WHAT MAKES THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE STILL A PROSPECTIVE PROJECT?

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Abstract: *This paper seeks to critically examine the required conditions for the emergence of a European public sphere. The topic is one of the most intensely discussed among scholars who have expressed their interest for both the development of the widely used concept of the public sphere, and the political and social mechanisms underpinning the function of the European Union. I shall try to evaluate here the prospects for the emergence and consolidation of a European public sphere by taking into account the criteria that Habermas used to establish his model of the public sphere. I shall refer in more detail here to the rational critical discourse, a condition that Habermas considered to be crucial for the development and, more importantly, the consolidation of the public sphere. Although the scope of this paper is somehow limited to a habermasian view of how a public sphere should look like, I consider that a historical approach to the concept may shed some light on the uses and misuses of its contemporary transformations.*

Keywords: Habermas, identity, legitimacy, rational critical discourse, European public sphere

1. SOME INSIGHTS INTO THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC SPHERE

In light of the recent debates over the (social, political or communicational) future of the European Union, the concepts of public sphere and, more specifically, European public sphere have gained significant ground in the literature on the European Union as well as in the published views on future implications on the development of the Union triggered by the integration process. As expected, many of the authors have started their analyses on the emergent European public sphere from the "historical" approach to the public sphere proposed by Habermas in his

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classical book, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. How far these views on the European public sphere have gone from the original concept, remains to be seen. Irrespective of the distance at which they placed themselves from the habermasian view of the public sphere and its modern transformations, almost every proposal of what a European public sphere should be has reconsidered a least three of the essential components of the model described by Habermas. These key elements of the public sphere are: the rational-critical debated it nurtures, and which, at the same time, feeds it; the public as a critical judge of the public affairs; and the potential of the public sphere to reflect and reshape interests and identities of the participants to the public debate.

From a chronological point of view, the public sphere is a concept that acquires substance in the eighteenth century. At that time, literary journals and periodicals flourished and educated people discussed the subjects presented in these publications in salons and coffee houses. Habermas's historical investigation of the concept revealed that it was the emergence of the literary public sphere that had made possible the apparition of the expression "public sphere", which was inexistent in the seventeenth century vocabulary. The literary public sphere of the eighteenth century replaced the obsolete representative publicity only to transform itself into the political sphere in the public realm. This was the last metamorphosis of the concept before it became the bourgeois or liberal public sphere. This reshaping of the public sphere that took place in the nineteenth century was linked to the invention of the bourgeois constitutional state (Habermas, [1962]/ 1989). Despite the criticisms drawn by historians and scholars in political theory and political philosophy[2], the historical examination of the public sphere helped Habermas grasp an understanding of the evolution of the category of publicness. The classical distinction between public and private, functional in the ancient Greece, has been replaced by another division adapted to the new type of societal organisation. Thus, on the one hand, the public gathered private individuals who "join in debate of issues bearing on state authority" (Calhoun, 1992: 7); this category acted as a counterpart to public authority. The private, on the other hand, related to the family, the economy or the society; it was conceived as the realm of "freedom that has to be defended against the domination of the state" (*ibidem*). In the contemporary world, the separation between public and private has faded, as the increase of consumer interests and the massification of culture have contributed to the jellification of the society. In fact, one of the key shifts in the structural transformation of the public sphere is the loss of the distinction between the two notions.

But Habermas is not entirely pessimistic with regard to the development of a strong public sphere in the modern world. Furthermore, he believes that in the mass democracies of the twenty-first century, public deliberation and communication

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[2] A collection of essays edited by Calhoun (1992) shows a wide range of critical approaches to Habermas's work. The reactions touch the factual foundations of some of the claims presented in the book (such as the economic and political history of the bourgeoisie or the development of the publishing industry), the overemphasis on the degeneration of the modern mass public or the disregard of the role of women in the public sphere. Habermas's attempt to answer his critics was also included in the volume (see *Further Reflections on the Public Sphere*).

constitute a powerful course of legitimacy. Habermas notes that "the function of the communicational infrastructure of a democratic public sphere is to turn relevant societal problems into topics of concern, and to allow the general public to relate, at the same time, to the same topics, by taking an affirmative or negative stand on news and opinions. Over time, these implicit attitudes coagulate to constitute public opinion, even though most citizens do not send public messages beyond voting or non-voting" (Habermas, 2006: 36).

