PROBLEMS WITH A EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE

AN INTRODUCTION

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Abstract

This introduction discusses some of the problems of applying the concept of the public sphere to the current situation in the European Union. The EU is a body that is beginning to have many of the features that were historically associated with states, and therefore the issues of openness to public scrutiny that occasioned the birth of the classical public sphere begin to become important in this new context. The citizens of the EU gain their information mostly from the mass media, but these remain predominantly organised along the lines of the constituent states of the Union, rather than on any genuinely transnational basis. This means that there is always a tension between the discussion of issues as European issues and their discussion as issues of national interest within Europe. The concept of a public sphere is a much-contested one, and it is important to determine whether it is the correct starting point for considering the openness of political processes in the EU. The introduction reviews some of the issues, and concludes that it seems very difficult to hold on to some of the strong formulations that are associated with the category. On the other hand, the idea of the public sphere in its more radical formulation illuminates very clearly some of the issues of the practice of democratic political life that are currently absent from, and urgently needed by, the European Union. Modified to take account of what is now known about the reality of public life, and linked more closely to concepts of social and political action, the concept can provide a useful starting point for further enquiry.

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Introduction

In January 2001, the Journalism Research Centre at the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication of Tampere joined Euricom in sponsoring a colloquium on the European Public Sphere. Our intention was to explore the nature of discussions about Europe, and more narrowly the European Union, and to examine whether these could be understood from the perspective of the concept of the public sphere. In the course of the colloquium, it became evident that there was a rich body of empirical evidence about various aspects of the problem, some of which we print here. On the other hand, it was also obvious to the participants that there were large unresolved theoretical issues that needed to be confronted. We did not succeed in resolving any of those problems, but this introduction is by way of being an exploration of some of them. We do not claim here to have any definitive answers, but we hope that the record of our concerns will provide a framework for the studies that follow, and be of some use to those who try to resolve these very difficult issues in the future.[1]

In *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), a book which has recently been, once again, much discussed and praised, John Dewey wrote that:

We take our point of departure from the objective fact that human acts have consequences upon others, and their perception leads to subsequent effort to control action so as to secure some consequences and avoid others. Following this clue, we are led to remark that the consequences are of two kinds, those who affect the persons directly engaged in a transaction, and those which affect others beyond those immediately concerned. In this distinction we find the germ of the distinction between the private and the public. When indirect consequences are recognized and there is effort to regulate them, something having the traits of a state comes into existence (Dewey 1927, 12).

Starting from the indirect consequences of the action of others, Dewey developed a definition of the public that nicely illustrates why the question of transnational or international public debates, spaces and practices is in today an inescapable one. From the BSE crisis to the destruction of the statues of Buddha at the Bamiyan-ruins in Afghanistan, from environmental risks to human rights violations, the news daily reports how the consequences of systematic human activities have long ago surpassed any national borders. The "states" needed to deal with these realities are necessarily larger than our nations. Some seven decades after Dewey, Eric Hobsbawm put it like this:

> *By the end of the century the nation state was on the defensive against a world economy it could not control; against the institutions it had constructed to remedy its own international weakness, such as European Union; against its apparent financial incapacity to maintain the services to citizens so confidently undertaken a few decades ago; against its real incapacity to maintain what, by its own criteria, was its major function: the maintenance of public law and order* (Hobsbawm 1994, 576-7).

In the course of the "short twentieth century," the nation states that had dominated its early years had apparently become obsolete institutions, quite unable to resolve the real human needs of collective life.

The European Union is the clearest example of this general phenomenon of the

contemporary world. It is a supranational organisation that is steadily gaining more and more of the powers historically associated with sovereign states. Beginning with a limited and purely industrial mandate, it has gradually extended its power. It now makes laws, controls borders, steers cultural life and social policy, conducts foreign relations, exercises taxation, increasingly develops a monetary policy and, most recently, is trying to build a common military organisation. Minting money, policing and taxing the population, relating to other sovereign powers, and making war, all lie at the core of what makes the modern state a distinctive form of social organisation.

