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Gramsci versus Habermas:A Post-Habermassian Approach into the Subaltern Public Spheres in the Digital Era

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Introduction:

The Habermassian conceptualization of the public sphere is irreducibly significant for assisting us to comprehend the role that modern media and communication actions play in shaping the meanings and practices of democracy. Habermas' work is immensely useful since it provides the most systematically conceptualized theoretical account of the public sphere presently available. Similarly Habermas's concept of the public sphere continues to be recurrently invoked in debates concerning democracy, citizenship and deliberation. In his classical work The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962)–basing on a neo-Kantian approach which vigorously emphasizes the rationality as an inexhaustible generator of societal emancipation- Habermas defines the public sphere as a collective arena where citizens, guided by the normative force of communicative rationality, can exchange views on matters of importance to the common good so that public opinion can be formed.

In point of factHabermas's conceptualization of the public sphere has been subjected to systematically intense critical argumentation and questioning. The debate that emerges as a reaction on Habermas' work goes in different directions.Amidst the incisive critiques of the Habermassian conception of public sphere, voiced particularly strenuously by subaltern-influenced critics, claims that Habermas failed to fully account for the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public.The subaltern

scholars inspired primarily by Gramsci affirm that Habermas unmistakably idealizes the bourgeois conception of the public sphere, failing to examine other, non-liberal, non- bourgeois, alternative competing public spheres, in which each public sphere is marked essentially by specific terms of exclusion (class, race, gender,etc…). In the same line of reflection, Nancy Fraser (1992) termed these public spheres which are formed substantially by marginalized groups, subaltern public sphereor counterpublics.

The subaltern approach is an epistemological countertendency within the critical theory tradition whichis inspired originallyfrom the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci about ''subaltern classes''. It has been developed later by group of South Asian scholars. It focuses essentially on the non-elites, subalterns individuals as agents of socio-political change. They adopted the vision of society from below, focusing more on what happens among the ordinary people at the base levels of society.The subaltern approach has perceptible influence on variety of disciplines including historiography, anthropology, sociology, literary criticism and communication studies.

On the other hand, in the digital era, the discussion about the public sphere has at the same time become increasingly relevant and increasingly problematic (Boeder, 2005).The theme of the Internet and the public sphere now has a permanent place onresearch agendas (Dahlgren, 2005).Ever since the Internet entered academia in the early 90s, much interest has been shown to the democratizing capabilities of the Internet, its potential to increase the scope, intensity, and forms of individuals' involvement in the democratic processes and the expansionof egalitarian participation in the public sphere.Nevertheless, studies that adopt a subaltern approach to examine the role of the Internet in empowering the subordinated and subaltern groups, extending the inclusiveness of democracy and embracing the formation of subaltern public sphere online through offering the subaltern groups alternative discursive arenas, are relatively rare (McDorman 2001; Palczewski 2001; Travers 2003; Zhang 2006).

As such, the main purpose of this article is to contribute dynamically to the debate concerning the emancipatory potential of the Internet from a subaltern perspective. Most importantly Iam interested in approaching the role of the Internet in fostering online subaltern public spheres and permitting the subordinated and excluded groups to form parallel discursive spaces to resist the dominant public sphere , in addition to investigate the capability of the Internet in enabling subaltern groups to strategically disseminate their counter-discourse into society.

I .The subaltern: Genealogy of a concept from Gramsci to Spivak

According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the word "Subaltern'' is derived from the Latin word *subalternus*, which consists of *Sub* (below, under) plus *alternus* (every other one), which produced *subalternus* that means literally *subordinate*.In Oxford Advanced Dictionary of Current English (2015), the word "Subaltern'' as a noun refers to an officer in the British army below the rank of captain, especially a second lieutenant. As an adjective it designates someone of lower status or inferior rank.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term *subaltern* was employed exclusively in the military context. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, under the influence of Marxism, Post-Marxism and post colonialist thought, the term subaltern has come to be used broadly to conceptualize subordination in socio-political and economic settings.From the exclusively contextualized military usage of the term, the subaltern entered social and cultural theory and scholarship owing to works of Antonio Gramsci,particularlythe chronological composition of *Prison Notebooks*1935 (*Quaderni del carcere*)in which he used the term to designate deprived proletarian, peasant and disadvantaged classes denied access to political and social representation, visibilityor voice by the fascist Italian state.

