The public sphere's metamorphosis: The triangular relation between the NGO, the state and globalisation

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The issue this chapter will discuss is related to the use of the Internet by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to improve social development in the African and international context. We will also discuss the philosophical background of the notion of "public sphere" by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Departing from the situation in Morocco, we observe that the lasting democratisation process aims to improve participation of the public sphere in the agency of social life. Taking for granted that society is not homogeneous as expected, we observe that it is divided into the political establishment, including the state, parliament and political institutions; and the social, religious and cultural institutions and civil society. The state aims to enhance the participation of the other social spheres in the programme set by the government. The task is to engage the public sphere in the so-called "partnership" in the realisation of its social programmes.

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Introduction

According to some political leaders, the latent task of the state is to substitute political opposition by non-political structures, i.e. non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Despite this objection, there is no doubt that the impact of the public sphere is noticed more and more in the country.

The purpose of this initiative

A more philosophical and decisive objection, however, comes from the political idea of sovereignty, which contradicts the idea of the public sphere. The main aim of this chapter is to try to save the pertinence of the idea of a public sphere against the traditional idea of the omnipotence of the state.

The official adoption of the ideology of the modern notion of society in Morocco is an adoption of the "discuss-ideology" in civil society. Historically, the discuss-ideology by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas aims to confront the challenges of absolute sovereignty by Carl Schmitt. This German professor of law (Schmitt, 1985) mentions the Spanish philosopher Juan Donoso Cortés:

Es liegt […] im wesen des bürgerlichen Liberalismus, sich in diesem Kampf nicht zu entscheiden, sondern zu versuchen, statt dessen eine Diskussion anzuknüpfen. Die Bourgeoisie definiert er geradezu als eine "diskutierende Klasse", una clasa discutidora. *Damit ist sie gerichtet, denn darin liegt, dass sie der Entscheidung ausweichen will. Eine Klasse, die alle politische Aktivität ins Reden verlegt, in Presse und Parlament, ist einer Zeit sozialer Kämpfe nicht gewachsen.*

The history of the concept

Habermas (Calhoun, 1992) questions the notion of "public sphere" as a crucial one for democratic theory:

What are the social conditions for a rational, critical debate about public issues conducted by private persons, willing to let arguments and not statuses determine decisions? This is inquiry at once into normative ideals and actual history.

The subject by Habermas (Calhoun, 1992:5) is:

... the historically specific phenomenon of the bourgeois public sphere created out of the relations between capitalism and the state in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Habermas sets out to establish what the category of public sphere meant in bourgeois society and how its meaning and material operation were transformed in the centuries after its constitution.

Originally, the political aspect was at random in the emergence of the phenomenon of the public sphere in the course of the 18th century (Calhoun, 1992:7):

Unlike the Greek conception, individuals are here understood to be formed primarily in the private realm, including the family. Moreover, the private realm is understood as one of freedom that has to be defended against the domination of the state.

The salons and coffeehouses were the host places of this new phenomenon of private autonomy against the *diktat* of the state. Hence, "civil society could be understood as neutral regarding power and domination" (Calhoun, 1992:16). For example, literature was also the first factor responsible for the birth of the public sphere, thanks to the journals created by the literary public sphere. Habermas (Calhoun, 1992:8) shows also:

... the intimate involvement of print media in the early extensions of market economies beyond local arenas. Long distance trade, for example, meant traffic in news almost as immediately as traffic in commodities. Merchants needed information about prices and demand, but the newsletters that supplied those needs very quickly began to carry other sorts of information as well. The same processes helped to engender both a more widespread literacy and an approach to the printed word as a source of currently significant "public" information.

The Moroccan situation

In contemporary Morocco, the public sphere includes about 35 000 organisations working in the fields of rural development, human rights and cultural matters. These organisations are related to some international institutions like the United Nations, and to those that are dependent on it. Despite the fact that this triangular relation between public sphere, state and international institutions may be successful, the range of organisations present in the mass media remains modest.

Mass media (television, radio, the press, etc.) do not observe the lobbying strategy in favour of the NGOs, which means that they do not have special programmes to present the diverse NGOs in order to foster a large social discussion about the social engagement of these organisations.

It is evident that the number and scope of NGOs are not clearly represented in the mass media, because the main purpose of the latter is first to represent the state's interests; to voice the official opinion of the government; and to manipulate public opinion. The state has acquired the ability to magnify its political figures and ideology through the mass media image. In contrast to this "media fact", there is a lack of a pertinent policy of information ethics in the presentation of NGOs in the traditional mass media. Also, public opinion, the alleged voice of the public sphere, is not really sufficiently present in the traditional mass media. This makes the role of new mass media crucial, because they are perhaps less dependent on the official political line of thinking. Thus, the Internet can play this role.

The monopoly of the state over the traditional mass media urges organisations to use new ways of self-presentation. In regard to the prevailing situation in Morocco, we must find valuable alternatives, taking into account the restrictions on ways of sharing opinions in the public sphere. Therefore, when seeking new alternatives, we may overcome the shortcomings of the mass media when they are anchored and linked to the traditional role of the political regimes.

For this reason, the situation stressed by Habermas (Calhoun, 1992:8) in his work published in 1962 is not true for Morocco. For him, the public sphere:

... could only be conceptualized in this full sense once the state was constituted as an impersonal locus of authority. Unlike the ancient notion of the public, therefore, the modern notion depended on the possibility of counterposing state and society.

