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## **PUBLIC SPHERE AND CIVIL SOCIETY: HABERMASIAN PERSPECTIVE**

**Kemi Anthony Emina;** Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy, Delta State University, Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria

**Abstract:** This work endeavours to examine the notion of public sphere as a preamble to the idea of public discourse and the inherent role of public deliberations within democratic societies. It also intends to probe as to how the need of civil society emerged within public sphere. Or, what can be the reasons that have warranted the shift of civil society from private to public and the kind of wide-ranging implications in such a shift? On the outset, this work will seek to understand the notion of public sphere (mode of Democracy) as originally conceived within socio-political conditions which influenced the processes of public opinion formation. Such an understanding of public sphere will be helpful to develop the changing notion of public sphere and civil society which is not merely limited to neo-liberal tradition. Consequently, this work also intends to analyze certain other relevant concepts such as rationality, radical form of democratic attitude, autonomy, freedom, human rights etc where public sphere has become an act of agent as discursive discourse and are related to the idea of civil society through the history of ideas in the philosophical writings of Jurgen Habermas.

**Keywords:** Habermas, civil society, Public Sphere, Critical Discourse.

✉ [eminakemi@yahoo.com](mailto:eminakemi@yahoo.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

In the Habermasian conception of civil society, there is an emphasis on the role of the private persons who participate in public affairs as such and not as state officials and whose public discussions do not eventuate in binding sovereign decisions authorizing the use of state power; rather the civil activity eventuates in public opinions and critical commentaries on authorized decision-making that transpires elsewhere. The kind of public opinion generated in the civil society is supposed to serve as a counterbalance to the state. According to Nancy Frazer, "It is this extragovernmental character of the public sphere that confers an air of independence, autonomy and legitimacy on the public opinion generated in it" (Dyczewski 2002, p. 317). According to John Keane, the overall objective of all these various associational organizations is "to maintain and redefine the boundaries between civil society and state through two interdependent and simultaneous processes: the expansion of social equality and liberty and the restructuring and democratization of the state" (Calhoun 1992, p. 454). These associational organizations will manage to have a political impact via the public media because either they participate directly in public communications or-as in the case of projects advocating alternatives to conventional wisdom-because the programmatic character of their activities sets examples through which they implicitly contribute to public discussion.

Habermas' early apprehensions came to light in the exposition of his thoughts with regard to the public sphere. At this stage, Habermas moved from a theory about the societal locations for democratic discourse and proceeded to ground his theory of society in language itself. In his work *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas attempts to scrutinize the way instrumental reason has dominated

modern thought. The main point of contention for him is the gradual decline of the significance of the epistemic subject resulting in the reduced capacity by the same subject to reflect on his or her activities, particularly in the face of the dissolution of epistemology and the ascendancy of positivism. Therefore, Habermas was very particular in reaffirming the necessity of self-reflection for self understanding, if emancipation from domination should remain a project of humanity.

Habermasian conception of civil society is particularly relevant for our discourse on society in contemporary lines because it takes into account the elevated degree of social differentiation whereby we can no longer afford to talk of civil society as if it were one homogeneous entity to which people belonged or did not belong. With these preliminary observations, let us start with the historical background of the primeval concepts of public sphere and civil society.

### Nature of Public Sphere and Civil Society

Generalizing the concept of public sphere from the developments in Britain, France, and Germany in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, Habermas sketched out a model of the bourgeois public sphere. The "bourgeois public sphere" consisted of social spaces where individuals gathered to discuss their common public affairs and to organize against arbitrary and oppressive forms of social and public power (Habermas 2020). The idea of the bourgeois public sphere with the notion of public opinion and publicity (*Offentlichkeit*), analyzes the social structures, political functions, concept and ideology of the public sphere, changes in its public functions, and shifts in the concept of public opinion before depicting the social structural transformation of the public sphere, changes in its public functions, and shifts

in the concept of public opinion (Emden & Midgley 2013).

