ABSTRACT The concepts of public space and the public sphere, still associated with Jürgen Habermas’ 1962 publication (and appearing in French in 1978), The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, have given rise to a great deal of theory-centred production in a variety of disciplines. These concepts have been revised by several authors and according to different objectives. Perhaps most ambitions among them is the desire to design a more realistic proposition—to deliver justice to “real-life” society. In this article, I attempt to contribute to this goal by reviewing certain developments in theory circulating in the French language since the 1990s (and quite often originally written in French) while taking into account the reconciliation (however lukewarm) of the question of the public sphere between disciplines concerned with social movements and democracy.

KEYWORDS Public sphere; Public space; Democracy; Social movement

Introduction

The concepts of public space and the public sphere have given rise to a significant amount of theory-based intellectual production in a variety of disciplines. Among them we find, without doubt, political philosophy, but also sociology (political, urban, media), literature, history, political science, communication, and architecture. An engagement with the question of public sphere can be observed since the end of the 1990s in several disciplines concerned with social movements and democracy (Sintomer, 2011; Neveu, 1999; Blondiaux & Sintomer, 2002). More generally, the concepts of public space and the public sphere have been examined according to different

France Aubin is Professor in the Department of Letters and Social Communication at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, Québec, Canada. Email: france.aubin@uqtr.ca.
objectives, leading to the emergence of a more realistic and highly ambitious proposition—to bring justice to “real-life” society.

The scope of this article is essentially limited to the work of Francophone authors. However, given the influence they have had on said authors, I also address the French-language translations of Nancy Fraser (above all), Eduardo Romanos, and Oskar Negt. Temporally, I have limited the scope to books published since 1990, with the exception of one text by Pierre Bourdieu on public opinion. Evidently, I make no attempt to be exhaustive, yet I attempt all the same to limit inexcusable omissions as much as possible.

The revisions and critiques of the Habermasian model proposed by these authors will be divided into four groupings: the pluralization of public sphere, the definition of the common good, deliberative and decisional publics, and the search for consensus. First, however, let us start with some introductory words on the concepts of public space and the public sphere, as well as the communicational approach to them.

**Fuzzy subjects: The public sphere and the public**

In French, the concept of “l'espace public” is founded on two central objects: “l'espace public” as a physical location that creates social ties (the public space) and “l'espace public” as the collection of attributes contributing to the formation of public debate (the public sphere). Anglophone researchers generally refer to the first as “public space” and the second as the “public sphere,” while the distinction is not as systematic in French. In fact, the expression “sphère publique” seems to be reserved, in French, for the specific bourgeois public sphere described by Habermas., which is a specific understanding of the public sphere. As a convention for this text, “l'espace public” will be translated most of the time as the public sphere.

Research on public space as a creator of social ties may look to subjects such as street culture, playing fields, and architecture, while work on the public sphere as contributing to collective deliberation is interested in questions of democracy, civil society, and public opinion. However, they may also coincide, as was the case of the liberal model of the public sphere, the structure and functioning of which was examined by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). In this text, which will serve as a conceptual point of reference for the current discussion, rational discussion contributing to the common good and leading to the attainment of consensus (public sphere) develops alongside public or semipublic spaces (public space), such as literary salons and cafes. The act of reading, undertaken in the private sphere and especially in relation to the political press, has also contributed to the formation of public opinion as an element that could then serve public discussion.

**In the field of communication**

While researchers in some fields, such as urban studies tend to concentrate their efforts on public places, communication researchers instead look to the deliberative dimension (the public sphere). It is thus possible to distinguish between “common space” (espace commun), “political space” (espace politique), and “public space” (espace public): “common space concerns circulation and expression; public space, discussion; political space, decision-making” (Wolton, n.d.).
For Éric Dacheux (2008), taking inspiration from Hannah Arendt, Habermas, and Richard Sennett, the public sphere is simultaneously a space for political legitimation, the creation of political community, and a stage for acting out politics. He believes that “the public sphere lends support to a certain pacification of social mores by substituting communication for physical violence, which does not however exclude the possibility of symbolic violence” (pp. 19–20).

To the contrary, according to Bernard Miège (2010), the theoretical issues linked to public sphere are limited not only to the functioning of politics in societies: “Important social issues are also involved, and not only according to the orientation of debates that unfold on the political stage” (p. 8). Miège distinguishes public sphere from mediation. “In contemporary societies, communication strategies and actions are not limited to public sphere, rather ... the functioning of the public sphere sets itself apart, conceptually and practically, from mediations that are managed somewhat directly by political and public systems” (p. 14).

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that Dacheux (2008) divides research on public sphere into two general categories: theoretical approaches and empirical approaches. He is often critical of the first for offering too much of an overview and of the second in that the research tends to have trouble demonstrating generality and to “identify strong structural evolutions” (p. 23).

**Four general revisions**

Until now, it may appear that the concept of public sphere is, on the whole, coherent and singular. As we will see through an exploration of its pluralization, it is in fact nothing of the sort. According to Habermas (1962), the function of public sphere is for it to be a foundation for attaining, via deliberation, a consensus on the common good. Deliberation, though, refers to a number of practices that are not universal and that often introduce inequalities. The attainment of consensus, indeed the very need for consensus, is also called into question when we assimilate public opinion and its institutionally recognized forms. The delimitation of the common good introduces serious questions concerning things that can no longer be taken for granted, such as the movable borders separating the public and private. While The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Habermas, 1962) continues to serve as a point of reference, various criticisms, largely adopted from Nancy Fraser’s reformulations of Habermas’ ideas since 1989 (see Aubin, 2006; Beaudry, 2008; Miège, 2010) are constantly being updated, as we will see in the following sections.

