

Deliberative public sphere

The rereading of Habermas's theory in Brazil and its significance for a public theology

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Abstract

After considering the social and theoretical context of reception and rereading of Jürgen Habermas' concept of public sphere in sociological studies in Brazil, we engage the question about a public theology that can be developed in dialogue with his theory. Relying on the criticism of South African theologians James Cochrane and Tinyiko Maluleke against public theologies that based on Habermas reject the democratic potential of liberation theologies, we affirm that criticism and resistance are constitutive elements of democratic dialogue. This affirmation is not inconsistent with the political theory of Habermas; rather, his theory allows to identify the relevance of a public theology precisely in its connection with spheres of life in which the suffering caused by the social problems to be denounced and discussed in the public sphere are more directly perceived.

Keywords: Public theology, liberation theology, Jürgen Habermas, public space, lifeworld

Introduction

There are many studies in the field of public theology marked by a theoretical connection with the concept of public sphere developed by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas.² According to this approach, theology is public insofar as it participates in the communicative process of the formation of political will in the public sphere. The South African theologian Etienne de Villiers distinguishes this understanding of “public” in public theology from two other more vague and frequent views found in works in this field: public as a denotation of life in general, in

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² See Don S. Browning and Francis Schüssler-Fiorenza, eds. *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); Jaco S. Dreyer and Hennie J. C. Pieterse, “Religion in the Public Sphere: What Can Public Theology Learn From Habermas's Latest Work?”, *HTS Theological Studies*, 66/1 (2010), 1-7; Dirk Smit, “What Does ‘Public’ Mean? Questions With a View to Public Theology”, in *Christian in Public: Aims, Methodologies and Issues in Public Theologies*, edited by Len Hansen (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2007), 11-46; Julio Zabatiello, *Para uma Teologia Pública*, 2nd ed. (São Paulo: Fonte Editorial; Vitória: Faculdade Unida, 2011).

society and in the world, and public with reference to different audiences to which theology is directed, such as the church, academia and society. His introduction of the two South African centers of public theology explicitly thus named--the Beyers Naudé Center of Public Theology at the University of Stellenbosch, and the Center for Public Theology at the University of Pretoria--shows that it is the second understanding of "public" that guides the work done at those centers.

In March 2012, both centers of public theology hosted, in Stellenbosch and in Pretoria, one of the meetings of the research project developed among institutions of theology in Brazil and in South Africa which gives rise to the present collection of articles. At that conference, whose theme was *Democracy, Citizenship and Interculturality*, I had the opportunity of presenting a paper on the reception of Habermas in Brazil and of hearing the response by the theologian and assistant researcher of the University of South Africa Cobus Van Wyngaard. I am grateful for his comments and questions, which I am seeking to integrate into the text originally presented at the conference. Van Wyngaard begins his comment about my paper citing the above mentioned distinction of De Villiers and he observes that, although Habermas is not rejected in South Africa - and the second definition of "public" as formulated by De Villiers does not require it - South African public theology has chosen a more general meaning of "public" as a reference to life in society and in the world. The same, I believe, can be said about public theology in Brazil. This raises an important question that public theology has to face: why talk about Habermas if the way we understand what is public does not depend on--and is sometimes very different from--his approach? Although one can easily argue that the public sphere as a space for political claims and discussions is an important element of life in society and is, therefore, part of what has been understood in a less restrictive way as being the "public" which public theology addresses and on the basis of which it is constituted, there remains the open question about what is precisely the relevance of Habermas's political theory for the reflection of public theology. An approach to this issue is made in the first section of this article, from the historical perspective of the creation of a communicative network of political challenges begun in Brazil in opposition to the military dictatorship. I imagine that the South African readers will be able to perceive many similarities with the organization that occurred in their country against the apartheid regime.

The historical experience of the search for liberation based on popular organization in groups making political claims supplies an empirical base for the reception and discussion of a theory of communicative action as formulated by Habermas. Despite this, his theory is the result of a particular context and cannot be simply applied to the political situation of countries like South Africa and Brazil. The importance of a rereading of Habermas's political theory from the Latin Ameri-

can context is precisely what I sought to highlight in my paper at the University of Stellenbosch, which I take up again in the second part of this article.³ The problem of a fragile bond between the public sphere and the political system, more precisely the fact that the electoral process does not guarantee control of society over the political system, requires a correction of Habermas's assumption about the political influence of the public sphere. One theoretical answer has been a deliberative public sphere. In the reading by Van Wyngaard, the fragility of the electoral process as regards an effective control of the political system can also be identified in South Africa, which points to the importance of this discussion for a common project on public theology in our countries.

After considering the social and theoretical context of the reception and rereading of the concept of public sphere in Brazil, one can finally come to the question about the model of public theology that can be developed in a dialogue with Habermas's theory. As noted by Van Wyngaard, South African theologians have been perspicacious in identifying the problems of a public theology that, in the name of democracy and dialogue in the public sphere, claims to be neutral and does not consider the present relevance of claims made by liberation theologies. I express my agreement with their critique, discussed in the third section of the article, at the same time as I consider a mistake a reading of Habermas that leads to such a type of public theology. Critique and challenge are constitutive elements of democratic dialogue. From the point of view of Habermas's political theory, the relevance of public theology must be formulated precisely in its connection with spheres of life in which the suffering generated by social problems to be denounced and discussed in the public sphere is more directly perceived. Liberation theologies are, one might then conclude, essential for—rather than incompatible with—the construction of democratic processes of governance. Based on this discussion, in the last section of the article the question about the importance of Habermas's political theory for public theology is taken up again based on these main topics: 1) public and private; 2) language and politics; 3) system and lifeworld; 4) religion and public sphere.

1. The formation of a public sphere in Brazil

The public sphere is a space for political interaction: through this space, society discusses topics that it is interested in, towards the solution of common problems.⁴

³ The paper was based on the research project for the Master's degree in Theology: Eneida Jacobsen, *A teologia ancorada no mundo da vida e dialogicamente situada na esfera pública: uma contribuição ao debate contemporâneo sobre teologia pública* (São Leopoldo: Escola Superior de Teologia, 2011). Accessible at: http://tede.est.edu.br/tede/tde_busca/arquivo.php?codArquivo=300. Access on: June 28, 2013.