In point of fact Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), the Italian socio-political theorist, provided the intellectual momentum that transformed the notion of subaltern into a socio-political concept through his writings.More broadly, Gramsci used the term to designate classes excluded from political and cultural hegemony by ruling elites. Furthermore the term identified the groups that are excluded from a society's established structures for political representation and therefore denied the means by which people have a voice and visibility in their society.Elaborating on classical premises of Karl Marx (1818–1883), Gramsci wrote of workers conditions as belonging to classes that had been subordinated through sociopolitical hegemony, and exploited through exploiting economic methods, and who were excluded from meaningful participation in the prominent offices and from benefiting of their laborious efforts, hence a binary pattern governed the unbalanced relationship between dominant and suppressed groups.Conclusively, in Gramsci's perception, *'subalternity'* is constituted through exclusion, domination, and marginality in their various forms.

Admittedly,Gramsci, who defined *subalternity* (*subalternita*) socio-politically, already substituted the term subalterns for the *proletariat* in his prison diaries (1934-35). He could not use the word *proletariat* overtly because of prison censorship under the fascist Italian régime. In this way, the term *subaltern*, which literallymeans *"of lesser rank"*, found its way into socio-political theory as a kind of unavoidably involuntary translation. Thus,Gramsci'sterminological neologism experienced the same thing as every translation; translations have an utterly dynamic nature, they become charged with new meanings that make it impossible to translate them back.

Shortly afterwards, the term *subaltern* entered the postcolonial studies scholarship through the works of *the Subaltern Studies Group(SSG)*, a collection of south Asian historians whichis influenced by the scholarship of Ranajit Guha, and evidently inspired by the writings of Gramsci.The SSG focused on the explorationofthe socio- political role of

the ordinary men and women rather than the socio-political roles of the social and economic elites—in the history of south Asia.The purpose of the Subaltern Studies project was to redress the imbalance created in academic work by a tendency to focus on elites and elite culture in South Asian historiography. Consequently, since the 1970s;they began to employ new perspectivesthat recount the history from the point of view of the colonized people rather than that of the colonizers, and to investigate colonial history as told from the perspective of the proletariat.

As clearly noticed, the term has been adapted to post-colonial studies from the work of the group of SSG, who aimed to promote a systematic discussion of subaltern themes in South Asian studies and extrapolated the multiple dimensions of it to different aspects in their societies. Thus, the term has acquired a more specified meaning, the subordination in society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender or in any other way' (Guha 1982: vii).Moreover, the term *subaltern* has come to symbolize tactical engagement toregain terrain in the public sphere and to secure visibility and adequate representation. In other words to give voice to the subordinated, to give the common people back their *agency*.

Not sufficiently satisfied by what she perceived in the work of the Subaltern Studies Group, the critic Spivak conceptualized the term*subaltern* to foreground gendered, caste, class, and colonial constitutive elements barring the subaltern from speaking or from being heard by western poststructuralist and feminist theorists as well as by diasporic intellectuals (Spivak, 1988).Spivak located the subaltern at the interstices of competing or conflicting discursive formations stratified by class differentiation (Spivak, 1987).Moreover,Spivak noticeably adopted a pessimistic position, she claims that the voices of the oppressed are inescapably marginalized and silenced by the hegemonic discourse; hence the subaltern has no history and cannot speak. In her examination of the position of Indian women as a *subaltern*and through an analysis of particular cases, Spivak concludes with the declaration that the subaltern

cannot speak and that the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow, this subsequently has been interpreted to mean that there is no way in which socially oppressed or politically marginalized groups can voice their resistance. Unquestionably, the very most significant contribution of Spivak and the subaltern scholars is that the spotlight of inquiries into societies should be on the contributions of the ordinary people rather than on the accomplishments of the elites.

