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Original Article

The reproduction of canonical silences: re-reading Habermas in the context of slavery and the slave trade

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Abstract

Recent discussions on "decolonizing" knowledge production have often foregrounded the importance of centering "marginal" perspectives, which is crucial but insufficient as it risks leaving the canon untouched. Jürgen Habermas' book on the bourgeois public sphere is one of the most frequently cited and debated canonical texts in media and communication studies. Drawing on the case of London's coffee houses and newspapers, this article argues for a critical re-engagement with canonical thinkers. It examines what the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere in 17th- and 18th-century England looks like if we re-read it within the context of slavery and the slave trade. The article demonstrates that race does not simply provide another "prism" to examine the bourgeois public sphere but instead enables and is constitutive of it. The reproduction of canonical silences through the continued circulation of influential texts has implications for how we conceptualize racialized publics in contemporary times.

Keywords: knowledge production, public sphere, publics, Habermas, race, slavery, slave trade

The notion of the "public sphere" is one of the key concepts in the field of media and communication studies. The book that coined the term, Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (published in German in 1962 and translated into English in 1989), could be considered as one of the most frequently cited and canonical texts of our field. Of course, it is also one of the most intensely debated texts, with critics highlighting the way in which Habermas' public sphere excluded women (Fraser, 1992) or working-class people (Negt and Kluge, 1972), doubting his belief in a unitary public sphere (Gitlin, 1998) or questioning his focus on rational-critical debate and neglect of the role of emotion (Mouffe, 2000). Arguably, even the critiques of this "essentially contested concept" (Rauchfleisch, 2017) have become canonized.[1]

Despite these shortfalls, Habermas' notion of the public sphere has inspired a range of scholars in our field who have found it useful as a normative ideal to assess the role of the spaces of deliberation brought into being by modern mass media such as television, radio, print media (Butsch, 2007; Dahlgren, 1995; Lunt & Livingstone, 2002), and more recently digital and social media (Benkler, 2006; Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002). The appeal of Habermas' notion of the public sphere should be understood in the particular context of the post-cold war period which saw a revived interest in civil society and renewed hopes of processes of democratization globally (Calhoun, 1992).

The global circulation of the notion of "the public sphere" means that Habermas' ideas are therefore a solid part of disciplinary histories of media and communication studies. The question that has been asked less frequently is how Habermas invoked history in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. While Habermas' concept has been applied countlessly in relation to a range of contemporary media institutions and technologies, his book essentially offered a *historical* account of the emergence of "a sphere where private people come together as public and discuss matters of common concern" (1989, p. 27) in 17th- and 18th-century England, France and Germany. As Habermas (1989, p. xvii) noted, his concept was a historical notion specific to the European context he studied:

> The other peculiarity of our method results from the necessity of having to proceed at once sociologically and historically. We conceive bourgeois public sphere as a category that is typical of an epoch. It cannot be abstracted from the unique developmental history of that "civil society" (…) originating in the European High Middle Ages; nor can it be transferred, ideal typically generalized to any number of historical situations that represent formally similar constellations.

The historical accuracy of Habermas' book has been questioned by a number of historians. For example, Downie (2004, p. 2) has argued that:

> [t]here are (…) problems with each of the key "events" cited by Habermas. Indeed, it would not be putting the matter too strongly to say that one can quibble about the accuracy of almost every sentence he writes about seventeenth- and eighteenth-century "Britain", including his assertions about art and architecture, literature, music and the theatre.

The use(s) of history have increasingly been contested in recent years in the context of the 2015 #RhodesMustFall and

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2015 and 2020 #BlackLivesMatter protests. These movements have also inspired revisions of received disciplinary histories (see for example Meghji, 2020 on "decolonizing sociology," and Shilliam, 2021 on "decolonizing politics"), which highlight how academic disciplines have been complicit in the colonial project while at the same time erasing legacies of slavery, the slave trade, and colonialism from theoretical approaches. They add to a longer history of revisionism in anthropology, which given its intimate and more visible link with colonialism, has reflected on these questions since the 1970s (Asad, 1973).