### **Public Sphere: Etymological and Historical Concerns**

The term public is derived from the Latin word *publicus* which means “pertaining to the people or open to all in the community” (Reddy 1998, p. 2). The notion of public sphere has equal access to express opinion publicly which is unrestrained by political bodies. It connects people who are not of the same families, communities, and clubs; people who are not the same as each other. It brings individuals closer with diversity or difference to achieve common goal remaining impartial to each other. It can be seen as authentic relation between first person and third person or considering other person as an end and not as means. Consequently, politically or normatively public sphere is an area of social life where people can discuss freely and identify societal problems. The discussion influence political as well as social actions of individual of different background who share common concerns. The concept of public sphere in the history of ideas is close to various thinkers; some of them like Hegel, Kant, and Hannah Arendt interpreted the notion of public sphere in their own way. In the case of Habermas, he has provided a distinct and different interpretation of this notion. The concept is central to Habermas’s understanding of philosophy and thus provides a historical sociological account of the creation, and demise of a rational critical debate through the medium of discussion.

Habermas specifies that, due to specific historical circumstances, a new civic society emerged in the eighteenth century. This new society, according to him, was motivated by a need for open commercial arenas where news and matters of common concern could be freely exchanged and discussed. It was accompanied by growing rates of literacy, ease of access to literature, and a

new kind of critical journalism. It can be seen as the emergence of public will formation and democratic participation on the one hand and birth of individual autonomy as autonomous citizen on the other. The reason of the evolution of the public sphere has engineered different sorts of developments in economic and capitalist mode of production or long distance trade, which afterwards lead to different political consequences within public sphere (in the form of civil society for example). Therefore, an investigation into the nature of public sphere with special reference to Habermas is to make out the historical trajectory of public will formation and civil society formation along with individual freedom.

### **Bourgeois Public Sphere: Habermas’ Interpretation**

To understand the notion of public sphere, let us focus on some of its main elements which are discussed in the writings of Habermas like the following:

1. Domain of rational critical debate.
2. Opinion or mode of public reason.
3. Medium to recognise one’s subjectivity in relation to others through recognising shared interests.
4. Political consciousness as mode of recognizing shared interests in private as well as in public domain of human existence.

Rational critical debate through public sphere refers to the development of self-conscious bourgeois public in England, Germany, and France during seventeenth century onwards. The individuals through rational critical debate tried to question the authoritative powers of society because, the private sphere of individual was controlled by manorial or feudal obligation which made the individuals as peasants denied the right to trade or to have any land. They have also controlled one’s public autonomy by putting obligation on the participation in state’s political function, as there was traditional representation

of particular class from ages. As a result, individual is like a peasant in private as well as in public domain with no rights, less freedom and no liberty etc. Here public and private powers over individuals were so confused that made them difficult to be divided. Such a perplexity brings the quest for private interest of people through critical discourse in public sphere. It was the first and foremost issue of public sphere among the bourgeois public in the beginning. And this replaced the different authorities of that time (like feudal powers, princely states, the nobility etc.), which were since ages sitting on the high position as state's authority. Later, the representatives of state authority monitored by the people have decided the critical discourse of debate. Thus he writes:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason (*öffentliche Rasonnement*). In our [German] usage this term (i.e., Rasonnement unmistakable preserves the polemical nuances of both sides: simultaneously the invocation of reason and its disdainful disparagement as merely malcontent griping (Habermas 1989, p. 27).

The bourgeois public sphere was to mediate within the private concerns of individuals in their familial, economic

and social life. The public sphere consisted of organs of information and political debate, such as, newspapers and journals. And, also the institutions of political discussion, such as, political clubs, literary salons, public assemblies, pubs and coffee houses, meeting halls, and other public spaces where socio political discussions took place. For the first time in history, individuals and groups could shape public opinion, by giving direct expression to their needs and interests while influencing political practice. The bourgeois public sphere made it possible to form a realm of public opinion that opposed state power and the powerful interests that were coming to shape bourgeois society. The public sphere thus recognises a space for institutions and practices between the private interests of everyday life in civil society and in the state power. The public sphere thus mediates between the domains of the family (private) and the workplace (public) - where private interests prevail - and the state often exerts arbitrary forms of power and domination. As Habermas states:

The self-interpretation of the function of the bourgeois public sphere crystallized in the idea of 'public opinion'. The prehistory of the latter, up to its articulated meaning in late eighteenth century, was naturally quite long and hitherto known only in its broad outline. Nevertheless, it will serve as an introduction to that idea of the bourgeois public sphere (section 12) which, after having received its classic formulation in the Kantian doctrine of right (section 13), was revealed as problematic by Hegel and Marx (section 14) and which, in the political theory of liberalism around the middle of the nineteenth century, had to admit to the ambivalence of its idea and ideology (Habermas 1989, p. 89).