⁴ See for instance: Leonardo Avritzer and Sérgio Costa, "Teoria crítica, democracia e esfera pública:

Even if the name may suggest a spatial existence, the concept concerns the diffuse relationships that occur in a society, implementing and condensing communicative exchanges from different fields of social life. Through direct and indirect encounters, printed and electronic media, members of society gather to discuss issues in which they are interested. As these communicative exchanges result in common ideas, they allow instituting a democratic government regime, since democracy, as a consented form of domination, considers itself based on the agreement of the political community, and that is why decisions must be constantly justified before it. According to the definition of Sérgio Costa, the public sphere "... becomes the arena where both the amalgam of collective will and the justification of previously agreed upon political decisions take place".⁵ Due to this possibility of self-justification of society as free and self-governed, the public sphere has constituted a core element for modern societies, to the point that, as Charles Taylor says, where it is suppressed or manipulated, it needs to be simulated.⁶

In Brazil, especially from the 1990s onward, sociologists like Sergio Costa and Leonardo Avritzer—who are important references for this article—intended to show that, despite the entire patrimonialist tradition that permeates political relations in the country, there are indications that corroborate the diagnosis of the constitution of a discursive public sphere in which problems that affect the various groups of society are discussed and, to some extent, assimilated by the political system.⁷ Their

concepções e usos na América Latina", *DADOS – Revista de Ciências Sociais*, 47/4 (2004), 703-728; Seyla Benhabib, "Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy", in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, edited by Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 67-94; Sérgio Costa, *As cores de Ercília: esfera pública, democracia, configurações pós-nacionais* (Belo Horizonte: UFMG, 2002), 15-16; Sérgio Costa, "Redes sociais e integração transnacional: problemas conceituais e um estudo de caso", *Política & Sociedade*, 2 (2003), 151-174; Erik Oddvar Eriksen, "An Emerging European Public Sphere", *European Journal of Social Theory*, 8/3 (2005), 341-363; Wilson Gomes, "Apontamentos sobre o conceito de esfera pública política", in *Mídia, esfera pública e identidades coletivas*, edited by Rousiley Maia and Maria Céres Pimenta Spínola Castro (Belo Horizonte: UFMG, 2006), 49-61; Friedhelm Neidhardt, "Öffentlichkeit, öffentliche Meinung, soziale Bewegungen", in *Öffentlichkeit, öffentliche Meinung, soziale Bewegungen*, edited by Friedhelm Neidhardt (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994), 7-41; Bernhard Peters, "Der Sinn von Öffentlichkeit", in *Öffentlichkeit, öffentliche Meinung, soziale Bewegungen*, edited by Friedhelm Neidhardt (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994), 42-76; Charalambos Tsekeris, "The Public Sphere in the Context of Media Freedom and Regulation", *Humanity & Social Sciences Journal*, 3/1 (2008), 12-17, 2008; Charles Taylor, *Argumentos filosóficos* (São Paulo: Loyola, 2000).

⁵ Costa, *As cores de Ercília*, p. 15.

⁶ Taylor, *Argumentos filosóficos*, 277.

⁷ Avritzer and Costa, "Teoria crítica...", 703-728; Leonardo Avritzer, *A moralidade da democracia: ensaios em teoria habermasiana e teoria democrática* (São Paulo: Perspectiva; Belo Horizonte: UFMG, 1996); Sérgio Costa, "A democracia e a dinâmica da esfera pública", *Lua Nova*, São Paulo, 36 (1995), 55-65; Sérgio Costa, "Contextos da construção do espaço público no Brasil", *Novos Estudos – CEBRAP*, 47 (1997), 179-192, March.

works illustrate a new sociological approach in which democracy is no longer analyzed as a simple moment of institutional transition and begins to be understood as a permanent process of implementation of popular sovereignty. Continuing the theories of social movements that, since the second half of the 1980s--in contrast to a tendency in sociological thinking that emphasized the decadence and disintegration of Latin American societies--sought to retrieve the importance of new social actors for democratization,⁸ this new sociological approach proposed to recover a perspective of analysis centered on the possibilities of transformation present in social action, its different actors and contributions.

The formulation of this new approach to democratization was done around key-terms such as public sphere and civil society.⁹ Through these categories the protagonism operated by new forms of collective action to implement a democracy legitimized by the public sphere was emphasized. The articulation of social movements and organized groups around issues such as land, work and ecology, more critical and faithful expressions of the mass communication media and, to use a recent example, the wave of demonstrations in various Brazilian states for improvements in public transportation and in the health system, corroborate the thesis of the formation of a space for discursive interaction through which social actors, especially since the military regime, have discussed issues that interest them, with a view to achieving a common opinion capable of influencing the political process. These diffuse communicative relations, according to the theory of Habermas, originate in the lifeworld, a sphere in which the problem-situations are directly experienced and also interpreted.¹⁰ The communicative encounter with other people allows generating new readings and languages about the situations experienced, leading to the elaboration of actions needed to solve them. The lifeworld, thus, is a first level of public communication which, as it reaches a larger number of people, begins to

⁸ Adrian Gurza Lavalle, "Sem pena nem glória: o debate sobre a sociedade civil nos anos 1990", *Novos Estudos - CEBRAP*, 66 (2003), 91-109, July, p. 94.

⁹ See e.g. Leonardo Avritzer, "Modelos de sociedade civil: uma análise da especificidade do caso brasileiro", in *Sociedade civil e democratização*, ed. by Leonardo Avritzer (Belo Horizonte: Del Rey, 1994), 269-303; Costa, "A democracia e a dinâmica...", 55-65; Sérgio Costa, "Esfera pública, redescoberta da sociedade civil e movimentos sociais no Brasil: uma abordagem tentativa", *Novos Estudos - CEBRAP*, 38 (1994), 38-52; Evelina Dagnino, "Os movimentos sociais e a emergência de uma nova noção de cidadania", in *Anos 90: política e sociedade no Brasil*, ed. by Evelina Dagnino (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1994), 103-115; Fábio Comparato, "A nova sociedade civil", *Lua Nova*, 28-29 (1993), 85-105.

