

What Pragmatism means by Public Reason

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ABSTRACT

In this article I examine the main conceptions of public reason in contemporary political philosophy (Rawls, Habermas, critical theory) in order to set the frame for appreciating the novelty of the pragmatist understanding of public reason as based upon the notion of consequences and upon a theory of rationality as inquiry. The approach is inspired by Dewey but is free from any concern with history of philosophy. The aim is to propose a different understanding of the nature of public reason aimed at overcoming the limitations of the existing approaches. Public reason is presented as the proper basis for discussing contested issues in the broad frame of deep democracy.

0. Introduction

Pragmatism brings to democratic theory as well as in other fields of political reflection a new look to classical issues. Among these, of the utmost importance for contemporary political debates is its renewed understanding of a central notion, that of public reason. Starting from a conception of rationality rooted in the primacy of practices, pragmatism redefines the notion of public reason in a way that is irreducible to the main contemporary approaches to this issue: the liberalist view mostly championed by John Rawls and the discursive, communitarian and critical theory approaches. In order to single out the specific identity of the pragmatist theory of public reason, I will firstly proceed to sketch the profile of its main contemporary competitors. The focus of my examination of the concept of public reason is mainly epistemological: it is my persuasion that the originality of the pragmatist approach to public reason resides precisely in its capacity to propose a fully new account of what is human reason, what its place in human affairs and what its main epistemological requirements. Some of the traits of this new conception of rationality will be sketched below.

1. Public reason and the pragmatist epistemology of practice

The pragmatist epistemology of practice, and the theory of rational inquiry that it supports have vast epistemological consequences non only in the domain of general philosophy but also in that of political reflection. The notion

of inquiry provides the conceptual basis for facing in a new way issues related to the relationship of beliefs to individual and collective agency. This is the avenue chosen by pragmatism in order to define the notion of public reason and to understand its place in public affairs. Through its theory of public reason, pragmatism has deeply contributed to a thorough redefinition of the political categories of the public and of the private sphere and of our understanding of their mutual relationships. Blurring the dualism of the public and the private that grounds the liberal approach to public reason, the pragmatist account provides a new understanding of the public sphere starting from a different theory of rationality. The novelty of the pragmatist approach, to this extent, is that its conception of the public sphere and the redefinition of the boundaries of the private and the public are strictly connected to the epistemological revolution operated by the introduction of the conception of belief as a guide for action and by the understanding of rationality according to the paradigm of inquiry.

With reference to mainstream liberal and discursive political philosophy, pragmatism operates a double shift: on one side, it resists the understanding of the public sphere according to the categories of universality and neutrality; on the other side, it rejects the traditional dichotomy of the public and the private. Both moves are important in order to provide a fresh interpretation of the contemporary dynamical transformations of the public space (Innerarity 2006, Held 2004), as this last has proven to be reducible to traditional conceptions of public reason only at the cost of great losses. Classical conceptions of public reason as being neutral and universal are generally couched in terms of a model of rationality dominated by the idea of a strong and irreducible opposition between the private and the public forms of its use. Ideals of universality and neutrality are generally conceived out of the persuasion that access to reason requires a process of detachment that frees the individual from his specific and personal traits (desires, interests, conceptions, etc.). In order to preserve the universality and neutrality that qualify its legitimacy, public reason needs therefore to set its operational conditions in opposition to the rules that govern its private use.

We can see this epistemological presupposition at work both in the classical liberalist paradigm and in the works of some of its opponents such as communitarian and critical theorists: whether such a reason is endorsed as the necessary basis of political legitimacy or rejected as a condition of oppression, it constitutes nevertheless the undisputed presupposition of the debate. Something similar happens with reference to the opposition of the private and the public: whether it is posited as the necessary presupposition of the social and political constitution or whether it is rejected in favour of a politics of identities and recognition, what is at work is the same epistemological

framework that sees the public and the private reason as being two statically differentiated and irreducible entities¹.

On both these issues, the route taken by pragmatism is radically different. Pragmatism offers not only a different account of the nature of the public sphere and of the place of rationality inside it, but also a different understanding of how the individual dimension (the ‘private’) can enter it in ways that while ensuring the necessary expression to the individual voice do not compromise its public nature. In a similar way, the pragmatist definition of the notion of public sphere via that of consequences and problematic situations points towards an understanding of the public dimension as being neither neutrally abstracted from individual interests (the public as that which is irreducible to individual drives) nor reducible to the sum of individual interests: while consequences affect individual lives and functions as individual drives, they operate as the forces which support the formation of new publics, giving form and meaning to collective action in a way that is not adequately explained neither by the individualist paradigm of classical liberalism nor by the collectivist paradigm of communitarian efforts at overcoming the limitations of the liberalist account. Failure at understanding this point determines the wrongful identification of pragmatism with a variant of utilitarianism. The political outcome of the process of public inquiry is, in fact, a new public which did not exist before.

Within the pragmatist tradition, it is notably deweyan pragmatism that has offered the most relevant contribution to the articulation of this constructive understanding of public inquiry as the process through which publics are shaped through the identification and discussion of specific issues that make visible the connections between consequences and individuals or groups that are affected by them. Such an approach requires us to renounce both terms of the opposition between a universality and a particularity equally conceived as being a priori, in order to conceive universality (or the global community – the Great Society) as the outcome, rather as the input of the political process of the quest for legitimacy. Pragmatism asks us to give up both the conception of a universal and neutral public sphere and that of a plurality of identitarian spheres statically defined by pre-determined traits (culture, gender, race, geographical proximity, language, religion).