*The pluralization of the public sphere*

Numerous authors concerned with the contemporary public sphere have noted its pluralization and fragmentation (see Pailliart, 1995; François & Neveu, 1999). “The evocation of fragmented public spheres, ‘mosaics,’ is justified as much by the multiplication of its borders as by the multiplication of its publics” (Riutort, 2007, p. 80). Negt (2007), originator of the concept of the proletarian public sphere, and Fraser (1990) assert that such a pluralization has always existed and was even recognized by Habermas in the preface to The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962), when briefly speaking of a plebeian public sphere. Habermas (1992)
would return to this theme in 1992, thirty years after the publication of his legendary tome:

The exclusion of inferior layers, culturally and politically mobilized, already provoke a pluralization of the public sphere in its formative phase. Alongside the hegemonic public sphere, and intertwined with it, a plebeian public sphere forms (p. 165).

The public sphere is self-perpetuating, all the while enlarging and fragmenting its bases of intervention (Miège, 1995a, 1995b), and there exist both a general public sphere and partial public spheres (Floris, 2003; Neveu, 1999; Pailliart, 1995; Miège, 2010). The Internet, for example, is a public sphere partially participating in the construction of an eventual transnational public sphere (George, 2003). In fact, there is hardly a single author who understands the public sphere from a unitary perspective. For instance, when examining research archives on the public sphere, such as those published by French journal *Hermès*, one finds as many articles on local public spheres or public spaces of proximity as on intermediary or national public spheres. Certain Grenoble-based authors have influenced this work, such as Pailliart (1995), Floris (2003), and Miège (2010), whose work I will examine in detail given his recent comprehensive publication on the subject (Miège, 2010).

To study the transformation of the public sphere over the course of time, Miège (1995b, 2010) proposes to approach the concept on the basis of five criteria: the relationship between citizens and discourse; the type of economic organization; the population included in the media market; the relationship to State power; and economic interests. In this way, he draws out five communicational models that have been successively formed and today organize the contemporary public sphere: the political press, the popular press, mass audiovisual media, generalized public relations (or generalized communication), and digital information and communication technologies (ICTs). Miège (1995b) emphasizes that these models operate according to conditions that vary according to the specificities of sociopolitical and cultural histories that make the public spheres of each country fundamentally unique configurations (p. 54). Seeking to demarcate this research both through an informational-communicational anchoring and a concern for empirical validation, Miège (2010) notes that the public sphere may appear in geopolitical contexts where it may not be expected and charts out the different socio-historical genealogies of the public sphere (p. 119). He maintains a previously stated distinction between the public and political sphere (1995b), underlining that the public sphere actually relates to three types of spheres: public, social, and private (2010). If judged according to the factors that he emphasizes in presenting the history of the public sphere in France (including the politics of linguistic uniformity), the public sphere is characterized by the relational dimension—that which “makes the connection” and results from socialization, that which “makes men march in time” (Miège, 2010, citing Durkheim, p. 31).

**THE MEDIA AND OTHER SYSTEMS AT THE ORIGIN OF VARIOUS MISUNDERSTANDINGS**

Sensitive to criticisms announcing the disappearance of the public sphere (rather than
its fragmentation), Marc Raboy (1991) writes that the media “as social institutions, have become the principle constitutive elements of the public sphere in which democratic life evolves” (p. 184) and that consequently, the public sphere must be protected by means of political regulation in order to support the advent of a truly democratic public sphere. This assumes that in the context of globalization, one must not only invest in the national political public sphere (submitting briefs, presentations to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, etc.), but also engage with the agendas of international organizations when it comes to issues of privatization and concentration of communication resources.

In the same vein and in the context of the global economic crisis, Negt (2009) expresses his concerns with regard to control of the media and the need to work toward an oppositional public sphere:

currently, there is a great risk that the conservative governments of Europe will be tempted to control the mass media. This has already occurred in Italy and the same phenomena is taking place today in France, tomorrow in Germany. As the structural aspects of the crisis are not clear to all, we try to understand why the media continue to hide this. For this reason, we need an oppositional stance of a completely different scale to today’s short-lived, ad hoc initiatives. (p. 192)

Anne-Marie Gingras (1999) notes that the association between the media and democracy rests on a “great misunderstanding” fed by: 1) the link between unrestricted media and the exercise of democracy (the existence of unrestricted media is not enough for democracy to be fully and entirely exercised); 2) the intrinsically pedagogic power of information and communication (information and communication do not necessarily lead to the formation of informed public opinion); and 3) the ideology of communication (communication allegedly leads to social consensus). Turning her gaze to the political role of the media, she concludes that:

The media do not satisfy this responsibility [social ideal of the public sphere] and do not constitute a public sphere in the Habermasian sense of the term. Rather they situate themselves at an extremity of the public sphere and according to a different ideological apparatus, the very idea of which reminds one of the use of the media by the elites. (p. 5)

This critical understanding of the media can also be found in the work of legal scholar Jonas-Sébastien Beaudry (2008), who approaches the concept of freedom of expression as the right to access the public sphere. Beaudry writes that “to attempt to reconceptualize the mass media as a new pro-democratic public sphere is a task that is bound to fail” (p. 24). Using Latin America as an example, Beaudry estimates that it is nonetheless possible to strengthen the right of access to the public sphere. He identifies four pillars: citizen education; improving the capacity of citizens to assemble in public; the affirmation of collective identities; and the active protection of rights to freedom of expression and access to information (p. 317).

In a book examining the media sphere, which includes community and alternative media, Michel Sénécal (1995) underlines the complexity of social communication.
Citing Yves de la Haye, Sénécal explains that “[t]he principles of organization of the public sphere … reveal different logics, at times contradictory but through which the interplay and reciprocal action that give social communication its identity and complex figure, shaped as it is by history” (La Haye, cited in Sénécal, 1995, p. 21). These are the logics of three important social actors: the State, capital, and social movements. Sénécal links the logic of social movements to a certain number of struggles, among them those that have been undertaken for freedom of expression and in favour of greater participation of citizens in the public sphere.