According to the framework of Carl Schmitt's political theology, authority becomes personal when decisions are seen to be necessary in "an exceptional state" or in regard to territorial problems. To some extent, in Morocco we have an analogous public sphere, as Habermas describes in the bourgeois society. We can only assume that the NGOs represent the heart of the public

sphere in Morocco. Besides, Nancy Fraser (1992: 111–112) contends that:

... oddly, Habermas stops short of developing a new, postbourgeois model of the public sphere. Moreover, he never explicitly problematizes some dubious assumptions that underlie the bourgeois model. As a result, we are left at the end of Structural Transformations without a conception of the public sphere that is sufficiently distinct from the bourgeois conception to serve the needs of critical theory today.

Moroccan scholars and politicians have adopted a new liberal conception of modernity in order to find a balance between state and society. This assumption is an equivocal claim. Morocco is a strange mixture of an archaic state and a new liberal ideology, and the situation suffers from the deficits related to this stated mixture. Pauline Johnson (2006) says:

The fallacy of liberal democracy's metaphysical attachment to the ideals of the public reason rests on the unrecognized incompatibility of the distinctive norms that govern liberalism and democracy. Democracy, Schmitt insisted, refers to the ideal of the self sovereign society while liberalism principled commitment to pluralism renders incoherent any appeal to the "self" needed to make sense of this ideal.

This strange mixture of sovereignty and liberalism does not enable the traditional mass media to undertake a free policy towards the partners of the public sphere. With the rise of "new" private channels of satellite television and broadcast, we hope that the Internet will enrich the discussion given by traditional mass media in the African and international contexts.

The task of the global public sphere

A main work on the phenomenon of the public sphere in Germany was indeed written by Jürgen Habermas, but he had given a response to an earlier critique by Nancy Fraser. In it he attempts to deepen the analysis of the post-bourgeois public sphere to cope with the challenges of globalisation. As Pauline Johnson (2006:100) notices, "Habermas has outlined the urgency of the project of building a global public sphere. He does not underestimate the challenge and does not ignore the adverse signs."

In regard to the persistence of common illiteracy, poverty and health problems on the entire continent, we favour Habermas' claim that "a global public sphere offers the only way forward and [are] persuaded that there are reasons to believe that this utopian aspiration is still worth investing in" (Johnson, 2006:100). The utopian project must avoid the ideas of a "national identity" and of a prejudiced "community of fate", which contradicts the "constitutional patriotism" and "collides with the universalist rules of mutual coexistence for human beings" (Johnson, 2006: 103).

The new cosmopolitan policy must work for the aim of a democratised welfare project. The traditional rights, such as human rights and rights of political participation, must be translated "in terms of enjoyment of social and cultural rights" (Johnson, 2006:104). The project of globalising modern democracy requires effort to build "transnationalized welfare projects" and "solidarity between strangers" in our multicultural transnational society, in the perspective of a "post-national public sphere" (Johnson, 2006:107):

Habermas sees the best hope in the pressures that can be exerted by interest groups, NGOs and civilly active citizens […] The only viable and effective solution is to exert more pressure for the creation of supra-national political institutions that are really responsive to democratic constituencies.

The Moroccan public sphere, represented by NGOs, is part of the global public sphere. For us, this concept is less controversial than that of "globalisation". The centre of the "global public sphere" is focused on the local problems of democracy, poverty, segregation against women in the workplace, homeless children, sickness, illiteracy, and so on. On the contrary, the centre of "globalisation" is represented by interests of little concern with everyday life when we ask the question: Who talks for humanity from the perspective of people's everyday concerns? The civil NGOs are concerned with the positive or negative effects of the state's measures in the citizens' everyday life. The government itself is unable to translate its strategy into concrete reality because it falls short of the overt commitment by all partners involved in the successful execution of policy.

For this reason, the government has concluded various forms of partnerships with organisations in civil society. Despite the fact that many observers suspect that these forms of "partnerships" borrow money from international foundations, these partnerships are still very important because governments are in need of a real strategy for working with the actual recipients, and they work in synergy with other regional partners on the continent. For this reason, the Internet is a device from the perspective of ethics of information. The government cannot, on its own, execute the programmes or achieve the tasks at which it is aiming. A main obstacle to its strategy is the lack of a comprehensive understanding of all the factors to be taken into account. Therefore, the intervention of NGOs must compensate for this highly disadvantageous situation of the state.

Conclusion: Collegiality and partnerships

In the analogous manner in which ministers collaborate with colleagues in the world, the privileged partners of NGOs are similarly analogous organisations with analogous prospects. What helps in reaching narrow collaboration in the region, or on the continent, is the existence of structurally similar social challenges. The political regimes may be indifferent or antagonistic to each another from country to country, but the degree and quality of the social problems may be the same. The governments are so structured that for each minister in one state there is a corresponding colleague in another state.

Moreover, the very prospects NGOs engage with are the common factors that link organisations. Thus, in the long run, clashes due to misunderstanding between states can be overcome thanks to the cooperation between similar organisations in these countries. The international foundations in this range can sustain the endeavours of the colleagueship or partnerships between these organisations in many fields, as in disease prevention in the case of SARS, AIDS and avian flu, for example. Efficiency in preventing similar global problems underlines the need for efficient partnerships between similar organisations in order to find international and successful aid.

Thus, the use of highly advanced mass media, especially the Internet, helps NGOs to find organisations with similar goals on the continent, as some organisations cannot achieve their tasks

once they are disconnected from similar organisations on the continent. It also helps them to find similar financial support from international foundations.

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