

Corporate Public Spheres between Refeudalization and Revitalization

Theory, Culture & Society

2022, Vol. 39(4) 75–90

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DOI: 10.1177/02632764221104694

journals.sagepub.com/home/tcs



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Abstract

The article critically analyses the gaps and the analytical potential in Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* concerning corporate discourses and debates. It is shown that Habermas only analyses the field of work in abstract terms, neglecting in particular corporate public spheres. In contrast, corporate public spheres are developed as an analytical concept, expressed by companies in the form of institutionalized co-determination, situationally granted opportunities for participation and self-willed public spheres of workers. These three fields are discussed using empirical examples. It is shown that corporate public spheres are eroded by precarization and instrumentalized by management. Furthermore, digitalization is working towards a comprehensive algorithmic control of corporate public spheres by companies, but also towards new autonomous communication networks that establish proletarian public spheres, so that both refeudalization and revitalization of corporate public spheres can be observed.

Keywords

co-determination, digitalization, Habermas, industrial relations, organization, participation, public sphere

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Introduction

With his seminal work on *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas (1991) drew attention to the phenomenon of the public sphere, analysing its origins in the emerging bourgeoisie as well as its refeudalization. With the classical identification of the state as the public force, Habermas, however, limits his analysis and the effectiveness of the public sphere to one subdomain of modern societies. In contrast, this article pursues the idea that the mechanisms of the public sphere also play an important role in the economy as the non-public social field and, more specifically, in the production process. Following Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1993: 1), the utility value of the public sphere is examined. A concept of corporate public spheres is presented and the role they play in industrial relations and work processes is analysed.

In this article we show that public spheres matter also within work organizations, and that Habermas's concept provides a valuable analytical framework to analyse them. Our focus as well as the concept of corporate public spheres are thus on the micro-level of workplace processes as the organizational structures in which they operate. Following Negt and Kluge (1993: 1), the questions are: 'To what extent can the working class utilize this sphere? Which interests do ruling classes pursue by its means?' Or, in other words, whether and how workers communicate with each other, how the conditions for this are structured and who determines them, and to what extent workers can challenge corporate domination by means of workplace public spheres.

Our contribution is first to critically discuss Habermas's concept of the public sphere and the discussions that followed. By coining the concept of *corporate public spheres*, we apply it to the workplace and refer to the central role which deliberation on the shop-floor plays for democracy, in general. By impacting the working and employment relations, constituency has an immediate effect on the quality of life. It affects the decision of how certain goods are produced. And corporate public spheres serve as important agencies of political socialization.

By drawing on the case of German labour relations at company-level, we then identify three types of workplace publics: institutionalized co-determination, situative participation offers by management, and unstructured obstinate publics. Subsequently, these are examined by means of empirical vignettes under the themes of precarization, corporate culture as well as digitalization, and trends of refeudalization on the one hand, but also of revitalization on the other.

The Public Sphere and Work

From the perspective of democratic theory, the public sphere serves as a mode of social integration. As Craig Calhoun (1992: 6) explicates, public discourse (or, in terms of the later Habermas, 'communicative action') constitutes 'a possible mode of coordination of human life, as are state power and market economies'. A number of critical diagnoses of present democracy (see e.g. Rosa et al., 2016; Brown, 2015; Crouch, 2004) have pointed to dysfunctions of a constellation, which Wolfgang Streeck (2015) refers to as 'democratic capitalism'. A general trend towards liberalization and market-based coordination of late modern societies has taken on various shapes that impact the social construction

