

The End or the Reconstitution of the Public Sphere? Communication, Meaning, and Society in Baudrillard and Habermas

NİHAT DURMAZ 
Selçuk University

Research Article

Submitted: 19.01.2026 | Accepted: 11.05.2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20148660>

Abstract: This article offers a comparative examination of Jean Baudrillard's and Jürgen Habermas's conceptions of communication, meaning, and the public sphere. Baudrillard argues that in the modern era communication and information lead not to an expansion of meaning but to its collapse, resulting in the disintegration of the public sphere within the domain of hyperreality. Mass media, accordingly, does not aim at genuine communication; rather, it seeks to simulate meaning and render it consumable. This process causes the social to implode into what Baudrillard calls the *silent masses*. The silent masses cease to function as subjects within rational public debate and instead become statistical objects. The social, in this sense, can no longer express itself openly except through opinion polls and surveys. By contrast, Habermas maintains that the public sphere can be reconstituted insofar as it is grounded in communicative rationality as the normative foundation of democracy. For Habermas, the essence of communication lies in the pursuit of mutual understanding and the critical evaluation of validity claims. When communicative action is structured around claims to truth, sincerity, and legitimacy, the possibility of social consensus emerges. This study therefore discusses Baudrillard's diagnosis of the end of the public sphere alongside Habermas's normative project of reconstructing the public sphere on a communicative basis. It emphasizes how each approach

should be understood in the context of contemporary society and highlights the limitations inherent in both perspectives. Finally, the article argues that in the age of hyperreality the public sphere can be understood neither as entirely vanished nor as something that can be naively reconstructed through pure optimism. By bringing together Baudrillard's critical warnings and Habermas's normative framework, the study defends the importance of critical awareness and participatory effort for the reconstitution of communication and meaning in contemporary society.

Keywords: Public sphere, communication, meaning, society, simulation.

Introduction

The concept of the public sphere refers to a communicative space situated at the center of modern democratic societies, where individuals arrive at shared judgments through processes of public deliberation. This concept attained a central position in social theory largely through the work of Jürgen Habermas. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), Habermas examines the normative significance of the public sphere through the emergence and eventual decline of the bourgeois public. His conception of the public sphere designates a social arena in which democratic legitimacy is grounded in critical reasoning and rational debate. At the same time, Habermas analyzes how the public sphere in modern mass society has gradually eroded and undergone a process of refeudalization. He also addresses the ways in which the forces of the state and the market transform the public sphere into an instrument serving their own interests. As this transformation weakens the role of the citizen, genuine public participation is increasingly replaced by derivative forms of political engagement and plebiscitary practices.¹

Habermas's conception of the public sphere has been critically

¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 176–177.

questioned by postmodern thinkers. Among them, Jean Baudrillard argues – through his theory of simulation and his analyses of mass media – that meaning and reality have been fundamentally destabilized in modern society. From this perspective, contemporary society corresponds to a structure dominated by simulacra, organized not around reality but around a network of representations referred to as hyperreality. In a society structured around hyperreality and simulacra, the transformation of communication and the public sphere appears unavoidable. Within this transformation, the media ceases to function as a space where messages generate critical interaction and instead becomes a system of non-communication.² Under such conditions, the development of genuine public debate becomes impossible. As information increases, meaning diminishes; the abundance of information paradoxically produces a scarcity of meaning. This study offers a comparative analysis of Habermas's and Baudrillard's views on communication, meaning, and the public sphere. Our primary motivation is to question whether the public sphere has in fact come to an end and, if so, to examine whether it can be reconstructed through communicative rationality. To this end, Baudrillard's reflections on communication and meaning will be examined alongside Habermas's concepts of communicative action and the public sphere. The two approaches will then be compared in order to assess the kinds of perspectives they offer regarding the future of the public sphere in modern society. Finally, drawing on the insights of both philosophers, the study will highlight the possibilities as well as the limitations involved in reconstructing the public sphere under the conditions of contemporary media and society. In this respect, the analysis goes beyond a purely theoretical conceptual inquiry and advances a critical evaluation.