The line between state and society, fundamental in our context, divided the public sphere from the private realm. The public sphere was coextensive with public authority, and we consider the court part of it. Included in the private realm was the authentic "public sphere," for it was a public sphere constituted by private people. Within the realm that was the preserve of private people we therefore distinguish again between private and public spheres. The private sphere comprised civil society in the narrower sense, that is to say, the realm of commodity exchange and of social labour; imbedded in it was the family with its interior domain (*Intimsphäre*). The public sphere in the political realm evolved from the public sphere in the world of letters; "[t]hrough the vehicle of public opinion it put the state in touch with the needs of society" (Habermas 1989, p. 92). This area can be seen as a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can be critical to state authorities. The public sphere is also different from the official economy and market relations. It is one of discursive relations, for debating and deliberating. The nature of public sphere centres on the idea of participation and how public opinion democratically becomes political action and morally relevant. In the primary stage of bourgeois development, public opinion was formed in open political debate concerning interests of common concern that attempted to an agreement in regard to general interests. The nature of public opinion also got changed due to power structure of public sphere from time to time.

In the public sphere of welfare state capitalism, public opinion is administered by political, economic, and media elites, which manage public opinion as part of systems management and social control. Now in the contemporary stage of capitalism, public opinion is formed by dominant elites and thus represented by their particular private interests. No longer is the

rational consensus among individuals and groups get predominant place in the interests of articulation of common good. Instead, struggle among groups to advance their own private interests characterizes the scene of contemporary politics. In view of the above, it may be stated that the use of opinion is considered as common sense or habit of an individual to maintain his/her identity as well as subjective freedom. It is right of every individual to express what is desirable according to need. It enhances the open use of reason. And one's opinion is not tied to preconditions of education or property. It is "...simple uttering of precisely those 'habits' that later on public opinion would critically oppose as prejudices" (Wetters 2008, p. 94). Therefore, through public opinion individuals behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion with the guarantee of freedom. One of the main reasons of the emergence of public opinion (as a cornerstone of public sphere) can be the excessive pressure of the major tendencies of eighteenth century. In contemporary times, opinion in public sphere to vote or elect can be seen through the right to express in mass media such as in news papers, on television, on internet etc. Is it done in valid or invalid way may be still debatable? By quoting Hegel, Habermas affirms that:

The formal subjective freedom of individuals consists in their having and expressing their own private judgments, opinions, and recommendations on affairs of state. This freedom is collectively manifested as what is called "public opinion".... In other words one's freedom dwells on the collective expression of individual in public sphere or in inter subjectivity (of "I" and "you"). The footsteps of this sort of freedom can be seen through the clear and distinct medium of public use of opinion/reason in public sphere of

the world of letters (*literarische Öffentlichkeit*) as expressed in the following way: It preserved certain continuity with the publicity involved in the representation enacted at the prince's court (Tönnies 2009, p. 9).

The bourgeois avant-garde of the educated middle class learned the art of critical rational public debate through its contact with the 'elegant world'. This courtly noble society, to the extent that the modern state apparatus became independent from the monarch's personal sphere, naturally separated itself, in turn, more and more from the court and become its counterpoise in the town. The 'town' was the life centre of civil society not only economically; in cultural contrast to the court, it designate especially an early public sphere in the world of letters whose institutions were the coffee houses, the salons, and the table societies (Tönnies 2009, p. 11).