This conception revolutionize not only the political notion of public sphere but also the epistemological notion of public reason: *constitution through inquiry and not representation through justification defines the proper core of public reason*. In so doing, pragmatism takes us also beyond the competing conceptions of rationality as a) a rational (Rawls), arguing (Elster) or communicative (Habermas) form of discourse and b) as a negotiating,

¹ I tackle extensively with this issue in Frega 2009a and Frega 2011 (Forthcoming)

bargaining, instrumental or pragmatic competition for the adjudication of scarce resources. Public reason is irreducible to both conceptions, as it denotes a collectively undertaken process of inquiry in which interests, aims, visions and identities are constantly negotiated through the participation in a common effort at revising the system of our partly shared and partly diverging beliefs, and where also the scope of this common interest varies according to the different kind of public that are mobilized by different issues. Reasons as well as interests, values, and political aims are the tentative and fallible outcomes of the political process itself. Through public inquiry, interests and aims are neither merely pursued nor simply justified: they are first of all constructed through the deliberative confrontation carried on according to the epistemological paradigm of inquiry. It is therefore to inquiry and deliberation, not to aggregation and negotiation that we should rely in order to reach this aim. This is the most concrete consequence of the epistemological shift from a classical to a pragmatist account of rationality based upon the acknowledgment of the epistemological primacy of practice (for a detailed account see Frega 2006a and Frega 2006b).

2. Pragmatist public reason: the main categories

A first glance at trends in contemporary debates shows that the advancement of mainstream philosophy and of the social sciences in the last decades has often been reached at the cost of a progressively impoverished and reduced conception of what is human reason, what its tasks, what its outcomes². Critics of this tendency have pointed out that this has produced an increasingly narrower understanding of the main features of human agency: if we conceive wrongly the nature and scope of human reason, we are likely to arrive at strong misconceptions concerning deeply important facets of human experience. This is a topic that pragmatism has long entertained in its calling for a renewed understanding of philosophy and the social sciences both in their professional identity and in their social function. Although pragmatism has traditionally advocated the idea of a unitary conception of reason based on the idea of inquiry, an updated account of rationality as a common feature of human agency is still missing.

Critics of traditional epistemology like Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Cavell, Michael Sandel, Bruno Latour and Michael Walzer join neo-

² Critical remarks along these lines can be found in the work of many contemporary philosophers. An account of contemporary anglo-american philosophy along these lines is offered in Frega 2009a. For a critique of the instrumental paradigm of rationality from a pragmatist perspective see Frega 2006b. See also, from a different perspective, Richardson 1994 and Richardson 2002.

pragmatists in the acknowledgment that moral and political theory have been dominated by an understanding of human agency which is based on an inadequate account of rationality. As a confirmation of this trend in moral and political epistemology, we should only consider the justificatory turn that has characterized the mainstream Anglo-Saxon political philosophy with the increasing focus on topics of justification, consensus, and truth³. This recent turn is, from a pragmatist perspective, the evident symptom of a broader problem: the tendency towards an understanding of human experience (and of the role of intelligence inside it) dominated by an hyper rational and idealistic conception of human reason as detached from its generative and functional roots in real practices. Defenders of this approach have often answered critics claiming that outside the safe harbour of such a reason we are exposed to the uncertainty and risk of disagreement, conflict, violence and that, in short, we are obliged to choose between a normatively strong conception of reason and the arbitrary rule of power or the irrational play of instincts and sentiments⁴.

The pragmatist concept of public reason is built upon the refusal of this presupposition; the re-location of rationality into the proper field of its exercise – human agency and practices – opens a different understanding of basic facts concerning the functions of reason, its mode of operation, its outcomes and scopes, and its criteria of validity. In order to accomplish this task, pragmatism proposed to conceive the notion of public reason as being part of a broader framework of naturalistic epistemology (Frega 2009b). Such an account deploys a conception of rational inquiry as human activity embedded in experience (principle of continuity) and functionally oriented to the development of experience itself (immanence of reason to agency and practice) through the examination of contested issues in problematic situations. According to such an account, rational inquiry is conceived as an activity whose main function is the guide of conduct through the fixation of beliefs⁵. Accordingly, human agents are said to be rational as long as their interactions with their environment are guided by a reflective attitude characterized by the fact that obstacles are perceived and faced as *problems*.

Rationality can be considered as an attribute of agency only as long as the notion of agency is in turn defined through the overcoming of the duality of thinking and action towards the idea of a ‘reflective behaviour’ that is common to the whole pragmatist tradition. On these general basis, inquiry becomes the general paradigm of human rationality. Here I would like to recall the traits of this conception which are more relevant for defining public reason.

³ See as examples the Volume 5, Issue 1, 2008 of the journal *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology*, or Gaus 1996.

⁴ An issue clearly dominating the tradition that connects the classical liberal sources of Hobbes and Locke to contemporary liberal scholars. For a survey, cf. Gaus 2003.

⁵ For classical statement on this issue, see notably Dewey 1922 (MW 14).

According to this perspective, an agent is rational if a) he bases his conduct on accepted beliefs as long as those are not currently put into question (primacy of practice); b) he adopts inquiry (and not authority nor other means) as the method for fixing the beliefs that governs his present and future conduct (inquiry as paradigm of thinking) and c) he considers beliefs as instruments for the control of agency that are revisable in principle (fallibilism) and whose meaning is defined with reference to the consequences derived by acting upon them. These traits point towards an understanding of rationality as a public and open enterprise.

Rooted in a contextual situation, driven by the needs of practice, implemented through specific forms of activity and dependent upon the intersubjective scrutiny of other fellow inquirers and agents, the exercise of rationality is inescapably public, both in its theoretical and its practical use. The pragmatist approach to public reason is built upon this basic assumption. In order to articulate a pragmatist theory of public reason, it is therefore necessary to qualify the term ‘public’ with reference to this more general awareness of publicity as an irreducible trait of all expressions of human rationality. This task will be accomplished starting from an examination of Dewey’s conception of the ‘Public’. I will then proceed to draw some broader implications for a pragmatist conception of public reason.