1. The Collapse of Communication and Meaning and the End of the Public Sphere

Baudrillard's analyses of media, simulation, and consumer society consistently revolve around the disappearance of meaning in modern society and the transformation of communication into a network

² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 22.

of simulacra. With the advent of modernity, consumption begins to displace production, while the sign gradually replaces reality. In this way, the world of meaningful signs is transformed into a game of simulation in which endless copies circulate. The sphere in which this transformation becomes most visible is that of mass communication and the media. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard argues that communication within the media produces only virtual interaction and that information, rather than generating meaning, ultimately destroys it. For instance, although mass communication technologies such as radio, television, and the telephone appear at first glance to expand participation and interaction, in reality they generate ghostly contents that contribute to the disappearance of meaning. While it is suggested that everyone has the right to speak on a given issue, what actually takes place is a one-way flow of messages. Under such conditions, individuals remain not participants in the communicative process but mere spectators. Indeed, the media system anticipates and neutralizes the responses of its audience in advance. According to Baudrillard, this illusion constitutes not genuine communication but the simulation of communication.³

Within this regime of simulation, information consumes communication, the social, and ultimately itself. As the number of messages multiplies, our capacity to extract socially meaningful messages diminishes. The central problem of this process of semantic erosion lies in the media's continuous production and circulation of signs that no longer refer to any real referent. These accumulating signs generate a self-referential form of reality, which Baudrillard terms hyperreality. In the condition of hyperreality, individuals can no longer draw a clear distinction between the mediated world and the real one. Baudrillard illustrates this point through a well-known allegory: in a certain empire, cartographers create a map so detailed that it covers the entire territory of the empire at a one-to-one scale. Eventually, the map replaces the territory itself. In the modern mediatized society, simulations similarly replace reality; the distinction between the map (media

³ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 79–80.

images) and the real (social events) disappears.⁴

The relationship between media images and reality also transforms the very ideal of the public sphere into a form of simulation. The Habermasian conception of the public sphere as a space constructed through rational-critical debate among individuals is no longer operative. Instead, the media constructs a pseudo-public sphere in which individuals are guided and pacified through the mechanisms of mass communication. Baudrillard argues that this pseudo-public sphere does not contribute to social integration; rather, it signals the dissolution of the social into the mass. If such a transformation is realized, it becomes increasingly difficult to speak of shared meaning or common values. For the defining characteristic of the masses, according to Baudrillard, is their capacity to neutralize and render ineffective everything they encounter, including meaning and value.

The transformation from the social to the mass gives rise to a structure that Baudrillard refers to as the “silent majorities.” In *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (1983), he argues that within a public sphere that has been transformed into a mass, the public itself becomes a passive, unresponsive, and opaque aggregation. The term mass here denotes a collectivity that is neither qualified nor predictable, neither homogeneous nor consciously organized. This popular mass corresponds to a formation that is difficult to assimilate precisely because it responds to political and cultural appeals addressed to it with a meaningless silence.⁵ To incorporate these silent masses into public opinion, both political authorities and media actors exert considerable effort. In a system where everyone speaks and everything appears transparent and measurable, individuals are far easier to control. Yet the silent masses undermine the strategies of power by rejecting meaning and discourse altogether. Baudrillard interprets the silence of the masses either as a strategic refusal or as a form of excessive conformity – hyperconformity – to the demands of the system.⁶

⁴ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.

⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, or, The End of the Social and Other Essays*, trans. Paul Foss, John Johnston, and Paul Patton (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 23–24.

⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 85.

The central problem of the contemporary public sphere is therefore no longer a lack of participation by individuals but the proliferation of silent masses. In modern society, this phenomenon has become a puzzling and potentially threatening condition for political power. In order to mitigate this threat, power attempts by every available means to make the masses speak and to draw them into communicative processes. For in a society where silence prevails, meaning becomes stagnant and loses its force as a form of power. Those who seek to mobilize the power of meaning therefore attempt to reconstruct a social order by compelling the masses to speak. Yet the form through which the silent masses express themselves is no longer rational debate but rather a statistical mode of existence reduced to surveys and voting mechanisms. Baudrillard formulates this situation in the following terms: "The mass designated as the silent majority is no longer social but statistical... The only mode of appearance of the mass is the survey. It does not express itself; it is surveyed".⁷

These observations indicate that communication within the public sphere is no longer realized through active deliberation but through statistics such as ratings, opinion polls, and electoral surveys. This new condition, in which the public exists primarily as numerical data, stands in stark contrast to the environment of public reasoning envisioned by Habermas. Whereas Habermas argues that the public sphere is constituted through rational deliberation, Baudrillard maintains that it is increasingly produced through numerical manipulation and media orchestration. Indeed, Baudrillard suggests that the traditional public sphere has effectively disappeared and has been replaced by a regime characterized by non-communication and a void of meaning. The most defining feature of this structure is the death of the social. In the traditional sense, society refers to a collective subject in which individuals come together to produce shared meanings. In the modern period, however, this social formation is transformed into a mass characterized by the rapid consumption of meaning and a state of meaningless saturation. The most visible characteristics of this mass are its immersion in the domains of spectacle and consumption.