The public sphere is intrinsically related to the existence of a genuine public communication that would spur the development of a functioning discourse on issues of public interest. Public discourse (or what Habermas later calls communicative action) and public participation are the two key elements, which taken together ensure the crystallisation of an authentic public sphere. The connection between the two seems to be stronger than one would have thought. The constitution of the public sphere in a democratic society depends both on the "quality or form of the rational-critical discourse and the quantity of, or openness to, popular participation" (Calhoun, 1992: 4). However, Habermas's analysis of the modern transformations of the category of the public sphere has revealed a paradoxical situation: apparently, the expansion of participation (i.e. the continuous enlargement of the public sphere to include more and more people) has led to a decrease in the quality of discourse.

"Public debate was supposed to transform *voluntas* into a *ratio* that in the public competition of private arguments came into being as the consensus about what was practically necessary in the interest of all" (Habermas, [1962]/ 1989: 83). The Latin words used to refer to "will" and "reason", respectively, are crucial for the model of the public sphere put forth by Habermas. The debate stimulated by the functioning public sphere should reflect the triumph of arguments over emotions and that of the general interest over the fluctuant particular interests. Although nowadays it may seem difficult to obtain, especially in a conglomerate such as the European Union, the general consensus over the topics that should be addressed publicly, through communication and deliberation, is essential to the very existence of the public sphere. One of the very harmful situations that could affect the public sphere is the accumulation of particular, subjective interests, which people who hold them try to promote as matters of general interest. In such a situation, the future of deliberation and of the public sphere as such is put in jeopardy. The dissolution of the public sphere would come naturally. The members of the public sphere would lose their common ground because of the disintegration of the notion of general interest and the growth of the consumption industry. As a result of the increasing orientation towards consumption, the public has been "split apart into minorities of specialists who put their reason to use non publicly and the great mass of consumers whose receptiveness is public but uncritical" (Habermas, [1962]/ 1989:175).

Due to the immixture of people's personal interests with those matters of common concern, the category of public as such has been set back, because "the very idea of the public was based on the notion of a general interest sufficiently basic that discourse about it need not be distorted by particular interests" (Calhoun, 1992: 9). Three very important features of the public sphere have been lost because of

people's incapacity to separate general interest from their particular *voluntates*: a) the essence of the public, b) the quality of the discourse and c) the practice of the rational-critical debate on an issue. Without a discourse, there is no public sphere, no symbolic place where people make "public use of their reason" (Habermas, [1962]/ 1989: 27), no agora where private people have come together as a public.

Literature on the public sphere largely uses a spatial metaphor to refer to a notion that cannot be confined to spatial boundaries (Calhoun, 2004), whereas this is a phenomenon that derives its life from conversation and discourse. The public sphere really exists only in and through communication. Public communication involves not only sharing what the participants to the process already know or think, but it also favours the reshaping of people's beliefs and knowledge as a result of the use of reason to govern the discursive exchanges. Therefore, the public sphere is not a setting where fully-formed identities, interests, beliefs work together to bolster the debate over matters of public concern. It is, however, a symbolic encounter place where people set aside their private interests and identities in favour of the preservation of the rational critical discourse.

Having set up the framework for my analysis of the European public sphere, I turn now to investigation of the possibility for the existence of such a European arena of public debate. I admit that I have adopted a rather pessimistic tone in my paper – I consider that, at least so far, the so-called European public sphere has failed to meet the requirements of a genuine public sphere (at least, Habermas's criteria). However, I do not want to discard here the merits of any efforts to create a European public sphere. The question is this: if these high standards determine the functioning of the public sphere, would it be possible for a European public sphere to reach and, at the same time, to maintain them?