### **Public Opinion and the Medium of Critical Debate**

The world of letters is one of the mediums which can put collective opinion as common concern for all and thereby highlight the notion of public will as general agreement of different people. It is in the nature of collective opinion as well as discussions. In that case, freedom or public use of opinion becomes the recognising factor in one's own subjectivity and common concern of all; it brings different ways to use public opinion through the medium of rational critical debate. Accordingly, public sphere starts transforming as medium for putting one's own opinion and remains free from any sort of obligation and control. The sphere of word of letters, coffee houses, salons, table societies etc. provided the notion of conjugal family with the subjectivity of individual (in Germany, Britain, France)

gave rise to social structures of the public sphere. All these social structures worked like milestones in developing the notion of public opinion and helped in transcending the barriers of social hierarchy. Social equality could only be possible firstly as equality outside the state/political realm. However, all these social structures differed in composition of their *publicus*, the style of proceedings, in the nature of their debates; but all of them organised discussion among private people. It has considered as the clear medium to put one's opinion because at that time the public sphere of world of letters had less interference of state authority, social elites and other upper classes that could have used this for their own benefits.

Habermas points out all these three factors as institutional criteria for the emergence of the public sphere. The discursive arenas, such as Britain's coffee houses, France's salons and Germany's Tischgesellschaften "...may have differed in the size and compositions of their publics, the style of their proceedings, the climate of their debates, and their topical orientations" (Root 2007, p. 146). But they gave rise to significant issues at that time which is supposed to be important in realising the relation between "I" and "you". These institutional criteria emerged as milestones to bring out the altered notion of freedom, rationality, or democratic attitude and thereby emphasising on "respecting each other's subjectivity as an end", by focusing on the following:

1. **Preservation of Status:** they preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether (Habermas 1989).
2. **Mode of Critical Discourse:** ...discussion with such a public presupposed the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned. The domain of 'common concern' which was the object of

public attention remained a preserve in which church and state authorities had the monopoly of interpretation. The private people for whom the cultural product became available as a commodity profaned it inasmuch as they had to determine its meaning on their own (by way of rational communication with one another), verbalize it, and thus state explicitly what precisely in its implicitness for so long could assert its authority (Habermas 1989).

Social intercourse and the problematization of concerned areas give birth to the domain of disregard of status and "common concern" which becomes the object of critical attention of the public. Public critical attention gives birth to rational critical debate which afterwards converts into public opinion and will. This awareness also further helps in bringing various transformation and awareness in society as well as in private life of individual or in his subjectivity. From here arise, the notion of rationality or freedom that is supposed to base on the public opinion/ rational critical debate.

**3. Inclusivity:** exclusive the public might be in given instance, it could never close itself off entirely and become consolidate as a clique; for it always understood and found itself immersed within a more inclusive public of all private people, persons who-insofar as they were propertied and educated-as readers, listeners, and spectators could avail themselves via the market of the objects that were subject to discussion. The issues discussed became 'general' not merely in their significance, but also in their accessibility: everyone had to be able to participate. Wherever the public established itself institutionally as a stable group of discussants, it did not equate itself with the public but at

most claimed to act as its mouthpiece, in its name, perhaps even as its educator- the new form of bourgeois presentation.

The notion of inclusivity brings the sense of equality among individuals at all the levels of society. Thus, indirectly it has started maintaining the balance between the subjectivities of different people of society as well as their class status in society. In seventeenth century, rational critical public debate among different groups against state authority or between private persons with one another with a specific subjectivity can be seen as the example of this very beginning. With such a beginning, private people made its way into the political realm's public sphere and thereby to represented one of the common interests in market economy as right to property owning. In short, these institutional criteria state that status was disregarded and the domain of discourse was that of 'common concern', where members of all levels of society were included Here, the point which should be brought into notice is Habermas's account of institutional criteria for public sphere that has included a large section of the population, notably women and working class. The absence of women and lower section can be seen in salons, table societies and coffee houses. They only talk about (bourgeois public) one class of society who is well educated and able to participate in free press, media, literary societies, etc. Furthermore the active space for women in public as well as in private is negligible or very limited one, which is also discussed in *Rethinking the Public Sphere* by Nancy Fraser. She revisits Habermas's historical description of the public sphere. She refers to scholars, like Joan Landers, Mary Ryan and Geoff Eley, where she argues that the bourgeois public sphere was in fact constituted by a number of significant exclusions.