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung: Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994); Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns: Band 1: Handlungsrationality und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung* (1981a); *Band 2: Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft* (1981b) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp); Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990).

constitute what is conventionally called the public sphere. With this movement from the lifeworld to the public sphere, topics that were formerly relegated to the sphere of the home, the family, or a specific ethnic or social group, may get the attention of society in a broader sense, which allows elaborating positions and claims that can provide a foundation for a democratic government regime.

Religious communities and discourses may play a crucial role in this process. Already during the military regime, which in Brazil lasted from 1964 to 1985, the creation in ecclesiastic spheres of spaces for communicative interaction designed to discuss the problems experienced by people at the level of the lifeworld provided a fertile terrain for the emergence of social mobilizations around topics such as land reform and human rights. Several organizations such as the Landless People Movement (MST – Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra), the Workers' Party (PT – Partido dos Trabalhadores) and the Unified Central Workers' Union (CUT – Central Única de Trabalhadores) originated in groups connected to the church such as Ecclesial Base Communities (CEBs – Comunidades Eclesiais de Base) and the Land Pastoral Commission (CPT – Comissão da Pastoral da Terra).¹¹ In South Africa, at the same time as churches contributed to legitimizing the apartheid system, which lasted from 1948 to 1994, they also supplied a broad network of opposition and initiatives for democratic reconstruction.¹² Both in Brazil and in South Africa religious communities had a major function in broadening the communicative structure of the lifeworld, to use Habermas's terminology. By means of their spaces for interaction, they helped in the process of awareness building about the profound social and political injustice reflected in particular life stories, to critically evaluate this situation and to seek alternatives for overcoming problems. As can be seen, the political theory of Habermas can supply a conceptual framework for reading this process of democratization in its connection with popular initiatives of political discussion and organization. Topics such as dialogue, civil society and public sphere touch the core of the historical experience of struggling for more inclusive and democratic political processes.

2. Between authoritarianism and democratic reconstruction

The emergence of a public sphere in Latin America presented the young Latin American democracies with the following problem: how to connect it with the recently

¹¹ Roque Hammes, *Igreja Católica, sindicatos e movimentos sociais: quarenta anos de história: projetando luzes para a defesa e a promoção da vida na região* (Santa Cruz do Sul: Edunisc, 2003); Peter P. Houtzager, *Os últimos cidadãos: conflito e modernização no Brasil rural (1964-1995)* (São Paulo: Globo, 2004), 136-149; Helena Lewin, Ana Paula Alves Ribeiro and Liliane Souza e Silva (eds.), *Uma nova abordagem da questão da terra no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: 7 Letras, 2005), 35-52.

¹² Dirk Smit, "Reformed Faith, Justice and the Struggle Against Apartheid", in *Essays in Public Theology: Collected Essays*, ed. by Dirk Smit and Ernst Conradie (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2007), 27-39.

re-empowered political society? In his study on democracy and the public sphere in Latin America, Leonardo Avritzer emphasizes that, in general, the process of political renewal of society was not considerably assimilated by the political system. Although democracy was instituted at the societal and legal levels, the authoritarian culture was maintained in many spheres of political life.¹³ This collision of the new socially achieved normativity with the permanence of an authoritarian regime leads the author to conclude--against Habermas's theory, which affirms the need for the political system to be connected to the discursive process that begins at the periphery of the political system to legitimize its decisions--that "... the problem faced by the new Latin American democracies regarding political accountability is that the electoral process does not guarantee citizen control over the political process".¹⁴ There is a tension between public opinion and the actually adopted political behavior. In other words, society lacks the capacity to substantially influence the people who hold power.

Because of this, the identification, in Brazil, of a discursive public sphere in its Habermasian meaning must be relativized, since, although a discursive movement from the lifeworld to the public sphere does occur, this does not always happen from the public sphere to the political system. The social problems are debated and in many cases it has been possible to formulate consensuses, although minimal, about them; but the political system is not substantially connected to the public opinion formed through the conversational structure of the public sphere. The solution found in various Latin American countries to deal with this tension has been to attribute a deliberative function to the public sphere and to create institutionalized mechanisms for the social control of politics. In Brazil the experience of the Participatory Budget has often been used to illustrate this view of the public sphere.

The Participatory Budget (PB) is an experience in which the population participates in the discussions and definitions of the municipal public budget through assemblies and votes. Since it appeared, in 1989, in the city of Porto Alegre, during the administration of Olívio Dutra of the Workers' Party (PT), the PB has used different methodologies in the cities in which it was implemented, one of the most recent being to use the Internet as an instrument of popular participation.¹⁵ As it is

¹³ Leonardo Avritzer, *Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America* (Princeton: University Press, 2002a), 117-119.

¹⁴ Avritzer, *Democracy and the Public Space...*, 112.

¹⁵ Here are a few studies that offer a general description of the PB in Brazil: Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Orçamento Participativo em Porto Alegre: para uma democracia redistributiva", in *Democratizar a democracia: os caminhos da democracia participativa*, ed. by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2002b), 455-559; Leonardo Avritzer, "Modelos de deliberação democrática: uma análise do Orçamento Participativo no Brasil", in Santos (ed.), *Democratizar a democracia*, 561-597; Leonardo Avritzer, "O Orçamento Participativo e a teoria democrática: um balanço

characterized by universal rules of participation and objective and impersonal criteria as regards the selection of priorities, as it creates obstacles for the private use of public resources and as it institutes an operational logic based on the discursive thematization of the demands of society, the experience of the PB has shown itself to be a promising way of constituting a public sphere that Luciano Fedozzi specifies as being an “active public sphere of co-management of the municipal public fund”.