Of course, both the origins and object of study of media and communication studies (as a field rather than a discipline) mostly lie in the recent past of the early-mid 20th-century (Park and Pooley, 2008; Simonson and Park, 2016). However, the normative ideals that are associated with debates in the field are part of a much older history of ideas and link to the emergence of European liberalism and liberal modernity. For example, the notion of freedom of speech can be traced back to 17th-century English philosophers such as John Milton and John Locke as well as 19th-century philosophers such as John Stuart Mill. Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* strongly draws upon their ideas and can in many ways be considered as a celebration of European liberal modernity.

The modern liberalism conveyed by European political philosophy was, however, highly contradictory and ambiguous. As Lowe (2015, p. 3) points out, while liberalism made "universal promises of rights, emancipation, wage labor, and free trade," these were freedoms for some which strongly depended on the denial of freedoms to others. The ideas associated with modern liberalism as reflected through "Lockean liberal political and economic rights to property and commerce were also notoriously employed to justify the slave trade and the ownership of slaves" (Lowe 2015, p. 11). Lowe's focus on "the intimacies of four continents" is useful in order to situate Habermas' public sphere in a more transnational historical context. Too often, European territories of the 18th century are described as "nations" but this does not reflect their status at the time. As Bhambra (2019, p. 176) argues, "a more adequate conceptual understanding requires us to take seriously the imperial histories that were constitutive to the formation of modern states *and their populations*." European "nations" such as Britain, France and Germany were "imperial formations constituted by a colonizing state and the territories and populations that were incorporated" (Bhambra 2021, p. 69).

Habermas' notion of the public sphere has inspired scholars to reflect on the existence of a global or transnational public sphere in the context of networked technologies of communication such as satellite television and the internet (Castells, 2008; Fraser and Nash, 2014; Sparks, 2001; Volkmer, 2014). However, his understanding of the 18th-century public sphere in Britain, France, and Germany was predominantly a national one. Given the intimate and connected nature of histories between Europe, Africa, and the Americas as highlighted by Lowe (2015) and Bhambra (2019, 2021), it is important to revisit Habermas' historical account of the emergence of the 18th-century public sphere in Britain. As Bhambra (2021, p. 81) argues, modernity did not "emerge from separation or rupture, but through the connected and entangled histories of European colonization." Hence, in this article, I ask what Habermas' European bourgeois public sphere looks like if we re-read it within the context of slavery and the slave trade. Instead of providing an exhaustive, revisionist history of Habermas' profoundly racialized, bourgeois public sphere, this article uses the example of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* to raise a wider argument about the importance of intervening in and disrupting the canon by exposing the silences in canonical texts, alongside the crucial work of centering "marginal" perspectives.[2]

The canon and uses of history in media and communication studies

The 2015 #RhodesMustFall and 2015 and 2020 #BlackLivesMatter protests provoked a debate on the nature of knowledge production and the role of colonial legacies. For example, African scholars-both based on the continent and in the diaspora-have stressed the need to center Africa in media and communication studies and to problematize claims to universality in much of U.S.-/Europe-focused work (Mano and Milton, 2021; Mutsvairo, 2018).

U.S.-based scholars have highlighted the racialized power relations in the field of media and communication studies by drawing attention to the marginalization of scholars of color in publication rates, citation rates, and editorial journal positions in the field of media and communication studies (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Ng et al., 2020).

These initiatives built on earlier calls to better understand the "raced" nature of the field of communications. Martin and Nakayama (2006, p. 2) offer three useful ways to understand the relationship between communication and race:

1) Racial histories and demographics inform and reflect communication behaviors.
2) The conceptualization and study of communication is raced—historically and contemporaneously.
3) The field of communication is raced.

While all three relationships are interlinked, the second relationship is of particular interest here. In offering a re-reading of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, this article demonstrates how Habermas failed to conceptualize the public sphere as a *raced* space that was connected to the larger project of European imperialism. As I pointed out above, Habermas' book has become a canonical text in the field of media and communication studies, and arguably in affiliated fields such as political science, sociology, and literary studies. The book is therefore a crucial part of intellectual history in itself (see Rauchfleisch, 2017).

Intellectual histories are important as they help to demarcate disciplines and fields. They signal what sort of knowledge should be valued and what deserves to be ignored or remain on the periphery. Hence, any intellectual history is contested (Park and Pooley, 2008; Willems, 2014), and any history will include "a particular bundle of silences" (Trouillot, 1995, p. 27).