In contrast to Habermas on the principle of disregard of status and

inclusivity, Nancy Fraser claims that the bourgeois public sphere discriminates against the lower section and women. Therefore, she stipulates a hegemonic tendency of the male bourgeois public sphere, which dominated at the cost of alternative publics; (for example by gender, ethnicity and property ownership) in this manner they have prevented other groups and their particular concerns. There are unmentioned “exclusion factors” in Habermas’s public sphere such as geographical locality, age and education which may be correlated with the previously mentioned factors, like gender and education. For example, how should a farmer from an isolated village be able to visit a salon of the eighteenth century (in an urban scene)? Or, how could someone with no education have been able to overcome the gap between the conceptual understanding and vocabulary to join a complex debate? Such a line of thinking obviates the necessity to argue that everyone was not taking part in the public sphere.

On the other hand, Antonio Gramsci would have made a case in categorizing this as a primary example of cultural hegemony. He has seen the bourgeois public sphere as institutional vehicle of historical transformation of political domination. Questions can be raised here such as: is it right to institutionalise the public sphere on the consent of one particular class of public? In *Equality, Diversity and Multiple Publics*, Fraser discusses Habermas’s normative assumption thus: “the institutional confinement of public life to a single, overarching public sphere is a positive and desirable state of affairs, whereas the proliferation of a multiplicity of publics represents a departure from, rather than advance towards, democracy” (Fraser 2021, p. 117). She tried to discuss two sorts of societies: stratified and egalitarian. She argues for making public sphere more democratic that there should be multiplicity of *publicus* rather than have single public called bourgeois.

In earlier days, there were not a prior differentiation between private and public. Like for example, domestic violence which used to be matter of private now have become the common concern/issue in public sphere. It amounts to saying that there is no definite definition of what a “common concern” entails. Even a person with a limited knowledge of history would agree that the public schema has changed thoroughly over the time. Like for example in India, there used to be sati pratha in older days, or immense number of female feticide, low rate of literacy among girls; but as the time passed on, all these issues have become the issues of public sphere and of common concern (moved from private to public as social disparities). The issues which were matter of private concern of one’s religion, culture, tradition or one’s faith started becoming a matter of public interest or issue for all. In a society, one’s matter of faith/convictions should not be the reason to restrict others actions. Thus, normatively and ideally, above sorts of inequalities (of gender, class, caste,) should be eliminated, rather than just being bracketed or explicitly articulated as issues of public concern, alarm and anxiety. Today public spheres hold intrinsic or even instrumental value. It certainly seems to suggest that Fraser focus towards an ideal post bourgeois, democratic public sphere(s), which make the differences to Habermas’s historical account of the bourgeois (eighteenth century Europe) public sphere.

### **Political Consciousness and Public Sphere**

Political consciousness can also be seen as one of the significant aspects of public sphere that results from the immense discussion taking place in private as well as public realm of individuals’ life. This domain of political consciousness have lead individual as a citizen or agent toward the notion of “rights bearing individual” in different institution of



society such as the political, economic, and social. Society became means of mutual understanding of each other's subjectivity and interests. Political consciousness can also be seen as one of the significant elements to move toward the other new/modern notion of public sphere again. Towards that end, the first sign can be getting from the upcoming notion of civil society.

A political consciousness developed in the public sphere of civil society which, in opposition to absolute sovereignty, articulated the concept of and demand for general and abstract laws and which ultimately came to assert it (i.e., public opinion) as the only legitimately source of this law. In the course of eighteenth century public opinion claimed the legislative competence for those norms whose polemical rationalist conception it had provided to begin with (Hayek 2012). The political consciousness in people brought a twist in the nature of public sphere, where public sphere from the social realm moved towards political realm. It was political consciousness about fundamental rights of an individual against state authority and market. In eighteenth century, public opinion through civil society demanded for legislative competence for every one as the notion of human rights through liberal tradition. Thus, the turn and twist on the idea of developing the notion of public sphere of civil society signifies to the changes that have been occurring due to the implication of both capitalism and state structure through the period of western modernity. Like the rise of large corporations, there emerged growth of social - welfare state and mass democracy. Both the notions have tried to replace the frame of excessive power, money and non-discursive modes of co-ordinations.

