Hence, social and communication theories may benefit from actualizing the concept of publicness. There are no definitive, absolute or normative boundaries in publicness because the frontier of public and private action is always shifting and assumes a myriad of symbolic forms that are not subject to a critical-rational appraisal. Therefore, what could be dangerous to the public sphere – the increasing influence of the state or the spectacularization of politics - may be just another form of social expression of public action. The absence of reflexive circulation of discourse does not entail the absence of public action. The absence of direct verbal confrontation and polarization is not the only mode to achieve public action. Public action depends on social actors' communication but it is different from the general will, as a political process. Hence, the public sphere may be the space, by excellence, to political communication but it is not the only one to public action. It may be the space of reference of discussion, but it is not the only one.

In order to better grasp how public action can exist beyond the public sphere, I will draw some major attributes of publicness in five (necessarily) brief paragraphs.

First of all, while publicity is normative, publicness – as an

encompassing principle of social integration – is empirical.

It happens every day and every time in social intercourse. It exists beyond linguistic discourse and integrates other kinds of multimodal discourse. Publicness is influenced by media but publicness exists – at a much lower degree and extension – at local, unmediated settings. For instance, every community publicly knows how to behave even if that shared meaning is independent from media and is only known by its members. The public quality assumes here the sense of socially meaningful, not a quality of a given Public (be it the bourgeoisie, the proletariat or the middle-class). Publicness is an experiential quality that is a sociological reality, more than a moral ideal contraposed to reality. And this is a major strength in order to accommodate the contemporary political challenges facing postmodern Western societies. While publicity or public sphere models put in democracy the responsibility to generate a general structure of experience in the context of complex societies, publicness presents itself as a general structure of social experience.

Second, and following this connection to a general structure of experience, publicness is pre-political.

It precedes and proceeds the strict political dimension of public action. Publicness situates in a pre-political or pre-decisional standpoint that is independent from the normative constitution of the public sphere. Esteves (2019, p. 365), for instance, calls attention to an alternative political communication aiming to correct the deficiencies of the structural transformations of the public sphere, and puts in "informal politics" (Nieburg, 1969, p. 196) the responsibility of achieving it. Publicness is associated with this informal public life that feed formal communicative and institutional processes. By being pre-political, publicness has in politics a key element but not its *raison d'être*. Socialization, acculturation, peer-recognition are just three aspects of social life that articulate this sense of publicness without (necessarily) a formal public sphere. Unlike the public sphere, the idea of publicness is more akin to the emotional, performative and symbolic manifestations, and deals with phenomenon normally

ignored by mainstream views on political communication such as, for example, silences (Mateus, 2020), as opposed to the vocal ideal of citizenship, deliberative democracy and the public sphere.

Third, publicness leads us beyond the public sphere because there is no need of formal institutions to initiate public action.

Since it is pre-political, publicness is also pre-institutional[9], laying aside substantial concepts such as Public Opinion, Civil Society, Public Sphere, Assemblies, Media, Governments, Parties, Deliberation, or even Democracy (publicness is not dependent of forms of political organization). These are institutions of (or related to) the public sphere, not institutions of publicness as Goodsell (2017, p. 478) claims. The promise of a communicative effort concerned with cohesion and consensus on shared values may well be hiding in plain sight. The promise of a strong public life is given

9 Rodger (1985, p. 210), interestingly, does take on the pre-institutional level of the public sphere but he is still conceptualizing within the public sphere modelization of the public action and social experience.

by publicness and its many forms of visibility (in a visual or in a symbolic sense) (Mateus, 2017). There is public action in associative life and in the state. But there is also public action in collective manifestations that are not absolutely political, as for example, in the refusal of a country to attend an international song contest such as Eurovision because of peace advocacy.

In *The sociological imagination*, Wright Mills (1959) distinguished "the personal troubles of milieu" and "the public issues of social structure", the former concerning the foundations of individual need and expectations, and the latter concerning the ability to enter the domain of public institutions and political action, converting those individual need into policy formation and decision-making. Publicness stands outside this public sphere framework referred by Wright Mills. The distinction between those two expressions is essential to sociological imagination. Yet, sociological imagination starts well before and goes after the public sphere of decision-making. The problem with conceiving the public

sphere as a political category is that it requires a legal framework that secure participatory rights. The same does not happen of the sociological reality of publicness. Public action cannot be reduced to a realm of institutions and interests bounded to the tensional relationship between state and citizens. This is, in no doubt, a fundamental aspect of public action, however, communities of interest arise long before their institutional realizations.

What I am here arguing is not too far from the actionist sociology of Alain Touraine (1977) in which society is always, and above all, a field of social action. Social action depends, not on the public sphere, but on publicness to be shared and collective. Touraine saw social movements as crucial agents of challenging historicity. Social struggles happen in public. Even if they do not enter a public sphere, they implicate groups which constitute themselves through social identities, and through communicative sharing and understanding. Social struggles are not political action (actions directly confronting the state and government policies). So, we can

have social movements without having political movements: while the latter operate at the institutional level of the public sphere, social movements start well before and constitute a plurality of groupings mobilized through diverse symbolic forms (e. g. Reddit and WallStreetBets communities).

Arguing the pre-institutional character of publicness means it is possible find significance in struggles that may not appear as such and that do not appear to challenge state power directly (e. g. attitude t-shirts that embody slogans such as "This body is mine" may be face as a fad, a private affair or a personal idiosyncrasy because they do not seem to challenge political power; yet, in the context of the legalization of abortion, this is a public action). In sum, the pre-institutional level of publicness revolves the vitality of social and public action without the need to inserting it in political action or political movements. Touraine's actionist sociology remembers this pre-institutional level of public action.

