Assessing the Critical Capacities of Democracy through the work of Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas: the Occlusion of Public Space and the Rise of Homo Spectaculorum

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Tauel Harper
Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the condition of critical debate in contemporary liberal democracies that is based upon a combined reading of the works of Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas. It begins with an elaboration of the position that Arendt and Habermas identify a similar malaise as afflicting modern liberal democracies, which is argued to result from a shared perception that such democracies fail to create a forum for critical public engagement. The argument that their democratic theories are highly complementary is further developed through an examination of their solutions to this critical failure, for these solutions reflect a sharing of important premises concerning the nature of power and freedom on the parts of Habermas and Arendt. A complementary reading of Arendt and Habermas also allows for a synthesis of their theories that results in a highly coherent picture of the form and processes of an ideal democratic forum. This synthesis of Habermas and Arendt, however, also suggests (or, at least, allows for the theorising of) the emergence of a new genus of political actor who is unlikely to engage in such a forum – a genus hereafter referred to as *homo spectaculorum*.

This thesis, therefore, makes three related claims. The first, and most important, is that it is possible to read Arendt and Habermas together as highly compatible democratic theorists and that their analysis of contemporary political conditions presents a single position from which to view the critical failings of liberal democracies. The second claim is that synthesising Arendt’s and Habermas’s democratic theories enables the theorising of an ideal public space, along with the emergence of *homo spectaculorum*. The third, and final, claim made in this thesis is
that the same conditions that lead to the emergence of *homo spectaculorum* can be understood to undermine the emancipatory potential otherwise proffered through critical public spaces.
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Introduction

A crowd has gathered, facing a light, an illumination brought about by a fire, an event, an ideology – or an ideal. The strong light casts shadows and as the light moves toward the back and diminishes, the mood degenerates, rowdiness, disorder and violence occur, showing the fragile nature of man. Illumination, hope involvement, hilarity, irritation, fear, illness, violence, murder and death – the flow of man’s emotion through space. Raymond Mason ‘The Illuminated Crowd’, Montreal

The original contribution of this thesis lies in its exploration of the ways in which Habermas’s and Arendt’s democratic theories apply to the functioning of actually existing liberal democracies. What is particularly original about this thesis is that I present Habermas and Arendt as developing, for the most part, complementary theories, insofar as they each identify very similar problems with democratic function. I also contend that they both understand that “freedom” in a democracy equates to the ability to partake in a critical communication about issues of power and that each seeks to appropriate democracy in order to facilitate this communication. In addition, both theorists assert that the liberal understanding of democratic citizenship has serious flaws when applied to liberal democracies in their time.
This use of Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories as the basis for an analysis of contemporary liberal democracy begins by identifying the flaws in liberal democracies with which they are familiar. Habermas and Arendt both criticise these democracies because of their failure to be both critical and engaging and this indicates a common theme in their projects. While this failure is also identified by liberal critics of democracy, who also criticise modern democracies for lacking critical inputs, the crucial point is that both Habermas and Arendt emphasise the fundamental importance and inevitability of personal engagement in politics. This means that they are opposed to the general liberal understanding that involvement in politics is dictated by personal inclination and a choice as to whether one will become involved. Rather they contend that the self can not be separated from world, a view that takes a particular salience in the context of contemporary information and communication technologies. In the thesis, therefore, I argue that Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories of democracy offer deep insights into the problems that societies under the influence of liberal forms of democracy are currently experiencing.

I also suggest in this thesis that reading Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories together provides more than an important opportunity for examining the conditions of contemporary liberal democracies. This reading also suggests that more significant problems are emerging in contemporary liberal democracies as a result of a collapse in the availability of critical public space. Both Arendt and Habermas defend the importance of public space and public discourses in developing emancipatory democracy, yet each argues that such spaces and discourses are increasingly hard to find. This process has continued to the point that critical public space has been lost and a new subjectivity can be argued to emerge that neither needs nor seeks a critical
public space. In this thesis I seek to make a further contribution to scholarship on Habermas and Arendt by outlining what happens to Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories of emancipation following the change in subjectivity brought about following the loss of critical public space. I present the argument that the resultant development of a new subjectivity - which I refer to as *homo spectaculorum* - sustains the myopia of liberal democracies, as described by Habermas and Arendt, while it undermines their hope that we might be progressing toward a more emancipatory form of human sovereignty.

In order to provide a brief overview of the aims and construction of this thesis, I shall initially offer some background as to why I embarked upon this project. I shall then go on to introduce the major themes of the project, identifying where it is located within the wider discourses of democratic theory and critical theory. Finally, I shall provide a structural introduction to the thesis, providing a brief account of the structure of each chapter and the contribution each chapter makes toward the complete project. Through introducing the thesis in this way I hope that the scope and intentions of my research are made clear.

**Background**

I originally conceived of this thesis as an exploration of the kind of political system Australia should institute upon achieving sovereignty. At the time of the 1999 referendum on the republic, there was a view amongst Australians that the time to cut our constitutional ties with the British Monarchy was well and truly upon us. I felt that this constitutional change might prove to be the single most important event in the history of the Australian nation; namely a nation constituted not just by
indigenous Australians or immigrants, but a nation constituted by all these peoples. Such a constitution would face the challenge of appearing legitimate to its citizens, a difficult feat considering the diverse interpretations of what constitutes Australia (Smith, R. 2001: 84). As a student of politics I became preoccupied with the hypothetical question: what would be the ideal political system for an Australian republic?

With an awareness of the possibilities that this moment of founding presented, in particular as an opportunity to explore and create a new political system, I set about researching democratic theory – focusing on what were considered to be democracy’s weaknesses and how democratic systems might be improved. Following the great liberal democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century, John Stuart Mill had declared the rise of democracy was part of an inexorable historical progression towards personal sovereignty that ‘dates from the dawn of modern civilisation, and has continued steadily advancing from that time’. I felt that if Australia’s new democratic forum was to be as progressive as possible, I should seek to explore how democratic politics could better harness the sovereignty of individuals. That is, I should explore the possibility of reconciling personal agency with public power.

While I sought to examine the ways in which democratic systems could be more amenable to individual sovereignty, it became abundantly clear that current democratic institutions no longer reflect individual sovereignty. That is, contemporary

1 ‘Democracy’ is understood throughout as meaning a government where power is vested in the people. Such a definition includes, but is certainly not limited to, the currently dominant ‘liberal democracy’ which is heavily influenced by the notion allowing individuals’ freedom from the duties of government.
2 From J.S. Mill’s ‘Introduction’ to (Tocqueville 1961: vi).
democratic systems are largely unable to harness an individual’s critical and constructive engagement with the world they occupy. This realisation was informed by a variety of scholarly discourses about democracy which highlighted the loss of the political in liberal democracies\(^3\). It was also apparent, however, due in no small part to the public antipathy towards politics, politicians and the prospects of an Australian republic\(^4\). Rather than finding a nation of individuals fervent about the prospect of sovereignty, I found individuals tended to resile from discussing the republic almost as if it were taboo. It was as if discussing politics forced them to answer questions they did not want asked. It was not as if they were never asked to make choices which would reflect their values and beliefs, as I believed that such choices were increasingly being provided by the market, with one’s purchases constituting the means for “saying” something about oneself. I came to the view that, while humanity was steadily advancing toward personal sovereignty in some ways, the existing political system was being left behind.

From this point the focus of my thesis changed from analysing the prospects of Australian democracy, to a critical analysis of contemporary democratic systems. In the work of Jurgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt I found two theorists who offer a convincing explanation for why politics has ceased to be a subject of critical personal engagement for citizens. Both Habermas and Arendt contend that modern democratic systems have marginalised citizens from political involvement and suggest that both the citizen and the public suffer as a result. At the same time I found their theories offered some hope that a properly designed democratic forum might act as an

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\(^3\) See, for example, (Boggs 2000), (Bobbio 1990).

\(^4\) As examined in (Smith, R. 2001: esp Ch.2 and 3) and (Cook 1997).
emancipatory force that would generate freer and happier citizens. I have since studied the work of Habermas and Arendt in order to gain an understanding of the reasons why modern democratic institutions are failing to harness personal sovereignty and what might be done to redress this problem.

A Review of Existing Literature about Habermas, Arendt and Democracy

Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas are two political theorists who have theorised the possibility that democracy might be reformed in order to achieve human emancipation. Arendt identifies public engagement with political decisions as a critical mechanism for preventing mindless behaviour and promoting virtue. Habermas, who searches for the possibility of emancipation in the universal conventions of language, does so on the basis of his view that a legitimate political system depends upon a high degree of critical interaction with its constituents. The differences in these accounts have meant that Arendt and Habermas are generally understood to be the central theorists behind the agonistic and deliberative schools of democratic theory respectively. These two schools of democratic theory are each opposed to liberal democratic theory, though for slightly different reasons. The argument I am developing in this thesis is that both schools concur that the failure of liberal democracy is, in essence, a failure to promote critical engagement with public power.

The members of the deliberative school of democratic theory are preoccupied with the critical capacities of democratic systems. Deliberative democratic theorists, such as John Dryzek, James Bohman and Jurgen Habermas emphasise the need for public spaces that are conducive to critical discussion in order to ensure the legitimacy and
reasonableness of public power. They see democratic political systems and public spaces as deliberative mechanisms through which the people can engage in rational debate about the ethos and functioning of the state. A central preoccupation of deliberative democratic theorists is to make debate accessible and inclusive, for they believe that this is necessary in order to address the critical deficit that exists in liberal democracies.

Those of the agonistic school of democratic theory emphasise the importance of personal engagement in politics as an aspect of living well. Agonistic theorists criticise liberal democracy for isolating citizens from the activity of political involvement by only allowing for representation. They argue that such isolation undermines the appropriateness of liberal democracy as a political forum. Agonistic theorists, such as Michel Foucault, Chantal Mouffe and Hannah Arendt, seek to identify ways in which democracy can be redesigned in order to harness the innate political expression of each individual. Whilst primarily occupied with the importance of political expression as an element of living well, agonistic democratic theorists do point out that liberal representative democracies also manufacture a critical deficit by excluding individuals’ political expression.

While I am seeking to interpret Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories as largely complementary, the majority of literature concerning Habermas, Arendt and democratic theory seeks to counter pose Habermas and Arendt in order to highlight the differences between the deliberative and the agonistic schools of democratic theory. Authors such as Craig Calhoun (Calhoun 1997), Wayne Gabardi (Gabardi 2001), Dana Villa (Villa 1997) and Chantal Mouffe (Mouffe 2000b) have all
contrasted deliberative and agonistic democratic theories in order to comment upon the relative merits of their respective ideals of public space. Such arguments are developed by appropriating Arendt as a theorist of agonistic democracy and emphasising the role that the public plays as a place for personal disclosure and validation. On the other hand Habermas is appropriated as a deliberative democratic theorist who emphasises the role that public debate fulfils in generating reasonable outcomes.

The conclusion that those who contrast these different democratic theories draw, particularly in the case of Calhoun, Villa and Mouffe, is that Habermas’s emphasis on the rationality of public space gives rise to a rigid set of conditions for public discourse that undermines the expressive conditions that Arendt regards as so important. While this is surely an important distinction which creates an interesting area of dialogue within democratic theory, I contend that these theorists misunderstand the intentions of Habermas’s project. I develop this argument in the second chapter, where I argue that Habermas designed his theory of communicative action as an inherently reflexive set of conditions for communication that will produce reasonable outcomes for all participants. He does not wish to establish a hegemonic criterion by which all arguments should be judged, but rather seeks to outline how argumentation can be approached in order to be legitimate and acceptable to all parties5. As an ideal this is entirely compatible with what Arendt understands to be

5 Habermas does not call on participants to leave their individuality behind in favour of the public good (as Habermas criticised Rawls for doing in (Habermas 1998: esp. Chapters 2 & 3)). He calls on them to publicly redeem their claims to truth. For that reason he implores individuals to establish publics, transcend incommensurability and, in the process, learn more about themselves and the world that surrounds them.
the requirements of public debate and, as I shall argue, even complements Arendt’s theory by indicating how adversaries can coordinate action without antagonism.

Three authors who have presented Arendt’s and Habermas’s theories as compatible rather than divergent and have sought to synthesise aspects of their work to some degree are Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos, Seyla Benhabib and Diana Saco. In an article on Aristotle and the role of politics (Triadafilopoulos 1999) Triadafilopoulos argues that certain elements of rhetoric generate deliberation by inviting agonism, thus providing a point of reconciliation for the agonistic and deliberative schools of democratic theory. This idea has been expressed more consistently by Benhabib, who has carried out a synthesis of the theories of Habermas and Arendt in developing her own narrative theory. In a series of articles Benhabib has highlighted some of the complementary features of their theories while still acknowledging their differences.6 The central thrust of Benhabib’s argument is that the act of narrative - the telling of stories - not only imparts meaning, but also publicly discloses the self. In this way narrative presents a form of political discourse that is both deliberative and agonistic and, from the standpoint of both Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories, admirable. Diana Saco has recently published a book on democracy and the internet (Saco 2002) in which she asserts that, when they are considered in light of the possibilities of ideal political fora generated by new information and communication technologies, Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories are highly complementary. Like Triadafilopoulos and Benhabib, her argument is that, when we come to understanding the ways that we can get politics to assume public importance, as opposed to slipping into an uncritical

6 See (Benhabib 1990; Benhabib 1992; Benhabib 1996b; Benhabib 2002). Although Benhabib rarely makes her complementary readings of Habermas and Arendt explicit, the fact that she does so has been acknowledged by others such as (Calhoun 1997).
obscurity, Arendt’s and Habermas’s theories are highly complementary and particularly useful when applied to contemporary conditions.

The difference between those who read Habermas and Arendt as presenting opposing theories and those who read them as developing complementary theories reflects the distinction between those writing democratic theory and those writing critical theory. The over-drawing of the distinction between Arendt and Habermas is understandable amongst democratic theorists, who seek to comment upon the differences between two theorists who have each theorised democracy extensively and not always in obviously sympathetic ways. When approaching Habermas’s and Arendt’s work in terms of general social problems and what role politics might play in addressing these problems, however, the work of these theorists evidences far greater cohesion and agreement.

In this thesis, I seek to present Arendt and Habermas as highly complementary theorists while still remaining aware of their differences. In order to defuse allegations that such an appropriation is unjustifiable I have paid particular attention to highlighting the performative benefits of Habermas’s ideal deliberation and the critical benefits of Arendt’s agonistic engagement. At the same time I defend my reading of these theories as complementary on the grounds that, in moments of founding, we should be investigating what we can do and what acts we can endorse, rather than discussing further the theoretical merits of idealisations. In this respect I agree with John Roberts and Nick Crossley that ‘the concern for the limits of the political has undermined the stress that the political, in itself, is disappearing’ (Roberts and Crossley 2004: 14).
Structural Introduction

The thesis comprises three chapters. The first provides an introduction to the thought of Arendt and Habermas as well as presenting the problems that they took to be endemic to modern liberal democracies. The second chapter outlines Habermas’s and Arendt’s conception of ideal political discourse and the ways in which they expect emancipatory change to occur. The third and final chapter consists of an account of the insights and concerns that arise when Arendt’s and Habermas’s theories are applied to current democratic conditions. The thesis, therefore, can be divided conceptually into two parts. The first part, Chapters One and Two, deals explicitly with Habermas’s and Arendt’s democratic theories, examining their analyses of the problems of liberal democracies and the solutions to these problems that they present. The second part, Chapter Three, is an attempt to apply Habermas’s and Arendt’s analyses to the contemporary material conditions of liberal democratic societies. The first part deals with the myopia of modern democracies as a symptom of the hegemony of instrumental reason in the political public sphere. The second part is an application of democratic theory to society as it is affected by this corrupted public sphere. The first part is a description of liberal democracy’s failure to engage citizens in a meaningful way. The second part is an attempt to apply Habermas’s and Arendt’s democratic theories to a society in which the political system has already failed to engage the real political interests of its citizens and which, as a result of this, is ceasing to function as a critical realm for political action.

The first chapter of the thesis is a close examination of what Habermas and Arendt identify as the fundamental problems of contemporary democratic fora. This examination of Habermas’s and Arendt’s democratic theories reveals that they share
the view that modern democracies suffer from a lack of critical engagement on the part of the citizen. Each agrees that existing representative democracies lack that amount of engagement with public policy-making required to render the outcomes of that policy-making reasonable. Each identifies a similar source for this malaise. This is the emergence of instrumental thought as the only legitimate form of public reasoning, which leads to the abuse of public space in the service of preconceived ends. The first chapter, therefore, serves to highlight Habermas’s and Arendt’s criticisms of the capture of public space by those who wish to use it as a forum for legitimating political decisions made elsewhere, as opposed to a public space for critical engagement.

The second chapter outlines the ways that, according to Habermas and Arendt, the instrumental dominance of public life might be undermined. Both Habermas and Arendt present an ideal form of democracy that not only increases the critical engagement of citizens with their democratic governments but, in doing so, also opens up the possibility for human emancipation through political participation. Here I outline Habermas’s theory of communicative action, which rests upon the possibility of using ideal discursive conventions as a critical tool. Habermas suggests that the critical potential of individual sovereignty is constituted not only within the state apparatus, but also within everyday discursive practices. In order to harness the emancipatory potential of speech acts, Habermas outlines an ideal speech situation that is governed by a set of conditions that produce reasonable outcomes from discussion. The conclusion to Chapter Two outlines the complementary features of Habermas’s and Arendt’s democratic theories, indicating that a synthesis of the two
theorists’ work suggests that there is a natural tendency towards emancipatory democracy.

In the third chapter I investigate why, despite this “natural” tendency, it is difficult to perceive an emancipatory democratic system emerging from contemporary conditions. In doing so I highlight the ways in which the agonistic drive of individuals has been harnessed and placated by those with control over steering media. This is essentially an analysis of how private interests have usurped public space. Through this analysis I present the occlusion of the political by the social as being at the base of the lack of critical engagement with political space. I contend that what we find in contemporary society is not only a public space dominated by instrumental thought, but also a myopic society that is a response to this impoverished political practice. One crucial result is that public space is not simply dominated by instrumental reason but becomes a mediatised spectacle. This spectacle serves to engage the individual’s agonism and, in the process, displaces the identity forming context of true public space. The result of this displacement of public space is not only a continuation of the critical deficit of contemporary liberal democracies. Such a displacement also undermines the basis for hope that there may be a “natural” inclination towards emancipatory democracy.

**Conclusion**

In this thesis I seek to use Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories to reassert the emancipatory potential of democratic systems, but only insofar as it appropriates democracy as an idiom of personal freedom and an institution that encourages individuals to engage in the critical composition of public power. A large part of this
thesis is, therefore, critical of democracy as it is currently practised. This thesis is based upon the understanding that the myopic tendencies of late capitalist societies and the ossification of democratic systems within these societies are inherently linked. It does not hold up western civilization and politics as an ideal to be emulated, but rather calls for critical thinking about what kind of political culture we in the west are exporting, given liberal democracy’s apparent failure to engage the personal power of its constituents.

The thesis is intended to serve as more than a useful summary of Habermas’s and Arendt’s democratic theories. The thesis also aims to describe these theories in such a way as to highlight their appropriateness for an analysis of the contemporary conditions of liberal democracy. As argued in the second chapter, by reading Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories as complementary, it is possible to imagine how democratic reform might lead to real human emancipation and this alone makes such a reading worthwhile. Whilst the third chapter undermines any false hope that such emancipation might be an historical inevitability, it serves to emphasise exactly what we are losing by not pursuing democratic reform - in particular a gratifying relationship with a natural and real world. This thesis is based upon the understanding that identifying what has gone wrong with the relationship between self and world in contemporary liberal democracies is the first step towards addressing the social myopia that results from the contemporary form of this relationship.
Chapter One: The Problem with Modern Democracies

Introduction

The aim of this first chapter is to indicate the ways in which contemporary democracies can be seen to suffer from a critical deficit. The ambiguity of the term “critical” in this statement is intended. That is to say that this chapter shall suggest that the major flaw of modern democracies is that they suffer from a deficit of criticism; at the same time the chapter advances the argument that this deficiency is of critical importance for the possibilities of individual and social happiness and freedom.

In order to draw attention to the critical deficit of democracy I intend to explore the evaluations of modern democracy presented in the works of Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas. These two theorists can be seen as representatives of the agonistic and deliberative schools of democratic thought respectively, and while there is much that separates their analyses of contemporary democracy, there is enough consistency in their diagnosis of its problems to present a cohesive picture of its shortcomings.

Hannah Arendt presents us with an elaboration of the failure of modern liberal democracies to emulate the original aim of the classical Greek polis. This failure is manifested in modern democracy’s inability to either stimulate critical thought or to produce a forum for the process of debate. Arendt describes this absence through a description of the “occlusion of the political by the social”. This is a shift in the
purpose of public space from a critical forum for the discussion of, and celebration of, public deeds, to that of a space of social coercion, where producers and consumers are seen to “behave” or be excluded.

Jurgen Habermas also presents the failures of modern democracies through a comparison with an idealised version of a public sphere. In this case, instead of comparing modern democracy to the original ideal of the classical Greeks, he compares it to the early bourgeois public sphere of the Enlightenment. In an early work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas describes this public milieu as maintaining the required critical social commentary for a democratic government to function legitimately. However, this democratic public sphere was chimerical, appearing briefly in order to elevate the bourgeois to political power and then becoming corrupt under the ossifying conditions of capitalist society.

My intentions in highlighting the critiques of both theorists are twofold. First, I feel it is necessary to establish that there is a problem with actually existing democracy; these two theorists present the problem as oriented around a critical deficit. Second, a sound exploration of the philosophical groundings of these theorists’ own projects will be of great benefit to understanding the basis of and limits to their solutions to democracy’s problems, which shall be explored in the second chapter.

**Part 1: Arendt’s Problem with Modern Democracies**

This initial discussion of the political thought of Hannah Arendt is based largely upon her work *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1958). In this work Arendt asserts a powerful criticism of modern democracies and outlines the philosophical foundations of this
critique. In order to present the most cohesive version of Arendt’s problem with modern democracies, I shall initially develop an account of the reasons why critical thought is so central to Arendt’s conception of the good life. Following this I shall summarise the arguments developed in *The Human Condition* concerning the critical deficiencies of the public realms constituted through labour and work, and outline the virtue of the polis of classical Greece. This will serve to give the reader a sound understanding of the premises that underpin Arendt’s criticisms of modern democracies, which will be fully explored in the final section.

**Arendt and Thinking**

If we are to gain a thorough appreciation of Arendt’s critique of modern democracies, it is useful to first understand her philosophical assumptions about the importance of thinking. In order to do this, I intend to outline the primacy of thinking, acting and speaking within the context of what Arendt defines as “The Human Condition”. I shall go on to indicate the danger Arendt describes as fundamental to instrumentalist thought, which is inherent in the distinction between “thinking” and “knowing”. In doing so my aim is to establish, at this early point, Arendt’s emphasis on the role public space plays in generating critical thought.

According to Arendt, humanity makes itself remarkable through the interrelated faculties of thought, speech and action. Arendt understands the ability to think to be the ability of a free human in a free society (Horowitz 1999: 273). Thinking and manifesting this thought through speech and action in the world is the unique characteristic of human existence that presents the possibility for glory. To avoid thinking is to go through life abiding by rules and norms, which is an aberration of the
human condition. Life without thinking, acting and speaking, would destroy the ‘potentialities of human power… [and] dispossess us of all power [such that] we can repeat along with Jesus: ‘It were better for him that a millstone were hanged around his neck, and he cast into the sea’ (Arendt 1958: 241 citing Luke 17:4). Arendt’s esteem for speech, thought and action arises not from biblical endorsements, however, but through her understanding of what contributes to healthy and happy human existence. In order to identify from where these presumptions arise, I shall examine the qualities of thought that establish it as an Arendtian virtue. I shall then go on to use the example of Arendt’s discussion of Adolf Eichmann to display how thought manifests itself through speech and action.

Central to Arendt’s assessment of the virtue of a democratic system is its ability to foster thought. Arendt states that thought is the process of creating a dialogue with oneself. This is a fundamentally use-less pursuit, which nonetheless guards against conformism and the ultimate “banality” of evil. The notion of thought as such a dialogue as a conversation between “me” and “myself” has been central to philosophy since the time of Plato (Arendt 1958: 76). Arendt believes that such a dialogue creates an awareness of the nuances of existence.

The advantage of such a conversation with oneself is the inherent appeal of its honesty. A conversation between “me” and “myself” is unique in the fact that both participants are communicating from the same position within a shared understanding. Arendt refers to this “honesty” through evidence of a lack of external impetus. ‘Truth’ she states, citing Thomas Aquinas, ‘can reveal itself only in complete human stillness’ (Aquinas 1947: 182 cited in; Arendt 1958: 15), ‘Thought…has neither an end nor aim
outside of itself” (Arendt 1958: 170). The honesty of the inner duality of contemplative thought gives thought itself a fundamentally critical nature.

Arendt believes that the benefit of thinking is that it presents the ability to offer a kind of recourse to basic human value. As Heidegger described it, ‘Thinking says what the truth of Being dictates; it is the original dictare. Thinking is primordial poetry’ (Heidegger 1973-74: 583). We experience what we do while thinking because we are confronted in our own minds only with what emerges from our ‘opaque and impenetrable’ hearts (Arendt 1971: 418). The result of this inner contemplation is that it reveals the truth, not only about everything that can be held to be true in the phenomenal world, but also about the nature of the contemplator (Arendt 1958: 75-76). The result is a process that involves inherent critique from a position beyond reproach that is nonetheless subjectively constituted and unique. As Arendt notes in *The Life of the Mind*, ‘The experience of the activity of thought is probably the aboriginal source of our notion of spirituality in itself, regardless of the forms it has assumed’ (Arendt 1978b: 44).

The notion of spirituality provides us with an interesting way to distinguish the critical nature of thought and to understand the dichotomy Arendt establishes between “thinking” and “knowing”. Thinking involves critical personal reflection; whereas knowing depends upon the acceptance of truth as external to individual perception. While Arendt believes that the process of prayer has much in common with the inner dialogue of thinking, there is a fundamental distinction as to whether critical space may emerge, which distinguishes thought from knowledge (Arendt 1958: 76-77). Prayer may be likened to thought insofar as it involves a process of questioning
dialogue, but the moment it becomes a process of passively beholding a “known”
truth it ceases its relentless questioning and becomes “knowing”.

Knowing, or cognition, most readily manifests itself through a flight from thought
into the security of structure. According to Arendt there is a modern human
propensity to “know” which arises from a deep mistrust of the human capacity to
identify reality (Arendt 1958: 310). This reflects the themes of Immanuel Kant in his
work ‘Answering the Question: What is the Enlightenment?’, where he describes ‘the
self incurred immaturity’ of people who are afraid of independent thought (Kant
1985). While Kant’s project rests upon supporting reason in the face of dogmatic
religions and customs, Arendt suggests that modern “knowledge”, as a flight from
thought, appears through Cartesian reason and instrumental sciences.

Cartesian thought entails a process of reduction to only those things that cannot be
doubted. Arendt notes that this eminent scepticism leads to faith only in knowing
what the mind itself has produced, which manifests itself in a mathematical approach
to knowledge (Arendt 1958: 283). As a result of our distrust of our own capacities to
receive reality, we cling to the “objectivity” of our measuring instruments. Although
this “objectivity” is entirely relative, and as such not objective at all, the material
nature of measuring provides evidence of a material reality. This material reality is
not submitted to critical scrutiny and becomes the “objective” and “real” standard
through which everything else is known. While thought becomes critical because of

7 This was pointed out by Heisenberg, who observed that the process of observation invariably affects
the properties of the object being observed (Arendt 1958: 261).
the worldlessness of inner duality, knowing is fundamentally uncritical, based upon an external, objective “truth”.

The importance of this distinction between thinking and knowing can be seen in Arendt’s encounter with the mind of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann, formerly a vacuum-cleaner salesman, rose unspectacularly through the managerial ranks of the Nazi party to be placed in charge of the “final solution” to the Jewish problem during World War Two. This position entailed the design, construction and supervision of the Nazi death camps. When Eichmann was apprehended some years after the war Arendt attended the trials to report on them from a Jewish perspective. When confronted with Eichmann, the man who had authorised the extermination of millions of human beings, what Arendt found remarkable was his banality; his evil nature existed not in the perverse nature of his thought, but in the lack of any critical thought and the subsequent dominance of external notions of truth.

For Arendt, what was obviously lacking in Eichmann’s thought process was the two-in-one – he lacked the capacity to question the legitimacy of his own actions. As a result this “average” and “normal” person displayed the horror achievable by someone with the inability to decide for themselves between “right” and “wrong” (Arendt 1964: 26). Arendt has been accused of being overly sympathetic to Eichmann, in not being able to see his demonic intention in constructing and designing death camps (Kristeva 2001a: 145). To her critics she seems to have a misplaced faith that Eichmann would not have been able to carry out these unconscionable acts had he engaged in an internal dialogue; that is, had he started actually *thinking* as opposed to *knowing*. Indeed it may appear that the line Arendt
draws between banality and evil serves no other purpose than to stress her own faith in a particular type of non-instrumental thought. However, Arendt bases her estimation of Eichmann’s thinking processes on both his speech and his action - his appearance in the world. According to Arendt, appearance in the world is defined through these two outputs of the mind that manifest themselves publicly (Arendt 1958: 3). Hence in her work on Eichmann, Arendt emphasises how his lack of thinking manifested itself in both his action and his speech.

In support of this argument Arendt highlights the thoughtlessness of Eichmann’s actions throughout his career in the Nazi Party. She asserts that Eichmann did not join the National Socialist party out of any deep-seated conviction, but rather as an unemployed and lonely individual who was looking for membership of any fraternity – indeed his application to the National Socialists was only processed after he unsuccessfully attempted to join the Freemasons (Arendt 1964: 29). His rise through the ranks of the Nazi Party was not due to any particular brilliance on his part; his remarkable characteristics were rather that he was efficient and unquestioning, key components of instrumental thought. He distinguished himself by conceiving of a new way of processing disenfranchised Germans such as Jews and Gypsies, a sort of human de-assembly line which would strip people of their German citizenship, property and money in one efficient procedure. This sort of dehumanisation flourished due to its lack of contemplative involvement during the processing – the processing centre operated as a machine whose success was gauged upon its efficiency. The efficiency of the machine was heightened by specifically excluding contemplative human involvement. Eichmann distinguished himself by his capacity to act out the
objectives set before him by the Nazi Party without question – as Arendt states he ‘merely...never realised what he was doing’ (Arendt 1964: 288).

Arendt’s estimation of Eichmann’s thoughtlessness is also based upon his qualities as a speaker. Arendt stresses that speech is the public manifestation of thought, insofar as ‘whatever men do or know or experience can make sense only to the extent that it can be spoken about’ (Arendt 1958: 4). In this respect, Eichmann distinguished himself by his use of fixed expressions and reliance on unoriginal phrases that appeared to be a direct recital of party propaganda (Kristeva 2001a: 148). Arendt expressed dismay at his trite phrases and bureaucratic vernacular: ‘he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché’ (Arendt 1964: 48). Arendt concludes from this that ‘his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else’ (Arendt 1964: 49). For Arendt, Eichmann’s inability to speak without relying on clichés and fixed expressions exemplified the fact that his thinking also relied upon external templates, indicating that he did not think, but, rather, knew.

Arendt’s encounter with Adolf Eichmann illustrates the nuances of her philosophy. Here we encounter a thinker who holds thought in the highest esteem, but only thought insofar as it is critical, reflective and evidences an inner dialogue about goodness. She holds instrumental thought, the process of cognition as objective and instrumental in its ignorance of any such plurality, in contempt. Thought, of whatever degree of integrity, manifests itself in the world through the human faculties of speech and action. This manifestation, in turn, allows us to assess the life of each individual as a narrative that indicates the goodness of the lived life, a goodness that is
exemplified by the degree of critical thought involved. It is critical thought that fundamentally underpins a healthy and free human existence, and as we move beyond Arendt’s philosophical foundations to her appreciation of the public sphere we shall find that it is the capacity of a public sphere to promote critical thought that determines its greatness.

Arendt’s Three Conceptions of Public Space

Arendt’s criticism of modern society is based upon its inability to promote critical thought through the function of the polis – a communal space provided to deliberate upon issues of universal relevance. This section is devoted to highlighting how Arendt believes public space can be misappropriated by being a place for conformism or instrumental thought rather than being a space for (critical) thought, speech and action. This description of the pejorative potentials of the public realm is necessary in order to understand the foundations of Arendt’s criticism of modern democracies.

Arendt’s description of this problem has been described as ‘the occluding of the political by the social and the transformation of the public space into a pseudospace of social interaction, in which individuals no longer “act” but “merely behave” as economic producers, consumers and urban city dwellers’ (Benhabib 1990: 169). Rather than approach this problem by trying to produce a definition of Arendt’s use of the word “social”8, I shall attempt here to describe the problem in terms of the use of public space. By concentrating upon Arendt’s definition of public space as the realm of appearance and the manner in which the potential of this realm is defined by the

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8 Such an attempt can be found in (Pitkin 1998).
activities contained within it, it is possible to come to an understanding of the basis
for Arendt’s approach to the possibilities of the polis.

We have seen in the last section that action and speech are central to Arendt’s
political thought due to their nature as public manifestations of identity. As she states
in *The Human Condition*, ‘the political realm rises directly out of acting together, the
“sharing of words and deeds”. Thus action not only has the most intimate relationship
to the public part of the world, but is the one activity which constitutes it’ (Arendt
1958: 198). Action is central to political space because, for Arendt, our very ability to
act and to speak gives rise to the need for such a forum.

At this point it becomes necessary to introduce the concept of *vita activa*, which
Arendt uses to designate the three types of action available to humans: labour, work
and action. In *The Human Condition* Arendt explores the type of public realm
manifested by each of these forms of action. The public realm produced through the
activity of labour is the public realm of *animal laborans*. The public realm produced
through the activity of work is that of *homo faber*. The public realm dominated by
action is the only truly human public realm and was exemplified in the agonistic polis
of Classical Greece. Arendt’s description of the public realms of *animal laborans*,
*homo faber* and human actors at times seems like a recipe for “progress”, that one
kind of existence might be said to lead to another, like Marx’s vision of historical
materialism. However, it is important to realise that Arendt rails against any such
deterministic thought that denies the primacy of human agency. All humans have the

9 Such an introduction highlights the important connection Arendt makes between the qualities of
public space and the kind of activity public space allows.
potential to become fully human, the question of the public realm is the question of what might be most conducive to achieving this potential.

The Public Realm of Animal Laborans

The public space created by animal laborans is that of a public realm manifested by the activity of labouring. Arendt differentiates labouring from work as a “worldless” activity, which is transient and leaves nothing behind (Arendt 1958: 87). As a labourer is paid for their labour, and not their product, they operate in space, but make no appreciable contribution to this space. Labouring is a mentally uninvolved process, requiring knowledge of externally determined objectives, but certainly not thought, speech or political action. As a result the public space dominated by labouring is most remarkable because of absences. There is no contribution towards public space made by labour; rather there is an acknowledged process and understanding of implicit hierarchy that is only contestable through non-participation.

In Arendt’s conception, a public sphere dominated by animal laborans is devoid of any meaningful public space. Rather, the animal laborans is ‘imprisoned in the privacy of his own body, caught in the fulfilment of needs in which the body can share and which nobody can fully communicate’ (Arendt 1958: 118-119). The activity of labouring does not allow for thought, speech or (public) action and, as a result, does not manifest a public organisation of people that arises out of speaking and acting together. Indeed, the labouring process is often designed to inhibit public contemplation, communication or action. Hence, Arendt agrees with the Marxist notion that a public realm dominated by labourers would result in ‘the withering away’ of the state (Arendt 1958: 117), although each regards the desirability of such a withering very differently.
While Marx relished the thought of the decline of the state and the concurrent rise of the *animal laborans* (identified in Marx’s writing as ‘worker’), Arendt regards this prospect with distaste. Whereas Marx looks forward to the world of the socialised worker in anticipation of the good works they will be able to accomplish once freed from the restrictions of labour (Marx 1990: 22 and 373), Arendt suggests that such freedom, without public space for thought, speech and action, can only lead to more insular patterns of production and consumption. What such a freedom lacks is the appropriation of critical thought, which leaves the existence of *animal laborans* open to the control of those who maintain public status.

This idea has interesting parallels with views Arendt expresses in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where she lambasts the Soviet government for failing to involve workers in their own public realm and, instead, installing an autocratic regime which purported to exemplify the model of public will but whose isolation from such public influences led to abuse of administrative power (Arendt 1967). Here we see an example of a community of labourers whose failure to manifest their own public realm does not result in communal freedom, but rather in domination by those who retain control of public space, and therefore the direction of development.

We can see then that the activity of labouring does not actually manifest a public realm of any kind. Rather, it serves as an occupation, an activity that goes on in the private realm but is directed by those who do control the public realm.
The Public Realm of Homo Faber

Unlike animal laborans, homo faber does manifest a public space. Homo faber represents the ‘work’ element of the tripartite vita activa, and is recognisable largely through the creation of products and uses. Arendt’s critique of the public realm generated through a social dominance of homo faber is based upon the quality of such a realm, rather than its failure to materialise. This critique rests upon the instrumental nature of value in homo faber’s public realm, that is, it is a public dominated by knowing as opposed to thinking.

Homo faber distinguishes itself from animal laborans through its capacity for work. Work in turn distinguishes itself from labour through its tangible output, its reification in the material world.

[These reifications] are mostly, but not exclusively, objects for use and they possess the durability Locke needed for the establishment of property, the ‘value’ Adam Smith needed for the exchange market, and they bear testimony to productivity, which Marx believed to be the test of human nature. Their proper use does not cause them to disappear and they give the human artifice the stability and solidity without which it could not be relied upon to house the unstable and mortal creature which is man. (Arendt 1958: 136)

The world produced through work has important consequences for Arendt’s understanding of human existence. Through the process of constructing the human artifice, working to a large extent shapes our material experience of being, and the material quality of human existence as a result.

Arendt’s analysis of the process of work is based upon a critique of homo faber’s appropriation of means and ends. She points out that in the process of fabrication the end justifies the means and suggests that this relationship between means and ends pervades the thought of homo faber. The goal of fabrication gives rise to the construction of tools and implements as means to achieve this goal: ‘The end justifies
the violence done to nature to win the material, as the wood justifies killing the tree and the table justifies destroying the wood… During the work process, everything is judged in terms of suitability and usefulness for the desired end, and for nothing else’ (Arendt 1958: 153). The activity of work therefore entails a thorough knowledge of means, as opposed to a thorough evaluation of ends. This approach to action clearly has its uses, but, Arendt argues, such action is detrimental if it comes to dominate the public realm.

The result of this preoccupation with means is a public realm obsessed with utility. The distinct problem with such a public realm is ‘an inane incapacity to understand the distinction between utility and meaningfulness’ (Arendt 1958: 154). With nothing to measure value apart from the instruments of their own construction, humans are left to believe that things have value only insofar as they serve human ends. Arendt makes the point that ‘Only in a strictly anthropocentric world, where the user, that is, man himself, becomes the ultimate end which puts a stop to the unending chain of ends and means, can utility as such acquire the dignity of meaningfulness’ (Arendt 1958: 155). Nature, philosophy, religion – all facets of existence - thereby lose their meaningfulness, except insofar as they serve human ends, being the ends instrumentally deducted by *homo faber*.

The danger of a public realm dominated by *homo faber* is that it is orchestrated through knowing, as opposed to thinking. Arendt’s problem with this form of a public realm is intimately tied up with her fear of banality – of life without thought. This fear can be seen in a succinct description of the problem, which is worth quoting at length:
The point of the matter is that Plato saw immediately that if one makes man the measure of all things for use, it is man the user and instrumentalizer, and not man the speaker and doer or man the thinker, to whom the world is being related. And since it is in the nature of man the user and instrumentalizer to look upon everything as a means to an end – upon every tree as potential wood – this must eventually mean that man becomes the measure not only of things whose existence depends upon him but of literally everything there is…. If one permits the standards of *homo faber* to rule the finished world as they must necessarily rule the coming into being of this world, then *homo faber* will eventually help itself to everything and consider everything that is a mere means for himself. (Arendt 1958: 158)

*Homo faber* establishes utility as the known goal of action, and thereby reduces all action to work, and all debate to a discussion of means. While Arendt objects to the public realm of *animal laborans* due to its inability to manifest speech and action, her objection to the public realm of *homo faber* is based more on the type of thought encouraged by such activity.

Arendt concludes that the public realm of *homo faber* is exemplified by the exchange market, ‘where he can show the products of his hand and receive the esteem which is due him’ (Arendt 1958: 160). The idea of value being a function of utility rather than thought and deliberation is abhorrent to Arendt, yet it holds public power in the world of *homo faber*. Adam Smith and his many followers exemplify the thought of *homo faber* when they state that it is this system of establishing value based upon utility and demand that distinguishes humans from animals (Smith, A. 12). Arendt rejects such a system because of its instrumental nature; its inability to distinguish value from its own existence – or its inability to facilitate thinking as opposed to knowing.

**The Ideal Public Realm of Action**

In order to appreciate Arendt’s vision of the virtue of an agonistic polis, it is helpful to realise that Arendt dismisses the public space of *animal laborans* and *homo faber* not because people in such realms *cannot* think, but rather because they *are not* encouraged to do so. The ideal public forum would provide everybody with ‘an
opportunity to engage in those activities of expressing, discussing and deciding which in the positive sense are the activities of freedom’ (Arendt 1990: 235). In opposition to the public realms of *animal laborans* and *homo faber*, Arendt places an idealised conception of the polis of Classical Greece. Deriving her perspective from the works of Plato and Aristotle, she imagines the polis as the ideal public space due to its ability to promote thought through providing a forum for action – the third activity in Arendt’s *vita activa*.

Arendt distinguishes action from work due to the fact that action has no physical reification; it is generated by an actor and is entirely subjective and reflexive of the surrounds of the act. Action is ‘the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter’ and, therefore ‘corresponds to the human condition of plurality [such as the plurality found in thought], to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world’ (Arendt 1958: 7). Arendt presents action as subjective; that is as non-instrumental, not based in knowing, aware of plurality and, therefore, grounded in thought.

Action is distinguished from labour because, as Arendt explains, action is never silent, but always exists as a manifestation of the agent involved in the action. Here she follows the classical notion that through acting agents reveal something of their own nature (Dante 1950: 13). Action is an actualisation of the “who”, a direct expression of the individual’s unique existence that is both gratifying and ingratiating. Unlike labour, which is silent and concerned only with sustaining life, action is a form of disclosure, and its prevalence gives rise to a very human conversation about the good.

Arendt posits that the closest approximation to a public realm constituted by action occurred in Classical Athens. Embodied in the polis of the city-state, this public realm was remarkable in part for its exclusion of the majority of the population\textsuperscript{11}. The polis was created as a political structure for the public realm and as a result no activity that served only the purpose of making a living was permitted to enter the political forum (Arendt 1958: 37). It was argued that to allow the polis to be permeated by questions of economy would be contrary to its meaning. At the time economics was considered housekeeping, an essentially private matter that had no bearing on the debate on public virtue central to the function of the polis.

The function of the polis was to provide a forum for debate over virtue by presenting a chance to win immortal fame. Through speech and action the polis of Ancient Greece provided a forum for citizens to express themselves in their unique distinctness, and gave them an opportunity to voice the story of their existence.

The polis was permeated by a fiercely agonal spirit, where everybody had constantly to distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique deeds or achievements that he was best of all. The public realm, in other words, was reserved for individuality; it was the only place where men could show who they really and inexchangeably were. (Arendt 1958: 41)

Rather than being a forum for consensus, the polis provided an adversarial, yet not antagonistic, forum for revealing difference and justifying that difference as evidence of virtue through the telling of stories. This proliferation of stories was stimulated by debate about what ought to be immortalised and by consideration of the good life; the immediacy and intimacy of participation promoted thinking as opposed to knowing.

\textsuperscript{11} See (Canovan 1978) for a criticism of Arendt on this account.
The polis also provided a refuge against the futility of action and speech. Hericlitus’s view that humanity distinguishes itself from animals through its ability to contribute to the immortal found its ideal public realm in the agonal polis (Arendt 1958: 19). The polis, in institutionalising a communal forum for notions of the good life, provided some permanence to good actions that were communally admired – enabling great humans to leave a legacy for so long as that legacy maintained itself as a valid contribution. An eternally brilliant idea or act (such as Hercules’ heroics) would achieve eternal recognition in the polis of Classical Greece, as it would continue to guide and inform the lives of those involved in the polis. In turn the agent who conveyed this act would achieve the worthy goal of immortality.

By providing space that privileged action, the polis of Classical Greece harnessed the public spirit of the citizens in a forum that empowered individual uniqueness and encouraged adversarial debate. Arendt believes that these factors combined to produce a citizenry that was both critically informed and whose members were unafraid to assert their individuality.12 The extent to which the public forum contributed to the citizen’s sense of humanity can be seen when Aristotle describes slaves and barbarians as those deprived ‘of a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense and where the central concern of all citizens was to talk with each other’ (Arendt 1958: 27). Where the central concern of the public realm is utility, we are condemned to an impoverished reality that has no public space for personal revelation and perspective. By claiming to ‘know’ the legitimate way to distribute

12 There is some debate about the accuracy of Arendt’s reading as there is some evidence to suggest that the Athenian polis was somewhat hostile to individualism – perhaps best exemplified by the trial of Socrates. However, Arendt certainly paints the polis as a forum for collaborative individualism; convinced by the heroism inspired by the Athenian polis, epitomised by Socrates defence of the virtue of the polis during his trial.
power, our current democratic systems reduce their critical potential. In order to appreciate Arendt’s critique of modern democracy, we must now examine the way that the modern public realm has deviated from the idealised classical model articulated by Arendt.

**The Problem with Modern Democracies**

Hannah Arendt’s critique of modern democracies is often approached through her description of the occlusion of the political sphere by the social sphere\(^{13}\). What exactly is meant by the term “social” is a subject of some debate\(^{14}\). My understanding is that Arendt refers to the “social” as a catchall phrase to describe *homo faber’s* and *animal laborans’* concurrent dominance of the public sphere. What I shall attempt to do here is advance an argument that the failure of modern democracy can be seen through the triumph of the values of *animal laborans* and *homo faber* over those of Classical Athens. Rather than engage in a debate about the problems raised by Arendt’s conception of the social, my aim is to highlight the various social factors that Arendt believes prohibit the emergence of a desirable public realm of the kind seen in Classical Athens and to identify the negative effect on humanity these factors might have.

In investigating the relationship between the origins and subsequent problems of the modern political realm, it is easy to be too keen to suggest some kind of determinacy. It seems logical to believe that an uncritical public realm will generate uncritical citizens, which will in turn further reduce the critical capacity of the public realm in a

\(^{13}\) This critique was first described as the ‘occlusion of the public by the social’ in (Benhabib 1990); it has subsequently been discussed by (Pitkin 1998) and (Isaac 1994) among others.

\(^{14}\) A debate directly addressed in (Pitkin 1998).
never ending downward spiral; and is it not equally true that a benign public sphere would be needed to be instrumentally applied to break this process? It is once again crucial to remember that Arendt abhors determinacy of any kind. The agency of humanity, the possibility of action, is the source of all Arendt’s hopes for an improved human condition. Her only concession to any form of determinacy lies in her faith that human needs are such that individual fulfilment can only be achieved through a forum for speech and action, and hence that there is some “natural” tendency toward this goal through the agency of unfulfilled citizens (Arendt 1958: 236). With this in mind I intend to explore Arendt’s discussion of the problem with the modern public realm through analysing her views on the growing dominance of instrumental thought, the concurrent changing role of philosophy, the development of a waste economy and the effect of these conditions on modern democracies. All these conditions are seen equally as results of a troubled public realm and further obstacles to the establishment of an engaging and thought-provoking forum for speech and action.

*The Philosophical Dominance of Instrumental Thought*

If we were to question Arendt about an approximate time and place for a discernable origin of the problems of contemporary democracies, she would most likely point us towards Descartes. Motivated by the discoveries of Galileo who, through the invention of the telescope, overthrew the popular belief of his time that the sun revolved around the earth, Descartes was the first to base his philosophical position upon incredulity towards the adequacy of the human senses for revealing the world. Confronted with the evidence that even the most apparent fact could be incorrect, Descartes reduced his entire basis for knowledge to what he knew to be true, arriving at the obscure yet normatively significant statement “I think therefore I am”. Arendt
argues that Descartes’ status as the first “modern” philosopher is attributable to his acceptance that the instrument of the telescope more readily interpreted reality than the faculties of his senses. He advanced the notion that reality was something that existed prior to our encounter with it and that reality could only be determined by removing the flaws created through human perception. This represents the initial aggrandisement of knowing over thinking and has led to fundamental changes in the realms of thought, action and speech.