This historical understanding of public sphere tries to enhance or help in grasping the modern category of 'publicness' or different modes of rationality as well as the way of putting

individual/collective autonomy and opinion. Simultaneously, civil society can be seen as the locus to enhance the common concern of individuals collectively and democratically before the state or any governing institute of the society. We may also note here that the comparison of the conception of public sphere according to Habermas in 1962 with the present times has profound divergence. Habermas is only talking about one sort of public in his conception of public sphere. But as in the second part of 'Structural Transformation', he writes about the decline of public sphere due to culture - consuming public. Accordingly, there began to build the importance of civil society worldwide because the boundaries of state and nation have started expanding due to various reasons like multiculturalism, cross boundaries trading etc. On the other hand, there started withering of state's role due to the emerging of civil societies which deal with issues like alienation, gender problem, human rights, child labour and poverty in developing countries. We may also take into consideration on the fact that there is difference in the notion of civil society in developed countries and developing one. The difference lies in the particular issues of particular culture or traditional societies. The only common feature which is universally applicable to the notion and civil society is its shift from private to public. It can be seen clearly that the issues which civil society handle is more of private concern in public realm, which have become the common concern globally.

### **Habermasian Public Sphere: A Conclusion**

The above considerations on the conceptual plane of Habermasian 'public sphere' make one to think in the following way. First, society is conceptualized and understood as class society by means of class struggle dictated by an outside factor, and not a

homogeneous society or better community. The absolute Ego of Descartes, the transcendental subject of Kant, or even the metaphysical God are constructed or re modelled to defend this social status quo. In fact, they can no longer claim to lay foundation to society. Habermas sought another way to deal with these conflicts in the society which he calls the dialogical way of the public sphere or consensus. First, he turns toward the ideal polis of the Greek and discovers that polis understood as the community of the city represents the common interests of the people. In this context, Habermas understands the public sphere as a 'realm of social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed'. In short, according to Habermas, like the pre-Socratic society, public sphere is a realm in which political life can be discussed openly, in which debate proceeds in accordance with standards of critical reason and not by simple appeal to traditional dogmas and authorities. But such a public sphere is hardly to be found in our society today, not because of a lack of debates or forums but because of the fact that we possess neither standards of critical reason nor the necessary conditions of such a public sphere. It makes us to state that it is too early to talk about a public sphere without establishing these standards. (Reasons, conditions etc) Habermas is certainly conscious of these facts when he embraces reasons or transcendental conditions. As a matter of fact, the Habermasian analysis of society points out the various distorted forms of debates such as the manipulated distorted and dictated debates and a lack of commitment to rational self-determination in politics for the following reasons:

1. If the public sphere is thought of to present the general interests expressed in the form of consensus of all parties involved, then such consensus is found in both capitalism and socialism as Weber

and Wellmer rightly demonstrated. The fact is that after the abolition of political monopoly of monarchism in the French Revolution, a new form of totalitarianism has emerged or in the form of dictatorship of the proletariat etc. They claim to be the rationale to consensus.

2. The form of consensus as a self-conscious determination is replaced today by a decision based on instrumental, purposive and calculated reason. It means that consensus is no longer determined by the human factor but by technological factors. All consensual determinations are guided and controlled by instrumentality of reason rather than by metaphysical reason or thinking. In this sense, what Hegel described as instrumentalization of reason could be understood in its modern sense as a form of instrumental consensus.
3. The liberal idea of free speech and discursive will formation is at some distance from reality: the discrepancy increased with the development of the capitalist economy. If free speech was promoted in its full strength and if there is free press which is capable of making human sufferings to the attention of public without any particular self-interest, then our press today would not have motivated by profits of self-interest and such maladies. In a word, the public sphere, which now mediates these interests have become the focal point of competition for self-interests and vested ideas.
4. The above difficulties make any rational consensus apparently impossible at present times. Supposing that these difficulties are overcome, there are still a certain number of problems concerning the claim of rationality in consensus. How can we build the ideal conditions for consensus? There is another issue such as whether

- consensus is sufficient to determine the rationality in social science?
5. The point here is that to determine the inner relationship between rationality and consensus, we need to demonstrate the inner and rational relationship between human activities and the outer nature. Being aware of such problems, Habermas sought to look for an objective standard of consensus in language which he partly found in the philosophy of Wittgenstein and particularly in the *Communis Consensus* of Hans Georg Gadamer.

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