of the public sphere. While the privatization of state-run media has increased the market-logic of public attention, a trend of work and labour relations becoming increasingly precarious has put pressure on reflexive journalism – a trend that has also affected patterns of knowledge production in public universities (see Brown, 2015; Rosa et al., 2016). Moreover, Crouch (2004) has pointed to a trend towards trivialization of political news formats – a trend that is further supported by the increased competition between private media sources. Another central feature of concentrated digital capital lies in the new agenda-setting power allocated with new platforms, such as Twitter or Facebook (see Baum and Seeliger, 2021). Finally, as Streeck (e.g. 2015) has repeatedly pointed out, while the extension of their scope in the process of European integration and globalization increases their inherent complexity, technocratic patterns of decision-making undermine the impact of public debates on the construction of political order. While all these developments follow the patterns of general megatrends (i.e. mainly globalization, digitalization and commodification of society), we focus on the micro- and meso-level of what can be termed the social construction of the public sphere. Yet, taking these considerations seriously, we are drawing attention to the role of the public sphere for the world of work – more precisely – by introducing the findings of a case study on the construction of corporate public spheres through delivery riders in the service sector.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (STPS), Habermas analyses the development of the public sphere in the 19th century as the ‘organizing principle of the bourgeois constitutional state’ (1991: 87). Beyond this empirical argument, Habermas conceptualizes the public sphere as a normative reference frame that connects authority and reason. For Habermas (1991: 85), the public sphere is a rational mode of communication that aims at the common good and, at best, proceeds free of restrictions and exclusions. Thus, the public sphere is part of the modern era, in which – as Habermas (1991: 117, 210) points out with reference to Hegel – domination is increasingly subject to reason and thus forced to prove its legitimacy. For Habermas (1991: 23–4, 57), the formation of the public sphere is linked to the development of bourgeois society and to the emergence of industrialization, wage labour, and the increase in global traffic; on the other hand, it is precisely its constitutional principles that endanger the public sphere, since they jeopardize equality. For example, during the 19th century, women and workers were excluded from the public sphere, so that in England, out of 24 million citizens, only 1 million held the right to vote.

Despite these limitations, Habermas illustrates a clear direction of development: the rights guaranteed are expanding and the groups that benefit from them are increasing. One focal point of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* therefore lies on the historical development of material rights and their institutional procedures. However, the public sphere only flourished for a short time, since general interests fragmented with increasing class struggles. Later ‘public relations’ emerged, shaping society with ‘refeudalizations’ and thus with pseudo-public spheres.

This analysis of the public sphere already contains the central argument of Habermas’s later theory of communicative action. According to this, rationality is located in communication processes and only these can be the basis of emancipation in modern societies. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas early on identifies the bourgeois public sphere as the central arena in which reason

can be realized collectively. This is accompanied by a rejection of work as the prioritized and decisive place of emancipation, as it is central in analyses following Marx and others. Throughout Habermas's work, there is a fundamental shift away from the traditional focus on work. According to him, work is no longer paramount in modern societies, it contains no normative potential and, in his view, it is too narrow for social theoretical analysis (Elbe, 2017; Habermas, 1987a: 79–81). Emancipation and rationality are thus to be sought not in work but instead in communication. In his further writings, Habermas emphasizes his focus on interaction instead of work with reference to Hegel (Habermas, 1968), and later he differentiates instrumental from communicative action. Thus, work is understood as (primarily or exclusively) purposive and teleological action that takes place monologically, whereas communication is intersubjective. This has been criticized as a dualism of work and interaction, of instrumental and communicative action, which ignores the interactive elements of work (Elbe, 2017).

As a result, labour in general does not play a significant role in Habermas's thinking. And, as a consequence, the public sphere, as part of a rational form of communication that forces domination to legitimize itself, does not exist for Habermas in the field of labour. Companies are only discussed from an external perspective with regard to the 'polarization of social sphere and the intimate sphere' (Habermas, 1991: 151–8) as the 'world of work' that is situated between the private (to which it has been assigned) and the public. In Habermas's thinking this is accompanied by the 'categorical omission of the forms of resistance and emancipation anchored in the very structure of the capitalist labor process' (Honneth, 1980: 213; our translation).

In contrast, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge criticize Habermas for not focusing on *the* public sphere, but only on its bourgeois form. The latter is considered to be an 'organizational form of the "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie"' (1993: 55) by means of which the bourgeoisie preserves and reproduces its class interests. According to Negt and Kluge (1993: 61), the 'proletarian public sphere as the working-class's defense organization' stands in opposition to this. The use value of the public sphere is therefore not universal but class-specific and contested (Negt and Kluge, 1993: 3). Accordingly, the public sphere is not characterized by the predominance of the rational and better argument, but by the competition of its bourgeois and plebeian variants, which are endowed with different power resources. Negt and Kluge recognize the relevance of the public sphere, but take a more materialist position, defending the importance of labour and its subjects as central agents of emancipation.