With the rapid development of the social Web (Millerand, Proulx, & Rueff, 2010), we are witnessing the emergence of new “public sphere activation locations” (Miège, 2010), some of which renew the ties between the physical occupation of public space and the discursive arena of the public sphere, “between the Net and the street” (Gutierrez Ruiz, 2012). This new point of convergence creates an important venue to support the ongoing work of organizations such as the North American “Occupy” movement, the Québécois “Red Square” movement, and the European “Indignados.”

Concerning links between (new) technologies and (new) social movements, I would like to draw particular attention to the pioneering works of George (2001) and Fabien Granjon (2001). George sheds light on a variety of subsistence-related inequalities, while Granjon focuses upon the relationship between the forms adopted by militant organizations and by the Internet. Setting out a chart of the negative and positive points of ICTs for social mobilizations, George asserts that one must be careful not to be too optimistic:

> Already, we can see that website production is becoming increasingly complex compared to “simple” html programming, something which will surely create a factor of exclusion. In addition, with the convergence between the Internet and older means of communication … one could ask if the information network will not ultimately become a tool for entertainment, relegating it to a place far from the social aspirations of popular education and awareness. (George, 2008a, pp. 9–10)

Even though new platforms, such as Wordpress, may lessen the criticism of technical complexity, George’s apprehension that the Internet is becoming co-opted by entertainment seems to be well-founded. Following the analysis proposed by Julien Bouillé (2010), George is among the researchers who judge the Internet to be playing a facilitating role. Thierry Vedel (2003) agrees, stating that:

> The Internet is certainly not THE solution to the political crisis but a tool which, if properly appropriated by social movements and accompanied by public policies promoting democracy, may in the long term substantially affect the functioning of political systems. (pp. 213–214)

Dominique Cardon and Fabien Granjon (2010) adopt a decidedly more optimistic tone when they address media activism (or informational mobilization): “the arrival of the internet constitutes a new context insofar as it does not only facilitate the production of digital information, but it also makes possible its dissemination at a lower cost” (p. 12). They are thus among the researchers who consider the Internet a catalyst (Bouillé, 2010, p. 55).
Relying upon a binary conception of public sphere—one part coming from that which has already been rendered visible (in the media, for example) and the other from that which is accessible (or public)—Cardon (2010) asserts that, with the Internet, “certain visible things are not necessarily public. ... A dichotomy substitutes itself for a continuum in which certain information is very ‘public,’ other information less so, and other information not at all” (p. 36). To represent transformations of the public sphere, Cardon, in *La démocratie Internet*, proposes a schema of the different ways to express oneself in the “space of visibility known as the Internet” by considering two types of actors: she who speaks, and she who is spoken of. She who speaks may be amateur or professional; she who is spoken of may be a public personality or an ordinary individual. The author arrives at four modalities: the limited public sphere (a professional who talks about public personalities) and public sphere (a professional who talks about ordinary individuals) correspond to traditional public sphere, while the participatory Web (an amateur who talks about public personalities) and the open/hidden Web (an amateur who talks about amateurs) are part of the new enlargement of public sphere.

On the whole, however, barely any techno-determinist discourse can be found in the work of researchers, even the most enthusiastic who have examined the contribution of the Internet to the public sphere. While they account for social mobilizations and thus participate in the exposition of other “possibles,” these researchers also draw attention to the risks of capitalist capture with respect to the Internet and other communication systems (Miège, 2010; George, 2008b), as well as the difficulty of movements to “stabilize and maintain visibility” without needing to rely upon collective support or to articulate common causes (Cardon & Granjon, 2010, p. 136).

PUBLICS, COUNTERPUBLICS, AND EMANCIPATED PUBLICS
With whom are these new public sphere activation locations concerned, and how do they stage public expression? And if public sphere is indeed plural, is it the same as publics who debate?

Basing her thoughts on work in historiography, Fraser (2005), notes that there have always been many publics and some of these publics, the counterpublics, have contested the bourgeois public norms that have excluded them and elaborated alternative styles of political behaviour and equally alternative public discourse norms (p. 117). She compares the relative merits of a single encompassing public with various publics in two types of modern society: stratified societies and multicultural, egalitarian societies. In both cases, she arrives at the conclusion that a plurality of publics is preferable to one singular public. In stratified societies, subaltern counterpublics have a dual character: as a space of withdrawal and regrouping, and as terrain for “agitation” activities aimed at larger publics (Fraser, 2005, p. 125). Subaltern counterpublics constitute parallel discursive arenas in which members of subordinate social groups construct and circulate counter-discourses, permitting them to develop their own constructions of their identities, interests, and needs (Fraser, 2005, p. 127).

Cardon (2010) presents a more optimistic vision of publics. While the traditional public sphere has always been paternalistic, “on the internet, and thanks to the internet, the controlled public self-emancipates. It expresses itself without being asked to do so. It shamelessly exposes itself for the sake of creating new social ties. It produces
knowledge without questioning the knowledge of others. It defines, on its own terms, the subjects which it wishes to debate. It self-organizes” (p. 99).

The perspective of Landry (2012) with regard to citizen mobilizations, often organized away from the media eye, offers a contrasting perspective. In the book version of his doctoral thesis, Landry “addresses the processes by which (publicly) politically active citizens are led away from a public sphere of political discussion and confined to a judicial sphere” (n.p.). Even though the actual context appears to be more open to online citizen expression (in western democracies), it appears to be otherwise in the public locations.

