The Habermasian Public Sphere: Women’s Work within the Critique of Instrumental Reason

As a tradition that understands public and private spheres as absolutely exclusive of one another, the liberal philosophical tradition relies on a metaphor of the social contract, where the strengthening of public decisions and collective life should happen at the expense of individual freedoms: Individuals trade a portion of their private liberties in exchange for public security protections to their person and property. Against such liberal tenets, however, the diminishing of powers in the public sector has not led to increased personal freedoms but rather the contrary. The privacy of citizens promised under liberalism—civil liberties and private expression, for example—has been compromised as much as the functionality and existence of the public sphere. The reduction of power, confidence, and investments in public regulatory and institutional bodies—for example, from welfare to education, from the overturning of the Glass-Steagull Act to the failure of the Federal Reserve system and the Security and Exchange Commission to enforce mechanisms of disclosure and accountability, from media consolidation to the squelching of public media sponsorship for minorities and local broadcasting on the public airwaves—has not led to the elevation of power in private initiative and responsibility. Rather, the moral elevation of private life in images of women’s work analyzed in the last chapter forms an ideological cushion around new economies that exploit and colonize private life. Material and symbolic violence against women becomes more integral to production and profit regimes as public protections of labor, environment, bodily integrity, speech, civil rights, and mobility have been conceded. Constitutionalism, in the form of a public rule of law, and popular democracy, in the form
of private sovereignty, seem to be equally at risk in ways that intersect. The “re-privatization” of women’s work—as also the privatization of labor more generally—testifies to a global politics where the waning of the general will paces equally with the downward spiral of individuals’ abilities to have a say in the conditions of life.

Early critical theory was concerned with giving a developmental story of modernity, and this story could be said to explain the desire to end privacy and its irrational social structures as an inaugural moment of the modern, rational public. Whether in the form of the disappearance of a Benjaminian “aura” that found its meanings in the family-focused religious rituals of peasant life, or in the form of the disappearance of the ethical community of Habermas’s communicating society, or in the form of the disappearance of Adorno’s particular, sensual, noncommodified, aesthetic individual (as I analyze in chapter 4), private life—and its associated women’s work—would disappear beneath the social and administrative demands of modernity. Yet, private life would also dialectically rebound—as the Benjaminian “aura,” though destroyed, frames the modern cinematic collectivity, or the communicating ethical community underlies and explains the intersubjective connections of Habermasian deliberation and action. While emphasizing that private forms of labor are always ready to resurface and take different forms within modernity’s progress, foundational critical theory also forms a notion of critique out of the unraveling of the industrial division of labor, and therefore connects the end of the privatization of women’s labor in industrialism to the development of the public sphere. “Re-privatization” means the disappearance of industrial domestic labor into different emergences of private labor, but it also shows that the disappearing private sphere continues to affect the non-instrumental moments of modernity’s public.

In this chapter, I use social theorist Jürgen Habermas’s public sphere theory to explore why liberalism overemphasizes the mutual exclusion between public and private spheres.¹ As can be read in Habermas’s critique, the overlapping of public and private results from the placement of women and their work as the line of communication between them, in particular as a type of work that resists total instrumentalization. Habermasian public sphere theory does predict neoliberalism’s appropriation of the private sphere into systems of money and power in its historical trends toward privatizing public life by “re-privatizing” women’s work, but at the same time it posits the invention of the public sphere from within women’s work in the private sphere. On the one hand, this means that thinking in