There is an alphabet soup of organisations that exercise sovereignty over activities located in a number of countries in a wide range of economic, political and cultural activities. From the WTO and the OECD, through NAFTA and Mercosur, to the United Nations family of organisations, numerous international bodies operate in this or that field of human activity. The uniqueness of the EU, however, is that it combines such a wide range of powers into one body and that it has a permanent executive with real powers. Thus, the EU is a case, but a special case, when we think about the more general problems of transnational political organisation. Whatever evasive politicians say to obscure the issue, the fact is that as the EU gains characteristically sovereign powers, so the states that are members lose those powers. The EU may not be a state, but in some ways it looks and behaves more and more like one every day. One is tempted to apply the vulgar proverb: "If it looks like a duck and sounds like a duck and acts like a duck, then why not call it a duck?"

We can embrace these realities and dream of a federal future or we can harbour a xenophobic hostility to the whole enterprise, but there is no doubt that they are the present realities, and as such they raise certain inescapable problems. With the increasingly clear characteristics of a state, and an increasingly intense debate about the "democratic deficit," a problem arises. If the EU functionally serves as a state-like power, what sort of publicity and public debates serve as the "watchdog" of that power and as forum for participation in discussions about how that power is exercised? Since the lack of a clearly identifiable forum or force of that kind is rather obvious, the obvious next questions are: what are the obstacles we are now unable to overcome, and what are potentials that we should recognise? This issue of *Javnost—The Public* makes an attempt to start paying attention and analyse some of these questions.

The Public and the EU

Public attitudes towards the EU present a series of paradoxes. There is manifest scepticism and, sometimes, downright hostility, towards the institutions of the EU in some important states, and a lack of engagement everywhere. More than 80 per cent of Europeans seem to think that the EU will either remain as important, or become more important in their lives, and 44 per cent them Europe *want* the EU to become more important (Eurobarometer 2000, 38-9). At the same time, there is incontrovertible evidence that involvement in debates and decision-making processes does not equal these attitudes. In every member state the proportion of people bothering to vote in European elections is falling, and in all cases other than Denmark the turnout in 1999 was lower than it was in the first EU election the country.

The level of participation in EU elections is generally very low by prevailing European standards. At the same time, though people know something about the EU and are relatively positive towards it. In every EU country, a much higher proportion of citizens expressed an *intention* to vote in the 1999 elections than actually did so (Eurobarometer 1998, 119). Public support for EU membership has generally been well above 50 per cent for the last twenty years, only falling below that figure briefly in 1996-97 and dipping to 49 per cent in the Spring of 2000 (Eurobarometer 1998, 17-18, Eurobarometer 2000, 7). Also, in broad terms, there is majority support for key European policy issues like a single currency (58 per cent) and a common defence (72 per cent) and foreign policy (64 per cent) (Eurobarometer 2000, 44).

There are, of course, important differences concealed within these representations of the "European" public opinion, the most obvious being those between the populations of different states. There are clearly countries (like the UK and Finland for example) in which there is very much higher than average disengagement from the EU. Similar differences of attitudes are observable in other areas. For example, in 1998 those saying that they would feel "very sorry if the EU were to be scrapped" ranged from 56 per cent in Luxembourg through to 19 per cent in the UK. Only in Finland (25 per cent compared to 23 per cent), Sweden (30 per cent compared to 21 per cent) and the UK (24 per cent compared to 19 per cent) would more people be "very relieved" than "very sorry" if the EU were to be scrapped (Eurobarometer 1998, 46). Other major social discriminators provide similar differences, but it is already clear from these figures that the prevailing attitude and practice towards the EU varies sharply from country to country.

At the same time, though, and despite these national differences, an overwhelming majority of Europeans would like the EU to have a constitution. 70 per cent are in favour, as opposed to only six per cent against, while 24 per cent do not know their views. Interestingly, even in the UK, which is one of the most sceptical countries, and probably the least constitutionally minded of the EU constituents, 47 per cent are in favour of a constitution with the same total of six per cent against, although here those without a settled opinion are most frequent at 47 per cent (Eurobarometer 2000, 36-37). This desire for a constitutional order may also be interpreted as a desire for a greater degree of democratic control over the workings of the EU, since overall only 43 per cent of citizens are satisfied with the level of democracy in the EU (Eurobarometer 2000, 81).