According to pragmatist epistemology publicity is a general trait of rationality. Notably, publicity enters the pragmatist conception of rationality in at least four senses:

1. *Rationality is directed to the control of consequences of actions.* Therefore, its use is public in the sense of taking place in the open field of phenomena that affect a plurality of agents.
2. *Rationality is a trait of human agency* (the deweyan “reflective behaviour”). Therefore, it is public in the sense of being the observable attribute of open activity.
3. *Rationality is experimental* as, after the scientific revolution, it is characterized by accessibility of results, transparency of methodologies, and repeatability of experiences by a plurality of inquirers.
4. *Rationality is shaped by the social and cultural matrix* that constitutes human experience, and therefore possesses traits which are indexed to its socio-cultural context of origin.

This epistemological framework implies that inquiry is intrinsically public in all its expressions. Therefore, if we want to give a specific meaning to the term ‘public reason’, in a way compatible with the meaning that has become popular in political philosophy, we should add a further specification to our initial definition of what qualifies the public nature of rationality. In order to do this, we have to specify in which sense, from a pragmatist perspective, this politically public dimension has to be taken into account. As I will try to show,

the specificity of the public use of reason is determined by reference to a subset of the category of consequences.

This idea can be found in Dewey's conception of public, as this last is defined through the concept of *consequences*. This connection is pivotal for the definition of a pragmatist conception of public reason as I conceive it⁶. This is the first condition that defines the *public* use of reason in *political* terms: rationality should be put under the requirement that where a plurality of agents is engaged, the general assumption that each action produces consequences has implications which cannot be dealt with merely by those that are directly implicated. If a public domain is generated by the mere fact of intersubjective consequences, public reason denotes a particular way of dealing with these consequences. More precisely, the idea of public sphere is related to consequences of agency as they are considered not merely in terms of their *natural effects* (in modifying the environment) nor of their *epistemic implications* (in view of the production of knowledge), but of their *experiential impact* (on the life conditions of other human beings). Dewey remarks that "human acts have consequences upon others, that some of these consequences are perceived, and that their perception leads to subsequent effort to control action so as to secure some consequences and avoid others" (LW 2: 243⁷). Here the third sentence introduces a theme which is crucial for a pragmatist account of rationality: that of the control of action and, through it, of consequences. The next element introduced by Dewey is crucial for the definition of a public sphere as opposed to a private one, and is therefore the central piece of a pragmatist understanding of the attribute 'public' as it is used in political theory.

Dewey writes that "consequences are of two kinds, those which affect the persons directly engaged in a transaction, and those which affect others beyond those immediately concerned" (LW 2: 243). The concept of public refers only to those consequences (intended or unintended) that affect people beyond those directly involved in the action considered⁸. More explicitly:

⁶ Bohman 2007 discusses in a partially similar way the political implications of the pragmatist passage from a politics of demos to a politics of publics. For different approaches see notably Talisse (this volume), Misak 2000, MacGilvray 2004.

⁷ Dewey's works are cited according to the complete edition of his work as *EW* (Early works), *MW* (Middle works), and *LW* (Later works) followed by volume and page numbers. Complete references for each work cited are provided in the Bibliography.

⁸ "The essence of the consequences which call a public into being is the fact that they expand beyond those directly engaged in producing them" (LW 2: 252); "The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for" (LW 2: 246). Further on: "the public itself, being unable to forecast and estimate all consequences, establishes certain dikes and channels so that actions are confined within prescribed limits, and insofar have moderately predictable consequences" (LW 12: 268).

“transactions between singular persons and groups bring a public into being when their indirect consequences – their effects beyond those immediately engaged in them – are of importance” (LW 2: 275). The criteria invoked for defining what should be considered important are: “the far-reaching character of consequences, whether in space or time; their settled, uniform and recurrent nature, and their irreparableness” (*ibid.*). In a way that has recently gained increasing consensus, Dewey pioneered an *issue-centred approach to politics*⁹.

This reference to the dimension of consequences is used by Dewey in order to define the notion of *publicity*, which, according to the perspective here outlined, is strictly related to that of the public¹⁰: “there can be no public without full publicity in respect to all consequences which concern it” (LW 2: 239), as well as – I would add – in respect to the ways followed in order to produce evidence about them. So conceived, public is a dynamic notion in two senses, that the pragmatist epistemology of practice helps us to explore. First of all, public coalesce and gather according to the varying needs of situations: each of us belongs to different publics according to the different order of consequences that affect our lives¹¹. Secondly, the public is the outcome of the reflective process of inquiry aimed at the identification of the consequences, not the pre-existing subject of the inquiry itself. It is precisely the effort at identifying and articulating problems that reinforces the constitution of the public. Inquiry, in this sense, is not a cognitive action of the public, but the activity through which the public discovers itself.

Therefore, the identification of a public sphere depends upon the following conditions: a) human actions produce consequences; b) these consequences affect also individuals which are not directly involved in the action itself; c) such consequences need to be managed in order to secure some effects and avoid others; d) the acknowledgment of these consequences is a proper function of the exercise of public reason, and e) the public so defined is not considered as a pre-existing collective entity but as the outcome of a process

⁹ See Marres 2005, which explicitly relates issue-based approaches in contemporary STS research on politics to Dewey’s theory of the public; for an issue-centred conception of the global governance, see Rischard 2002: 171 ff., cit. in Held 2004.

¹⁰ Public and publicity should be kept strictly distinguished, although they are strongly related. It would be useful here to remark the similarities and differences with other notions of publicity, e.g. the arendtian one. If the idea of a strong correlation between public reason and full accessibility is generally acknowledged, Dewey’s originality lays in the fact that publicity’s constraint is considered as an attribute of consequences and not of decisions (power) or discussion (discourse).