Mukherjee (2020, p. 152) argues that the field of communication studies "remains so white because its experts and leaders continue to ignore its own institutional DNA, deliberately not knowing profoundly raced elements of its own intellectual history." Instead of highlighting the institutional racism that

has shaped the emergence of our field, my focus here is on the *uses of history* within the intellectual histories of the field of media and communication. By making visible the larger transnational, racialized context in which the European bourgeois public sphere emerged, this article provokes discussion on how history is understood *within* disciplinary histories of our field.

Challenging the uses of history in canonical texts offers one way of intervening in and disrupting the canon in addition to others. In media and communication studies, canonization has been defended by some "as efficiency mechanisms to protect students or scholars from wandering in the wilderness of the literature" or as "ways to cut through overwhelming amounts of material" (Katz et al., 2002, p. 4). Problematically, canons are often considered to represent "intellectual quality and interest" and to "establish standards" (Katz et al., 2002, pp. 4–5) rather than examples of "the institutionalized standardization and normalization of whiteness (and maleness)" (Baugh-Harris and Wanzer-Serrano, 2018, p. 338).

Inspired by Southern theory, Black Studies, and indigenous/decolonial approaches, recent discussions on decolonizing knowledge production have highlighted the importance of centering "marginal" perspectives (Connell, 2007), recognizing the pluriversality of knowledge(s) (Escobar, 2020), offering an alternative ethics and method of knowledge production (Smith, 1999), and contesting precisely what counts as theory (McKittrick, 2021). In our field, some recent proposals in this regard have included challenging the canon by centering marginal perspectives (Mohammed, 2022; Na'Puti and Cruz, 2022; Zidani, 2021), or by abandoning "the long-held assumption that 'canon' should be a goal at all" (Baugh-Harris and Wanzer-Serrano, 2018, p. 337).

All these strategies are valid and do important work. However, there is a risk that they leave the canon-and one could argue, white supremacy more broadly-largely untouched. As Shome (1996, p. 49) cautioned nearly two decades ago in relation to the field of rhetoric:

> The solution, however, is not merely to do more rhetorical studies on nonwhite people (. . .), for that only becomes a matter of extending, instead of displacing or challenging, the canon by adding "others." Rather, the solution is to critically examine and challenge the very value system on which the rhetorical canon and our scholarship is based.

It is crucial to unsettle the unproblematic celebration of European liberal modernity that is at the heart of Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, and which considers the bourgeois public sphere as a key achievement of a number of "democratizing" nation-states in Europe. Intervening into this text helps to disrupt its legitimacy and expose its omittances. Given the canonical status of the notion of the "public sphere," it is imperative to examine how the constant recirculation of Habermas' ideas helps to normalize certain hegemonic understandings of history and to silence other versions of history considered to be peripheral. As Hesse (2007, p. 658) points out, "[b]ecause concepts and categories are inherited in traditions of thought, what becomes particularly consecrated as the heritage of thought, the recognized or legitimated lineage of thinking, exerts a powerful conventional presence on conceptual formations." Hence, the necessity to make canonical silences visible to ensure that these are not reproduced endlessly.

Disrupting the universal subject of liberal modernity

A number of scholars have highlighted the elision of race, colonialism, and slavery in accounts of liberal modernity, and scholars affiliated to the Frankfurt School more specifically (Bhambra, 2021; Hesse, 2007; Mukherjee, 2020). Jürgen Habermas is often seen as part of the younger generation of Frankfurt School scholars who followed in the footsteps of Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Theodor W. Adorno. Habermas joined the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt-the institution associated with "the Frankfurt School"-in 1956 as a researcher and teaching assistant to Theodor W. Adorno (Corchia, 2015, p. 192). This was after the Frankfurt School had been reconstituted in Frankfurt after the Second World War when it had moved to New York temporarily. During this early stay at the Frankfurt School, he wrote his habilitation dissertation on the public sphere which later led to his book publication in 1962.