The public “realisation” that truth was not to be arrived at through thought, but rather through the manipulation of instruments can be seen as the origin of the philosophical ascendancy of homo faber. Prior to the invention of the telescope, truth had been the subject of philosophy – the most accurate account of reality was to be provided through a discussion between the wisest and most perceptive members of any community. The members of these groups had arrived at the conclusion that the sun revolved around the earth, and as far as this understanding was coherent in appearance, it was true. Arendt argues that Galileo’s use of the telescope did not render this truth invalid, and indeed did not differ from the established arguments of many other philosophers without telescopes (Arendt 1958: 258). What changed the order of thought and knowledge was the acclaim given to the instrument itself, and Descartes’ abdication before the evidence of the telescope as he concurrently reduced the realm of philosophy to accounting for the ‘experience between man and himself’ (Arendt 1958: 254). The instrument provided a demonstrable fact in place of speculation, and thus rendered all further speculation irrelevant. Science, through its process of measuring, naming and categorising, appeared to present exciting new possibilities for human potential. At the same time, philosophy was “revealed” as
being subjective and obscure, and hence displaced from the role of imparting truth about the external world to that of commenting only on those aspects of existence that could not be “objectively” measured (Arendt 1958: 303-304). From this point on, knowledge assumed a primacy over thought. Knowledge became oriented to how the universe affects our measuring instruments, a process that based itself on the reduction and elimination of human contemplation. Hence Descartes’ realisation of the inadequacy of the senses to reveal truth limited the scope of philosophy at the same time as he reduced thinking to knowing.

This fundamental reversal of the hierarchy of thinking and knowing went hand in hand with the rise of homo faber in the realm of action. Following the instrumental turn of philosophy, the world of things inherited a new importance insofar as instruments could facilitate knowing. Arendt maintains that the break with thinking was consummated by the introduction of process into making (Arendt 1958: 301). Before this break, contemplation was considered an inherent element in fabrication insofar as craftspeople were guided by the “idea” of what they wished to achieve, and retained the unique possibilities of action in the course of creation (Arendt 1958: 301-302). Following this break, fabrication was “better” instructed through process, using tools and measurements to recreate the desired ideal. The ascendency of knowing over thinking, and work over action, was evident in the introduction of instruction as the basis for fabrication, as opposed to contemplation and interpretation.

The ascendency of the ideals of homo faber also has a deleterious effect upon the realm of speech. Despite the freedom of human agency and the eternal possibility of action, the instrumental nature of knowledge means that speech is only valued insofar
as it might *command, instruct or resolve*. As we have seen, Arendt values speech for its power to *reveal* and, in doing so, inspire action. The fundamental difference here can once again be seen as being the elemental difference between thinking and knowing. The difference between action and work lies in their prioritisation of contemplation – in the act (in the case of thinking, acting and speaking) or external to, and in some sense prior to, the act (as in knowing, working and instructing).

*Ramifications in the Public Realm*

The ramifications of the dominance of the ideals of *homo faber* for the public realm, and for the associated health of community in general, indicate how far we have deviated from Arendt’s ideal public realm. One of the most fundamental challenges to the dominance of the agonistic model of a public realm over those of *animal laborans* and *homo faber* is that the vast majority of enfranchised citizens are more intimate with the worlds of labour and work than they are with the world of action. Arendt’s visions of the “good life”, based as they are on the ramblings of antiquated philosophers and pieced together through Arendt’s own abstract thought, are neither accessible nor interesting to the vast majority of modern citizens. Indeed, the majority of citizens ‘will generally judge public activities in terms of their usefulness to supposedly higher ends – to make the world more useful and beautiful in the case of *homo faber*, to make life easier and longer in the case of *animal laborans*’ (Arendt 1958: 108). Arendt argues that the position of action and speech in modern societies is ‘implied when Adam Smith classifies all occupations which rest essentially on performance…together with “menial services”’. She contrasts this classification with the time of her ideal public realm when occupations such as play-acting and flute playing ‘furnished ancient thinking with examples for the highest and greatest activities of man’ (Arendt 1958: 207). *Homo faber* may value examples of such action...
in the form of art\textsuperscript{15}, \textit{animal laborans} may enjoy such action as entertainment, but neither \textit{animal laborans} nor \textit{homo faber} identifies the purpose of incorporating such action into the public realm. The failure to appropriate a public realm arises from the fact that there is no public space of appearance to inspire such an action.

As a result of the lack of a forum for action and speech modern democracies experience a dominance of process and a dearth of meaning. Arendt argues that this manifests itself in an over-emphasis of the benefits of the productive capacities of \textit{animal laborans} and \textit{homo faber}. The rise of making and producing leads to a system of value based upon productive capacity in itself, devoid of any contemplation but based upon utility maximising calculations of capacity and demand. This system of value originated as the utilitarian desire to eliminate want – to stimulate production to the extent that all desires could be satisfied. This was the basis not only of Adam Smith’s faith in the invisible hand of the free market, but also the reasoning behind Marx’s belief that the productive capacities induced by the bourgeois era could usher in a utopian workers paradise where ‘the realm of freedom’ could supplant ‘the realm of necessity’ (Marx 1990: 873). However, Arendt argues that the great fallacy of Marxist thought was to assume that the free time allowed by liberation from the process of production and consumption would be spent nourishing higher activities. Instead, we find in the experience of a system without public space to inspire thought and action that \textit{animal laborans} aspires to nothing more than consumption, and \textit{homo faber} never aspires to anything more than production (Arendt 1958: 133).

\textsuperscript{15} As Kristeva notes, \textit{homo faber} the artist distinguishes herself from the ideal artist through the purpose of the work. ‘In Arendt’s view, the artist, and the modern artist in particular, is the quintessential \textit{homo faber}: a deeply mediocre form of humanity who embodies the modern tendency to regard contemporary works as opportunities for commercialisation and consumerism’ (Kristeva 2001a: 94).
Arendt posits that the failure of higher productive capacities to truly emancipate humanity resides in the failure of the philosophies of *homo faber* and *animal laborans* to locate meaning externally to production and consumption. The dominance of instrumental reason leads to social worth being reduced to the ability to accumulate wealth and, with the advent of capital whose ‘chief function’ is ‘to generate more capital’, private property gains the ability to express the permanence ‘inherent in the commonly shared world’ (Arendt 1958: 69). Thus in a society in which wealth and status is reckoned in terms of earning and spending power, value - both material and human - exists only insofar as the yardstick of consumption and production can measure it. Arendt argues that the possibilities for action in such a society are limited to the purchase and control of the reifications of the processes of production and consumption, and as a result any gains achieved from excess production can only be meaningfully invested through a corresponding increase in consumption (Arendt 1958: 124-131). The permanence of material possessions provides *homo faber* with the only recourse to some form of immortality or meaning in the world. Without a public outlet for disclosing action, possession of material objects fulfils the role of public disclosure of identity.

One consequence of such an existence is a waste economy, in which people, who understand production and consumption as their only standards of meaning, regard all objects as consumable goods. The objectification of all meaning, and the status of material goods as the sole recourse of man to immortality ‘harbours the great danger that eventually no object of the world will be safe from consumption or annihilation through consumption’ (Arendt 1958: 133).
The tragedy is that in the moment *homo faber* seems to have found fulfilment in terms of his own activity, he begins to degrade the world of things, the end product of his own mind or hands; if man the user is the highest end, ‘the measure of all things’, then not only nature, treated by *homo faber* as the almost ‘worthless material’; upon which to work, but the ‘valuable’ things themselves have become mere means, thereby losing their own intrinsic ‘value’ (Arendt 1958: 155).

Furthermore, when meaning is determined through instrumental value, the elimination of necessity only blurs the distinction between freedom and necessity (Arendt 1958: 71). Arendt posits that Marx correctly foresaw that in a “socialised” world, humans would spend their time free from labouring enjoying “those strictly private and essentially worldless activities that we now call “hobbies”” (Arendt 1958: 117-118). According to Arendt, what Marx did not understand is that such liberation would only inhibit the opportunities for the thought, speech and action necessary to conceive of a system of value external to value in the world of things. Hobbies have non-instrumental value only in an incredibly private setting and are reliant upon the productive and consumptive capacities of the public world. The elevation of labour did not serve Marx’s desired end of ushering in a new realm of understanding, but merely embedded the instrumental ideals which led to the initial ascendency of labour and work over action. In such a world, everything is valued in terms of utility, and excess production only generates excess consumption16.

In the dominance of utility over both the private realm and the public realm, Arendt perceives “the rise of the social”. The dominance of instrumental thought gives rise to the situation in which nothing except questions of utility can legitimately appear in public. ‘Society’ Arendt argues, ‘is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the

16 Hanna Pitkin argues that Arendt misrepresented Marx in *The Human Condition*, and that the worldlessness of *homo faber* can actually be seen in Marx’s prevalent concept of alienation (Pitkin 1998: 139-144).
activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public’ (Arendt 1958: 46). In such a situation, the public sphere serves as an extension of the private sphere, insofar as it is concerned with matters of the household such as economics on a communal or “social” level. This function of the public sphere is a drastic deviation from the original function delineated in city states of Classical Greece, where no activity concerned with “making a living” was permitted to enter the political realm (Arendt 1958: 37). Once again, Arendt derides this “social” public sphere because of its inability to foster critical thought. She cites economist Gunnar Myrdal’s conclusion that economics can be a science only if one assumes that one interest pervades society as a whole (Myrdal 1953: 194-195) and suggests that all modern political movements (such as Marxism and Liberalism) fall into the trap of proposing to meet the needs of such a household of society. Arendt argues that this occlusion of what ought to be debated by what utility deems should be debated elaborately insulates modern political institutions from critical thought.

In the end, the most disturbing fact is that there is no public sphere that might stimulate critical thought and thus facilitate an escape from this situation. The logical political forum for a society numerically dominated by homo faber and animal laborans is a utilitarian democracy, insofar as it functions to provide the decisions conducive to the greatest utility; and indeed this model of democracy is not only present in modern societies, it is hegemonic in them. The result of the search for utility in government gives rise to an essentially uncritical public sphere. In accordance with the rise of the philosophy of homo faber, politics has been reduced from the role of normative contemplation to that of legitimating the state’s distribution of wealth and productive capacities. Animal laborans seeks to fulfil needs
and wants in the life process, and *homo faber* seeks to achieve validation through the production of material to satisfy these needs. What is never acknowledged in the political realm is the need for a separate space for action, or even the legitimacy of any challenge to the current status quo.

In modern society, philosophers have been reduced to validating their work according to the standards of utility established by the broader society. Truth has been established as being beyond philosophy’s grasp, and hence philosophers are either engaged in the epistemological task of an ‘over-all theory of science’ or they exist ‘as mouthpieces of the zeitgeist’ (Arendt 1958: 294). In both cases they exist in an observational capacity, not in a directive one and, hence, present no impetus for change. The numeric and ideological dominance of the ideals of *homo faber* and *animal laborans* gives rise to ‘the transformation of the public space of politics into a pseudospace of social interaction, in which individuals no longer “act” but “merely behave” as economic producers, consumers and urban city dwellers’ (Benhabib 1990: 169). Political action, far from being a path toward what Arendt calls ‘disclosure’, has been reduced to the mockery and emptiness of marketing gurus susceptible to influence and corruption (Kristeva 2001a: 43). And, most importantly for Arendt, the fact that no space is generated to encourage the development of thinking, acting and speaking has cataclysmic outcomes.

The reason why it may be wise to distrust the political judgment of scientists *qua* scientists is not primarily their lack of “character” – that they did not refuse to develop atomic weapons – or their naïveté – that they did not understand that once these weapons were developed they would be the last to be consulted about their use – but precisely the fact that they move in a world where speech has lost its power. And whatever men do or know or experience can make sense only to the extent that it can be spoken about. (Arendt 1958: 4)

An understanding of the importance of thinking and acting in Arendt’s thought helps in identifying why she judges public space in terms of its conduciveness towards
thought, speech and action. Her criticism of modern democratic systems is predicated on the understanding that, through a preconceived notion of the utilitarian purpose of public space, modern democracies marginalise free expression and reduce their potential as a place for disclosure and critical discussion. Because we have allowed issues of function and utility to dominate our public space, we are less likely to be thoughtful, critical and expressive in these spaces. This introduction to Arendt’s thought therefore serves to identify the importance of public space to the development of critical faculties, and to identify the absence of such space in modern democracies.

Part 2: Habermas’s Problem with Modern Democracies

The aim of this section is to clearly identify the basis of Habermas’s critique of modern democracies. In order to achieve this identification, it is my intention to outline Habermas’s work in the context of the aims of the Frankfurt School and indicate the foundations of Habermas’ unique contribution to critical theory in his theory of communicative action. With this paradigm in mind I intend to explore Habermas’ earlier work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* which contains Habermas’ most explicit attempt to deal with the issue of the problems of the public realm. Following a close analysis of Habermas’s description of the problem in terms of the function of the public sphere, I intend to then briefly couch the terms of this problem within the framework of Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action*. Such an exploration of Habermas’s criticism of contemporary democracies identifies that he shares with Arendt an understanding that the major problem with contemporary democratic systems is that they fail to foster the critical engagement of individuals with the world around them. This commonality is at the basis of the
complementary reading of Habermas’s and Arendt’s democratic theories that underpins this thesis.

I believe that a brief overview of the work of the Frankfurt School, from which Habermas emerged, helps to place Habermas’ work in an important context. Although Habermas’ theory of communicative action arises from a frustration with philosophies of consciousness, I still find that some grounding in the terms of instrumental aims and objectives might make his work more accessible in this instrumental world. Although Habermas is clearly reluctant to couch his theory of communicative action in these terms, I am confident that The Theory of Communicative Action is, in itself, Habermas’s realisation of the goals initially set by the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School. As such, an introduction to the thought of some of the members of the Frankfurt School serves as a good introduction to Habermas.

Habermas’s most direct engagement with the problems and potentials of the public sphere is in his The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Habermas 1989), his second habitation dissertation following his PhD. Originally published in German in 1962, but not available in English until 1989, this work emerged at a very early stage in the development of Habermas’s theories17. Nonetheless it contains an ethos and insight commensurate with his later work and, more importantly, deals directly with the practical problems with modern democracies without any of the obfuscation that occurs as a result of the heavy theoretical emphases of his later work. The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere also contains a tripartite delineation of

17 For a comprehensive outline of Habermas’s theoretical progression see (Matustik 2001).
separate eras of the public realm, and I feel this similarity with Arendt’s work on the
critical role of the public realm invites closer investigation.

Following a detailed analysis of Habermas’s representation of the problem with
modern democracies in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, I intend
to revisit these themes within the framework established by Habermas’s theory of
communicative action. This serves three purposes. First, it makes the difficult
theoretical position of the theory of communicative action easier to comprehend by
relating it to the practical situation I wish to address. Second, and relatedly, it
introduces the theoretical language which will be used to discuss Habermas’s ongoing
work in the next chapter. Third, it shows the continuity of Habermas’s work as critical
theory, justifying my use of his older work to examine his ideas about democracy.

The hope is that through this discussion of Habermas’s work I can present a clear
picture of his critique of modern democracies. As with my discussion of Arendt’s
work my goal here is not only to understand Habermas’s thought, but to highlight the
validity of his concerns for the condition of modern democracies.

**Habermas’s Place in the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory**

In order to gain a thorough understanding of the direction and intent of Habermas’s
work, it is useful to explore the philosophical tradition from which he emerged. The
ideals of critical theory and the remarkable environment of the Frankfurt School
clearly had a profound effect upon Habermas’s work, and a brief investigation of this
background seems invaluable in placing his later work in context. The Institute of
Social Research in Frankfurt Au Main was not only the place of the conception of
“critical theory” it was also home to the most profound exponents of critical theory. Although Habermas eventually appears to depart from all previous work of the Frankfurt School, the writings of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse all had profound effect on Habermas’s work and provided him with some of his inspiration. I shall briefly discuss each of these influences in an attempt to further locate Habermas’ place in critical theory.

Critical theory emerged as an outgrowth of orthodox Marxism and was first delineated in opposition to classical theory in the work of Max Horkheimer. In his essay ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’, Horkheimer delineated a new type of theory that would draw its material from the experience of human history. He opposed critical theory to the classical theory of Aristotle and Plato, which refused to be concerned with the mutable, mortal and ever changing world of things and instead occupied itself with grander theories of the cosmos (Horkheimer 1974). The aim of critical theory was to render judgement upon those things previously held by philosophers of the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition to be impermanent and, therefore, below the lofty purpose of contemplation (Theunissen 1999: 243-244). Through the elaboration of this distinction Horkheimer named a difference that had existed since Marx had turned Hegel on his head – the use of theory as a reconstructive force based upon a critique of the immanent conditions of existence.

Horkheimer and Adorno were the first to delineate the scope of the Frankfurt School’s critical theory, and their initial challenge to the conditions of existence was to question the process of Enlightenment. In their work *Dialectics of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno depict the coexistence of reason and unreason in the
developed world. They investigate the ways in which the process of Enlightenment could lead to the savage irrationality witnessed during the Second World War and conclude that Enlightenment has led only to repressive administered societies that contain their own contradictions through the continual endorsement of dehumanising myths. Within these sentiments resided a profound understanding of Enlightenment as a form of mass deception, where humanity clings to “reason” despite the many negative manifestations of this reliance (Horkheimer and Adorno 1987). Incredulity towards forms of rationality and a critique of reason based upon its human ramifications became the leitmotifs of Frankfurt School work, and is integral to Habermas’s work.

Herbert Marcuse further explored the critique of reason established in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. His major contribution to the Frankfurt School, and to the inspiration of Habermas, was to detail the kind of false consciousness that controlled the possibilities of reason in administered societies. In his work *Eros and Civilization* Marcuse suggests that society has produced surplus repression due to an initial triumph of control over desire (Marcuse 1974). In his later work *One Dimensional Man* he explains how industrial societies manipulate such control to generate “false needs” in order to integrate individuals into the processes of production and consumption (Marcuse 1964). He also argues that the unified, functional language of instrumental reason is fundamentally anti-critical and limits the possibilities of human progress (Marcuse 1974: 97). His contention that instrumental reason maintains the ideological dominance of the societies of control has much in common with Arendt’s critique; and the suggestion that instrumental reason rests upon its own, arguable, normative position is central to much of Habermas’ work.
This quick examination of some of his precursors goes some way toward providing the background for Habermas’s distinct contribution to critical theory. Habermas accepts none of the work of the previous members of the Frankfurt School uncritically. He disagrees with Horkheimer and Adorno for their pessimism and rejects Marcuse’s understanding of the possibilities for overcoming societies of control\textsuperscript{18}. Nonetheless he has continued the tradition of criticising systems and structures for their effects upon reason, as opposed to the more traditional Marxist concerns with ownership and control of the means of production.

**Habermas’s Theoretical Progression**

It is hard to clearly differentiate Habermas’s work into categories of pre and post communicative action due to the gradual evolution of his theoretical position and the consistency of the spirit of his work. Nevertheless, there is an obvious break in objective between his later work and his earlier work, insofar as his emerging interest in the possibilities of communication occurred concurrently with a decline in his direct critique of particular social and political arrangements (Olafson 1990: 646). His earlier work is more obviously a product of the Frankfurt School, continuing the tradition of criticising dominant theories of the public realm, knowledge and science against a consciousness of what ought to be. His later work, while still an endeavour of critical theory, is different because Habermas seeks to avoid being drawn too significantly into criticism of actually existing conditions in an effort to avoid it being constructed as a “philosophy of consciousness”\textsuperscript{19}. His earlier work, therefore,

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\textsuperscript{18} These discussions take place in (Habermas 1983b).

\textsuperscript{19} In “philosophies of consciousness” Habermas detects the possibilities of emancipation are limited by the particularity of the consciousness they rely upon. As Horkheimer and Adorno pointed out, reason
provides us with the greater insight into the problems Habermas saw in western societies of his time, as he was unafraid to posit his critical theories as solutions to these problems.

Habermas’s earliest political writings suggest a thinker heavily influenced by Marcuse’s analysis of science. In his work *Towards a Rational Society*, and in particular the chapter ‘Science and Technology as Ideology’, Habermas generated his own critique of science. Taking the term “rationalisation” from Weber to mean ‘the extension of the areas of society subject to the criteria for rational decision making’ (Habermas 1971: 81), Habermas described the process of rationalisation as one of endorsing instrumental action in all aspects of everyday life. He suggested that the progressive rationalization of society, due to the institutionalisation of scientific and technical development, meant that instrumental reason intruded upon normative and traditional areas of reason where it did not belong (Habermas 1971: 81). Although he disagreed with Marcuse about the possibilities of an emancipatory use of technology, he developed Marcuse’s argument that this institutionalisation of rationality inhibited the development of critical perspectives and, subsequently, human progress.

Habermas developed his analysis of the manner in which reason shaped society in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, the work that first earned him widespread international recognition. In this work Habermas subjected the theory of knowledge to critical theory; an inherently self-reflexive undertaking that can be seen to introduce the first elements of the communicative theory to come. While Habermas criticised

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and philosophy can actually impede emancipation in these conditions (Horkheimer and Adorno 1987). Similarly, Arendt identifies that instrumentality has hamstrung the possibilities of emancipatory politics (Arendt 1958: 294).
the positivist model of explanation and knowledge, he also came to the conclusion that all bases of knowledge within the social sciences ‘were inherently historical, and thus non-universal’ (Olafson 1990: 642). This critique included, quite necessarily, his own “philosophy of consciousness”, based as it was upon his own normative preconceptions about what it may take to improve the world. Habermas concludes that anyone unaware of this limitation fails to be sufficiently self-reflexive, which leads to an unfree existence that is dangerous because of an immoral lack of self-examination and a theoretical tendency towards dogmatism (Habermas 1971: 208). From this moment of the recognition of the importance of self-reflexive realisation on, Habermas’s work is oriented less around the typical concerns of the Frankfurt School, and more by an attempt to re-establish critical theory within the communicative framework of all knowledge and debate.20

In subsequent writings Habermas continued to explore the crises of legitimation and the possibilities of communication until he articulated a new incarnation of critical theory in his work *The Theory of Communicative Action*. In this work he focused upon establishing the possibility of an emancipatory politics based upon the “metatheoretical” tool of critically assessing communicative practices. This critical assessment was not to be based upon a “philosophy of consciousness”, but rather was to be based upon the reason embodied in the conventions of language. Habermas asserted that communicative care could be enacted in order to ensure a greater degree of communicative integration in society, without imposing any normative force external to that community. Habermas thereby reinvented critical theory in an attempt

20 Habermas acknowledges this shift in (Habermas 1993b: 149).
to escape the instrumental abuse of philosophies of consciousness and to emphasise the importance of legitimate communication in its place.

The conceptual shift Habermas made in his *Theory of Communicative Action* is very important for his subsequent work on the emancipatory potential of democracies. It is my intention to explore his theory of communicative action in the next chapter, which deals with Habermas and Arendt’s solutions to the critical deficit of liberal democracies. However, it is his early work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* that provides us with the clearest expression of the problems Habermas saw in contemporary democracies. This work of orthodox critical theory shall form the basis of the following assessment of the important shortcomings of modern liberal democracies.

**Habermas’s Three Conceptions of the Public Sphere**

In his work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas sets out to delineate the inherent contradictions within liberal democracies and illustrate how these contradictions have transformed the ideal bourgeois public sphere into something far less critical than its original incarnation. Habermas’s interpretation of the development of the public realm is intimately intertwined with the transformation of the state and the economy. For Habermas the ideal form of public space - one that was both critical and empowered - existed for a transient moment before being undermined by concurrent changes in state and media interference in the public realm. The bourgeois public institutionalised a democratic principle without the necessary changes to civil society, resulting in a “structural change” in the public sphere that emphasised the contradictions within the initial democratic ideal. The upshot of
Habermas’s investigation is to show that the bourgeois or liberal model of democracy is no longer feasible (Fraser 1992: 111).

*Structural Transformation* provides us with an accessible way to grasp the concrete social-institutional foundations of Habermas’s work on contemporary democracies. This early work has come under attack for privileging the bourgeois public sphere over others, for not being critical enough of the bourgeois public sphere, and for an inadequate grasp of the effects of mass media on public opinion. Although he has defended the basic validity of his analysis against these claims, Habermas himself believes he was naïve to attempt to effect change through the inherited theoretical framework of Frankfurt School Critical Theory (Habermas 1985: 77-78). Despite these theoretical shortcomings, this work provides us with a good introduction to Habermas’s conception of the nature of an ideal democratic public and a unique, historical, account of the corruption of the public sphere of liberal democracies. While it may precede the theoretical cohesion of Habermas’s later work, it provides us with an invaluable insight into the existing problem with liberal democracies.

Habermas’s ideal public sphere ‘cannot be abstracted from the unique developmental history of that “civil society” from which it emerged’ (Habermas 1989: xvii). In order to gain a thorough appreciation of the rise of the ideal bourgeois public sphere, and its subsequent transformation and decline, it is necessary to delineate three historical epochs of publicity. The first is the feudal public sphere, characterised by “representative publicness”. The second is the bourgeois public sphere, characterised by informed public debate and control of the state. The third is the modern public

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21 See, for example, (Calhoun 1992), (Negt 1978: ; Negt and Kluge 1973).
sphere, where the inherent contradictions of the bourgeois public sphere manifest themselves in a “refeudalisation” of the public sphere and a return to representative publicness. Each of these epochs shall be examined in turn in order to illustrate the rise and fall of the ideal public sphere.

The Feudal Public Sphere

The feudal public sphere distinguished itself by its exclusivity. Using the courts and halls of medieval Europe as the template for the political fora of the time, Habermas argues that in the middle ages publicness was more a status attribute than a political right (Habermas 1989: 7). Those who maintained public stations did so in a representative capacity, as an embodiment of some sort of “higher” power, commensurate with the status of divinity at the time, ‘The feudal powers, the Church, the prince and the nobility’ were the bearers of the representative publicness (Habermas 1989: 11). These public figures served to represent virtue to the masses, to embody, and to some extent enact, the higher aspirations of the larger population.

Publicness in the Feudal epoch rested precisely upon the lack of critical public interaction. Those who assumed public station did so due to their inheritance of a traditional role, and those who witnessed public station did so due to their traditional deference to such roles. Publicity was wedded to the staging of the event, in which personal attributes, such as insignia, dress and demeanour, were the important elements of a successful appearance (Habermas 1989: 8). These attributes brought acclaim and allegiance from the masses because, in effect, they were employed (or
reified) for their enjoyment. The means of education were controlled in this situation by the same authorities that maintained the tradition of representative publicness, and this ensured a certain continuity of tradition. Reading and literary production took place more as forms of conspicuous consumption by those holding office rather than as a serious critical engagement (Habermas 1989: 38). As can be seen in the transplantation of European monarchies throughout the middle ages, even cataclysmic political change manifested itself through the exchanging of symbols and personal attributes rather than through public engagement. The feudal public sphere distinguishes itself as being both exclusive and non-critical.

According to Habermas, the eventual decline of the feudal public sphere was brought about by the gradual expansion of critical-rational discussion. This discussion, in turn, had been stimulated by the concurrent development of trade in both goods and news. As trade routes developed and market-driven calculations depended more and more upon “foreign” circumstances, so did the necessity of exchanging information about more distant events (Habermas 1989: 16). The increasing traffic of news of increasing numbers of “foreign” lands led quite naturally to a more varied and critical discussion of what up until this time had been considered beyond reproach. The strata of society whose profits depended upon trade found it increasingly beneficial not only to know about foreign affairs, but also to understand the ramifications of certain events. As a consequence rational-critical debate acquired utility and began to proliferate in the coffee houses and salons of the trading centres of Europe (Habermas 1989: 20-44).

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22 The strength and loyalty of such fundamentally unengaged private citizens to public symbols indicates a normative proclivity of humanity, that is, a fundamental desire to show normative allegiance. This “creation of meaning” is central to Kant’s work ‘An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?’ discussed by Arendt in (Arendt 1982: 19) and in Habermas’s discussion of Weber (Habermas 1984: 187). This proclivity will be further examined in Chapter Three.

23 The invitation to William of Orange to take up the English crown is a good example of this.
The emergence of this critical thought was the rudimentary challenge to the feudal public sphere that contained the seed of its own succession. It makes an interesting vignette to understand that the increasing desire on behalf of elites to encounter difference led to the expanding trade routes that in turn contributed to the sharing of news and ideas. In Habermas’s opinion it was this proliferation of communication that formed the basis of the subsequently rational challenge to these same elites’ appropriation of public power.

At the same time as trading publics began to find their critical voice, the associated increase in wealth from trade led to a mercantilist manufacturing class. The new bourgeoisie, empowered by critical discussion, began to place pressure on the public elites for political changes that would allow a greater share of wealth and power. What united this emerging class was that as a whole it was excluded from political participation; its members shared a common interest due to their equal exclusion, and also shared a common forum for dissent in civil society (Habermas 1989: 35). Due to its exclusion from state power, and its increasing self-awareness of its own critical-rational abilities, the bourgeois civil society that emerged excelled at promoting critical engagement. Fuelled by the fervour ignited through both the power of critical engagement and the denial of a state forum for this engagement, coffee houses and salons were hotbeds of political discussion based upon the reading of critical works and public engagement. While Habermas undoubtedly admires the critical fervour of

24 It is interesting to note that Habermas places the entire impetus for control of the public sphere upon bourgeois shoulders, something he has been criticised for by (Fraser 1992) amongst others. This tendency can be seen as negligent from a historical point of view; failing to recognise various people’s rebellions such as the Diggers’ Rebellion at St. George’s Hill in 1649 and the rebellion led by John Ball in 1381, to name two English examples. However, we can see these rebellions may be understood to have failed because they were not generated through the power generated by critical public discussion; as far as determining the impetus for the successful bourgeois attempt at gaining power, Habermas’s analysis is still valid.

Comment [TH6]: I mention this because it is precisely this phenomenon that I wish to emphasise has occurred with the internet (STPS p.43)
this bourgeois class, he equally emphasises that the political will of the class emerged out of a frustration with the structural limitations of the feudal public sphere.

The Bourgeois Public Sphere

The bourgeois public sphere distinguished itself by being a forum for critical debate, having its right to a political presence asserted in the name of a more rational society. A notable example of this ethos can be seen in Kant’s essay ‘Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?’ (Kant 1985). Here Kant argues that Enlightenment, ‘man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity’, depends upon public freedom and, more crucially, ‘the public use of reason’ (Kant 1985: 54-55). In this declaration Habermas detects the emergence of a new approach to politics in which it becomes a battleground for reason and morality; ‘Kant’s publicity held good as the one principle that could guarantee the convergence of politics and morality. He conceived of “the public sphere” at once as the principle of the legal order and as the method of enlightenment’ (Habermas 1989: 104). Enlightenment discourses such as Kant’s highlighted the irrational injustices of the feudal political system and the utopian possibilities of human political freedom. The growth of the general reading public, the emergence of a bourgeois class that coveted political power and the development of rational arguments for the emancipatory potential of a critical public realm all contributed to the eventual downfall of the feudal public sphere.

The rise of the bourgeois public sphere occurred concurrently with a rise in the belief in the ability of society to politically organise itself through rational debate. Kant’s ‘What is Enlightenment?’ clearly envisioned that the public use of reason could be used to create an “enlightened” public realm. While he saw this public realm to be comprised of learned and well read individuals under feudal conditions (Kant 1985:
55), Kant imagined that following the establishment of the critical public sphere, ‘Men will of their own accord gradually work their way out of barbarism so long as artificial measures are not adopted to keep them in it’ (Kant 1985: 59). Elsewhere, he presented his conception of the form that the state should take in order to facilitate the vigorous growth of enlightenment; a state both republican and pacifist (Kant 1957: 128). These conceptions were tempered by the debate between other bourgeois notables of the time about exactly what form the political public realm should take.

The institutionalisation of the bourgeois public sphere involved establishing the fora of bourgeois debate on a political level. Into the constitutions of the new democracies went safeguards for the freedom of communication and assembly, a division between executive and legislative power to emulate the division between reason ordering and will acting, and an extension of the franchise to involve more “critical” voices. The impetus for freedom of communication and the right of assembly arose from the spirit of enlightenment, and the fresh memories of the political submission of the bourgeoisie. The division between legislative and executive powers served to institute a degree of critical reflection in the process of public debate. And the extension of the franchise to include all property owners ensured a political public that was constituted by educated and critical citizens (Habermas 1989: 71-85). Politics was to be conducted as a form of critical conversation about what was right and good amongst all those able to participate meaningfully in this conversation. For a moment, ‘It became possible to recognise society in the relationships and organisations created for sustaining life and to bring these into public relevance by bringing them forward as interests for public discussion and/or the action of the state’ (Calhoun 1992: 9). At this time, following the decline of the feudal public sphere, but before the ossification
and corruption of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas’s ideal bourgeois public sphere existed.

The Refeudalisation of the Public Sphere

The reign of an enlightening, bourgeois public sphere was always to be transient due to its inherent contradictions. The political task of the bourgeois public sphere was the regulation of a civil society that was critical and capable of contributing to political development. However, ‘The social precondition for this “developed” bourgeois public sphere was a market that, tending to be liberalized, made affairs in the sphere of social reproduction as much as possible a matter of private people left to themselves’. This had the effect of emphasising existing power differences, and ‘completed the privatisation of civil society’ (Habermas 1989: 74). With further control of the market placed in the hands of the bourgeois political realm, ‘the positive meaning of “private” emerged precisely in reference to the concept of free power of control over property that functioned in a capitalist fashion’ (Habermas 1989: 74). The bourgeoisie had supposed a certain equality in private access to the public realm that in reality simply did not exist. As a result the public realm came to be dominated by bourgeois ideals and bourgeois laws, which led to the marginalisation of “common people” from both the political public sphere and civil society.

An ambiguous commitment to political participation was one of the inherent contradictions of the bourgeois public sphere that contributed to its structural transformation. On one hand, the enlightenment attainable by participation in the political public sphere was to be coveted by all and available to everyone; on the other hand, only those who owned property, and thus had certain guarantees of education

Comment [TH8]: Maybe some mention of the development of legal-rational institutions that Habermas would later laud.
due to social position, were entitled to participate. With regard to the initial franchise, where the delineation of meaningful participation was denoted by property ownership, the constitutional constructions of the bourgeoisie were based upon high-minded ideals of civil rights that had no grounding in the reality of social existence, in which exclusion from civil society due to economic status within that society went hand in hand with exclusion from the political realm (Habermas 1989: 85). However, in employing a highly rationalised civil rights argument in order to overturn the legitimacy of feudal powers, the bourgeoisie were forced to concede that if “all men are created equal” then they should all receive equal opportunity to participate in their own governance, regardless of their wealth or status. Of course, this did not reduce the structural inequalities brought about by the bourgeois design and control of the political public sphere; but it did mean “the enlargement of the public” to include those previously disenfranchised by high material prerequisites for public participation.

The expansion of the franchise was met with mixed reactions from the liberal political theorists of the time. Liberals such as Alexis De Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill appreciated the fact that the ideal public sphere would be all-inclusive; however, they also warned of the consequences of opening up democratic procedures.

This was because the unreconciled interests which, with the broadening of the public, flooded the public sphere were represented in a divided public opinion and turned public opinion (in the form of the currently dominant opinion) into a coercive force, whereas it had once been supposed to dissolve any kind of coercion into the compulsion of reason. (Habermas 1989: 133)

The threat of public opinion, as a compulsion toward conformity rather than a critical force, undermined the critical capacity of the public sphere and caused liberals such as Mill to deplore ‘the yoke of public opinion’ that could stifle critical debate (Habermas
The contradictions inherent in the bourgeois public sphere thus began to alter the form of that public sphere and take it away from its own ideal.

The reason that non-bourgeois involvement in the public sphere led to coercion, as opposed to critical debate, can be located in the associated loss in interest in maintaining society as a private sphere. Fundamental to the allocation of the vote to property owners was the premise that this property provided the basis for private autonomy and that, because of this general interest, their involvement in public debate would be critical (Habermas 1989: 135). The expansion of the franchise to include non-property owners, however, meant that the public realm was now dominated by a majority who were deprived of private property and sought to secure publicity in order to address the material imbalances this created (Habermas 1989: 127). The public realm was opened up to a public it was not structurally created for. The previously held notion of an objective general interest was thereby replaced and the purpose of the public sphere shifted from rational-critical debate to negotiation (Calhoun 1992: 22).

The expansion of the franchise thus led to a new use for public debate. Marx had held high hopes that given access to the public sphere the masses would transform it into ‘what, according to liberal pretence, it had always claimed to be’, a universal forum for expression and discussion (Habermas 1989: 177). However, Habermas points out that ‘the occupation of the political public sphere by the unpropertied masses led to an interlocking of state and society which removed from the public sphere its former basis without supplying a new one’ (Habermas 1989: 177). The unifying private interests of the constituents of the bourgeois public had been overwhelmed by a self
interested, non-critical and widely divergent public. The public realm became the staging point for expressions of private interest, and negotiating material interests became the role of the public forum.

The new role of the public realm as a space for the mediation of private interests resulted in the emergence of welfare state mass democracy. The dominance of competing interests resulted in the private affairs of citizens being the central public concern, and the most legitimate justification of statehood came in the form of state care of the private affairs of its citizens (Habermas 1989: 158). At the same time the financial demands of the welfare state made economic prosperity the predetermined goal of the polis. Here society and the state became intertwined. In the formal political realm, publicity, in the sense of critical scrutiny of the state, gave way to public relations, mass-mediated staged displays and the manufacture and manipulation of public opinion (Fraser 1992: 113). Meanwhile private organisations began to assume increasing public power as powerbrokers in the political realm (Calhoun 1992: 21). The public sphere became the realm of private affairs, and the private sphere assumed a disproportionate public relevance, thus completing the structural transformation of the public sphere.

The outcome of this structural transformation, for Habermas, is a “refeudalisation” of the public sphere. Habermas points out that in modern democratic society ‘rational-critical debate has a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unravels into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode’ (Habermas 1989: 161). Rather than presenting us with the opportunity to engage in critical debate, the elevation of private issues to the centre of public debate
makes us regard the public realm as consumers. Publicness becomes a place for the representation of images and symbols. The people are engaged insofar as they anonymously tabulate their allegiance, but the ability to set public agendas falls once again to the elites. This structural transformation has detrimental effects for modern liberal democracies. If we are treated in the public realm as consumers, rather than thinkers or actors, we make consumption the measure of public worth.

**Habermas on the Problem with Contemporary Liberal Democracies**

In this next section I shall continue to outline the problems confronted by liberal democracies following the structural transformation of the public sphere. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Habermas goes on to discuss some of the dilemmas brought about by the “refeudalisation” of the public sphere; such as the private undermining of the public realm and the rise of mass culture as a culture of consumption, as opposed to rational-critical debate. These criticisms are integral to his later attempts to reformulate a type of democracy that would be able to reinstitute a critical public realm.

The last section concluded with a description of the refeudalisation of the public sphere that followed its structural transformation. The key to this notion of refeudalisation is the return to a “representative publicity” to which the public responds with conspicuous consumption within the public realm, as opposed to critical engagement with it. ‘The sounding board of an educated stratum tutored in the public use of reason’, which once provided the basis for the rise of bourgeois democracy, ‘has been shattered’ (Habermas 1989: 175). In its place exists a public that ‘is split apart into minorities of specialists who put their reason to use nonpublicly
and the great mass of consumers whose receptiveness is public but non-critical’ (Habermas 1989: 175). As Habermas points out, this form of publicity is a complete contradiction of the original intention of the bourgeois democrats, as it lacks communication amongst members of a public and manifests a public sphere where private interests are displayed and contested publicly.

The result of this refeudalisation is an intertwining of state and society that blurs the notions of public and private. As the public sphere became the battleground of diverse private interests the state assumed the function of social guarantor, as opposed to the forum of social debate. The role of the state has “evolved” so that it ensures that every citizen can meet the basic requirements of bourgeois (material) existence (Habermas 1989: 146-148). The result of this shift to welfare state democracy means that issues of private survival replace the normative element of public debate (envisioned as the 

*raison d’être* of the bourgeois public sphere by thinkers such as Kant) as the central concern of the state. As a result:

> The public sphere becomes a setting for states and corporate actors to develop legitimacy not by responding appropriately to an independent and critical public but by seeking to instil in social actors motivations that conform to the needs of the overall system dominated by those states and corporate actors. (Calhoun 1992: 26)

This removal of the critical function of the democratic state underpins Habermas’s problem with modern democracies. The remainder of this section will highlight the flaws of this structurally transformed democracy in the language of Habermas’s philosophy of consciousness before going on to briefly reiterate the problem through the language of Habermas’s communicative action.

As evidenced in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas’s main criticism of modern liberal democracies is that they allow great advantage to
certain groups under the guise of equal participation. The possibility of a truly critical public sphere is frustrated by the fact that certain groups hold disproportionate power over the formation and manipulation of public opinion. This is a manifestation of one of the initial contradictions of the bourgeois public sphere; formal equality in civil society and public life does not translate to equality in the actually existing world. To put it bluntly, the average individual has less chance of influencing public opinion than the owner of a newspaper. As the public sphere becomes a forum for private issues, as opposed to public ones, public fora become a field for business advertising, and as a result ‘private people as owners of property [have] a direct effect on private people as the public’ (Habermas 1989: 189). The bourgeois democratic ethos involves gestures toward the ideal of a civil society of free and equal participation. However, the structural transformation of the public sphere exaggerates the distinction between those who have expressive access to publicity and the masses who, without expressive access, can only involve themselves publicly as consumers.

Habermas argues that the undue influence of certain groups over the public realm of the contemporary liberal public sphere was facilitated by bourgeois control of the mass media. “News” originated from the needs of bourgeois business interests and the notion that the mass media should serve the interest of the propertied class was enshrined in the new public realms of bourgeois democracy.

Ever since the marketing of the editorial section became interdependent with that of the advertising section, the press (until then an institution of private people insofar as they constituted a public) became an institution of certain participants in the public sphere in their capacity as private individuals; that is, it became the gate through which privileged private interests invaded the public sphere. (Habermas 1989: 185)

The dominance of business interests in the mass media rendered control of the content of the media to the bourgeois class. The result was that the material dominance of the bourgeoisie was translated into their practical dominance of the public sphere.
The commercialised nature of the mass media has inevitably had a qualitative effect on the kind of deliberation available to the public. Habermas cites an early study of American media which shows that even in the early penny press sales were maximised by the purposeful exclusion of political content that might alienate potential readers (and buyers) (Bleyer 1927: 184). The market demands ‘immediate reward news’ such as ‘tales of corruption, humour, accidents, disasters and social events, rather than “delayed reward news” of critical social issues’ (Habermas 1989: 169-170). The content of media designed for consumption cannot be too challenging for its audience, or it runs the risk of losing both the audience and its advertising revenue. ‘Radio stations, publishers and associations have turned the staging of panel discussions into a flourishing secondary business’. Habermas notes, ‘Thus, discussion seems to be carefully cultivated and there seems to be no barrier to its proliferation. But surreptitiously it has changed in a specific way: it assumes the form of a consumer item’ (Habermas 1989: 164). The practical result of this is that civil society comes to be dominated by forms of media that are oriented towards consumption rather than towards rational critical debate.

Of course, the proliferation of cultural goods that are consumption ready is only a negative thing for the public sphere if that consumption is decidedly uncritical. The premise of the ideal bourgeois public sphere was that its constituents would savour critical interaction as part of “living well”. Habermas argues that the structural transformation of the public sphere removes this requirement for participation in public debate and replaces it with consumption commensurate with the feudal notion of publicity, in which the expressive boundaries of participation are set prior to the
conversation (Habermas 1989: 164). As with the feudal era, those who maintain the contemporary public realm do so with a view to maintaining the status quo and, to that end, they purposefully alter publicity to be consumptive rather than critical. In the world of advertising publicity is coveted in order to generate consumption, and does so through the ‘reorientation of public opinion by the formation of new authorities or symbols which will have acceptance’ (Steinberg 1958: 92). It is the very absence of critical public debate that gives such ‘authorities and symbols’ their power and it is those with control over mediatised publics that benefit from being able to establish such symbols. We express our public spirit in a public world established by private corporations, where we are given the impression that we may actually make a difference in our own world25. At the same time we do not expect to affect the structure of the political public realm, where we ironically feel unqualified to debate issues of public importance; instead we may only take sides through consumption.

Habermas argues that the exaggerated public influence of the bourgeoisie manifests itself not only in the realm of civil society, but also in the political public sphere. The structural transformation of the public sphere resulted in a change in the function of parliament from being a forum for critical debate to being a forum for the negotiation of social interests. The bourgeoisie had to make certain concessions to the numerical superiority of the newly enfranchised proletariat; hence the emergence of parliament as a forum for social bargaining resulted in a more equitable distribution of state wealth. However, the bourgeoisie retained the constitutionally guarded rights and democratic system that ensured their continual dominance of civil society. The result

25 ‘The awakened readiness of the consumers involves the false consciousness that as critically reflecting private people they contribute responsibly to public opinion’ (Habermas 1989: 194).
of this compromise was welfare state mass democracy; ‘making proletarian life bearable and ensuring the gap between the rich and the poor did not grow so big that the poor could not afford the products of the rich’ (Habermas 1989: 146). The emergence of welfare state mass democracy incorporated the proletarian class into a state whose civil society is dominated by the bourgeoisie.

This emergence of welfare state democracy resulted in a fundamental shift in the purpose of parliament’s publicity. Parliamentarians were judged on their ability to represent their constituents’ private interests as opposed to their ability to participate in rational-critical debate (Habermas 1989: 180). Citizens, therefore, regarded the parliament as stakeholders, and adopted ‘a general attitude of demand’ (Habermas 1989: 211). This attitude is inherently associated with bourgeois influence upon civil society. ‘Because private enterprises evoke in their customers the idea that in their consumption they act in their capacity as citizens, the state has to “address” its citizens like consumers’ (Habermas 1989: 195). Here they have to compete with private enterprise in presenting a consumable product. The ideal of providing a forum of debate is so remote that Habermas suggests the most effective political party would be one without members ‘but [which] mobilizes only in the event of an election in the same manner as an advertising agency with no other goal than to win that election’ (Habermas 1989: 200-211). The mercenary nature of this system can be seen in the fact that “independent voters” who know and care the least, are nevertheless the target of election campaigns’ (Habermas 1989: 215). Welfare state mass democracy thereby completes the transformation of the public sphere from a realm of critical debate to a realm of consumption.
Following this exploration of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* it is easy to see that Habermas held a dim view of the critical capacities created by the structure of contemporary democracy. He stresses that if there is any hope for contemporary democracy it is in further incorporating democratic forms into societal organisation; but he remains pessimistic about the possibility of this in a society in which the mode of appropriation ‘removed the ground for a communication about what had been appropriated’ (Habermas 1989: 227 & 116). Moreover, Habermas could not foresee how the public could ‘set in motion a critical process of public communication through the very organisations that mediatize it’ when ‘the unresolved plurality of competing interests… makes it doubtful whether there could ever emerge a general interest of the kind to which a public opinion could refer to as a criterion’ (Habermas 1989: 232-234). Given the partisan appropriation of all conscious attempts at liberation, even philosophy had become cynical.

Explaining his communicative turn in ‘Further Reflections on the Public Sphere’ Habermas explains that ‘the presumption that society as a whole can be conceived as an association writ large, directing itself via the media of law and political power, has become entirely implausible in view of the high level of complexity of functionally differentiated societies’ (Habermas 1992: 443). Due largely to the problems he initially uncovered in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas concluded that the state apparatus and economy cannot be transformed through contemporary democratic systems but, rather, that the impetus for transformation has to come from changes in the dominant mode of legitimate communication.
It was in light of this analysis that Habermas regrounded his critical theory in communicative action. In order to avoid the defunct (inherently bourgeois) norm and value orientations of traditional philosophies of history, Habermas attempts to ‘lay the normative foundations of critical theory at a deeper level’ through communicative action, which ‘intends to bring into the open the rational potential intrinsic in everyday communicative practices’ (Habermas 1992: 442). The development of the theory of communicative action is an attempt to redress the democratic imbalance on a metatheoretical level – that is, by employing everyday communicative practices to ensure the legitimacy of power. This approach avoids the search for a general interest or state to legislate change, but rather rests upon the inherent emancipative potential of reason.