¹¹ I disagree with MacAfee’s interpretation of Dewey’s notion of public as cannot being plural (MacAfee 2008: ch. 6). As I will show, publics are not plural merely according to a multicultural perspective; they are structurally plural because the world we inhabit is organized according to multilayered and evolving systems of consequences which affect the constructions of collective identities and, therefore, of publics.

aimed at producing a shared response to the developed awareness of being commonly affected by the consequences of certain facts.

If the pragmatist conception of rationality can be defined through the idea of the intelligent control of action and of its consequences (the fixation of belief being the main medium), the idea of a specifically public form of rationality is, accordingly, defined with reference to a specific subset of consequences: those that affect people not directly involved in the action and therefore not in the position to partake directly in the positive control of those consequences. The public does not denote, then, neither a specific political entity (e.g. state, government, representative bodies, etc.), nor a given set of reasons (universal principles, neutral reasons, etc.) nor a distinctive sphere of individuals involved in specific forms of agency (the officers, the readers, the bourgeois, the voters, the rational agents, etc.), but *a specific set of effects induced by actions performed by agents*, be they individuals or groups.

The implication of this approach is threefold. Firstly, the focus on consequences rather than on causes and principles determines a shift of democratic theory from a general quest for justificatory consensus to the search for solutions to specific problems. Secondly, the traditional democratic conception of publics as territorially based homogeneous communities (shaped according to the state-model of citizenship) is overcome towards an issue-based conception of publics as being dynamical, and shifting. A fact, this last, that in recent decades has been identified as an important cause of democratic deficits¹². Democratic deficits occur precisely when the community of those engaged in a given issue fails to overlap with the political community that has the legitimate power to decide, and no alternative forms of devising solutions are found¹³. Thirdly, the identification of the public with effects of actions rather than with specific institutions implies a turning away from the idea that the task of political philosophy is the justification of given institutions¹⁴ towards a transformative conception of political theory and practice as oriented towards the regulation in the formation and resolution of specific issues. The task of political theory becomes that of experimentally devising solutions to problems related to the consequences determined by private and public actions¹⁵. As Dewey notes, in political theories that do not acknowledge this fact, “reason comes into play only to find justification for the opinion which has been adopted, instead of to analyze human behaviour with respect

¹² Marres 2005, Nahuis 2009, and Hamlett 2003.

¹³ See Held 2004 for the notion of a multilevel citizenship, and Bohman 2007 for a similar pluralization of the concept of *demos*.

¹⁴ An approach that has dominated the liberal debate of the last three decades and that have come to be identified, following Gerald Gaus, as “justificatory liberalism”.

¹⁵ In Dewey’s words, “the formation of states must be an experimental process” (LW 2: 256).

to its consequences and to frame polities accordingly” (LW 2: 249). This turn might be defined as *a passage from a justificatory to a transformative conception of rationality*.

Shift from consensus to issues, conception of rationality as inquiry, pluralization of publics and focus on transformative processes are four important traits which characterize a pragmatist conception of public reason. So defined, the public denotes necessarily a *dynamic entity*: it is not identified once and for all by some substantive traits (the belonging to a racial, linguistic, cultural, geographical or political community) but is functionally defined in terms of who is effectively involved by the consequences of a certain type of action. Therefore, we have to consider it not as the pre-given subject¹⁶ of a claim but as the *outcome of a quest*. This conception has not only a political but also an epistemological meaning: it is the cornerstone of the pragmatist approach to justification and consensus. In this perspective, the State (using this expression to identify all kinds of governmental and representative institutions) is only a specific category of public, characterized by the presence of “official representatives to care for the interests of the public” (LW 2: 259). Therefore, “the public forms a state only by and through officials and their acts” (LW 2: 277).

This dynamic conception of the notion of public has a further consequence which concerns the role played by inquiry in its transformative constitution: as the public does not denote a mere collection of individuals identified from outside but a self-aware community, then public reason is composed by at least two dimensions: an *objective dimension* concerning the events that produce consequences which affect agents (exploitation of youngster in work, pollution of a given area, racial/religious/gender discrimination, etc.); a *subjective dimension* concerning the shared awareness that a plurality of individuals are affected by the same consequences. Inquiry shall therefore have a crucial role in identifying new publics not only through the theoretical study of how consequences (direct or indirect, intended or unintended) affect a plurality of individuals but also through the practical work of rising awareness, in order to make consequences to be *perceived*. Therefore, the idea of public reason that emerges from Dewey’s writings is considerably different from that which dominates current debates in political philosophy, not only because of its larger extension, but also because of its deeper context-dependence. In a pragmatist’s perspective, we are confronted with a public use of reason whenever both of the two following conditions are satisfied:

1. a public is objectively and subjectively identified (reference to the shared *and* perceived nature of consequences);

¹⁶ That is a subject given as self-subsistent and unaffected by the process in which it is engaged.

2. problems that concern it are faced through the use of rational means (resort to inquiry in order to face the problematic situation).

Dewey adds two further conditions, intended as criteria for determining the degree of democracy of an institution trying to organize a public. From the perspective of the individuals belonging to the public, a democratic public is one that grants to each individual “a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain” (LW 2: 328). On the side of the aggregate, a group is a democratic public if it is able to free “the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common” (*ibid.*)¹⁷. It should be noted that in a pragmatist perspective *consequences* (and not rights or other intrinsic properties of individuals) are the explaining factor in the use of public reason. Accordingly, values and other conceptual entities (e.g. principles) are defined with reference to their function in the organisation of experience rather than as pre-defined criteria of assessment. This has huge implications on philosophical issues like those of legitimacy and justification: notably, it puts into question the very idea that the task of philosophy should consist in providing justifications (or foundations) for existing institutions, ideals or norms. A task that continues to exhaust the energies of a great part of political philosophers.