⁷ Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, 20.

Both Baudrillard and Habermas agree that these features defining the contemporary public realm possess either a pseudo-public or pseudo-private character. The pessimistic portrait drawn by Baudrillard raises a number of pressing questions. Among them are how democracy can function in a context where the public sphere has effectively disappeared and whether the silence of the masses represents a form of refusal or mere indifference. Baudrillard does not offer definitive answers to these questions; nevertheless, through his observations and diagnoses he clearly exposes the conditions of non-communication and the erosion of meaning in contemporary society. In light of this pessimistic account, outlining Habermas's comparatively more optimistic framework may contribute to a clearer understanding of the issue.

2. Communicative Rationality, the Construction of Meaning, and the Transformation of the Public Sphere

As a member of the Frankfurt School, Habermas approaches the issues of communication, meaning, and the public sphere in modern society with a comparatively more optimistic perspective. This approach grounds the construction of social life in linguistic communication. Linguistic communication constitutes the foundation of rationality, social integration, and democratic legitimacy. In contrast to Baudrillard, Habermas proposes a model in which communication and the production of meaning remain possible – indeed necessary – despite changing social conditions. If communication and meaning can be produced, the revitalization of the public sphere becomes a viable possibility. For this reason, the first task is to construct a valid theory of communication. With this aim, Habermas authored the two-volume work *The Theory of Communicative Action*, in which he analyzes modern society by distinguishing between the lifeworld and the system. The lifeworld refers to the domain composed of culture, society, and personality structures, within which individuals share horizons of meaning in the course of everyday life. The system, by contrast, consists of structures that operate through instrumental media

such as state power, the economy, money, and administrative control.⁸ Habermas attributes the crisis of modernity to the domination of the lifeworld by the system. In other words, instrumental rationality invades the sphere of linguistic and cultural communication, thereby generating a crisis.⁹ This process – conceptualized as the colonization of the lifeworld – also profoundly affects the public sphere.

From a historical perspective, the public sphere emerges during the transition from feudal structures to the modern constitutional state and is largely associated with the rise of the bourgeoisie. As is well known, during the feudal period kings and nobles displayed their power before a largely passive public, a phenomenon described as representative publicity. In the bourgeois public sphere, however, property-owning individuals possessed the capacity to criticize political authority and exert pressure on governance. During this period, individuals formed the public sphere by gathering in various social settings and engaging in discussions of literature and art. Over time, the proliferation of newspapers and journals enabled political issues to enter the public sphere as well.¹⁰ Habermas argues that the bourgeois public sphere possessed a fundamentally rational character. Individuals were able to set aside their wealth and social status while discussing public matters, thereby contributing to the formation of public opinion. The task of the state, in turn, was to respond reasonably to this emerging public opinion. In this sense, the public sphere functioned as a bridge between state and society, transmitting social needs to those in positions of power.¹¹

By the twentieth century, however, significant structural transformations occurred within the public sphere. Among these changes were the inclusion of the working class and women in public debates, which diversified the topics of discussion, as well as the growing dominance of organizations and political parties rather than individuals

⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 113–114.

⁹ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 236.

¹⁰ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 18.

¹¹ Craig Calhoun, “Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 6.

within these debates. The increasing power of private corporations and interest groups (such as organizations and parties) and their tendency toward authoritarian structures facilitated state intervention into the private sphere, thereby blurring the boundaries between state and society. Habermas characterizes this complex transformation within the public sphere as a process of refeudalization. According to him, private actors – such as media conglomerates and multinational corporations – appropriate the public sphere and transform the role of individuals into that of a passive audience.¹² In this new public sphere, the relationship between public opinion and political power increasingly resembles that between the people and the monarch. Beyond approval or rejection, the public has little opportunity to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. Habermas describes this condition as plebiscitary publicity.