To sum up, the *Subaltern approach* currently encompasses a recognizable mode of investigation and field of study that focuses on marginalized members of society (Chakrabarty, 2000:9).Furthemore, although Gramsci is often considered as the 'original mentor of the *Subaltern Approach*, nevertheless the *Subaltern Approach*includes currently various points of view, theoretical orientations, and epistemological tendencies that are more numerous than the label suggests (Persram, 2011:9).In the words of David Ludden"the *Subaltern Approach*deployed some of Gramsci's ideas',but ultimately the *Subaltern approach* reinvented *subalternity"* (Ludden, 2002:5).

II .The Habermassian Concept of Public Sphere:

Habermas has introduced his concept of the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) for the first time is his book The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*), which was published in 1962. The bookhas had a major impact on a variety of disciplines.After its translation into English in 1989 by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, the work has received detailed critique and promoted extremely fecund discussions of relevant concepts such as liberal model of democracy, civil society, public life, deliberative democracy and political communication.

Through this work, Habermasgave us a historical and sociological account of the rise, brief flourishing, and demise of a "bourgeois" public sphere based on rational-critical debate and discussion (Berdal, 2004).In that work and conceivably since then as well, Habermas' intent was to further "the project of Enlightenment" by advocating the reconstruction of a public sphere in which reason might prevail, not an instrumental reason ,but a critical reason that represents the best of the democratic tradition(Poster,1995).

It is worth mentioning the undeniable terminological ambiguity, arising particularly from the English translation of Habermas's concept, hence the English equivalent "*public sphere*" is based on a fairly imprecise translation of the German term *Öffentlichkeit*, while the term *Öffentlichkeit* literally means "*publicness*" or "*publicity*", moreover the notion *öffentlicher Raum*, is to a certain extent more adequate, hence it denotes the idea of "*public sphere*" or "*public realm*" with more precision.

Generalizing from socio-historical developments in Britain, France, and Germany in the late 18th and 19th century, Habermas first sketched out a model of what he called the *"bourgeois public sphere"* and then analyzed its degeneration in the 20th century. The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor (Habermas, 1989: 27). Habermas (1989) defined the public sphere as an imaginary gathering which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space. In its normatively ideal form, the public sphere is "*made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state"* (1989:176).Furthermore,according to Habermas, the public sphere constitutes an intersubjectivelyconstructed realm of linguistically equipped and discursive engagedindividuals(Susen, 2011: 57).Through acts of assembly and dialogue, the public sphere generates opinions and attitudes

which serve to affirm or challenge-therefore, to guide-the affairs of state. In ideal terms, the public sphere is the source of public opinion needed to "legitimate authority in any functioning democracy" (Rutherford 2000:18). In addition, the public sphere can be seen as a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk, a realm of social life in which public opinion can be formed (Asen, 1999).

Consequently,the public sphere plays a pivotal role in providing a forum for deliberative processes aimed at the democratic construction of society (Susen, 2011: 57).In a similar line , the public sphere aimed to mediate between "society" and the state by holding the state accountable to "society" via "publicity." Thus, at one level, the idea of the public sphere designated an institutional mechanism for "rationalizing" political domination by rendering states accountable to (some of) the citizenry (Fraser, 1990:65).

Moreover,Habermas perceivesthe public sphere fundamentally as a domain of uncoerced conversation oriented toward a pragmatic accord. (Poster, 1995). Therefore, democratic governance rests on the capacity of and opportunity for citizens to engage in enlightened debate within the arena of the public sphere. Additionally, the rational-critical character of the modern public sphere is rooted in social actors' capacity to engage in intersubjective discourse oriented towards the communicative coordination and normative regulation of social life (Susen, 2011: 47).

Eventually, in the contemporary societies, mass media replaced all the coffeehouses, salons, and societies to become the institutions of today's public sphere. However, mass media function poorly in this regard. They provide passive culture consumption and apolitical sociability rather than serious involvement in critical debates (Habermas, 1989:166).The rational-critical discussions are lost in the mass media Public sphere (Calhoun, 1992:22).Moreover, the decline of the public sphere is indissolubly related torapid societal developments, industrialization, urbanization, growth of literacy and popular press and other related factors. These changes,resulted

in "a blurring of the distinction between public and private in political and economic affairs, a rationalization and shrinking of the private intimate sphere and the gradual shift from an (albeit limited) public of political and cultural debaters to a public of mass consumers(Dahlgren1991:4).