3. *Contemporary varieties of Public Reason*

In order to better grasp the distinctive traits of the pragmatist account of public reason sketched so far, I will compare it with three of the most important conceptions of public reason that are found in contemporary political theory: a) the classical liberal conception of the public as the space of shared reasonable beliefs; b) the discursive conception of the public as an enlarged sphere characterized by the kind of rationality displayed by the rational use of discourse; c) the critical theory account of public reason as the political answer to conditions of oppression.

3.1 *Liberal public reason and the dualism of the public and the private*

In the liberal tradition, epistemic conditions of validity for public rationality are defined through the opposition of the public to the private use of reason (a conception to be found in the liberal tradition from Hobbes and Locke to

¹⁷ Both conditions have recently been taken into serious consideration by theories of deliberative democracy. For an account which considers these two dimensions, see Dryzek 2000, Niemeyer 2002, Niemeyer-Dryzek 2007.

day¹⁸). Most part of the liberal tradition shares the idea that public use of reason is legitimate as long as it respects certain requirements which guarantee its impartiality. It is the idea of publicity that dominates the liberal tradition and which has become of central importance especially since the work of John Rawls. This idea stems certainly from the long-lasting commitment of liberalism to the autonomy of the self. But it is also rooted in a strong epistemological conception of human reason as divided into a private and a public realm. At the heart of this distinction lies the intuition that, while the use of reason in its private form is selfishly subjected to individual drives and therefore liable to producing conflict and disagreement, access to its public use enables a universal understanding on which only it is possible to ground our associated life.

The idea of such a dualism is already present in the philosophical work of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke and spans all the liberal tradition¹⁹. Here I will briefly present it with reference to its recent formulation by John Rawls. In Rawls' philosophy, the dualism of the private and the public is formulated as an opposition between the *rational* and the *reasonable*, this last standing for the public use of reason and the rational for its private use. Rawls defines private reason through the paradigm of instrumental rationality as "a conception of rational advantage of each participant, what they, as individuals, try to claim". Private reason is defined as the ability to pursue with efficacy an end whatever it is²⁰, while public reason is identified by the capacity to reason from a common standpoint, whose function is to free the individual from his particular perspective in order to identify the collective aim worth of being pursued. Private reason can be altruistic (whenever the interest I pursue is the wellbeing of another person) but cannot be intersubjective²¹. Public reason, or reasonableness, is then introduced in order to provide a suitable epistemic basis to a particular form of reasoning that takes place when interaction aims at instituting fair terms of cooperation. This requires two conditions: a) the willingness "to propose principles and standards as fair terms of cooperation" and b) the readiness "to abide by them willingly, given the assurance that others will likewise do so" (Rawls 1993: 49). Intersubjectivity is then defined in terms of reciprocity: the human reason

¹⁸ For a complete account, see Gaus 2003. For a critical appraisal, see Frega 2007.

¹⁹ The criticism of the dualism of the private and the public that I am advancing on pragmatist grounds is mainly epistemological: its focus is not the public/private divide as such – as is the case for example in critical theory – but the specific understanding of rationality that is presupposed by liberal epistemology and on which liberal political philosophy is built. For a more extensive treatment, see Frega 2009a: ch. 2.

²⁰ In Rawls' words: "the rational ... applies to a single, unified agent ... with the powers of judgment and deliberation in seeking ends and interests peculiarly its own" Rawls 1993: 50.

²¹ "The reasonable, in contrast with the rational, addresses the public world of others" (Rawls 1993: 62).

attains its public functioning whenever it operates on grounds that all agents can accept.

We can grasp the strong continuity in liberal thinking in the persuasion that human rationality has an intrinsically asocial nature expressed by its private use (a use that, as Rawls observes, aims not only at identifying the most efficacious means for given ends, but also at choosing among competing ends). In order to overcome their deep disagreements, human agents must therefore give up their private reasons and engage in a different way of thinking characterized by the fact that they appeal only to reasons that are considered to be shared by all (reasons that nobody could reasonably be expected to reject, in the classical liberal wording). As Rawls remarks, the meaning of the concept of public as referred to reason is threefold²² (Rawls 1993: 213).

– *Its subject is the public*: it is constituted by the ensemble of beliefs that are shared by all citizens (in virtue of being those beliefs that no individual could reasonably reject);

– *Its object is the common good*: it aims at defining the basic structure of a democratic society;

– *Its content is public*: it consists of those assumptions that are implicit in the political culture of a democratic society and therefore assumed to be shared by all (under the presupposition of reciprocity).

Public reason, therefore, speaks with a universal voice and addresses common problems starting from shared assumptions and referring to shared criteria of assessment (a theme that accompanies Rawl's thinking from the *Theory of Justice* to the following political liberalism and to his later revisions of the idea of public reason²³). Justification, in fact, "is addressed to others that disagree with us, and therefore it must always proceed from some consensus, that is from premises that we and others recognize as true" (Rawls 1985: 229). Public reason identifies the ensemble of shared beliefs that constitute the common framework for taking public decisions, according to a deductive paradigm of rationality. As John Dryzek has remarked, "public reason is a set of commitments that individuals must adopt before they enter the public arena, not what they will be induced to discover once they are there" (Dryzek 2000: 15).

As can be seen even from this short sketch, pragmatism and liberalism are grounded on two radically different epistemologies; refusal of the dualism of the private and the public and willingness to conceive public reason as a deliberative arena where shared conclusion and not already given premises

²² I would say that properly speaking the criteria are only two, as the first and second criteria can be reduce to one, the second depending clearly on the first.

²³ I offer a reconstruction of this theme in Frega 2009a.

identifies the public content of our common rationality, are the main traits that separate the pragmatist notion of public reason from its liberal competitor.