This liberating potential of reason is enacted through the practice of communicative action. Communicative action occurs when ‘actors seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to co-ordinate their action by way of agreement’ (Habermas 1984: 86). It is an open, honest and unrestrained dialogue through which people seek to coordinate their actions with the greatest possible legitimacy for all parties involved. Communicative action can be constructively compared to strategic action, which is action oriented to reaching a predetermined end.

Within the language of communicative action, the problem with liberal democracies is that they suffer from a communicative imbalance. Liberal democracies exist as disempowering bureaucracies that expand the scope for engineering mass loyalty and make it easier to uncouple political decision making from concrete, identity forming
contexts of life (Habermas 1987b: 325). They provide a refuge for the implementation of strategic action, as opposed to a forum for communicative action. As depicted in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, liberal democracies give legitimacy to already entrenched power bases; in terms of communicative action they remove all sorts of policies from the sphere of public discussion and insulate them in existing hierarchies of money and power. The systematic mechanism of government replaces the traditional procedures of consensus formation, and strategic action replaces communicative action.

This is a very brief introduction to the *Theory of Communicative Action*, but for the purposes of this chapter I wish only to suggest that the shift in languages did not involve a withdrawal of the arguments Habermas made in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* about the problem with contemporary democracies. Much of what Habermas discusses in *The Theory of Communicative Action* can be seen as a direct reiteration of the arguments made against contemporary democracy in *Structural Transformation* 26. The underlying ethos behind *The Theory of Communicative Action* is a complaint about the amount of critical access individuals have to the world around them, based upon disempowering bureaucracies and economies (Habermas 1987b: 325&480). This problem is a consistent theme

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26 In 'Further Reflections on the Public Sphere', a commentary on *Structural Transformation* written some time after publishing his *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas admits that his perception of the shift between culture debating and culture consuming public was a little simplistic, and that he might have been too pessimistic about the possibilities of welfare state education and the mass media (Habermas 1992). On the whole, however, he maintains that his understanding of the problem with contemporary democracies, as being that they fail to foster rational critical debate, remains as true and pertinent as ever. He concludes that the only revision necessary after his communicative shift was that there is cause for a little more optimism about the possibilities of democracy. I shall investigate these possibilities in the next chapter.
throughout Habermas’s work; it is the articulation of his response to the problem that has changed, and this shall be examined in the following chapter.

**Conclusion**

The end of this exposition of the problems with democracy is an opportune moment to highlight the similarities in Arendt’s and Habermas’s analyses. Uniting the two theorists is a contempt for instrumental thought, a concern for the hegemonic effects of this thought on the public sphere, and a faith in the inherent emancipatory potential of human agency.

Underpinning both theorists’ critical analyses is an allegation that the public forum of liberal democracies is dominated by instrumental thought, which has myopic effects upon the quality of democratic discussion. Whether instrumental thought lends itself to abuses because, as Arendt intimates, it entails a lack of critical thought or, as Habermas has suggested, because it disguises a bourgeois agenda, is a moot point. Both theorists argue that instrumental thought has to be rejected as the basis of public reason, so that we might address the myopic deficiencies of our democratic systems.

Furthermore, both believe that instrumental thinking is dangerous if it comes to dominate the public realm. Arendt chooses to highlight the destructive and essentially alienating nature of the instrumental world; whereas Habermas emphasises the inequitable effects of the uncritical nature of existing power structures. Each theorist defines this situation as one in which the self-regulating mechanisms of society are no longer adequate. For Arendt, philosophers, who may once have injected some critical thought into the public sphere, are now no more than “organs of the zeitgeist” who
offer clarification rather than criticism. For Habermas, the very act of social criticism has been gentrified and appropriated by the dominant class and offers no real hope of social transformation.

Habermas’s and Arendt’s assessments of modern democracy combine in such a way as to render a very disturbing picture of its failings. They suggest that we approach public space as animal laborans and homo faber. As animal laborans we have been largely excluded from the activity of political expression; politics is something done for us and should not distract us from the labour or work that is the subsequent measure of our worth. As homo faber the public space we are deemed able to use is dominated by the values and mores of economists; we are expected to engage with this space as a consumer, rather than an actor. Nowhere are citizens given the opportunity to act in public in such a way that might generate critical and engaging debate about political power.

The result is that representative liberal democracies produce nations of Eichmanns. We simply do not think about what we are doing politically. As with the workers on Eichmann’s human de-assembly line, we are purposefully employed in such a way as to inhibit us from thinking, for the greater good of public utility, progress, economic development and security. The validity of these goals is determined prior to a critical/thoughtful conversation about these goals, while the “public” fora, which are supposed to generate debate, are controlled by those who have a significant stake in keeping the line moving. The result is a social myopia and a democratic decision making process that suffers from a deficit of criticism.
Insofar as this chapter identifies that Habermas and Arendt share very similar perspectives about what is wrong with modern democracies it provides the basis for reading Habermas and Arendt’s democratic theories as largely complementary. It also, I hope, makes clear that there are problems with modern democracies; at least enough so as to justify the following exploration of how these problems might be rectified.

In Habermas’s and Arendt’s work on contemporary democracies the dominance of the uncritical public sphere can only be undermined through human agency. Below the shallow resemblance of the tripartite description of types of public sphere that exists in both accounts there lies the remarkable similarity between what Habermas describes as communicative action and what Arendt describes as thinking. Both describe an honest, open conversation, devoid of strategic distortions, that inspires action. Each theorist is attempting, in their idiom, to reduce decision making to its most genuine or legitimate base and to facilitate the appropriation of this form of decision making in the public realm. This similarity in objectives shall underpin the next chapter, in which I shall investigate the solutions that Arendt and Habermas posit for the problem with democracy.
Chapter Two: A Description of Habermas’s and Arendt’s Solutions to the Problem with Modern Democracies

Introduction

This chapter provides an outline of the models of an ideal democracy articulated by Habermas and Arendt. It is my contention that, while Habermas and Arendt represent the deliberative and agonistic schools of democratic theory respectively, they share an emphasis on the importance of immanent critical political engagement. The models they describe as preferable to the liberal representative model are based upon the notion that the personal exercise of political power is an identity forming and self validating activity. This congruence between their thought indicates a point of universal agreement between agonistic, deliberative and critical liberal democratic theories. This is that the failure to give all citizens access to public space results in a critical deficit in democratic systems. By examining Habermas’s and Arendt’s democratic theories closely, it is possible to identify the kind of critical alternatives to representative democracies they envision.

Explaining Habermas’s ideal democratic system involves explaining his conceptual shift from orthodox critical theory to a critical theory oriented around discursive ethics. As introduced in the previous chapter, Habermas came to believe that broad theories of emancipation are an ineffective mechanism for social change. Instead, Habermas develops a communicative approach to critical theory. He seeks to understand the critical potential that is inherent in the social construction of meaning and to employ this critical potential in such a way as to generate culturally sensitive
critical forces that are immanent to the individual. In this way he felt he could ensure
the legitimacy of authority and counteract ‘the intrusion of imperatives rooted in
structural properties of economic and political institutions into the capacities of
individuals to understand and act politically’ (Peterson 1996: 126). Using John
Austin’s work on the conventions of language, Habermas develops his theory of
communicative action (Habermas 1984). The centrepiece of Habermas’s theory is an
explanation of why an ideal form of communication can be understood to be the
fundamental building block of reason and, therefore, of legitimate government. The
discussion of Habermas’s work that follows is an attempt to explain Habermas’s
Theory of Communicative Action in such a way as to render the problem with modern
democracies understandable in terms of discourse ethics and to indicate how attention
to communicative practices might harness the personal sovereignty necessary for a
critical democratic system. Habermas presents communicative action as an ideal to be
used to critically assess personal public interactions and the legitimacy of existing
overarching public structures.

In order to articulate Hannah Arendt’s vision of a truly democratic system, I initially
describe Arendt’s understanding of what a truly democratic public space ought to do.
The various roles of public space in generating power, reality, criticism, a space to
disclose the self and a refuge against futility are examined in order to outline the
inherent link Arendt sees between the overall quality of the public realm, and the
overall quality of existence. The importance of public engagement for the well being
of the individual is central to Arendt’s assertion that we should take care that public
engagement is healthy and rewarding for both the individual and the public. On this
basis she recommends public structures that emphasise the role of individual
engagement and display, while retaining the critical function of plurality. This engagement with plurality is something that individuals invariably seek as they come to constitute themselves as part of the world. Arendt asserts, therefore, that a healthy public, or system of publics, leads to healthier people and societies.

**Part One: Habermas, Deliberative Democracy and the Importance of Being Earnest**

This elaboration of Habermas’s views as to how we might “solve the problem” of liberal democracies begins with an attempt to outline Habermas’s theory of communicative action. Understanding this theory is central to understanding the ways in which Habermas believes we might address the critical deficit of the refeudalised public sphere. The central presupposition of the theory of communicative action is that by caring for the other as we would ourselves, it is possible to employ discursive conventions that make discussion as reasonable and reflexive as personal thought. Following this elaboration on communicative action, I turn my attention to how Habermas seeks to use the theory in order to promote a more critical and engaging democratic system.

My overview of communicative action and the emancipatory potential of ideal speech not only establishes the mechanism that Habermas believes provides the basis of legitimate democratic reform, it also introduces us to the notion of examining political sovereignty in terms of an individual’s capacity to critically engage with power. As will be shown in the following chapter, such an analysis of power is particularly apt for coming to understand how sovereignty is exercised in contemporary society.
Answering the Question: What is Communicative Action?27

This exploration of Habermas’s response to the critical deficit of democracy will begin with a more thorough exploration of his theories concerning communicative action. Habermas wrote the Theory of Communicative Action in the hope that it may provide the foundation for an identification of the positive possibilities of democracy and reignite the possibilities of critical theory. In order to give the reader some understanding of what communicative action is, I will outline the illocutionary nature of communicative action in opposition to the perlocutionary nature of strategic action. I shall then use the tension between illocutionary and perlocutionary aims to introduce Habermas’s notion of lifeworld and system. This exploration serves to introduce the reader to the “building blocks” of Habermas’s democratic theory and to indicate that communicative action is a form of discourse designed to facilitate considered thought.

The distinguishing feature of communicative action is that it is action oriented to achieving understanding, as opposed to strategic action which is action oriented to achieving results (Habermas 1984: 295)28. In order to illustrate this difference, Habermas makes use of John Austin’s distinction between ‘illocutionary’ and ‘perlocutionary’ speech acts (Austin 1962)29. An illocutionary speech act is one in

27 As readers will recognise, this is a reference to Kant’s famous article ‘Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?’(Kant 1985). Similarly The Theory of Communicative Action is an attempt to articulate the emancipatory potential of the public use of reason. The following is an attempt to articulate The Theory of Communicative Action (Habermas 1984) & (Habermas 1987b) focusing on elements relevant to a study of his theory of democracy.
28 ‘I count as communicative action those linguistically mediated interactions where all participants pursue illocutionary aims… On the other hand, I regard as linguistically mediated strategic action those interactions in which at least one of the participants wants his speech acts to produce perlocutionary effects on his opposite number’ (Habermas 1984: 295).
29 Habermas’s use of Austin as opposed to other, possibly more Arendtian, speech theorists such as (Skinner, 1970) and (Pocock, 1962) is most likely due to Austin’s highly theoretical approach to understanding communication. Such use helps protect Habermas’s theory from charges of normativity, as discussed later in this thesis.
which the speaker speaks in an effort to communicate something in earnest – an honest attempt to achieve understanding. A perlocutionary speech act is one in which the speaker speaks with a view to achieving a strategic ambition, where understanding is not as important as the success of a particular objective (Habermas 1984: 293). The difference between these modes of action lies in the discursive ambitions of those engaging in the discursive process; an ambition to achieve understanding gives rise to illocutionary acts, an ambition to achieve a predetermined strategic outcome gives rise to perlocutionary speech acts. Hence, communicative action occurs when every participant in a discussion has illocutionary aims.

Habermas suggests that illocutionary speech constitutes the majority of day-to-day conversations. In such exchanges the actors seek to reach an understanding about their situation and to agree on a plan of action in order to coordinate their behaviour (Habermas 1984: 85-86). When two parties reach an agreement on a particular issue they generally assume the fundamental illocutionary attitude of communicative action. This allows the most readily justifiable and shared premises to form the basis for normative agreement and action orientation.

The earnest engagement of illocutionary speech acts can be seen in contrast to perlocutionary speech acts where the statements of the speaker are designed to secure a strategic interest that is determined externally to the communicative process. In contrast to the communicative intent of illocutionary actors, strategic actors have a preconceived notion of the ends they desire and pursue these ends throughout their exchanges through perlocutionary acts. During communicative action aims can be stated openly, but they are subject to change as agents maintain their fundamental
ambition to achieve understanding by reorienting themselves around each other’s validity claims (Brand 1990: 24). However, the aim of perlocutions is not to achieve understanding, but to effect strategic action determined as desirable prior to the process of communication. Rather than having a commitment to achieving understanding, perlocutionary actors have a commitment to a preconceived goal, and hence orient their validity claims around the successful achievement of that goal. In the case of strategic action, the act of communication is not undertaken in order to explore the possibilities of agreement, but rather in an effort to achieve a predetermined outcome.

The aim of communicative action is sustainable reasonable dialogue, but this dialogue ceases if strategic actors use discussion merely to pursue their preconceived strategic orientations. The healthy development of illocutionary discussion is inhibited by the fact that strategic action is parasitic upon communicative exchanges, and the existence of a strategic actor in an exchange will prohibit the possibility of communicative action. A communicative exchange is one where the outcome is determined by the cooperative search for truth, the discussion ceases to be communicative if a preconceived notion of truth comes to dominate the discussion. The difference between illocutionary (communicative) action and perlocutionary (strategic) action thus comes to reflect the difference Arendt posits between considered thought and instrumental reason.

As was discussed in the previous chapter, Arendt defines thinking as an internal dialogue that does not rely on external notions of truth or process, whereas instrumental reason relies heavily upon a preconceived notion of truth against which

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all other voices are to be measured. This latter process, in which the preconceived status of knowledge limits the scope of analysis, emulates the effect of a strategic actor in communication. In each case there is a preconceived notion of truth, which is not available for discussion, through which all alternative positions are to be measured. On the other hand, communicative action resembles the process of thought, where each voice is treated in a way that must be reconciled with every other voice, so as not to create “disharmony”30.

Achieving understanding in public situations appears more challenging than achieving understanding through individual considered thought. There is a unity to the thinking processes of individuals that perseveres due to the “shared” experiences and norms of the person who undertakes the dialogue which is thought. The conversation that takes place between “me” and “myself” is one in which the experience and understandings of those conversing is identical. In order to replicate this unity, Habermas asserts there are certain conditions communicative actors must accept in order to achieve understanding. Most fundamentally those acting communicatively must be prepared to redeem any claims to truth that they make31. This serves the purpose of clarifying the positions of all who are involved in a discussion and facilitating appropriate criticism for ill-used or potentially hegemonic terms. Furthermore, as communicative exchanges are fundamentally oriented to facilitate understanding, communicative actors share a discourse in which they each determine to speak openly and in a way

30 Referring to Plato’s record of Socrates’ comment ‘I think it better, my good friend, that my lyre should be discordant and out of tune, and any chords I might train, and that the majority of mankind should disagree with and oppose me, rather than that I, being one, should be out of tune with myself’ (Gorgias 482c)
31 In my view, the most tenuous presumption of Habermas’s theory is that any truly adversarial participants in such an exchange will generate the amount of care for the other required to meet these requirements. This shortcoming will be discussed in the section dealing with criticisms of Habermas’s theory of communicative action.
that all participants can understand. This may involve redefining terms or positions to achieve universal consent, or recontextualising the debate in a way that enables all participants to understand what is being said. Insofar as communicative action is oriented to achieving understanding, the ultimate goal of discussion is to emulate the process of thought, and thereby give the widest critical consideration to the coordination of action.

**Communicative Paradigms: The Lifeworld and the System**

Habermas believes that language oriented to reaching understanding is the original mode of language use (Habermas 1984: 288). The fundamental purpose of communication is to exchange information in order to cooperatively coordinate action. When this type of communicative exchange occurs regularly and naturally it generates the web of meaning that constitutes the *lifeworld*. The lifeworld can be understood, then, as the shared network of meaning that is the ‘correlate of the processes of reaching understanding’ (Habermas 1984: 70). When communicative action occurs naturally, it occurs because the actors are coming to an understanding within the context of commonly shared and unproblematic background convictions – a context Habermas refers to as the lifeworld. Within the lifeworld, communicative actors can orient their discussions around certain presuppositions that they take for granted, and these shared convictions provide the basis for a meaningful exchange. Thus the lifeworld enables the possibility of communicative action and it, in turn, reproduces itself only through ongoing communicative action. Due to the self constituting nature of communicative action, the shared understandings of the lifeworld possess a self constituted validity.

32 See (Habermas 1994a) and (Habermas 1987b: 119-52).
Habermas juxtaposes the inherent communicative legitimacy of the lifeworld to the legitimising mechanisms of the other major component of this worldview - the system. The system is composed of rational institutions whose teleological ambitions are determined by the strategic functions of those institutions. While action coordination in the lifeworld is achieved through normative consensus based upon unproblematic and shared presuppositions, action coordination in the system tends to be coordinated through the strategic manipulation of instrumental goals. The lifeworld is the correlate of actors pursuing communicative action through illocutionary acts; the system is the correlate of actors pursuing strategic action through perlocutionary acts.

The theory of communicative action is underpinned by two basic notions. The first is that there are several different forms of speech action that can be employed in communication. The two forms of action critical to our understanding of Habermas’s democratic theory are strategic action, which can be defined as action oriented towards realising goals, and communicative action, through which actors seek to reach an understanding (about the action situation and their plans of action) in order to agree on how to coordinate their action (Habermas 1984: 85-86). The second idea underpinning communicative action is that there is a distinction between system and lifeworld; the lifeworld is the realm of personal relationships and is constituted by communicative action, while the system integrates society through functional or cybernetic feedback and is ordered on the basis of non-linguistic steering media, such as money and power (Calhoun 1992: 30; Habermas 1987b: 152). These concepts
provide the basis for Habermas’s new approach to critical theory and provide the central idiom for his reframing of the problem with contemporary democracy.

Rephrasing the Problem: The Colonisation of the Lifeworld by the System

As indicated briefly in the last chapter, Habermas developed the theory of communicative action in an attempt to reaffirm democratic possibilities in a world dominated by capitalism and bureaucracy (Calhoun 1992: 32). This project has been described by Habermas as an attempt to ‘erect a democratic dam against the systemic colonization of the lifeworld’ (Habermas 1992: 444). In the following interpretation of Habermas’s later work, the problem with modern liberal democracies will be reframed in terms of the colonisation of the lifeworld by the system.

Habermas argues that the colonisation of the lifeworld was enabled by the crisis of legitimacy brought about by the failure of traditional value and belief systems to sustain themselves against the rise of instrumental reason. This loss of a shared normative structure, combined with the rise of instrumental legitimacy, enabled the development of subsystems of rationality with independently constituted legitimacy. In Habermas’s analysis, these subsystems have become detached from the legitimating power of the lifeworld, yet continue to command authority due to their internal systemic legitimacy. The prevalence of systemic rationalities in domains of cultural reproduction (such as public space) causes systemic imperatives to pervade the rationality of the lifeworld. This “colonisation” of the lifeworld by the system distorts the inherent reason of the lifeworld and undermines the critical function of democratic fora. While this exploration is intended to elucidate these important elements of Habermas’s theoretical framework, it also makes further sense of
Habermas’s criticism of contemporary democracies for a lack of critical interaction between people and the world around them.

Such abstract concepts as “lifeworld” and “system” make it difficult to visualise what exactly is intended by the phrase “colonisation of the lifeworld by the system”. What I will be detailing here is the gradual replacement of communicative forms of action orientation by strategic forms of action orientation. This occurs partly as a corollary of the modern embrace of instrumentalism, as described by Arendt in the previous chapter, and partly as a result of the change in human socialisation under this condition. Although it will be expressed in a different idiom, as far as political institutions are concerned, the problem remains that there is not enough considered engagement in political fora.

Habermas asserts that the lifeworld has been “uncoupled” from the system as a result of the epistemological ascendency of instrumental reason. He uses Max Weber’s description of the effects of the spread of occidental rationalism to illustrate the process of lifeworld rationalisation which leads to this “uncoupling”\textsuperscript{33}. As Weber notes, the consequence of the spread of instrumental rationality was to undermine archaic societies’ normative “mythological” notions of legitimacy by replacing them with instrumental forms of legitimation (Habermas 1987b: 114). Hence, following the invention of the telescope, it becomes illegitimate to argue that the universe revolves around the earth, as we know otherwise.

\textsuperscript{33} Weber emphasises the goal-rational orientation of occidental rationalism as witnessed in the Protestant work ethic and Calvinism in order to make this point (Weber 1958: 320-350). The previous section on Arendt discussed the instrumental dominance of modern thought; ‘We have leveled all human activities to securing the necessities of life and providing for their abundance’ (Arendt 1958: 126)
Prior to the rationalisation of the lifeworld, systemic imperatives were inseparable from the web of legitimation that forms the lifeworld. In “traditional” societies, the bases of systemic coordination are the traditions and social obligations that also shape those unproblematic convictions that form the lifeworld. However, following the displacement of holistic religious worldviews by occidental rationalism during the Enlightenment, the instrumental appropriation of previously communicative forms of coordination has shattered the normative consensus of the lifeworld. In place of that normative consensus new instrumental modes of legitimacy and action coordination have emerged. The holism of traditional worldviews has been replaced by the “objective truth” of rational enquiry, as the legitimating functions of these worldviews are questioned from an instrumental means-ends perspective.

Prior to this “rationalisation” the validity of cognition, morality and aesthetics had been unified under the same normative understanding. For instance; to be thoughtless was also to be evil and ugly and to be good also meant to be thoughtful and beautiful. Following the triumph of instrumental rationality over this unifying normative conception, cognition, morality and aesthetics have been differentiated from each other and each has developed as an independent domain of legitimacy. In modernity, beauty has no rationally legitimate claim to be equal to goodness, just as no one can rationally state that ugly is the same thing as evil. This process of differentiation is described by Habermas as the rationalisation of the lifeworld.\[^{34}\]

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\[^{34}\] Habermas emphasises that this rationalisation of the lifeworld should not be seen as systemic colonisation, but rather as a fundamental change in the nature of the lifeworld: “In a differentiated social system the lifeworld seems to shrink to a subsystem. This should not be read causally, as if the structures of the lifeworld changed in dependence on increases in systemic complexity. The opposite is
Following the rationalisation of the lifeworld the system essentially “uncouples” itself from the lifeworld by systemically legitimating the validity of strategic goals without recourse to the shared understandings inherent in the communicative process. As the complexity of society grows, the lifeworld:

gets cut down more and more to one subsystem among others. In the process, system mechanisms get further and further detached from the social structures through which social integration takes place. (Habermas 1987b: 154)

In place of the normative cohesion of the lifeworld of archaic societies, in modern society the social system bursts out of the horizon of the lifeworld and escapes from the intuitive knowledge of everyday communicative practice (Habermas 1987b: 186). The activities of the system, or rather of the various subsystems that come to compose the system35, no longer garner their validity from communicative consensus, but rather through their own independent strategic imperatives.

In order to gain an appreciation of the ways in which the system can begin to encroach upon the lifeworld, it is important to understand how systemic imperatives are reconciled with the legitimacy constituted by the lifeworld. In archaic societies action was coordinated through a basic normative agreement that transcended “domains of rationality”, such as cognition, morality and aesthetics. Following the rationalisation of the lifeworld, however, there is no universal normative consensus through which the coordination of action can be assured. The undermining of consensus occurs concurrently with the new possibilities of individualisation; namely

true: increases in complexity are dependent on the structural differentiation of the lifeworld (Habermas 1987b: 173).

35 The system can be broadly defined as the domain of subsystems which do not directly derive their legitimacy from the lifeworld.
the ability of individuals to develop a subjective and differentiated attitude with regard to the realms of cognition, morality and aesthetics. Due to this individuation, social integration becomes absurdly complex and, indeed, in Habermas’s view, impossible to orchestrate through normative unity. When systemic subsystems seek to coordinate action, each subsystem is typically unable to do so on a normative basis. Systemic action must be coordinated, therefore, through non-communicative “steering media” such as money and power. Thus:

...in the wake of capitalist modernization money and power – more concretely, markets and administrations – take over the integrative functions which were formerly fulfilled by consensual values and norms, or even by processes of reaching understanding. (Habermas 1993a: 171)

In lieu of normative agreement, steering media present an avenue through which it is possible to continue to coordinate action despite the conflicting strategic interests of participants in communication. Money and power serve the role of steering media because their distribution can allow for the mediation of disputes over action without having to achieve consensus through communication. Quite simply, normative disagreement within and between systemic subsystems is compensated by the distribution of money or power. So we find in the system that money and power provide the incentive for action coordination in the place of the inherent coordinative power of normative consensus in the lifeworld. Rather than resort to the clumsy and possibly action-inhibitive mechanism of reaching consensus on normative issues, the use of “steering media” makes up for the normative deficit and allows for the smooth functioning of systemic operation. Given these terms, it is now possible to recast the problem with modern democracies as a result of the gradual replacement of discursive forms of action orientation with systemic forms of action orientation.
The colonisation of the system occurs not as a result of the rationalisation of the lifeworld, but rather as a myopic effect that exists following this rationalisation. The rationalisation is part of a process of freeing up the emancipatory potential of reason, and according to Habermas this emancipation should be celebrated. The problems of modernity occur because the systemic legitimation facilitated by steering media is, in the modern and postmodern era, progressively usurping the consensual communicative basis for the orientation of action. ‘The transfer of action coordination from ordinary language to steering media has the effect of uncoupling interaction from lifeworld contexts’ (Habermas 1987b: 263). Given the inherent vulnerability of communicative action to strategic action, the colonisation of the lifeworld can be seen as the inevitable result of the inequitable access to steering media. The ability to alter norms and values within the lifeworld is disproportionately possessed by those who have money and power.

Money and power act as steering media insofar as they provide the universalisable counterweight for normative imbalance, but also insofar as those who can extensively utilise these media also control the steering capacity within any given society. For instance, in modern liberal democracies the institutions of property and contract govern the flow of money, while power is largely governed via the public-legal organisation of offices (Habermas 1987b: 270). The legitimacy of these “governors” is still anchored in the lifeworld, but the governors themselves operate within their own systemic realms of legitimacy. These systemic realms of legitimacy are insulated from real communicative engagement beyond their subsystem, and they are subject to the influence of steering media as a result. Because of the governors’ role in determining the distribution of steering media, systemic forms of legitimacy are taken.
to be universally “legitimate” and can then supplant the communicatively generated legitimacy of the lifeworld.

As a result, in modern society we witness the development of expert cultures oriented around the peculiar specialisations required by the media through which their subsystems are steered. As individuals become more indoctrinated in systemic forms of legitimation they become “experts” in that particular system. Because of the normative detachment following the rationalisation of the lifeworld itself, the fundamental legitimacy of “expertise” in one domain is understood as being beyond the realm of critique of the other subsystems. Each subsystem develops its own functional language and system of legitimacy to the point that the increasing isolation of experts from the lifeworld leads to ‘an elitist splitting-off of expert cultures from contexts of communicative action in daily life’ (Habermas 1987b: 330). Without a unifying normative standard to be measured against, experts can come to know an incredible amount about their particular area of expertise without having to situate the legitimacy of this knowledge in the context of a shared lifeworld. The only functional purpose for the continued operation of an inter-system discourse is the communication of use value, which allows the knowledge of experts to be employed in instrumental ways when this suits the strategic interests and steering capacity of alternate subsystems.

Due to the universal, non-communicative nature of steering media, those who hold a superior position in the distribution of money and power have a greater opportunity to implement their strategic goals irrespective of their lifeworld legitimacy. They can essentially “buy-out” normative disagreement through the judicious use of steering
media. As the lifeworld shrinks to become one subsystem among many, it becomes susceptible to the possibility that its legitimacy is not as immediate and recognisable as that of other subsystems.

This situation is exacerbated by the fact that perlocutionary acts are parasitic upon illocutionary acts. While it may be true that the original mode of communication was oriented towards reaching understanding, a communicatively oriented participant in an exchange will always be susceptible to strategic (perlocutionary) aims. Simply put, if during a dialogue between two people one person trusts the aim of communication to be sharing an understanding while another is pursuing strategic interests the process of thoughtful discussion is never really engaged, and what is already “known” assumes precedence. The presence of a strategic actor in any communicative exchange automatically undermines the possibility of communicative action insofar as any strategic orientation in such a dialogue undermines the illocutionary objectives of all parties involved. The moment perlocutionary aims are introduced into an exchange, communicative action ceases, and the linguistic exchange becomes strategically mediated. We are presented, therefore, with a situation in which the ongoing reproduction of the lifeworld is susceptible to external and instrumental interference. When systemic forces achieve positions of control and distribution in regard to steering media, this can lead, either overtly or indirectly, to the infiltration of perlocutionary voices into previously communicative exchanges.

When the increasing dominance of systemic expert cultures is considered in light of the fact that the rationalised lifeworld increasingly loses its structural possibilities for
ideology formation, it is possible to see how the lifeworld itself can begin to be infiltrated by systemic forces.

It is not the uncoupling of media-steered subsystems and of their organizational forms from the lifeworld that leads to one-sided rationalization or reification of everyday communicative practice, but only the penetration of forms of economic and administrative rationality into areas of action that resist being converted over to the media of money and power because they are specialized in cultural transmission, social integration and child rearing, and remain dependent on mutual understanding as a mechanism for coordinating action. (Habermas 1987b: 330)

As systemic knowledge permeates previously inaccessible realms of human conduct, we open ourselves up to greater levels of systemic colonisation through socialisation. The structurally differentiated and systemically colonised lifeworld, upon which modern states are fundamentally dependent, remains the only source of legitimation (Habermas 1987b: 359). The fact that language functions not only as a medium of reaching understanding, but also of socialisation and social integration in the process of identity formation (Habermas 1987b: 24) means that, in the process of socialisation, systemic imperatives have an opportunity to pervade, or colonise, the lifeworld.

Public education is a relatively benign example of this occurrence, and a comparison of the archaic pedagogy of Ancient Athens with the public education system of the Enlightenment as depicted by Charles Dickens in *Hard Times* can be very helpful in identifying the ways in which education developed (as a result of systemic imperatives) to be less about thinking, and more about knowing. The Athenian mode of education was focused on what might be called human development; that is, developing all human capacities including honing aesthetic, athletic and mental abilities. The purpose of these activities was to enable reflection upon one’s life, and to facilitate comprehension in doing so. The education of modernity, however, as articulated by Dickens’ character Principal Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, is based upon
reverence for facts and quantifiability. These skills provide the tools through which it is possible to become a useful member of an independent subsystem, but their centrality to education means that certain systemic presuppositions actually become presuppositions of the lifeworld. From this point on, the student is not expected to develop as a student, or as a human, but as a worker, as a potential tool in a functionary subsystem. In this way, as forms of administrative and economic rationality penetrate into areas that, in effect, constitute society the lifeworld opens itself up to systemic colonisation.

What Habermas objects to in this process of lifeworld colonisation is essentially the same kind of instrumentality that Marcuse protests against in One Dimensional Man and Arendt criticises in The Human Condition. The criticism is that in advanced liberal democracies the voices of considered and human reason are being drowned out by the rationality of strategically oriented subsystems (Habermas 1992: 444). What Habermas objects to is ‘the degree of autonomy that has been achieved by more or less automated social subsystems that, in the interest of efficiency, remove all sorts of policies from the sphere of public discussion where they could be assessed in the light of the desirability of the outcomes they actually produce’ (Olafson 1990: 65). The colonisation of the lifeworld describes the situation wherein these subsystems secure their freedom from lifeworld legitimacy and determine success according to their own strategic criteria. In doing so, the subsystems undermine the very possibility of critical discussion about their outcomes.

If we now take a look back at the problem with liberal democracies that Habermas describes in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere it is possible to
resituate that problem directly in terms of the colonisation of the lifeworld and the communicative disruption this process entails. In terms of communicative action, the critical success of the bourgeois public sphere can be seen as a result of the earnest discussion that naturally occurs between common constituents of a lifeworld. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas argues that the bourgeois public sphere was particularly open and discursive because it was constituted by property owners who enjoyed a comparable degree of education and financial security (Habermas 1989: 71-85, 135). Habermas might have phrased the same understanding in terms of the shared and unproblematic convictions of the bourgeois lifeworld that gave rise to communication oriented to reaching understanding. Of course, we can also see that strategic forces began to dominate the forum and truly communicative action effectively ceased when the disparate lifeworlds of the working classes were brought to the conversation.

As far as the “refeudalisation” of the public sphere is concerned, this can be recast as the colonisation of the lifeworld by the system. Due to the fact that perlocutions parasitically elide illocutions, as long as no political space exists for communicative action, political debates can only be conducted along strategic lines. Hence the bourgeois forum designed for action coordination based upon the compulsion of reason becomes limited to reconciling systemic strategic interests, with no functional use for critical reason or input from the lifeworld. The only relationship that the modern democratic political forum has to the lifeworld occurs when the political subsystem is judged once every three or four years. This is a return to publicity as a form of production and consumption. The democratic process intrudes upon the citizen once every few years in order to tabulate a preference, and it reciprocally
claims to possess legitimacy as a result. The fact that the political institution of representative liberal democracy claims, and is granted, this legitimacy despite any apparently real and direct relationship with its constituents illustrates the extent to which the lifeworld can be colonised by the system.

In instrumental terms this means that there is no place for communicative action in the public sphere. Instead, we are given strategists operating within the legitimating mechanisms of their political party, court or electoral system, each of which is designed according to instrumental purposes in order to facilitate a preconceived kind of rationality, a certain kind of knowledge. The possibilities for coordinating action on a social level are surrendered to the culture of political experts, who continue to make themselves useful by ensuring their re-election above all else. When the sole purpose of government becomes to secure its position in the distribution of steering media, the space of critical freedom is lost and the machine runs itself. Hence we find Habermas argues, in sympathy with Arendt, that if we do not clear a space for freedom then we will be bound by the determinism of instrumental thought.

As Habermas discovered following the publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* even philosophy becomes instrumentalised in this scenario; it is interesting insofar as it is useful for preconceived ends. Habermas attempted to avoid playing out this act of critically analysing consciousness by developing his theory of communicative action. In his work following this theoretical development he depicts how communicative action – an ethics of discourse – might be used to turn back the tide of lifeworld colonisation.
Deliberative Democracy

Habermas suggests that the solution to the problem of systemic colonisation of the lifeworld lies in his conception of “deliberative democracy”. Despite his misgivings about the impact of the universal franchise on the quality of political debate, Habermas understands that the legitimation crisis facing the modern liberal political apparatus should be addressed through the critical capacity inherent in the notion of democracy. Put very simply, the appropriation of communicative action, as an inherently legitimate form of reason, challenges the authority of systemic rationality and provides an impetus for criticising the system.

Habermas’s deliberative democracy distinguishes itself from other democratic theories through a focus on communicative practice; most notably he presents the ideal speech situation as a model for the ideal political forum. Habermas’s understanding of the fundamental inadequacies of theories of consciousness prevents him from identifying a specific concrete democratic structure that would serve equally well for all purposes. Rather, he describes ideal speech as an ideal against which to criticise actually existing democratic structures. Nonetheless, he has several ideas as to how communicative action might proliferate through existing democratic mechanisms such as state institutions and common law. This section of the chapter is an exploration of Habermas’s deliberative democratic solution to the problem with modern liberal democracies.

Despite the threat of lifeworld colonisation, Habermas’s theory of communicative action reflects an optimism concerning the possibilities of democratic systems. In the communicative framework, the rationalisation of the lifeworld unleashes the
emancipatory possibilities of communicative action. Following the rationalisation of
the lifeworld, traditions lose their claim to authority and are set communicatively
aflow; hence norms become abstract, positive and in need of justification (Habermas
1979). It is a loss of the legitimacy of other normative forces, seen by different
theorists as the “death of god”, the “linguistification of the sacred” or “an incredulity
towards metanarratives”, which enables the rationality inherent in communication to
provide the basis for action coordination (Habermas 1987b: 89). It is only at this point
that societies have the tools to coordinate their actions via considered reason, and
democracy can be a vehicle of legitimate political discussion.

Habermas seeks to show that communicative action would pervade the discursive
institutions of any democratic system that would be claimed to possess rational
legitimacy. Habermas emphasises that this legitimacy is derived from the earnest
rationality of illocutionary discussion and that this legitimacy arises from the open
and rational character of the discussion. Legitimacy is granted, therefore, by what we
have been describing as considered reason – that is the exposure of all arguments to
counter-arguments based upon a motivation to achieve understanding\(^\text{36}\). While
Habermas evokes the timeless notion of the inherent legitimacy of communicative
utterances to justify his position, the interplay of two (or more) voices in a dialogue
committed to reaching an understanding is reminiscent of Arendt’s description of
thinking (Habermas 1996b: (6)). For Habermas, the institution of communicative

\(^\text{36}\) In ‘Wahrheitstheorien’, cited in (H. Fahrenbach ed. Wirklichkeit und Reflexion, 1973), Habermas
suggested that consensus in ideal speaking conditions can operate as the criterion of truth. His
theoretical progression reflected in The Theory of Communicative Action includes the recognition that
this consensus doesn’t necessarily indicate ‘truth’, but rather constitutes legitimacy for that particular
communicative community. This realisation leaves open the possibility of culturally specific
consensus. The strength of this realisation was so profound for Habermas that he subsequently refused
to allow ‘Wahrheitstheorien’ to be translated.
action through discursive democratic practices is the basis for solving the problem with liberal democracies.

**The Ideal Speech Situation**

In order to produce the greatest degree of communicative reason during situations of action orientation, Habermas describes an “ideal speech situation” to which all political conversations should aspire. Habermas presents this idealisation in order to point out the fundamental principles of democratic legitimacy.

The first specification Habermas makes about the ideal speech situation relates to who should contribute to the dialogue. The principles of participation can be best summarised by stating that everyone affected by the decision should be free to speak, and to speak freely (Habermas 1990: 86). These principles emphasise the liberal nature of Habermas’s ideal forum. The extension of the forum to all parties affected not only rests upon the notions of freedom and equal rights but also echoes John Stuart Mill’s passion for the consideration of marginalised voices in order to achieve the most well informed debate possible. Habermas emphasises that the broader the consideration that any decision undergoes, the more legitimate the outcome is likely to be (Rehg and Bohman 2002: 46).

In order to establish a discussion in which communicative action would flourish, Habermas depicts a situation in which care and understanding tends to develop between participants. For instance, in an early piece ‘A Theory of Communicative Competence’, he suggests that the condition of ideal speech relies upon the ability of the ego to assume the subjectivity of alter ego and vice-versa; a condition he calls
“intersubjectivity”. He argues that this takes place when there is complete symmetry among participants in a conversation.

Pure intersubjectivity exists only when there is complete symmetry in the distribution of assertion and dispute, revelation and concealment, prescription and conformity among the partners of communication. (Habermas 1970: 371)

Symmetry among participants would mean that the notion of shared purpose would eliminate the instrumental uses of perlocutionary acts, and thus encourage the proliferation of illocutionary acts. Such a discussion would result in communicative action; in which case the most rational, that is, fundamentally acceptable, action coordination would result.

In speech situations that can not be fully symmetrical\(^\text{37}\), Habermas argues that certain commitments be undertaken by participants in order to emulate the condition of pure intersubjectivity. Fundamentally, the participants need to be committed to coordinating action on the basis of understanding. To this end, the communicative process should exclude all force except for the force of the better argument, and should exclude all motives but the cooperative search for the “truth”. ‘From this perspective argumentation can be conceived as a reflexive continuation, with different means, of action oriented to reaching understanding’ (Habermas 1984: 25). As perlocutionary acts will fundamentally undermine the reasonable quality of conversation produced by this process, the sole goal of participants in conversation needs to be reaching understanding.

In order to ensure that this understanding is achievable in non-symmetrical conditions, participants must be willing to rephrase their own arguments in a way that all

\(^\text{37}\) Such as when participants do not share a common lifeworld and thus do not share unproblematic convictions and understandings.
participants can understand. Normative claims of truth and rightness must be discursively redeemed (Habermas 1993a: 171). In order to ensure that the debate takes shape based upon terms that are understood by all concerned parties, participants ‘should ascribe identical meanings to expressions and connect utterances with context-transcending validity claims’ (Habermas 1996a: 4). Participants must also endeavour to explain themselves in an idiom that can be understood by all. Such a process leads to each participant gaining a more intimate knowledge of the argument and communication community of which they are part, which, in the process, facilitates action coordination based upon understanding.

The ideal speech situation is one in which all participants have the same understanding of language and seek the same goals. In typical situations in which this symmetry does not exist, the single goal of interlocutors must be to achieve understanding. In order to achieve this goal, they must be prepared to explain and examine their language and arguments in such a way as to make them intelligible to all other participants. Such a process gives rise to the most reasonable results in situations of action orientation.

**Domains of Application**

So how can these idealisations come to be implemented in a way that might mitigate the effects of the colonisation of the lifeworld by the system? This is the question Habermas seeks to address in his later work on democracy, most notably in *Between Facts and Norms* (Habermas 1996a). This work explores the tension between the administrative/instrumental authority of the system (facts) and the moral/ethical authority of the lifeworld (norms).
Communicative action can be seen to reconcile facts and norms by challenging systemic imperatives in both social and administrative fora. Habermas refrains from arguing for an ideal form of democratic citizenship, but bases his democratic theory on what is required to make democratic government internally legitimate according to his discourse theory. His later work pursues this goal by detailing his attempts to determine the ways in which the legal-rational institutions of modern liberal democracies can be imbued with communicative reason. At the same time he advocates communicative action and ideal speech as critical tools that enable a critical assessment of systemic imperatives on the level of personal engagement.

Deliberative democracy does not involve a set of prescriptions for “correct” democratic citizenship, but rather presents a model of democratic decision making that ideally should proliferate through legal institutions, political institutions and the public sphere (Cooke 1997: 274). In Between Facts and Norms, Habermas presents law as the most reflexive and pervasive institutionalisation of those speech conditions he had come to realise as ideal. Habermas argues that courts of law act as a forum for allowing the voices of the lifeworld to compete against systemic forces in relatively ideal conditions. Working as an autonomous subsystem, law ‘translates ordinary language into specialized codes, regenerates social solidarity through universal(ized) norms, and institutionalizes radical democracy as equal rights’ (Love 2002: 321). However, because the validity of the courts relies directly upon the support of the communicative community, its very use value lies in its ability to coordinate actions through legitimacy constituted in the lifeworld.

By meeting its need for legitimation with the help of the productive force of communication, law takes advantage of a permanent risk of dissensus to spur on legally institutionalized public discourses (Habermas 1996a: 462).
With their specific rules about revelation, language and deliberation, the law courts of modern democracies represent the closest existing institutionalisation of the ideal speech situation. It is only in a court of law that participants in discourse are under an oath to speak honestly, openly and redeem any claims to truth that they make. Habermas argues that courts of law are constituted through the need for communication communities to emulate ideal speech so that the conditions of common life might be regulated impartially (Habermas 1996a: 306).

Habermas indicated in *The Theory of Communicative Action* that the purpose of juridification had changed from constraining administrative systems to constraining economic systems (Habermas 1987b: 361). By the time he wrote *Between Facts and Norms* it is clear that Habermas hopes juridification might help to constrain both systems. Insofar as law courts present the opportunity to oppose the steering capacity of money and power through recourse to what is commonly held to be legitimate, it follows that Habermas identifies positive law as an already constituted means to resist the colonisation of the lifeworld. An example of this can be found in the successful legal challenge against McDonalds for portraying their food as nutritious and for targeting children with their advertising. By making McDonalds redeem their claims to truth in a court of law, it was publicly shown that such claims were illegitimate, and hence inhibited their colonisation of the lifeworld.

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38 These imperatives might exist in the system of democratic representation, but a cursory examination of the process of debate in modern liberal democracies indicates they are given scant regard in comparison to the strategic imperatives of the political subsystem.

39 Habermas’s assessment of the role of law is ambivalent in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, where he suggests that the intrusion of juridification into decision making processes that otherwise would be coordinated through communicative action opens up these processes to the influence of steering media and thus represents a further colonisation of the lifeworld (Habermas 1987b: 361-364).

40 A thorough account of this trial can be found at the website [www.mcs spotlight.org](http://www.mcs spotlight.org), or in the publication (Vidal 1997).
Habermas does not maintain, however, that the existence of a functional judiciary precludes the need for a vibrant democracy. Indeed, he suggests the validity of the rule of law can only be established in the context of a vibrant and discursive political public sphere (Habermas 1996a: xlii). The point he makes is that without a vibrant and healthy public sphere, the lifeworld cannot be a source of valid norms. This is an outgrowth of the problems posed by the systemic colonisation of the lifeworld. If the lifeworld itself has been colonised, then the judicial system will not be regulated by a communicatively constituted lifeworld, but rather by the systemic imperatives that have managed to infiltrate the lifeworld through processes of socialisation. Hence, law cannot operate independently in controlling the colonisation of the lifeworld by the system; it also requires a discursive public sphere in order to maintain the internal legitimacy of the lifeworld.

Habermas’s admiration of democracy is based upon its ability to reflect and enact the values of the lifeworld in the face of systemic pressures. The ultimate proof of a legitimate democratic system is provided when ‘all outcomes reached in conformity with the [democratic] procedure are reasonable’ (Habermas 1996a: 304). This is to say, the procedure must be designed so as to allow the force of reason to determine action coordination. This does not preclude broad participation, but does impose procedure in order to extract rational participation. Habermas avails himself of John Dewey’s position that:

> Majority rule, just as majority rule, is as foolish as its critics charge it with being. But it is never merely majority rule… The means by which a majority comes to be a majority is the more important thing. (Dewey 1954: 207)\(^41\)

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\(^41\) Quoted in (Habermas 1996a: 304).
According to Habermas, the way to fix democracy is to implement discursive procedures that promote communicative action both in the political realm and concurrently in the informal processes of will-formation in the public sphere (Habermas 1996a: 376). In order to ensure a legitimate political system, therefore, both the political apparatus and civil society must be imbued with a discursive spirit that ensures that all political decisions are ratified in the face of divergent opinions.

Habermas does not hold much hope for reforming the public sphere as a unifying template for discursive ethics. Rather he hopes the development of discursive ethics, as a self-reflexive search for understanding and reconciliation of identity with environment, will give rise to a critical civil society, which will in turn generate a legitimate democracy. In order to meet Habermas’s requirements of legitimate democracy, a vibrant public sphere must ‘not only detect and identify problems but also convincingly and influentially thematize them, furnish them with possible solutions, and dramatize them in such a way that they are taken up and dealt with by the parliamentary complex’ (Habermas 1996a: 359).

William Rehg and James Bohman have pointed out that Habermas presents four functional requirements for a democratic public sphere that elaborate on this statement (Rehg and Bohman 2002). First, the public sphere must be receptive to the problems of citizens in their everyday lives. Second, it must be rooted in robust civil society and an open, pluralist culture to ensure that problems are brought to the attention of the public. Third, the public sphere should act as a unifying conduit between different segments of civil society in order to ensure inclusivity and broad debate. Fourth, the public sphere should be free of communicative blockages or
distortions so that the public sphere can place issues on the political agenda without being controlled or distorted by powerful social interests (Rehg and Bohman 2002: 41-42). The first two conditions deal with detecting and identifying problems, both in the lifeworld of the individual and through the individual’s engagement in civil society. The second two conditions reflect the requirements of a public sphere that can thematise and dramatise problems so that they are dealt with publicly and reasonably by the political apparatus. The existence of this kind of public sphere would facilitate the critical consideration of political action and critical access to the political system.