III .The critiques of Habermas:The Subaltern Public Sphere as an Epistemological Alternative

The formulated line of reasoninglaunched by Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) has become increasingly central for the debate of the rationality of democratic communication and deliberation in the last decades in the English-speaking academia (Tănăsescu, 2015).He represents the *locus classicus* of all the discussions on the public sphere (Fraser, 2007). ConsequentlyHabermas's conceptualization of the public sphere has been extensively discussed in the literature. (Susen, 2011: 52).In point of fact Habermas' concept of the bourgeois public sphere and its *modus operandi* has been criticized on dissimilar focal points.The debate that emerges as a reaction on Habermas' work goes in different directions.

Habermas (1997) maintains that the bourgeois public sphere (*bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*) as it existed in the early 19th century provides an ideal model, arguing that a single political public sphere that is built on the principles of communicative action can serve contemporary societies.The assumption that the bourgeois public sphere represents the public sphere of the contemporary world *par excellence* is both conceptually and empirically reductive. For such a view fails to take into account the fact that modern society contains a multiplicity of simultaneously existing, and often competing, public spheres (Susen, 2011: 55).Multiple scholars claim that Habermas reduced the complexity of the modern public sphere to the singularity of the bourgeois public sphere, underestimating the sociological significance of alternatives such as non-bourgeois public spheres (2011: 58).

Nancy Fraser (1992) offers an essentially feminist revision of Habermas' account of the socio-historiographical genesis of the public sphere, and scrutinized it in the light of recent revisionist historiography.She refers to other scholars, like Joan Landes, Mary P. Ryan and Geoff Eley, when she argues that the bourgeois public sphere was constituted by a multiple significant exclusions. Fraser's critique on Habermas is organically related to the Gramscian legacy and *subaltern studies agenda*, which approach the masses instead of the elite.

By contrast to Habermas' assertions on disregard of status and inclusivity, Fraser (1992) claims that the bourgeois public sphere is based on a discriminatory structure against women and other historically marginalized groups. Moreover, Fraser (1992) argues that the whole structure of the bourgeois public sphere worked to the advantage of dominant groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinates. Fraser (1992) set forth that women of all classes and ethnicities were excluded from official political participation , precisely on the basis of ascribed gender status, while plebeian men were formally excluded by property qualifications. She asserted that in many cases, women and men of racialized ethnicities of all classes were excluded on racial grounds (1992:80).

In addition to that , the important point to Fraser is that the public sphere generates a new mode of political domination, like the older one, which secures the ability of one stratum of society to rule the rest. Therefore the dominant public sphere , was indeed, the prime institutional site for the construction of the consent that defines the new, hegemonic mode of domination (Fraser ,1990:68). Moreover, Fraser argues that rather than opening up the political realm to everyone, the bourgeois public sphere shifted political power from "*a repressive mode of domination to a hegemonic one*"(1990:62).On the other hand, from a discursive perspective, the discourses produced in the bourgeois public sphere are unavoidably based on the perspective of the dominant class; they serve, first and foremost, the interests of a particular social group (Susen,

2011:48).In similar fashion, Geoff Eley (1994) inspired by a Gramscian perspective, contends that exclusionaryoperations were essential to the liberal public spheres and that gender exclusions were linked to other exclusions rooted in processes of class formation.

Moreover,Habermas remains silent on the existence of alternative and multiple public spheres. In this respect,in the process of critiquing Habermas,Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1993) have coined the notion of an oppositional public sphere, namely that of the proletariat. The work of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge provides an insightful account notion of a proletarian counter-public sphere (Jameson, 1993).Hence Negt and Kluge shifted the terrain of the notion of the public sphere from a historico-transcendental idealization of the Enlightenment to a plurality and heterotopia of discourses(Hansen, 1999).Most importantly, for Negt and Kluge (1993) any practices that bring the proletarian experience into the visible horizon of social experience could be the embodiment of the public sphere (Zhang, 2012:148).