This process, which can be summarized in the definition that it is the institution of an *active public sphere of co-management of the municipal public fund*, is expressed through a system of power sharing, where the rules of participation and the rules of distribution of the investment resources are constructed in a procedural and argumentative manner, in the institutional interaction that takes place between the agents of the Executive and the communities of civil society.¹⁶

Although the Participatory Budget is not an unheard of form of local democratization in Brazil, the experience has proved promising. As Fedozzi says, referring to the Porto Alegre experience, the PB has allowed acknowledging social segments that had historically been excluded from urban development as legitimate subjects of the decision-making process in the government's management. According to him, “... the structure and process of the PB functioning created a consensually constructed and permanently reevaluated institutional arena where the production and selection of opinion and political will for the deliberation on the public funds of the municipality occur”,¹⁷ which indicates a major contribution to acknowledging, constructing and validating a democratic public sphere. The possibility of popular interference in the decision-making process concerning the way public money is spent represents an innovative practice of societal State management, especially if it is considered that in Brazil the spending of public budget reflects to a great extent patrimonialist relations.¹⁸

If one takes the PB experience as an example for the constitution of a public sphere in Brazil, a few elements of Habermas's view of public sphere tend to be relativized. The idea that the public sphere should be constituted autonomously from the State, for instance, even if Habermas recognizes the need for mechanisms that make free communication feasible in society, cannot be easily harmonized with a type of cooperative work between the political system and society that is in large

crítico”, in *A inovação democrática no Brasil: o Orçamento Participativo*, ed. by Leonardo Avritzer and Zander Navarro (São Paulo: Cortez, 2003), 13-57; Luciano Fedozzi, *Orçamento Participativo: reflexões sobre a experiência de Porto Alegre*, 3rd ed. (Porto Alegre: Tomo Editorial, 2001), 97-183.

¹⁶ Luciano Fedozzi, “Orçamento participativo e esfera pública: elementos para um debate conceitual”, in *Por uma nova esfera pública: a experiência do orçamento participativo*, edited by Nilton Fischer and Jaqueline Moll (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2000), 68.

¹⁷ Fedozzi, “Orçamento participativo...”, 70.

¹⁸ Fedozzi, “Orçamento participativo...”, 53-54.

measure enabled by municipal administrations connected to left-wing parties.¹⁹ In view of these problems, it has been emphasized that despite the proximity between State and society, a certain autonomy is maintained between both. Avritzer, for instance, emphasizes that "... when participating in budget assemblies, the actors not only establish fields of conflict with the State, but also among themselves".²⁰ Santos notes the existence of a "mutually relative autonomy".²¹ Although Navarro relativized this position more recently,²² he points to the possibility created by the PB of constituting a non-State public sphere, since a process of decentralization of the State occurs.²³

The topic of autonomy of the public sphere from the State leads to another question, which cannot be so easily harmonized with Habermas's perspective, namely, the possibility of attributing a deliberative role to the public sphere. As a communication network, the public sphere naturally does not deliberate. In this sense, Habermas is right in saying that "speeches do not rule".²⁴ The communicative in-

¹⁹ In Porto Alegre, for instance, in the context of the polemic about the institutionalization of the PB, Marcia Ribeiro Dias remarked that "... the weakness of the Participatory Budget is at the same time that which sustains it: the close tie with the city administration run by the PT" (Marcia Ribeiro Dias, "Entre a representação e a participação política: o debate acerca da institucionalização do Orçamento Participativo de Porto Alegre", in: *Democracia e governança mundial: que regulações para o século XXI?*, ed. by Carlos Milani, Carlos Arturi and Germán Solinis [Porto Alegre: UFRGS/UNESCO, 2002], 204-230, here 207). This close tie of the PB with the municipal administrations leads Goetz Ottmann to criticize the general association established with Habermas: "... in many cases, therefore, to speak of participatory budgets in terms of a Habermasian public sphere would endorse a politically motivated desire to paint them with organic colors, as an autonomous public process, free of the control of the State" (Goetz Ottmann, "Habermas e a esfera pública no Brasil: considerações conceituais", *Novos Estudos - CEBRAP*, 68 [2004], 61-72, here 70).

²⁰ Leonardo Avritzer, "Teoria democrática e deliberação pública", *Lua Nova*, 50 (2000), 25-46, here 41.

²¹ "The PB is the manifestation of an emerging public sphere toward which the citizens and community organizations, on the one hand, and the municipal government, on the other, converge with mutual autonomy. Such a convergence occurs through a political contract by means of which this mutual autonomy becomes a mutually relative autonomy. The experience of the PB thus constitutes a co-management model, i.e. a model of sharing political power through a network of democratic institutions designed to obtain decisions by deliberation, by consensus and by compromise" (Santos, *Democratizar a democracia*, 526).

²² Zander Navarro, "O 'Orçamento Participativo' de Porto Alegre (1989-2002): um conciso comentário crítico", in *A inovação democrática no Brasil*, ed. by Leonardo Avritzer and Zander Navarro (São Paulo: Cortez, 2003), 89-128. In this text the author calls attention to the limits of the PB as related, for instance, to the selectivity of the participating social sectors and to the persistence of clientelistic and party mechanisms that inhibit the constitution of an autonomous public sphere vis-à-vis the State apparatus.

²³ Zander Navarro, "Democracia e controle social de fundos públicos: o caso do 'orçamento participativo' de Porto Alegre (Brasil)", in *O público não-estatal na Reforma do Estado*, ed. by Luiz Carlos Bresser Pereira and Nuria Cunill Grau (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1999), 293-334, here 295.

²⁴ Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, 44: "Diskurse herrschen nicht."

teractions, however, as they converge toward the formation of a public opinion, should have mechanisms available that are more clearly connected to the political system, so that they are not aborted still in the public sphere. If the demands of the lifeworld are not able to reach the political system, it is no use to constitute a discursive public sphere on the level of society. The Participatory Budget, in this regard, shows itself to be a fruitful resource of institutionalized connection between the discursivity of the public sphere and the deliberative function of the State. This relationship can be expressed through the concept of “deliberative public sphere”.