As is well known, plebiscitary publicity is a concept Habermas employs in his analysis of the historical transformation of the public sphere to describe a form of publicity in which the mechanisms of mass approval replace critical-rational debate in modern mass democracies. Whereas in the classical bourgeois public sphere citizens addressed public matters through reasoning and discussion, in the modern period the techniques of media, public relations, and political representation have transformed public communication into a kind of staged performance. Citizens, rather than acting as deliberating subjects, are reduced to spectators who applaud political leaders and decisions – in other words, who endorse them in a plebiscitary manner. In this sense, plebiscitary publicity refers to a form of publicness grounded not in the critical formation of public opinion but in the production of mass visibility and legitimacy, representing a public structure that remains formally representative while its deliberative capacity has significantly weakened.¹³

Habermas's characterization of the modern era as a pseudo-public world bears a strong resemblance to the relationship Baudrillard

¹² Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, xii.

¹³ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 137.

establishes between modern publicity and the consumption of culture. Both philosophers argue that the subject within the public sphere is no longer active but has been transformed into a passive object that consumes media-driven content. More precisely, individuals increasingly prefer to watch rather than to debate within the public sphere.¹⁴ This situation also affects the sphere of politics, where political parties seek not the active participation of citizens but rather their consent and enthusiasm. In an era in which politics itself has become a spectacle, the aim of nearly every political activity is to influence the emotions of individuals. These developments reveal that the public sphere – whose proper function should be the center of critique and deliberation – has increasingly turned into a showcase that legitimizes the actions of the state and various interest groups.

Up to this point Habermas shares a similar diagnosis with Baudrillard; however, the two thinkers diverge regarding the question of whether the public sphere has been irretrievably lost. Habermas maintains that the public sphere can be reconstructed and that, in its renewed form, it can adapt to the conditions of democratic society. This claim rejects the idea of a single unified public sphere and instead advocates a pluralistic and deliberative structure. Despite the adverse conditions described above, Habermas argues that, through appropriate institutional and communicative reforms, a public sphere can once again emerge in which social problems are openly debated and collectively addressed. In this renewed configuration, the public sphere may generate a reflexive public opinion capable of guiding political authority through what Habermas describes as communicative power.¹⁵

For communicative power to be effectively exercised, certain conditions must be fulfilled. The first of these concerns validity claims. In linguistic communication, validity claims arise when speakers com-

¹⁴ Uğur Kaan Odabaş, "Tarihsel Süreçte Kamusal Alanın Yapısal Dönüşümü ve Habermas," *Atatürk Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 22, Special Issue 2 (2018): 2055.

¹⁵ Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 74.

bine the elements of a) intelligibility, b) truth, c) sincerity, and d) legitimacy within a statement.¹⁶ In addition, such claims must be publicly open to discussion and subject to rational evaluation. Accordingly, a statement can raise a validity claim if it possesses an intelligible structure, corresponds to objective reality, expresses a sincere intention, and carries normative rightness. Under these conditions, participants in discourse are expected to reach agreement regarding the validity of the statement, since they are assumed to engage within what Habermas calls an ideal speech situation. Yet because such an ideal cannot always be realized in practice, it is more reasonable to treat it as a normative standard against which existing debates can be evaluated. In this respect, Habermas describes the formation of rational consensus as follows: “The goal of reaching understanding aims at an agreement that terminates in the intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another; agreement rests on the recognition of corresponding validity claims”.¹⁷

These statements demonstrate that Habermas attributes to communication a meaning-producing function. While structures such as money and power distort the lifeworld, Habermas argues that the communicative model enables us to identify the domains in which such distortions occur. Even though the consumer system and bureaucratic language manipulate debates within the public sphere, Habermas maintains that a renewed normative structure can still be produced through communication. In other words, whereas Baudrillard appears to accept the dominance of simulation, Habermas envisions the possibility of reconstructing the public sphere within a society in which communicative capacities are emancipated and manipulation is reduced. With this objective in mind, Habermas wrote *Between Facts and Norms* (1996), where he argues that the constitutional state can revitalize public communication by establishing an institutional linkage between communicative power and administrative power.

¹⁶ Jürgen Habermas, “What Is Universal Pragmatics?” in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (London: Heinemann, 1979), 3.

¹⁷ Habermas, “What Is Universal Pragmatics?” 3.