Another point to be taken in consideration, Fraser indicates that a single public sphere does not provide an accessible arena for subordinated groups in which they can represent and discuss their needs, objectives and strategies, *"they would have no venues in which to undertake communicative processes that were not, as it were, under the supervision of dominant groups"* (Fraser 1997:123).Sure enough, the existence of multiple public spheres would enhance participation in the sense of "being able to speak in one's own voice, and thereby simultaneously to construct and express one's cultural identity through idiom and style" (Fraser, 1997: 126).Moreover privileging a single seemingly all-inclusive public sphere thus results not only in a reduction of these diverse modes of expression but indeed in a privileging of a dominant mode (Fraser, 1997:128).Inspired by the *Gramsien* legacy, Nancy Fraser (1992) identified the fact that marginalized groups are excluded from a universal public sphere, and thus that marginalized groups formed their own public spheres, and termed this concept *a subaltern counterpublic*.Fraser argues that these "*Subaltern*

counterpublics" function dynamically as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (Fraser, 1990:67).

Conceptually speaking, we would define the subaltern public spheres too as collective virtual or spatial platforms to resist systematically a systemized condition of subordination brought about by distinct forms of economic, social, racial, linguistic, and/or cultural dominance and coercion.The empowering potentials of subaltern public spheres as alternative public spheres emanate from their capacity to challenge the legitimacy of dominant practices and dominant discourses by creating counter-hegemonic realms based on alternative practices and alternative discourses. In addition, the significance of subaltern public spheres is often manifested through their relationship with the dominant public sphere (Zhang, 2006:46).

On the other hand, we claim that the aproach of subaltern public sphere provides more adequateperspectives to approach the modern public spheres , since these last-mentioned are greatly differentiated and stratified realms of interaction and, as such, they are inhabited by various social groups, some of which occupy subordinate positions in society: members of the working classes, ethnic or religious minorities, etc...More importantly,the aproach of subaltern public spheres directs our attention to the vivid and diverse lifeworld for the possibility of public exchange of everyday experiences (Zhang, 2012:149). Moreover Subaltern scholars are concerned not only with political *acts*, but also with political *rhetorics* and *discourses*, which are also the focus of the theory of public sphere. Fraser's critique on Habermas carries on the legacy from Gramsci and subaltern studies, which calls for the attention on the masses instead of the elite, on the differences instead of the commons within the public sphere (Zhang, 2006:43).

Conclusively, the theory of subaltern public spheres provides a compendium of perspectives to analyze the modalities of subordination and the construction of power and hegemony in specific contexts, a solid theoretical framework to approach adequately the specificity of subalternity and subaltern groups in social, political, economic, and cultural conditions that these groups existwithin , avigorously epistemological platform to understand the subaltern socio-political praxis in its diverse dimensions.

IV. The Subaltern Public Spheres in the Digital Era,Rhetorics, Meta-narratives and Dynamics

When approaching new media technologies and its impact on Subaltern groups, several points have to be taken into consideration.Most importantly thediametricallypolarized debateon technology, where cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists argue over the democratizing capabilities of Internet, thus the pessimists think that the optimists grant too much significance to technology and its capability to change society in a democratizing manner, while cyber-optimistsascertain that cyber-pessimists oversimplify the authentic role of technology.Moreover, to properly approach the complex dynamics of the subaltern public sphere within the geographies of the internet, it is mandatory to conceptualize and discuss the democratic potentialities of the internet.

Several optimistic scholars acclaim enthusiastically the empowering potential of the internet, prophesying the advent of a cyber-democratic society where all citizens to be equal (Lévy, 2002). For Kahn and Kellner, the internet is *''a living, historical force and one of the keys to understanding and shaping the political and cultural life of present age"* (2004: 88).In the same line of reflection, several various scholars argue that the use and effect of ICTs is so expansive that it has caused a fundamental change in power relations (Castells, 2001: 20).