Due to the great ambiguity that exists between the demands of the public sphere and the incapacity of the political system to assimilate them, the need has been noted for a theory that is able to recognize the deliberative potential of the public sphere, to be implemented by means of mechanisms and forums of social deliberation. The “deliberative public sphere” would be an answer to this problem which is difficult to solve: “what to do in the case in which the flow of communication between the public sphere and the political system is not as automatic and as perfect as he [Habermas] supposes?”²⁵ Avritzer advocates that instead of starting from the probability that the practices that emerge on the public level become integrated with political society--formed by the parties, by parliament and by the state administration--, giving rise to a process of political transparency, the relationship between the actors of society and the political system must be directly derived from the specific ways in which political society was constituted in each society. In the case of Latin America, this means that “the link between a new public space and deliberation has to be strengthened in three senses: in its capacity to encourage reflection on participation; in its capacity to strengthen democratic values; and in its capacity to increase the occasions in which deliberation takes place”.²⁶ The author believes that, in this way, the innovations that emerge at the public level can be institutionally assimilated.

In a situation of democratic elitism which foresees the participation of the masses only at the time their representatives are selected, when political sovereignty is transferred to some elites of the political body, or, on the other hand, in relation to a republican view of politics with a notion of self-government that is not very adequate to the complexity of current societies, Habermas's theory of the public sphere, according to Avritzer, offers an interesting third way, since it can maintain the centrality of politi-

²⁵ Leonardo Avritzer, “Teoria democrática, esfera pública e participação local”, *Sociologias*, Porto Alegre, 1/ 2 (1999), 18-43, here 39. Several political theories, including that of Habermas, according to Avritzer assume, “... in a rather naive way, that processes of accountability will work, that is, that political society will be effectively held accountable or that the connections between civil and political society will lead to a workable agreement” (Avritzer, *Democracy and the Public Space...*, 104).

²⁶ Avritzer, *Democracy and the Public Space...*, 134.

cal participation, even if not in the sense of a direct participatory relationship, but through communicative interaction, which is more compatible with the complexity of current societies. Outstanding, however, is the possibility of direct forms of participation in the current democracies, which does not annul the fundamental role of a public sphere.²⁷ The source of political legitimacy must continue to be the public sphere, i.e. the process of free discussion based on criteria such as equal right to speech, but this cannot prevent the political system from connecting clearly, legally and institutionally to the decisions resulting from the communicative process, or, in cases in which a consensus is not possible, provide deliberative processes by majority, anchored in a broad public discussion.²⁸

Conceived of on the basis of these criteria, the public sphere must become more than a mere place of informal discussion. It becomes a place in the periphery of the political and administrative system, in which the informal networks of communication constituted by members of social movements and civil associations connect. These social actors discuss issues, thematize problems, discuss the acts of political authority and think of the institutional forms capable of solving the specific cultural problems with which they deal. These institutions have the public space itself as the site of their deliberation and make their decisions based on public forms of discussion and deliberation. They can decide by vote, but the most important aspect in relation to their form of decision-making is that it is public, transparent, and has the consensus of the other actors who participate in the deliberative process. The decisions of a deliberative public sphere conceived of in these terms are implemented by an administrative system that is outside their reach, but whose decisions can be submitted to public monitoring processes.²⁹

The argument in favor of a deliberative public sphere, as formulated by Avritzer, can be summarized as follows: the political institutions do not assimilate demands from the public sphere; consequently, the public sphere itself needs to take on a deliberative role. The immediate question evoked by the argument is: who would enable such a deliberative role except the political institutions themselves, either by pressure from society, or by initiatives of political parties, or even as an electoral strategy? The example of the PB is adequate as an empirical case of a deliberative public sphere, but it is insufficient insofar as it is very rapidly transposed to a new type of theoretical normativity that is seen as a solution for the non-assimilation of

²⁷ Fedozzi, e.g., observes that the excess of formalism may make citizen manifestation difficult, but in cases such as the Participatory Budget, in which there is already a consolidated social practice, institutionalization may help it to continue regardless of the parties in power (Fedozzi, *Orçamento participativo*, 176-183).

²⁸ Avritzer, "Teoria democrática...", 18-43.

²⁹ Avritzer, "Teoria democrática...", 40-41.

the claims from the public sphere by the political system, since unless one uses violence, the only means by which a public sphere can become a deliberative public sphere is through discursivity--when society demands greater participation--or by the initiative of the political system itself. In the case of the PB, both discursivity, here meaning the pressure exerted by social actors when they claim greater political participation, and initiatives of left wing parties that, like the Workers' Party (PT), were already integrated in the government, played a crucial role in implementing this participatory and deliberative model of management of public funds. If one considers this action of social actors, an action that in no way can be forgotten in the history of how parties like the PT arose, it becomes clear that the deliberativeness of the public sphere has been achieved by its discursivity.

3. Habermas and public theology: the South African critique

Once the assumption of a fragile link between the public sphere and the political system has been corrected and, despite this, it has been admitted that a deliberative public sphere can only emerge from communicative processes, it is possible to safeguard the political role of theology, which deals primarily with discursivity. In a democracy, it is not up to religious institutions to have a deliberative function, although they may take the side of a public sphere that is deliberatively constituted. Insertion into the public sphere without a direct link with the political system has the advantage of ensuring greater freedom of opposition and the possibility of greater proximity to the communicative processes that emanate from the margins of the system, i.e. from the lifeworld and civil society. In theological discussions about Habermas's thinking, it has often been highlighted that the democratic potential of religious discourses lies primarily in their link with the lifeworld.³⁰ Personal experiences of life, whose expression can be very vividly found in the artistic and religious language, as noted by Habermas, are the first resource to build awareness of the problems to be elaborated by the political system.³¹ Therefore, the more discon-

³⁰ Friedo Ricken, "Postmetaphysical Reason and Religion", in *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, ed. by Jürgen Habermas et al. (Cambridge/Malden: Polity, 2010), 51-58; Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Church as a Community of Interpretation", in *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*, ed. by Don Browning and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

³¹ Habermas writes: "The problems thematized in the political public sphere, as a reflection of a social suffering, appear initially in the reflections on personal experiences of life. As these experiences find their concise expression in the languages of religion, art and literature, the sphere specialized in the articulation and discovery of the world, in a broad sense, the 'literary' public sphere, interweaves itself with the political public sphere. ... These experiences are initially worked out 'privately', i.e. in the horizon of a life story interwoven with other life stories in the context of shared lifeworlds. The communication channels of the public sphere are connected to areas of private life--to the dense networks of interaction of the family and the circle of friends, as well as with less close contacts with neighbors,

nected from the sphere of daily relations, the more the communicative processes will be subject to maneuvers of strategic acting directed at profit and power.