Habermas believes that liberal democratic systems tend to meet the first three of these conditions, but he is critical of the role of the mass media in achieving the fourth condition. The media obviously plays a central role in the healthy functioning of the public sphere and, according to his discourse ethics, Habermas advances a series of requirements the media should satisfy if it is to fulfil its role as the mouthpiece of a vibrant public sphere. He does this using the work of Michael Gurevitch and Jay G. Blumler, who identify the following services that the media ought to provide in democratic political systems:

1. Surveillance of the sociopolitical environment, reporting developments likely to impinge, positively or negatively, on the welfare of citizens;
2. Meaningful agenda-setting, identifying the key issues of the day, including the forces that have formed and may resolve them;
3. Platforms for an intelligible and illuminating advocacy by politicians and spokespersons of other causes and interest groups;
4. Dialogue across a diverse range of views, as well as between powerholders (actual and prospective) and mass publics;
5. Mechanisms for holding officials to account for how they have exercised power;
6. Incentives for citizens to learn, choose and become involved, rather than merely to follow and kibitz over the political process;
7. A principled resistance to the efforts of forces outside the media to subvert their independence, integrity and ability to serve the audience;
8. A sense of respect for the audience member, as potentially concerned and able to make sense of his or her political environment. (Gurevitch and Blumler 1990: 270)
These measures are designed to ensure that the communicative potential of the media is exploited to its fullest extent by bringing problems to public attention and by generating discussion free from the distortion of systemic influences. It is clear that Habermas hopes that an effective media might force public interlocutors to be more communicative and less strategic, so that public actors might pre-emptively redeem their claims to truth and present arguments in broadly understandable language.

These prescriptions for media regulation are one of the few instances at which Habermas has concrete recommendations for facilitating deliberative democracy. He restricts himself to an abstract contrasting of legitimate democratic function, that which is discursive and based upon the principles of communicative action, with the illegitimate democratic function, in which political participation is limited to the occasional experience of voting. As existing liberal democratic political apparatuses fall between these extremes, Habermas is ambivalent about the role of political parties (Munichs 2002: 193). Ideally, political parties should provide a mediating forum for discursive interplay and serve as anchors between the political apparatus and the lifeworld. On the other hand, political parties may occupy the position of systemic subsystems existing for their own strategic imperatives and thereby reduce the possibility of truly communicative interaction. This ambivalence underlies much of Habermas’s application of his discursive ethics to the “real world” – and is essentially the same problem Habermas has with philosophies of consciousness. Every possibility for emancipation also contains a possibility for further entrapment; the only way out of this predicament is through recourse to the inherent validity of communicative action.
As a result of this awareness, Habermas’s work gives us scant indication as to how the civil society required to generate democracy’s critical capacities might come about, but we have an eloquent metatheoretical conception of how democratic legitimacy should be constituted. The great simplicity of Habermas’s theory is that it relies upon the rationality inherent in everyday communication. This communication is responsible for the reproduction of the lifeworld, and this is where social norms have the greatest communicative interaction with systemic forces. In the public sphere Habermas asserts that ‘the formation of rational opinions and decisions must rest on validity claims to truth, rightness and so forth, which can or at least could be justified before all competent persons with convincing reasons’ 42. In both private and public scenarios the key to Habermas’s answer to the problem with modern democracies lies in appropriating the correct democratic procedure. The strength of his argument lies in his elegant and exhaustive exploration of what is required to make democratic procedures inherently legitimate.

By singling out a procedure of decision-making, it seeks to make room for those involved, who must then find answers on their own to the moral-practical issues that come at them, or are imposed upon them, with objective historical force. (Habermas 1990: 211)

Communicative action gives us a form of reason that is both culturally sensitive and immanently critical. Asking for claims to truth to be redeemed is both a reasonable and critical expectation that opens up the possibility for emancipation.

We can see, then, that according to Habermas the emancipatory potential of democracy essentially rests upon his understanding that power is communicatively generated and sovereignty can, therefore, be seen as a correlate to critical access to decision making processes. According to Habermas, in order to fully cater to

42 (Rehg and Bohman 2002: 33) citing (Habermas 1984: 1-42 and 273-337)
contemporary notions of sovereignty, the institutions of democracy need to become more open, deliberative and inclusive. At the same time, he believes all institutions should aspire towards becoming more democratic. The ideal speech of communicative action provides an exemplar for all reasonable discussions to emulate, and as such serves as an emancipatory mechanism for reforming systemic institutions. Habermas’s theory thus forms the basis of the deliberative school of democratic theory.

It is my contention that while there are notable differences between Habermas’s deliberative democracy and Arendt’s agonistic democracy, the complementary nature of their theories is more striking. In order to illustrate how Arendt’s agonistic theory can be seen to rectify several weaknesses in Habermas’s deliberative theory, I shall first indicate these weaknesses as identified by other democratic theorists.

**Objections to Habermas**

As the primary theorist of deliberative democracy, Habermas’s work has generated much criticism. My aim here is to review and assess only a few of these objections in order to illustrate the limits of Habermas’s work as an aid to theorising democracy. The most pertinent objection to Habermas’s work is that he gives no indication of the source of the impetus for procedural reform of decision making fora\(^{43}\). This is not to deny his functional recognition of the institution of law as one currently existing forum to address the tension between systemic and lifeworld legitimacy in modern societies. Habermas has clearly indicated, however, that courts *per se* do not ensure the existence of a healthy, vibrant democratic society; rather the existence of a

\(^{43}\) For an example of such an argument see (Johnson 1992).
healthy, democratic society is the prerequisite of a legitimate court of law. The hope that the critical use of ideal speech might proliferate through society on the basis of the consciousness aroused by The Theory of Communicative Action belies the difficulty involved in understanding Habermas’s theory, and his own cynicism about such attempts to develop an emancipatory consciousness. By failing to situate his solution to the problem with democracy in the idiom of the oppressed, Habermas fails to make his work since Communicative Action into practicable critical theory.

As a result of this failure to illustrate how change may occur, his deliberative democratic model of democracy has been accused of being at best irrelevant, and at worst a re-justification of liberal ideals at the expense of meaningful critique⁴⁴. To Habermas’s critics his obscurity combined with his inaccessible language and argument contribute to a theory whose critical credentials are highly suspect. While I defend the value of Habermas’s work as an expression of an ideal, I recognise that these criticisms point out some deficiencies in Habermas’s theory as a tool for re-conceiving democratic practices. The following discussion serves to outline the scope of Habermas’s deliberative democratic solution in response to these criticisms.

The most pertinent criticism as far as the ambitions of this thesis is concerned, is that Habermas does very little to tell us how democracy might be “re-ordered” to ensure the flourishing of communicative action⁴⁵. The feeling is that, in lieu of a concrete change to the material conditions of the public sphere, all ideals concerning discourse are nothing but “pie in the sky” theorising. Indeed, if we accept the pertinence and

⁴⁴ For an example of this kind of argument see (Reichelt 2000).
⁴⁵ See, for example, (Baynes 1995: 218).
accuracy of Habermas’s earlier criticisms of the nature of the modern public sphere, such as those articulated in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, wouldn’t it be reasonable to conclude that political elites might ‘take advantage of a situation characterized by a “public in dormancy” in order to exacerbate privatistic tendencies?’ (Scheuerman 2002: 75). Without concrete changes to the way that the systemic structure works (or in terms of legitimacy, does not work) it is not clear as to how the ideal decision making procedures are meant to gain ascendancy over more strategically oriented (and strategically supported) models of decision making. More to the point, since Habermas fails to articulate the ways in which these changes might occur (as he relies on the inherent strength and validity of communicative action as an idealisation) he is vulnerable to the charge that he is merely an apologist for the present regime.

Chantal Mouffe is one author who has oriented her democratic theory around a critical reading of Habermas’s hopes for deliberative democracy. Her critical assessment is based on two interdependent arguments. First, she argues that no political forum can ever be truly “neutral” in the way that deliberative notions of politics suggest; hence Habermas’s communicative idealisation cannot purport to be a completely neutral way to arrive at decisions. Echoing Habermas’s Frankfurt School predecessor, Herbert Marcuse, Mouffe claims that “objectivity” is always constituted through acts of power (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Although Habermas developed his theory of communicative action in order to eliminate social power in the face of reason – to produce “objectivity” through pure intersubjectivity- if power exists prior to the formulation of communicative action, is it not reasonable to suppose that power is embedded in the very structure of communicative action? As Mouffe claims ‘there
Mouffe argues that although Habermas may be right in diagnosing the need to formulate an alternative to liberal democracy and the instrumentalist conception of politics it fosters, the solution cannot be found through the appropriation of “ideal” discourse. Underpinning this belief is the understanding that there is no such thing as consensus without exclusion, because politics is constituted precisely through plurality and when incommensurabilities arise the resolution of action coordination cannot be neutral. As Wittgenstein notes:

Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and a heretic. I said I would “combat” the other man – but wouldn’t I give him reasons? Certainly; but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes persuasion. (Wittgenstein 1969: 81c)

It is argued that “universalisable” arguments, those which should gain acceptance via Habermas’s communicative rationality, can often conceal widely shared prejudices and viewpoints, undermining the true sovereignty of the individual, and without the guarantee of truly reasonable (rather than merely populist) outcomes (Villa 2001: 180). The attempt to focus critical attention upon democratic procedure is therefore seen as being normatively loaded and ignorant of the true plurality of the polis.

Habermas has certainly been criticised from other quarters for concealing a normative ideal in his delineations of the role lifeworld and reason occupy in constituting legitimacy. A number of critics have suggested that Habermas’s delineation between lifeworld and system is, as Rosenthal puts it, “based upon a criterion of functionality
that instrumentalizes his entire project’ (Rosenthal 1992: 7)\textsuperscript{46}. This charge resembles an earlier criticism brought forth by William Connolly who argues that Habermas fails to acknowledge the contestable character of the ideal of rationality to which he appeals as a basis for agreement (Connolly 1983). It is equally possible to argue that the requirements of ideal speech favour a particular kind of citizenship and will become oppressive if continually required from the citizen\textsuperscript{47}. The grounds for each of these objections are basically the same; that is, the assertion that the kind of neutrality that Habermas aims for is unachievable because the very act of situating the argument requires justifications and assumptions that are unavoidably normative.

With this in mind Mouffe makes the associated argument that it is precisely the liberal emphasis on neutral procedure and principles that serves to obscure the more pressing problem with democracies in modern societies – the lack of a democratic ethos (Mouffe 2000b). According to Mouffe, the supposed neutrality of Habermas’s discourse ethics re-enacts the false universalism of bourgeois citizenship, in which a forum of theoretical equality is supposed to exist among participants who are clearly not equal. Given the impossibility of establishing such an “ideal”, Mouffe insists that the priority of democratic thought must be to imagine ways to promote a democratic ethos that encourages people to engage in democratic practice, even as the structure of that democratic practice remains contestable (Mouffe 1997: 25). The aim of democratic politics must be to encourage people to engage democratically with each other. The challenge of politics is ‘to transform antagonism into agonism’ or rather ‘to

\textsuperscript{46} A similar criticism can be found in (Olafson 1990: 648).
\textsuperscript{47} This line of argument was developed by Jean-Francois Lyotard in (Lyotard 1993: 109).
construct the “them” group in such a way that they are no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed but as an “adversary” (Mouffe 2000b: 126).

I would argue that Mouffe’s criticism of Habermas is based upon a misunderstanding of the intent of *The Theory of Communicative Action* and that this is, in turn, a result of a failure to acknowledge Habermas’s development as a critical theorist. Mouffe suggests that ‘according to the deliberative approach, the more democratic a society is, the less power would be constitutive of social relations’ (Mouffe 2000b: 125). This statement does not accurately describe Habermas’s theory, which does not serve to undermine the power constitutive of social relations but to ensure that such power is democratically constituted according to the internal legitimacy of communicative communities.

The reason Mouffe misunderstands the applicability of Habermas’s deliberative democracy is, in my view, because that she does not recognise the level of abstraction at which Habermas wishes to work. Habermas explicitly seeks to ground authority in metatheoretical terms that are normatively “neutral” and therefore universalisable; working upon an understanding that authority is generated by consent upon legitimacy. Mouffe denies the possibility of this neutrality, however, citing Michael Oakeshott’s assertion that the authority of political institutions is not a question of consent but of the continuous acknowledgement by *cives* of their obligation to the pre-constituted conditions of *res publica* (Oakeshott 1975: 149-158). She interprets the political as inherently reified. Citizens are born into political communities and, therefore, are constituted by them in very important ways. This is why Mouffe seeks a democratic ethos that will encourage citizens to engage with each other politically.
Habermas’s work on the procedural constraints on ideal discourse does not contain concrete prescriptions for the redesign of democracy, as to do so would be to limit the universality of such a theory. Habermas has always stressed that in order to remain universal his theory of communicative action should remain as non-specific as possible concerning the concrete changes that have to occur in order to turn his theory into practice. Habermas believes that the autonomy private individuals exercise in pursuing their notion of the good life is as important to the health of democracy as the opportunity to participate in processes of democratic will-formation (Cooke 1997: 272). Habermas argues that some methodological objectification is needed in order to make the lifeworld concept serviceable for theoretical purposes (Habermas 1987b: 135). However, if he was to start prescribing how discourse ethics should be applied, as opposed to continually arguing for the internal legitimacy of those ethics, he would return his own project to the realms of the philosophy of consciousness and open it up to be instrumentally explored and exhausted. Also, his project would then be susceptible to Mouffe’s critique that every concrete democratic form involves an element of hegemonic exclusion (Mouffe 2000a). In order to ensure the inherent legitimacy sustained by the lifeworld, Habermas avoids delineating the manner in which the lifeworld should constitute itself, outlining instead a model of ideal procedure that would function as a tool of universal criticism. In this way he hoped to ensure that his critical theory of society moved beyond the aporia introduced into this tradition by Horkheimer and Adorno’s criticism of instrumental reason (Habermas 1984: 386).
I believe Chantal Mouffe does have a valid point about the need for a democratic ethos in order to stimulate the potentials of democratic thought. Habermas acknowledges that ‘nothing will change without the intervening, effective, innovative energy of social movements, and without the utopian images and energies that motivate such movements’. ‘But’, he adds, ‘that does not mean that theory itself… must take the place of utopias’ (Habermas 2002: 243). Habermas’s intention with respect to communicative action is not to prescribe the solution to the problem with modern democracy, but to illustrate the most rational way to determine and judge the solutions with which we are dealing. To this end Habermas continues to insist ‘on the idealizing content of the inescapable pragmatic presuppositions of a praxis from which only the better argument is supposed to emerge’ (Habermas 2002: 251). The standards of ideal communication may not tell us how to order a democratic system, but they serve as a basis for the continual critical assessment of the legitimacy of public reason and, therefore, remain useful in thinking about how a critical democratic system might take shape.

**Part Two: Arendt’s Agonistic Polis**

The criticism that Habermas does not identify the possible sources of a democratic ethos leads us to consider Arendt’s solution to the problems with modern liberal democracies. While Habermas does not concern himself with the reasons that individuals should choose to approach public discourse with an orientation to achieve understanding, Arendt bases her vision of the role of the public realm upon a conception of the human need to understand and be understood. Due to her emphasis on the role of the polis as a forum for the fulfilment of a human need to publicly appear, Arendt’s work has often been used to elaborate the views of the “agonistic”
school of critical democratic theory. Agonistic democracy emphasises the virtues of
direct political participation as an expression of self. The ethos necessary to establish
a polis arises directly from the human desire to have a common and “real” forum in
which to act. Reality, in turn, is constituted in the process of public dialogue, display
and storytelling. Arendt’s account of the solution to the critical deficit of modern
liberal democracies therefore acts as a corrective for the motivational deficit of
Habermas’s theory. The human functions that public space fulfils mean that we
appropriate a public space regardless of the quality or “legitimacy” of that space. In
order to explain this point, I shall describe the various functions of Arendt’s ideal
polis in fulfilling certain needs. Although in the process Arendt loses the
“metatheoretical” qualities of Habermas’s theory, she provides valuable insights into
the human energies that provide the motivation for a democratic ethos.

An exploration of Arendt’s ideal of agonistic politics serves to elucidate some of the
similarities between her ideal political discourse and that of Habermas. In both cases,
power is understood to be communicatively constituted and democratic virtue is
judged upon the amount of critical interaction that individuals have with the world
around them. Arendt’s emphasis on how people innately form publics in order to
manifest meaning provides an interesting counterweight to Habermas’s theory of
communicative action, which fails to articulate what might motivate people to form
an ideal public. Through Arendt’s emphasis on the various roles publics serve in
validating the self, it is possible to come to a better understanding of the ways in
which corruptions of such publics are myopic. At the same time, Arendt’s emphasis
that the self needs such publics in order to generate meaning highlights the
emancipatory potential of an ideal public space. The human desire for meaning and
reality, as can be constituted through public space, provides the central tenet of hope for those of us who wish to use democracy as an emancipatory idiom, and shall subsequently be explored in the following chapter.

The Philosophy of Arendt’s Agonistic Politics

In order to begin this exploration of the philosophy of Arendt’s agonistic politics, I feel it is useful to pick up our discussion of Arendt where we left it; with this quotation on the danger of a non-critical public sphere: ‘whatever men do or know or experience can make sense only to the extent that it can be spoken about’ (Arendt 1958: 4). This single line speaks volumes about Arendt’s understanding of politics. On the one hand, it indicates the importance of an audience for validating speech, through the exposure of action to the scrutiny of plurality. On the other hand, it indicates the importance of speech as a record of action. Arendt’s model of ideal democratic practice has been justified on the basis of its ability to critically coordinate action, on the basis of its normative contribution towards the “good life” and as refuge against the futility of human existence. While exploring each of these “functions” of Arendt’s polis, I will show that Arendt believes that public space constituted by free speech and action is desirable not only because it will generate and maintain critical thought but also because such a public space serves a human need for disclosure and engagement.

The Critical Qualities of Arendt’s Ideal Polis

I shall begin this description of Arendt’s agonistic politics with an investigation of a common thread that runs through Habermas’s and Arendt’s understanding of politics. Hannah Arendt’s understanding of power as being constituted through communication has much in common with Habermas’ conception of
communicatively generated legitimacy. Both theorists identify that power is a manifestation of public existence and is constituted by communicatively generated legitimacy. This commonality leads them to share similar views on the possibilities of public space as a place to resolve tension and coordinate action. Both theorists believe in reconciling antagonistic positions through recourse to commonly shared understandings. They each justify this engagement in dialogue upon the basis of the broadening of the debate that takes place in such a process and the inherent validity of critical discourse that this enables. Where they diverge is in their estimation of where this discourse takes place and their views on the purpose it should serve. This difference resides in their fundamental philosophical positions of modernist and anti-modernist, rationalist and phenomenologist; my position is that attention to the differences between Habermas’s and Arendt’s democratic theories neglects the remarkable degree of similarity and complementarity between their visions of an ideal democracy.

Habermas flags his general approval of Arendt’s understanding of the communicative concept of power in an admiring article in a memorial issue of Social Research, which was dedicated to her contribution to political theory (Habermas 1977). In this piece Habermas contends that Arendt shares his understanding of power as that which ‘corresponds to the human ability not just to act, but to act in concert’ (Arendt 1970: 41). This reflects Habermas’s own understanding of power as the ability to make a claim on the legitimacy constituted by shared understandings. Habermas also notes that Arendt similarly attempts ‘to derive the conditions of the public political sphere

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48 Arendt rejects the notion of progress, and thus cannot be seen as a “modern” political philosopher.
49 This was subsequently reprinted in his Philosophical-Political Profiles (Habermas 1983a).
from the structures of undistorted subjectivity that have to be fulfilled in order for power to be communicatively generated or expanded’ (Habermas 1983a: 183). In making this proclamation Habermas identifies two important resonances between his own work and that of Arendt. First, he recognises that Arendt shares his view that legitimate power is communicatively generated. Second, he acknowledges that Arendt’s political philosophy also reflects a desire to reconcile institutions of power with this communicative legitimacy through the public use of reason.

The communications concept of power is based upon the notion that power is intersubjectively produced within a communicative community. That is to say, in the process of reasoning, the power of our convictions stands and falls according to the mutual acknowledgement that these convictions are acceptable to the wider community (Habermas 1983a: 173). Arendt expresses this understanding of mutual acknowledgement as the basis of power throughout her work. As Habermas quotes Arendt:

> It is the people’s support that lends power to the institutions of a country, and this support is but the continuation of the consent that brought the laws into existence to begin with… All political institutions are manifestations and materializations of power; they petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them.50

The communicative element of this notion of power is derived from the element of community that is central to it. Arendt argues that ‘when we taste or judge, we judge in our role as a “member of a community”’ (Arendt 1978b: 72). By this she means that we share communicative presuppositions (within what Habermas regards as the lifeworld) that entitle judgement to be received as relevant and appropriate. It is only within the common bonds of shared understanding that it is possible to manifest power: ‘While strength is the natural quality of the individual seen in isolation, power

50 (Arendt 1970: 41) quoted in (Habermas 1983a)
springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse’ (Arendt 1958: 200). According to Arendt, the public is constituted through people speaking and acting together, and in this fundamental way her theory of communicative power mirrors that of Habermas’s understanding of the inherent legitimacy and power of the lifeworld.

Along with Habermas, Arendt also understands that the public serves a critical function, providing a forum for criticism and the refinement of subjects through discussion. This shared understanding is based upon the Socratic principle that when one seeks to determine what is real, the more opinions that are consulted, the more “real” the final estimation of reality will be. This element of Arendt’s thought can most adequately be summed up in the following statement:

Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear. (Arendt 1958: 57)

Just as Habermas argues that agreement under the conditions of ideal communication is the criterion for legitimacy, Arendt suggests that “reality” can only be accepted as that which appears in the same way to all members of a communicative public. This implies that the process of ascertaining “reality” requires exposure to publicity in order to prove its authenticity.

Given the communicative constitution of power, both Habermas and Arendt seek to ground this power in the most fundamentally justifiable ways possible. Habermas, therefore, understands legitimate power as constituted by the shared assumptions and beliefs that unite the members of a lifeworld. Similarly, the legitimate power of

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51 This shared understanding is the very opposite of that of Descartes, who isolated himself from the world in order to determine what was real.
Arendt’s public debate is constituted by an ability to appeal to the shared assumptions and beliefs of the given public. She contends that this purpose is expressly served by narrative. Arendt suggests that the persistence of stories that are shared and understood by a plural public denotes the relevance and legitimacy of such stories for this public. The more commonly acceptable the story, the more it is told, the more legitimacy it has. Here, Arendt echoes narrative theorist Hayden White’s view that narratives have the ability to transcend difference by identifying commonality. Thus, far from being one code among many that a culture may utilize for endowing experience with meaning, narrative is a meta-code, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted. (White 1987: 1)

Whilst there are important differences in the aesthetic qualities of communicative action as constituting the lifeworld and narrative as bearing the legitimacy of a shared public understanding, in both views the bounds of legitimacy are taken to be constituted by the commonly identifiable and communicable norms of any discursive public (Benhabib 2002: 357). While narrative devices, such as rhetoric, can be employed strategically in order to command or instruct, the reflexive and discursive character of narrative implies that it is oriented to be understood. Similarly, the discursive element of Habermas’s ideal communication seems to suggest that the telling of stories is a good way to move towards understanding. Narrative provides an avenue to express the ‘context-transcending validity claims’ (Habermas 1996a: 4) that can form the basis of agreement.

Authors such as Seyla Benhabib have sought to reconcile the democratic theories of Arendt and Habermas by placing particular emphasis on this “deliberative” aspect of Arendt’s thought. By emphasising Arendt’s understanding of communicative rationality and the associated importance of deliberative public political fora,
Benhabib comes to regard the communicative function of the public sphere as the most important element of Arendt’s democratic thought. This resonance provides an opportunity to synthesise the two theories in interesting ways that shall be explored at the end of this chapter, but first I shall explore the other purposes of Arendt’s public realm that are in addition to its deliberative function.

The congruence between Habermas’s and Arendt’s views concerning the function of the public sphere ends with their divergent attitudes with respect to the space allowed for critical thought. Habermas argues that the best form of critical discourse – that of communicative action, takes place in the “ideal speaking position” in which participants share unproblematic convictions and are determined to achieve understanding; an orientation that naturally tends to occur within the boundaries of a shared lifeworld. I would argue that Arendt sees these conditions as most readily sustained in the activity of thinking. In the dialogue between “me” and “myself” the conditions of ideal communication are achieved – each participant shares unproblematic convictions and each is determined due to their symmetrical interests, to reach a conclusion based upon understanding. For Habermas, strategic interests are eliminated in ideal speech through symmetry of position and the participants’ commitment to achieving understanding. For Arendt, strategic interests are eliminated by the conversation being conducted in private, away from the plural pressures of the public realm. Habermas sees the communicative ideal as inspiring a critical public; Arendt understands that a critical public inspires thought.

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52 See, for example (Benhabib 1996a: 123-130) and (Benhabib 1992).
53 Arendt describes understanding and thinking as functionally similar processes in (Arendt 1953: 337).
Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories converge because both theorists emphasise the importance of harnessing the critical potential of public speech and believe that the place of this speech is important (because of their shared assumptions about the communicative composition of legitimacy). The divergence in their theories lies in the way they believe that this critical function operates. For Habermas, the public forum generates critical discourse by scrutinising communicative processes. For Arendt, the public forum generates critical discourse by providing a space for identity to appear. This serves a critical function not only by allowing critical “deliberative” discourse, but also because public engagement fulfils a private need for disclosure. Thus Arendt’s public sphere serves not only in a deliberative capacity but also in an aesthetic sense, by allowing a space for expression.

**The Aesthetic Qualities of Arendt’s Ideal Polis**

Much more than simply a forum for critical discussion, Arendt argues that public space provides and serves a public good by providing a forum for speech and action. This view is based upon Arendt’s assertions that being cries out for self-display and that happiness is based upon the possibilities of engaging in an agonistic struggle that validates the self. Hence Arendt argues that the public realm should provide a forum “for being to be”, which will foster an experience of the “good life” by encouraging an adversarial, yet not antagonistic, forum for the innate human ambition to achieve distinction⁵⁴. Arendt believes that the public realm must provide, therefore, a forum for the telling of stories – for speech and action; activities that disclose the agent in the act, and thereby invite understanding.

⁵⁴ An excellent analysis of this aspect of Arendt’s public sphere can be found in (Curtis 1997).
The Public as a Place to Reveal Identity

Whereas Habermas understands the public sphere to serve, in a critical capacity, to produce reasonable outcomes, Arendt believes that an equally important function of the public sphere is to provide a space for a critical reception that facilitates the revelation of individual identity. She argues that because we are human beings, with human capacities, we have a desire to distinguish ourselves through these capacities. As she points out in *The Life of the Mind*, ‘Whatever can see wants to be seen, whatever can hear calls out to be heard, whatever can touch presents itself to be touched’ (Arendt 1978b: 29). As we have the capacity to display and engage, we seek to do so. While the private serves as the place to develop our private selves, the public gives us the opportunity to have these selves “revealed” in the light of plurality, serving an aesthetic purpose by providing a forum in which all people can achieve the distinction that humans crave.

Arendt argues that the public forum is needed to provide an understanding of our selves because it is only in the light of public reception that identity can truly reveal itself. In the same manner that communication generates a deeper understanding of reason, through acting in public it is possible to come to identify and gain acclaim for who one really is. Arendt declares bluntly in *The Human Condition* ‘the essence of who somebody is cannot be reified by himself’ (Arendt 1958: 211); rather someone’s essence can only be grasped following their appearance before a relevant public (Arendt 1958: 193-194). This is because one cannot have an “objective” understanding of self when one is alone with one’s thoughts. Who someone is remains hidden from the person in their private existence but appears in public ‘clearly and unmistakably to others’ (Arendt 1958: 179). Identity is a private attribute, developed
through one’s own reconciliation through thought, but publicity gives this identity meaning by receiving this essence in an intersubjective way. Arendt suggests that we seek to “know” and distinguish who we are through exposure to such a public.

In order for the public to fulfil this function of facilitating recognition, it must provide a space for speech and action. These are the telling human qualities that require public reception in order to be validated. Unlike the work of *homo faber*, which is judged according to its end product, or the labour of *animal laborans*, which is not public at all, speech and action acquire their meaning only through public acclaim. They are the only human capacities that are truly free; that is, they exist as a manifestation of private thought and are not produced ‘under bondage to one or another kind of master’ (Kateb 1977: 142). People are driven to think, act and speak in Arendt’s public realm because they are given ‘an opportunity to engage in those activities of “expressing, discussing, and deciding” which in a positive sense are the activities of freedom’ (Arendt 1990: 235). Because being cries out to be, and can only be recognised through public acclaim, the public realm also serves the function of providing a forum for human expression as an activity of freedom.

*The Public as an Inclusive Forum*

Here we encounter an important element of Arendt’s thought; for the public realm is supposed to operate as a forum for reasonable resolution of difference at the same time as it exists as a forum for the expression and celebration of difference. Through her description of the agonal role of the Greek polis, Arendt suggests that this tension can only be contained within a space of common activity. What constitutes *real*
freedom and real equality can only be determined by what is shared in common and appears publicly (Herzog 2001: 174).

Hence, speech and action stand as central components of Arendt’s public realm. Speech, with its capacity to organise and inspire thought and action through its public use, is ‘what makes man a political being’ (Arendt 1958: 3). While we are born with the capacity to act and think, it is our ability to relate through speech that enables the coordination and celebration of action\textsuperscript{56}.

And whatever men do or know or experience can make sense only to the extent that it can be spoken about. There may be truths beyond speech, and they may be of great relevance to man in the singular, that is, to man in so far as he is not a political being, whatever else he may be. Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves. (Arendt 1958: 4)

As beings with the capacity to speak, we are able to represent our identities in public. Thus, another argument for the care and maintenance of the public realm arises from the fact that only within a space of common visible activity can real freedom and equality emerge (Herzog 2001: 175).

Arendt’s thought is predicated on the idea that being, however it is created through the miracle of natality, will possess an urge to disclose its identity no matter what its position with respect to race, class or gender\textsuperscript{57}. Identity is necessarily pre-political; it may be constituted by recourse to private thought, but ‘everything that our birth mysteriously grants us has no [publicly real] legal or political status’ (Arendt 1978a: 246). We can only attempt to reconcile our individuality with the political by

\textsuperscript{56} George Kateb argues that by action, Arendt must mean political speech, as she would see every other form of action as violence (Kateb 1977: 155-156). I argue that action also encapsulates judgement, where people may ‘act’ through engaging in voting procedures or withdrawing from the public.

\textsuperscript{57} This is the source of the plurality that gives the public its intersubjectivity, and therefore its critical power.
distinguishing ourselves in the eyes of the plural public. It is through this preservation of public space as a forum for general proclivities, such as speech and action, that Arendt seeks to assert public space as being conducive to adversarial but not antagonistic engagement.

Arendt, therefore, rails against identity politics, the allocation of political power according to an identifying feature such as ethnicity or gender, which purports to override all the other elements of that individual’s existence. To act publicly on behalf of a notion of such a private identity is to suggest that all private identities ought to be equal and accepted as real prior to their appearance in the public realm. This undermines the role of publicity in defining that identity and prejudices the effect that this pre-constituted “identity” should have on the public. By fixating upon a certain element of an individual’s character as defining their “identity”, such an approach to politics denies the true plurality of individuals, and refutes Arendt’s assertion that no one can truly “know” themselves prior to public appearance. To do so would lead to the public realm becoming antagonistic to those who are “different”. Part of the reason for having a public is to recognise that we are all different and have value because of our difference.

Arendt believes that identity is endlessly plural and it is only through engaging this plurality in an equally open public space that individuals can reveal their essences in their many-faceted reality. She wants people to feel pride in ‘whatever we happen to be by accident of birth’ because of the uniqueness of that accident, and not because

58 For an example of the extent Arendt was willing to take this argument see (Arendt 1959a).
59 This proclivity towards categorising in order to know is a fundamental feature of instrumental thought.
that accident allows people to fulfill a role already established for them\textsuperscript{60}. This is of fundamental importance for those who argue that Arendt’s public realm serves her political theory primarily by providing a forum for the competitive expression of individuality\textsuperscript{61}. As we are all distinct, political expression by way of representation is a fundamental error, it denies the plurality that really exists in the world.

\textit{The Public as a Space for Normative Debate}

Arendt’s public realm also serves its constituents by providing a forum for a conversation about the good\textsuperscript{62}. This occurs because the public conversation is confronted by the fact of natality, which is the continual production of unique individuals who seek to redeem their identities in the public realm. As transient faculties such as action and speech constitute the public realm, the reality of the public is constantly challenged and renewed by individuals wishing to express their particular understanding of being. It is the very publicness of action and speech that contributes to the flexible appearance of public order and fosters the greatest discussion of the good.

\begin{quote}
The art of Politics teaches men to bring forth what is great and radiant, in the words of Democritus; as long as the polis is there to inspire men to dare the extraordinary, all things are safe; if it perishes, everything is lost... Greatness, therefore, or the specific meaning of each deed, can lie only in the performance itself and neither in its motivation nor its achievement. (Arendt 1958: 206)
\end{quote}

Appearance in public not only provides a forum for “being to be”, the public is also the most hospitable realm for those who wish to observe and judge (Kristeva 2001a: 51-52). Because the public is formed through the faculties of speech and action, its validity can be assessed through the universal faculties of hearing and viewing. The
agonistic drive to show oneself measuring up against others privileges the faculty of storytelling that, through speech and metaphor, allows meaning to transcend the boundaries of the different private experiences of public participants. Memory and interpretation leave space for plurality in the process of telling and re-telling. This is why Arendt claims that ‘real stories, in distinction from those we invent, have no author’ (Arendt 1958: 185). If a story is acceptable to every listener in a gathering and no one need defend the reality it presents – it needs no author – it is viewed as a constant (despite the plurality of the public) and, therefore, claims the status of real. When such a reality is not accepted, stories do have authors who are prescribed defenders of the reality contained in these stories. The agonistic struggle of Arendt’s public realm consists in the struggle to get stories commonly accepted, something that can only occur following the public reconciliation of the story with the private understandings of the public’s constituents.

This is not to deny that everybody views and hears differently, but rather to insist that because they do, appearance must be subjected to judgement. Arendt locates the source of democratic survival in the pluralism of this judgement (Horowitz 1999: 275). So long as people are comparing the validity of speech and action, they are all capable of rendering judgement. By providing a forum for judgement, Arendt makes the ideal public realm an enticing place to express one’s humanity, not only through speaking, but also through judging. Hence, she argues that the glory of the public of the French revolution consisted not so much in the actions of the political leaders, but ‘the acclaiming spectators’ (Arendt 1982: 61). These spectators, who are acknowledged as playing a legitimate part in the public constitution of power, experienced the joy of being a part of the constitution of truly public power and
sought to consolidate that experience through further political participation. Participating through the action of judgement opens up the possibilities of thought and speech and generates a public realm worthy of the name.

Arendt seeks to reconcile the tension between the role of the public as a forum for the coordination of action and as a forum for individual distinction through her treatment of thought, speech and action as inalienably human abilities. Our shared ability to speak, act and think means that no one need be alienated by what they find in a public constituted through these faculties. Our experience of our private thoughts teaches us the benefits of deliberation, and we inherently understand that we can only manifest this debate publicly through the universal faculties of speech and action. As she states in *The Human Condition*, ‘Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live’ (Arendt 1958: 8). As humans we share a basic intersubjectivity, we understand that we have the capacity to speak, act and think. Arendt suggests that we need share nothing in common but these faculties and that the concurrent human desire to display and self-display will ensure that we navigate the problems of plurality in a meaningful way.

**The Public as a Forum of Agonistic Engagement**

Given this aesthetic environment, the existence of plural private identities does not undermine the possibility for harmony within the public realm. Quite the opposite, it is the need for this plurality, to display and self-display in a way that can be spoken about and thereby “make sense”, that drives individuals to take part in public activity. In Arendt’s ideal polis, ‘the intrinsic tendency of people to create things of value is
realized. By giving meaning to their lives and the lives of those close to them, people are able to resist the futility that threatens to swallow them up' (Arendt 1968: 228-229). Arendt believes, therefore, that a mutual respect for the public forum is born out of mutual understanding of the need for such a forum. We need a place where we can appear; hence it is provident to care for public space.

[The] revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others and neither for nor against them – that is, in sheer human togetherness…. Because of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent together with the act, action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is only possible in the public realm. Without the disclosure of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others. (Arendt 1958: 180)

The solidarity necessary for citizens to constitute a public that is adversarial – rather than antagonistic – arises from the shared desire for distinction through the commitment to action and the telling of stories (Arendt 1990: 85-89,92). A personal concern for encountering reality manifests a public care for the other – in order to truly know anything, you must expose what you “know” to public scrutiny in order to ascertain what is real. Those who seek to justify a claim to reality, therefore, seek to make their public spheres as inclusive as possible. Theoretically only an infinitely inclusive public sphere can give you an “objective” appreciation of reality.

The further advantage of combining plurality through the public realm is that it establishes a refuge for the immortality of glory and human greatness63. The ideal public sphere distinguishes itself because of the speech and action, or the free actors, which continually constitute it. It is the polis, ‘the space of men’s free deeds and living words, which could endow life with splendour’ (Arendt 1990: 281). This forum stands in stark contrast to the public realm of homo faber, which can only distinguish

63 This understanding of the purpose of Arendt’s public realm as providing a refuge against the “nauseating futility” of mortal life has been fully explored by George Kateb (Kateb 1984).
itself through an appeal to functionality. Rather, through the revelation of reality that occurs in a plural public sphere, it is possible to immortalise worthy participation. Paraphrasing Heraclitus, Arendt asserts that ‘the potential greatness of humans lies in their ability to contribute to the immortal’, that is, ‘to contribute to the immortal cycle of humanity’ by appearing in public and contributing to it (Arendt 1958: 19). Arendt implores us to live a life worth telling a story about; if we live well enough the story will be told again and again.

The public realm provides a degree of permanence for speech and action by providing a forum for these otherwise transient capacities. As we have previously seen, Arendt’s public realm operates in such a manner that only what is “real” can withstand the scrutiny of the plural public. More specifically, while only what deserves to be recognised as real becomes fully manifested in the public realm, every participant in the public is a part of the constitution of the real. Thus the agonistic drive for “being to be” is gratified by the existence of a public realm which ‘seems to assure that the most futile of human activities, action and speech, and the least tangible and most ephemeral of man-made “products”, the deeds and stories which are their outcome, would become imperishable’ (Arendt 1958: 197-198). The polis serves as a guarantee, therefore, against the futility of individual life and incites participation through its promise to ‘absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men may want to save from the natural ruin of time’ (Arendt 1958: 55 - 56). This kind of immortality provides the incentive for adversarial engagement that is not antagonistic; one wants to show oneself as remarkable in the public sphere, without undermining the validity of that public sphere in the process.
Due to their differing intentions, theorists tend to appropriate the separate functions of Arendt’s public realm in order to serve their purposes. There is no doubt that narrative, with the values that narrative transposes, serves a purpose by broadening deliberation. Similarly, the aesthetic of Arendt’s political action fulfils a basic human need for agonistic competition and individual distinction; as does developing a forum for immortality as a refuge against mortality. Seyla Benhabib has appropriated the deliberative elements of Arendt’s theory in her understanding that the immortal and aesthetic elements of her public realm serve Habermasian ends insofar as they encourage deliberation. However, such an emphasis neglects the pervasiveness of Arendt’s conception of identity formation, contemplation and judgement as part of what makes us human. Arendt’s intention is not just to resolve the tension created by difference, but to explore difference and celebrate it.

The calamities of action arise from the human condition of plurality, which is the condition sine qua non for that space of appearance which is the public realm. Hence the attempt to do away with this plurality is always tantamount to the abolition of the public realm itself. (Arendt 1958: 220)

I chose to appropriate the critical function of Arendt’s public realm for my own purposes in the first chapter. This critical function of Arendt’s public realm can be understood through a combination of her deliberative thought with that of Habermas, but it can also be understood in light of the aesthetic and agonistic roles of the public realm. I would argue that, in all of its interpretations, the ideal public realm acts as an incentive to think; whether this is in order to understand reality in a “reasonable way”, to live the good life, or to competitively engage. In this way it is possible to formulate Arendt’s theory as conveying an explanation as to why people may be motivated to try to come to decisions based upon public understanding. Public fora generate what constitutes “reality” and as such, the integrity of public fora is directly proportional to the integrity of the reality they constitute.
The Construction of Arendt’s Ideal Polis

Since I have identified the various functions of Arendt’s ideal public space, I can now turn my attention to the ways in which Arendt believes that this polis might be reified. In her work she prevaricates concerning the possibility of defining the ideal political institution because she does not wish to pre-empt the creativity of an active public. The ideal public realm can only reveal itself through its appropriateness for the particular plurality whose members seek to constitute a public. She tentatively suggests an “ideal” model of power distribution in *On Revolution* (Arendt 1990), which has subsequently led to criticisms of her democratic theory for being elitist. After exploring this area of Arendt’s thought, I intend to attempt to refute these charges of elitism by paying closer attention to her understanding of the possibilities of multiple publics. Following this I take up her admiration of Jefferson’s wards as an ideal public forum. Understanding her views in terms of her admiration for Jefferson helps us reconceptualise her ideas about concrete public participation in a way that is commensurate with her broad theoretical perspective on the role of the public sphere.

Just as Habermas understands that engaging in philosophies of consciousness undermines their critical potential by locating them within a particular perspective, Arendt understands that advocating a particular kind of public sphere undermines the role that public appearance must play in creating that public sphere. Whereas Habermas’s answer is to identify the ways in which we can go about deliberating in order to ensure the legitimacy of the public sphere, Arendt’s answer is to suggest that the creation of public space depends upon the desire of individuals to constitute a space for appearance. While we have just analysed the various justifications Arendt
puts forward for this act of creation, we now turn our attention to the structures Arendt believes might reflect her ideal.

Arendt’s most explicit description of how the perfect public sphere might be structurally constituted takes place in her work *On Revolution*. Here she identifies a political system of tiered councils, each with its own internal deliberative mechanism, in which the members of each tier deliberatively elect their representative for the next highest council (Arendt 1990: 278). Arendt imagined that through this structure the public sphere would combine the virtue of public engagement with the positive functional attributes of an interconnected system of communication. This, in turn, would reconcile equality with authority by enabling a space for equality in each individual’s “tier” while bestowing the highest possible legitimacy (that is legitimacy open to discursive redemption) upon the authority that comes from the tier above and the authority generated by the tier below.

Perhaps not surprisingly for such a corporatist model of power distribution, this element of Arendt’s thought has led to the criticism that it lends itself to elitism. Such a criticism is often justified on the basis of her own admission that such a distribution of power resembles the shape of authoritarian government (Arendt 1990: 278), sometimes combined with readings of passages in *The Human Condition* in which she emphasises the lack of political abilities possessed by *homo faber* and *animal laborans*. Certainly, there are passages throughout her work which, when read in isolation, can be interpreted as reflecting the view that the political realm would be better off if it were only open to a certain type of person. It can seem that Arendt

64 See, for example, (Canovan 1978: 15)
derides the majority of the population as being too stupid to know what they really need and for undermining the possibility of real humans to achieve happiness in their pursuit of the satisfaction of their material interests. It is only those people who have managed to escape the realm of necessity who are fit to act politically and, as a result, ‘the political way of life has never been …the way of life of the many’ (Arendt 1990: 275)\textsuperscript{65}. Such a reading of Arendt’s work leads to the suspicion that the task of her corporatist structure of councils is not to generate authority from below but to imply and inculcate the authority of a political elite.

I believe, however, that such a reading of Arendt’s political theory misinterprets the purpose of insulating politics from mass participation. In an extended passage on the subject in \textit{The Human Condition}, Arendt argues that organising participation into decision making “tiers” maintains the vital role of personal engagement and appearance that public space should serve. ‘Large numbers of people, crowded together, develop an almost irresistible inclination towards despotism, be this the despotism of a person or majority rule’ (Arendt 1958: 43). We can see that the public sphere loses its aesthetic and immortalising functions without the immediate experience of personal involvement in political action. As a result unengaged participation encourages “knowing” rather than “thinking”. Following this broader understanding of the purpose of Arendt’s public sphere, it is important to insulate political action from the effects of people acting as part of an indistinguishable mass. Not because such insulation might provide an opportunity for the elite to rule, but in

\textsuperscript{65} \textit{Homo faber} understands the rewards of an “escape the realm of necessity” only in terms of material wealth, an Arendtian reading is that the reward for escaping the realm of necessity is to engage in a truly public debate.
order to ensure that everyone gets an opportunity to distinguish themselves (Isaac 1998: 104).

Arendt’s depiction in *On Revolution* of a tiered structure of publics shaped like a pyramid, therefore, is less an attempt to create a space of power for an elite with an affinity with the political than it is an attempt to make the political directly relevant for all individuals. Those who choose the former explanation of her motives tend to view her theory as an attempt to secure all power for *good* political actors. This position disregards the fact that her own “phenomenological essentialism” prohibits her from making such normative judgements (Benhabib 2002: 70). Indeed, one of the main arguments Arendt makes in *The Human Condition* is that under modern conditions a consensus about what constitutes a “good” political actor can only be based on a worldless notion of “good”; such a notion would be based on knowledge of the good rather than thinking about the good (Villa 1997: 199). The important function of the public realm is to counteract such worldlessness, and Arendt’s apparent endorsement of corporatist power structures has more to do with keeping the public relevant to individuals than it has to do with the pursuit of a particular repression of citizenship.

In order to elaborate my view that this position springs from Arendt’s concerns over what is necessary for an engaging democratic practice, it is helpful to illustrate the importance of plurality to her thought. As part of her justification for advocating small publics, Arendt argues that “since the laws of statistics are perfectly valid where we deal with large numbers, it is obvious that every increase in population means an increased validity and a marked decrease of “deviation”” (Arendt 1958: 43). Her fear
in this context is that for every increase in the number of participants in a forum, there is a decrease in the likelihood that each individual can appear to be as remarkable and unique as they ought. At the same time, an extensive public sphere carries a greater weight of legitimacy and a greater likelihood that its conclusions will be seen as compelling, rather than subjectively acknowledged. Thus for Arendt, the ideal public space should be small enough to celebrate individual contribution and action.

The plurality of any given public sphere is inevitable, and in a way the point of having such a public sphere is to extract that plurality in a way that allows every participant to make a unique contribution. The political has no business in determining which aspects of being manifest which political attitudes; to do so would to “know” what could be expected from each participant, and one of Arendt’s most emphatic and consistent ideas is that where “knowledge” is constituted prior to the space for speech and action ‘the space for freedom is lost’ (Arendt 1990: 264). For similar reasons, Arendt derides the mechanisms of voting as public participation, especially given the predilection for private interests to dominate voting behaviour prior to public scrutiny of these interests (Arendt 1990: 227,256). Rather, plurality is a given in any group of individuals, and the public realm must be small enough so that individuals are free to reveal these differences through their own speech and action.

Arendt believes that the problem of ensuring that democratic polities remain meaningful for all participants can be solved through the dissemination of public space. As she wrote in *The Crises of the Republic*, ‘since the country is too big for us all to come together and determine our fate, we need a number of public spaces within it’ (Arendt 1972a: 232). With this in mind, it is possible to understand the particular
political virtue Arendt saw in Thomas Jefferson’s ward system and in other theories and practices of revolutionary councils. These models of democratic practice captured important elements of Arendt’s ideal conception of the ideal public sphere and have been championed by her as historically specific displays of the revolutionary potential of democracy.

Thomas Jefferson’s ward system was an attempt to harness the political capacities of public citizens through their involvement in small community “wards”. He declared that a system of wards – polities roughly 24 square miles in size and each with their own school – would be “the most fundamental measure for securing good government, and for instilling the principles and exercise of good government into every fibre of every member of our commonwealth”. Arendt argues that Jefferson perceives that the great danger to the United States republic is “that the constitution had given all power to the citizens, without giving them the opportunity of being republicans and acting as citizens” (Arendt 1990: 253). Arendt argues that Jefferson shares her understanding of the importance of personal involvement in politics:

> The basic assumption of the ward system, whether Jefferson knew it or not, was that no one could be called free without his experience in public freedom, and that no one could be called either happy or free without participating, and having a share, in public power. (Arendt 1990: 255)

By making the domain of government that much smaller, along with giving each ward control of education, Jefferson advocates a polis that would demand the normative consideration of its citizens. Such a responsive polis would promote the benefits of

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66 John Sitton has analysed Arendt’s predilection towards decentralisation in (Sitton 1987).
67 From a series of Jefferson’s personal correspondences; letters 8940-8943 in (Jefferson 1900: 921).
68 “Participatory” democracy is not something Arendt directly advocates, due, no doubt, to her “phenomenological essentialism”, which leads her to insist that the Christian doctrine of non-engagement deserves the same a priori respect as any other privately formed opinion. In a force de jure she would insist that the doctrine of non-engagement must be publicly justified before it is publicly accepted as legitimate.
political involvement; which is a boon to both the healthy function of the polis, and the healthy existence of the individual.