3.2 Publicity as the attribute of the discursive sphere

A different account of the public dimension of reason is offered by Jürgen Habermas, notably in his groundbreaking work on the origin of the modern public sphere. His speaking of a public *sphere* rather than of a public *reason* is quite revelatory of the fact that he is proposing a rather different idea of what constitute the public character of reason. The most relevant innovation introduced by the notion of a public sphere concerns the acknowledgment that beliefs about public life have an inescapably dynamic nature: the public sphere is conceived not as the institutional arena where competing individual interests find a compositional order but as the social sphere where individual beliefs concerning the public dimension of life are constantly formed and unformed. Habermas includes in his account of public rationality a strongly transformative perspective that brings him close to the pragmatist tradition well before his later more explicitly pragmatist turn. *The process of belief-formation gets primacy over the process of belief-justification.*

This transformative stance is couched in linguistic terms, as the public sphere is mainly conceived as being discursive: it is a realm of discourses oriented towards agreement. Public opinion, than, more than public reason, seems to be the adequate category for grasping the content of Habermas understanding. The public sphere, in fact, as Nancy Fraser puts it, “designates a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk” (Fraser 1992: 110). Rationality is in this way separated from agency in order to be characterized only as an attribute of discourses: it denotes discourses which are shaped in accordance with some given procedural constraints²⁴. A second relevant difference with the liberal account is the broader range of contexts to which public reason can be applied. According to Habermas, in fact, the public use of reason is not confined into the formal context of institutional practice only (governmental, parliamentary and judicial) but extends over to what he calls the informal public sphere. This broadening is so evident and the recognition of the importance of the informal public sphere so great that it could even be possible to conceive the public sphere as being external and somehow opposite to the state (see Fraser 1992).

²⁴ This exclusively discursive definition of the public sphere can be found also at the bottom of new concepts such as those of “transnational public sphere” or “global public sphere”, which focus precisely on the new discursive arena made possible by the development of new media technologies (mainly web based) and which are therefore of a purely discursive nature. See Bohman 2007, Olesen 2005, Fraser 2007 and Stichweh 2003.

Nevertheless, Habermas shares with Rawls the idea that in order to rise from the private to the public use of reason²⁵ – a mark, indeed, of the dualism of reason they both accept – a sort of moral supplement is required: the injection of an ethical drive (Habermas speaks of solidarity, Rawls of reciprocity) is seen as the necessary condition for contrasting the insufficiency of a reason that, because of its private character, has no legitimacy where public issues are at hand. Not differently from Rawls, Habermas sees public reason as requiring that private reasoners refrain from exercising their reasons in their own private interest. Only in that way rational discourse can attain this legitimacy which is required in order to ground public decisions and institutions. While in Rawls the egoism of private rationality is neutralized through the fiction of the veil of ignorance freeing each agent of his individual traits, in Habermas this same moralizing function is accomplished by procedural rules that inform and orient communicative public discourse.

Habermas' discourse centred democratic theory grounds democratic legitimacy in the institutionalization of procedures of public discussion and reasoning that are consistent with those discursive standards of rationality that he has discovered as the normative grounds of all discourses oriented toward communication. These are necessary procedural presuppositions of rational argument and their respect constitutes the main requisite for a use of reason that can deliver legitimate pretences. In this perspective, the public sphere is conceived as a space of dialogue among citizens in which every speech is governed by the ultimate *telos* of arriving at a form of agreement. Habermas' model of public reason as *communicative* is centred on a purely *linguistic understanding of rationality* as the practice of exchanging reasons with the aim of producing consensus among people – and so assuring the coordination of social action – through reciprocal understanding (instead of, say, coercion). As it was the case with Rawls and more broadly with the classical liberal tradition, this communicative use of reason has to be understood through its opposition to a different conception of rationality, that Habermas, referring to the sociological tradition, calls strategic or instrumental and which is defined through its lack of reference to the intersubjective dimension of the coordination of social action. It is, in short, another avatar of the private vs. public dualism. The Habermasian approach to public reason is characterized by a focus on the procedural content of rationality: it identifies a list of criteria²⁶ that should be respected in order to ensure that discussion is oriented

²⁵ “Every citizen must know and accept that only secular reasons count beyond the institutional threshold that divides the informal public sphere from parliaments, courts, ministries and administrations”, Habermas (2002: 9).

²⁶ It is not by chance, then, that those who have attempted to develop empirical tools for measuring the degree of rationality of practical deliberation have turned towards Habermas

towards communication rather than towards persuasion and that will enable to distinguish a discourse conducted according to normative requirement – and so being able to claim legitimacy - from a discourse that is not.

While familiarity of Habermas with pragmatism has often been noted, his kantian-based epistemology puts him nevertheless at odds with the central tenets of a practice-based pragmatist epistemology²⁷. With reference to the notion of public reason, it is notably the priority accorded to the linguistic dimension and the acceptance of the dualism of public and private reason that contribute mainly to differentiate Habermas' thinking from a pragmatist account.

3.3 Public reason, critical theory, and the critique of actually existing democracies

There is a third contemporary conception of public reason worth examining, which is shared by a wide range of political thinkers which spans from post-modernism to feminist thinking to subaltern studies via critical discourse theory. This wide array of conceptions is unified by an agonistic understanding of the public sphere as a political arena where reason and discourses are but some of the forces engaged in the task of shaping collective agency, and where power (and its unmasking) becomes the primary focus of philosophical scrutiny. Many of these thinkers acknowledge a deep indebtedness to Habermas (and some also to pragmatism) and tend to privilege discourse over rationality, and power over reason as the main explicative category of political theory. One of the most relevant achievements of this approach is an enlargement of the boundaries of the public sphere²⁸, associated though with a remarkable restriction of the prerogatives of reason inside it.