However, their analysis is primarily devoted to the media and the culture industry as well as the existence and opportunities for counterpublics. Thus, the authors, like Habermas, adopt a macrosocial perspective that is equally incapable of recognizing mundane forms of proletarian public spheres in everyday working life. They analyse labour only abstractly in its capitalist specificity and the resulting alienation (1993: 59), and beyond that, only consider potentially emancipatory fantasies (1993: 28–31) or proletarian public spheres far from actual wage labour (e.g. in the form of workers' associations or unions). For them, workplace public spheres are only 'so-called' ones, which they formally analyse on the basis of legal provisions for workplace assemblies and not on the basis of workers' practices (1993: 49–53).

Following this, Eberhard Schmidt and Edgar Weick (1975) analyse proletarian public spheres in the workplace. They ask where public spheres exist for workers ‘in which they can articulate their interests and exchange their experiences independently of the dominance of the interests of production and in the face of a trade union public sphere that largely reproduces the structures of the bourgeois public sphere’ (Schmidt and Weick, 1975: 467). To do so, they examine, for example, company newspapers, leaflets, union journals and demonstrations and show that the public sphere in companies ranges from managerial concealment of conflicting interests to the channelling of opinions through unions and unfiltered articulation in autonomous publications. The public sphere in the workplace thus exists in various forms and is an instrument that is as relevant as it is contested in order to support or undermine corporate domination.

Corporate Public Spheres

Having reviewed the discussion of public spheres and labour so far, we now present a new concept of public spheres in workplaces. This initially follows Habermas’s identification of the public sphere as an instrument of a potential rationalization of domination. Building on the work of Negt and Kluge (1988) as well as Schmidt and Weick (1975), we would like to add to the materialist dimension of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. By including a perspective on the world of work as the societal sphere where humanity produces their material living conditions, we would like to complement what Selk and Jörke (2019: 44) term as ‘Habermas’s shift from neo-Marxism to a liberal position’. We understand public spheres as contested but by no means only ‘so-called’ in companies, but as an instrument for establishing and securing power of the management or, in contrast, for undermining it by the workers. Following Schmidt and Weick, we thus analyse specific public spheres in workplaces. The focus of our concept and the analysis of corporate public spheres, however, is on the meso- and micro-level of companies where the use value of public spheres is realized, so that the practices of management and employees, as well as the structures framing them, come into view.¹

Corporate public spheres are embedded in special social conditions. Companies are hierarchical organizations functioning beyond democratic principles. Even if authority is rationalized throughout the modern era and, thus, requires legitimacy, this applies only partly to private companies, where property rights and working contracts legitimize authority and principles such as effectiveness and efficiency are sufficient for management decisions. Yet companies are not only shaped by systemic rationality. According to Habermas, increasing substitution of communicative social integration by functional systemic integration is a central and irreversible aspect of modern societies. However, systemic mechanisms cannot completely replace lifeworld integration (see Habermas, 1987b). Where both modes of integration meet, conflicts emerge. Such antagonistic constellations can be found in companies, and the corporate public is where these conflicts are dealt with.

Corporate public spheres emerge in organizations which in Habermas’s perspective belong to the private sphere. Following Habermas, we define the corporate public as the sphere of the employees of a company gathered together as an audience. Here, they claim this public sphere from the management, in order to argue with the latter about the

general rules of the sphere of work, which is basically privatized but relevant for the workers. The focus is thus on corporate public spheres, which are characterized by conflicts of interest between capital and labour, each of which endeavours to either secure or question corporate domination by means of the public sphere.

Accordingly, a structural asymmetry exists in which management generally holds the more effective power resources. From their point of view, the sphere of production is declared private and, as far as possible, withdrawn from the social public sphere and its debates. What penetrates to the 'outside' is primarily what has to fulfil a purpose there, such as self-expression or advertising. Inwardly, the public sphere is negotiated under the provision that it does not endanger the corporate structure. Accordingly, there are limitations to the issues the employees can deal with and to their possibilities of access. Public participation is generally realized in three ways.²