2. THREE MODELS TO EXPLAIN THE EMERGENCE OF A EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE

The development of a European public sphere – whichever position one may adopt in conceptualising this space of communication – seems to be rather difficult to account for in habermasian terms. The greatest challenge in explaining the necessity for such a symbolic construct to tie in with the communication within the EU comes from the very nature of this supranational structure. Since the European Union is neither a state nor a nation, ascribing it a public sphere may seem uncanny. The concept of the public sphere belongs to the logic of the nation-state. The members of the public sphere are supposed to watch over the legitimacy of the actions taken by the state and the government. To this sense, the public sphere should be closely related to a "sovereign power" (Fraser, 2007). The people acting as voices in the arena are empowered, to ensure that the state takes into account the will expressed by the citizenry and, at the same time, it is their responsibility to hold accountable the officials who neglect that will. Perhaps this explanation would seem a bit too simplistic to a reader in search for an encompassing definition or model of a European public sphere. Let me elaborate some more.

The very challenge is not to dismiss the possibility of a European public sphere, but to search for the idea of the public sphere that best fits the specificity of the European Union (Fossum &Schlesinger, 2007). So far, the results of such a search have led to the shaping of three models of the European public sphere that have attained a certain visibility among the academics preoccupied with this topic. These three theoretical approaches to what the European public sphere should be constitute a point of departure for future research on the topic or on related issues. Despite the growing popularity of these three models, there is quite a heated debate as to whether the European public sphere is a void concept or not and, if it is not, how it could be materialized into a helpful construct.

I shall briefly present here the models that propose three distinct ways of conceptualising the European public sphere. The first model is the most intuitive and the least original. It states that the European public sphere should reproduce the national public sphere at the European level (Lingenberg, 2006). According to this model, a common European-wide public sphere could develop if some conditions are to be fulfilled. In order for a European public sphere to repeat the national public sphere in content and form, there is a pressing need for a common media system, a common language and, overall, a European identity that ensure an accurate reception of the subjects discussed all over the European Union. As reality has shown us so far, this is rather unlikely to happen. Attempts have been made to consolidate a European media system[3] (e.g. *Euronews*, *Eurosport* or the newly created portal *presseurop.eu*; for a discussion on the potential of these media to consolidate a European deliberative arena, see Bargaoanu, Negrea & Dascalu, 2010), but they have resulted in failure so far.

The second approach seeks to view the European public sphere as the consequence of the Europeanization of the national public spheres. What makes this approach interesting is the idea that topics pertaining to European affairs should also be covered in national media, but they should be evaluated from a European, not a national perspective (Kunelius & Sparks, 2001). This is the model that brings forward the importance of a solid discourse of the EU, and of distinguishing between EU-issues and national issues and covering the former separately in the national media. The current image of the coverage of EU-issues across the national media shows that topics on the EU and EU affairs are discussed predominantly from a national point of view. It would seem, thus, that this model does more justice to the ideal of creating a European public sphere than the one previously presented did. Furthermore, some think that the Europeanization of national public spheres may be the only successful way in which a European public sphere could be brought to light (Bruggemann, 2005:2).

Finally, the third approach to the development of a public sphere within the EU seems to have gained the majority of sympathies. This view sees the emergence of

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[3] Efforts have been made to set up a pan-European media, to include newspapers (such as *The European*) and TV channels (such as *Europa TV)*. This initiative has been dismissed due to language barriers and lack of demand (Kevin, 2003).

the European public sphere as a consequence of the segmentation of publics. This model explains the continuing transformation of European publics to keep pace with the ongoing variation of the issues on the EU debated in national media. Therefore, the European public sphere would consist of an "ensemble of issue-oriented publics" (Lingenberg, 2006: 123). This model is intrinsically connected with media reporting and analysis on EU issues. The existence of "issue-oriented publics" that form the European public sphere is determined by the need that EU-issues be simultaneously reported, analysed and debated in various media across Europe. Furthermore, the information transmitted has to be decoded using the same schemes, and any interpretation has to use same "relevance criteria" (van de Steeg, 2002; Risse, 2003). Therefore, in order for an EU-issue to cause public debate that supports the consolidation of the European public sphere, it should gain the same level of attention across all the member states of the EU. This is another way of saying that the crystallisation of a public sphere within the EU is merely a form of transnationalisation of the public sphere. Despite the beautiful arrangement that the supporters of this model have described, they have pushed the discussion on the European public sphere on slippery ground. No matter how appealing the concept of "transnational public sphere" might be, from the perspective on the public sphere endorsed by Habermas, this expression is quite oxymoronic (Fraser, 2007).