Even if the political system is not connected to the public sphere, the discussion of topics of the lifeworld remains relevant insofar as claims for changes at the level of culture can be brought to public attention and perhaps be implemented to some extent at the level of the lifeworld itself. Gender and race issues, for instance, even if they have to be elaborated by the political system, are intimately related to daily practices whose transformation is demanded. The relevance of a theology anchored in the lifeworld, thus, occurs both considering the topics to be elaborated by the political system and the issues to be evaluated within the sphere of the lifeworld itself. From this point of view, the major role of liberation theologies for political life can be acknowledged against approaches such as that of William Storrar, whose problems, as pointed out by Van Wyngaard in his reaction to my paper, have been well elucidated by James Cochrane and Tinyiko Maluleke in a special issue of the *International Journal of Public Theology* dedicated to South African public theology. The central point of their critique is the doubt about the existence of an ideal public sphere as proponents of public theology based on works by Habermas tend to suggest, inferring the democratic inability of liberation theologies from that mistaken diagnosis. Let us see the definition of public theology that William Storrar proposes, taking recourse to Habermas's concept of the public sphere:

A truly public theology is to be found operating in the public sphere, the place of public communication and argumentation. If, with Habermas, we agree that the public sphere is "a domain of our social life in which public opinion can be formed", where any and all citizens can gather freely and without coercion consider matters of general interest, then a public theology must be a discourse that circulates in this public sphere and both informs and is informed by public opinion on public issues. Clearly, then, where such a public sphere does not exist or operate, we cannot speak of a "public" theology in this definition, although we could speak of a liberation theology, for example, which contested the exclusion of the poor or other parties from history.³²

Storrar acknowledges that certain groups are excluded from this public sphere. Based on feminist readings of Habermas's work, he points out the need to create

colleagues at work, acquaintances and so on--and this in such a way that the spatial structures of simple interactions are broadened and abstracted but not destroyed" (Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung*, 441-442). On the topic of religion, see also Jürgen Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001); *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion: Philosophische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005).

³² William Storrar, "The Naming of Parts: Doing Public Theology in a Global Era", *International Journal of Public Theology*, 5/1 (2011), 23-43, here 27-28.

more inclusive spaces for political communication. With this he points at the possibility of an action of public theology before the existence of a democratic public sphere whose access is consented to any person: "Public theology should help to create a more inclusive public sphere in which the public anger of the silenced and excluded voices of the oppressed and marginalized can be heard and addressed by policy makers and practitioners."³³ Emphasizing the task of leading this anger to effective political resolutions, Storrar contrasts the more constructive orientation of public theology with the character of resistance and denunciation of liberation theologies. Although there is a certain continuity between the theologies insofar as they seek social justice voicing the anger resulting from exclusion in a non-violent and constructive manner, there remains the fundamental difference that theologies born amid the struggle for liberation did not need to articulate their opposition in a collaborative and propositional way, while in the case of the public theologies that emerged in democratic contexts this is clearly desired. According to the author, "it may be a harder task for churches in a democracy to bring that public anger at injustice to an effective public resolution than it was for those in a liberation struggle to give oppositional voice to such anger."³⁴

For Cochrane and Maluleke, that public theology should operate primarily in an inclusive public sphere, "a place where the silenced can find their voice and the angry lament of the victim may be heard",³⁵ contradicts the broad experience of exclusion of these voices from the public sphere. Cochrane reminds that for Habermas himself the diagnosis that the dimension of the lifeworld and the discursive sphere that emerges from it have been colonized by the instrumental logic of the market (money) and of the political system (power) is central. "If so, then a responsible public theology must surely reflect not only anger and the spirit of citizenship, but also a capacity to counteract the erosion of the public sphere per se by forces internal to its structural foundations."³⁶

Although Storrar refers to the problem of the excluded voices of victims from the public sphere, this does not appear to significantly reflect on his definition of public theology. As noted by Cochrane and Maluleke, Storrar maintains a questionable distinction between theologies of resistance and public theologies, claiming that the latter are more propositional, constructive and, therefore, capable to act in a democratic public sphere. For Maluleke this problematic distinction is derived from the persistence of a romanticized view of the public sphere, which has led both to the depreciation of a theory of resistance and to the mistaken assertion that resistance and reconstruction exclude each

³³ Storrar, "The Naming of Parts", 23 (see also p. 31).

³⁴ Storrar, "The Naming of Parts", 36.

³⁵ Storrar, "The Naming of Parts", 37.