Toward variable geometry

Today, the idea of global or transnational public sphere (Fraser, 2005) is making advances, and some researchers are interested in the role the Internet may play in it. As in the case of “Internet potentialities” at the national level (Vedel, 2003), these authors tread carefully: “nothing is definitively in play when it comes to ICTs” (Gingras, 1999, p. 223). George (2003) sets out three barriers that put the creation of a veritable Internet-based international public sphere into perspective: inequality to access, linguistic diversity, and experiential diversity. That said, these barriers also exist at the local level and contribute to complicating the definition of the common good, a task to which I will now turn.

The definition of the common good

The importance given by Habermas to the concept of the common good is proof that he believed in the possibility that human beings might bring together, via deliberation, collective interests that transcend the sum of their personal interests. Speaking of the absolute power of a monarch, Habermas nevertheless was careful not to substitute private interests or stakes, or “lobbies” to speak in more contemporary terms. However, having not yet completely accounted for the nature of the bourgeois public sphere—notably in terms of exclusion—Habermas had not foreseen that the very constitution of the bourgeois public sphere would question the identification of the common good.

Perhaps more fundamentally, Fraser (2005) protested that one cannot know what the common good is as long as it is still subject to debate, and that the very definition of this common good indeed must be at the heart of debates. She writes:

Its civic republican conceptualization of public sphere expects a short-circuit between the idea of deliberation and that of the common good in assuming that deliberation must be deliberation on the subject of the common good. It therefore limits deliberation to a discussion taken up from the point-of-view of a unique and global “we,” thus declaring any claim of personal or group interest to be undesirable. This compromises one of the principle objectives of deliberation which is to help participants to clarify their interests, including when these interests turn out to be in opposition to one another. (p. 135)

Fraser specifies that it is otherwise impossible to predict if a common good will come to fruition following deliberations: it could be that conflicts of interest cannot be over-
come. She adds that it is thus impossible to predict the subjects, views, or interests that should be subject to deliberation, a perspective shared by Bernard Miège. Miège, for his part, also asserts that criteria do not exist that allow for the inclusion or exclusion of what should be debated in the public sphere (Miège, 1995a).

THE VOICELESS

According to Fraser, it is probable that what is important to subaltern classes rarely comes to light because they are voiceless or incapable of problematizing according to official rules. Fraser’s remark recalls the criticisms formulated by Pierre Bourdieu in his 1973 article “L'opinion publique n’existe pas,” which aimed to deconstruct the concept of survey-extracted public opinion. Bourdieu asserted that there are several principles according to which one may generate a response (an opinion), among them being political competence and class ethos. He defines class ethos as “a system of implicit values that people have internalized since childhood and according to which they generate responses to extremely different problems” (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 1299). Bourdieu claimed that political competence was measured, among other things, by the degree of ease of perception and implied categories of perception to construct and structure such political competence. He specified that this competence was not universal and that it varied depending on level of education and experience. In other words, individuals without access to the necessary cultural capital (or political competence) run the risk of producing an “opinion” contrary to their own interests, while ignoring the ultimate purposes of the questions posed during surveys. As Bourdieu (1973) well demonstrated in his seminal text, the interpretation that pollsters (and political commentators) give to responses may strongly differ from that attributed by survey respondents themselves. The rhetorical or cultural inadequacy of incapable counterpublics unable to make their point of view known in the dominant public sphere, thus contributes to the eventual instrumentalization of opinion expressed in the absence of political competence by members of these counterpublics and, more certainly, to more isolated individuals.

THE OPEN/HIDDEN WEB

Cardon (2010) offers a unique reading of the possibility that there are other publics participating in the discussion thanks to the Internet. “The new forms of Internet expression do not only seek to open up the ‘oligarchic’ public sphere to a periphery of new actors. They pluralize and distribute, in different ways, forms of public speech, by borrowing languages and inhabiting spaces that conventional politics, quite often, do not know how to recognize” (p. 70). Importantly, the author evokes the sphere of self-expression, the “open/hidden Web” or social Web. He writes:

In rearticulating the exposition of the self into everyday conversation, the social web has allowed for a democratizing of narrative auto-construction by inscribing it in the practices of everyday life. Above all, it allows Internet users of a lower level of cultural capital to present themselves through forms that are shorter, less weighty, and easier than the regular upkeep of a blog. (p. 59)

One could, however, object that narrative auto-construction does not necessarily contribute to the search for a common good even if it supports, according to Cardon, the self-expression of Internet users with a low level of cultural capital.
Public Problems

The definition of the common good, of that which can be determined to be in the general interest and subject to debate, can, according to Erik Neveu (1999), be approached from the perspective of public problems. Neveu defines the public problem as “the transformation of a social fact of some sort into an issue of public debate and/or state intervention” (p. 42). He then proposes “three series of classification” in order to address public problems that are constituted by the voluntary action of various operators such as the press, social movements, political parties, lobbies, and intellectuals. The first series is inspired by the Chicago School of sociology and tells the history of an evolution from a sociology of deviance to a sociology of public problems. The concept of “owners of public problems” (Gusfield, 1981, p. 6), defined as “the ensemble of protagonists that, at a given moment, benefit from regularized access to politico-administrative processes that manage a recognized problem as such” (p. 6) helps emphasize “the unequal capacity of groups and individuals to access the arenas of public debate” (Neveu, 1999, p. 4).

For Neveu (1999), it is also possible to reverse the role of the media operator (the press) in the construction of a social problem with the model of “moral panics.” He recalls that Cohen (1973) had worked on the narrative patterns of discourse in the press in order to “understand its impact and its capacity to arouse intense and volatile emotion in public opinion, leading to moral ‘panic’” (Neveu, 1999, p. 5). Cultural Studies researchers, refining the analysis by (re)integrating the complexity of interdependencies between the media and sources (the primary definers, in a position to impose their vision on the media), as well as the possible flaws in the power of institutional sources, leave space for outsiders or social movements to sometimes “exploit or to create situations that give them access to the media” (p. 50).