For this to occur, the media must prioritize the creation of a pluralistic environment for public deliberation rather than merely serving commercial interests. The media, in this sense, should serve communicative rationality rather than particular interest groups.¹⁸

From these observations, it can be argued that Habermas offers a more programmatic and normative perspective. Whereas Baudrillard depicts the existing condition through striking concepts and provocative diagnoses, Habermas attempts to formulate possible solutions to the problem. This raises an important question: can Baudrillard's diagnoses and warnings be reconciled with Habermas's proposals for reconstruction, or do these two perspectives ultimately represent mutually exclusive frameworks? The following section will address these questions.

3. Simulation or Deliberation in Communication

In contemporary society, Baudrillard interprets communication largely as a form of deception, whereas Habermas regards it as the most rational form of social action. Because he conceptualizes mass communication as a theatrical stage or a domain of simulation, he situates the audience as the object rather than the subject of communication.¹⁹ Within this process, the media operates through one-way communication, directing the masses and producing a form of illusion. Habermas, by contrast, defines communication as a process in which multiple individuals come together in pursuit of meaning and agreement, while cultural knowledge is reproduced through interaction. In this process – grounded in reciprocity and critical reflection – every claim remains open to questioning.²⁰ For this reason, Habermas's model of communicative action possesses a deliberative structure. Where Baudrillard undermines confidence in communication, Habermas appears to introduce a normative trust in its possibility.

If we indeed live in a world of spectacle or simulation rather than genuine communication, then the political debates observed on social

¹⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 75.

¹⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 50–51.

²⁰ Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 138–139.

media, the activities of online influencers, and the proliferation of digital videos must be understood less as authentic communication than as forms of digital noise. Once this condition is acknowledged, a fundamental choice emerges regarding how one should respond. Either the impossibility of escaping the world of simulation must be accepted, or efforts must be made to reconstruct the public sphere through improved institutional and communicative norms. Habermas, who opts for the latter path, recognizes that disinformation and the superficial culture of instant approval render communication increasingly meaningless. Nevertheless, by revising existing conditions, it may become possible to revitalize communication – and thereby regenerate meaning – through mechanisms such as online deliberative platforms and citizen panels.

4. The Collapse or Reproduction of Meaning

With regard to meaning, Baudrillard argues that meaning has disappeared within the world of signs, whereas Habermas maintains that meaning emerges through an intersubjective process of construction. Baudrillard contends that in the modern era – where signs have lost their referents – reality has fallen victim to an overwhelming proliferation of images. The transformation of meaning into a consumable object indicates that it no longer possesses internal coherence. Indeed, the excessive presence of commodities does not merely satisfy needs but instead generates a persistent sense of meaninglessness. Similarly, the excess of information does not satisfy the desire for knowledge; rather, it produces a continuous feeling of semantic emptiness.²¹ Habermas, by contrast, understands meaning not solely as a product of individual consciousness but also as an outcome of linguistic communication. For this reason, he interprets the current condition as containing the possibility for the reproduction of meaning.²² Every dialogue that takes place within the public sphere opens both the meaning and the truth of a proposition to discussion, and the consensus reached through such deliberation produces a shared meaning.

²¹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 29–30.

²² Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 134–135.

Both perspectives underscore the critical importance of the public sphere. When the shared meanings that unite individuals in the public sphere disappear, rational debate becomes impossible. In such a society, conspiracy theories stand on the same level as truth, and media celebrities occupy the same space as ethical values. For Baudrillard, this condition can be described as a form of semantic anarchy or nihilism.²³ Habermas, who adopts a more positive stance toward meaning, argues that shared meanings and common grounds can be generated within the public sphere. The most important factor enabling this process is the pragmatic character of language. In a public sphere grounded in critical reasoning, meaning is first produced through discourse; subsequently, shared values and truths can emerge, making the achievement of public consensus possible.²⁴

When the two approaches are applied to the problem of climate change, they lead to different conclusions. If the issue is interpreted through Baudrillard's perspective, one might argue that the media transforms the realities of climate change into a form of simulation, dissolving their meaning in the public eye by mixing scientific facts with conspiracy theories. Indeed, the persistence of climate change denial offers a striking example of how meaning can collapse in situations where information proliferates. If, on the other hand, one adopts Habermas's perspective, the increasing number of climate conferences and the efforts of civil society organizations can be interpreted as indications that communicative rationality continues to function. From this standpoint, if even a minimal common stance emerges in response to a social problem, Habermas's view appears justified; if such consensus proves impossible, Baudrillard's diagnosis gains greater plausibility.