³⁶ James R. Cochrane, "Against the Grain: Responsible Public Theology in a Global Era", *International Journal of Public Theology*, 5/1 (2011), 44-62.

other. The fallacy according to which liberation theologies are limited to a simple attitude of opposition is refuted by the author in the following terms:

There is a lot more to the praxis of liberation theology than protest and resistance as understood in narrow and one-sided terms. Long before reconstruction and construction came into fashion, various strands of liberation theologies were imagining and proposing alternative models of society and formulating strategies to translate survival tactics into programmes of liberation. To reduce liberation theologies to protest and resistance is thus not only a failure to understand what it takes for those on the underside of history to protest and resist, but also a gross misunderstanding of the very project of liberation itself.³⁷

Cochrane likewise argues in favor of the inseparability between resistance and democratic reconstruction, although he sees the tension between the different discourses that derive from both:

The tension arises in the difference between “civil” discourse and “prophetic” discourse, which Storrar appears to set apart, reserving the former for “public theology”. My argument is that this tension never disappears, even in the most open public spheres that one might find in the real world of particular societies, and that the tension itself is definitive of an adequate public theology, rather than public theology being defined as one side of that tension.³⁸

In brief, a) against the idea that in a democracy the voice of resistance of liberation theologies would be inappropriate, it is noted that democracy as a process is constructed both on the basis of protest and confrontation in the dialogue and on the basis of the search for consensually established resolutions; b) against the notion that liberation theologies would not be propositional enough one should underline their association with projects of popular organization and overcoming of ills such as male chauvinism and racism; c) if resistance and transformation do not exclude each other, but, on the contrary, are equally part of political life, one must question the theoretical and practical relevance of a rigid distinction between liberation theologies and public theologies, the latter being supposedly more productive in current societies.

4. Contributions of Habermas’s paradigm to a public theology

The diagnosis of the rise of a public sphere in Brazil elucidates the intrinsic relationship between indignation, protest and the possibility of democratic transformation. One of the indications of the formation of a communicative network connected to the lifeworld is the broadening of the spectrum of problems dealt with publicly, a

³⁷ Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, “The Elusive Public of Public Theology: A Response to William Storrar”, *International Journal of Public Theology*, 5/1 (2011), 79-89, here 87-88.

³⁸ Cochrane, “Against the Grain”, 47-48.

process in which, as Sérgio Costa notes, collective actors play an important role because they bring new issues and interpretations to public attention and sometimes solutions to the problems identified. The author refers to the women's movement, which took topics such as violence against women, contraception and sexuality from the private sphere to the public sphere; to the black movement, which forced the introduction of topics such as racial discrimination and inequality into the Brazilian political agenda; to the environmentalist/ecologist movement, responsible for important environmental achievements in the last few decades; and to the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST), which, despite recourse to violence and equally aggressive reactions, has managed to persuade society of the importance of its claims.³⁹ These topics continue to be present in the Brazilian public sphere, sometimes with more or less emphasis. Political transparency and gender diversity are the two great topics that, more recently, have been targets of claims and debate.

The encounter of different opinions, claims and arguments is the mark of a democratic public sphere. It does not exclude conflict; on the contrary, it is in the diversity of voices under the constant possibility of dissension, of 'being able to say "no"', as Habermas writes, that the possibility of genuine agreements also arises, i.e. not established by coercion, but through the communicative practice of expounding and contrasting arguments.⁴⁰ Dialogue is not a neutral process that excludes conflict and a language of resistance. This is an idea that is broadly worked on by the well-known pedagogue of liberation, Paulo Freire. Human existence is not able to keep mute, Freire believes. To exist humanly is to pronounce the world in a transforming manner. Dialogue as an existential demand that is actualized when human beings meet to pronounce the world constitutes a profoundly creative act. From this derives the following problem: the impossibility of dialogue between the people who want the transformation of the world and those who

³⁹ Costa, "Contextos da construção...", 188-189. A mapping of the main social movements that arose in Brazil from 1972 to 1997 can be found in Maria da Glória Gohn, *Teorias dos movimentos sociais: paradigmas clássicos e contemporâneos*, 7th ed. (São Paulo: Loyola, 2008), 379-383.

⁴⁰ What makes consensus possible amid the multiplicity of opinions and arguments is the fact that the communicative process is connected to pre-reflexive contexts of the lifeworld that, although considered self-evident, are equally susceptible to problematization as they become relevant for a situation. See Habermas, *Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*, 189. "The rational motivation for the agreement, which is based on being able to say no, certainly has the advantage of a *non-violent* stabilization of expectations of behavior. However, the high risk of dissension, constantly fed by experiences, i.e. by surprising contingencies, would make social integration through the use of language guided by the understanding completely unlikely if communicative action were not incorporated into contexts of the lifeworld that provide support through a massive consensual background In the praxis of everyday life, the constant disquiet through experience and contradiction, contingency and critique, breaks against a wide, unshakeable and deep rock of loyalties, skills of consented patterns of interpretation" (Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung*, 38).

do not. For Freire the latter deny the possibility of pronouncing to the former, who must, therefore, reconquer the human right of saying their word.⁴¹

Reconquering the pronouncement about the world of marginalized groups is a central task for liberation theologies. As Gutiérrez writes, a liberation theology is born from the very life and reflection of oppressed people and is the result of their right to “think their liberating experience”.⁴² The option for the poor does not only mean to be conscious of their social situation in order to seek to overcome it, but it implies truly taking into account the “life and the reflection of the poor”⁴³, which is mystical and contemplative, and which also protests and wants social transformation. Beyond a doubt, there are attempts at individualistic solutions among the popular classes. However, as Gutiérrez highlights, even these attempts point to the same wish for a radical transformation.⁴⁴ On the side of the poor and marginalized of our history, one takes on the perspective of the victims, acknowledging that “now is the time to hear the reverse of conquest”, which means, citing Leonardo Boff, “to give a turn to the discourse of those who lived on this continent for centuries and were on the beach observing the strange creatures in the caravels”.⁴⁵

Liberation theologies, because of their connection with issues experienced at the level of the lifeworld, such as poverty, suffering and discrimination, can contribute to a political life that is more inclusive and sensitive to the clamors of different groups in society. By channeling communicative efforts around problem-situations in which people find themselves in daily life to the public sphere, one contributes to constructing more dialogical political relationships. The reflection of religious communities on issues of social justice and their contribution to political life is a topic explored by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, whom Habermas refers to when he expounds the link between the public sphere and the lifeworld made possible by religious language.⁴⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza writes about the churches that they deal constantly with the challenge of interpreting the normative potential of their tradition vis-à-vis the challenges of the social context in which they find themselves. For this reason, they are able to offer a place for the realization of an ethics of discourse as proposed by Habermas.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogia do oprimido*, 43th ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 2005); Paulo Freire, *Educação como prática da liberdade*, 3rd ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1971).