It is important to note the connections that Neveu establishes between research on public policy, sociology of the media, and sociology of social movements. Public policy researchers have studied the effect of ideas on the development of social problems and their treatment, the role of experts and think tanks, and the considerable disparities in the degree of mediation of public policy processes. In the field of sociology of media, Neveu outlines a revision in agenda-setting theory, the interest attributed to the interdependence of sources, journalists, and agenda setters. The sociology of social movements contributes to reflections on the public sphere by questioning the possible institutionalization of social movements, granting them concomitant political legitimacy and access (often problematic) to the media. In calling for a renunciation of “narrow disciplinary specializations,” he concludes by proposing a research program (an “interrogation grid”) combining the study of interdependencies of different actors, including the media; modes of agenda-setting; mediatization arenas (press, elections) and the treatment (judicial, administrative, legislative) of public problems; and operator communities.

Deliberative and decisional publics

After the publication of his doctoral thesis at the beginning of the 1960s, Habermas barely worked on the concept of the public sphere, instead moving onto a reflection on the modalities of discussion. In an article published following a 1989 colloquium organized by Craig Calhoun, Habermas (1992) cited Bernard Manin:
A legitimate decision does not represent the will of all, but instead constitutes the result of the deliberation of all. It is the process by which the will of each is constituted that grants legitimacy to the result rather than the sum of the wills that are already determined. The deliberative principle is at once individualist and democratic …. I must affirm, at the risk of contradicting a long tradition, that legitimate law is the result of general deliberation and not the expression of the general will. In this way, the burden of proof displaces itself from the morals of citizens to procedures for the democratic formation of will and opinion, which must justify the presumption of the attainment of possible rational results. (p. 180)

This transition from a substantial definition to a procedural definition of a democratic public sphere, whereby “the public sphere is defined as an arena destined to a certain type of discursive interaction, and not as an arena destined to evoke certain types of subjects and problems” (Fraser, 2005, p. 136, footnote 38), announces what will be referred to as the deliberative turn. We find important traces of this change in direction in the theories of deliberative democracy, to which I will now turn.

Two sets of theories will be used to return to the concept of the public sphere and its deliberative and decisional roles: weak and strong publics (Fraser) and democratic. Democracy will be examined according to the following variants: deliberative and participatory (Blondiaux & Sintomer, 2002); protest (Mathieu, 2011); and cooperative (Cardon, 2010).

WEAK PUBLICS, STRONG PUBLICS

In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Habermas (1978) preconceived a rigid separation between civil society and the State and determined that this separation had not been respected because the State had appropriated functions of economic regulation and public management (administration) otherwise reserved for civil society. Since then, Habermas has subscribed to the Hegelian perspective:

“Civil society” today, as opposed to the traditional Marxist usage of the term, no longer includes the economy. This is understood to be constituted by private law and guided by labour markets, capital and products. Its institutional framework instead includes non-governmental and non-economic connections as well as volunteer-based associations that anchor the communicative structures of the public sphere within the societal component of the “life-world” (Lebenswelt). (Habermas, cited in Kaldor, 2007, n.p.)

Fraser (2005) also adopts the associative conceptualization of civil society, which she defines as “the network of non-governmental associations or ‘secondary associations’ that are neither economic nor administrative” (p. 139). To address the separation of civil society and the State, the author distinguishes between different publics. Civil society that is separated from the State is a weak public. Here deliberations occur that are related to the formation of public opinion but not to decision-making. Parliamentary sovereignty is a strong public because it occupies two functions (opinion and decision-making), which, according to Fraser, nullifies the separation between civil society and the State.
Fraser (2005), however, asserts that this evolution represents democratic progress when compared to previous political regimes: “As the terms ‘strong public’ and ‘weak public’ suggest, the force of public opinion is confronted once a body representing it is able to translate this ‘opinion’ into authoritative decisions” (pp. 140–141). As Fraser specifies, certain important questions remain unanswered when it comes to the relationship between strong parliamentary publics and the weak publics for whom they are believed to be responsible, neatly bringing together a number of criticisms of representative democracy.

**DEMOCRACY: DELIBERATIVE AND PARTICIPATORY VARIANTS**

In an article on the concepts of deliberation and participation, Sintomer (2011a) explores the tensions and affinities that have marked their relationships. Rejecting the radicalization of some authors who oppose the two concepts, he proposes a synthesis of possible connections between deliberation and participation, and the concept of representation.


The decisive theoretical step is to destroy the partition between public opinion and deliberation. … Habermasian deliberative democracy is resolutely anchored in the conversations of ordinary citizens. The instant of formation is no longer an election, but rather the formation of public opinion. (p. 254)

While it may be possible to legitimize democracy through procedures that grant participation rights to a larger number of people, this does not directly affect resulting decisions. Political representation thus may accommodate a certain pluralization of participant actors in deliberations. However, these participant actors must be understood in a way that limits them to discussion (as opposed to decision-making) (Sintomer, 2011a). In Fraserian terms, this constitutes a weak public. Another cross-cutting observation of Sintomer is the emphasis put on “the procedures and the desubstantialization of the political, [which] are pushed so far that the preoccupation of a possible deformation of deliberation by social or cultural inequalities becomes completely secondary” (p. 255).

While deliberative democracy focuses on modes by which deliberation is institutionalized within the procedures of the democratic legal State (Sintomer, 2011a, p. 254), participatory democracy subscribes to a much broader deliberative and procedural perspective. Democracy “is ‘participatory’ in that it has coupled structures of representative democracy with structures founded upon direct democracy” (p. 256). It should be noted, though, that the concrete translations of these structures in the United States and Brazil are more convincing than the models put in place in continental Europe, where “the link between participation in decision-making has been more evanescent, particularly within the Hexagon (France) where the dynamic remains generally one of selective hearing, decision-makers themselves synthesizing the debates” (p. 258). Finally, con-
trasting with Brazilian and Anglo-Saxon research, “the dimension of popular mobilization, of fighting for social justice and for a qualitative transformation of society is missing from the majority of participatory democratic experiences in France and in Europe” (p. 258), hence the need to now turn our gaze to that which is unthinkable within representative democracy: understanding the place of protest.