In *On Revolution*, Arendt suggests that the benefits of public participation have been apparent throughout all revolutionary movements. The personal and political benefits of participatory publics became apparent during the American Revolution, when local councils and militia constituted publics through their own activities and oratories. Arendt cites other examples of the awakening of political virtue, such as the French *societies révolutionnaires*, the Russian soviets, the French Resistance, the Israeli kibbutzim and the American Civil Rights Movement. Each of these movements succeeded politically, as forms of resistance, because they sought to open up space for free public action (Isaac 1994: 163). As a result Arendt sees such council systems as ‘the single alternative that has ever appeared in history, and has reappeared time and time again’ (Arendt 1972a: 231). This continual appearance is evidence enough to Arendt that all that is required for a virtuous public realm is a place for people to speak and act about common concerns.

In *On Revolution* Arendt makes the point that these exemplary publics are invariably constituted through the act of resistance to an illegitimate form of political power. People are forced to constitute their own public when they are confronted with a public existence they cannot reconcile with their private being. When people refuse to speak and act through the machinery of the state and instead choose to constitute their own forum, their own speech and their own action, by necessity they begin to constitute a new public realm. This public realm gains power simply because of its immediacy and responsiveness. Resisters ‘had become challengers, they had taken the
initiative upon themselves, and therefore, without even noticing it, had begun to create the public space between themselves where freedom could appear’ (Arendt 1968: 3-4). In the act of resistance, people are forced to devise new structures of politics based upon their own notions of legitimacy, and in doing so are not only forced to think about the ‘stability and durability of the new structure’ but also enjoy ‘the exhilarating awareness of the human capacity of beginning’ (Arendt 1990: 223). Thus the very act of creation is part of the experience offered by the ideal public realm.

Despite their approximation of the virtue of the agonal Greek polis, Arendt notes that modern revolutionary publics have never managed to survive their own founding69. She notes disdainfully the capitulation of the thought of these spontaneous public realms in the face of political “knowledge” (Arendt 1990: 264). The founding of such a public in the modern period, although spurred on by a human need to oppose the prevailing public realm, is doomed by the modern conception that reality is constituted prior to the individual. With the dominance of this understanding, the tendency has been for councils to acquiesce in the face of more instrumentally legitimate power structures of administration. Throughout the modern period the victories won through agonistic, participatory democracies have been quickly exploited by experts who “knew” what needed to happen. Since ‘man has lost faith in himself as partner of his own thoughts’, Arendt understands that the moments in which he regains that faith are unique and rare moments – ‘islands in the sea or oases in the desert’ (Arendt 1990: 275).

69 See her address given upon accepting the Lessing Prize in Hamburg 1959 - reprinted as ‘On Humanity in Dark Times - Thoughts about Lessing’ in (Arendt 1973).
This depiction of agonal politics as occurring only in moments of resistance has led various writers to conclude that Arendt’s ideal polis is a chimera, manifesting itself only through civil disobedience and resistance. However, I would suggest that Arendt’s aim in On Revolution is to acknowledge that freedom presents itself as resistance in the modern period. In an instrumental society, with an innate tendency towards totalitarianism, resistance remains as the irreducible aspect of political freedom. Arendt is never so pessimistic, however, as to suggest that this is a terminal condition. She even names the ever present hope of humanity - natality, which is the constant plurality and founding brought about through the fact of birth (Arendt 1958: 247). It is the very act of creation, of beginning something that has never been begun before, that guarantees the occurrence of difference and ushers in the need for speech and action. The fact that something born new has to be reconciled with the world means the space for freedom continually appears. As George Kateb has noted, her interest in Jeffersonian wards was based upon Jefferson’s attempt to maintain the positive experience of founding – she wanted to ‘found a form that would institutionalize the practice of beginning or founding, and provide a way of having the revolutionary spirit survive the end of the revolution’ (Kateb 1977: 157). In modern politics, it is only in the activity of resistance or disobedience that the authority of political knowledge is abandoned long enough to reacquaint concern with stability with a spirit desirous of change within a common public (Arendt 1990: 223). In witnessing birth, however, we are continually forced to reconcile the old with the new – the more immediate our connection with this process, the more we are forced to

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70 See, for example, (Villa 1997).
think. Our personal experience of birth gives us the capacity to conceptualise new political beginnings.

Quite plainly, the smaller the public, the more the intimate experience of creation is shared among its constituents and the more immediate the experience of public activity as a result. Arendt’s work, therefore, ‘allows us to see possibilities for political action instantiating multiple, overlapping and sometimes conflicting public domains’ (Calhoun 1997: 239). This reading of Arendt draws attention to her depiction of political associations as fluid and subjectively constituted; indeed, ‘Ten people around a table are a political group provided their talk is about public business and they are part of a public network of councils’ (Arendt 1972b: 232-233). All that is truly needed for a political public is a space in which people come to understand each other through the free use of their speech and in which they find an outlet for action (Calhoun 1997: 237).

This line of thought offers up the possibility of using Arendt’s political vision to correct the various modes of citizenship already engaged in by the modern democratic citizen. George Kateb argues that liberal democratic citizens are already engaged in various types of publics – through private relationships, participation with voluntary associations, daily life at work and through the possibilities for involvement presented by local government and political parties (Kateb 1977: 175). He argues that, ideally, all these engagements fulfil Arendt’s requirement of a place for free speech and action and at least aspire to some form of equality between participants (Kateb 1977: 176). With such a plethora of opportunities for participation already in existence, Kateb argues, surely Arendt’s theory can be applied as an institutional critique in order to
make life ‘more political, and therefore more satisfying and more dignified’ (Kateb 1977: 176). Kateb wishes to use Arendt’s standards for what public associations should be in order to critique and change the public situations encountered in civil society. Should we then assume that the structure of Arendt’s ideal public realm resembles a more democratically vigorous modern liberal democracy?

Kateb’s ideas about how Arendt’s agonal vision might be implemented may go a long way to refining and improving the democratic credentials of any administrative organisation, but they do not do justice to the many roles Arendt’s publics serve. Providing a space of equality in which speech and action can appear serves the purpose of engaging participants and offering refuge from the futility of existence. However, it denies the role of the public in providing a space for “reality” to appear. For within the confines of a business, or a political party, a family, or municipal council, one can only encounter a public whose constituents are already somewhat constrained by the predefined roles these “publics” serve. As seen in her estimation of revolution, a large part of democratic participation is the act of founding a public, not as a means to an end but as a way of determining worthy ends through the collective perception of “reality”. By appropriating Arendt’s thought as a way of improving the democratic function of these essentially “private” institutions, Kateb re-enacts the fallacy of Saint Just: ‘The freedom of the people is in its private life; don’t disturb it. Let the government be a force only in order to protect this state of simplicity against force itself’. As Arendt notes, ‘these words indeed spell out the death sentence for all the organs of the people, and they express in rare unequivocality the end of all

71 Kateb actually makes the admission that ‘too much is left out’ in this appropriation of Arendt’s thought (Kateb 1977: 177).
hopes for the revolution’ (Arendt 1990: 244). Nothing precludes the possibility of freedom more than predefined and exclusory notions of who should take part in public discourse and how they should do so. Without the constitution of the public by the public, as opposed to a public constituted by individuals acting in their private interests, the public cannot truly serve as a place for reality to appear.

This is not to say that Arendt completely dismisses the possibilities of multiple publics, but it is important to understand that she places the possibilities of these semi-autonomous publics in the context of a broader and more inclusive public that still conforms to her idealisations of the public sphere. If we take into account her pessimistic assessment of the political ethos of modernity, it appears that multiple publics constituted in resistance to the modern democratic “public” might be the only way to rescue some of the virtues of her ideal polis. This by no means implies, however, that we are justified in abandoning the attempt to create a more inclusive overarching political public. It is of fundamental importance that Arendt bases her understanding of the possibility of reconciling multiple publics under one general public upon the ‘possibility of intersubjective dialogue and mutual understanding’ (Disch 1994: 40). The point of public appearance is to make oneself understood, both to oneself and to others. The crucial factor is not appearance before a fixed or universal public realm, but appearance before all publics in a way that constitutes a continuous identity.

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73 This interpretation of Arendt invokes thoughts of Habermas’s notion of discursive ethics as democratic reform.
In the condition of multiple publics, the single constant is the continuity of identity within the space of memory. In order for the publics to fulfil their functions of disclosing reality, constituting power and providing aesthetic gratification, the identity of the individual involved needs to be consistent. For example, an individual cannot appear in their capacity as a worker in one public, and appear differently as a citizen in another. To do so would be to privilege the private over the public and belie the purpose of public space in its role of disclosure. More to the point, it would deny the possibility of the individual to have a consistent identity and to live a life that can be told as a single, consistent, inspirational story. By serving as a constant, identity transcends the founding of new publics and serves to remind us that the condition of legitimate publicity is when the revelation of our identity (through both our acts and through stories told about us) makes sense in every public role we serve. As Calhoun has pointed out, ‘Such identities require a field of common knowledge within which to be comprehensible, but there is no reason that the field must have strong institutional boundaries (in the way that, for example, an electorate must)’ (Calhoun 1997: 251). In Arendt’s thought identity comes to constitute the political, and in doing so gives rise to the many virtues of public activity.

It is important to understand, then, that what is significant for Arendt is not so much the physical qualities of the public space for freedom but the existence of a place to allow stories to reveal themselves and judgements to be made. Storytelling and judgement remain as two of the most pervasive elements of Arendt’s thought, and I would suggest this is because they provide a bridge between understanding, thought and action. Storytelling serves this purpose in its capacity to render speech about action broadly consumable by reconciling detached and seemingly incongruous
details about an individual in a way that transcends incommensurability. Judgement links understanding, thought and action in the manner in which it generates action through speech and does so in a way that can be spoken about. We can therefore come to understand that, for Arendt, proper democratic functioning does not depend on any specific structure or site of political engagement. Rather, ‘democracy is a project concerned with the political potentialities of ordinary citizens… with their possibilities for becoming political beings through the self discovery of common concerns and of modes of action for realizing them’ (Wolin 1996: 33).74

Conclusion

Arriving at the end of our investigation of Arendt and Habermas’s solutions to the problems of modern liberal democracy, we are left with largely consistent indications as to how we might expect to overcome these deficiencies. A public culture of critical engagement is central to Arendt’s and Habermas’s solutions to the critical deficit of democratic systems, and each suggests that the cultivation of “ideal” fora is integral to addressing the broad social problems brought about by the ascendancy of instrumentalism and the decline of critical thought.

As seen in the first chapter, both theorists identify a similar malaise in liberal democracies – being an inadequate critical impetus in the functioning of its institutions. However, they have somewhat different ideas about how this inadequacy ought to be rectified. Habermas tries to incorporate critical deliberation into the very procedure of communication. Arendt, on the other hand, seeks to inspire critical

74 For an elaboration of the congruencies between Arendt and Wolin’s political thought see (Wolin 1960: 2,277).
thought by creating a space for the celebration of the human faculties of thought, speech and action. Habermas’s approach is to try and make an irrefutable and always evocable connection between public power and the critique of that power. Arendt’s approach is to seek to institute publics that inspire thought and criticism through participation. What I hope I have emphasised is that these differences do not render Arendt and Habermas’s theories incompatible.

Much ado has been made by democratic theorists about the bases and consequences of the subsequent differences between agonistic and deliberative democratic systems. My particular contribution in this thesis is to highlight the similarities between Habermas’s and Arendt’s democratic projects, rather than the differences. I have argued that they share an understanding of the communicative composition of power, and of personal sovereignty as the ability to critically engage in this power. To be sure, Habermas emphasises the importance of making the mode of discourse critical, while Arendt emphasises the importance of keeping the space for discourse critical, but this does not render their projects to be exclusive of each other. Indeed, given their shared understanding of the communicative composition of power, it is easy to come to understand that critical engagement with the “space” for discourse and the “mode” of discourse comes to constitute the same thing - an individual’s expressive interaction with discursively constituted power.

What reading Habermas and Arendt together does is provide us with a cohesive view of not only what ideal political discourse might involve, but also why we might expect people to seek to constitute an ideal forum. Rather than being antagonistic, I argue that the two theorist’s democratic theories are highly complementary. The
Arendtian notion of agonistic drive provides us with an idea of where the care necessary for communicative action might arise from. At the same time, Habermas’s notion of ideal speech outlines the conditions that can make discourse itself adversarial, yet not antagonistic. Even then, Arendt’s insistence on the inevitable plurality of identity and reality undermines Mouffe’s fear that any particular “ideal” political forum could become hegemonic. Read in this way, the democratic theories of Habermas and Arendt have much more to offer the theorist who wishes to understand what can be done to improve contemporary democratic systems. It is not that democracies need to become more critical or engaging, democracies need to be more critical and engaging in order to fulfil the aspirations of either the agonistic or deliberative theorists.

It is possible to synthesise Arendt’s and Habermas’s views concerning ideal democratic forms in order to reify a truly “ideal” democratic structure, but such an instrumental appropriation of their theories does not do justice to their awareness of the limitations of historical and cultural contingencies. For the sake of those who like instruments, such a synthesis would identify the need for a public sphere that is endlessly inclusive and plural. This global public sphere would provide the most coherent perception of reality, insofar as it was inclusive and plural, and would provide a space for immortality and agonistic engagement for all citizens. In order to ensure that all participants in the global public are fairly included, the global public would aspire to the conventions of ideal speech – ensuring that public communication is effective, active and revelatory. Such a public could then act as a model for smaller publics, as the engaging and critical virtues of such a public became clear. While this model would invariably be an improvement on the current state of democracy, it does
not do justice to the non-instrumental nature of Arendt’s and Habermas’s theories. By instituting a preconceived notion of the good such a forum – any forum - has the potential to become a hegemonic force that, in turn, will need to be overcome in the process of critical political engagement.

It is perhaps more instructive to explore another similarity between the emancipatory theories of Arendt and Habermas; each theorist identifies the creation of ideal publics as an essentially human ability. In the form of deliberative democracy or agonistic democracy the “space” available for discussion is not as pertinent as the proclivity of the identities involved to “become public”. As Arendt and Habermas both argue, all it really takes to form a public is a shared willingness into engage in debate in such a way as to coordinate action through consensus.

Such a reading of Habermas and Arendt suggests that democratic emancipation may be a human inevitability. The democratic theory of Hannah Arendt provides us with an account of how public engagement is a necessary result of the human urge to disclose one’s unique identity. The democratic theory of Jurgen Habermas provides us with an account of how discussion can be conducted in order to ensure this disclosure translates effectively into action coordination, and how the rationalisation of the lifeworld is increasing such communicative integration. In the next chapter I shall investigate the factors that are inhibiting the development of an ideal democratic polis, despite the apparently human and historical proclivity towards a more emancipatory democratic system constituted by reality seeking identities.
Chapter Three: Applying Habermas and Arendt to Contemporary Democracy - The Emergence of *Homo spectaculorum*

**Introduction**

As discussed in the previous chapter Habermas and Arendt’s theories on democracy are highly complementary. On the one hand, Habermas provides Arendt’s agonistic actor with a set of discursive conditions that are conducive to meaningful communication in a plural public. On the other hand, Arendt provides Habermas’s communicative actor with the agonistic motive for engaging in that dialogue. Indeed, it is even possible to synthesise the two theories so as to suggest that the increasing rationalisation of the lifeworld will encourage a greater emphasis on communicative forms of legitimacy in the political public space. In this chapter I shall investigate why natality in a rationalised lifeworld is not leading to a more critical political system.

In order to understand why political systems are not becoming increasingly critical, I shall explore the implications of Habermas’s and Arendt’s democratic theories when applied to the material conditions of existing post-industrial societies. The argument I intend to develop here is that the effect of the internal colonisation of the lifeworld on natality is such that a new subjectivity is produced - that of *homo spectaculorum*. This new mode of being undermines the emancipatory force of agonism which is the basis of a positive synthesis of Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories.
In the last chapter I alluded to the idea that natality and the human desire for reality might create the impetus for the proliferation of communicative action within plural political fora. What I intend to do in this chapter is outline why I believe this impetus is not developing. At the heart of this belief is the view that natality in a colonised lifeworld gives rise to a new subjectivity that is disposed to display and recognition within a common context, but is not reality seeking, nor in need of a consistent identity that can be told as a coherent story. This new form of being interacts (or rather, does not interact) with the remnants of the political public sphere of *homo faber* so that the critical deficit of contemporary democracies is exacerbated, at the same time as the emancipatory potential of agonism is undermined.

The previous chapter outlined the way in which a democratic politics, and more directly a democratic ethos, was of principal importance to Habermas’s and Arendt’s projects of human emancipation. The point was made that, while Habermas makes an eloquent argument about the emancipatory potential inherent in the legitimacy of communicative action, he fails to articulate why people would want to engage in this process of democratic legitimation. Arendt, however, insists that the human need for meaning and display impels people to manifest publics for this purpose. My argument is that Arendt does not account for the effects of lifeworld colonisation and rationalisation upon the way that agonism expresses itself in the contemporary world. Thus the condition of a colonised lifeworld undermines the emancipatory potential of the reconciliation between the natural and real world that is implicit in natality and moments of founding.
Arendt’s assumption is that we seek to engage our agonism as publicly as possible because it is only in a plural public that we can find out who we truly are. This assumption is based upon Arendt’s understanding of the human condition, in which we are born into a natural and plural world that can never condition us absolutely (Arendt 1958: 11). Arendt’s argument is that the space between the self and the natural cyclical world provides an opportunity for humans to come to distinguish themselves through public action. In this chapter I argue that such a public space does not currently exist. I suggest that “public” space as such has completely disappeared and in its place we have a series of private spaces each simulating the purpose of public space. The loss of public space has changed the constitution of subjectivity to such a degree that it undermines the reconciliation between identity and reality that Arendt views as the foundation for optimism about the persistence of a democratic ethos.

Whilst Habermas and Arendt try to avoid inserting their own consciousness into their projects of emancipation, each relies on the hope that there is an innate human predisposition to seek freedom and legitimacy. Habermas suggests that the positive possibilities of democracy are founded upon the persistence of reason. Arendt believes that democracy will always spring up wherever human expression is repressed. She also contends that natality, the act of new humans being born, introduces a biological “moment of founding”. Habermas argues that the interaction of identity with the lifeworld means that reason must always be generated by a set of unproblematic and shared convictions. In coming to reason, or reconciling identity with the public world, we are forced into a critical conversation in which one side of this conversation is informed by our humanity. It is the persistence of our humanity
that provides the eternal hopes for redressing the problems caused by the systemic
colonisation of the lifeworld or the occlusion of the political by the social. Hence,
whilst the systemic, social forces which contort our reality are historically derived and
contingent, our humanity – our need to make sense of our selves within a public
context – remains constant and provides an unending source of emancipatory acts. In
this light Habermas and Arendt can be presented as eternal optimists, believing that
our human nature is the very source of our own emancipation.

In this chapter I raise some contemporary objections to Habermas’s and Arendt’s faith
in the “persistence of humanity” by suggesting that the lifeworld has come to be
colonised to such an extent that reality and identity have lost their emphatic meaning.
In a situation in which the reality encountered publicly is no more or less real than the
various realities encountered privately, the idea of forming identity in the context of a
real world becomes obsolete. Similarly, when reality and identity can be seen to be
fluid, the attempt to legitimate systemic rationality through recourse to one’s lifeworld
is undermined as an emancipatory act. Without identities needing to critically engage
with the construction of reality, the innate human force of emancipation that Arendt
and Habermas rely on is undermined somewhat. This chapter is an attempt, therefore,
to outline the ways in which the pursuit of reason and identity has been undermined as
an emancipatory force.

In this chapter I suggest that the loss of plural public space has undermined the level
of concern for the integrity of reality and then reflect upon the negative consequences
of this shift for political action. Most importantly it has led to a situation in which
identity remains important to people but the degree to which they wish to reconcile
their identity with “reality” is in dramatic decline. The chapter is intended to show that the meaningfulness and relevance of the grand narratives which project an authentic account of existence have passed simply because, at this point, reconciliation with reality is an unimaginable prospect. Instead, people are happy because they express themselves in “public” and they feel free because they are engaged in the construction of the “reality” in which they exist. The integrity of this “reality” might suffer and it may be subject to manipulation by those who control publicity, but the experience of self within this “virtual” reality can be gratifying. In this analysis, I extend Arendt’s and Habermas’s theories to analyse the ways in which discursive conventions are shaped in arenas of cultural reproduction and of the thorough appropriation of public space by private interests. Unfortunately these analyses lead to the conclusion that these conditions undermine the possibility of the emergence of a public of the sort that Arendt and Habermas idealise.

In Part One I describe the effect of systemic colonisation of the lifeworld as being a change in the predominant social subjectivity: from *homo faber* to *homo spectaculorum*. First, I shall provide a brief description of how contemporary public realms differ from the modern public realms described in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and *The Human Condition*. I shall then go on to argue that this change has resulted in the loss of the public sphere as described in these works. For, as Arendt argues in *On Revolution*, the existence of a repressive public authority gives rise to rebellious publics which cater to the repressed agonism and political expression of individuals. My argument rests upon the contention that, as the public realm became dominated by the instrumentalism of *homo faber*, people found the market to be that forum which allowed them to express their agonism in
identity defining ways. While this argument reflects Arendt’s description of the “occlusion of the political by the social”, a crucial difference concerns the way in which the individual’s sense of identity and reality can be taken to have altered following the loss of any plural and communicative public space. Another difference is that this change is construed in terms of Habermas’s arguments about the effects of the colonisation of the lifeworld.

By analysing Habermas’s understanding of fragmented consciousness in light of theories about the effect of lifeworld rationalisation on subjectivity, it is possible to understand how the individual, as a sovereign and consistent being who acts as a coherent political unit, has become obsolete as a way of conceptualising political agency. I shall argue that this change in subjectivity does not undermine the motivational component of generating meaning through shared contexts, which continues to be exploited by private interests that usurp the role of public space. However, I argue that this usurpation of agonism prohibits the development of reality in a truly plural, and subsequently real, public realm. An analysis of the effects of agency and steering media in privately controlled public spaces reveals disturbing aspects of the current critical capacities of political action. As the rest of the chapter shall indicate, the political symptoms of a public realm dominated by *homo spectaculorum* are similar to those of a public realm dominated by *homo faber*. However, the elision of public identity forming contexts by private identity forming contexts seems to indicate that *homo spectaculorum*’s emergence undermines Arendt’s belief in the emancipatory potential of natality and moments of founding.
In Part Two of this chapter I highlight the features of spaces in contemporary liberal democratic societies that encourage the “public” practice of display. The new fora for agonistic expression within the colonised lifeworld are domains in which the purpose and functions of public space are appropriated by private interests in order to obtain public power. Several of these domains will be examined in order to identify how they manipulate their agonistic appeal, and to detail the way they usurp what would otherwise be public interaction.

In Part Three I shall return to the resulting poverty of the political public sphere as a space for political engagement, presenting existing political institutions as obsolete due to their lack of agonistic appeal. I shall argue that the systemic exploitation of agonism leads to a splintering of publics, a lack of care about the lifeworld, a lack of care about a public that is reconciled with reality, and a lack of the care needed in order to approach the ideal of communicative action. For these reasons we find ourselves with a lack of critical debate about political decisions. Because of this we find ourselves returning to the subject of Chapter One, the problem with modern democracies, but here we deal with the prevailing material conditions that allow us to identify the limits that have emerged for being, resistance and reason.

In this chapter I argue that the need for democratic reform has become more pressing than ever due to the rise of homo spectaculum. Despite quantum leaps in the sophistication and reach of communication technologies, contemporary political fora are increasingly irrelevant and unresponsive to the lives of ordinary citizens. Communicative spaces are shrinking, whilst strategic actors are ubiquitous in what pass as “public” spaces. There should be little surprise either that citizens are less
convinced than ever that there are ways in which political processes might improve their lot or that postmodern philosophy has itself become cynical. Whether or not this cynicism is justified, the resultant apathy concerning political action is undermining the credibility and legitimacy of liberal democratic systems.

The claimed benefit of the liberal democratic model is that public processes do not intrude upon the world-making processes of individuals, which means that politics tends to be peaceful and unobtrusive. Precisely because political decisions are reduced to being a product of detached processes of purely functional decision making, politics is unlikely to be a source of agonistic engagement. By keeping the expression of self within the economic realm, the liberal model undermines the possibility of violence and places the burden of social integration upon systems regulated by money and power. As seen in the last two chapters, this arrangement is not without its faults, including the resultant critical deficit of our contemporary democratic systems. The point of this chapter is to present the liberal understanding of humans as innately reasonable, impermeable and self-defining individuals as obsolete and, therefore, as an inappropriate way to conceptualise sovereignty when envisaging a new democratic system. In this chapter I shall be making the argument that the basic liberal premise of individuality has been fundamentally undermined by the current material conditions of late-industrial capitalism.

In this chapter I apply Arendt’s and Habermas’s theories to the material conditions of contemporary democracy. By synthesising Arendt’s and Habermas’s theories I highlight the ways in which the constituents of contemporary democracies differ substantially from the conception of individuals that liberal democracy is premised
upon. As a result of this synthesis I introduce a new genus into Arendt’s tripartite description of political actors - to animal laborans, homo faber and political actors I add homo spectaculorum. Following an exploration of this synthesis I examine the conditions of public space that give rise to such a genus and explore the political ramifications of the public dominance of homo spectaculorum. Through this exploration of the continuing applicability of Habermas’s and Arendt’s democratic theories I am able to draw attention to the plight of the critical capacities of contemporary democracies.

**Part One: Introducing *Homo spectaculorum***

The term *homo spectaculorum* is one I use here to refer to the rise of a new subjectivity that emerges following the occlusion of the political by the social and the colonisation of the lifeworld by the system. *Homo spectaculorum* develops the human needs to display and to find meaning through engagement in a competitive environment, but *homo spectaculorum*’s desire for reality is undermined by the fabricated mode of existence generated by the public realm of *homo faber*. Because of this *homo spectaculorum* is a subjectivity produced through natality in a lifeworld already colonised by systemic forces. Following a brief introduction as to how Arendt and Habermas’s theories can be understood to account for the emergence of this new subjectivity, I shall highlight how the change in subjectivity can be witnessed as a move from instrumental rationality to “the society of the spectacle”. I shall then go on to outline *homo spectaculorum* as a product of what Habermas describes as “fragmented consciousness” and as a result of the usurpation of what Arendt describes as the inherent plurality of the real world by non-plural private publics. Finally, I shall outline the subjectivity of *homo spectaculorum* as I did for animal laborans and homo
in the first chapter - by identifying its activities, its instruments and its proclivities. By establishing a theoretical image of homo spectaculorum it is then possible to identify how homo spectaculorum is engaged in public spaces and how this form of subjectivity interacts with contemporary liberal democratic systems of government.

My development of the concept of homo spectaculorum - meaning human of the spectacle - was influenced by Guy Debord’s description of contemporary society as The Society of the Spectacle (Debord 1995)\textsuperscript{75}. Whilst Arendt’s description of the public realm of homo faber resembles what Herbert Marcuse has described as ‘One Dimensional Society’ (Marcuse 1964), the argument I shall develop here is that this understanding of a public realm dominated by instrumentality is no longer adequate for an understanding of contemporary society. Whereas Arendt believed that the pervasive instrumentality of the public realm would contribute to its downfall, insofar as it restricted the possibilities of human expression, Debord described a situation in which the emancipatory potential exacted through instrumentalist repression has been undermined by a society that indulges its citizens in more reflexively spectacular and display-validating ways. Debord and others have explained this development from instrumental publics to “publics” of display as a shift necessary for capitalism’s continued expansion. We can more fully understand this development, however, in terms of the Habermasian language of lifeworld colonisation and in Arendtian terms in the need for humans to find meaning through their agonistic expression. Simply put, the infiltration of the commodity into the lifeworld becomes so thorough and

\textsuperscript{75} Debord further describes the society of the spectacle in (Debord 1990).
unproblematic that the commodity replaces ideology as the individual’s very basis for meaning.

It is my contention that Arendt’s understanding of the emancipatory potential of natal actors seeking reality is undermined by this colonisation of social life. When Arendt’s human subjects are born into this context and start to create meaning, the colonised lifeworld forms the basis of individuals’ shared and unproblematic convictions and systemic forces thus come to constitute the boundaries for individuals’ agonistic engagement. This engagement, however, is not purely thoughtful or communicative, as its “original position” of thought is already strategically defined by the “public” it is constituted in. Furthermore, unlike the public realm of *homo faber*, this public realm caters to display and expression - albeit display and expression within the contexts defined by those who control public space. This new condition, in which the public realm engages within a predefined context, displaces Arendt’s emancipatory force of action and replaces it with an activity she calls behaviour. This brings about a subjectivity that is neither *animal laborans* (defined by its exclusion from public appearance), *homo faber* (defined through its fabrication within a public realm dominated by instrumental value), nor properly human (defined through expressive public action), but that of *homo spectaculum* - humans defined through their participation in a manufactured spectacle.

**The Plight of Agonism**

Understanding agonism is integral to understanding the rise of *homo spectaculum*. Arendt believes that the reason that individuals wish to critically invest themselves in reality is that reality is plural, and thus neither reality nor the individual can be
conditioned absolutely. In a plural reality, therefore, the opportunity remains for the individual to affect reality, and influence it in such a way as to leave a lasting imprint of being. Because of its plurality, reality remains open to the influence of an individual. Although she somewhat ambiguously suggests that the social as a totality has undermined the reality of true publicity, it is clear that Arendt believes that reality is somehow irrepressible even given this occlusion. The uncritically constructed reality of instrumentalism still has a dialectic relationship with public reality because, Arendt believes, the plural reality of the natural world continually undermines the coherence of the instrumental public (Arendt 1958: 300-301). What has changed following the colonisation of the lifeworld is a fundamental perversion of reality, a result of the world-alienation this entails. For *homo spectaculorum* displays a complete lack of concern for reality. Following the public ascension of “knowing”, critical public spaces are shut down. Following the elimination of critical public space, reality, in an Arendtian sense, is driven to extinction. With the loss of a forum that can be claimed to allow for a critical and plural reality the positive element of Arendt’s emancipatory agonism is lost. There is no public space that is plural in which being can reveal itself in a purely expressive way. Display becomes a form of behaviour, as opposed to an opportunity for expression.

The distinction between agonism invested in action and agonism invested in behaviour is fundamental to understanding the passive elements of *homo spectaculorum’s* display, so with the help of the work of John Stuart Mill, Frederick Nietzsche and Michel Foucault I shall now detail the difference between display as expression and display as behaviour.
The need to distinguish between display as expression and display as behaviour reflects the need to understand the emancipatory potential of agonism. The agonistic drive serves as a fundamental component of the faith Arendt has in natality. She believes that in the process of founding humans will tend to invest themselves in public and they will tend to do so critically, actively seeking to declare and defend one’s privately formed ideals in a communicative way. For Arendt, the benefit of a coherent and constant identity is that it is consistently seen as the same in public and, as a result, this identity is in the most profound sense real. An expressive display of self is, therefore, a contribution to the plurality of public space. Such an identity must be generated through private reflection but seeks an ideal public in order to engage with the world in a way that validates the self in the most real (critical) and amicable (engaged) way possible. However, a passive display of self (one that evidences behaviour as opposed to expression) does nothing more than reinforce the non-plural and non-critical elements of public appearance.

The persistence of a coherent and constant identity is fundamental to Arendt’s political thought, hence her motivation to describe the ideal polis as a way to express and celebrate this identity. She urges people to be proud of ‘that untaught and natural feeling of identity with whatever we happen to be by accident of birth’ (Arendt 1959b: 179). This cherishing of identity is a result of her high regard for natality as a critical force and her assumption that we are all the same yet different, ‘that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live’ (Arendt 1958: 8). She believed, following Heidegger, that being has an urge to disclose itself; hence a “good” life is one that can be told as a consistent, inspirational narrative (Arendt 1973: 105). Such a life would bring forth the
uniqueness of one’s identity most emphatically in public space, and subsequently the ideal polis, with its critical and aesthetic functions, would gratify this urge in the most socially advantageous way.

Arendt’s faith in a human urge to disclose their unique selves probably stems from her personal conviction that ‘a philosophy of life that does not arrive, as did Nietzsche, at the affirmation of “eternal recurrence” as the highest principle of all being, simply does not know what it is talking about’(Arendt 1958: 97). Arendt passionately affirms the individual as that means by which we avoid the pitfalls of knowing and maintain the emancipatory moments of natality, critical engagement and founding. In the world of *homo spectaculorum*, however, public space has been completely occluded by private space. This means that, when we examine the role of public space, we find that expressive forms of display are shunned, excluded and defined as incommensurable. Instead we find the proliferation of display as behaviour, as an indication of allegiance and a way of establishing the reality of what is already known.

This kind of display as behaviour has been more thoroughly explored in the political theories of John Stuart Mill and Frederick Nietzsche. Each of these theorists identifies a human tendency to accept and rely upon a non-critical reception of the reality of the world as it is. In the tendency towards a passive reception of reality and the human predilection towards *ressentiment*, Mill and Nietzsche enable insight into the way in

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76 Arendt’s assertiveness on this point is noteworthy, considering her heavy emphasis on the dangers of knowing anything.
which *homo spectaculorum* seeks to find meaning following the loss of Arendt’s idealised critical public sphere.

Like Arendt, John Stuart Mill argues that critical thought must in some sense be inspired by public life. In his principal work, *On Liberty*, he makes an eloquent argument for the necessity for individuals’ critical involvement in public decision-making, arguing that such an involvement is beneficial for both the individual and the society in which the individual moves (Mill 1991). He argues that this critical involvement must be nurtured and encouraged, through the public use of reason because without such a public individuals are naturally inclined to reject their own critical voices in favour of those of other people and because there is a fatal tendency on the parts of members of a society to stop thinking about things as soon as they become commonly accepted (Mill 1991: 49). As pointed out by Dana Villa, Mill made the point that

> we don’t merely accept this condition but we will it with our hearts and souls. Our acceptance of what is ‘unquestionable’ for our class, culture, or age, provides us with the orientation and support we yearn for in an otherwise contingent and disturbingly pluralistic world. (Villa 2001: 80)

We seek to orient our lives around something, and the more pervasive this reality is the more comfortable we are with our identity and security. We are “encumbered selves” in the sense that we cannot imagine ourselves as ourselves without some “unquestionable orientations”\(^7\). In *On Liberty* Mill develops an elegant argument against the social tendency to know, outlining why such unquestionable orientations are dangerous for both society and the individual. Whilst Mill’s understanding of the

\(^7\) (Villa 2001: 23) quoting (Sandel 1982).
social benefits of individuality varies from that of Arendt\textsuperscript{78}, he expresses very similar ideas to Arendt insofar as he advocates a public space that encourages individuals to have critical access to their world as an essential part of the good life. Without such a space, he argues, there is a prolific tendency to know, rather than to think.

Frederick Nietzsche also argues that the likelihood is greatest that people will embrace common values in lieu of critical engagement in both philosophy and in society in general. ‘Madness’, he famously declared, ‘is rare in individuals – but in groups, parties, nations, and ages it is the rule’ (Nietzsche 1986: aphorism 156). As Villa points out, Nietzsche contends that the collective need for obedience to authority has stunted our appreciation of our own moral and critical capacities (Villa 2001: 134). Furthermore, Nietzsche argues that the “death of god”, which should have resulted in an increase in critical engagement, has led instead to the appropriation of weaker idols (Goodchild 1996: 22). The need for “orientation” is so pressing that it cannot be abandoned, it is forever assumed. In the place of an expressive and critical formulation of reality, Nietzsche identifies a process of increasing \textit{ressentiment}:

\begin{quote}
\begin{quote}
a \textit{ressentiment} experienced by creatures who, deprived as they are of the proper outlet of action are forced to find their compensation in an imaginary vengeance. While every noble morality springs from a triumphant affirmation of its own demands, the slave morality says "no" from the very outset to what is "outside itself," "different from itself," and "not itself"; and this "no" is its creative deed. The \textit{volte face} of the valuing standpoint—this \textit{inevitable} gravitation to the objective instead of back to the subjective—is typical of \textit{ressentiment}.
\end{quote}
\end{quote}
\hfill (Nietzsche 1956: 170)

In place of the critical and creative possibilities of individuality, Nietzsche perceives a devotion to a herd mentality brought about by the need for a common, and, in his view, base world in which people can display\textsuperscript{79}. Such a slave mentality can be seen in

\textsuperscript{78} For example, Mill promotes individuality as being a fundamental component of progress, whereas Arendt is hostile to ideas of progress and promotes individuality insofar as it is an expression of self.

\textsuperscript{79} Base because such people display as slaves to those who have created the boundaries of their \textit{ressentiment}, rather than as an expression of self.
humanity’s “flight” from its own senses and will to the comforting reality of material and knowledge. It can also be seen in the predilection that people have towards fear as opposed to self-affirmation. Simply, Nietzsche argues that there is an inherent human weakness that leads one to locate self within an externally created context rather than to affirm a unique identity.

Hence we can see that while Mill and Nietzsche identify the need for recognition and display, both argue that for most people this engagement tends to be display as behaviour according to externally defined parameters and not as a critical and expressive display of self. As discussed in the first chapter, Arendt describes a propensity to know, rather than think, particularly where there is no public space conducive to thought. Arendt’s belief that agonism is an emancipatory force reflects her faith that humans are reality seeking individuals that tend towards a critical engagement with reality as opposed to the passive reception of reality which is expressed in display as behaviour. Arendt herself argues that critical engagement with the world is the exception rather than the rule (Arendt 1958: 108).

Crucially, this does not undermine an individual’s desire to excel within the context of a commonly shared world (Arendt 1990: 119). Indeed, as Nietzsche argued, the failure to have a real forum to act induces a mental predisposition to will such a forum and imagine one where it does not truly exist. People ‘deprived of the direct outlet of action, compensate by an imaginary vengeance’ (Nietzsche 1956: 170). As one finds oneself more isolated in the world there is a tendency to grasp onto one’s illusions with greater ferocity.
The desire to display is, therefore, both the chief virtue and vice of humanity (Arendt 1990: 119). As a virtue it engages with reality and inserts the plurality of a private self into that reality in a way that generates thought, action and distinction. As a vice it constitutes a form of behaviour that conforms to passively accepted contexts of meaning established prior to action. Michel Foucault is one theorist who, like Arendt, identifies the endless subjective plurality of the world as an opportunity for an expression of self. ‘From the ideal that the self is not given to us, I think there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as works of art’ (Foucault 1983: 237). Certainly, *hominis spectaculorum* seek to develop their identities in such ways as to appear functional, desirable and spectacular, but insofar as the parameters of function, desirability and the spectacle are established prior to their engagement and yet still inform their action, the art they create is derivative rather than originating in the actor.

**Fragmented Publics, Fragmented Individuals**

In Arendtian terms, the loss of a plural public undermines the impetus for the expressive public action of individuals. This development can also be understood as a result of the internal colonisation of the lifeworld following the loss of a reality defining public. It is my contention that the emergence of *homo spectaculorum* is a consequence of the change in reality that resulted from the process that Habermas identifies as the colonisation of the lifeworld by the system. That is to say, the Arendtian/Habermasian conception of the pursuit of a coherent life story as a source of communicative integration is undermined by the fragmented subjectivity of *homo spectaculorum*. I believe that the private usurpation of agonism was not fully anticipated by Arendt. Nonetheless, it must be understood as a symptom of what
happens to personal existence and reality following the rise of instrumental rationalism and the decoupling of the system from the lifeworld. Habermas and Arendt see the rise of the social and the refeudalisation of the public sphere as the endpoint of their analysis. In this chapter these moments will be viewed as the beginning of an examination of the ways in which the privatisation of “public” space affects the emancipatory potentials of contemporary democracy.

The Loss of a Plural Public: Homo Faber’s Abstraction from Reality

As described in the first chapter, Arendt believes that *homo faber’s* obsession with instrumentality contributes to an impoverished public existence. In a public realm dominated by the values of *homo faber* we find a society obsessed with rationalisation, where utility is the equivalent of meaningfulness and human purpose is equated to production. Herbert Marcuse identifies this type of instrumentalist repression in his work *One Dimensional Man* (Marcuse 1964). The chief characteristic of one-dimensional subjectivity is:

> the repression of all values, aspirations, and ideas which cannot be defined in terms of the operations and attitudes validated by the prevailing forms of rationality. The consequence is the weakening and even the disappearance of all genuinely radical critique, the integration of all opposition in the established condition. 80

Like Arendt, Marcuse criticises the thoughtlessness of a public realm dominated by instrumental rationality. Marcuse also makes the Arendtian argument that, in coming to dominate the public realm, instrumental rationality has concurrently come to generate its own reason and reality. What was public, or rather what could be publicly acknowledged, was regarded through a single instrumental rationality. This signifies the ‘absorption of ideology into reality’ such that the ideology of instrumentality

comes to define reality (Marcuse 1964: 11). Under the public dominance of *homo faber* instrumentality comes to represent that public’s “communistic fiction” or “invisible hand” that provides universal values and aspiration for citizens and in doing so marginalises all other forms of criticism (Arendt 1958: 44-45).

In contrast, Arendt’s human and worldly publics are open to plurality and inherently multi-dimensional because:

> the conditions of human existence - life itself, natality and morality, worldliness, plurality, and the earth - can never 'explain' what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that they never condition us absolutely. (Arendt 1958: 11)

Marcuse indicates, however, that following the ascension of instrumental reason to the role of definer of publicity, reason comes to constitute reality, and thereby presents the possibility that we may be conditioned absolutely. Arendt recognises that the consciousness of *homo faber* dominates the modern public realm, and that this consciousness was the first to generate reality from the Archimedean point, beyond the earth and beyond the plurality of human existence (Arendt 1958: 11). Marcuse aptly describes the myopia produced by this situation in its nascent state - instrumentalism and engagement through material reality was the ideology that came to dominate the public realm, and as a result of its own inherent means-ends tendencies, to recreate society based upon an abstraction. One dimensional society, therefore, signals the emergence of reality as an abstract totality.

Whereas Marcuse and Arendt are concerned with the public dominance of a particular form of reason, Habermas’s theoretical progression displays an increasing preoccupation with the loss of public ideology altogether. Marcuse is in agreement with Arendt on this particular point: instrumentality was the first step in
rationalisation that detached public meaning from its determination in public. According to Arendt, this was a fundamental shift, as prior to the rise of instrumentality, reality had been determined as a result of plural, real, consistent identities agreeing on something. According to Marcuse the rise of instrumentality represented the dominance of single (instrumental) rationality over the public sphere. Habermas, however, described this conception as obsolete. He suggests that rather than a single public sphere and a single ideology that eventually would conflict with the limited productive imperatives of the lifeworld, contemporary society has developed a ‘functional equivalent to ideology formation’ that avoids the productive constraints generated by consistency of being (Habermas 1987b: 355). The use of the term “functional” implies the instrumental origins that underpin the development of *homo spectaculorum*; the use of the term “equivalent”, however, clearly implies that this is no longer an ideology in itself. In this formulation society has undermined its own rational and ideological foundations in order to remain productive.

**Habermas and the Fragmentation of Consciousness**

Habermas, therefore, provides us with a reasonable explanation for why private spaces have proliferated as meaning givers, while larger ideological “publics” seem to be in decline. Habermas believes that such a change began with the linguistification of the sacred, which in turn led to a compelling incredulity towards all traditional forms of legitimation. Whilst he is very rarely credited with having postmodern insights, his criticism of the subsequent fate of consciousness is an excellent introduction to the rise of the new subjectivity of *homo spectaculorum*. Furthermore, if we understand the “linguistification of the sacred” to refer to the process of pervasive rationalisation that Arendt believes is the consequence of the philosophical ascension of instrumentality, it is possible to identify how the public dominance of *homo faber*
initially undermines the human subjectivity and then reasserts a spectacular subjectivity in its place.

In a chapter of *Communicative Action* entitled ‘Linguistification of the Sacred’, Habermas describes a process of rationalisation whereby the effort to rationally understand myths leads to their deconstruction and incredulity with respect to their legitimacy. What he refers to as “linguistification” is an abandonment of traditional structures of legitimation for rationalised structures of legitimation. As seen in the second chapter, these new forms of legitimacy came to undermine and usurp the coherence of preceding forms of legitimacy and led to the differentiation between system and lifeworld. One outcome of this development is that individuals themselves become fragmented:

> To the degree that the Protestant ethic of the calling ceased to place its stamp on the private conduct of life, the methodical-rational way in which bourgeois strata led their lives was displaced by the utilitarian life-style of ‘specialists without spirit’ and the aesthetic-hedonistic life-style of ‘sensualists without heart’, that is, by two complementary ways of life that soon became mass phenomena. The two life-styles can be strikingly represented by different personality types, but they can also take hold of the same person. With this fragmentation of the person, individuals lose their ability to give their life histories a certain degree of consistent direction. (Habermas 1987b: 323) [my italics]

The loss of meaning, in this instance the Protestant ethic of the calling, is profound in that it undermines the value of a consistent identity[^1]. Without a coherent and meaningful ideology around which to orient themselves, individuals seek meaning through various arenas of engagement. This represents the shift from instrumentality to spectacle. Instrumentality retains an orientation towards overall productivity by making productivity the source of all meaning. The spectacle maximises productivity by initially removing all universal meaningful orientations[^2], and then caters to the

[^1]:  By “universal meaningful orientations” I am referring to the grand narratives of modernity such as instrumentalism and progress, as well as traditional value systems such as religion and custom.

[^2]:  By “universal meaningful orientations” I am referring to the grand narratives of modernity such as instrumentalism and progress, as well as traditional value systems such as religion and custom.
unrequited need for meaning in a way that indulges the human proclivity to display within a series of privately controlled “public” spaces.

According to Habermas, therefore, the loss of a consistent public space does not undermine the need for the meaning and context providing faculties of public space. However, he argues that the drive for meaning providing contexts is distorted and channelled into fragments in order to avoid the conflict between lifeworld and system that a consistent identity might demand. This process was described in the previous chapter as the rationalisation of the lifeworld.

If… the rationalized lifeworld more and more loses its structural possibilities for ideology formation, if the facts speak for an instrumentalizing of the lifeworld can hardly be interpreted away any longer and ousted from the horizon of the lifeworld, one would expect that the competition between forms of social and system integration would openly come to the fore. But the late capitalist societies fitting the description of ‘welfare-state pacification’ do not confirm this conjecture. They have evidently found some functional equivalent for ideology formation. In place of the positive task of meeting a certain need for interpretation by ideological means, we have the negative requirement of preventing holistic interpretations from coming into existence… Every consciousness is robbed of its power to synthesise, it becomes fragmented. (Habermas 1987b: 354-355)

Here Habermas presents the profound idea that the reason that late-capitalist systems are able to avoid cataclysmic change is because of a change in the conditions of individual subjectivity. ‘In place of “false consciousness” we today have “fragmented consciousness” that blocks enlightenment by the mechanism of reification’ (Habermas 1987b: 355). Put simply, we are no longer taught to expect coherent public reason, but to expect subjective private satisfaction. As a result we resist from questioning the legitimacy of our interaction with the world and instead seek to approach the world as a source of sensation.

The Emergence of the Spectacle

Critical theorist Guy Debord is one writer who sensed this change in the role and function of public space. Writing just three years after the publication of One
Dimensional Man, Debord argues that while instrumental reason may have been the bane of modern existence, contemporary problems stem from the subsequent usurpation of reason as a totality and the rise of the society of the spectacle (Debord 1995). According to this analysis, it seems as though, according to typical postmodern irony, instrumental rationality itself has outlived its usefulness. Following on from the insights of Debord, Antonio Negri and Micheal Hardt suggest that the capitalist system relies upon the continual reinvention and abstraction of “reality”; the spectacle becomes a necessary preoccupation of the capitalist system. The system operates not by attempting to make everyone the same but by celebrating diversity. It ‘recognizes existing or potential differences, celebrates them, and manages them within a general economy of command’ (Hardt and Negri 2000: 210). In Habermasian terms, those in control of steering media are able to strategically stimulate production and consumption beyond the natural imperatives of the lifeworld through this control. Debord argues that those in control of the steering media are tampering with reality through their ownership and control of public space. They are encompassing individuals in a space that gives them a sense of meaning and purpose in order to keep them productive and consumptive despite the lack of a meaningful reason for doing so.