The main reason for this restriction has to be found in the fact that traditional universalistic models of rationality are criticised on a political rather than epistemological basis. Public reason is, in fact, generally criticised not on the ground of some epistemological argument (as is the case with pragmatism) but according to the political argument that in its universal guise it operates as an instrument of oppression: while claiming to speak with a universal voice, it unduly generalizes a particular perspective (gender, class, race) at the expense of others and, in so doing, it masks real differences and sustains forms of exploitation. While in Rawls and Habermas public reason is

in order to find a theoretical framework for their enterprise. Cf. especially Steenberger *et al.* 2003.

²⁷ I will not discuss here the more pragmatically oriented turn that characterizes his writing since the de-transcendentalizing move accomplished in the mid-nineties (see notably Habermas 1999). My focus is not a complete assessment of Habermas philosophy but rather to highlight the main differences between two competing paradigms in moral and political epistemology.

²⁸ See Fraser's critical remarks of in Fraser (1992: 110).

the most authentic expression of human rationality, in critical thinking it becomes the avatar of power and the instrument of exploitation and exclusion. In this perspective, broadening the very notion of reason has a direct political implication: it aims at giving voice to all those instances that have been kept silent under the fiction of a universal public reason speaking with a single and universal voice.

The important key to critical theory is that its countermove is enacted in the same presupposition of habermasian discourse theory, i.e. a definition of reason through the notion of discourse: if rationality is discursive, than discourses can be claimed to be either the instrument of universal emancipation or of particular forms of domination. Speaking rationally, and rationality as the attribute of a mode of linguistic expression, become therefore the focus of debate, as it can be seen in many of the critiques that have addressed the rational/logic form of expression as being merely a form of distinction²⁹ aimed at enforcing exploitation of western, bourgeois, white, adult, male over one or the other minority group. If we, therefore, look at the parable going from rawlsian political liberalism to critical theory, passing through discourse theory, we notice an inverse relation between the width of the public sphere and the place assigned to reason in public affairs: while rawlsian public reason was remarkably restricted only to political essentials but Olympic in its epistemological power (in the most classical sense), critical theorists accomplish such a broadening of the notion of public reason that many of the practices that it now encompasses can hardly be called rational or be considered as genuine expressions of rationality³⁰.

The broadening of the public sphere enacted by this heterogeneous group of scholars is realized along multiple and differentiated strategies: through the pluralization of the forms of expression that are considered to be legitimate in the public arena (*pluralization of expressive forms*), of the kind of discourses that are admitted in the public arena (*pluralization of discourses*) and of the forums where people meet and which are considered part of the public sphere (*pluralization of spheres*). According to the first strategy, expressive forms such as greetings, visual communication, personal narratives, etc. should be given full citizenship in the public arena, as they express the voice of subaltern and exploited groups, while communicative rationality is said to express the voice of dominant bourgeoisie (Fraser 1992, Young 2000, esp. ch. 2) According to the

²⁹ In Bourdieu's sense.

³⁰ Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (Mouffe 2000, Laclau-Mouffe 1985) provide a clear example of how the refusal of the classical model of rationality issues in an antirationalistic approach that opposes language games to argumentative foundation (Mouffe 2000: 11-12). Pragmatist public reason, as we have seen, is similarly critical of classical model of foundational rationality, but leaves much broader prerogatives to the use of reason in politics and justification.

second approach, public reason has to be broadened in order to include “artistic methods, arts of communication and arts of living, philosophical reflection, and therapeutic and educational methods” (Neubert 2008: 103-104), as these are legitimate discursive forms that shape public agency. Finally, according to the third, the habermasian preference for a single universal bourgeois public sphere should be given up in order to let flourish a plurality of subaltern counterpublics where counterdiscourses are produced and circulated in order to affirm different and contrasting interpretations aimed at shaping identities (Fraser 1992).

In all these approaches, the refusal of the neutral or universal subject which follows the acknowledgment of the inescapability of identitary traits in rational discourses is obtained through the dismissal of some of the central epistemic requirements implicit in the notion of public reason. Rationality is then progressively deprived of some of its distinguishing traits: equating reason with other forms of utterance, or rational inquiry with other forms of discourse, or reducing public discourse to its role in shaping identity, we miss some distinctive traits which are nevertheless necessary if we wish to account for the role rationality plays in shaping and guiding not only private but also public agency and life.

The consequence is a twofold contextualisation of rationality. Firstly, as the subject of reason is always a specific group speaking from a situated and specific perspective (and never from a universal or neutral point of view). Therefore, discourse is considered to be public precisely *as long as it keeps track of its situatedness*, and not as long as it removes it. Secondly, as the content of public reason (reasons in Rawlsian terms) tends to be widened: far from restraining its content to neutral reasons to be used within the institutional debate, it covers all beliefs and forms of expression which circulate in the multiple forums where political issues are debated, according to a model which, like the deweyan, is *problem driven*. Therefore, the outcome of public reason is not adjudication according to uncontroversial universal principles, but local decisions which take into consideration contextual factors. As a consequence, a public is not identified by the set of beliefs, institutions, or principles their members share, but by their acknowledgment of sharing an interest or a problem that touches upon the lives of a plurality of individuals.

These approaches are right in denouncing the distortions generated by the idealizing model of reason that philosophers such as Rawls and Habermas have introduced in the political discourse. They are right, too, in acknowledging that agents access the public sphere not as disembodied rational agents but as bearers of an individual and social identity that shapes (and hinders) their participation to public life. In this perspective, a viable account of public reason has to take into consideration how social, cultural, political, and economical practices are intertwined with rational discourse. But

the acknowledgment of the irreducibly practical nature of human reason, of its being a distinctive trait of human agency, cannot be adequately maintained unless we acknowledge also the specific traits that rationality brings to agency. In order to do this, we need to fix some clear limits to the pluralization of reason advocated by these theorists. Only in this way, in fact, we will be able to preserve the epistemic requirements which are needed if we wish to maintain a consistent notion of rationality. To this extent, critical thinking often lacks the required epistemological resources.