Furthermore, it is beyond question, that the internet is an emancipator factor which has become a site of"virtual" struggle for direct

action, forms of electronic civil disobedience, and strikes or demonstrations (Robinson, 2008).On top of that, most cyber- enthusiasts ensure that the internet as a new medium facilitates a two way mode of interaction, which differs fundamentally from previous media technologies – most commonly referred to as the mass media or mainstream media– by offering a two way interaction where the citizen is no longer only a consumer but also a producer of content in the public sphere. Furthermore, Michael Margolis and David Resnick (2000) argued, years ago when the Internet was still very new among the average citizen, that "[...] the Internet might facilitate the particular style of democratic politics favored by activists, a style that, unlike that of traditional political parties, does not concentrate on voting and elections." (p. 17).

Likewise, Barlow (1996) proclaims the ungovernability of cyberspace, and thus he describes metaphorically the cyberspace as the new "home of minds". For Barlow (1996) the underlying technology of 'cyberspace' empowers the individual as it shifts the power from governmental institutions to individual citizens. Similarly, Lévy anticipated the fall of dictatorships around the world and the advent of what he refers to as cyberdemocracy. Unquestionably, the techno-optimists perceivethe cyberspace as an exceptional driving force for the dissemination of freedom. For them Internet does not just "spread participatory democracy, but it also forges a new era of Athenian democracy"(Gore, 1995:4).

According to the perspective of cyber-enthusiasts, the Internet is expected to significantly empower the subordinated social groups and extend the inclusiveness of democracy and support the construction of subaltern public spheres instead of a unitary dominant public sphere. Moreover, the online subaltern public sphere in essence could potentially offer an inclusive discursive space for the subaltern groups.

Most importantly, subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional

interpretations of their identities and discourse (Fraser 1992: 123) they need inexorably open and unrestricted discursive arena to voice their discourse plainly. Sure enough, the cyberspace could welcome the multiple marginalized groups and individuals within its geographies and issue them cognitive and symbolic shelters.

Admittedly, the mainstream mass media are the popular known format of the dominant public sphere in many societies; it cannot afford an open and unrestricted discursive space where societal members can exchange their opinions (Zhang, 2006:46). Furthermore, activists and scholars have always criticized the mass media system for favoring the positions of dominant political and social actors. Additionally , unlike traditional media (e.g., print and broadcast media) that allow only unidirectional one-to-many communication, the Internet opens up the opportunities for low-cost point-to-point, point-to multipoint and multipoint-to-multipoint interactive communication across time and geographic boundaries (Benkler, 2006, DiGennaro and Dutton 2006, Simone, 2010).

In a similar way,Nayar (2011) asserts that subaltern online activism enables a transnational subaltern project, seeking and establishing links with sympathizers, activists, NGOs, transnational organizations as well as with other histories of oppression.Furthermore, the Internet strategically enables the subaltern to acquire global visibility and therefore leverage.

In her influential study *can the subaltern speak*? Spivak (1988) claims that the subaltern groups mostly cannot find the opportunity or the space to voice their thoughts and ideas, and when they do, they are not heard.However since the advent of a whole range of new Web 2.0 applications, marginalized individuals and groupsbecame able to exchange theiropinions and critically debate on issues that they are interested in. They can now constructstrategically their own discourse, which is different from the mainstream dominant discourse. These new applications range from social networking sites (Facebook or MySpace, etc…) to collaborative

sites (Wikipedia or Flickr). Their modus operandi is based on the collective creation and sharing of content, manageable forms of *self-publishing* and social*networking*. Consequently, the subaltern is now dynamically networking and communicating through text, video, blogs, pictures, tweeting, status updates on social networks sites such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn or microblogs such as Twitter.

Undoubtedly the Internet has the potential to bring people with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints together and permit them to meet their peers online and to exchange their voices and create their self-identity. Moreover online encounters may facilitate the formulation of thoughts by requiring discussants to convert their inchoate ideas into text (Price, 2006).

To certain extent the Internet provides subaltern individuals with the platform to become 'cultural insiders' to exclusion, oppression and marginalization (Nayar, 2011).Comparably, Manuel Castells (2001) argues that the Internet facilitates a new way of protesting where people and Non-GovernmentalOrganizations (NGO) from different backgrounds converge for a specific purpose so to reach a common goal.