⁴² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A força histórica dos pobres*, transl. by Álvaro Cunha (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1981), 142.

⁴³ Gutiérrez, *A força histórica dos pobres*, 133.

⁴⁴ See Gutiérrez, *A força histórica dos pobres*, 136.

⁴⁵ Leonardo Boff, *América Latina: da conquista à nova evangelização*, 3rd ed. (São Paulo: Ática, 1992), 59.

⁴⁶ Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung*, 442.

⁴⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Church as a Community of Interpretation”.

As to the possible relevance of Habermas's theory for a public theology, the discussion throughout this article allows to offer a brief sketch.

1) The relationship between public and private sphere is not presented dichotomically by Habermas; rather, the impulses for the legitimacy of politics are seen as originating in private contexts of life. Feminist approaches highlight the fact that binary oppositions such as that between public and private for a long time had the function of confining women and typically feminine spheres to the home, denying them a political character.⁴⁸ Although "private" and "lifeworld" are not equivalent categories, the daily communicative interactions permeate many spaces that traditionally were and have been identified as belonging to the private domain and, therefore, as inappropriate for public discussion. Public theology must look out for this type of mechanism of exclusion in order not to contribute to perpetuating it. Habermas's theory helps perceive the important and fruitful relatedness between the private and public-political dimensions of human life. And insofar as the deliberative dimension of the public sphere is provided, it is ensured that the communicative flows from the lifeworld will also enter the political system.

2) Habermas's theory is of interest to a public theology because it thematizes the transforming and conciliating character of language. There is a potential for denial, critique and innovation that accompanies the communicative encounter between people. This potential can be inhibited, but never completely annulled, and the legitimacy of politics is proved in its use. It is a reductionist reading of Habermas's theory to omit this disputative and creative character of communication in the public sphere, as though dissenting and seeking consensus—or, to use the terms of the discussion with Storrar, resistance and reconstruction—were mutually excluding. The rise of an active political sphere in Brazil occurs, as can be seen, from the challenge made possible by the articulation of voices that were previously silenced or ignored by the media and by the political system.

3) When theorizing the systemic threat faced by communication, both in everyday life and in public life, Habermas's theory calls the attention of theology to the risks of becoming affiliated to the interests of the market or of the State, thus being determined by values connected to seeking money or power. The more theologians are interested in public notoriety and political positions, the less sure becomes their commitment to the political organization on the basis of everyday life and a possible contribution of theology to the democratic legitimacy of politics. Habermas's political theory helps safeguard what has been advocated as central by libera-

⁴⁸ Cf. Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas", in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun (Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 1992), 73-98, here 89.

tion theologies: their connection to the lifeworld, more precisely, their commitment to the people more directly affected by the dysfunctions of life in society.

4) Finally, it should be emphasized that, differently from several other approaches in the field of political philosophy, Habermas sees major possibilities of contribution by religion to political life. For the author, it is of interest to the liberal State to allow free access of the multiplicity of voices in society--including religious ones--to the public-political sphere, because otherwise one might be depriving society of important reserves of meaning. Habermas advocates that to penetrate the institutional practice of political deliberation, it is important that religious contents be translated to a more general language. This may be an important task for public theology.

Conclusion

With the process of democratization in Brazil, legal guarantees were obtained for political organization and expression. On the level of society, the emergence of new social actors contributed to broadening the frontiers of politics and to consolidating a politically influential public sphere. Although communication between the public sphere and the political system occurs under many limitations, new experiences at the local level, such as the Participatory Budget, have enabled a clearer tie between society and the State. Theoretically, this means a complementation of the discursive view of the public sphere developed by Habermas, insofar as a deliberative dimension is assigned to it.

The deliberative public sphere emerges from the discursive one, operating as an intermediate organ towards the political system. Thus, the discomfiting question that is not answered by Habermas's theory appears to be solved: what to do when the political system does not connect to public opinion? It must, however, be realized that the problem is only provisionally solved, because the same question can be asked about the deliberative public sphere, namely: what to do when the political system does not enable the public sphere to have a deliberative function? Now, the direct participation of the population in political processes does not exclude the importance and need for discursive procedures to form the political will for the legitimation of these decisions. Establishing deliberative practices in itself is a challenge to a discursive public sphere. With this it becomes clear that a deliberative public sphere is formed based on the discursive one and must be anchored in it.

The public sphere has often been identified as the main space of action desired by a public theology, insofar as it intends to help and influence the process of forming political will. Recognizing that the public sphere has only in part been a real space for the presentation, discussion and search for solutions to the main problems that afflict people in their daily lives, it is a challenge to public theology

to help increase the representativeness of public discussions. As a reflection on discourses about God and about the perception of God's action in history, on faith and its religious practices, theology can supply a tie to the dimension of the lifeworld, the horizon of meaning in which speaker and listener move in their everyday lives, based on which they interpret facts, norms and experiences and based on which they problematize matters to be elaborated by the political system.

As a network for discussion whose impulses are given by the challenging of and reflection on problems experienced in daily life, the public sphere gathers voices from different fields of social life. Simulation of agreements and the selection of topics by the media are constant threats to this process. To evaluate the authenticity of public communication, Habermas proposes the analysis of its capacity to assimilate and process communicative flows from the world of life. It is the people affected by the dysfunctions of life in society who can best speak about how these problems have been reflected in their life stories.

The tie with the lifeworld as a criterion to evaluate the authenticity of public communication allows seeing the political importance of the work of liberation theologies. Experience, suffering and struggle for liberation are some of the categories that point to the theological centrality that the lifeworld has in these theologies. From this it is concluded that the assertion that liberation theologies would be inadequate in societies under a democratic government regime is mistaken. Denouncement and announcement, resistance and transformation, challenge and dialogue must be integrated creatively by every theology that is willing to contribute to the constant process of creating and recreating life in society.