The scholarship produced by the Frankfurt School-and the early generation of scholars in particular-was strongly shaped by the rise of Nazism in Germany and motivated by a drive to understand the causes of Nazism. As Horkheimer and Adorno ([1947] 2002, p. xiv) wrote in *The Dialectics of Enlightenment*, "[w]hat we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism." As Mukherjee (2020, p. 158) explains, they concluded that "it was a Western problem, rooted in the Enlightenment urge to dominate nature." However, in doing so, they failed to situate the Enlightenment project within the larger context of European colonialism and imperialism:

> Nothing prevented them [*scholars part of the Frankfurt School, WW*] from turning this insight toward full analyses of how Western Enlightenment was linked to the racial projects of European colonialism and imperialism. But, after 1950, the Frankfurt School, stayed, for the most part, focused on the linkages between modernity and authoritarianism, approaching anti-Semitism not in terms of its significance as a racial project but as a generalized technology of modern societal control. (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 158)

Like Mukherjee, a number of other scholars have pointed to the blind spots in Habermas' work. For example, literary scholar Brooks (2005, p. 86) has pointed out that Habermas failed "to investigate fully the racialization of the public sphere, especially in relationship to questions of property that were crucial to the capitalization of the emergent middle class." The philosopher Eze (1998, p. 140) has argued in relation to Habermas' first 1984 volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action* that analytic categories like imperialism, colonialism, and postcolonialism "play no role in Habermas' theory of modernity." With regard to his more recent two-volume history of Western philosophy, *This Too a History of Philosophy* (published in German in 2019; no English translation available as yet), critics have pointed out that Habermas "devotes limited attention to the contradictions of European slavery and colonialism, as well as their problematic treatment by contemporaries" but "instead

frames colonial encounters as moments in the learning process, way stations on the path toward moral universalism" (Bloch, 2020).

The philosopher Mills (2014 [1997], p. 129) suggested that "Habermas's Eurocentric, deraced, and deimperialized vision of modernity [as outlined in his 1987 book *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*] itself stands in need of critique." When he asked Habermas why he did not write about race, Habermas replied "because I'm not a Nazi."[3] Habermas' reluctance to discuss race may link to the connotation of the German notion of "Rasse" to the scientific racism ("Rassenlehre") that was at the heart of Nazism. It might reflect a wider public debate in Germany about how invoking the term "race" might end up condoning or reifying a racist ideology (Roig, 2016, pp. 617–618). Instead of drawing links between colonialism and Nazism, the Holocaust is presented as an anomaly and the end of Nazism is equated to the end of racism.

It is important to make visible the elision of histories of colonialism in theories of liberal modernity. While these approaches claim universality, they primarily reflect a white, Western vantage point that masks "the darker side of Western modernity" (Mignolo, 2011). Often, modernity is constructed as the product of processes of change internal to European history. However, of course, this project strongly depended on "world-historical processes of dispossession, appropriation, elimination, and enslavement" (Bhambra, 2021, p. 80). As Bhambra (2021, p 75) argues, "[t]he modern (European) subject, defined in terms of self-ownership, comes into being in the context of wider discourses of emancipation and is constituted through the practice of taking others *into* ownership and appropriating their means of subsistence and reproduction."

Histories of slavery are rarely discussed in media and communication studies, yet are fundamental to the emergence of media institutions and technologies. Armond Towns' and Lyndsey Beutin's work are exceptions here; both draw attention to the racialized nature of much received scholarship in the field. Towns' (2019) re-reading of McLuhan's canonized work through the lens of Charles Mills "racial contract" approach deconstructs the universalism in McLuhan's notion of "Man." Towns (2019, p. 549) demonstrates that "Man is not just anyone who utilizes Western media, such as phonetic literacy or the printing press; man is a Western being, situated in time and space." He suggests the Black body-as Man's private property-is a medium in its own right which helps to constitute Western humanness. Similarly, Beutin (2021, p. 15) argues that the field of communication studies "continues to accept and affirm a universal liberal subject, without understanding how history-the history of racial chattel slavery and settler colonialism in particular-shaped the discourse of liberal humanism in ways that secured racial hierarchy and white power." The act of re-reading the canon helps to expose its flaws and limitations.