In The Society of the Spectacle Debord suggests that we are living in a reality in which ideology formation and reformation is integral to the continued survival of the capitalist system. As opposed to the cause of repression identified in One Dimensional Man, no “rationality” is allowed to dominate the public realm, as rationality, even instrumental rationality, has lost its use value.

Comment [TH15]: Clearly, instrumental rationality could be used to generate liberation, as Marcuse project intended.

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83 A similar thesis was developed by Jean Baudrillard in (Baudrillard, 1994)
The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonisation of social life. It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see – commodities are now all that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity. (Debord 1995: 29)

Debord contends that the project of advanced capitalism is to ‘restructure society without community’ (Debord 1995: 137) so that a society of fragmented consciousnesses can be manipulated infinitely without challenge from the lifeworld. Where Debord deviates from Marcuse is to suggest that following this rationalisation, it becomes necessary for capital to invent new ways of developing a consumptive consciousness. From an Arendtian/Habermasian perspective, the degree to which our agonism is entertained without really being engaged reflects the degree of systemic corruption of the lifeworld or the occlusion of the political. In Marxist terms this is the condition of “total subsumption” through which social relations are derived primarily from the machinations of capital rather than encounters with reason or reality (Negri 1989).

In Arendtian terms, following the decline of public reality, a “public void” exists and the human desire for meaning creating contexts remains to be filled. In this situation, as Habermas and Arendt suggest through their analysis of the communicative composition of power, real political power is wielded by those who colonise the lifeworld. When *hominis spectaculorum* come to asking the question “why?” the market is the only form of public space through which they can seek to provide an answer. Coke stands for freedom. Virgin stands for “power for the people”. Ideas have become commodified and the strategic goal of the market is limited to its own expansion. Even democracies, which were created to allow a full discussion of a political proposition, are now subject to the direction of a market that is anchored by concepts rather than material goods.
Hence we can see that with the emergence of *homo spectaculorum*, the market proliferates as a meaning provider because it has most adequately and enthusiastically catered to the agonism of consumers by distancing them from reality and providing them with a spectacle in its place. By adjusting to the fragmented human imperatives of desire-satisfaction and emotional fulfilment the private public realms of the market have become far more engaging for *homo spectaculorum*, who nonetheless never encounters “reality”, in the Arendtian sense of the term, or what Habermas would consider a lifeworld of fundamental integrity.

**Defining Homo spectaculorum**

Having outlined the conditions that have led to the emergence of the subjectivity of *homo spectaculorum*, I shall now define *hominis spectaculorum* in terms of their activity, their instruments and their relationship to the means of production. This is the first step in identifying the subjectivity of *homo spectaculorum* in the world and, consequently, in understanding the effect this subjectivity has on contemporary democracies.

**The Activity of Homo spectaculorum: Display as Behaviour**

*Animal laborans* labours, *homo faber* works, humans act and *homo spectaculorum* displays. The activity of display, being transient, subjective and requiring an audience to be meaningful appears to have more in common with Arendt’s idealisation of action than work or labour. There is an important distinction to be made, however, between display as expression and display as behaviour. The former, lauded by Arendt, involves an investment of self that is unique and is an earnest attempt to identify that uniqueness in the world. The latter involves an aspiration to be measured
according to the standards of behaviour prescribed by someone else. As in the
distinction between thinking and knowing, the former involves personal, private
introspection; the latter involves conforming to a pattern that is established prior to
the action situation.

*Homo spectaculorum* can be defined, therefore, as a subjectivity that seeks to display
identity but not in a way that critically engages with a truly plural public realm. Thus
*homo spectaculorum* shares with *homo faber* an engagement with a facile reality and
shares with *animal laborans* the inability to contribute to publicity (or reality) in any
meaningful way. In order to explain this, I shall initially describe the futility of *homo
spectaculorum*’s agonistic engagement in these terms before going on to illustrate
some of the defining features of the private/public existence of *homo spectaculorum*.

*Animal laborans*, whose activity is invested in labour, always engage their agonism in
fora designed to appease agonism without actually contributing to public space in an
enduring way. As mentioned in the first chapter, Arendt argues that the activity of
labour leaves no public manifestation. As a result, *animal laborans* engages in
agonism outside of work through hobbies and sports. *Animal laborans*’ agonism
while at work is expressed through transitory contributions to their immediate
environment – such as the traditions of labourers who have sung while working.
Outside of employment *animal laborans*’ urge to display is engaged through
expressive activities such as brass bands and involvement in sporting organisations.
Here *animal laborans* encounters visceral realms of appearance constructed
purposefully in order to make engagement immediate and self-validating. Those
whose daily activity is labour seek outlets everywhere through which to express
themselves through action, not because their labour reflects their personal contribution to the public realm, but because their labour does not do so. *Homo spectaculorum* shares with *animal laborans* the experience of being personally engaged, despite the fact that this engagement has no truly public manifestation.

Unlike *animal laborans*, the work of *homo faber* manifests a public product, and therefore *homo faber* is far more likely to engage in work in an agonistic way. It is because of the tangible material qualities of the output of work, and its association with its creator, that work is so gratifying. The agonistic urges of workers, therefore, are much easier to engage in pursuit of preconceived ends. Indeed, clever employers learn how to extract and use this agonism in order to increase production by making the private space of work appear as the public space of reality.\(^4\) Those who excel at fabrication usually do so because they invest all their desire to display in the carefully constructed “public” of their workplace, rather than in anything approaching a real public. This engagement with agonism in the workplace is a reality constituting activity; in Habermasian language, the systemic rationality becomes the rationality of the lifeworld, and the result is *homo faber*, who is devoted to the pursuit of an end without ever thinking publicly about that end. The investment of agonism in essentially privately designed spaces is also emblematic of *homo spectaculorum*.

Hence we find that the subjectivity of *homo spectaculorum* shares characteristics of *homo faber* and *animal laborans*. Despite the fact that *homo spectaculorum* shares with *homo faber* an obsession with production and fabrication, *homo spectaculorum* is

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\(^4\) One of the interesting discoveries made during my research was how contemporary management techniques make use of the conventions of communicative action in order to endorse the strategic goals of the management team. By reconciling the employee with the “reason” behind the company ethos, action can be coordinated with less recourse to steering media such as money and power.
more like *animal laborans* insofar as it neither produces or enjoys a public realm. The dominance of instrumental rationality - its commonality induced through the functionality of centralised production - generated a public realm, albeit a fatally uncritical one. *Homo spectaculorum*, like *animal laborans*, has no recourse to any truly public realm. Rather *homo spectaculorum* is manifested in and entertained by a series of private realms, each usurping the role of public meaning provider, but none forming a *real* plural or coherent public. While these private publics do provide a meaning and identity providing context for the individual, like the old public realm of *homo faber*, insofar as they do not invest this “public spirit” publicly, but rather exploit this spirit privately or strategically, they are not truly critical public realms of the type that Arendt and Habermas idealise.

Thus we find that while agonism is a constant, each avenue of agonistic expression is usurped and appropriated by the private “public” institutions of *homo spectaculorum*. It is the loss of a public realm as a forum for critical, expressive action that has led to the creation of other “publics” (be they private, corporate or social) that do cater to the agonistic drives of the individuals who constitute them. As Mill’s and Nietzsche’s theories suggest, agonism need not be critical. In fact there seems to be a tendency for world reception to be passive. Arendt argues that this is why we need worthy public spaces to inspire critical agonism. Critical agonism leads to ruptures and innovations that further human interests, non-critical agonism keeps human beings passive and isolated and yet productive.

*The Instruments of Homo spectaculorum*

If the telescope is the object that redefined reality in terms of instrumentality, the screen is the object that redefines reality in terms of the spectacle. Both the telescope
and screen offer the opportunity to engage reality according to a perspective external to the innate human senses and each seeks to present this perspective as real. Similarly, the flatness of the screen reflects the limited dimensionality of the perspective provided by the telescope. Both serve the role of meaning givers, despite the fact that both the telescope and the screen actually serve to occlude the reality that otherwise would be determined through critical and plural communication.

Where the telescope and the screen differ is in the effect that they have on public space. For Arendt, the telescope offers a universal perspective that can be established as public reality. Its “objectivity” becomes pervasive, and thus marginalises critical perspectives by undermining the plurality provided by subjectivity. The screen, on the other hand, displays a projection of reality with a view to occluding public space altogether. The screen itself is two-dimensional, limited to displaying what is projected upon it. What appears on that screen is for the producer to make, and, nominally, up to the viewer to choose. Through their choices as to what is displayed on the screen, reality can be tailored to suit the needs of individuals. The screen itself is not gratifying, but what is presented on it generally is placating, sympathetic and panders to an enlarged sense of the viewer’s importance. The individual, therefore, comes to feel as though it is through their personal choice that they are a participant in the construction of reality, thus satiating their need for display without the associated “difficulties” of truly public revelation or personal expression.

The telescope presents the instrument as the purveyor of reality. The instrument’s objectivity is what gives it its status of public truth. The screen presents the spectacle as the purveyor of reality. The role of the screen is not to present a singular pervasive
truth, but to prevent the observer from looking into the space behind the screen and finding a more compelling natural and plural reality there. Screens, televisions, computers, billboards, borders: all serve to inhibit our ability to see the world as it really is and advance our ability to see the world as the screen controller wants us to. This is emblematic of *homo spectaculorum*, who, deprived of any contact with reality as such, is ever more eager to engage and display within a mediatised reality that is particularly responsive to their choices.

**The Productive Activity of Homo spectaculorum**

The emergence of *homo spectaculorum* has seen a shift in the focus of production from creating products to creating meaning. The outcomes of Naomi Klein’s research in *No Logo* (Klein 2000) were predicted by Gilles Deleuze’s theoretical insight in his meditation ‘On Societies of Control’ (Deleuze 1992). Deleuze had suggested that the capitalist system was no longer involved in production, but had moved on to marketing the product – ‘the factory has given way to the corporation’ and ‘marketing has become the centre or the “soul” of the corporation’. Meanwhile, ‘We are taught that corporations have a soul, which is the most terrifying news in the world’ (Deleuze 1992: 6). Those in control of capital understand that meaning can be associated with products and consumption in order to stimulate the growth of production. By continually shifting identity markers and playing with reality, capital can continue to appropriate the productive drive of agonism. This is the world of consumerism, which can be seen as a direct outgrowth of the material orientation of the public realm dominated by *homo faber* (Giddens 1994: 169). In one sense the meaning provided by corporations fulfils the lack of public meaning generated through the public realm of *homo faber*; in another sense the common use of
marketing to create meaning prevents the possibility that meaning will be found in a real and plural public.

The notion that capitalism operates by continually redrawing the boundaries of social existence has been around since Marx suggested that ‘a precondition of production based on capital is…the production of a constantly widening sphere of circulation, whether the sphere itself is directly expanded or whether more points within it are created as points of production’ (Marx 1973a: 407). Following the expansion of capitalist production to the world market, the only scope for further expansion is in the reconfiguration of existing flows of desire and the conjuring of new ones. This reconfiguration necessitates the reconfiguration of forms of control; thus we find that the disciplinary control of *homo faber*, whose main feature is the dominance of a certain form of instrumental rationality for productive ends, is superseded by the spatial control of *homo spectaculorum*, characterised by the attempt to exploit and reconfigure meaning providing spaces in order to foster continual re-production and growth.

The new role of production is reflected in the new tools of production. Digital technologies are for the corporation what machinery is for the factory: the basic technological instrument of production. Yet the fact that digital technologies do not manufacture in the same manner as industrial machinery speaks volumes for the difference between the productive activity of *homo faber* and *homo spectaculorum*. As Jameson pointed out, machines of the digital ensemble are tools of reproduction, rather than production (Jameson 1991: 37). As seen in the rise of branding and the development of a hyper-real economy, machines of the new economy are engaged in
‘the action of knowledge upon knowledge itself as the main source of productivity’ (Castells 1996: 16-17). Production itself has lost its value and, as Deleuze proclaimed, has been farmed out to the less capital intensive areas of the global capitalist system to be coordinated at a distance (Deleuze 1992). The crucial role that digital technologies play is the role of reproduction, that of processing information, mining the lifeworld for meaning to harness the exploitable flows of desire. This is not to say that land and capital do not play a role in the distribution of steering media, just that the creation of the spectacle is increasingly based upon the production and control of information.

What has changed is not simply the product, but the means of production and, importantly, the relationship of the worker to the means of production. The machines of the digital ensemble are far more responsive to the isolated world of the contemporary worker than the factory and machines of production ever were to the workers of the classic industrial era. The mainstay of the digital economy is the personal computer, whose screen not only tends to isolate the individual from any sort of productive chain but also indulges the expressive capacities of the user by allowing for the personalisation of the work environment. The machines themselves are adjustable to personal tastes, from hardware that enables certain processes, to desktop settings that alter the aesthetic appearance of the “workstation”.

But desktop computers represent only the thin end of the wedge as far as digital technology is concerned. Laptops, electronic personal assistants and mobile phones...
represent a new set of tools of production that in combination ensure that the personal life of the individual remains functional regardless of what space they inhabit. In a very practical sense advances in information and communication technologies allow the user to always have access to a screen. The producers and distributors of these technologies claim that they challenge the notion that labour has to be alienating, at the same time changing the relationship of the worker to the means of production from antagonism to integration. This change reflects the shift from *homo faber*, a subjectivity confined by its instrumental sense of meaning, to *homo spectaculorum*, a subjectivity confined through a choice of illusions, all of which occlude the real.

*A Comment on Acting*

The role of acting in the society of *homo spectaculorum* provides a perfect example with which to illustrate the ways in which the private publics of *homo spectaculorum* differ from those of *homo faber* and Arendt’s idealised Greek public. Individuals whose work involves a major contribution to spectacular space get to express their agonism in a very spectacular way. That is to say the position of public actor becomes fetishised in the world of *homo spectaculorum*. Actors, who get to display publicly on the reality occluding and defining screens, are the idols of *homo spectaculorum*. But these are not the same actors that Arendt lauded. Under the conditions of late-industrial capitalism, we find those professions that are oriented toward acting are being stripped of the acting individual’s personally expressive faculties. Life becomes scripted display, *hominès spectaculorum*, like typical movie actors, use their rhetorical skills to display themselves as a character someone else has designed for them. Thus, politicians, elected to opine, critique and express, find that when they assume their positions of power they are asked to work to systemically generated
scripts, rather than act and express. The crucial point is that the role and purpose of action are defined and scripted prior to the action situation.

The fact that, as “actors”, *hominæ spectaculorum* do not display a unique, real and consistent identity does not undermine their worthiness for acclaim in the society of *homo spectaculorum*. The fact that they act, that they get to be seen, is enough to render them idols. This description of the role and status of actors brings us to a fine distinction that differentiates the instrumental and spectacular societies. Writing in 1958 Arendt saw that:

> the position of action and speech in modern societies is implied when Adam Smith classifies all occupations which rest essentially on performance – such as the military profession, ‘churchmen, lawyers, physicians and opera singers’ together with ‘menial services’. The lowest and most unproductive ‘labor’- It was precisely these occupations – healing, flute playing, play-acting – which furnished ancient thinking with examples for the highest and greatest activities of man. (Arendt 1958: 207)

Here we see a marked difference from the position of action and speech in the society of *homo spectaculorum*. In contemporary society those occupations that rely upon performance - “churchmen, lawyers, physicians and opera singers” along with screen actors, sport stars, art producers, politicians - are among the most celebrated and well renumerated. Adam Smith understood that the end point of instrumentality is that all public value should be determined by its contribution to production. What has changed since then is that the very act of being public has become the rarest (and subsequently, the most valuable) commodity in the society of *homo spectaculorum*. Because screens everywhere obscure *homo spectaculorum’s* reality, what appears on those screens automatically becomes reality defining. Screen actors, who are seen more often by more people, therefore, receive the highest acclaim in the society of

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87 Although there is little chance of immortality for *homo spectaculorum* - the acclaim of the spectacle is, by its very nature, transient.
homo spectaculorum, despite the fact they produce nothing of material value. This may be seen as a move toward an agonistic public, however such actors expression is severely limited by their strategic environment.

**Homo spectaculorum and the Society of the Spectacle**

The preoccupation of the agonistic drive of homo spectaculorum within private and strategically arranged contexts is the condition of existence of the society of homo spectaculorum. While the public realm of homo faber is uncritical because it presents reason as a totality that is beyond criticism, the “public” realm of homo spectaculorum is uncritical because it occludes real publicity altogether. Whilst homo faber instrumentally defines reality, homo spectaculorum engages with private display in order to prevent a truly public reality from appearing at all. Habermas, through his depiction of the fragmentation of consciousness, identifies that this is a means for keeping individuals productive. As discussed earlier, after the dominance of instrumentality had served its purpose by stimulating production to eliminate want, capital had to come up with new ways to generate wants and continue to stimulate production. Instrumentalism may have been exhausted in this context, but the instrumental dominance of the public realm meant that unfulfilled agonism was a readily exploitable way to generate further production and consumption.

It is by controlling the public, by infiltrating the lifeworld in which agonism may be strategically manipulated, that those with performative roles essentially function as the channels of cultural transmission that facilitate this colonisation of the lifeworld. Within the world of homo spectaculum, publicity is the source of power. As mentioned previously, homo faber had already discovered that the productive potential of humans was best extracted by establishing work as a kind of reality
defining public. *Homo spectaculum* has since realised that peoples’ productive potential is maximised if every space they engage with is a reality defining space. Because none of these spaces can lay claim to having complete public integrity, ideology becomes fractured, and so does the individual. This allows fragmented individuals to retain their productivity regardless of the conflicts they experience between system and lifeworld. In a sense, the society of *homo spectaculum* signals the complete occlusion of the lifeworld by a continuous series of meaning providing subsystems.

As a result of the usurpation of public reason by rationality, and the subsequent decline of rationality as an ideological totality, the agonistic drive of *homo spectaculum* is engaged by and in various spaces that seek to constitute themselves as meaning givers. Everywhere they go they are given an opportunity to express themselves – through what they wear, what they do, what they learn and where they live. They also always find themselves in a public space willing to present a reality that is viscerally engaging and satisfies their desire. This does not necessarily lead to a desire for this “public” to present some true reality, as all realities encountered by *homo spectaculum* are virtual. As Habermas identifies, under these conditions the desire for a coherent and consistent identity is undermined, as there is no space for this identity to appear as it really is. The question “who are you really and what do you really believe in?” will not be asked in any earnest way but only to determine how these presumptions and desires might be made functional within the space they inhabit. This is the rise of a new form of control: personal sovereignty as the ability to change a personal environment according to shifts in flows of desire.
Homo faber devised a system of mirrors and lenses through which to apprehend reality; in doing so homo faber started to produce reality. The production of reality now requires smoke and mirrors as the spectacle obfuscates its connection with productive, material reality and reasserts the gratification of self in its place. What has happened with the society of homo spectaculorum is that desire is now stimulated so that production can never be satisfied. We are left in a society dominated by instruments we have been fooled into needing.

So here we see the subtle difference between “one-dimensional” society as Marcuse describes it, and the emergence of the society of homo spectaculorum. Basically, the society of homo spectaculorum can be seen as the cultural manifestation of “One Dimensional Man” – what happens following the occlusion of the political by the social, or the systemic colonisation of the lifeworld. It can be seen to refer to the obliteration of truly public fora and their usurpation by private interests and the resultant change in subjectivity that result from this. As I shall now describe, the evidence of this change of subjectivity can be witnessed in the move from suburbia to gated communities, from the town square to the mall, from advertising to branding, and in the move from detached experts to appropriated experts. In each of these cases the change in subjectivity is one that can be reflected as a development from animal laborans and homo faber to homo spectaculorum. The useful public realm is superseded by the strategically designed public realm as a realm of personal engagement and expression.
Part Two: The “Public” Realms of *Homo spectaculorum*

There is no better way to understand the emergence of *homo spectaculorum* than to look at what has happened to public space and those social institutions that seek to provide meaning. In this next section I intend to outline the way that the conditions of the public sphere have altered following the rise of instrumental rationality as public dialogue, and also to highlight how the detachment of the system has led to a perversion of the public realm beyond that produced by instrumental reason. In the first instance I am describing the occlusion of plural public space as a place to determine reality; in the second I am providing an account of the reproduction of meaning in order to stimulate production. In essence I am recounting the plight of agonism in a colonised lifeworld in order to illustrate how the emancipatory potential of encountering reality is undermined in the society of *homo spectaculorum*. In order to approach the issue of how agonism is usurped in late capitalist societies, I will indicate how the control of steering media translates to the control of discursive spaces, which in turn leads to political power. I hope to outline what I mean by suggesting that the public realm of *homo faber* has become controlled by the whims of *homo spectaculorum*; detailing how the loss of a real and identity forming public has resulted in a change in the expectations associated with publicness.

The first step in this investigation is to analyse the ways that private interests have infiltrated what otherwise might be critical public spaces. This phenomenon has already been explored theoretically in the first chapter as Habermas’s refeudalisation of the public sphere and in Arendt’s occlusion of the public sphere by the social
sphere. This infiltration of public spaces takes place as a result of public power being in the hands of essentially private interests.

Following the refeudalisation of the public sphere, normative power is exercised through representative publicity, rather than critical publicity. The common occurrence in the society of homo spectaculorum is one wherein publicity holds the normative benefits of appearing as public truth without actually having to conform to the public criticism that would allow for real endorsement of that claim. This kind of publicness is the medium of the society of homo spectaculorum. We can witness instances of this in contemporary versions of public space, the emergence of branding, and the employment of cultures of appropriated experts. Through describing the phenomena of the complete strategic colonisation of communicative space, I shall illustrate how each of these spaces placates the agonistic drive of homo spectaculorum. This serves to identify how the need for context is engaged in order to extract value and productivity from the individual - it shows what homo spectaculorum surrenders and what the meaning provider gains. The dominance of instrumental rationality is the precondition for this change in subjectivity, but the human need for meaning is more pressing than the validity of instrumental understandings. Everywhere we find strategic interests pretending to be public, without conforming to the democratic procedures that would make such a claim valid.
Agonism is the desire to measure oneself against a public world, so it is important to identify the form that the public world takes in post-industrial society. What one finds is a world dominated by private interests, in which public space has been usurped almost everywhere by private interests and recreated as “public” space. The effect of lifeworld colonisation on the nature of publicity goes beyond the mechanical issues associated with the marginalisation of critical voices. Following the decoupling of the lifeworld and the system, and the linguistification of the sacred, there is a void left available for ressentiment that private interests seek to exploit, and control over publicity is integral to this venture. The psyche must receive its orientations from somewhere, even if its functioning is irrational and disjointed. Indeed, as Nietzsche argues, the more disjointed the psyche, the greater the need for shared orientations. There are a plethora of private interests willing to provide these orientations.

One example of the usurpation of public space by private interests can be seen in the rise of gated communities. The development of suburbia itself has often been criticised for encouraging uniformity and detachment from external influences; gated communities represent a spectacular manifestation of this one dimensional tendency. The general idea behind gated communities is to group together like-minded and comparably resourced people in the interests of harmony and security (Bickford 2000). Whilst this seems to recreate the preconditions of Habermas’s ideal public sphere, in which interlocutors share a common lifeworld and common goals, in essence it is simply changing public space into private space, dominated by private

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89 'Whatever occurs in this space of appearances is political by definition, even when it is not a direct product of action’ (Arendt 1958: 155).
concerns. As Evan MacKenzie has noted, the original impetus for the creation of gated communities arose not from a democratic utopian ideal, but derived from an economic rationale; gated communities allow for shared resources and the private development of infrastructure (McKenzie 1994: 80-84). The developments are politically organised on the basis of what is good for property values – this necessitates strategically determined limitations on personal expression and even restrictions on what kind of people may enter the “public” space (McKenzie 1994: 12-18, 147-149). While it constitutes a public space, what this space is missing is the plurality, which, according to Arendt’s understanding, is necessary for truth to reveal itself. Whether the gated community is rich or poor, it is basically a tool of segregation, wherein public space loses its public nature and becomes a haven for collective resentment as opposed to engagement with critical others (Bickford 2000). By avoiding engagement with the real world, constituted by plurality, gated communities develop a systemic reality, which is, in essence, virtual.

The Internet as Public Space

In search of a replacement for lost shared space, many democratic theorists have recently begun to turn their attention to what they believe to be the utopian possibilities of the internet as public space. Insofar as the internet provides entertainment through virtual engagement, while occluding public space with what is essentially a proliferation of private spaces, the internet is the quintessential public space of homo spectaculorum. As with gated communities, the internet seeks to cater to the individual’s needs for publicity in order to satisfy some of the conditions of a public forum. However, when we understand the internet as a public space that functions in the context of the systemic colonisation of the lifeworld, we find that the internet further panders to the detachment from reality that is encouraged by the
technology of the spectacle, and is emblematic of the “public” experience of homo spectaculorum. In order to explain this point, I shall initially examine the internet’s claim to be a public space before going on to identify the ways in which the internet entertains the agonism of those who engage with it, while surreptitiously denying the manifestation of this agonism in reality. In making these points it shall become clear that, insofar as it engages the individual without really publicly manifesting that engagement, the internet represents the superlative “public” space for homo spectaculorum.

Recently bought up by commercial communications companies, the claim that the internet is a form of public space is immediately suspect90, yet it is often understood as an open public forum. Much of the optimism concerning the internet as a new form of public space relates to its properties as an egalitarian medium for the distribution of information. The internet appears public, from this perspective, because the ability to publish on the internet is open to anyone with access to some space on the server. Insofar as the internet enables its users to simultaneously receive and compose the media that they are engaged with, there has been a suggestion that this space resists the coloniser/colonised dichotomy. As Mark Poster has put it:

The magic of the internet is that it is a technology that puts cultural acts, symbolizations in all forms, in the hands of all participants; it radically decentralizes the positions of speech, publishing, filmmaking, radio and television broadcasting, in short the apparatuses of cultural production. (Poster 1997: 222)

What is important here is the notion that one composes the media at the same time that one absorbs it. Unlike more traditional forms of mass public communication, such as broadcast and print media, the participant in the interaction is an active...

90 ‘There aren’t any public parks or libraries in cyberspace– it has all been sold’ (McIntosh and Cates 1998: 84).
component in the composition of that media (Poster 1995). Such a perspective presents the possibility that the internet might bring about a new structural transformation of the public sphere, one that manifests a critical and agonistic relationship between self and world.

The validity of this interpretation of the internet as a public sphere is undermined by the facile version of interaction with “reality” that the internet offers. From Arendt’s phenomenological perspective, the experience of the world in virtual space is always removed at least one degree from the reception of the senses. While the internet is actually composed of a multitude of servers linked in a network, its representation in the world is via a screen, generally a screen within the private setting of the household or work. This private nature of reception tends to undermine any otherwise public properties that the internet might have.91

Certainly, the internet provides a far more engaging and reflexive medium than newspapers and broadcast media. However, the internet is so personalised an experience precisely because nothing about it is public. One may move from one privately created space to another, but as one does nothing about one’s identity or reality remains constant. Apart from a few specifically constructed spaces, such as the discussion group known as the WELL, participation on the internet is anonymous, with no connection between your identity online and your identity in the real world.92

91 Unlike Habermas’s salons and coffee houses, the proliferation of screens in contemporary “cybercafes” actually inhibit the engagement with the visceral public by engaging the user in a virtual reality that is not connected to any physical public. For a discussion of the relative merits of “cyber salons” in Habermasian terms see (Dean 2001).

92 Realising that the lack of identity was a flaw in using the internet as public space, the WELL community has made it mandatory to maintain a consistent identity whilst participating in WELL discussions, and has sought to reconcile online existence with real world existence through public
The lack of coherent identities on the internet undermines its virtue as a “public” space since some of the principal purposes of public space are to allow identity to reveal itself and to create a space for recognition of self. The internet does not force us to gain a perspective on reality through plurality, but rather panders to our preconceived tastes and habitual choices. What we find, then, is that, in essence, the removal of public space from a real community removes the individual from direct participation in that community and those encounters with “the other” that this participation entails (Wilson 1997: 159). The virtual reality of the online world creates an escape from the reality of community, and re-establishes community as a virtual one. The internet only allows the development of character, reputation and identity within the confines of a limited discussion group or web site. Whilst this can lead individuals to form the impression that they are engaged with the media, the falsity of such an impression is evident from the facile relationship this feeling of engagement has with reality. As with all “public” spaces of *homo spectaculorum*, personal engagement is represented but is not connected to public action.

Like the other screens of *homo spectaculorum*, the internet is susceptible to the criticism that it is a strategically constructed space that reflects certain strategic interests. As Chantal Mouffe has suggested, the space and nature of political deliberation is inevitably normatively loaded (Mouffe 2000b). She makes two associated, and important, points in developing her analysis. The first is that any manifestation of “ideal” public communication must reflect, by the mere fact of its existence, a certain normative predisposition of power and knowledge. Second, as a

meetings. While the WELL encapsulates most of the positive possibilities of the internet as public space, it is certainly the exception rather than the rule. See (Wilson 1997: 149)
result of the inherent hegemony that political power reflects, the nature of ideal political communication should always be contested. It pays to remember that the internet is not public space when dealing with the internet as an ideal public forum. Rather, according to both Arendt’s and Habermas’s theories, it is a constructed space that represents certain strategic interests.

This occlusion of real expression is also at the basis of a Habermasian critique of the public space produced by information and communication technologies. In Habermas’s analysis of the systemic colonisation of the lifeworld, colonisation occurs as we surrender areas of cultural reproduction to the influence of steering media, such as money and power. In the process, we bypass important critical opportunities to reflect on the communicative processes that come to constitute the lifeworld and surrender that lifeworld to strategic uses. The extent to which the internet acts as the meta-coloniser of the lifeworld is reflected in its manifestation on a screen. It appears public, it entertains notions of publicity, is intended to appear public and provides some of the functions of a public; but essentially it is governed by non-linguistic steering media, of which money and economic power are pre-eminent.

The basis of criticisms of the influence of information and communication technology on the public sphere is that it places an instrument of systemic influence - a screen - between self and the lifeworld. Although the textual content of internet discussion is subjectively constituted, the forum through which that text is exchanged is not. This detachment operates in two senses, as the removal of context and the insertion of subtext. The removal of context leads to the loss of connection with offline “reality” that occurs when the effects on a screen that manifest the internet are accepted as
constituting reality. Screens emulate public space because if they don’t they must compete with public space. For it is by serving the functional purposes of public space that the screen occludes the need for truly public space by suppressing this need, which otherwise might demand satisfaction. Thus, the internet undermines the existence of a real public by providing effects like those that might otherwise be derived from an actual public.

Simon Cooper encapsulates this process of occlusion in a discussion of the political implications of “virtual reality”:

Consistently in the discourse of VR there is a tendency to devalue the variety of concrete social and environmental settings that gives meaning to human activity. The assumption of autonomy, of the subject’s freedom to create comes only through removing the subject from these settings. The promise of a mode of being which takes place on this abstracted level ends up enforcing a process of reification rather than resisting or overcoming it. The fundamental alienation that VR offers severs the subject from the very possibility of experiences which might be more resistant to the process of commodification that s/he is partly trying to escape. (Cooper 1997: 102-103)

Here we see how the insertion of a technological mediator in communication can automatically disengage the critical process of the interaction between identity and “reality”. Through its presentation of virtual realities as being as valid or validating as offline reality itself, the internet can be seen as yet another forum for the development of systemic control.

Hence, while the internet may broaden our scope of experience, it does not make that experience any more real. As Michelle Wilson has pointed out, the experience of assuming an identity online provides some insight into people’s reactions and behaviour online but it is by no means the same as the embodied experience in the real world (Wilson 1997: 149). Actually, it can be argued that the ephemeral quality of internet undermines the very possibility of purposeful action. The internet as public
space offers a peculiarly detached experience, and this detachment, while seemingly engaging, can be seen to produce facile experiences precisely because it has no connection with the limitations and constraints of the real world. As Jean Pierre Dupuy notes, ‘a world without constraints, without order, a world in which everything would be possible, would have no meaning’ (Dupuy 1980: 13).

Virtual community is the illusion of community where there are no real people and no real communication. It is a term used by idealistic technophiles who fail to understand that authentic community cannot be engendered through technological means. (Wilbur 1997: 14)

Without a tangible and personal commitment to care about the integrity of a public, virtual publics tend to lack the structure and conditions necessary to approximate ideal speech.

Despite the fact that the internet does not really serve the role of a public space, many users feel that their engagement on the internet serves the role of personal expression and investment because it is such a responsive and personalised medium. Digital technology enables this to a far greater extent by enabling the targeting of advertisements by tracking an individual’s internet surfing and the automated compilation of a profile based upon the patterns that they generate. This kind of technology has been extended to the development of mobile phones that allow different advertisements to be received by users’ phones according to their location and anticipated tastes (Negroponte 1995: 164-165). The responsiveness of this technology to the individual, along with the “freedom” of internet discussion (insofar as it allows discussion without identity), all too easily leads to disenchantment with the real environment of political discourse (Cooper 1997). Hence we see the danger that the internet poses to Arendt’s conception of the purpose and practice of political discourse, which is supposed to harness identity and plurality in order to create a meaningful existence for the individual and a critical public for action coordination.
The actual plurality of our community, for Arendt, is to provide the impetus for agonistic engagement and political action; when this plurality is “virtual” and, as a result, constructed and constrained by virtual limitations, it reduces the impetus to pursue “real” action.

In its manifestation as a screen the internet co-opts its users by catering to their “public” needs while surreptitiously seeking to govern such needs. Whilst the potentials of the internet as a public sphere are certainly exciting, the actual status of the internet as a public sphere in the current political climate reflects the condition in which private strategic interests come to occlude what otherwise might be communicative spaces. The idea that the internet can even be thought of as a public sphere, despite the fact that it is fundamentally privately owned and privately experienced, is a symptom of the fact that homo spectaculum has no reference points that would allow them to recognise a real public.

The Market: From Commons to Commodities

Arendt is a vocal proponent of the value of private space as a place to develop one’s uniqueness. However, she also argues that the desire to develop uniqueness has to be generated through the individual’s engagement with an expressive and plural public. If one were to search for the nearest thing to the agonistic meeting place of a Greek polis in contemporary liberal democracies the first port of call would be the shopping centre. It is here that homo spectaculum is encouraged to engage in the activities of expressing, discussing and deciding that Arendt recognises as the activities of human

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93 The functions the internet provides include communication, commerce, education, information, archive and entertainment.
94 For an optimistic appraisal see (Rheingold 1993).
freedom (Arendt 1990: 235). This freedom is confined by a crossroads of commerce\textsuperscript{95}, through which the public pass while conducting their business. It is the closest thing to what would be regarded in English towns as “the common”, or what in Spain would be “the plaza”. The fact that shopping centres have replaced the village green is a function of instrumental rationality – there is a greater quantifiable utility in the use of public space for commerce. The ways in which this usurpation of public space affects individual perceptions of reality, however, is more a function of the subsequent colonisation of the lifeworld. As a direct result of being “common” the shopping centre becomes a centre of agonistic engagement; a place where values are debated and instilled. To see how this instillation takes place, it pays to remember Habermas’s formulation of lifeworld colonisation occurring through systemic influence on areas of cultural transmission.

If we accept the fact that shopping centres occupy the role of the modern “commons”, it is not hard to extrapolate from this that they therefore have an effect on the transmission of culture\textsuperscript{96}. Young adults “hang-out” at the mall because it is the public place, as they might once have met on the commons or in the plaza. They meet at the mall to engage with each other and to participate in their culture. Adults, intentionally or not, also receive impressions about “reality” from their experiences in shopping centres. Habermas and Arendt are critical of the fact that “public” spaces like these are not public at all, but are pervaded by an association of private interests that seek to strategically manipulate the “public” forum.

\textsuperscript{95} Quite literally, as many shopping centres are designed around a transept, similar to the design of medieval cathedrals and understood to convey a certain form of reverent publicness. For a detailed exploration of how shopping centres have usurped the role of churches as providers of meaning, see (Pahl 2004).

\textsuperscript{96} For a specific study illustrating this see (Abaza 2001).
According to their role in the society of *homo spectaculorum* these private interests invest considerable effort in making their space appear as public as possible. They invest in security, cleaners and environmental controls so that the mall has the requisite elements of safety and comfort to encourage a feeling of security and familiarity. They supply entertainment and information for free to encourage people to use the shopping space as a cultural hub. They provide all the inducements of publicity but the shopping centre is, in essence, designed by private interests for private interests.

Some powerful examples of why shopping centres are not true public space can be found in security policies that prohibit beggars and buskers, pamphleteers and political dissidents from disrupting the flow of commerce. A study of the legal parameters for political action in United States shopping malls indicates that, while democratic rights to free speech are occasionally upheld due to the “public” nature of malls, the majority of cases concerning restrictions of free speech in malls are dismissed because malls are private property (Kohn 2001). Private property, it is argued, ‘does not lose its private character merely because the public is generally invited to use it for designated purposes’ (Kohn 2001: 74). As a result, the private owners are permitted to prohibit unprofitable, or even unwanted, “expressive conduct” within their shopping malls.

So here we see how the public fora of *homo spectaculorum* in some ways emulate Arendt’s formulation of the public realm of *animal laborans*. That is, a public space distinguished by the absence of speech and action. This prohibition of public criticism
is reminiscent of Arendt’s account of the initial bourgeois claim on political power. ‘Society’, she claims, ‘assumed the disguise of an organization of property owners who, instead of claiming access to the public realm because of their wealth, demanded protection from it for the accumulation of more wealth’ (Arendt 1958: 68). Insofar as they contain the public space as a way of stifling critical expression, the property owners of the contemporary shopping centre recreate the public realm of animal laborans – mute and uncritical.

However, the public realms of homo spectaculum also share homo faber’s public purpose of creating meaning. Naomi Klein develops the argument that while curtailing criticism is a fortuitous by-product of the benefits of property ownership, the real reason that shop owners like malls is because malls allow them to fabricate and cultivate a consumer culture (Klein 2000). The shopping mall can be a place of silence and sterility, but it rarely is. More often the shopping mall is dominated by expression and spectacle – but specifically that expression deemed to suit the strategic interests of the property owners. Hence we find the shopping mall is, at least to some extent, a manifestation of the public realm designed by homo faber. It is humans as instrumentalisers who fabricate shopping malls and it is they who dictate the cultural transmission they deem necessary. To this end they create a culture that depends upon the agonistic interaction they offer within their fabricated world.

As with employers who understand that the best way to get the most out of their employees is to validate their expressive conduct and channel it towards the purposes of their enterprise, the shopping centre validates the person who purchases. Consumption is the only allowable way to effectively display in a shopping centre...
and incentives such as rewards programs, cross promotions and personally validating service are available to those who “buy in”. Thus we see how the public realms of *homo spectaculorum* share the characteristics of those of *animal laborans* and *homo faber*. On the one hand, they engage individuals within a reality they define, on the other hand, they channel this engagement into furthering their own private and strategic interests, undermining the communicative role that publics would otherwise serve.

Before turning to a discussion of the ways in which private interests engage the agonism of citizens in the market, it is important to understand this use of space within the context of the role that publicity plays in cultural transmission. When a community of shop owners decides to redevelop as a mall they do so essentially because it gives them control over that environment; not only control over critical voices, as just mentioned, but also control over the temperature, cleanliness and presentation of that world. They essentially create a pseudo-public space - akin to a screen - which is regulated and designed with their interests in mind. This does not stop it being a “public” place for those who go there and indeed, as suggested earlier, they like to encourage this notion of publicity by catering to “public” needs. Their interest in publicity is, however, in no way earnest. Public space is something that cannot be earnestly bought, for it is one of the:

> areas of action that resist being converted over to the media of money and power because they are specialized in cultural transmission, social integration and child rearing, and remain dependent on mutual understanding as a mechanism for coordinating action. (Habermas 1987b: 330)

What the fabricators of shopping centres are hoping to exploit is this dependence on mutual understanding, which, following the uncoupling of the system from the lifeworld, is the well-spring of competitive engagement. Thus, they seek to fabricate a
world of spectacular values they can imbue in their public and reap the subsequent profits.

A steady stream of critical theorists have identified consumption’s role in placating the masses. From Adorno and Horkheimer to Hardt and Negri, the rise of the agonism of the market is seen as evidence of the advanced capitalist system undermining the possibility of revolutionary politics. These theorists argue that capital has developed new ways of containing revolutionary forces and that its chief means of doing so is through engaging the agonism of individuals as consumers. There is less incentive to engage in political citizenship in the face of active engagement with private, corporate and quasi-corporate interests and a greater incentive to let government remain an unresponsive and uncritical activity (Rose 2000: 327).

The most pressing concern for Habermas’s and Arendt’s democratic theory is that modern liberal democracies do not prioritize democratic involvement as the best forum for agonism; rather the market is presented as the space for passionate engagement. As Habermas puts it:

> the liberal model hinges not on the democratic self-determination of deliberating citizens but on the constitutional framework for an economic society that is supposed to guarantee an essentially non-political common good by satisfying personal life plans and private expectations of happiness. (Habermas 1996a: 298)

Were it that democratic deliberation formed the basis of a political society, we might find that markets spring up where such deliberation determines it to be felicitous. As a result of our recent instrumental history, we find that democratic engagement is the handmaiden of the market. In the liberal model described above, it is the “non-political” nature of personal life plans and private expectations of happiness that is held to be suspect by Habermas and Arendt. Both of these theorists point out that
when “public” space becomes a place to represent private interests, some interests end up being better represented than others. It is possible to illustrate why they are so suspicious about this claim by investigating how private interests have invaded public space and how the market subsequently exploits the systemic colonisation of the lifeworld.

The ability to command a “public space” - a screen - translates into the ability to establish a projection of reality, and the subsequent ability to become a culturally important identity marker. Arendt saw that in a world where identity is fluid ‘Men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table’ (Arendt 1958: 137).

The desire to use common markers as a source of meaning is ever more demanding in lieu of a meaningfully constructed public. Those who determine the capacities of markets are aware of this and for this reason have devised the phenomenon of branding. The rise and rise of branding within the system of consumption and production is a symptom of the fact that the market has become the agonistic theatre *par excellence*.

**Advertising: From Editorial Influence to Branding**

Branding describes the process of associating meaning with commodities. This has become the primary goal of marketing and represents an attempt by those in the corporate world to command ‘the most valuable real-estate in the world, a corner of the consumer’s mind’ (Brands 2004). Brands have come to colonise the lifeworld as individuals have come to relate to each other and themselves in terms of their material possessions and investments. Companies that used to concentrate on producing
products to meet these needs are now focusing on producing brands to meet these needs. In her examination of this process, *No Logo*, Naomi Klein has uncovered the surreptitious occupation of public space and personal engagement by brands (Klein 2000). In a large part of this work Klein investigates the colonisation of public space by private interests, but her main point is that the intent of private interests in usurping this public space is to become normative governors, ‘chief communicators of all that is good and cherished in our culture’ (Klein 2000: 335).

What might be perceived as the relatively benign occupation of public space by private interests proves pernicious when the strategic value of occupying this position is capitalised upon by the marketing sections of the consumer world. In trying to occupy a position of greater importance than the use value of their actual product, brand owners are trying to cash in on their position as meaning providers. As Phil Knight declared in his role as the chief executive officer of a footwear company:

> For years we thought of ourselves as a production-oriented company, meaning we put all our emphasis on designing and manufacturing the product. But now we understand that the most important thing we do is market the product.97

Marketers understand the value of maintaining the role of meaning providers as a means to increase sales. As Klein describes it, the process of branding involves developing meaningful normative constructions that are marketable to consumers - and this moves the role of the corporation from producing the product to producing the product’s meaning. Hence IBM does not sell computers, it sells business solutions. Polaroid does not sell cameras, it sells a social lubricant. Levis does not simply sell jeans, it sells a way of life (Klein 2000: 23-24). In this role the market

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97 (Williagan 1992: 92) cited in (Klein 2000: 22)
consciously fulfils the role of meaning provider through its control over identity forming discursive spaces. The way marketers do so is once again by usurping public space, which are areas of cultural transmission, in order to have an undue effect on action coordination. As Hardt and Negri described it in *Empire*: ‘Capitalism sets in motion a continuous cycle of private reappropriation of public goods: The expropriation of what is common’ (Hardt and Negri 2000: 301).

The most notable and obvious forms of the intrusion of the market into cultural transmission are through markets intertwining with the media. However, far beyond the practice of censoring content, which for Habermas began with the advent of the penny press, market forces now seek to saturate the private worlds of individuals in such a way that they come to constitute culture itself. As noted at the start of the second chapter, strategic action is parasitic upon communicative action. If we take consumers to be forever attempting to reach an understanding of the world, and accept the cultural transmissions they receive as objectively “real”, then they are subject to practising communication according to the predefined interests of strategic actors. As Frederick Olafson has noted, liars employ the conventions of communicative action in order to make their lies seem compelling. The only difference between the activity of lying and the activity of communicative action is an earnest commitment to truth, which is surrendered by the presence of a strategic actor (Olafson 1990: 653). The challenge of marketers seeking to brand effectively is to relate meaningfully to their target markers, and occupying positions of public importance is absolutely integral to fulfilling this role. By infiltrating the lifeworld, or occluding it, they may appear communicative while actually being strategic.
In order to fulfil the role of meaning givers, marketers have had to play the role of philosophers. They become the ‘organs of the Zeitgeist’ (Arendt 1958: 294), projecting the good life and selling it. As a result marketers now do research into what people think, not to find out what they think about a product and how to improve it, but rather to find out how best to understand and motivate them through the shared preconceptions of their lifeworld. It is the market that seeks to engage and thematise the important issues of the public world in order to gain the emotional leverage needed to motivate individuals to buy. Hence, the role of the consumer expert has changed from data analysis and prediction to exploring concepts of validity through cultural studies, ethnographies and personal introspection (Wehner 2001).

As a result advertising has become creative, poetic and, by Arendt’s definition, political. Advertising involves making value statements, redeeming claims to truth and appealing to the capacity for understanding within the target audience. When the workers of Debord’s society of the spectacle finish their dehumanising labour, they find at home in their private space ‘they are treated like grown-ups, with a great show of solicitude and politeness, in their new role as consumers’ (Debord 1995: 30). Brands are created in an effort to rhetorically engage the public. They are developed to ‘establish emotional ties’ with their customers so that the brand might ‘[weave] itself into the fabric of people’s lives’, providing a basis of reality and an opportunity for ‘emotional leverage’. For this reason, marketers seeking to brand are amongst the most fervent miners of lifeworld understandings, and do so in order to make their claims to legitimacy valid.

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98 Referring to Arendt’s statement ‘Political phenomena emerge into their space from an opaque and impenetrable darkness, which is the human heart. Forever closed to “scientific” inquiry, it may yet be illuminated by the insight of poets’ (Arendt 1971: 418).

The brand rationality has penetrated areas of cultural transmission, including child-rearing: shoe manufacturers run anti-bullying campaigns in schools and department stores teach children how to shop for themselves (Monbiot 2001). Klein cites a specific example of a child being suspended from school ‘for wearing a Pepsi shirt on Coke day’ (Klein 2000: 95), an incident which is Orwellian in terms of its level of political control. Klein also cites the case of an American elementary school maths book which ‘was riddled with mentions and photographs of well known brand name products: Nike shoes, McDonalds, Gatorade’ which was defended on the basis that ‘you’re trying to get into what people are familiar with, so that they can see, hey, mathematics is in the world out there’. Through their infiltration of areas of cultural transmission commodities come to constitute the world - commodities are presented as equally immortal as the reason contained within mathematics. Thus, in a manner that reflects Arendt’s description of the public realm of homo faber, the contemporary world of things comes to be the basic foundation of all other relations between humans. By colonising the lifeworld, through occluding what should be political space with the social, private interests commandeer publicity for their own ends.

Once again, it pays to consider how the lifeworld itself is colonised through systemic rationality entering into areas of cultural transmission. The control of media through advertising, and the control of public space through privatisation are obvious ways to access processes of cultural transmission and become meaning providers, but these are not the only way to do so. As Klein points out, the tendency towards multinational and multimedia mergers have allowed brands to invade every aspect of modern life. Brands are cultural commanders. Their political power is witnessed in the way their

100 Quoting the book’s author, Patricia S. Wilson, cited in (Klein 2000: 175).
language infiltrates the everyday exchanges of the lifeworld, which in turn gives them an ability to constitute reality. Microsoft spellchecker will recognise “Coca Cola”, but not “reification”; it has “Subaru” in its dictionary, but not “commodification”, this is the reality of discursive control. In actuality, branding appears to be the most recent incarnation of reification, the act of regarding an abstract phenomenon as a material thing. It appeals to the individual’s need for an identity forming context, for a meaningful reality to relate to. It is a process employed in the public realm of *homo spectaculorum*, because such a public realm has an excess of material goods and production and a scarcity of *real* meaning.