3. WHY THE EUROPEAN UNION DOES NOT YET HAVE A FULLY-FLEDGED PUBLIC SPHERE

The brief outline of the most influential three models of the European public sphere, which almost any piece of "Euro-literature" reports on, allows me to move forward and reflect on the places that the habermasian key concepts of public, general interest and rational debate occupy in these views of the public sphere within the European Union. Although I have already stated that I am rather pessimistic about the actual functioning of the European public sphere, there might be some better prospects ahead. If the search for a definition of the European public sphere had been a lottery, I would have bet on the second model. The Europeanization of the national public sphere by means of disentangling the EU-related topics from the national perspective used to cover them in the media is the only model that, so far, proposes a view of the European public sphere situated at a safe distance between the requirements of the classical habermasian model and the particularities of the area to which this public sphere is attached.

Despite this promising vision of a functioning arena of lively debate within the EU, to state that a European public sphere currently exists would be unwise. The very idea of a genuine arena for rational debate within the diverse and (currently) troubled European Union is surrounded by many doubts. In what follows, I shall try to inventory some of the main reasons for which the European public sphere is still a prospective project, and not a reality. My analysis will focus on theoretic assumptions and conceptualisations rather than empirical evidence.

The lack of a (European) public

So far, there is little evidence that such a category as a "European public" exists. There is a category of public related to the EU, but it is not referred to as a "European public" since it is mainly formed by the EU Commissioners, civil servants or other professionals working within the EU institutions. Ordinary people of the member states are rarely directly touched by matters discussed at the European level and, in many of the cases, they do not even care about such issues (Wilson & Millar, 2007). Since the number of debates over the future of the EU has gradually grown, the issue of a better and stronger communication with the European citizens became an overtly assumed objective of the EU. In a speech delivered in 2000 at the Humboldt University in Berlin, the former foreign minister of Germany, Joschka Fischer, pleaded for the establishment of a European federation and stated the reasons for which the EU needs a constitution that helps it find the right balance between a "Europe of nation-states" and a "Europe of the citizens". The project of the constitution has been initiated, but unfortunately for its supporters it was abandoned after the powerful *non* and *nee* it received in France and the Netherlands, respectively.

Beginning with 2005, the year of the rejection of the EU constitution project by the citizens of two of the most important members of the Union, the initiatives to bring the citizens closer to the EU have multiplied and intensive discussions on dialogue, debate and deliberation, as well as on communication with the people, have occupied much space in the online arena (forums, blogs, portals have been created in order to encourage people to express their opinion and to facilitate public debate on EU-related issues).

Despite the significant effort made by officials of the EU to set up a communication arena in which matters of public interest be debated by the citizens, the results show that people's interest in such endeavours has been lower than expected. Not only have the EU-related issues only slightly made it to the public agenda, but they have been greatly overcome by discussions on national-related issues. Furthermore, there is still room for discussion on the nature of the EU-related issues that may be put under scrutiny in the public sphere. Following their examination of a wide range of EU-related texts and conversations, Wodak & Weiss (2005) reported a list of recurring topics in these texts. Those topics gave rise to discourses "on unemployment, European identity, attitudes towards EU Enlargement and on multilingualism or language policies" (2005: 128). Most of these are easily cast into shadow by topics reflecting national or global-related issues (such as environment and climate change, threat of terrorism, economic development, socio-economic gaps, etc.).

While the theory on the emergence of a public sphere where EU-related issues are discussed may have looked promising, in practice it has failed to deliver. People have shown little interest in such issues as Europe identity and multilingualism, to name but two of the topics mentioned above. Thus, attempts to form a public of citizens who willingly participate to public debates on European affairs have failed.