Fourth, publicness is not clearly demarcated, unlike the public sphere model.

That is why it is so difficult to retrieve the normative ideal of the public sphere in today's postmodern societies. The public sphere seems to be retracted or in lethargy because the concept rests on a given historical, fix and rigorous delimited process. But, in contrast, what becomes public is not pre-determined (for instance, by entering the media realm). Publicness is not a given, but the product of a social and communicative process that is always on the move. We encountered the public sphere when a given (Illuminist) crystallization of publicness developed. Yet, man's right to publicness is found in social interaction – that may or may not be mediated. So, publicness is a process in mutation; it is what societies allow it to be. Publicness can transform citizens into objects (re-feudalization of the public sphere) or, on the contrary, may be the beginning of their autonomy (as enabled by press freedom and the dissemination of information).

So, Public Opinion is not a coherent, discernible object. Bourdieu (1979) considers it as an artificial opinion or a statistical desideratum, so, to him, the (normative) Public Opinion does not exist. And media are not necessarily organs of the capital Public Opinion (as current media landscape confirms it). As public opinion, publicness emerges from its concrete expression. It does not precede public action but it is a dialogic element of it. It is not aggregated opinion but the plural expression of individuals (not necessarily citizens) in publicness: a common symbolic milieu that stimulates harmony to plurality by making something common.

Lastly, and fifth, publicness has not so much to do with the formation of a capital Public Opinion (like the public sphere models) but with the formation and transformation of social imaginaries. I suggest we should consider publicness an invisible symbolic cement that enables our living in the world (and world-making), through the production and reproduction of social imaginaries. Social imagination is made in public. Publicness contributes to the symbolic stability of the social world by holding together a large community of individuals. Just like social imaginaries are multidimensional and heterogeneous (Castoriadis, 1987), so publicness is multidimensional and unbounded. Just like social imaginaries are unstable and undetermined, so publicness is not subject to any particular configuration (such as a public sphere model).

But the closest link between publicness and social imaginaries has to do with the spontaneous, grass-roots, casual, every day, symbolic struggles. Such struggles are everywhere from a videogame title to fictional character. The formation and transformation of a social imaginary results from the dynamics publicness inputs to them. The more intense publicness functions, faster the circulation and dissemination of social imaginaries. So, publicness is central in society because it enables social imaginaries to embrace world-making and identity-formation.

All social imaginaries are suitable to be communicated and to be made available to others since they are incorporated in a public process. Imaginaries are imagetic activities which try to imagine, i.e., to establish relations through images in a public context. As

long as they circulate (and be communicated) through society, and as long as they are recognised and appropriated by individual behaviours, imaginaries are communicative instances which benefit from their insertion in publicness. (Mateus, 2013, p. 44)

Public Imaginal (Mateus, 2013) is, thus, an expression that resumes the multitude of different social imaginaries in the public world. Publicness enables the collective sharing functioning and a kind of enriched communicative substratum, from which word-views can thrive.

The five points enumerated are seminal research lines on the publicness concept.

All we have to is to manage "the latent potentialities available in the existing forms of social life" (Fours, 2008, p. 100). This means to be capable to articulate the diverse symbolic strategies that publicness foster, regardless of its public sphere model. More importantly, it means to be able to recognize its empirical, pre-political, pre-institutional, unbounded, social imaginary status.

Conclusion

Publicness: a communicative ideal situation or a social reality?

This could have been this paper's sub-title. By now, it is clear this paper contends publicness goes beyond the public sphere and that this concept is an ideological *constructum* that limits the boundaries of publicness into political terms. Here I thought the complex heterogeneity and instability of public action in terms of symbolic interactionist approach of publicness, retrieving the explanatory and communicative potential of publicness through the distinction from the political normative understanding of the public sphere.

To go beyond the public sphere does not mean do give up on or prescind of the public world. On the contrary, it means to reinforce the importance of public action in the social world – separating, if need arises, from its orthodox political framework. We do not absolutely need a public sphere in order to make sense of a collective world.

One does not absolutely need to consider all public communication to be rational, critical, and subject to

deliberation and political decision-making. Even though a public sphere model is aimed to enhance democracy and political discussion, publicness is a social principle that aims social integration beyond strict politically boundaries. By keeping in mind a universal socio-anthropological principle of public action, it is possible, not only to resuscitate the importance of publicness and public life, but also to stress their vitality – for instance, how music concerts are opportunities of collective engagement, such as in concerts whose profits revert to public causes.

The media and the re-feudalization of the public sphere may be a dark chapter on the publicness principle. But it is only one chapter of it.

In this paper, I theoretically extended the scope of publicness beyond the public sphere and formal politics to include everyday actions that make coherent the social world. Media play an important function, but mass communication technologies are just one aspect of publicness. Media do not subsume publicness even if media are credited as main contributors to the fall of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989), and a central

aspect to debate facticity and norma-
tivity (Habermas, 1996). This paper
intends to discuss publicness beyond
normativity and that is why the public
sphere theory is only superficially
alluded to.

As such, I highlighted the connec-
tion between publicness and social
imaginaries. Each one feed on the
other: publicness is a process of dis-
semination of social imaginaries and,
at the same time, social imaginaries
need publicness to become acknowl-
edgeable, recognizable, and shared.

Publicness is not imperishably
subjugated to functionalist impera-
tives and condemned to death. Pub-
licness precedes public models of
social life and goes beyond the public
sphere. Long live publicness.

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