In a similar vein,Thirumal and Tartakov (2011) suggest that new media and information technologies offer subaltern groups spaces for self-representation, and a dynamic entry into both the nation's internal discourse and into the global discourse , where linkages across geography and geopolitical boundaries based on a shared vulnerability and suffering are possible through new media.

In addition to that,McDorman (2001) considers that the expansion of the Internet offers propitious conditions to a broad range of counterpublics.In his study about the interactive website Right-to-Die he concluded that the Internet offers potential for counterpublics to resist the state control. The studied website encouraged more meaningful individual participation and more egalitarian dialogue.Consequently increased participation and dialogue enhance the prospects of successful mobilization

against the state. Furthermore, the feminist scholars such as Travers (2003) found that feminist activity in cyberspace subverted traditional and exclusive public spaces and created parallel subaltern feminist counterpublics.

There is no doubt that Internet constitutes a dynamic space for action that is not possible offline such as virtual sit-ins or hacking web sites. The Internet is either considered by several scholars as an "additional tool" for mobilization and coordination of protest actions or a "new tactical site" (Lee, 2009: 16) in order to move collective action online.

It's beyond question that cyber-optimists have high hopes about the emancipatory potentials of new communication technologies .Yet such visions are confronted by more cautious voices stressing that it is naïve to expect that solely technology can transform the existing disparities of power and hegemony .

Even though internet-based technologies are often portrayed as emancipatory forces, this is not necessarily what happens in practice. For cyber-pessimists, the internet alone do not suffice to change the democratic process due to the political system's reluctance to change and the unwillingness of citizens to transform themselves into 'good citizens' (Bentivegna, 2006).Furthermore, Michael Margolis and David Resnick (2000) argue substantially that *"[...] the democratic hopes attached to the Internet resemble those that have been hitched to other communications media when they were new"* (p. 103). Likewise, cyber-pessimists argue that internet-based technologies reinforce fragmentation and divergence, and deepen the digital divide (Ludes, 2008). Moreover ,the internet is primarily accused of leading to an atomized society in which individuals experience loneliness and isolation. Thus, the prevailing conviction within the cyber-pessimists is that ICTs causing individuals" increasing isolation and limited civic participation (Kraut et al., 1998).Most importantly new 'digital factors' such as access, skills and motivation to use ICTs constitute new hindrances to dynamic online presence and participation. The divide

between those who have access to the network (but also the skills and desire to use it) and those who do not (or do not want to) constitutes another major challenge to society.

On the other hand, scholars fear the alienating effects of increased computer use and networks in society, which could only lead to depression and social isolation(Breindl 2010), and they fear more the increased state surveillance at the expense of civil liberties (e.g.: Van De Donk et al., 1995). Moreover, concerning the equalizing effects of the Internet, cyber-pessimists argue that the inequalities of the offline world are transmitted in the online world. The traditional barriers such as ethnicity, gender, social status, etc..., are also transcended on to the virtual sphere, which evidently endanger the idea that the Internet can create a truly democratic forum.

Another vital point to be taken in consideration, while the internet has been praised by several scholars for providing access to huge amounts of information, raising hopes that this would lead to a better informed society and thus significantly increased citizen participation (Rheingold, 1991), nevertheless Ayres (1999) firmly claims that "while there is little question of the internet's ability to quickly disseminate information, there is a great deal of uncertainty about the value of this information. That is, much of the material available on the internet is often unreliable and clearly unverifiable." (1999: 141). Furthermore, he states that citizens have limited capacities to vitally absorb and process information. Therefore, the fluid dissemination of information does not affect positively the processes of societal democratization.

When approaching the dynamics of the subaltern public spheres in the multiple online and virtual spaces, we would find that although Internet is the most open and unrestricted medium, it cannot guarantee assuredly the universal access, hence as we have mentioned previously, the digital divide based on income, education and race continues to be problematic although the whole access is quickly rising (Luke 1998).

In a similar line of reasoning, empirical studies proved that active minorities are often overrepresented in cyberspace (Corbineau & Barchechath, 2003).Similarly; Jensen (2006) argues that online involvement still remains determined by 'classical' factors such as resources, education, social capital and existing political participation.