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So far, it seems that citizens of the EU involved in public communication and deliberation are mainly concerned with topics addressed from a national rather than a European perspective. Furthermore, the economic and financial crisis has favoured debates over national-related issues, such as the loss of jobs, the decrease of incomes, the response-to-crisis measures taken by the governments, the consequences of the crisis on the education and health systems, etc. Since these topics are deeply connected to the national realities of the member states, the EU has not been too present in such debates. This should not surprise us, since, apparently, public perception and understanding of the EU are hardly separated from a national perspective (Galasinska & Galasinski, 2007). News on the demise of the nation-state have been greatly exaggerated; as the recent situation in Greece has shown, the instinct of national (individual) welfare has exceeded the instinct of a (manifested) European solidarity. Again, Joschka Fischer somehow foretold such a behaviour of the citizens of the EU (and his words below predicted not only people's response to the financial and economic crisis in Greece, but, more importantly, the response of the EU institutions, as well): "The nation-states are realities that cannot simply be erased, and the more globalisation and Europeanization create superstructures and anonymous actors remote from the citizens, the more the people will cling on to the nation-states that give them comfort and security" (www.ena.lu/speech_joschka_fischer_ultimate_objective_eu ropean_integration_berlin_12_2000-2-17984).

To sum up, there is little evidence to attest to the existence of a public sphere, in Habermas's understanding of the concept, in which European issues are addressed by a public formed of citizens of the member states who either acknowledge the legitimacy of the initiatives taken by the EU or who hold EU officials accountable for their actions.

The undefined European identity, or 'what is it like to be a European'?

The question of the European (collective) identity has been a problematic issue that many scholars have tried to solve. Solutions and formulae to define the European identity have been put forward. Nonetheless, there is no agreement yet on the form that the European identity should take. Furthermore, recent transformations within the EU (e.g. the successive Enlargement waves in 2004 and 2007, the debate over Turkey's accession or the pressure on the Eurozone triggered by the economic and financial crisis) have largely fuelled the considerable industry of research on whether there is or there will be a European identity.

Recognition of the importance of the European identity is not new. It has been always attached to the ongoing growth of the EU. As long ago as the 70', the high officials of the then nine members of the EU met at the Copenhagen summit and issued a document entitled *Declaration on European Identity*. A definition of the European identity as it was conceived by the nine member countries would involve the following three aspects: 1) re-examining the common heritage, the interests and the special obligations of the member states within the EU, 2) taking into account the dynamic nature of the European unification and 3) determining the extent to which the (nine) member states collaborate in relation to the rest of the world.

Thus, according to the heads of state or government gathered in Copenhagen in 1973, a definition of the European identity should be "intimately tied to the coordination and development of the member states" (Wilson & Millar, 2007). This view supports to a certain extent the idea that the European identity is pragmatically built. "Europe" and "the EU" should be treated separately, despite the (too much) freedom applied to their interchangeability. The two ideas can be understood in a myriad of ways, and both embody ideas that are socially and discursively constructed. Furthermore, both ideas bear a multiplicity of meanings and both are context sensitive. Lately, while not conterminous, "Europe" and "the EU" have blended in people's minds as a sense of what Europe is. To a certain extent, this is a consequence of constant efforts of the EU to develop "a collective (European) identity" and to advocate the expansion of the "we-feeling" beyond the boundaries of nation-states (Eriksen, 2009). In spite of this concern, people's reaction to the EU and its "benefits" still pays tribute to the pragmatic, personal needs. A shared idea of Europe, a sense of "Europeness", become attractive when it manages to solve people's own problems: e.g. immigrants' need for a citizenship (or residence), farmers' need for a regulated market, merchants' need for protective trade laws, etc.). Therefore, a pragmatic, need-based idea of European identity seems to overcome a more sophisticated, value-based approach to what belonging to the EU might mean. There is little doubt that, at least nowadays, people value highly the practical benefits that the EU brings them, more so than the emotional and symbolic elements associated with it. I believe that, contrary to how people relate to their national identity, "the banal assimilation of everyday symbolism and categorizations" (Schlesinger, 2007: 71) is much less important for their identity as European citizens (flags, anthems, national/ Europe's day, distinction between EU-related news and home news, etc.).