**Expertise: from Appropriating Experts to Isolating Experts**

As Habermas describes it, the emergence of ‘specialists without spirit’ and ‘sensualists without heart’ is one of the by-products of the linguistification of the sacred (Habermas 1987b: 323). This process contributes to the systemic colonisation of the lifeworld by allowing structures of legitimacy to become isolated and lose their groundings in the commonly shared lifeworld. Habermas contends that the everyday language of the lifeworld is the most powerful critical tool available to those seeking to address the colonisation of the lifeworld – the use of a shared vocabulary enables truth claims to be easily redeemed and reasonable argumentation to take place.

The systemic development of expert cultures is the antithesis of this situation, as cultures of expertise operate within their own domains of legitimacy secured according to systemic imperatives. As Marx predicted, this specialisation has the immediate effect of alienating experts from their own humanity, their own lifeworld (Marx 1990: 481-2). The development of systems of experts not only serves to stifle
critical input from the lifeworld, it inhibits inter-systemic criticism and the development of holistic approaches to overarching social anomies. As Hardt and Negri point out, ‘The neutralization of the transcendental imagination is thus the first sense in which the political in the imperial domain is ontological’ (Hardt and Negri 2000: 354). The current state of thought is one in which knowledge within a system is valued, as opposed to admiring general propensities for reason and wisdom. Functional knowledge in the world of homo spectaculorum, is knowledge at the level of the screen, not of the reality that lies behind it.

The political nature of ontology can be further explained in terms of the way in which the role of public expertise has been privatised. In light of the previous discussion, one of the most obvious examples of the privatisation of experts can be witnessed as one of the facets of branding. In attempting to sell products, private interests often present “expert” opinions that validate their claims to truth. The use of this device has become prolific, and as identified by Naomi Wolf in The Beauty Myth, some of the best examples can be found in the beauty industry (Wolf 1991). In what is a seminal text on the function of branding, Wolf identifies the ways in which expertise is either simply purchased, or otherwise simulated, in order to endorse a product and an image. This device uses the leverage provided by the legitimacy of apparently public institutions in order to endorse private claims. The pseudo-scientific posturing of the beauty industry raises questions, such as: exactly what kind of qualifications does one need in order to graduate from the “Ponds Institute”? The private command over steering media, the money to purchase expertise (along with the concurrent condition that experts allow themselves to be bought rather than defend the integrity of their
character and research) or the power to imitate the spectacle of expertise, is one form of the commodification of knowledge.

Indeed, the corruption of expertise is further engaged in the society of *homo spectaculorum*, in which appearance is more important than substance. For the manipulation of expertise by those with access to “public” fora is endemic. This can happen as a result of the use of steering media to “buy out” expertise, or through the abuse of control over a “public” that essentially has no critical mechanisms that cannot be purchased. An excellent example of this is identified by Klein, who describes how the dominant English pharmaceutical brand Boots commissioned a study to compare thyroid drugs and then withdrew the rights to publication when a competitor trialled in the study was found to be superior to and cheaper than their product (Klein 2000). Another example of the abuse of “public credentials” was uncovered by journalist George Monbiot who found that Monsanto, the agricultural production company, not only attempted to buy out critical experts, but also falsely created its own experts to publicly deride an article that was critical of their products and practices, causing the unprecedented retraction of the critical article (Monbiot 2002). This case was particularly insidious, as Monsanto was found to have presented false identities as “experts” on an internet forum in order to generate a petition against the critical article. Monbiot points out that the development of massive and coherent private interests comes to dominate the public sphere by dominating every facet of resistance. Quite simply, in lieu of a truly public place to expose the truth, private interests run riot.
Academia has not been immune to the appropriation of expertise. This can be seen in systemic influence over the kind of expertise that has developed under the conditions of late-capitalism and it can also be witnessed in the postmodern attitude towards critical theory. As an instance of the first order, one only need witness the incredible growth and dominance of business schools in most contemporary academic institutions. As lamented by John Ralston Saul, this development reflects academia’s changed purpose from fostering critical thinkers to generating foot soldiers for the new economy; this is a direct consequence of the historical dominance of the public realm by *homo faber* (Ralston Saul 1997: 127). Beyond the dominance of utility in public institutions we witness the emergence of branded knowledge; with the proliferation of corporate teaching material, courses and educational programs. Through creating its own privately determined “public” knowledge ‘business stands as a guard dog at the gates of perception’\(^\text{101}\). In the society of *homo spectaculorum* universities help to ensure the continuity of screens. The places of thought are everywhere replaced by places of knowledge and, once again, private interests establish the boundaries, purpose and utility of knowledge.

Finally, those areas of the academy that were devoted to critical thought have themselves been hamstrung by the development of postmodern thinking. The postmodern approach to knowledge is perfectly suited to the world of screens, with the development of fetishistic specialisations and the dissolution of reality in a way that validates the continual reinvention of meaning; it is the best possible functional language for areas such as marketing and management in the information economy (Hardt and Negri 2000: 151-152, 159). As mentioned above, those areas of academia

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\(^{101}\) See Ch.9 ‘Silent Science – The Corporate Takeover of the Universities’ in (Monbiot 2000a).
that specialise in the relationship of the system to the lifeworld and in the methods of
cultural reproduction have been appropriated by the marketers. In the public realm
dominated by the values of *homo faber*, novel theoretical insight into what drives the
minds of consumers is invaluable market research and very little else. Meanwhile the
possibility for transcendental and unifying theory, truly revolutionary critical theory,
is hamstrung by the postmodern approach, which leads to the view that theories of
change are self-defeating and misguided. Postmodernism, the theory that reality itself
is a construct, undermines the plausibility that there is a reality behind the screen, and
thus allows the screen to be taken as reality.

**Arendt, Habermas the Public Space of Homo spectaculorum**

The problem that Arendt and Habermas would have with the society dominated by
*homo spectaculorum* is that there is no critical depth to any of its spaces. This is
despite the fact that elements of the society of *homo spectaculorum* - such as
incredulity towards instrumentality, the development of egalitarian communication
structures and personally responsive technologies - seem to hold much promise for
Habermas’s and Arendt’s vision of a critical and engaged democratic polis.

Market forces certainly promote communication between vendors and consumers, in
which the former investigates the shared assumptions of their lifeworlds and seeks to
position their products in such a way as to make them appealing. As the advertising
industry’s own experts assure us, the marketers’ only interest is in effective product
distribution, in giving the people what they want (Sutherland 1993: 96-98). Indeed, as
prominent Habermasian Thomas McCarthy has noted:
There may be some plausibility to characterizing the market as norm free, as the ethically neutralized system of action in which inducements interrelate as the basis of egocentric calculations of utility, in which subjectively uncoordinated individual decisions are integrated functionally. (McCarthy 1985: 34)

After describing the ways in which the market functionally resembles an ideal speaking situation, McCarthy makes the point that, while claims that the market is an “ideal” forum may be spurious, they remain more plausible than the claim that any modern democracy is norm free, ethically neutral and functionally responsive (McCarthy 1985: 34). If advertising companies fulfil the role of philosophers, at least philosophy is taking place. Indeed, the organic intellectuals of capital are devising new ways to explore the political sensibilities of its subjects; they engage, question and respond far more effectively than the ossifying political system of *homo faber*. Furthermore, with the rise of personally enabling technologies, the market has extended the capacity of agents to affect the world. Thus the development of digital technologies is the latest stage in a technological process that results in the individual’s seamless integration with capital. While the market responds, the political system of *homo faber* becomes a ludicrous parody of its decaying and forgotten essence. Following the rise of the society of *homo spectaculorum*, and the consequent capture of the agonistic and subsequently political drives of the individual by the market, the really pertinent issue concerns whether anyone is able to care that the political, as Arendt identified it, has been occluded.

In order to respond to this challenge, it is important to understand that what prevents the market of the society of *homo spectaculorum* from being or becoming the political theatre *par excellence* is the lack of the true and earnest publicness that would make
the manifestations of the current public realm “real”\textsuperscript{102}. As discussed in the first chapter, the market is not a value free meeting place of ideas and it does not respond simply to consumer’s demands. The market has assumed a position of publicity despite the fact that it is not truly public; it represents private interests, and does so in such a way that some private interests are represented more effectively than others. The market does engage the agonistic drive of what otherwise might be political citizens, but it does not do so in the earnest and communicative fashion required by Habermas or Arendt. Rather, it is a massive system in which legitimacy is based directly upon the distribution of steering media. There is no obligation for participants in the market to care for others (at least in a manner that might make market activity communicative), and if instrumentally mining the lifeworld of its riches will strip that lifeworld of its sacredness, there is no mechanism in the market to prevent it from doing so. Finally, the market can not be made publicly accountable and does not approach anything like the inclusive and engaging democratic processes that it would need to embrace in order to meet Habermas’s and Arendt’s requirements for emancipatory democracy. The market may possess progressive features, insofar as it has encouraged and enabled the rationalisation of the lifeworld; however, because it cannot reconcile identity with reality, it does not possess the qualities of an ideal public space as is understood by Habermas and Arendt.

As with all the “public” realms of \textit{homo spectaculorum}, these screens serve to engage and satisfy the individual’s agonistic drive in such a way as to occlude the need for a real public space. So much of the virtue of public participation arises from the fact that public interaction is what provides a sense of the “real”. Without a common and

\textsuperscript{102} What is real is what appears as the same to all who behold it (Arendt 1958: 57).
immanent public space in which to come to understand what is real, humans are left isolated and disempowered, and vulnerable to the ressentiment that the social sphere provides.

Isolation is that impasse into which men are driven when the political sphere of their lives, where they act together in the pursuit of a common concern, is destroyed. Yet isolation, though destructive of power and the capacity for action, not only leaves intact but is required for all so-called productive activities of men. (Arendt 1967: 474)

By removing the construction of self from the world of real experience, these screens can be seen as undermining the critical potential of public space by extending the lifeworld to such an extent that there can be no critical depth to any of it. Here we come in contact with a criticism that Arendt makes of the banality of evil.

It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never ‘radical’, that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is ‘thought-defying,’ as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its ‘banality’. Only the good has depth and can be radical. (Arendt 1978a: 250-251)

In the flatness of the screen we witness the one dimensional origins of the society of homo spectaculorum and the threat that the screens of homo spectaculorum pose to human subjectivity. For these screens extend over everything, seemingly constituting a public which, precisely because of its lack of depth and real immanence, can never truly be public.

**Part Three: The Politics of the Spectacle - The Casualties of the Loss of Engagement with Reality**

The political symptoms of the dominance of homo spectaculorum are similar to those of homo faber. Certainly a failure to critically examine arguments is emblematic of the public spaces of both subjectivities. However, the subjectivity of homo spectaculorum differs fundamentally from that of homo faber in that the agonistic drive of homo spectaculorum is far more effectively harnessed through privatised
“public” spaces than it is by the instrumentality of the ossified remnants of *homo faber’s* political public realm. Thus we find that the interaction of *homo spectaculorum* with modern democracies fails to generate either criticism or engagement with political decisions or processes.

The emergence of *homo spectaculorum* results in a complete misfiring of the critical imperatives of the democratic system. While we still have a political public realm created by *homo faber*, society itself has become dominated not by a universal reason but by a series of fragmented systems which, as a totality, occlude the opportunities for truly public engagement. This is a result of the infestation of public space by a myriad of private interests, the development of a new impetus for (re)production and the fragmentation of subjectivity that results. The political system has remained focused on catering to the political demands of *homo faber* and *animal laborans* - keeping them safe and productive. Meanwhile, the capitalists have generated new and ingenious ways to cater to consumers’ agonistic desire. By harnessing the agonistic drive of contemporary citizens in order to strategically exploit this failure on the part of the political public space, those who strategically control discursive spaces occlude the drive to critically engage with political decisions.

The political institutions of *homo faber* remain organised on the basis of the old liberal conception of the individual; however, following the structural transformation of the public sphere, these same institutions deny the opportunity for public expression to the individual.

The establishment of basic political rights in the framework of mass democracy means, on one hand, a universalization of the role of citizen and, on the other hand, a segmenting of this role from the decision making process, a cleansing of political participation from any participatory content. (Habermas 1987b: 250)
Insofar as citizens’ agonism is actually engaged in the “private” spaces they inhabit in an immediate, gratifying and functional way, the system of representative voting on “public” issues every four years becomes rather obsolete as an agonistic engagement.

In the society of homo spectaculum:

citizenship is not primarily realised in a relation with the state, nor does it involve participation in a uniform public sphere; citizenship, rather, entails active engagement in a diversified and dispersed variety of private, corporate and quasi-corporate practices, of which working and shopping are paradigmatic. (Rose 2000: 327)

Whilst the state seeks to compete with the market by entering into citizens’ consciousness as an element of consumption, it fails to foster the critical, expressive role that Habermas and Arendt believe is integral to a virtuous public space. The market has responded to the citizen’s need for agonistic engagement, whereas the political system remains unresponsive and devoid of plural criticism. In the context of a world pervaded by screens, the political system of representative liberal democracies shrinks, for the most part, to a relatively derived subsystem of power distribution.

While the political symptom of the public realm dominated by homo faber was an exclusion of critical voices that could not phrase their arguments in terms of instrumental rationality, the political symptom of homo spectaculum is a complete lack of association between the public realm of homo faber and meaningful political participation. Whilst homo faber could not care about anything that wasn’t quantifiable, homo spectaculum is motivated to care about more than pure instrumentality - but does not identify the ossified political system of homo faber as a meaningful place to do so. Indeed homo spectaculum is asked to care about everything, as they are continually reminded that every space they engage in has meaning associated with it.
The Blurring of Public and Private Spaces

This shift of meaning defining contexts into the private realm has undermined the quality of private space as Arendt understands it. For Arendt, the quality of the private realm depends upon the quality of the public realm.

While [entirely public life] retains its visibility, it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real non-subjective strength... The only efficient way to guarantee the darkness of what needs to be hidden against the light of publicity is private property, a privately owned place to hide in. (Arendt 1958: 71)

The proliferation of screens and meaning providers in private contexts makes it very hard for homo spectaculorum to judge exactly what is private and what is public. Indeed, critical scrutiny of the “public” spaces homo spectaculorum inhabits reveals them to be private. Under this condition, the boundary between the real world and the perceived world is fractured, and the distinction between public and private becomes completely blurred.

The spectacle erases the dividing line between self and world, in that the self, under siege by the presence/absence of the world, is eventually overwhelmed: it likewise erases the dividing line between true and false, repressing all directly lived truth beneath the real presence of the falsehood maintained by the organisation of appearances. The individual, though condemned to the passive acceptance of an everyday reality, is thus driven into a form of madness in which, by resorting to magical devices, he entertains the illusion that he is reacting to his fate. The recognition and consumption of commodities are at the core of this pseudo-response to a communication to which no response is possible. The need to imitate that the consumer experiences is indeed a truly infantile need, one determined by every aspect of his fundamental dispossession. (Debord 1990: 153)

The dual effect of the proliferation of private spaces that usurp the role of public space is to politicise privacy and depoliticise the public. This is the condition that the market requires in order to remain a meaning giver. As suggested by Arendt and further examined at the beginning of the chapter, the banal rise of the instrumental public sphere paved the way for this occlusion of the political by the social.
In Habermasian terms, the transfer of world-defining roles to the market means simply that the steering media provided by administrative power are undermined while the steering media provided by money become more powerful. This is quite a distinct change from the “one dimensional” society dominated by the public realm of *homo faber*, in which all public legitimacy was constrained by a pervasive ideology established through public institutions. The ideologies that dominate public institutions in the “public” realm of *homo spectaculorum* are usually generated from the dominant private ideology of the times\(^\text{103}\). Exactly how far the care of *homo spectaculorum* extends depends upon the screens s/he is surrounded by. There is nothing rational about this. Command of screens is generally open to those in control of steering media and thus they are the ones who get to manipulate publicity.

**Freedom and Steering Media**

The concept of spatial control as a device through which dominance is exercised can be seen as being closely related to Habermas’s notion of steering media. An individual’s ability to control money and power determines the extent to which their virtual world reflects their expressions, discussions and decisions. The “trick” is not that the working class escapes control, it is that their engaging worlds are less real and more likely to be constrained by someone else’s expression. Whilst people who have access to steering media can control their real environment to the extent that their control over steering media allows\(^2\), those who do not exist in a strategically defined environment and seek to express their agonism through their strategically determined interactions. It is in this sense that we can understand Marcuse’s point that the only possibility of freedom in late capitalist society remains the fantasy of control over the

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103 Such as widely facilitated by the “privatisation” of public institutions to allow such institutions to operate under greater market influence.
entire apparatus (Marcuse 1968: xxvi). We apportion engagement with the spectacle to everyone. The real quality of that engagement becomes the commodifiable element, the greater control over steering media the more chance your expression will be effected in the “real” world. Even so, by Arendtian standards, this real world, along with all the “publics” that engage *homo spectaculorum*, is not real at all – it is a construction taking the place of reality.

The effect of the interaction of modulation and steering media is that the wealthier you become, the further you can use the steering media to which you have access to assert your particular spectacle as reality. Greater control over money and power translates directly in more control over the screens that exist outside one’s immediate area. In current conditions we find that the majority of money and power is concentrated in the hands of very few people. They are not acting together, nor are they necessarily competitive - though they don’t necessarily have evil intentions. The control wielded over “public reality” that is currently available to people in power can be seen in the way Tony Blair managed to rationalise an invasion based upon a media dossier. The communicative, thoughtful process that Habermas and Arendt desire may be taken to have been avoided at two points in this case. In the first instance, critical decisions should be made on intelligence (information exposed to critical scrutiny within government), not speculation and the assembly of media reports. In the second instance, the BBC, a trusted news source, seems to have been reporting material without subjecting that material to critical scrutiny. One question that arises in this context concerns the kind of editing process that effects what we see on our screens. Those with access to governmental power and news media do not need to ensure the “reality” of what they report. Instead, they are aware that their position in regard to
steering media allows them to delineate reality as such and in such a position they are unlikely to be subjected to critical scrutiny.

On the other hand, the less access people have to money and power, the less “real” or public the extent of their modulation is likely to be. It is more likely that those who are deprived of steering media will control only their private environment; their home environment, their work space, perhaps their own body. Insofar as those with less access to money and power tend to receive their world-orientations passively from the environment, the virtual worlds they inhabit are defined by those who do establish the “public space” in which they engage. The less control people have over steering media, however, the less likely it is that they will have the ability to project their reality; rather they will move within spaces that are projected by others in order to make themselves a functional component of those spaces, without actually being given the power to constitute themselves as an act of unique expression. In the society of *homo spectaculorum* the ability to be noble and avoid *ressentiment* is the ability to live according to one’s own projection.

**Homo spectaculorum and Identity Politics**

The dominance of the political realm of *homo faber* in the time of the rise of *homo spectaculorum* also contributes to the rise of fundamentalisms, ethnic politics and the extreme detachment of individuals from the instrumental political subsystem. The purpose of public space, as conceived by Habermas and Arendt, is to bring individuals together in a forum that can coordinate public action in a fair and reasonable way and which is explicitly accepted and constituted by the participants. By failing to encourage the active involvement of citizens in the process of
government, the political subsystem has bought about the decline of such a “public” space. The loss of such a space manifests itself as an extreme form of individualism, whereby individuals lose sense of their real public identities as a source of value orientation, and, instead, seek to locate themselves within an existing set of orientations — opening them up for ressentiment in the process.

Liberal democracies tend to orient participants through utilitarian notions about private loss and gain, and for this reason this subsystem is largely redundant as an avenue for political expression in an Arendtian or Habermasian sense. Thus we find that:

> deprived of the possibility of identifying with valuable conceptions of citizenship, many people are increasingly searching for other forms of collective identification, which can very often put into jeopardy the civic bond that should unite a democratic political association. (Mouffe 2000a: 96)

Everywhere citizens abandon the political public space as a space in which they might reasonably and equitably address their political concerns. As a result, they find their outlets of expression in more private fora that are not always conducive to considered or careful thought. Many instances of so-called “terrorism” are only extremely violent outcomes of this process of exclusion; terrorism often appears to be the action of people excluded from proper political participation.

The failure of the public realm of *homo faber* to deal with the political expressiveness of *homo spectaculorum* is a direct result of the interaction of the unified political institutions of *homo faber* with the fragmented subjectivity of *homo spectaculorum*. Representative liberal democracies, very much based upon the notion of irreducible

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104 Arendt discusses the thoughtlessness effected by the loss of public meaning in (Arendt 1967: 477 esp.)
and consistent individuals, still seek to affect power through discipline over distinct national territories. They operate in this way despite the fact that most citizens’ political engagement rarely conforms to that of national territories. The result is that, in attempting to address the concerns of individuals as private citizens, the national governments appropriate public power for private ends, determined through projected “publics” that are not primarily generated by authentically democratic processes.

While the conditions that give rise to homo spectaculum are not restricted to national borders, the political apparatus that purports to serve homo spectaculum remains fixed to the nation-state. In their function as utilitarian “ends-meeting” government, the role of national governments is to provide the security that the spectacle demands. The reduction of government to the purposes of homo faber means that governments fail to cater to the political needs of homo spectaculum. Rather, the role of government is confined to finding the solution to technical problems; such as how to secure a supply of oil necessary for continued economic growth or how to avoid international conventions on human rights and resource consumption in order to perpetuate systemic stability. The political subsystem ensures its continued survival by acting as an institutional guarantor of the reality established by those in control of steering media.

In the process, the politics of representative democracies becomes a spectacle, and culture becomes even more spectacular. As we transmit and imbibe the spectacle globally, we continually appropriate wealth and power nationally, and the resulting dissonance between what we expect and what others perceive reflects an international conflict between system and lifeworld. Sustained by our national governmental
systems we are continually advancing spectacular notions of legitimacy that are not reconcilable with the internationally constituted lifeworld. The conflict that this incommensurability generates represents the ultimate tension between the spectacular and the real, and the resolution of this tension will determine the future human condition. I discuss the ways that this tension might resolve itself in the conclusion. In order to provide further evidence that this subjectivity is emerging, however, in the following section I shall examine some of the practical manifestations of the critical failings of *homo spectaculorum*.

**The Material Manifestations of the Society of Homo spectaculorum**

*The Waste Economy*

I believe that the most startling cultural aberration caused by the shift of agonistic engagement from the political realm to the market is the thoughtlessness of the waste economy. By encountering our reality as strategically designed by private interests:

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we have found a way to act on the earth and within terrestrial nature as though we dispose of it from outside, from the Archimedean point. And even at the risk of endangering the natural life process we expose the earth to universal, cosmic forces alien to nature’s household. (Arendt 1958: 262)

Examples of the waste economy generated by the market’s position as agonistic forum abound, but one exemplar is the increasing use of sports utility vehicles for personal transport. Despite their relatively high impact on the environment, despite the increasing scarcity and cost of oil, indeed, despite the fact that wars are being fought over this resource, the demand for these awkward, dangerous and uneconomical vehicles is increasing. One explanation for this is that they are large, and for the purposes of display, a large vehicle can be considered superior; furthermore their “utility” panders to a constructed notion of the possibility of
The expansion of the ownership of such vehicles is a result of the fact that they make a statement about their owners that the owners find they cannot make anywhere else, such as in a truly public political forum. The consumer does not engage in all other forms of the spectacle just to become a rational utility maximiser precisely at the moment when the opportunity for personal expression presents itself.

This drive to engage in the agonism of the market is causing a dramatic increase in consumption, despite the fact that this consumption seems to offer very little satisfaction. As Monbiot has pointed out, humanity has used more goods and services since 1950 than in the rest of human history, yet in the same period the incidence of depression has increased tenfold (Monbiot 2000b). Monbiot suggests that the inbuilt obsolescence of many consumer goods is a possible cause of this statistic, but an application of Habermas’s and Arendt’s ideas suggests a deeper root for the problem – the society of homo spectaculorum modulates desire in such a way that no product is ever likely to satisfy in the way that it is purported to do so at purchase. Not only are newer and better products conjured by the market at a startling rate, but the desirable features themselves can be reconstructed in order to change the meaning of a product and to require a new purchase. The fashion industry is the best example of this. As fashion changes, what one was wearing five years ago could not possibly be worn this year as it no longer has contemporary meaning. The dominant symptom of the society of homo spectaculorum is that everything becomes fashion and, therefore,

105 Advertisements for such vehicles seem to invariably depict a fantasy that command over such a vehicle translates to command over the environment around it. As Marcuse suggests and was discussed earlier, for homo spectaculorum freedom is seen as control over everything (see (Marcuse 1968)).

106 The lack of true public space for disclosure is linked to this inability. The private public spaces of homo spectaculorum modulate themself in order to ensure that what is suitable behaviour at one moment is inappropriate in the next.
is redundant soon after it has been purchased. An obsession with objects has undermined the understanding that action is the source of happiness, hence the act of consuming itself becomes the source of happiness, and the obsolescence of commodities ensures that this activity must be engaged in continuously. The generation of the need for material goods, which are only public status markers, is what has led to an unsustainable increase in the consumption of resources.

The competitive demand for resources between nations is one of the consequences of the sharp spike of consumption in the late capitalist period. Oil is the prime commodity, and, as a map of conflict throughout the world indicates, the presence of oil without the wealth to defend it generates conflict. Even more catastrophic, though, is the jealous hoarding of wealth and political power by those in wealthy nations. At a time in human development which has been characterized as “post-scarcity”, those sovereign nations with wealth are spending massive amounts of money to ensure no-one else can gain access to it.

Homo spectaculorum and the International Order

Despite some attempts by the United Nations to generate an international fraternity, no such engagement exists. Indeed, self-evident truths about all being equal are not even maintained to be true when national interest is at stake\textsuperscript{107}. It may be reasonable to identify a human as a human, and not differentiate further between people, but nationalism is the oldest usurper of such communicative engagement. For this reason we can understand that the United States refuses to endorse an international criminal

\textsuperscript{107} Referring to the first lines of the United States’ Declaration of Independence ‘We hold these truths to be self evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’.
court, such as might have been used to bring Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein to trial, on the basis that the United States does not wish to conform to the same norms as everyone else. It seems that the consciousness of *homo spectaculorum* does not need to reconcile the deaths of the thousands of people who were killed in the process of enforced regime change with their otherwise inalienable right to life. Other nations are taken to be competitors in order to ensure electoral and popular support, therefore, each must present the illusion to their citizens that their nation is stronger, wealthier and more successful than the others\(^{108}\). Nations, therefore, engage in the society of *homo spectaculorum*, with the tangible result that the wealthier a nation becomes the more it spends on the defence of that wealth.

One recent example of this is the planned militarisation of space. Members of the United States government intend to install a missile defence system that will protect the United States from the type of weapons it itself uses in its national interest. This system is predicted to cost in excess of US$270 Billion (Isaacs 2001), an expenditure that in itself is a form of display. In essence, this system of “defence” gives the United States government sovereign power, in the Weberian sense\(^{109}\), over the entire globe. For Habermas and Arendt the development of such a weapons program should necessitate the establishment of concurrent deliberative mechanisms, yet those involved in international relations continue to act strategically rather than communicatively. From even the most pragmatic perspective, the failure to reconcile this coercive power with communicative power is likely to stimulate anti-American


\(^{109}\) Max Weber identified state power as being achieved through the state’s monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. From a Habermasian and Arendtian standpoint, power is communicative, hence the missile defence system is redundant considering the United States’ strategic dominance of the communicative institutions of international relations.
sentiment and will certainly undermine the sovereignty of every other nation on earth. The absence of a public forum that will thematise and scrutinise the arguments for such a weapons platform in an engaging and critical way means that the platform is created for spectacular purposes beyond an instrumental interest in human survival.

There may be progressive potential in this process of globalisation/centralisation. *Homo spectaculorum* is aware of national boundaries but does not feel confined or defined by them. This characteristic distinguishes *homo spectaculorum* from *homo faber*. While *homo faber* remains tied to the productive apparatus, the productive imperatives of *homo spectaculorum* encourage travel. As Habermas suggests in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, such population movement can be seen as conducive to the development of critical dialogues that lead to the development of a vibrant public sphere. Certainly, it is possible to argue that this change is leading to greater intersubjectivity on the part of *homo spectaculorum*\(^\text{110}\) and that this, in turn, is responsible for the political ascendancy of international non-governmental organisations, such as Medecins Sans Frontiers and Amnesty International, which specifically try to address human issues without regard to political boundaries.

The political consciousness of *homo spectaculorum*, however, is restrained by its material conditions. Non-governmental organisations are serving as publics in lieu of a meaningful international public forum. While they are well intentioned, such organisations lack the legitimacy that comes from public office and are treated arbitrarily by institutions such as nation-states (Monbiot 2003: 82). While the society

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\(^\text{110}\) This positive potential of *homo spectaculorum* will be assessed in the Conclusion to this thesis.
of *homo spectaculorum* is increasingly responsive to global events, writers such as Clifford Bob note that this responsiveness is tailored by the spectacular imperatives of non-governmental organisations, rather than the demands of those requiring assistance (Bob 2002). Lacking a discursive international political forum, the international political expression of *homo spectaculorum* is clumsy and uncritical.

As an example of the weaknesses of existing international political institutions, it is helpful to recount how the United Nations, a plural but not entirely discursive public organisation, stood in opposition to the invasion of Iraq. Indeed, due to its plural congregation of discursive participants who agreed that the invasion of Iraq was illegitimate, it *had* to stand against the invasion of Iraq. Nonetheless the invasion went ahead, initially as a reflection of the strength of the United States’ brute power and subsequently as a consequence of the strength of its propaganda. Only in societies dominated by *homo spectaculorum*, where there is a massive disassociation between “reality” and critical communicative power, could the invasion not only still take place but also gain popular support.

It is reasonable to surmise that since the United Nations was created to prevent the emergence of totalitarianism, what negates the United Nations is in fact that very totalitarianism. Here we find the superposition of the negative aspects of Arendt’s and Habermas’s theories. Because the lifeworld is colonised and because we are lacking a public space where reality can reveal itself, the individual goes through a process of fragmentation of consciousness and loses trust in themselves as a partner of their own thoughts. They become isolated and, in isolation, seek to reground their sentiments through knowing. In coming to know something in a colonised lifeworld without...
engaging in critique we come to support the system. We come to identify the interests
of the system as our own and we lose the critical impetus with which to address social
issues.

In the society of homo spectaculorum, contemporary “terrorism” has to increase, as it
constitutes the realm of otherness to capitalism. As depicted by the theorists of
modulation, capital will tend to inculcate and then subsume. In the process we can
expect to discover that “terrorism” has eventually become commodified, with the
concurrent linguistification of the concept. This will give rise to some perverse
ironies whereby terrorism actually gains power despite the fact that it has become
reified as a particular type of fashion. This is the way in which capital will defeat
terrorism, existing as it does now as a constructed notion. A communicative
exploration of the term “terrorism” would expose the fact that “terrorists” are really
opponents of United States hegemony that act violently, and such a reasoned
exploration might begin to investigate what the justification for this opposition is.
There is no need for this exploration in the society of homo spectaculorum; for the
population accepts that terrorists are irrational monsters, the new “other” that were
once communists, and at other times Jews. They can be blamed for the world’s ills,
and they can be eradicated.

This allusion to the holocaust brings us back to where we began – Arendt and
thinking. The society of homo spectaculorum, although it differs somewhat from that
of homo faber, shares the common failing to foster critical thought and, therefore, is

111 Given that terrorism is currently undefinable, it is in some sense still sacred and delinguistified. It
currently serves as an evil idol that is normatively powerful only because it is never examined or
explained as a concept.
subject to similar problems. The society of *homo spectaculorum* has catered to the public need for participation and interaction with public power by allowing this interaction to take place within the market; but the market itself does not promote the processes of thought and reason in the manner Habermas and Arendt assure us is vital to the integrity of the public sphere. Subsequently our reality, humanity and identity are all casualties of the rise of *homo spectaculorum*.

**Conclusion: The Loss of the Real Natural Public as a Source of Democratic Emancipation**

Hanna Pitkin has described how the opportunities for submersion in the unreal, or the virtually real, have exploded in the last thirty years (Pitkin 1998: 273). Thus the rise of the society of *homo spectaculorum* can be seen as an extension of Arendt’s uncritical social realm because it abstracts the real from the immanent public, and places a preconceived and uncritical social reality in its place. The internet and the associated “virtual realities” of *homo spectaculorum* have allowed people to become ever more isolated and insulated in their virtual worlds; while these virtual worlds have, at the same time, become more responsive and tangible. This lack of public reality spells the demise of reason and the ascent of desire. If we believe that the majority of the population of the demos have no pressing reason to be engaged with “reality” as such, then we may question whether it is necessary to advocate a democratic system of government at all. Indeed, without being preoccupied with consistency of reality and identity, it is possible to engage agonism in ever more spectacular and quantifiable ways. Indeed this is exactly what the market currently does.
Maintaining a consistent identity in contemporary society can be a most daunting challenge, and we are currently debating exactly how *useful* identity is considering it only ever produces dissonance\(^{112}\). This is the fundamental failure of contemporary democracies and is particularly notable because, while capital and information have globalised, political communication has not. The self’s failure to disclose in the world leads to a heightened emphasis on self control, which for *homo spectaculorum* is an expression of power as “real” as any “public” engagement\(^ {113}\). Once people enter the engaging spaces of strategically designed public space they are necessarily made more aware of the effects of their own consciousness. Whether this consciousness is emancipatory (that is, intersubjective, expressive and noble) or oppressive (that is, isolated, colonised and enslaved), the awareness of the abstract relation between the self and the world is made more acute by immersion in the society of *homo spectaculorum*.

This chapter was intended to highlight the reasons why, from Habermas’s and Arendt’s perspectives, liberal representative political systems are unable to engage with contemporary sovereignty. The harmony between capitalism and liberalism is predicated upon the primacy of the individual as a basic, irreducible and impermeable unit. This is important because it distinguishes liberal from agonistic and deliberative models of democratic function. The latter two are predicated on the idea that individuals are inseparable from the world in which they come into being. The liberal model, instead, is predicated on the notion that individuals exist prior to, and in some

\(^{112}\) Not least because average citizens are not given an opportunity to disclose their selves in relation to a real world in any meaningful way and are thus denied that element of being human. The dissonance between consistent and schizophrenic identities has been explored in (Deleuze and Guattari 1983) and (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

\(^{113}\) Hence Foucault’s conclusion that since the world is not given to us ‘we should create ourselves as works of art’ (Foucault 1983: 237).
way separately from, the world in which they act. The centrality of this notion to liberal theories of meaning is one of the reasons that liberal democracy is so useful for expansive capitalism, for this understanding of individuality makes sense of the world-alienation generated by modernity and the formation of one’s world independent of the public is the perfect motivation for continued capitalist expansion. The notion of world-alienation also underlies the liberal conception of the primary purpose of the state – namely, to ensure that one’s liberty is not impinged upon by others. This conception of self, as somehow separate from the world, or, indeed, in need of its own world, can be viewed as assuming antagonism in light of the fact that we are still bound to the human condition of sharing one planet.

In determining where homo spectaculorum is heading, one must draw conclusions about whether humanity needs to remain human. There is much evidence in the society of homo spectaculorum that the conscious seduction of consumerism is pervasive and that a widespread detachment from reality is here to stay. As Michael Heim notes ‘the final point of a virtual world is to dissolve the constraints of the anchored world so we can lift that anchor – not to drift aimlessly without point, but so we can explore anchorage in ever new places’ (Heim 1993: 7). This project of exploration is certainly one that can be geared to the satisfaction of desires that do not reflect the constraints of reality.

The rise of homo spectaculorum - desiring beings who are quasi-rational and increasingly able to determine the objective qualities of their own experiences - suggests a tendency for the public processes of reality constitution to move into ever more virtual realms. At the same time as we experience reduced access to public
space that might constitute reality, we have increasing access to “virtual” realities. The question arises, then, as to whether we should feel nostalgic for a reason or regard for reality that essentially enslaves us and restricts our enjoyment of those agonistic indulgences that seem to be the one indefatigable element of consciousness.

*Homo spectaculorum* thus exacerbates the critical failings of democratic systems. The failure to reconcile our “public realms” with reality would suggest that the political has been occluded by the social, or that the lifeworld has been colonised by the system. The way in which this dissonance will resolve itself is hard to predict, but there is significant evidence that the “real” world cannot support the consumptive expression of our spectacular selves. If the material existence of late-capitalist societies was to be extended to the entire globe, the real world is likely to be threatened by environmental destruction. The problem is precisely that we have lost touch with the “real” world and, instead, engage in a world that has only a cursory resemblance to the one formed from the human condition.

This is not to say that the existence of *homo spectaculorum* is not worth considering or exploring on the basis of an *a priori* assumption of the worth of human life. However, the tension between the detached public spaces of *homo spectaculorum* and *homo faber* and the real public space of humanity demands action. We might discover how to decouple the virtual public spaces of *homo spectaculorum* from the material productivity of *homo faber*, or we might let systemic rationality develop to the point that we can physically leave the earth and explore new realms of material, systemic existence. These alternatives emphasise the virtues of immersion in systemic rationality, they signal the emergence of a spectacular existence.
Following the loss of a public forum in which to understand the real, and the subsequent emergence of control as control of the self, there is much to suggest that the world has also lost the means to chart a course back to “reality”. A commonly held reality can be restricting, denying people the opportunities to indulge a desire for some public good that appears increasingly illegitimate (as the public itself shrinks to one particularly perverse subsystem). Hence we can envisage a future in which there is no politics as such, just an incredibly deliberative and reflexive market that caters to isolated individuals in their screened environments. Such a future would promote the development of desire-satisfaction as opposed to reason-satisfaction. This future would represent the complete colonisation of the lifeworld, the loss of shared experience, and it would alter the human condition to such an extent that “human” traits may no longer be a suitable basis for political systems. Such a situation has been discussed by a number of political theorists, including Donna Harraway, whose ‘Cyborg Manifesto’ details this scenario.

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation. (Haraway 1991: 150)

The reconceptualisation of the political following the concurrent developments of information and communication technologies and postmodern philosophy has tended to avoid engaging with the human search for the truth and moved towards imagining what might come from abandoning such a search. A reasonable and legitimate democratic government is one barely lamented casualty of such abandonment.
Conclusion

What follows includes a brief overview of the subject matter of this thesis and some discussion of its conclusions. Initially I shall summarise the main points of the thesis in such a way as to indicate the contribution this thesis makes to scholarship. In the latter parts of this conclusion I wish to discuss the emancipatory possibilities of agency and communicative acts available to *homo spectaculorum*. This discussion is included because the pessimism that results from observing the way that *homo spectaculorum* interacts with the political public realm of *homo faber* makes it difficult to identify the positive effects that derive from applying Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories to current conditions. Given that both Habermas and Arendt find ways to be hopeful with respect to the future, it seems proper, perhaps authentic, that I should conclude with some discussion of the sources of hope for *homo spectaculorum*.

The first part of this chapter identifies how I have constructed the theories of Habermas and Arendt in order to highlight a particular problem with democracy and to make a contribution to critical theory. Part Two presents an overview of a positive interpretation of Habermas’s and Arendt’s democratic theories in light of the rise of information and communication technologies. Part Three revisits the subject of Chapter Three, namely, why it is difficult to be positive about the possibilities of democracy in contemporary conditions. I finish by offering some ideas about the ways in which the flaws of contemporary democracies might be addressed.
Part One: Using Habermas and Arendt to Construct a Critical Democratic Theory

Part of the original contribution to knowledge of this thesis lies in the elaboration presented concerning the ways in which it is possible to read Habermas and Arendt as complementary theorists when thinking about how democracy might be redesigned. Another part of its contribution to scholarship is in its outlining of ways in which a synthesis of Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories can be applied to contemporary conditions. While in the thesis I suggest that synthesising Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories creates pessimism with respect to achieving true public spaces in contemporary material conditions, I believe the thesis also makes an important contribution by identifying the limitations and potentials of *hominès spectaculorum’s* interactions with contemporary liberal democracies. I shall briefly summarise each of these claims in order to clarify what this research indicates and how it might be used.

Habermas and Arendt as Complementary Theorists

The areas of complementarity between Arendt and Habermas that I have sought to highlight derive primarily from their shared understanding of the communicative composition of power. This shared premise allows their theories to be read together as an effort to reconcile expressive agency with political power. I assert that their understanding of the role that public space plays in generating a critical interaction with reality, along with their similar depiction of the conditions of critical dialogue and the resulting immanence of political emancipation, combine to produce a synthesis that is a meaningful and practicable contribution to critical theory. In each of these instances the two theorists’ positions reconcile with each other in a way that is not only consistent but complementary.
In the first chapter I sought to outline the similarities between Arendt’s and Habermas’s description of the problem with modern democracies, as identified in *The Human Condition* and *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. I suggested that, although they start their journey from different places and with different perspectives, they each believe that liberal democracies suffer from the lack of a forum that stimulates critical thought. I have used this commonality, in part, to justify my sympathetic reading of the two theorists, but also to justify the remainder of the project: looking into the ways in which Habermas and Arendt suggest that this critical deficit might be addressed.

Whereas the first chapter provided an exploration the similarities between Arendt’s and Habermas’s diagnoses of the problems with modern democracies, the second chapter was an attempt to illustrate the point that their solutions are also highly complementary. As discussed in Chapter Two, the basic area of agreement between Habermas and Arendt is in their shared understanding of the communicative composition of legitimate power. This shared understanding is reflected in Arendt’s statements concerning the meaning of public life deriving from the plural engagement with (and composition of) reality (Arendt 1958: 57) and Habermas’s insistence that fundamental normative agreement must form the basis of action coordination prior to the influence of steering media. As a result of this understanding of the composition of power, I have pointed out how each theorist seeks to integrate personal agency with power in the most gratifying and expressive way.
Whereas other theorists have sought to distinguish Arendt’s and Habermas’s projects at this point, I have instead sought to emphasise how their ideas about expressive critical conduct actually complement each other. For instance, for those who emphasise that Habermas’s deliberative democracy presents a rationally hegemonic version of discourse that carries a necessary political violence of exclusion, Arendt’s notion of the inescapably plural nature of the public forum suggests that such hegemony is something of a practical impossibility. It becomes clear that Arendt and Habermas share this understanding when one realises that Habermas’s requirement that claims to truth be discursively redeemed is intended to draw out and celebrate this plurality, as opposed to exclude it. On the other hand, where Arendt’s agonistic democracy has been criticised for relying on a competitive expression of uniqueness that too easily ‘results in universal suspicion and resentment’ (O’Sullivan 2000), Habermas’s conditions of ideal communication provide a reflexive theory that can ensure that agonism does not develop into antagonism.

The similarity between Habermas’s and Arendt’s ideas here is based upon other shared preconceptions. Namely, both Arendt and Habermas believe that there is a fundamental intersubjectivity that is achievable and practicable between all human subjects; or rather, that there is something about being human which endows us with

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114 Such as (Mouffe 2000b) as discussed in Chapter Two.
115 Those who appropriate the Habermas’s deliberative democracy as rationally hegemonic misunderstand the purpose of communicative action. According to such a reading, Habermas’s theory of communicative action seems to suggest that we might find that an agreement would render further debate needless if we were all included in processes of decision making. Put this way, if we universally experienced an ideal speech situation and if every citizen of the earth could contribute and come to agreement about existence through the use of communicative action, the result of communication would then be reality defining and somewhat limiting of the possibilities of further thought, criticism and distinction. An Arendtian perspective on the inevitable plurality of the world, however, asserts that the natural world will always contribute the unexpected, local variances and other plural inconsistencies that would generate rupture and disagreement. Habermas himself is acutely aware of the local nature of legitimacy, hence his focus on local legitimacy as opposed to universal truth.
the ability to make meaning together. Arendt contends that there is a human need to make meaning, which gives rise to the construction of the public realm (Arendt 1958: 180). Habermas, in turn, relies upon the human need for legitimation as a source of ongoing communicative interaction. In the process of public dialogue the critical faculties of communication and thought are stimulated, validating the self and the public realm in the process. Once again, the themes of validation and critical action can be developed concurrently through the intersection of Arendt’s description of thought and Habermas’s idealisation of communication. In each case the idea is to reduce contemplation and decision making down to the most legitimate or real basis.

Arendt’s and Habermas’s democratic theories are also largely complementary insofar as they both present the possibility of human emancipation as something which is already imminent to the individual. What I hope to have derived from reading Habermas and Arendt in this way is that we understand that emancipatory acts - asking that claims to truth be discursively redeemed, and distinguishing oneself through public challenge and argument - are actually accessible to all of us, even homo spectaculum. Indeed, homo spectaculum may well have a greater propensity for redemption and distinction than either animal laborans or homo faber; although I have argued that the conditions which might encourage such an engagement are disappearing in contemporary publics.

It has not been my intention to suggest that Habermas’s and Arendt’s democratic theories are the same or interchangeable, but rather to identify how they complement each other in terms of increasing our understanding of the critical deficit of liberal democracies. This process of identification unearthed a common understanding of the
social nature of individuality, which stands in contrast to the liberal conception of the individual existing prior to, and in many senses, above, the society in which that individual is formed. By alerting us to the communicative composition of power and the importance of democratic interaction in making sure that individual sovereignty is both critical and engaged with the world, Arendt and Habermas present a common front against the premises of liberal democracy. For they both oppose a conception of individuals as existing outside of the communicative and public community of which they are part.

While liberal democracy is based upon the existence of individual rights prior to the individual’s engagement with the world, Habermas and Arendt both emphasise the symbiotic connection between self (and rights) and world. Through their understanding of the communicative composition of power both theorists emphasise the identity forming aspects of the interaction between self and world. They therefore design their emancipatory projects around ensuring a critical interaction between self and world – notably involving thought and consideration – rather than a passive reception of self and world. They each identify chimerical moments in history in which the interaction between self and world was both critical and engaging as facilitated by democratic politics. They also identify the ways in which the critical and engaging elements of political fora have been usurped and replaced by more passive modes of reality reception.

What I also hope to have shown in this thesis is that Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories are particularly cogent in light of the contemporary condition of public space. The first two chapters emphasise that Habermas and Arendt identify that world
reception and world creation are integral to the constitution of the self. Habermas and Arendt both emphasise the point that engagement and control of the self translates directly to engagement and control of the world. What they conspire against is the passive construction of self in relation to a world that is determined by the constructions of those who control the identity forming contexts of public space. This is the threat carried by the public space of *homo faber* - which is instrumental and valued only in terms of its ends - and the “private” public spaces of *homo spectaculorum* - which are judged in terms of their capacity for desire-satisfaction. Habermas and Arendt believe that it is possible to reassert the importance of self in world creation through democratic action, action that resists the passive reception of reality and engages in the construction of the world. It is in this context that they present their democratic theories as emancipatory theories, taking the view that it is through aspiring toward a sound democratic form that a freer and better human existence can be generated.

**Applying Habermas’s and Arendt’s Theories to Contemporary Conditions**

The other contribution that this thesis makes to scholarship is to apply Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories to contemporary conditions. This application brings into focus the weakness of Arendt’s assertion about the persistent plural nature of reality given the loss of public space. Dana Villa has described this dilemma:

> From an Arendtian perspective, the challenge of a “postmodern” politics is to maintain the link between action and publicity in a context where the institutionalised public sphere is deeply compromised and the definition of what is properly “public” is perhaps the most hotly contested issue of all. (Villa 1997: 201)

The argument developed here is that the fragmentation of publics, realities and identities that occurs following the colonisation of the lifeworld fundamentally
undermines the link between action and publicity and does not facilitate their reconciliation with reality. The effect this has on the emancipatory potential of democratic action undermines the very basis of Arendt’s hope for the inerradicable emancipatory force of natality. Whilst Habermas’s theory is much more conducive to generating legitimacy even in the conditions of a highly “abstracted” reality, I have used Chapter Three to suggest that the loss of a real public undermines the individual’s concerns for legitimacy, reality and care for the “other”.