Re-reading Habermas

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Habermas describes the emergence of a new sphere of public communication in 17th- and 18th-century England, France, and Germany. While the church and state had thus far played an important role in controlling the circulation of ideas and information, the rise of capitalism resulted in a new public sphere "where private people come together as public and discuss matters of common concern" (1989, p. 27). Coffee houses, newspapers, journals, and periodicals constituted the "social structures" that he considered to be foundational to this new public sphere.

In his book, Habermas (1989, p. 34) identifies the period between 1680 and 1730 as the "golden age" of coffee houses in England. Coffee houses were intricately linked to the establishment of new newspapers, journals, and periodicals. The public discussions taking place in coffee houses fed back into publications such as *Tatler* and *The Spectator* which reported on the discussions taking place in the coffee houses (Habermas, 1989, pp. 42–43). The coffee houses, in their turn, made a range of newspapers, journals, and periodicals available to customers to read within their premises. Customers who frequented these new institutions included "the wider strata of the middle class, including craftsmen and shopkeepers" (Habermas, 1989, p. 33) but excluded women. The coffee houses were also known as "penny universities" (Ellis, 1956); customers were charged a penny which covered both entrance to the coffee house and a cup of coffee.

The coffee house scene in London was a crucial meeting space for new commercial elites, and many coffees houses could be found in the vicinity of the Royal Exchange, founded in the 16th-century to act as a center of commerce for the City of London. Merchants, traders, sailors, insurers, and bankers all frequented the new coffee houses. In his book, Habermas narrates how the emergence of these spaces coincided with a new phase of capitalism which he describes in euphemistic terms such as "mercantilism" and "long-distance trade." What he fails to explain is how this new phase was *enabled* by gains made from slavery and the slave trade.

In his seminal book, *Capitalism and Slavery*, published in 1944, Eric Williams argued that the 18th-century "triangular trade" between Europe, Africa and America was crucial to Britain's Industrial Revolution, its accumulation of profits and economic growth. As part of this, Britain exported manufactured goods in return for Africans, who were captured and shipped to North and South America and subsequently enslaved and subjected to forced labor on plantations. Britain was then provided with raw materials from the Americas such as sugar and cotton which helped to fuel its industries. In his 1983 book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Cedric Robinson-whose work has seen a revival in recent years-expanded Williams' arguments through the concept of "racial capitalism" shaped by histories of slavery and colonialism.

As the most dominant slave-trading nation after Spain and Portugal, it is estimated that Britain captured and shipped nearly 3.3 million Africans between 1551 and 1825. Most Africans captured by British slave traders were enslaved in the Americas (Eltis and Richardson, 2010, p. 23). In the period which Habermas described as the "golden age" of coffee houses, 683,000 Africans were taken as captives from the continent. A small proportion of Africans ended up in Britain; most arrived as waged or enslaved servants and some as freed, formerly enslaved. While the numbers vary, it is estimated that by 1768, London had an estimated Black population of 20,000 but the number could be somewhere between 10,000 and 30,000 (Gerzina, 1995, p. 5).

Both coffee houses and newspapers were intricately linked to the slave trade and slavery in a number of ways. First of

all, in the most direct way, they facilitated the sale and recapturing of enslaved people. As Mullen, Mundell and Newman (2020, p. 82) argue, "'[f]or sale' notices (...) were an everyday feature of English and Scottish newspapers" which suggests that "trafficking of enslaved people was routine." Coffee houses were often listed as point of contact for prospective sales. For example, as an ad in the *Daily Journal* of 26 September 1728 read: "To be Sold, A Negro Boy, aged about Eleven years. Inquire at the Virginia Coffee-House in Threadneedle-street, behind the Royal-Exchange."[4] Many enslaved African children were sold to work as domestic servants.