- a) Co-determination is institutionalized, limited and above all focused on a few functional contexts. It is institutionalized in that it is related to clearly defined processes and structures of the representation system, disabling spontaneous expressions of interest in co-determination. The elected works councils' rights are often limited to being heard and to receiving advice and information from the management, and even the few rights of consent (e.g. in the case of certain dismissals or overtime approvals) are designed to restrict the property rights of the owner as little as possible. In addition, there is a strict obligation to maintain secrecy with regard to members of the workforce or external parties, the violation of which can be punished. In co-determination research, these relationships have been criticized frequently and clearly as forms of 'halved democracy' (Kißler et al., 2011: 31). As a result, it is often only in exceptional situations, for example in strike disputes or at training courses, that antagonistic and conflicting positions are expressed.
- b) Corporate public spheres also manifest themselves in situationally granted participation. These have primarily emerged as techniques of social control in new management concepts. Inspired by the idea that the 'gold in the heads' of the workforce must be valued, zones of controlled autonomy are established. These forms of participation are – at least in their explicit and conceptual form – comparatively new phenomena, which have emerged in distinction to the devaluation of employees' production knowledge – think of Taylor's 'trained gorilla'. However, the access of this knowledge is designed from the outset to be utilized in the capitalist production process. Thus, these are top-down public spheres, whose direction is predetermined and which are flanked by clear guidelines in terms of content. Above all, the management can revoke these opportunities for participation at any time.
- c) Thirdly, unstructured and obstinate public spheres exist. The development of the public sphere, as outlined by Habermas, parallels the development of corporate domination. Analogous to the coffee houses that played an important role for the bourgeoisie and became 'seedbeds of political unrest' (Habermas, 1991: 32–3, 59), proletarian public spheres emerge in pubs, clubs, parties, organizations, and also in factories (Negt and Kluge, 1993). Regarding the shop-floor level,

however, as Schmidt and Weick (1975: 476) highlight, independent leaflets and newspapers have enabled the emergence of unstructured spaces for articulation and deliberation. Obstinate corporate public spheres of this kind often find no visible expression and are clearly more ‘transient’ in their forms; they usually do not find their way into corporate archives and are therefore difficult to research empirically. But since they develop below and at cross-purposes to the corporate public spheres and are thus not per se pre-structured in terms of domination, they correspond most closely to the idea of a freely deliberating public sphere.

These three types represent heuristics that allow for an initial structuring and analysis of corporate public spheres. While they cover the spectrum of corporate public spheres, their concrete manifestations can be different in particular cases. The types are historically contingent and geographically specific as they are derived from the post-war contexts of Western industrial nations. In addition, the co-determination described above is based on the specific coordinated German model of industrial relations. The types presented are thus by no means universal, but not necessarily limited to these specific contexts. Analyses in other national and institutional settings need to be adapted to their specific contexts. In order to further elaborate on the concept, the three types are illustrated with empirical examples below.

Analysis

Precarization and Corporate Public Spheres in Institutionalized Co-determination

Transferring Habermas’s approach from the societal to the organizational level, the institutional reference frame for the public sphere is changing dynamically. This, in turn, has consequences for the members. When parts of a company are sold or dissolved, when new locations are opened or parts of the value chain are purchased, in legal terms the demos changes too. Unlike in the case of states, this has consequences for the understanding of the organizational public sphere. The dilemma of amorphous organizational public spheres is also reflected in the difficulty of defining the concept of the contemporary workplace. Especially if one assumes with Habermas that the public sphere – particularly as an oppositional one – develops slowly and in the long term, the constant transformation of its reference frame is a complication.

However, not only the organizational structures are shaken up, but also employment relationships themselves. The standard employment relationship, which is designed for the long term, is increasingly competing with other employment forms that challenge its normativity. First of all, the quantitative expansion of temporary employment should be mentioned here (ILO, 2016) – in Germany especially since the Hartz reforms. While the historically achieved social rights (e.g. voting rights, protection against dismissal, prohibition of fixed-term contracts), occupational safeguards and labour market de-commodifications were cumulatively combined in the normal employment relationship, temporary work unravels this bundle and puts its individual components at risk. Precarious work of this kind therefore includes potential disintegration in various respects. It no longer

guarantees the reproductive dimension of work, it deprives those affected of their social status and the recognition that goes with it, and it tends to overexploit the employees' labour power.