Acknowledging the proper place of reason in the public sphere and explaining how rationality can both be public and keep its relationship with the agent's identities requires that we drop the universal project of classical liberalism while at the same time that we avoid to collapse reason with discourses or other expressive forms. It is to this extent that a new and different epistemology is required, if we wish to find new keys to understand the place of rationality in human agency. The key to this new understanding of public reason can be found in the priority of practice over discourses and in the acknowledgment that the reference to agency and practices does not destitute the powers of reason but rather provides the conditions for a more adequate understanding of human rationality.

4. Public inquiry and the pragmatist concept of public reason

As I have tried to show, the contemporary scene of political philosophy shows three main conceptions of public reason. According to the first, public reason denotes those beliefs which can be granted universal assent and, for this reason, can ground forms of reasoning that have intersubjective normative value. According to the second, public reason receives its normative force by the endorsement of some procedural traits which guarantee that outcomes are not driven by selfish interests but by genuine commitment to the public good. According to the third, public legitimacy belongs to any form of expression which is used in the political affirmation of a collective claim (identity, need, right) provided it is not driven by violence but by the search for understanding.

Pragmatism offers a different account of public reason and, as a consequence, of the notion and functioning of the public sphere. A first important consequence of the pragmatist notion of rationality as here defined is that it overcomes the dualism of the public and the private in order to adopt a reflexive conception of rationality based on the self-correcting nature of practice. A second innovation concerns the different scope assigned to reason. While the liberal and discursive traditions assigns to reason the theoretical function of identifying common rules or beliefs that should be adopted by all

citizens in their public deliberations, pragmatism sees reason as rather issue oriented and problem driven. Both the classical liberal and the habermasian perspectives conceive the scope of reason in terms of providing justification to given theoretical beliefs or existing institutions, rather than in terms of the practical dimension of joint action. The idea of citizens engaged in a coercion-free discussion aimed at producing a justification for given institutions, compared to the pragmatist idea of a process of inquiry aimed at identifying and solving specific problems shows the difference between the exclusive consideration of the discursive or linguistic dimension typical of liberalism and the account of the full import of human practices in the normative functioning of public reason. While the liberal tradition locates public reason in the methodological context of the pluralism of beliefs and the conflicts to which they are subjected since the modern era, pragmatism locates public reason in the context of concrete and pluralistic practices, focusing its use on the assessment of consequences determined by the fact of associate living. In so doing, pragmatism relocates public reason on the ground of practice.

A further aspect of the difference between these two accounts can be seen in the different appreciation of a common theme, i.e. the introduction at the heart of the concept of reason of a reflective element. But while in Habermas the reflexivity stands for the critical attitude of reason in questioning its own presuppositions, in pragmatism the reflexivity expresses a more complex relationship between the individual, the situation and the experimentally public nature of inquiry. In Habermas the idea of a public sphere is tightly connected with a discursive understanding of rationality. The use of reason, in its instrumental and especially in its communicative dimension, is mainly seen as the practice of exchanging reasons. The public sphere is certainly enlarged compared to the rawlsian notion, but it extends to the broader society only as far as society develops forms of communication and discussions that respect certain discursive criteria. The development of a public sphere is then connected with the diffusion of this discursive practice. In this perspective, the public is the place where discourses are exchanged and where people debate political issues in a form that is submitted to certain procedural rules, the first of which is the publicity made possible by the spread of the press. In critical theory, these limitations of the liberal tradition are clearly identified and overcome. The dualism of the public and the private is fully criticised; unfortunately, this is done on a political rather than on an epistemological basis. Still in line with the pragmatist approach, the classical foundational project is generally replaced with a more contextualized project of critique of actually existing democracies whose aim is transformative rather than foundational. Unfortunately, these positive aspects are generally accompanied by a too fast dismissal of the prerogatives of rationality in human agency, private and public. The appeal to the principle of difference, to the right of

expression and inclusion and to the hermeneutical paradigm of understanding are, in fact, inadequate in order to provide a full account of public reason. The ensuing idea of public reason, as a consequence, lacks the epistemological resources that are necessary for enabling it to address questions of legitimacy and of normative validity.

Critical theory thinkers have criticised classical liberal paradigms of public reason for relying on a too formal model of rationality, which has exclusionary consequences that democratic theory should avoid. Pragmatism shares this critique but fears that this critical stance might underscore some epistemological requirements that should be preserved in order to shape policies according to goals and resorting to means that can best support the flourishing of a society. Pragmatism shares this critique and joins critical theory in claiming that the use of public reason cannot depend upon the sharing of some universal beliefs or principle, nor on the adoption of some conceptual framework *a priori* considered to be shared by all. The inescapability of the fact of pluralism, of the inhibitory effects of oppression, of the fragmentation of identities imply that traditional conceptions of rationality such as those of Rawls and Habermas are not adequate for providing a normative account of how rationality should guide political practice. But the solution, according to pragmatism, does not reside in substituting rationality with expressive and rhetorical forms of expression, nor inquiry with communication, discourses and narrative, but rather in developing a conception of rationality capable of taking into account the experiential conditions in which public reason operates. Communication and narrative are certainly powerful resources at play in public spaces, but their role should not be confused with that of rationality, and notably should not be overestimated in the domain of justificatory practices.

Pragmatism assigns this task to the theory of inquiry. The idea of political inquiry as a collaborative practice aimed at solving problems emerging in the course of associated life offers the preliminary basis for a pragmatist theory of public reason. In this article I have showed that pragmatism can be seen as offering a theory of public reason which rivals with the most influent contemporary approaches. More empirically oriented work will have to show the extent to which this alternative paradigm will help us in dealing with issues of disagreement and controversies in our contemporary public arenas.

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