5. The Public Sphere: A Defunct Myth or a Normative Ideal

While Baudrillard characterizes the public sphere as the end of the social, the domain of silent majorities, or a myth that has already disappeared, Habermas treats it as an indispensable ideal of demo-

²³ Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, 103–104.

²⁴ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 111.

cratic society. Baudrillard argues that within a model defined by statistical data, silent masses, and the illusion of participation, no subject capable of constituting a genuine public sphere can exist.²⁵ Consequently, elections, referenda, and opinion polls do not represent the authentic will of the public but rather a closed and self-referential system. In this system – commonly described as modern democracy – political rituals correspond to symbolic events to which the masses respond primarily through silence.²⁶ Although casting a vote in an election theoretically represents an individual's declaration reached through public reasoning, in practice it often amounts to the manipulation and direction of the individual, reducing the citizen to a mere numerical unit.

Habermas does not deny the existence of Baudrillard's silent masses or the illusion of participation; however, he proposes the expansion and deepening of public deliberative spaces as a means of overcoming these negative conditions. According to him, the gap between communicative power and political power – however deep it may appear – can be bridged through the mobilization of society. This principle, which is critical for the reconstruction of the public sphere, enables individuals to exercise their rights through mechanisms such as protests, petitions, and citizen assemblies. Thus, when confronted with the same phenomenon, the two philosophers arrive at different conclusions: Baudrillard maintains that what exists is not public reason but rather a system of spectacle and statistics, whereas Habermas argues that, despite numerous challenges, traces of public reason continue to exist and should be strengthened. The roots of this divergence lie in the broader philosophical orientations of the two thinkers. Baudrillard represents a postmodern rupture that proclaims the collapse of modern ideas of reason, truth, and publicness, whereas Habermas adopts a perspective that affirms the continuing validity of the modernity project.²⁷

²⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Tüketim Toplumu: Söylenceleri / Yapıları*, trans. Nilgün Tunal and Ferda Keskin (İstanbul: Ayrıntı Yayınları, 2017), 215.

²⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Tam Ekran*, trans. Bahadır Gülmez (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2001), 76–77.

²⁷ Ahmet Çiğdem, *Bir İmkân Olarak Modernite: Weber ve Habermas* (İstanbul: İletişim

These observations suggest that the present condition can be interpreted in different ways depending on one's theoretical perspective. In this context, Baudrillard prefers to offer a critical diagnosis rather than a programmatic solution, whereas Habermas seeks a normative path forward alongside his diagnosis. According to Baudrillard, silent majorities display a form of quiet resistance by remaining indifferent to the demands of power and media; through their refusal to produce meaning, they paradoxically gain strength. This attitude, which corresponds to a paradoxical strategy, destabilizes the existing system. Yet despite the acuity of Baudrillard's diagnoses, he offers no concrete prognosis regarding the transformation of the system or the recovery of the public sphere.

Habermas, by contrast, offers concrete proposals for addressing the present crisis by advocating the development of participatory democracy, the preservation of communicative freedom, the diversification of the media, and the institutionalization of public deliberation. Because these proposals are oriented toward dialogue and reform, they appear more practically acceptable. Baudrillard's analysis may provide a compelling diagnosis of the world in which we live, yet it offers little guidance on how such conditions might be confronted. Habermas's approach, on the other hand, not only addresses the question of what kind of world we ought to inhabit but also considers how such a world might be achieved. Nevertheless, phenomena such as misinformation on social media, digital harassment campaigns, and artificially generated agendas produced by bot accounts vividly illustrate the hyperreality that Baudrillard describes as the rupture between truth and image. For this reason, it is difficult to draw a sharp distinction between the two philosophers in terms of practical relevance.