THE PROTEST VARIANT

The relationship between a weak public and strong public (Fraser) can be perhaps thought of in terms of the distance between the governed and the governors. In the context where the governed are unsatisfied with their governors, there often comes a moment when their patience reaches its limit and “the next electoral period will be the occasion to vote out the incumbents and replace them with the adherents of a different type of politics” (Mathieu, 2011, p. 145). Taking up the words of Jean-Pierre Raffarin, France’s prime minister at the time, who said, “[I]t is not the protesters who govern,” sociologist Lilian Mathieu explains that

in a democracy, direct expression of wishes and grievances is no longer possible as it is the elected representatives, resulting in electors who are dispossessed of their sovereignty at the moment they vote for somebody who, for the duration of their mandate will be the sole agents of public authority.

(p. 145)

The legitimacy of the weak public, when it protests in public, appears fragile and resists pressure poorly, as we saw in Québec in 2012 when media and political discourses associated protesters with violence and chaos.8

Twenty years after the publication of Patrick Champagne’s Faire l’opinion (2001), in which the author seeks to establish the legitimacy of protest, and thirty years after the French-language publication of Charles Tilly’s (1984) work on repertoires of collective action, protest-oriented democracy appears to have difficulty influencing decisions taken in political public sphere, at least in certain contexts. To explain its failure (or indeed, its success), authors associated with the field of social movements (Eisinger, 1973; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001) have constructed a series of hypotheses known as the political opportunities structure.

In the context of a return to conflict, as much in the Arab world as in Europe or North America, it appears that the legitimacy of self-organizing weak publics remains fragile, and political authorities often respond with repressive measures.9 In the face of this apparent blockage of the representative political apparatus, social movements turn toward public opinion, which they seek to convince of their legitimacy by appealing to different awareness strategies (Boltanski, 1993). Recent research demonstrates the paradox between supposedly democratic states that seem fairly closed to taking protest-oriented democracy into account and the opinions of which they are at least partially in favour. This, among other observations, was determined in a recent study by Gingras (2008) on social representations of democracy within a set of social actors with access to the public sphere:

The social representations of democracy as they stand were expressed by the 110 social actors interviewed, demonstrating a strong and positive as-
The cooperative variant

While protest-oriented democracy may seem fragile when practised in public space, what does it do for democracy in the partial public sphere of the Internet? Models for online consultation inspired by the logics of participatory democracy seem to have been fairly fruitless (Blondiaux, cited in Vedel, 2003, p. 83).

Against approaches that privilege a “thematic” or issue-oriented strategy, such as that of participatory democracy, Cardon (2010) opposes a system-oriented strategy: “The need for participation most often occurs as an experiment that self-organized around a system that permits for action and cooperation” (p. 84). The author asserts that institutions “should not seek to initiate nor conclude debate, but only to improve the conditions in which Internet users may create their own debate” (p. 85). He continues, illustrating the importance given to systems by the open data movement:

The open data movement is suspicious of the capacity of representatives to conduct debate with citizens and incites them to profit from accessible data to visualize them in their own way, aggregate them according to their own questioning, subject them to their own interrogations. (p. 85)

The transition from a substantial democracy (centred on a predefined common good) to a procedural democracy (centred on conditions or systems) has thus also been observed on the Internet. In this way, cooperative democracy (Cardon, 2010) inscribes itself in the deliberative tradition, aiming to share or bring forth expressive power. This does not mean that the Internet is completely removed from power relations, which are, for example, present in activist collectives where the authority of the actors comes from their engagement and activity, and where “talkers” are disqualified to the advantage of “doers” (Cardon, 2009). However, this relative domination is one of actors sharing a weak public (Fraser), not likely to make decisions that will have more generalized repercussions “as the internet is a limitless territory which does not need to manage resource scarcity” (Cardon, 2010, p. 90). The effects of the “doer’s” decisions are thus quite relative.

The search for consensus

The final section of this article returns to the concept of public opinion, which supposedly crystallizes consensus, and to the concept of compromise. Countless works in the domain of communication have addressed public opinion, and this section will, in part, review the general characteristics of critiques that have been made of it.10 The concept of compromise— which research on social movements, such as the Indignados, has begun to distinguish from consensus—is better known in the field of political philosophy than that of communication, and is thus worthy of attention here.
PUBLIC OPINION

Among Francophone authors, three have weighed in substantially on the concept of public opinion. Bourdieu, whose foundational text—already mentioned—was published in 1973; Champagne (2001), whose book on legitimate manifestations of public opinion was also mentioned previously; and Blondiaux (1998), notably his history of surveys. On the subject of public opinion research and political legitimacy, Bourdieu (1980) writes:

This is the fundamental effect of public opinion research: constituting the idea that there is such as thing as unanimous public opinion research, and thus legitimizing politics and reinforcing the power dynamics that underlie them and make them possible. (p. 224)

Champagne (2001) specifies that “the concept of public opinion has nothing to do with science and everything to do with politics” and that it is “necessarily variable over the course of history because it is the result, not the by-product, of metaphysics, historically determined by the functioning of the political field” (p. IV). Both authors criticize the scientific validity of surveys and their claims to reflect opinion. Blondiaux (2003) summarizes the different criticisms levelled at surveys in seven points. A survey only collects opinions that are 1) private, 2) provoked, 3) non-organized, 4) limited to their verbalized forms, 5) non-discriminatory in terms of intensity, 6) non-discriminatory in terms of the competence of those being surveyed, and 7) not the systematic product of deliberations. Other authors, such as Wolton (1995) and Vincent Lemieux and François Pétry (2010), however, assert that surveys constitute legitimate manifestations of public opinion when applied to the cases of elections and referenda.