Related to this, both coffee houses and newspapers also helped to sustain slavery in Britain and played an important role in recapturing those enslaved people who managed to escape. As Williams (1944, p. 98) wrote in *Capitalism and Slavery*, "many advertisements in the *London Gazette* about runaway slaves listed Lloyd's [coffee house] as the place where they should be returned." A recently compiled database as part of a research project based at the University of Glasgow lists over 800 runaway adverts published in English and Scottish newspapers between 1700 and 1780.[5] Many of these also listed coffee houses as places to return runaways to. For example, the *London Gazette* (an official journal of the British government established on 1 February 1666[6]) published the following advert on 10 July 1704:

> RUN away the 17th of June last from his Master, a short Negro Man, 18 years old, named Jack, blubber Lip'd, sharp Shin'd, long Heel'd, speaks good English, with a Frise Coat and Breeches, hath been seen at Safron-Hill near Holborn: He is mark'd on one Shoulder with W. B. and on the other with W. D. Whoever brings him to the Jamaica Coffee-House in Miles Alley in Cornhill, shall have a Guinea Reward.

Given the intricate links between coffeehouses and newspapers, it is not surprising that these mutually constituted each other as early technologies of surveillance of Black bodies (see also Browne, 2015).

A second more indirect connection pertains to the activities that the customers of coffee houses and readers of newspapers were involved with. In many ways, they represented the new commercial elites who benefited from the slave trade. For example, the well-known Lloyd's Coffee House-initially based in Tower Street, Covent Garden and then relocated to Lombard Street near the Royal Exchange-was frequented by merchants, sailors, and ship owners who gathered to discuss shipping- and business-related issues.[7] The coffee house later evolved into the well-known insurance company, Lloyd's of London, which amassed wealth through its insurance of ships transporting the enslaved who were treated as a form of private property.[8] So apart from directly facilitating the sale and recapturing of enslaved people, the coffee houses also hosted networking opportunities for commercial elites involved in insuring slave ships. Ultimately, this helped to sustain slavery by reducing the so-called 'risks' associated with the slave trade to those directly benefiting from it. Although discussions on slavery "seemed almost forbidden by common consent" in the coffee houses themselves, slavery dominated the mercantile culture within which the coffeehouses were embedded (Reynolds, 2022, p. 149).

A third link relates to the way in which the coffee houses acted as spaces where colonial commodities like sugar, which were produced in slave-based economies in the Caribbean, were consumed (Mintz, 1985). According to Gikandi (2014, p. 110), "the counterpoint to the European coffeehouse was the Caribbean sugar complex, the growing, processing, and export of this commodity enabled by African slaves." The wealth accumulated by the British owners of sugar plantations in the Caribbean sustained coffeehouse culture but in turn, those consuming sugar also were able to do so as a result of the violence that enslaved people were subjected to on the plantations. Sugar was inextricably linked to slavery and a key part of the 18th-century British economy. "English sugar imports increased sevenfold from 430,000 cwt. in 1700 to over 3,000,000 cwt. in 1800" while sugar consumption per capita rapidly increased from "1 lb. to 25 lbs. between 1670 and 1770" (Morgan, 1993, pp. 184-185, quoted in Sheller, 2011, p. 4). These three links help to make visible the multiple silences in Habermas' historical account of the key social structures that he associated with the emergence of a new public sphere in Britain.

Conclusion

While Habermas idealized public deliberation as a key element of what a European liberal democracy should look like, by situating his historical account of the public sphere in the larger transnational context of racial capitalism, this article has demonstrated that the coffee houses and newspapers of the 17th- and 18th-century were both made possible by slavery and the slave trade and at the same time, helped to sustain it further. A number of scholars have deployed Habermas' notion of the public sphere to reflect on the existence of a global or transnational public sphere in the context of networked technologies of communication such as satellite television and the Internet. This article has shown that Habermas' public sphere was *already* deeply transnational in the 18th-century. As Eze (1998, p. 141) has argued in relation to Habermas' work, "for Europe or the modern West to think itself without Africa is to suppress the conflicts that shaped and continue to shape modern and postmodern European history and identities."

By only focusing on the "emancipatory" nature of the public sphere, scholars of liberal modernity have adopted partial, white vantage points which have led them to neglect the racial violence required to make this space possible. Given our field's focus on modern mass media and digital technology, it is rare to have discussions on the 17th- and 18th-century. However, when this period is addressed, it is often through Habermas' account of the bourgeois public sphere. It is crucial to make the silences in canonical texts visible so as to ensure that these are not replicated endlessly.