Habermas acknowledges that the development of a completely cynical consciousness undermines the emancipatory potential of democratic processes. The condition of detachment from political power that I have suggested is a central characteristic of *homo spectaculorum* is such that it undermines Habermas’s own theory of actors seeking legitimacy. Under these conditions:

> law has to be transformed into an instrument of behaviour control; and democratic majority decision turns into an inconsequential spectacle of deception and self deception. A capitulation of constitutional principles in the face of overwhelming social complexity cannot be ruled out. Should this occur, our concepts of justice and democracy will change, and citizens’ normative self-understanding, which still exists in our latitudes today, will undergo a radical transformation. (Habermas 2002: 242)

Here Habermas acknowledges that the emancipatory potential of communicative action relies upon the existence of actors that are not thoroughly cynical and disillusioned with the processes of politics and law but who, rather, share concepts of democracy and justice that are in some sense inherent to a citizen’s normative understanding of self. In this thesis I assert that *homo spectaculorum* is thoroughly cynical and disillusioned in regard to politics and, thus, if there is any hope for democratic emancipation, it lies in the *human* search for reality and identity.
Hence, in this thesis I am seeking to assert the centrality of Arendt’s position on the importance of “natural right” to democratic emancipation. On the one hand, I believe that Arendt, who locates the need for democratic expression within the imperatives of the natural world, thereby identifies one fundamental imperative for reasonable action coordination - to care for the world that sustains us. At the same time the idea that human action is the only possible source of emancipation and that our humanity is somehow irrepressible, implies that the power to be emancipated lies in our own hands and is not constrained by socially determined subjectivities such as homo spectaculorum. This is an important idea given the ascent of information and communication technologies - and it is a way to read Arendt as positive about the democratic potential of cyberspace.

Arendt’s argument is fundamentally located in her view as to what it is to be human, and the rights granted to us by our human abilities. The prospect of finite abilities is not a problem for Arendt, who believes that such abilities may yet become immortalised in the public realm. Finiteness plagues homo spectaculorum, however, who has lost such a realm. We are seeking to reconcile this tension between a virtual reality, defined by Habermas as composed by a series of fragmented and independently legitimated subsystems, and the conditions of natural human existence. Arendt’s theories constitute a source of optimism concerning homines spectaculorum’s moments of founding in the information age, but only if we accept that homo spectaculorum has certain human elements - a need for identity, reality and natality - that are, in some sense, inalienable. If we accept this then the

\[\text{116 This position was perceived to be a weakness by Habermas who lauds Arendt’s conception of communicative power and critical publicity but criticises Arendt for retreating ‘into the tradition of natural right.’ rather than justifying democracy on an abstract notion of communicative legitimacy (Habermas 1983a: 185).}\]
communicative potential of virtual reality provides a basis for optimism about the
development of internet technology.

**Part Two: Revisiting a Positive Synthesis of Arendt and Habermas**

In the previous chapter I presented a synthesis of the democratic theories of Arendt and Habermas that was quite pessimistic with respect to the ways in which the conditions of contemporary public space affect the critical capacities of democratic systems. This pessimism arises from the understanding that a critical interaction between reality and identity is unlikely to occur in a society dominated by *homo spectaculorum*. It is, however, possible to contend that *homo spectaculorum* has attributes that would allow for the emergence of an ideal democratic subjectivity according to the democratic theories of Habermas and Arendt. In this section I shall investigate how we can read Habermas’s and Arendt’s democratic theories as being positive about the democratic potentials of *homo spectaculorum*. Habermas’s view that communication is the basis of social progress and Arendt’s understanding of the benefits of plural interpretations of reality lead us to the conclusion that while *homo spectaculorum* may not be drawn to engage in ideal democratic practices, there are elements of spectacular existence that have the potential to promote and enable a critical public engagement.

**Habermas’s Optimism about *Homo spectaculorum***

In terms of Habermas’s democratic theory, optimism about the democratic potential of *homo spectaculorum* comes in the form of the communicative evolution of the public sphere. In his work *The Reconstruction of Historical Materialism* Habermas
outlines how Marx misjudged the driving force of social progress (Habermas 1976). Habermas argues that it is development in the means of communication, rather than development in the means of production, that is the engine of human history. This is explained in his theory of communicative action in terms of the manner in which social progress is controlled by steering media; strategic control over areas of cultural reproduction translates to the ability to extend systemic influence over the lifeworld (Habermas 1976: 267). Habermas understands emancipation in terms of the critical access individuals have to substantive deliberation, and it is this understanding that underlies his emphasis on communicative action as a tool of emancipation.

Thus, whereas Marx argues that conflict that derives from the concentration of control over the means of production in the hands of a few is the engine of social change, Habermas insists that control over the means of communication is the basic tool of human freedom. Despite this difference, the goal of emancipation remains the same. Habermas’s goal of reconciliation with the lifeworld more clearly resembles Marx’s early writings, in which Marx identifies the practical ramifications of emancipation as reconciling the personal and the political:

All emancipation is a return of the human world and human relationships to humans themselves… Not until the real individual man has taken the abstract citizen back into himself and, as an individual man, has become a species being in his empirical life, in his individual work and individual relationships, not until man recognises and organises his ‘forces propres’ as social forces and this no longer separates social forces from himself in the form of political forces, not until then will human emancipation be completed. (Marx 1972: 44-45)

While Marx went on to identify relations of production as the major source of liberation and oppression in modern society in his later work; Habermas has asserted that it is communication that is central to the project of human emancipation.

117 Habermas’s emphasis on the use of communication as an emancipatory force, as opposed to Marx’s emphasis on material production, is explored in (Owen 2002).
Habermas’s project is much more sensitive to the expressive freedom that Arendt regards so highly, rather than the material freedom that Marx took to be the source of liberation. In this way Habermas’s emancipatory project is more appropriate for the conditions of late-capitalism, as described in the previous chapter.

This emphasis on communication is made even more explicit through a reading of Habermas’s earlier work. *Knowledge and Human Interests, Towards a Rational Society* and *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* all depict changes in communication as the instrumental factors in human emancipation. As was suggested in the first chapter, in *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Habermas argues that it is the development of a critical exchange of information that causes the rise of the emancipatory public sphere, rather than developments in the mode of production. In his view, ‘the capitalist mode of production is of course decisive for the *developmental dynamic* that explicates the contents and functions of civil law, but not the *developmental logic* which alone explicates the form and structures of rationality of civil law’ (Habermas 1976: 267). While Habermas acknowledges that production might affect communication, the key to emancipation remains in the process of communication itself. So, if we are to conduct a search for the structural changes that might bring about emancipation in a Habermasian sense, it is essential that the search concentrates upon those who appropriate and control communication, as opposed to production.

The development of the internet is important in this context, as it has several attributes that can be viewed positively in the light of Habermas’s view that communication is the basic element of progress. As a communicative structure the internet has arguably
more “ideal” qualities than any previously encountered communications system. Indeed, it is plausible to suggest that the critical potential of humanity has been effectively harnessed in the development of a system of instantaneous and predominantly horizontal communication. As described in Chapter Two, Habermas’s basic requirements for ideal communication are inclusion and intersubjectivity. The internet presents a communicative structure that enables an almost infinite amount of communication to take place, removing the physical constraints associated with including mass participation in debate. At the same time, the bodiless “neutrality” of virtual space offers the prospect that arguments are judged purely on their reasonableness; for virtual space is, in a sense, conducive to intersubjectivity and the discursive redemption of claims to truth\textsuperscript{118}. In these fundamental ways the internet seems conducive to the kind of ideal conditions that seemed only theoretically possible when Habermas wrote *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

In terms of communicative action, the internet offers the possibility that ‘technologically mediated interactivity balances the rationalistic activities of the system… through the insertion and operation of the more communicative activities of the “lifeworld”’ (Wilson 1997: 146-147). The internet is the first communication platform to offer the possibility for creating an international public space that is theoretically equitable, inclusive and open. Even though the way that the internet is used might not currently reflect the practices that would constitute an ideal public, the development of the infrastructure alone is a quantum leap forward in terms of the creation of inclusive publics. Further, the emergence of the internet has certainly

\textsuperscript{118} A positive interpretation of the bodiless virtues of cyberspace in terms of the work of Habermas and Arendt can be found in (Saco 2002: 37 especially).
enabled the proliferation of participants in a manner that undermines central authority and control. In the context of Habermas’s theory of communicative progress the development of such infrastructure can be perceived to be a good thing for the fostering of critical inputs in a democratic society.

While the expansion of trade and communication through the internet may have systemically imperialist implications - the internet linguistifies the sacred and rationalises the lifeworld - the process has also generated a new kind of communication that presents new possibilities for critical interaction with the world. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Habermas claimed that the development of the bourgeois critical public space was an unforeseen by-product of the increasing trade amongst nobles (Habermas 1989: 43). It is equally plausible to suggest that the expansion of communication in pursuit of trade may once again lead to the emergence of a critical public discourse.

**Arendt’s optimism about Homo spectaculum**

From a perspective informed by Arendt’s work, the main reason for optimism with respect to the rise of *homo spectaculum* is that *homo spectaculum* has undermined the coherence of the public dominance of *homo faber*. For Arendt, the public dominance of *homo faber* signifies the end of the public space. As she states in *The Human Condition*, ‘the end of the common world has come, when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective’ (Arendt 1958: 58). The rise of *homo spectaculum* has meant that the public realm can no longer be claimed to be legitimate solely on the basis of utility. Instead, we see that those in the public realm seek to satisfy the spectacular imperatives of a wide array of
“identity” and “interest” groups who make spectacular, rather than utilitarian, demands upon the public realm of *homo faber*. This fragmentation of the public realm invites greater levels of debate and even though spectacular society also occludes the space and agonistic drive that would engage this debate and generate action, the schism between the political capacities of *homo faber* and the political demands of *homo spectaculorum* suggests that some impetus toward political reform will develop through their interaction.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the impetus toward critical public space is undermined by the fact that *hominem spectaculorum* gratify their need to display more readily through the market than through political public space. It is possible, however, to contend that engagement with plural private “public” spaces is more conducive to generating thoughtful consideration than engagement with a single ideologically dominated public space. In this context, the development of the internet, as described above, can be seen as an important step towards undermining the non-critical nature of public communication and introducing the reception of reality through an engagement with plural narratives in its place. Such an argument has been developed by Mark Poster, who suggests that new modes of communication, such as the internet, resist the coloniser/colonised dichotomy (Poster 1997: 222). Rather than allowing for the dissemination of a dominant ideology, the internet facilitates the proliferation of narratives, and it can be argued that it does so without privileging any one of those narratives as world defining. *Hominem spectaculorum*, therefore, find that the world is not given to them and are presented with the opportunity (if not the impetus) to create themselves as a work of art.
If we accept Arendt’s assertion that emancipation is generated by natality and the subsequent human need to engage with reality, then the rise of *homo spectaculorum* seems to indicate a massive improvement upon the public dominance of *homo faber*. The potential for progress arises out of the human need to constantly create publics within which reality and truth can be determined. Because, following communicative evolution, this act of public creation is accompanied by ever greater access to plural input we can see that the undermining of *homo faber’s* pervasive and instrumental public realm presents liberating possibilities for future moments of founding. As Craig Calhoun notes, Arendt’s philosophy depicts the worldly estrangement brought about by the loss of a coherent public realm as the first step towards the assertion of individuality and action (Calhoun 1997: 242). If Arendt’s optimism concerning humanity’s irrepresible curiosity about reality and identity is well founded, the fragmentation of the public realm into a series of private realms, all vying for legitimacy, may be viewed as a positive step. Those seeking to recapture a coherent identity amongst a series of fragmented public spaces might be more likely to do so through the greater use of their faculties for critical reasoning.

**A Positive Synthesis: *Homo spectaculorum* in a World of Petite-Narratives**

In many ways, the positive democratic potentials of *homo spectaculorum* arise from *homo spectaculorum’s* need to construct reality through a series of narratives. As a result, *homo spectaculorum* is far more liable to develop incredulity with respect to “ideologies” in general. At the same time, the expressive nature of narrative introduces subjective elements of place and identity into the interpretation of reality.

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119 While the term “petit narratives” is intended to invoke Lyotard’s understanding of the postmodern challenge to metanarratives (Lyotard 1984), I am consciously using the feminine petite to indicate that much of this hope springs from incredulity towards dominant discourses such as masculinity.
The positive aspect of this loss of meaning is reflected in Habermas’s argument that the loss of “real” (universally accepted) meaning providing contexts is an integral step in the development of democratic emancipation. In the work containing his most direct defence of modernity, Habermas asserts that:

the rationalized lifeworld secures the continuity of its contexts of meaning with the discontinuous tools of critique; it preserves the context of social integration by the risky means of an individualistically isolating universalism; and it sublates the overwhelming power of the genealogical nexus into a fragile and vulnerable universality by means of an extremely individualized socialization. The more abstractly the differentiated structures of the lifeworld operate in the ever more particularized forms of life, the more the rational potential of action oriented toward reaching understanding evolves solely by these means. (Habermas 1987a: 346)

Here Habermas implies that the more we exchange the overarching normative orientations that guide us as a society for individually differentiated and experienced lifeworlds the more we are forced to coordinate action through the pursuit of communicative action. Hence, the more *homo spectaculorum* becomes devolved from a social lifeworld and integrated into its systemic peculiarities, the more the opportunity exists to coordinate understanding and action entirely through communicative action. Just as the extension of the franchise was a positive step forward because it forced communicative engagement despite the loss of intersubjectivity it entailed, Habermas believes that this increasing detachment from a specific cultural lifeworld also should be viewed as a positive step. The loss of a shared lifeworld means that legitimacy might increasingly demand the discursive redemption of claims to truth, even though it makes communicative agreement a little harder to achieve.

Habermas’s insistence that, in some senses, detachment from the lifeworld may be positive derives from his faith in the spirit of modernity, and his insistence that, given the need for action coordination, this coordination is best carried out
communicatively. In the contemporary world, however, we tend to find that disagreements about truth are more often settled through a redistribution of steering media than through communicative action. Because of the materialist ramifications of a political public realm dominated by *homo faber* we find that materiality has more public salience than agreement. For Habermas this means that the lifeworld tends towards colonisation under the conditions of instrumental thought. The way to avoid this tendency is to tackle legitimacy at the level of communication itself. He is looking for a change in the basic requirements of communication; not only to ensure that action can be coordinated effectively, but also to ensure that communication takes place. Thus, Habermas and Arendt conclude that it is only by generating significant increases in the levels of participation and access to meaningful communication that the lifeworld can regain its integrity.

This point of agreement between Habermas and Arendt suggests that human emancipation involves allowing all people to tell their story and have it heard. Habermas's emphasis on the discursive redemption of truth claims is nicely complemented by Arendt's emphasis on storytelling as an intersubjective communicative device\(^\text{120}\). In both Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories the efforts to seek reconciliation through communication are not enacted as a violence, but as a recourse to peace. The nature of the reason uncovered by such a commitment may depend upon the communicative situation, but both Habermas and Arendt emphasise that a commitment to pursuing understanding is integral to an inclusive and ideal public. Their view that the act of telling stories simultaneously exposes and validates

\(^{120}\) The central role of narrative in Arendt’s work is explored by Julia Kristeva (Kristeva 2001b), (Kristeva 2001a).
the self, leads both Habermas and Arendt to refuse to validate the philosophical merits of the individual’s detachment from the real world and to emphasise public communication as the primary corrective to violence and injustice.

Given the proliferation of petite-narratives under the condition of postmodernism, it is possible to contend that the loss of public meaning actually increases the emancipatory potential of a well designed democratic forum. The modern impetus to design such a forum arises from the inevitability of modernity’s impact on the world and a normative duty to facilitate the debate about that impact in the most reasonable way possible. The postmodern appeal of this synthesis is that it is an attempt to reinstitute critical debate as a form of public validation. This validation of the lifeworld not only allows it to resist colonisation but furnishes an opportunity to found new understandings in a cybernetic world. Alternatively, as Arendt may lead us to believe, the flourishing of the lifeworld may actually lead to a new relationship between humans and the world.

This positive synthesis of Arendt’s and Habermas’s thought suggests that, in seeking to establish the real amongst a proliferation of new media, the urge for identity to become constant and real generates a critical exchange between self and world. This exchange is inherently communicative, as it is motivated by a person seeking an identity that manifests integrity, and, in turn, it precipitates a need for a community that gives a more immediate sense of reality. Such a synthesis points to the ways in which information and communication technologies can facilitate the development of a critical and engaging public space amongst the very public that needs it the most – that of the rationalised lifeworld of late-capitalist society. As established in the third
chapter, agonistic expression affects the real world in accordance with one’s command over steering media. The impetus to reconcile identity and reality - if it is to be done through systemic reform - must come, therefore, from those in control of steering media. In a global sense, worldwide emancipation depends upon the emancipation of those of us with systemic power.

Hence, it is possible to identify reasons to believe that *homo spectaculorum* can and might generate a more critical and engaging democratic system than the one formed by *homo faber*. This hope is based, however, upon an understanding of the questionable normative presuppositions of Habermas’s and Arendt’s works. I argue that both Habermas and Arendt rely on the human predilection to search for truth, reality and identity in order to suggest that social change may be emancipatory. These convictions are not unproblematic, particularly given the challenges to identity, reality and humanity discussed in the previous chapter. Hope, therefore, is constructed by consciousness and not theoretically inevitable – it requires faith and is ineffective unless accompanied by action. There is every chance that the internet, the development of the information economy and the rise of the society of *homo spectaculorum* are contributing to the emergence of something positive. The internet and virtual reality offer us a chance to create and engage in a truly public space. The development of communication technology offers the possibility that the lifeworld might strike back.
Part Three: Revisiting Reality - the Material Constraints of Homo spectaculorum

The reason that I did not explore this positive synthesis of Habermas and Arendt in this thesis is that I believe such an exploration required both speculation and a leap of faith that seemed inappropriate for a doctoral thesis. Further, as discussed in the third chapter, the conditions of contemporary existence make it extremely difficult to sustain and defend the optimism that Habermas and Arendt have with respect to the future. Certainly, if we place our hope in the idea that reality seeking individuals might come to form a critical and expressive consciousness in the context of a fluid and transient interaction of realities and subjectivities, we are neglecting that, for many, the loss of public reality is a reflection of the loss of the individual who partakes of the “two-in-one” of critical thought. This argument, as developed in Chapter Three, suggests that the fragmentation of public space mirrors the fragmentation of the individual and indicates the loss of that very kind of subjectivity that seeks to reconcile self and world.

While Habermas’s theory can be used to generate optimism about homo spectaculorum, the development of an ideal network for communication is not the same as the proliferation of an ideal form of communication. As discussed in Chapter Three, there is considerable evidence that the proliferation of screens is serving not to bring a sharper image of reality but to make reality even harder to discern. The emergence of plural voices in public space is not causing individuals to interact with those voices critically but is fragmenting the individual in order to keep the individual functional. If the individual is not given those expressive opportunities that are important for a sense of defined self, then homo spectaculorum’s society enables the
emancipation of the system from individual reason (or, to view the same phenomenon from another perspective, frees the individual from the requirements of a coherent world).

Habermas assumes that, at some point, those who act strategically also wish to act communicatively in order to care for those around them and in order to develop their own world orientations correctly. *Homo spectaculorum* simply does not encounter such a communicative situation in a world where the political public realm is dominated by *homo faber* and every public space is privately owned and strategically employed. While families may resemble a communicative public in much of their structure, it does not necessarily follow that they manifest communicative spaces. The communicative interaction of a family depends upon the care that exists within that family, yet it requires a normative leap to suggest that the strategic success of family members is determined by the communicative care of that family. The colonisation of the lifeworld may mean that such a degree of care stifles systemic possibilities. Because of their lack of familiarity with the very public benefits of communicative care *homo spectaculorum* may increasingly resist such obligations in favour of the pursuit of desire-satisfaction. The loss of a shared source of meaning diminishes the need to critically engage with the identities of others and with the world in general.

In order to contextualise the positive possibilities that the democratic theories of Habermas and Arendt suggest for *homo spectaculorum*, I shall describe a recent event during which the communicative dissemination enabled by the internet was undermined by the direct effect of consumptive, rather than critical, publicity. I believe this example is useful for situating optimism concerning information and
communication technologies in a contemporary context. At the same time, though, it serves to highlight the continuing pertinence of an understanding of the political limitations and abilities of *homo spectaculorum*. Following this exploration, I shall briefly examine how the continuing rise of *homo spectaculorum* may affect the relationship between reality as determined through the public realm of *homo faber* and the preoccupying spectacles of *homo spectaculorum*.

On 17 November 2004, there were two separate pieces of video footage released on the internet; each featured vision of two separate murders that occurred in the process of the occupation of the town of Fallujah in Iraq. The first was the murder of a charity worker who had been kidnapped by Iraqi soldiers. The soldiers were using the hostage as a “bargaining chip” in an attempt to get the American forces to cease their offensive on Fallujah. The Americans did not pull out, the hostage was killed and a video of the execution was distributed through the internet.

The second video was of a wounded Iraqi soldier being shot in a mosque after a gun battle. The video was taken as two American squads descended upon the mosque in Fallujah, where they expected to find dead and wounded soldiers who had been left by United States forces after a battle the previous day. The video features one of the squad members executing a wounded Iraqi soldier with his machine gun. The video, captured by an “embedded” journalist, was subsequently distributed through the internet.

Both videos feature footage of soldiers murdering defenceless and vulnerable human beings and both videos are testament to the hideous acts carried out under the guise of
war. Importantly, the dissemination of both videos was also only possible because of the remarkably horizontal and control-resistant distribution structure of the internet. Yet when we look at how this information affected public debate, we come to understand that the existence of an egalitarian communication structure is not necessarily conducive to egalitarian communication; rather steering media such as money and power still dominate the lifeworld of *homo spectaculorum*\textsuperscript{121}.

Upon monitoring five news broadcasts over Australian network television, it was remarkable that while all five ran the first story as a major headline, the second story was only covered by two of the networks. The two networks that ran the second story were the “public” networks (that is partly or fully government funded): the Australian Broadcasting Commission and the Special Broadcast Services. While those involved in providing news for these networks have a reputation for greater journalistic integrity than those who “make” news for the commercial networks, they tend to receive the lowest ratings. While viewing both videos produced yet another impression of the senseless waste and thoughtlessness of war, the lack of coverage of the second video meant that the likely impression created by the mainstream coverage was one of abhorrent Iraqis stooping to depths, to which the “coalition of the willing” would not sink (despite the fact there was evidence they had already done so). As Habermas suggests in *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, such a one-sided reception of reality is encouraged by commercial news, as the news aims to be consumable rather than critical. While the internet allows more critical voices to proliferate, it does not catalyse a need for critical engagement.

\textsuperscript{121} Research on how steering media manages to continue to influence the internet can be found in (Diceman 2001).
While it is possible to access either of the videos through the internet, this does not mean that the coverage it provides is necessarily equal. Social constructions of what is deemed consumable content still dominate the internet and, along with server filters, search engine sequencing and publishers’ concerns about sponsorship, online content still has a strategically determined flavour122. More to the point, the internet is a subjective medium insofar as one finds on the internet only that for which one looks. There is no forced exposure to unpalatable perspectives, as might happen in a true public space. For the internet is the most exquisite form of narrowcasting, able to be finely tuned to the preconceived tastes and desires of its individual users. So while the internet does present new possibilities for undermining the system, it does not present a ready made antidote to systemic dominance. Rather, the internet can contribute to the coherent appearance of a spectacular reality, as described in Chapter Three, by presenting information that reinforces preconceptions rather than exposing the plural perspectives of true public space.

The chimerical character of the ideal communication offered by the internet is a reflection of the fact that ideal communication is not a function of structure but of communicative orientations and commitments. As with the feudal era, those who maintain the contemporary public realm seek to maintain the status quo and, to that end, purposefully alter publicity to make it consumptive rather than critical. While movements supporting Linux and open source programming do champion opportunities for critical engagement in the construction of technological publics, the

122 As Dahlberg states ‘the colonisation of cyberspace by state and (increasingly) economic interests is limiting the extension and autonomy of online discourse’ (Dahlberg 2001). While the interactive nature of internet searching renders search references rather inappropriate, the results of an internet search for the two Iraqi death videos provides some support for this point.
dominant form of computer software (proprietary software) encourages passive
reception of the internet and the use of the internet to extend existing power
structures, rather than to create new spaces/opportunities for founding. Interestingly,
“Windows” software has developed so that it can now accommodate a number of
different identities for one person on the one machine, making the machine integrate
with the condition of fragmented users. From this we see that, while the opportunities
for expressive and critical engagement within this communication exist, the passive,
functional and fragmented meaning providing forms of interaction continue to
dominate internet discourse.

Habermas’s contribution to the search for ideal forms of sovereignty lies in his
conviction that, given that action coordination happens, action is best coordinated
through the use of reason. His position can be summed up in his statement: ‘Persistent
thinking is certainly not enough, but without it you don’t get very far’ (Habermas
1994b). Once again, however, hoping that persistent thinking is endemic to humanity
is equivalent to hoping that all humans care for each other. The only thing that
provides the impetus for someone to aspire towards ideal discursive conditions is
some form of care to understand and be understood. Habermas merely asserts that if
we are to conduct discussion in a legitimate and sustainable way then we need to
agree to publicly redeem claims to truth, to publicly seek understandings and to
publicly ask for interpretations. The internet does present the conditions for such
discussions, and the proliferation of personal/public communication in the form of
“blogs” has allowed for some heroic instances of achieving understanding through
discussions of this kind. However, we still find that the emancipatory potential of
blogging is limited by its narrow audience and the fact that blogging has not yet
developed a culture of ideal communication.

Hence, while the internet certainly allows us to envisage a more democratic
communicative practice, it still seems that ‘nothing will change without the
intervening, effective, innovative energy of social movements, and without the
utopian images and energies that motivate such movements’ (Habermas 2002).
According to Habermas’s own theory of lifeworld colonisation, however, we are born
into a world that not only lacks real integrity but also suffers from a lack of public
space, such that ‘the unresolved plurality of competing interests… makes it doubtful
whether there could ever emerge a general interest of the kind to which a public
opinion could refer to as a criterion’ (Habermas 1989: 232-234). Basically, as we are
born into spectacular society, there is no impetus for us to seek reconciliation with
reality or to seek to secure a world of critical legitimacy.

The ramifications of this loss of touch with reality vary depending on how important
encountering reality is to generating a care for that reality. Arendt’s and Habermas’s
theories diverge in their different positions on the question of whether publics
detached from reality can serve the role of publics. Habermas insists that certain
communicative commitments can emulate the process of pure intersubjectivity that
Arendt understands to exist in a real public. What makes Arendt’s real public as
elusive as Habermas’s communicative action is the fact that it requires the
interlocutors involved to be pursuing the better argument. Arendt believes that
interlocutors will pursue the better argument because of the public nature of the
forum, their care for reality as something they constitute and their desire to display
their character in such a forum. Habermas does not account effectively for why anyone would want to discard the benefits of strategic manipulation in favour of communicative action, beyond the notion that communicative action is essentially more legitimate. Why people are motivated by legitimacy, particularly given the rise of *homo spectaculorum*, is not clear. What I wish to emphasise is that Habermas’s criticism does not acknowledge the pertinence of Arendt’s position on “natural right”, particularly given the challenge to the legitimacy of individual sovereignty witnessed in the operation of contemporary democratic institutions.

In terms of Habermas and his redevelopment of historical materialism, I believe that it is possible to argue that the success of political movements has been determined by the degree in which they enable personal expressive freedom. There is a modern tendency to underestimate agency when declaring that there is an engine of human history, but again and again the individual’s struggle for expressive freedom seems to play that role. If a democratic forum can harness this as agonism, it can then use discursive conventions to allow expression while coordinating action in the most reasonable and legitimate way possible. Agonism, linked to a human search for truth and reality, is enough to inspire the care for the other that Habermas’s deliberative ethics require; or, at least, ideally this would be so. If agonism is the engine of human history, then our influence over history depends upon our ability to create and participate in the fora for agonistic expression.

The rise of information and communication technologies, concurrent with the development of incredulity towards metanarratives and the occurrence of total subsumption, make the personal aspect of world creation more apparent than ever. In
place of disciplinary control, which effects control through the direct application of coercive power, homo spectaculorum controls through changing the environment one inhabits. It controls by usurping the institutional position of disciplinary power and inserting the self there. For this reason, it creates new opportunities for engaging the self in the act of world creation. Spectacular society, however, also usurps plural public space. It presents a “reality” tailored to the self which occludes the reality of shared public space. In doing so, the spectacle opens up opportunities for ressentiment, and indeed creates the impetus for the process of ressentiment to occur.

In the environment in which information and communication technologies are central, Habermas’s and Arendt’s emphasis on inserting critical capacities into the process of self and world formation are all the more poignant. The advent of total subsumption, the incredulity towards metanarratives and the loss of public space in which to receive reality have resulted in the loss of any touchstone through which to judge reality as such, and the opportunity to create more virtual worlds has been enacted. This allows those in control of public space to issue us with our ressentiment, condemning passive receivers of publicness to what Nietzsche describes as a slave mentality - that is a servant of someone else’s interests. At the same time, the incredulity derived from these processes has created a proliferation of narratives, and what might become a healthy cynicism about the legitimacy of parties seeking to issue such ressentiment. The loss of reality can be taken to provide more opportunities for the creation of self, such that we might create ourselves as works of art.

Contemporary liberal democracies survive on the memory of the notions of individual rights and sovereignty on which they were based. As suggested in the first chapter,
liberal democracies were initially designed to extend political sovereignty to those who displayed an investment in the world, achieving the level of engagement and intersubjectivity required for constructive critical engagement in political decisions. In overextending the franchise, however, the political fora of liberal democracies lost their intersubjective capacities and became a part of a system of world production that was not critical and responsive to the political will of its citizens. Perhaps by design, or perhaps by circumstance, those deprived of a political outlet in a political forum became politically engaged through their common access to the market. The market has since become the battleground for agonistic expression and, subsequently, the basis of contemporary innovation and progress. Hence we see how the market has become the “public” and usurped the role of politics. The market retains many of the meaning providing features of action coordination without having to deal with the requirements of legitimacy, accountability or reality that would make it a true public space by Habermasian or Arendtian standards.

Hannah Arendt’s depiction of agonism as a social manifestation of a human desire to display suggests that world creation is a fundamental human imperative. It is her argument for the persistence of agonism that offers most hope that democracy might be revived. Although the political life may never be the domain of the many, in her work, along with John Stuart Mill and Frederick Nietzsche, she insists that there is an innate human potential for emancipation. Along with Habermas, these theorists all rely on the understanding that our public efforts to reason are actually an expression of our freedom. Our search for truth, individually or as a society, binds us to an agreement to engage critically with the world during moments of founding. This is the fundamental emancipatory force, as described by Marcuse.
Inasmuch as the struggle for truth ‘saves’ reality from destruction, truth commits and engages human existence. It is the essentially human project. If man has learned to see and know what really is, he will act in accordance with truth. Epistemology is in itself ethics, and ethics is epistemology. (Marcuse 1964: 125)

The search for truth is a process of the elimination of the untenable elements of rhetoric and an attempt to come to an understanding. It is at this point that Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories combine to suggest that there is a natural inclination towards seeking reality and identity.

Arendt’s particular contribution to this study is to remind us that we have to examine sovereignty in terms of one’s access to the communication that generates power. As Habermas notes in (Habermas 1983a), Arendt refuses to understand legitimate power as generated in other ways than through public communication, and thus she completely obscures the effect of systemic colonisation on power differentials. I argue, instead, that Arendt’s tendency to view power as only that which is communicatively generated in public represents her own normative investment in what Habermas describes as communicative action. Arendt’s phenomenological essentialism prohibits her from looking at the potential for political action from any other perspective than that of the individual. As a result, her understanding of the role that the public serves is actually significantly different from the idealisation that Habermas, Canovan, Triadafilopoulos and other contemporary theorists identify. Arendt insisted that we judge our notions of the political according to what we find in the world. Her real public forum was inherently tied, therefore, to the biological exegesis of natural life. Without ever grounding his theory in material conditions, Habermas’s communicative theory is much more amenable to the condition of detachment of reality; though, in a way, Habermas thereby loses touch with the very thing that brings human redemption to the process of legitimation.
The fact that Habermas made a mistake in this respect is not a foregone conclusion; we cannot exclude the possibility of a cyborg existence and a synthesis of Habermas’s and Arendt’s ideas in this context may still prove to be useful. However, I believe Habermas is merely unable to declare his own assumptions about human existence - namely that legitimacy carries its own imperatives. The apparent incredulity towards metanarratives that defines the postmodern era undermines this assumption straight away, so I choose to base my hope for emancipation upon the irrepressibility of reality and human curiosity, rather than on a faith in the functional imperatives of legitimacy. Should Arendt be wrong, however, and there is no fundamental imperative to reconcile reality and identity, we can only predict that the increasingly detached legitimacy of the system will one day usher forth a non-human existence.

**Two Visions of the Future**

I shall now examine two possible futures that are suggested through a synthesis of Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories. These futures are constructed according to what we should expect to see resulting from the dominance of *homo spectaculorum* in light of Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories. The difference in the two visions arises from the differing regard to reality in Arendt’s and Habermas’s projects. In the first instance, the growing illegitimacy of the society of *homo spectaculorum* may well lead to a conflict in those societies in which legitimacy is still a precondition for the use of power. If this eventuates, Marx will have been proven to have been right in his prediction that the decadence of the bourgeoisie would eventually inspire a proletarian revolution. In terms of my Arendtian appropriation of the various subjectivities defined by action, this can be seen to reflect an irrevocable tension between the
productive orientation of *homo faber* and the satisfaction orientation of *homo spectaculum*. In the second instance, the development of *homo spectaculum* beyond the legitimacy restrained by the real, natural world suggests the rise of the Cyborg - an individual unit integrated through functionality and desire-satisfaction rather than public action and reason.

**The Rise of the International Proletariat**

In the last chapter, I suggested that those who control capital have sought to appropriate public space in order to continually stimulate production. I also argued that, in the process, there has been a change in the nature of the means of production and a change in the relationship between self and world. On this basis, I endorsed the Marxist view that capital is the driving force of history, and it is interesting at this point to scrutinise the validity of Marx’s predictions. Marx predicted that capital would continue to expand and conquer new territory until it could expand no further, at which point it would invent and reorganise points within its territory in order simulate this expansion. Marx also predicted the development of the world market and a communications network that would undermine the constraints of space and time in order to stimulate growth (Marx 1973a: 408-539). All these things will conspire, Marx argues, to develop the tools and consciousness of a revolutionary proletariat (Marx 1973b: 73). While we may not see this consciousness emerging in the fragmented subjectivity of *homo spectaculum*, it remains eminently possible that this consciousness is developing in the global working class and may conflict with the consciousness of *homo spectaculum* in such a way as to generate progress.

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123 See (Marx 1973b: 70-72) for some particularly appropriate comments about how ‘the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the means of production’ and how ‘the need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, establish connections everywhere’.
While production is increasingly expunged from the capital intensive workplace of *homo spectaculorum*, this does not mean that the alienation generated though production simply vanishes. Instead, the globalisation of the market can be understood to have merely enabled the outsourcing of productive alienation (indeed in the previous chapter I argued that this condition is somewhat constitutive of the society of *homo spectaculorum*).

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation…It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image. (Marx 1973b: 71)

For Marx, the globalisation of the market and the subsequent globalisation of communication is the precondition for a worldwide revolutionary consciousness. The demands exacted upon the world by *homo spectaculorum* may be irreconcilable with what the real world can produce. The spectacular imperatives of *homo spectaculorum* still require the productive efforts of *homo faber*, while maintaining the machines may be alienating, the production of the spectacle still depends upon such machines. The need to resolve this tension implies that the emergence of *homo spectaculorum* may yet generate progress in a Marxist sense.

As many have pointed out elsewhere, the system of international trade operates under extremely detached systems of legitimacy that are based on claims to truth that are not easily redeemed. While *homo spectaculorum* demands a more spectacular degree of consumption, the spectacular society requires the developing world to develop into the world of *homo faber*. The view that those in the developing world accept this role

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124 See (Ralston Saul 1997), (Soros 1998) and (Monbiot 2003).
because they so desperately want to be part of world trade relies upon the assumption that they will adopt the material fixations of *homo faber*. In order to generate those fixations, the material society of *homo spectaculorum* is presented to the rest of the world as innately virtuous and good. Such a depiction is only ever presented on a screen, it is rarely deeply examined. Through the inculcation of this idea *homo spectaculorum* seeks to convert the working class of the world into *animal laborans*.

In part, this is done through the appropriation of action; *homo spectaculorum* markets itself through the productive capacities of the military-industrial-media-entertainment complex. At the same time *homo spectaculorum* isolates its workers by denying them access to anything other than an instrumental public realm. For nothing other than a representative liberal democracy is permitted to be seen as legitimate despite *hominis spectaculorum’s* own alienation from such a public. Given that *homo spectaculorum* is highly detached from production, the imposition of a public realm that is essentially alienating may precipitate a revolutionary consciousness.

When one comes to regard this dynamic in terms of the way that these differing populations are interacting with public space, we find that the interaction governed through the political public realm of *homo faber* engages with neither the silent participation of *animal laborans* nor the fragmented subjectivities of *homo spectaculorum*. Instead, the public realm of *homo faber* responds to the powerlessness of those in both the developed and developing world by increasing their productive and consumptive capacity. Here we confront the problem that the power that really needs to be equalised in this case is not productive power but rather communicative

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125 See (Der Derian 2001) for an exposition on this connection.
power. Because of this failure to establish good communication, we find development is understood only in terms of productive capacity.

As Arendt predicted, the failure to create a public realm that reconciles humanity with reality either precipitates a disregard for reality or a revolt against the public realm that fails to enable this reconciliation. As has been argued throughout this thesis, the impact of *homo faber* and *homo spectaculum* upon the environment suggests that reality itself may give rise to such a reckoning. The loss of available drinking water, arable land and pollutant-free food are all pressing and immediate concerns for a large proportion of the global population. These very real concerns generate their own communicative power. Indeed, environmental disaster may be the first ‘general interest to which public opinion could refer to as a criterion’ (Habermas 1989: 234) that generates the intersubjectivity necessary for ideal communication. The effects of the consumption of *homo spectaculum* are beginning not only to change our experience of the world but are changing the world itself. The rising water levels are seen everywhere as real; throughout the human plurality of the biosphere such universal environmental changes may finally usher in some degree of intersubjectivity. We are, after all, sharing the public space of earth, and our failure to face up to this fact is having spectacular effects upon our natural environment and our human selves.

Amid all these situations of unequal relations it remains the case that the majority of the world’s *animal laborans* are excluded from the decision making fora that affect their lives. Along with the fact that their working conditions are defined by repressive national governments, which attract investment by banning workers from political
organisation, international political institutions, such as the United Nations, fail to provide or demand legitimate democratic accountability\textsuperscript{126}. While the internet presents the possibility for increasing communicative action on an international level, the current nature of international institutions reflects the values of \textit{homo faber}. The three major commitments of the United Nations Economic and Social Development Forum are to eradicate poverty, address underemployment and promote social integration. Along with the fact that this forum avoids communicatively engaging with the meaning of development, these three commitments are striking, insofar as they address the purely functional concerns of \textit{homo faber}. Since the alienation of political agency generally requires the pacification of agonism through screens, \textit{homo spectaculorum} will be forced to either exclude and antagonise the developing world, or to include and assimilate it. Becoming global remains a process of assimilation rather than integration because the international public sphere is dominated by the values of \textit{homo faber}.

In such a situation \textit{animal laborans} is deprived of a correct outlet for action and may respond through an “imaginary” vengeance, whereby their interests are identified in a fundamental rejection of reason. Subsequently,

\begin{quote}
where the institutions and discourses are missing that could permit that potential antagonisms manifest themselves under an agonistic mode, the danger exists that instead of a struggle among adversaries, what will take place is a war between enemies. (Mouffe 2000a: 30-31)
\end{quote}

The inability of vast quantities of the world’s people to gain access to a meaningful political forum results in the transformation of agonism into antagonism (as people fail to recognise their commonality). This phenomenon, when viewed in light of the theories of Arendt and Habermas, can be seen as a direct and simple result of the

\textsuperscript{126} See, for example, (Olesen 2005).
absence of public space that can translate antagonism into agonism. As Arendt suggests, the failure of a public realm tends to generate the construction of new public realms. By significantly levelling communication, the internet represents the possibility of achieving global action coordination. As we have seen in the use of the internet to coordinate both “terrorism” and “regime change”, however, the utilisation of such a forum by strategic interests is already underway. Habermas and Arendt each suggest that our ability to use such a forum communicatively is the first step away from violence. If political actors fail to make this realisation, we can only hope they will be usurped by those who generate power communicatively.

The Rise of the Cyborg

If we do take the opportunity to avoid conflict through establishing a tradition of communicatively legitimate power, the final question that remains concerns whether that power needs to be reconciled with our earthly reality. Donna Harraway has suggested that this reconciliation with reality is largely unnecessary and would represent a backward step for humanity (Haraway 1991). Jean-Francois Lyotard has hinted that our detachment from the world is, in some sense, the foundation of our escape from its limitations (Lyotard 1992). If we are to take Arendt’s pronouncements about founding seriously we can interpret the benefits of the loss of world from only the most essentially phenomenological perspective; that is, we can believe that such a loss provides us with a new opportunity to rediscover our humanity as (somehow) independent of the world. As mentioned above, the prospect of developing beyond the natural constraints of the world is much more compatible with Habermas’s understanding of the requirements of legitimacy than it is with Arendt’s. I believe that Habermas’s theories leave open the possibility that we might actually evolve away
from the earth, as communicative action’s emphasis on legitimacy provides us with the ability to achieve emancipation without recourse to the “real”.

This discussion has been conducted in order to illustrate the possible futures that await *homo spectaculorum* according to the theories of Habermas and Arendt. There are optimistic possibilities; however, if we are going to pursue the cyborg immersion or attempt to coordinate our survival as humans, the course of future action is going to require communicative action coordination on the largest scale. In a more pessimistic sense, the conflict between systemic and lifeworld realities is unsustainable and may well result in the spectacular decline of *homo spectaculorum*. Based upon my understanding of the theories of Habermas and Arendt I would suggest we should not demand that other people submit to the spectacle, as it is the attempt to do so that is causing friction between those who choose the spectacle and those who choose reality. Liberal democratic societies have traditionally been lauded because they avoid conflict by forcing agonism from the political arena into the market. However, their reliance on a continual increase in production means that reconciliation between *homo spectaculorum* and worldly reality now seems to lead to conflict. The alternative, for *homo spectaculorum* to fight and subjugate, is not a way to resolve conflict, but to generate it. Under these conditions, liberalism as a peaceful element of democracy loses its normative appeal, as does democracy itself.

**What Can Be Done**

My outline of the myopic development of contemporary public spaces is not intended to imply that there is no hope for humanity, but to generate awareness of this situation so that this consciousness might be expressed in moments of founding. Habermas’s
and Arendt’s theories, although evasive about what should be done in moments of
founding, can nonetheless be useful in this context. For a combination of their
theories enables a characterisation of liberal democracies as inherently flawed in the
way they reflect individual sovereignty. It, therefore, challenges the unproblematic use
of “democratisation” as a legitimating principle of imperial expansion. At all points I
have tried to remain faithful to Habermas’s and Arendt’s aspiration to never suppose
to know. As a result, I have subsequently sought to redeem my claims to truth in a
manner that encourages thoughtful consideration.

The success of this thesis as critical theory is constrained by my abilities as a
storyteller and the limitations of thesis production as a product of consciousness.
Nonetheless, I have earnestly endeavoured to relate claims to truth in such a way that
their redemption encourages thought and action. Put simply, I hope that this thesis
generates an impetus to think and do things. As an exercise in consciousness the
thesis faces the threat of becoming either an “organ of the zeitgeist” or a contribution
to repressive knowledge. In highlighting how contemporary conditions undermine
hope for emancipative development I hope to encourage readers to act independent
from theory - the expressive action of one’s own, which, according to Habermas and
Arendt, is really the only hope for any of us. My method has thus been in the realm of
traditional critical theory - to create a consciousness of what is wrong in order to
generate a consciousness that can contribute to making things right. If I have
emphasised the trouble we are in, as opposed to the hope that we can find, it is only
because nothing will change without the conscious motivation to act127. As Gregory

127 In this regard, my supervisor Dr. Ian Cook has convinced me that negativity is more compelling
than optimism as the basis for a PhD Thesis.
Bateson has identified ‘the experience of defeat not only serves to convince [us] that change is necessary: it is the first step to change’ (Bateson 1987: 313).

By alleging the emergence of *homo spectaculorum* I am instrumentalising my own philosophy in order to indicate how Habermas’s and Arendt’s theories apply to contemporary conditions. In doing so I have neglected to highlight the continuing applicability of their solutions to contemporary problems in favour of focusing on their diagnosis of the problem. In part, I am trying to avoid the groundless optimism about the inherent positive characteristic of new technologies and new modes of being. The positive potentials of such an autonomous process of critical subject formation lies at the basis of Hardt and Negri’s revolutionary subjectivity, as described in *Empire* (Hardt and Negri 2000). What Hardt and Negri lack is a depiction of how this subjectivity might be engaged, given the overwhelming colonisation of the lifeworld as it exists. Whilst the theoretical basis for optimism may be warranted and perhaps they don’t want to jeopardise the appeal of their vision with concreteness, I feel their optimism with respect to the potential of the multitude is misplaced if it is not accompanied by a concurrent change in the way political deliberation takes place.

This thesis is, in part, an attempt to create the impetus for this change. Even the public realm of *homo faber* allows for the distinguishing of the utility of starting to think about what the human race is going to do about universal concerns such as global warming, depletion of drinking water and rising sea water levels. People who argue about incommensurability are generally to be respected, as they are fighting against what they see as an implicit violence. The continual appropriation of such
incommensurability so as to confound the implementation of improved forms of action coordination, however, is placing the cart before the horse. We find ourselves in a concrete world with opportunities for founding and for clearing a space within which freedom can emerge. If governments do not take advantage of these spaces, they will continue to ossify and retain an ever decreasing proportion of steering media. I would say everyone in politics can use this as a motivation towards regaining legitimacy.

Part of what we learn from Habermas and Arendt then, both through their argument and their action, is that the process of reification cannot avoid manifesting a consciousness. Even Habermas, who desperately seeks to avoid giving his project any normative slant, relies on some assumptions about legitimacy and humanity in order to generate some purpose to his project. In writing this thesis I understand that consciousness is inherently flawed, but I also understand that it unavoidably affects what we do, so ought to be discussed. Habermas and Arendt merely ask us to reveal this consciousness, communicate about it and understand it. They implore us not to avoid it for the sake of our selves and our world. Against this conception, the liberal argument that the state should leave the individual alone is completely inadequate as a way of conceptualising politics and sovereignty in a global era. We need to find a way to harness our self expression in order to validate ourselves; and at the same time this is precisely something from which the world would benefit.

The world stands on the edge of a precipice in regard to the major concern of critical theory: universal emancipation. Whilst the means for equitable ideal communication may well have become available to all and we have “post-scarcity” economies, the
economic gap between the richer and poorer nations is steadily increasing. Governments and international organisations look to the expansion of the international market to define value and force political change. In the process the market continues to undermine incommensurability and install a functional and productive ideology in its place. It is very interesting to note the ways in which the markets have managed to centralise their international management system and construct it as a public space for elites. They have done this despite problems with language, customs and values; indeed, they have flourished with energy and innovation derived from these differences. Perhaps what makes the market so successful in this regard is that it does not have to legitimate itself continuously through communicative power. Rather than pursuing agreement through reason, the market can neutralise disagreement through the judicious use of steering media. Unfortunately, it is the same characteristic that prohibits the market from being a thoughtful, legitimate or emancipatory means for coordinating action.

Because of our regard for action and thought (or communication and strategy), politics and economics hold the positions they do in our society. Like Arendt and Habermas, I believe that returning politics to its public place is the primary condition for human emancipation insofar as it once again makes thought a public concern. The well spring for such a task lies in the intrinsic value and legitimacy of communicative power which always exists as a potential antidote to systemic abuses. Opportunities to engage this power are not only available to homo spectaculorum but are abundant. Those who assume public status should be brought to redeem themselves publicly. Although the natural public spaces in which to do this have been occluded, the system has created some discursive situations that may suffice for this purpose. As Habermas
points out, the court of law is largely designed to emulate an ideal speech situation and therefore enables the redress of systemic abuses. In addition we have the internet, an ideal communication structure that presents the possibility that communication and political power may be linked in an equitable and accessible way. Finally, even existing systems of government, although flawed, are sometimes required to justify their own legitimacy - particularly in moments of founding such as the emergence of an Australian Republic. All these systemic products present the opportunity for emancipation, but as Habermas and Arendt indicate, they will never be emancipatory fora until we regard them in this way.
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