Regarding corporate publics, two further dimensions have a particular impact: the social-communicative and the legal-institutional dimension. Short-cycle temporary employment prevents the development of stable social relationships at the workplace. Many of those affected are no longer employed in the same company on the following day, so any 'investment' in this social-communicative dimension is hardly worthwhile. The more precarious the employment, the more this issue moves into the focus of attention – also for the corporate public. Works councils and regular employees report how precarious workers appear and disappear, are not embedded in any common routines, do not receive any safety training, neither participate in collective actions nor practise solidarity. On the other hand, their fleeting existence in the company means that they are not integrated into the corporate public and that their voices, which are already weak, cannot be heard.

The legal-institutional dimension of precarious employment focuses on the reduction of social and participation rights of employees. Looking at the German case, but similarly at many other systems of industrial relations, the most relevant aspect regarding corporate public spheres is the multiple restriction of voting rights for temporary workers in the company. They have no passive right to vote and are only entitled to vote actively after three months of employment – much longer than they usually remain. Thus, already powerless employees, who are under the permanent threat of being exited, lose the opportunity to exert counterpressure via voice. Additionally, many works councils do not feel obligated to temporary workers since they do not belong to the demos by which they are elected. Temporary workers can neither express themselves powerfully in the workplace nor are they effectively represented. They often do not experience any collective solidarity from regular employees, since they personify the labour market risk and the individual degradation in company and society. The abstract neoliberal mantra becomes concrete in their case: they act as a deterrent in their powerlessness and speechlessness, since they embody the de-securitization and re-commodification of labour power. And once they are established as cheaper competitors they also undermine the remnants of an oppositional counter-public sphere in the workplace, as their mere presence has a disciplinary effect.

As a result, the use of temporary employment not only aims at reducing business costs but can also be read as an approach of strategic under-classing and thus undermining collective counter-publics. Thus, a third class of precarious employees is increasingly established beyond the owners/managers and the already legally limited second class of employed citizens (standard employment relationship). A look at the history of the development of civil, political and social rights makes it clear: the neoliberal precarization of work has brought about a turning point and a step backwards, which affects the growing number of precarious jobs just as much as those who are only indirectly affected by precarity.

Negotiating precarization in corporate public spheres often unfolds as a disparate process. The difficulties of comprehensive solidarity, the limited possibilities of works councils (temporary workers and contract workers are usually not dealt with via the

personnel departments but as material costs via purchasing) and general competition have led to contradictory attitudes at works meetings, ranging from militant rejection of precarious employment relationships to majority approval of shifting risks to these groups. The respective micropolitical manifestations can vary in time and place, from a gloomy spiral of silence to successful power struggles that also give precarious workers a (corporate) public voice.

Company Culture and Corporate Public Spheres

Habermas describes the decline of the public sphere as an expression of its development into public relations. Throughout this commodification process, professions emerge that offer services which help design this 'public sphere'. A similar process also affects corporate publics. Since their original emergence, their design has been on the management's agenda. Initially, this was done rather informally by making heroes of company founders as *pater familias*.³ In postwar Fordism, this function fades into the background; in contrast, new ideas appear on the scene in the form of the publicly presented family or all-in-the-same-boat metaphors, some of which refer back to pre-modern models and are still influential today, especially in small and medium-sized enterprises, as instruments for creating internal cohesion and concealing antagonisms or differences. In addition to the traditional notices, management also uses the newspaper as a public medium, telling the tale of a 'company family'. In 1980, the category of corporate culture appeared in management literature, and with it an instrumental form of public sphere experienced an upswing. Since then, corporate culture in the form of rites, rituals, and public spheres has been the object of managerial influence, as contemporary recommendations have argued:

These rituals of social exchange govern relationships between bosses and workers, old and young, professionals and support staff, men and women, insiders and outsiders. They specify how formally or informally individuals are addressed, the long-standing customs that govern conversation, how much emotion or public controversy is permitted, who speaks first in meetings, and even who is permitted to end a conversation. (Deal and Kennedy, 1982: 65)