The reproduction of canonical silences through the continued circulation of influential texts such as Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* has implications for the way in which we conceptualize the world in the present. By situating Habermas' work within the context of slavery and the slave trade, the *constitutive* role of race in the emergence of the public sphere is made visible. Race does not simply provide another "prism"[9] or "additive element"[10] to look at the bourgeois public sphere but instead, race-as (re)produced through slavery and the slave trade-enables, and is

fundamental to, the constitution of the bourgeois public sphere. These histories continue to have repercussions for the way in which we make sense of contemporary racialized publics which are shaped by algorithmic racism (Noble, 2018) and in which Black women are disproportionally harassed online, often without any significant intervention from digital platforms (Bailey, 2021).

While centering the "margins" is frequently seen as crucial in debates on "decolonizing" academic knowledge production, this article has argued for the added importance of disrupting the "center" in order to make the silences in canonical texts visible. As Shilliam (2021, p. 2) points out, "if you moved your focus to a study of the 'margins' only, then that would leave the 'center' intact. Your movement would thereby avoid difficult but compelling questions such as: Who made their lives central and other peoples' lives marginal?." Or put differently, "[f]ocusing only on what happens 'elsewhere' has the effect of disconnecting the 'Southern' from the 'Northern' forms of thinking" (Khoo, 2021, p. 705).

Of course, in drawing attention to Habermas' work, his ideas are reproduced yet again but the point is not simply to discard his work but to demonstrate how the act of "re-reading" can contribute to a renewal of concepts and theoretical approaches (Bhambra and Holmwood 2021, p. 209). Acknowledging the foundational role of histories of slavery and the slave trade more profoundly in our field will help to produce more intimate, entangled approaches to history which reveal the multiple connections between Africa, Europe, and the US (see also Willems, 2021). While this article has only made a start with exposing the historical silences in Habermas' work, there is space for a deeper cross-reading between his version of the emergence of capitalism in Western Europe and the accounts of writers in the Black radical tradition such as Eric Williams and Cedric Robinson.[11] This can shed light on how the racialized, transnational emergence of capitalism has been constituted by and has helped to constitute the European bourgeois public sphere.[12]

Author note

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NOTES

1. Lesser-known critiques have addressed the Eurocentric nature of Habermas' account of the public sphere, and its inapplicability outside the context of Western Europe. See for example Dalleo (2011), De Sousa Santos (2012), Gunaratne (2006), and Min (2014).
2. I use "marginal" here in scare quotes to problematize this term, and to emphasize its relational nature. Of course, the supposedly "marginal" perspectives referred here are central to making sense of the so-called "center."
3. This statement is based on a conversation between Charles Mills and Yale philosophy professor Jason Stanley: https://twitter.com/jasonintrator/status/1535458938698727424 (last accessed: 11 June 2022).
4. See 'Runaway Slaves in eighteenth-century Britain 'For Sale' Advertisements', p. 2, available via: https://www.runaways.gla.ac.uk/for_sale/Runaway%20Slaves%20in%2018th%20C%20Britain%20-%20For%20Sale.pdf (last accessed: 1 November 2021).
5. To access the database, please check: https://www.runaways.gla.ac.uk/database/display/?rid=675 (last accessed: 1 November 2021).
6. See: https://www.thegazette.co.uk/history/timeline (last accessed: 1 November 2021).
7. White, Matthew, Newspapers, gossip and coffee-house culture, 21 June 2018, available via: https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/newspapers-gossip-and-coffee-house-culture (last accessed: 1 November 2021).
8. See for Lloyd's recent reflections on this history: https://www.lloyds.com/about-lloyds/history/the-trans-atlantic-slave-trade (last accessed: 1 November 2021).
9. See also Stuart Hall's approach, summarized by Gilroy (2021, p. 2) as "race is the prism."
10. See Grosfoguel (2011, p. 11) on race as an "integral, entangled and constitutive part of the broad entangled 'package' called the European modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system."
11. See also Towns (2019) who adopts a similar strategy in cross-reading Marshall McLuhan, Charles Mills and Frantz Fanon and Shilliam (2021) who contrasts Immanuel Kant and Sylvia Wynter in Chapter 2 of his book.
12. See also Sobande (2021) and Saha and van Lente (2022) how engage with the concept of 'racial capitalism' in their analysis of digital racism and the cultural industries respectively.

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