If no single approach clearly prevails in terms of normative preference, it becomes possible to ask whether a form of reconciliation between the two thinkers might exist. In this regard, one may argue that their perspectives possess a complementary character. Baudrillard's

Yayımları, 1997), 172.

critique of the instrumentalization of media can be considered alongside Habermas's calls for a renewal of public deliberation. Likewise, Baudrillard's reflections on simulation and hyperreality may be interpreted together with Habermas's efforts to reconstruct the public sphere. The increasing dominance of simulation in media and the growing prevalence of silent masses can be addressed simultaneously with measures such as strengthening public oversight of media institutions, promoting media literacy, and expanding the role of civil society organizations and public education. Public opinion, in this sense, may be supported not only by rational arguments but also by symbolic interventions, mediated images, and forms of emotional rhetoric. Accordingly, the contemporary public sphere appears to be situated somewhere between Habermas's conception of what ought to be and Baudrillard's description of what actually is.

The fundamental dynamics of the present era thus reveal a dual movement. On the one hand, the deterioration of public deliberation, the relativization of truth, and the increasing passivity of citizens give rise to conditions characterized by hyperreality, simulation, and silence. On the other hand, processes such as multiculturalism and the emergence of global awareness simultaneously generate new possibilities for communicative rationality, mutual understanding, and democratic deliberation. Similarly, while conspiracy theories, propaganda, and the mechanisms of surveillance capitalism erode public reason, movements advocating open data, along with the efforts of international civil society and media organizations, attempt to revive it. If we are to shape the future under these conditions – marked simultaneously by negative and positive developments – each individual must cultivate both a critical awareness capable of recognizing the operations of simulation and a normative commitment that invests in the possibilities of communication.

Conclusion

The condition of the public sphere constitutes one of the central problems interrogated in modern social and political thought. While Baudrillard argues that the public sphere has effectively disappeared between the domains of simulation and the silent masses, Habermas

maintains that, despite prevailing challenges, it can be reconstructed under the guidance of communicative rationality. Baudrillard contends that in an era dominated by media, communicative reason continually falls into the trap of simulation: meaning dissolves within an abundance of information, and the masses are reduced to statistical data. Habermas, by contrast, argues that because the decline of the public sphere is not an inevitable or natural process, it can be revitalized through the establishment of appropriate institutions, conditions of free and equal communication, and the cultivation of a critical public culture.

When evaluated in light of contemporary conditions, the perspectives of both philosophers draw attention to crucial aspects of modern communication and public life. Baudrillard's emphasis on the darker side of communication technologies – such as media manipulation and the increasing desensitization of society – complements Habermas's focus on themes such as critical public opinion, civil society, the culture of dialogue, and the constitutional state. Both approaches, in different ways, seek to address and mitigate the negative developments occurring within the public sphere. For this reason, considering the thought of each philosopher in relation to the other provides an important critical perspective. Such a perspective reveals that the public sphere is neither a completely vanished domain nor the fully rational forum it is sometimes portrayed to be.

Abandoning the idea of the public sphere altogether would likely accelerate the erosion of both authority and meaning, and therefore does not appear reasonable. Accordingly, the reconstruction of the public sphere proposed by Habermas remains both possible and necessary, provided that Baudrillard's critical insights are taken seriously. Principles derived from communicative action – such as inclusivity, transparency, equal participation, and the obligation of justification – may offer institutional and normative innovations capable of mobilizing Baudrillard's silent masses and revitalizing public debate. In this way, individuals may cease to exist merely as statistical units and once again assume the role of active subjects within the public sphere.

References

- Baudrillard, Jean. *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, or, The End of the Social and Other Essays*. Trans. Paul Foss, John Johnston, and Paul Patton. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983. (Original work published 1978).
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. (Original work published 1981).
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Tam Ekran*. Trans. Bahadır Gülmez. İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2001. (Original work published 1997).
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Tüketim Toplumu: Söylenceleri / Yapıları*. Trans. Nilgün Tural and Ferda Keskin. İstanbul: Ayrıntı Yayınları, 2017. (Original work published 1970).
- Calhoun, Craig. "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere." *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Ed. Craig Calhoun. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992: 1–48.
- Çiğdem, Ahmet. *Bir İmkân Olarak Modernite: Weber ve Habermas*. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1997.
- Habermas, Jürgen. "What Is Universal Pragmatics?" *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. London: Heinemann, 1979: 1–68.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987. (Original work published 1981).
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989. (Original work published 1962).
- Habermas, Jürgen. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Trans. William Rehg. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.
- Odabaş, Uğur Kaan. "Tarihsel Süreçte Kamusal Alanın Yapısal Dönüşümü ve Habermas." *Atatürk Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 22, Special Issue 2 (2018): 2051–2066.