Following Bourdieu, Fraser (1993) notes that what appears to be consensus expressed by public opinion in reality masks the conflicts that appear throughout society, while at the same time legitimizing dominant power. Habermas (1978) also recognized this, while emphasizing the conjunctural coincidence of class interest and general interest:

Class interest is the foundation of public opinion. During this period however, it had to objectively coincide with the general interest, or at least enough for this opinion to be considered to be the public opinion, so that it might appear the result of the public’s use of reason, and consequently appear to be rational. … On the basis of the continual domination of one class over another, this ideology nonetheless has given rise to political institutions that have allowed the idea of their own disparition to be come a measure of their objectivity …. (p. 97)

Relying upon the historiographical work of Geoff Eley, Fraser (2005) emphasizes that: the official bourgeois public was the institutional vehicle of an essential historical transformation regarding the nature of political domination. It was a passage from a mode of repressive domination to a hegemonic mode, of a governance based principally upon consent accompanied by moderate repression. The important aspect is that this new mode of political domination, like the old one, assures one strata of society the possibilit-
CONSENSUS, COMPROMISE, AND COLLECTIVE THought

The concept of consensus has often been criticized alongside that of consent: consensus can only ever be apparent, while consent is the result of propaganda and well-orchestrated public relations to silence opposition. From a more general point of view, consensus-based decision-making appears to require not only unanimity or quasi-unanimity—as the sense of the word consensus may imply—but the absence of expressed disaccord. When those who remain silent are asked of their approval or disapproval, this silence remains. The double negation, ‘there is no such expression as a refusal to proposition P,’ is not the equivalent of the affirmation ‘everybody expresses her approval of P.’ (Urfalino, 2007, p. 60)

Closer to the perspective of the public sphere, researchers working on democratic theory, such as Sintomer and Blondiaux, have approached consensus in terms that may approach Fraser. Turning to French experiences in participatory democracy, Blondiaux (2004) asks:

What do these systems [of participatory democracy] wish to produce: consensus or dissensus? Do they want to arrive at consensus, at all costs, or to the contrary, uncover sources of conflict? Do they want to rally citizens to the perspectives of decision-makers or try to find an acceptable norm for all? (p. 18)

Emphasizing the practical difficulty of bringing together two dimensions, he asserts that the essential question in democracy is and will remain the following: “Do we really want to share power and political decision-making” (p. 19)?

Some social movement researchers tend to be interested in compromise in the form of collective thought. Although they are not Francophone, they have been included here, as an increasing number of online translations of their work have been made available. Of particular interest is Eduardo Romanos’ (2011) article “Les Indignés et la démocratie des mouvements sociaux.” He writes:

One of the principle objectives (if not the principle one) of social movements was the development of a new concept of democracy. … In general, they do not demand the abolition of the current party system, but instead search to give it more ample democratic content while working to create alternative and open public spheres where other models of democracy can be experimented with. (p. 3)

Romanos (2011) notes that this objective is not unique to current social movements. “While the protest cycle that hit its apex at the end of the 1960s led to an updating of the concept of direct democracy, the recent transnational mobilization for a globalization from below put into practice a new concept of deliberative democracy” (pp. 3–4). He cites della Porta (2005), who defines deliberative democracy as that which appears...
when “under certain conditions of equality, inclusion and transparency, a communicational process based on reason (the strength of a good argument) is capable of transforming individual preferences, resulting in decisions in the public good,” Romanos (2011, n.p.) then suggests that “the global justice movement is not limited to discussing the principles of this new concept, but has put it into practice in its internal networks and in the development of decision-making processes” (p. 4). To illustrate this, he presents the following extract from the Quick Guide for Dynamic Popular Assemblies (Acampadasol, 2011), conceived in Madrid by the Indignados:

When typically faced with a decision to be made, two people have a tendency for confrontation or to ferociously defend their respective point of view, aiming to convince the other, to win, or simply gain a mediation point. The goal of collective thought is to be constructive. In other words, two people with different ideas will combine their energies to build something. It doesn’t mean adopting my idea or yours. It is these two ideas together that result in a new product that we know nothing of beforehand, not you, not I. Collective thought, or collective reflection, develops when we understand that all opinions, ours and those of others, are necessary to generate the idea of consensus. (n.p.)

While the collective thought associated with compromise mobilized by the alternative globalization movement becomes a physical occupation of public space, giving rise to the notion of “assemblyism” (Dolidier, 2011), compromise as envisioned by Cardon (2010) is produced online. According to Cardon, to eventually establish this type of compromise, one must resort to “extremely complex procedural systems: systems of open consultation, argument hierarchization techniques, finding mediators to defuse conflict, dividing issues into multiple questions in order to attain local agreements, systematic publicity of debates, etc.” (p. 90). In the end, the most active and engaged members are those who benefit the most. These individuals also know how to best manipulate code to increase their visibility on the Web (on Google, for instance), something that consolidates the domination of actors in traditional public, media, or institutional sphere, to the effect that “if we only pay attention to the top level of the informational hierarchy, the agenda of the Internet appears to be only slightly different than that of traditional media” (p. 96).