Irrespective of the way in which it has been framed, the European identity or "identities" (Wodak & Weiss, 2005), has been intrinsically connected to the emergence of a European public sphere. Some even say the prospects of the European public sphere are rendered rather bleak by the absence of a collective identity (Eriksen, 2009). This may sound bizarre to someone who tries to examine the concept of a European public sphere from a habermasian perspective. As Habermas himself remarked in his work, the public sphere should be a communication arena where actors reason about matters of general interest. There is no room for emotions, collective identities or symbolic values to be displayed and acted upon in such a place. While this may be the case for a national public sphere, this argument seems not to hold anymore when referring to the EU. Let us suppose that a genuine European public sphere would greatly contribute to the reduction or even elimination of the democratic deficit that the EU is insistently charged with. This is why a way must be found to cope with the problem of the collective identity, as it "lingers and represents a barrier to the development of a general public" (Eriksen, 2009: 124).

A shared view of a common (European) good

Ideally, a functioning European public sphere should bring together private citizens of the EU who publicly deliberate and decide about affairs of common interest. Matters of particular concern are set aside while the citizens forming the European public scrutinize the matters of general interest. In Habermas's view, discourses inspired by personal interest abound in uncritical arguments, which, in most cases, make them profoundly flawed. The interests of those who publicly discuss EU-related issues are discursively judged with respect to their generality and universality (Eriksen, 2009).

Habermas hopes that a genuine public sphere will give rise to a rational agreement between citizens and the state, which ultimately would reinforce the democratic society. He describes a model of the public sphere where access is limited to citizens who are well-equipped to contribute to the public communication and deliberation on matters of general interest (at the same time, these citizens must be capable to determine the content of the "general interest" in a certain period of time). This is a precaution that the German philosopher takes in order to keep the public discourse from being distorted by disqualifying diversity of interests and of identities. Thus, Habermas proposes an account of how actual social inequality might be kept from disturbing the equilibrium of a sound public sphere, where only "enlightened and equal" (Eriksen, 2009) citizens could be active; those individuals "fully formed in private who may communicate about public affairs" (Calhoun, 2004).

Would this ideal image of the construction and the function of the public sphere hold for the deliberative activity within the EU? My pessimistic feelings towards the European public sphere have already been disclosed to the reader. I do not wish to reiterate them. The doubts concerning the enthusiastic approaches to the European public sphere I hope to have risen in the previous sections of the paper should be sufficient to let the reader know that I do not embrace this eagerness. There are still a lot of aspects underpinning the functioning of a European public sphere that prevent it from being an arena of qualified debate over major European decisions. The difficulty of determining the category of "European public" or the exclusive pragmatic terms which ground European identity formation contribute to slowing the process of public deliberation on EU affairs.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Regardless of the strength of the arguments concerning the lack of necessary conditions for the emergence of a European public sphere presented in this essay, there is no doubt that the topic will further generate a considerable amount of writing. There are not only scholars and researchers in the field of communication, sociology or European studies who are interested in this subject, but more and more EU officials and high representatives of the European Commission show growing enthusiasm for the idea of a communication arena for the public assessment of the

European affairs. During a conference on EU communication held in Brussels, a high representative of the European Commission[4] has emphasised the idea that "Europe should be brought closer to the citizens, so that a greater local impact of the European issues should be obtained", and that all these will help transform the EU into a "lively democracy". One way to achieve such goals is to focus on the creation of a functioning European public sphere, where citizens can assemble and discuss EU-related public matters on the basis of a shared conception of the general interest.

Despite this ambition, this paper has attempted to show that, at least in theory, current proposals for the development of such a public sphere within the EU lack a few of the necessary crucial constitutive elements. Drawing my arguments from Habermas's classical approach to the public sphere, I hope to have demonstrated that, to this point, there is a long way still to be covered until the required conditions for the functioning of a European public sphere are met.

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