These forms are top-down socio-technological approaches linking corporate public spheres to specific managerial functions and are intended to prevent dissent and the discussion of contradictions. The professionalization of corporate public relations and communications management has been a booming industry for several decades, and its adaptation of elements of a functioning public sphere (i.e. in the sense of the criteria mentioned by Habermas) sometimes bears strange blossoms: company newspapers without a *résonnement*, corporate anthems, large open-space publics for streamlining purposes, small group discussions on predefined topics and purposes. Certain topics that revolve around the corporate arrangements for power and ownership, around the resulting clashes of interests, or the legitimacy of property rights are systematically withdrawn from these public spheres. Their purpose per se is rationalization, not rationality; the results of their processes are instances of narrow consensus, not contested compromises; they do not instil stubbornness and enlightenment, but submission and consent. The

function of these public spheres lies between the instrumental use of the workers' knowledge and the creation of cohesion of the centrifugal enterprises of market-centred financial market capitalism (Brinkmann et al., 2008).

Digitalization: Platform-Based Food Delivery Work

Digitalization has increased the range of public spheres. The case of platform-based courier work shows the contested state of corporate public spheres especially by means of algorithmic management and digital communication. In platform work, platforms mediate individual jobs such as passenger transport, product design or micro-tasks such as the tagging of images to mostly self-employed workers. Compared with traditional employment, these activities are (still) small in scope, but at the same time they illustrate a potential future work in which fragmented work processes are controlled through algorithms. One of the most relevant fields of locally bound platform work is food courier work, in which workers called riders deliver meals from restaurants to private individuals. Here, too, corporate publics are relevant, which, through their digitalized form, lead to effects that are both refeudalizing and resistant. Below, results are presented from an analysis of two food delivery platforms in Germany that were studied by means of interviews, ethnography, and a survey (see Heiland, 2021a, 2021b).

Platform-mediated courier work is characterized by an automated organization of the labour process. By means of such algorithmic management, 'human jobs are assigned, optimized, and evaluated through algorithms and tracked data' (Lee et al., 2015: 1603). In this way, it is possible for the platforms to control various activities down to the smallest tasks remotely, in detail and automatically. In addition, these new digital control mechanisms are also becoming increasingly important in highly qualified fields of work. In courier work, orders are automatically assigned to riders distributed in the various urban areas. The non-transparent algorithms define a 'grammar of action' (Agre, 1994) that provides the riders with narrow agency corridors and allows the platforms to automate and control the labour process in detail.

In this context, the algorithms do not appear as a direct exercise of managerial power, but rather as a form of technological rationality that legitimizes corporate rule on the basis of its supposedly objective decisions. The latter is thus not rationalized in Habermas's sense as the enforcement of the better argument and public rhetoric; rather, in-transparent technologies prevail, whose modes of operation cannot be seen through or negotiated, neither within the company nor in the general public. The result is that a collective exchange, for example about conflicting interests, is withdrawn from the corporate public and the workers' scope for perception and action is limited. Accordingly, 63 per cent of the riders interviewed in a recent survey conducted by the authors stated that they very often or often feel at the mercy of technology (Heiland, 2019: 302).

Moreover, algorithmic management enforces consensus and makes contradictions difficult. The platforms communicate information almost exclusively via proprietary apps, over which they have sole control. There is no provision for deviation from the rules, because the platforms' rules, through their digital codification, demand a level of conformity that goes beyond that of legal regulations. As a result, algorithmic

management renders communication and cooperation among workers superfluous, replacing these with the organization of the labour process by machines.

In general, the differentiation between work and interaction, or later between instrumental and communicative action, discussed by Habermas following Hegel, loses its discriminatory power in operational contexts. Company processes and thus also their specific public spheres stand at the interface of lifeworld and system. Work and interaction are closely linked in them. Thus, in everyday working life, exchanges among employees can have not only an instrumental character and thus aim at system integration, but also contain understanding and criticism and promote social integration. And this is why a lifeworld sociality inside organizations exists. 'The public sphere was constituted in discussion [. . .], as well as in common action' (Habermas, 1991: 3), which in the case of corporate public spheres also includes work. If neither common work processes nor communication among workers are possible, public spheres cannot emerge. Both through amorphous corporate structures and through algorithmic management, work and interaction are separated from each other, or the latter is eliminated from the labour process. This development is paradigmatic for Habermas's thesis of the substitution of communicative social integration by functional system integration. Algorithmic system integration disposes of the social integration that accompanies every human interaction. Instead of face-to-face, face-to-interface interactions prevail, the course of which is determined by the companies. The digitalized labour process makes it more difficult to establish and make use of a corporate public sphere as a means of critical control and reflection vis-à-vis the management. Digitalization thus works in the direction of refeudalization in that the corporate public sphere is determined by the platform companies and the plebeian public sphere of the riders is marginalized.