However, Cardon (2010) underlines the importance of Web 2.0 community metrics (number of friends, recommendations, newfeeds), “which permit Internet users to make themselves known and to navigate within their relational universe without having to use search engines” (p. 96). He recognizes the fragility of these community metrics and the risk of repeating the feudalization of the public sphere on the Internet. “The commercial audience logics increasingly impose their hierarchy upon rankings, stamping down diversity on the web and risking the corruption of social recommendation tools that permit for the circulation of less-well ranked content” (pp. 97–98). Cardon concludes by appealing for a critical analysis of algorithms “in order to maintain the ‘long tail’ of marginal content, the most radically democratic phenomena of the Internet and which has long since disappeared from the traditional public sphere” (p. 98).
Conclusion

The four general groupings that have been used here to present recent research and thought on public sphere are proof not only of the influence of Habermas (and Fraser) on the concept of the public sphere, but also of Habermas’ work on the act of communication and the ethics of discussion. As already noted, there has been a transition from a substantial definition to a procedural definition of the democratic public sphere, which, in effect, concentrates both the role of communication as a means of coming to an agreement and the normative principle associated with access to deliberation. Thus, in different public spheres there will no longer be an agenda that confirms the quality of deliberation (of a communicative act aimed at resulting in agreement); rather, it is the quality of the deliberation that will confirm the agenda according to criteria or principles related to the ethics of discussion. A norm that is the product of debate would only be valid if the people affected by the norm had access to the discussion, directly or through representation. In addition to theoretically addressing the question of access, the identification of people affected by the norm allows one to approach the issue of demands made by identity-based movements, corresponding to Fraser’s subaltern counterpublics. Thus, those affected by the norm, resulting from deliberation, may have access to these processes.

We have seen that the preoccupation for procedure, conditions, or deliberative systems can be observed online (Cardon, 2010), in public spaces through the organization of public assemblies (Romanos, 2011), and that it is a fairly old practice in social movements. There has been a consensus of sorts around the pluralization of publics and public spheres, on the limits of representative (and participatory) democracy, on the impossibility of a preconceived common good, and on the need to redefine systems to implement in order to attain compromise based on dialogue-based communication.

The public sphere could ultimately become more than an accounting of divergent preferences or interests, in order to ideally reveal new preferences. That said, the research and thought that appears to best respond to the need to revisit the concept of the public sphere in real-life society seems to manifest itself at a point of disciplinary convergence, most notably among fields that try to establish connections between social movements and the public sphere, and to account for—rather than exclude—expressions that do not respond to the expectations of legitimate (rational) communicational exchange. Blumer (1995) has already stated that, as in the 1950s, social movements serve to regenerate society. This is doubtlessly one observation that we must adopt in our future work if we want to avoid moving backwards.

In conclusion, I believe that existing democracy cannot continue along its current path for much longer, and that we must return to the idea of the common good, or at least to something that might constitute an ethical foundation issuing not from natural law but from individuals participating in an exchange of ideas—communication. This is what researchers like Romanos have implicitly begun to do in focusing on the alternative globalization movement as a global social justice movement.
Notes

1. For example, Paquot (2009) distinguishes between singular and plural public space. Public space therefore corresponds to the public sphere and public spaces to public places.

2. The French translation of Fraser (1993) published in 2005 is as follows: “merites relatifs d’un public unique global par rapport à une multiplicité de publics.” However, I’ve stuck with the literal translation in translating “comprehensive” (“relative merits of single, comprehensive publics versus multiple publics” [Fraser, 1993, p. 13]), instead as “englobant” in order to avoid confusion with the idea of a macro type of global public space such as that put forward by Keane (1995).

3. For a synthesis of this work (mostly in English) on political competency, see Blondiaux (2007).

4. For a French-language synthesis of the concept of moral panic, see Chaumont (2012).

5. Agenda setters are actors who mobilize so that a given activity can be perceived as a public problem. One of the best known examples is drinking and driving.

6. The model of the bourgeois public sphere theorized by Habermas assumes that by depriving its members (civil society) of decisional power, civil society will retain its critical function.

7. More precisely, Sintomer (2011a) distinguishes between deliberation performed in mini publics composed of ordinary people engaged in a “quality deliberation”—such as juries, consensus-oriented conferences, or deliberative surveys (pp. 260–261)—and generalized public participation in the context of a representative mass democracy, “maintaining a status of listener, though not passive as it makes use of reason in weighing contradictory arguments set before her so that she may forge an opinion” (p. 263).

8. Sintomer explains that the French law of 1881, which legalized the freedom of assembly, sought to “encourage public debate in order to discourage popular action in the streets, always suspecting such things of subversion” (Sintomer, 2011a p. 247).

9. This was the case during the “Maple Spring” in Québec in 2012 where the governments responded to the demands “of the street” by imposing a law restricting civil liberties and by calling general elections.

10. To these critics of the concept of public opinion, we can add those who examine propaganda and the manufacture of consent and study not procedural frameworks of the public sphere but rather rhetorical processes put in play through the production of consensus or consent. They are generally American (Noam Chomsky, Robert McChesney, Edward Herman), but are also greatly inspired by the work of Jacques Ellul. In France, Serge Halimi and Dominique Vidal, working in the tradition of Paul Nizan, have examined similar issues. For a listing of political science texts on public opinion see Blanchet (2011).

11. For a short summary, see “L’opinion publique” by the same author (Gingras, 2003, pp. 153–157).

12. Communicative action is without doubt the most ideal and most normative concept of all. Work in the field of communication, such as Miège’s work on the ascendancy of strategic communication, calls into question its generalizability to real-life democracies. Loïc Ballarini’s doctoral thesis (2010) (of which I learned while finishing this article) proposes to move beyond the concept of the public sphere of communicative action, substituting it with a (Marxist) theory of society that is capable of making social relationships visible. In his most recent book, Miège (2010, p. 70 and endnote) steps away from both communicative action and the ethics of discussion, stating that he will review the “fairly improbable conditions.”

13. In fact, according to Sintomer (2011b), these practices are much older than the majority rule systems that our political systems have adopted.

14. I have already noted (Aubin, 2009) that engaged intellectuals do not have any reliable ethical foundation, even that of human rights. I have not changed my mind: the movement or cause of human rights is not a given but a choice.
References