Contrary to the cyber-optimists who praised the virtual community for its capability to engage people for a common cause, the cyber-pessimists argued that online engagement lack the solid commitment which consequently negates its potential (Papacharissi, 2002).In a similar vein, empirical evidences from the study of Palczewski (2001) about online subaltern public spheres concluded that the unequal access and surveillance from the state are the two major factors that make subaltern public spheres hard to emerge visibly on the Internet. Conclusively, the Internet is perceived by the cyber-pessimists as unable to provoke any change in relation to the nature of power and principles of democracy or a shift to a new society (Webster, 2006).

It is goes without saying that the impact of technological change on the various aspects of society has long been the subject of undeniably intense debate, and every technological revolution brings out a fresh generation of both pessimists and optimists. In the case of new technologies of communication, Flichy (2001) claims that the utopian and dystopian exclamations are not only media deterministic but also ahistorical. Analogously, Vanobbergen argues that "These discourses conceal that mythmaking is inherent to technological development and that the introduction of 'new' media in the past (telegraph, telephone, radio, television) was also surrounded by 'doom' and 'boom' scenarios about their effects on society" (2007: 2).

It's beyond question that some technologies have the capability of radically altering the context in which they operate. These are the so-called "*disruptive technologies*": capable of displacing pre-existing innovations and of bringing about a profound change in the people who use them, in

their strategies and in the effects of their actions (Abelson, H; Ledeen, K. & Lewis, 2008). The consequences generated by such technologies are considerably ambiguous and disputable, and they require systematic effort to comprehend them. Moreover , scholars today agree in general terms that technology both shapes and are shaped by its social context, and that new mediums are constantly developing into new mediums based on hybridization of both current and new technologies. Therefore instead of understanding technology and its impact on society as *exogenous* factor, where it is exclusively regarded as astatic instrument,it is more adequate to adopt an*endogenous*perspective that perceivestechnology as a dynamic and integral part of society that impacts and been impacted by the political, economic and sociological settings (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006).

Conclusion

No doubt that it is because of, rather than despite, the fact that the Habermassian concept of the public sphere has been highly influential that it has been criticized diversely in numerous ways.Likewise,the multifaceted forms ofcriticism levelled against Habermas's theory of the public sphere should not be one-sidedly interpreted as evidence of its analytical weakness and explanatory inadequacy; rather, they should be considered indicative of the fact that Habermas provides an insightful theoretical framework for understanding the concept of the public sphere (Susen, 2011).

On the other hand it is undeniably difficult to approach the topic of public sphere without drawing on Habermas's classical conceptualization,however in order to comprehend adequately the statusquo of the contemporary public spheres is imperative to transcend his classical conceptual framework. In this respect, I conclude that the subaltern approach of the public sphere is a dynamic approach that pays focal attention to the role of the marginalized groups, underclasses and the voices that had not been heard previously, in constructing their discursive spaces, voicing their discoursevisibly and resisting the symbolic and cognitive hegemony of the dominantpublic sphere. Furthermore, this

approach focuses on the discursive engagement of the *subaltern* in terms of class, gender, race, language and culture, of those who experienced and are experiencing marginalization, institutionalized and non-forms institutionalized of exclusion. In addition, subaltern theorists pay particular attention to the equality, the inclusiveness,the unrestricted accessibility and egalitarian participation during the discursive interaction within the public sphere; hence they reject the elite-centered way of constructing the project of public sphere.

Sure enough, the ways in which a technology impact cannot be understood without understanding how that technology is embedded in its social and cultural context.Admittedly, technology can be a truly driving force and a democratizing tool, but we should take into consideration that social and political change processes are not statically linear, and that the impact of the technology is much more complex and dynamic.

In a similar vein, the impact of the Internet and new communication technologies on subaltern groups de facto is not determined only by the affordances of the technology itself, but also by the motivation , intention and transformative conscience of the subaltern actors. By implication,the subaltern groups potentially can shape, impact, and even redefine relatively the mainstream dominant public sphere by producing alternative discourse using new communication technologies to challenge and to subvert the often-institutionalized and non-institutionalized norms of exclusion and marginalization, and more importantly by disseminate their counter-discourse and severely question the socio-cultural, economic, political settings constraining them.

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