However, 61 per cent of the riders in the aforementioned survey reported very frequent or frequent contact with other couriers and only 7 per cent had no social contact at all with other riders. The reason for this is that although the algorithmic management organizes the workers in an atomized way, they continuously meet during waiting times in restaurants or at central locations in the delivery zones. Digital communication proves to be particularly relevant for stabilizing these chance encounters. These unique forms of communication illustrate the contrast between a corporate-controlled public sphere and a plebeian one.

Deliveroo, one of the companies, provided its own platform-wide chat program, through which the riders exchanged information and clarified minor problems among themselves. On the part of the platform, this was not intended as a space for critical but for an instrumental public in the form of collegial self-help, in order to save resources for the platform. At the same time, this offered the possibility for the workers to establish a channel for weak but critical public spheres (Heiland and Brinkmann, 2020: 133–4). At the end of 2017, discussions regarding working conditions and the election of a works council arose in the chat. This use of the chat's public sphere with the aim of institutionalization in the form of an elected representation of the workers' interests led to a harsh reaction from the platform. The company used its property rights (here: *ius abusius*) as well as its technical supremacy and deleted the critical contributions. When the riders reacted with critical inquiries, the chat was abruptly deactivated and later replaced by a chat function integrated into the app, which only allowed contact with the platform and

not with colleagues. Deliveroo thus closed the central channel of the internal public and the riders were degraded to a passive and isolated audience.

Similarly, Habermas (1991: 20–21) describes how the merchants of the 19th century organized private correspondences by means of which the latest news was exclusively communicated. With the advent of public newspapers, merchants were anxious to control the flow of information and to allow only selective and filtered news to appear in them. Similarly, corporate managements have no interest in a public sphere as a ‘medium of collective self-understanding and self-enlightenment’ (Peters, 2007: 655; own translation) and therefore control internal information flows. However, just as independent newspapers emerged as part of the development of the public sphere to allow independent and critical communication of information, riders have established autonomous chat groups in which they can exchange information free from the supervision of the platforms, thus reclaiming their role as ‘critically reflecting private people’.

A similar process occurred on another platform (Foodora). The result for both platforms was the establishment of a parallel proletarian public sphere with many autonomous communication channels. Networks developed that have established cultures of solidarity among the riders and thus created the possibility for collective action. To this day, there are usually numerous such chat groups in every city, as well as supra-regional forums with over a hundred participants from various platforms. All protests as well as the elected works councils of the riders so far have emerged from informal groups, for whose exchange digital forms of communication such as chats or online forums are of central relevance.

Regarding corporate public spheres, digitalization thus proves to be ambivalent. On the one hand, companies can not only formally command the workforce, but can also enforce their orders in detail and automatically by means of algorithmic management. In doing so, they gain control over the kind and content of communication within the framework of their platform. Accordingly, they control strong publics that can set binding rules that can hardly be evaded.

In contrast, there are the riders who use new digital forms of communication – next to traditional public spheres such as, e.g., newspaper coverage – and in this way create community and a stubborn proletarian public sphere. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels (2002: 229f) already see ‘the real fruit of their battles’ in such successes of the workers, a fruit which is ‘helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by modern industry, and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another’. While digital control deprives workers of autonomous spaces for action and communication, technology allows them to create public spheres along new paths in which workers can exchange experiences and articulate their interests unfiltered. This form of corporate public thus constitutes a critical instance of reflection that comes closest to Habermas’s ideal type.

Conclusion

Habermas’s understanding of the public sphere is an ambitious concept that offers valuable insights into the constitution of modern societies. As shown, however, the crucial field of work is missing. If we understand the public sphere as procedural, i.e. as neither

‘an order in which domination itself was dissolved’ (Habermas, 1991: 82) and where the ‘peculiarly unconstrained compulsion of the better argument’ prevails, nor as merely publicity or an instrumental ritual, then we gain a mechanism that allows for the analysis of the development, legitimation and undermining of power and domination in various contexts, for example, also in companies. This demonstrates that there are also corporate public spheres. Corporate domination and the workers’ resistance against it are thus not limited to coordination and control of work processes, but also and especially include communication structures and processes. These are not a side effect of labour relations but the precondition for both the control of work processes by management and their refutation.

With institutionalized co-determination, situationally granted participation and unstructured idiosyncratic publicity, we have identified three types of corporate public spheres. As the analysis shows, these are primarily characterized by refeudalization, but revitalization exists as well. Precarious forms of employment exclude considerable parts of the workforce from active participation in the corporate public sphere, so that established co-determination structures become less effective and increasingly exclusive. New forms of corporate culture activate workers by means of internal publics, not with the aim of critical-rational reflection but instead exploiting silent reserves of the workers’ labour power. Similarly, digitalization allows comprehensive control of the labour process via algorithmic management, which makes it more difficult for a corporate public to constitute itself. At the same time, workers establish obstinate and unstructured public spheres by means of the use of digital communication technologies, which in the analysed case of platform-mediated courier work led to the organization of protests and the demand for co-determination.

Returning to our initial references (Rosa et al., 2016; Brown, 2015; Crouch, 2004; Streeck, 2015), it can generally be stated that the crisis of contemporary democracy (or democratic capitalism) corresponds with a crisis of the public sphere, which materializes on various meso-levels (or sub-domains) of modern societies. One of these sub-domains is, as we have argued with and against Habermas, and based on the work of Negt and Kluge (1993) as well as Schmidt and Weick (1975), the world of work. Looking at this domain empirically, in summary an ambivalent picture emerges. Conceptually, Habermas’s idea of the public sphere proves timeliness and possesses analytical power. The three forms of public spheres are central manifestations in corporate environments. Emphasis must be laid on the fact that the findings presented here, so far, are only vignettes, outlining first insights and tendencies. However, it can be assumed that these can also be found in other contexts. In this regard, the various forms of corporate public spheres can have different outcomes, for example, co-determination can be revitalized, corporate cultural initiatives can be ineffective or subverted by employees, or unstructured publics can strengthen exclusionary positions in companies. Likewise, in addition to the basic forms of corporate publics outlined above, additional varieties are possible, which points to the need for further analysis.

Such studies might, for example, examine the connections between corporate public spheres and external proletarian counter-publics. For example, the role of trade union public spheres, as emphasized by Schmidt and Weick (1975), and their relation to corporate publics could be looked into in more detail. In addition, interorganizational

relationships of different publics would be of interest. And finally, the inclusiveness and exclusiveness of corporate public spheres should be examined, since these do not necessarily address all employees equally. Beyond that, Nancy Fraser's (1992) differentiation of 'weak publics' that shape discourse without being formally binding and, on the other hand, 'strong publics' that express themselves, for example, in legal decisions might be worth considering. Thus, the effectiveness of the different types of corporate public spheres could be discussed. An interesting question could also be whether the effectiveness of a co-determination that is institutionalized but restricted in content is more pronounced compared to that of unstructured publics which are precarious but free in content.

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Notes

1. In their article, Schmidt and Weick make prominent reference to trade union publics (*Gewerkschaftsöffentlichkeiten*). These are not discussed in this article, as they are not a genuine part of corporate public spheres. Unions are crucial actors, especially in coordinated economies, but they are intermediaries, have only indirect access to companies and can only intervene in corporate public spheres from the outside.
2. The national co-determination system constitutes one core element of German capitalism as a 'coordinated market economy' (Hall and Soskice, 2001). Based on two institutional pillars – works councils and workers' representatives on the company board – this system limits the commodification of labour and grants workers a certain influence on its allocation (Nachtwey and Seeliger, 2020). By drawing on the German case, we imply national co-determination laws in place.
3. As new forms of this, monarchical managers like Steve Jobs, Elon Musk and others have emerged in the recent past, as one reviewer accurately notes.

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This article is part of the *Theory, Culture & Society* special issue on ‘A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere?’, edited by Martin Seeliger and Sebastian Seignani.