The strongly perceived need for something like a constitution, along with the weak participation by citizens in the existing political processes, are relevant in terms of the question of a European public sphere. Without a constitution of some kind, reasonably effective public surveillance of the newly emerged state-like powers of EU will hardly succeed. Without reasonably functional mechanisms of public debate, there are no resources for public participation. Although participation in a political structure does not necessarily mean that one should identify with all the ideological assumptions of that structure, it does assume that one should be well informed of the workings of that structure and that the structure should have reasonably clear rules that govern the political power and responsibilities in that structure. Thus, the first litmus test of a European public sphere must be: how well are we informed of what goes on Brussels? This brings us to the role of the media.

A European Media for Europeans?

According to the citizens themselves, their knowledge of the European Union is derived largely from the mass media, and within that category from television and radio. The two possible sources that appear remarkably unimportant are the Internet (except in the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland and Denmark — the "wired north"), and official information sources, whether EU or state-based, and whether governmental or directly political. In the latter case, if we combine EU sources, government sources, and public sources together, we find that only 11 per cent of citizens claim to gain information from them. We should also note that there is a considerable group of people who either "Don't know" (2 per cent) or who "Never look for such information/not interested" (15 per cent). The vast majority (77 per cent for television, 70 per cent for daily newspapers and 68 per cent for radio) of people believe the quantity of information about the EU is either about right or actually too little (Eurobarometer 2000, 70).

Fifty per cent of the EU population believe that the media coverage of the EU in their country is either "very fair" or "quite fair." There are substantial national differences, with those believing that the coverage is fair ranging from 68 per cent in Ireland down to 40 per cent in Portugal. (Eurobarometer 2000, 73). At the same time, though, if we ask how well informed citizens feel themselves to be, only 26 per cent rated themselves as well informed (Eurobarometer 2000, 74). When asked how they might wish to receive information about the EU, there is a strong desire that information be made available through the main mass media, rather than either through direct printed information provision or through electronic means. Whatever might be the case in the future, the population of the EU, even in the most wired of countries, does not today see the Internet as a major source of information on political life.

The overall picture that we can draw, then, is that most EU citizens gain their knowledge about the EU from the traditional mass media and that, while they do not feel themselves adequately informed, they nevertheless either think that the coverage is adequate, or they wish it were increased. The population is relatively satisfied with the coverage in the media, with few either very contented or extremely discontented. When asked which media they prefer for EU information, they tend to choose the standard mass media that have long provided political information and commentary about the constituent sovereign states.

One obvious problem in building an argument on these somewhat contradictory figures is that the people who are being asked to make these judgements lack any independent measure by which they could arrive at a reasoned response. The belief that the media that one consumes constitute a fair reporting of events and opinions is not a particularly persuasive measure of the reality of media performance. To say that a sole source of information is reliable or unreliable is to make a claim that one cannot possibly sustain.

In scholarly studies, the actual media coverage of Europe, particularly in the British press, has been shown to have serious faults (Andserson and Weymouth 1999). The work of individual journalists seems to also have severe limitations, and EC's own public information activities are manifestly inadequate (Meyer 1999). What is more, it is often claimed that it is only the elite press that engage in any systematic European discourse, and that therefore the majority of the population,

as consumers of non-elite media, are effectively excluded from serious engagement with the issues (Schlesinger 1999, 272-76). The rather limited empirical evidence about this suggests that the popular printed press does tend to differ from the more serious press, and from broadcasting, in adopting a more human interest based news frame (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). In addition to these criticism, and from a European point of view, the media remain fundamentally "national" in scope. Learning about the situation in the EU from the media of this or that European country does not necessarily amount to learning about Europe, as for instance Deidre Kevin's article in this volume shows. In Kuhne's (2000, 6) words " there remain 15 national public spheres, each essentially separate from the other."

This situation is in large part the product of the structure of the existing mass media. In theory, at least, the mass media in any particular national state represent the political universe to the citizens of that state, and although in practice they may display greater or lesser degrees of bias or distortion, they are in principle bound to present their material *as though* it was addressed to the general interests of all of those citizens. The debate over the adequacy of the media as the embodiment of public information and debate is, in part at least, a debate over how far they do in fact achieve this kind of universalism.

This is very far from being the case with the European Union. The media are, historically, not only limited by the borders of states but also bound up very closely with the formation of nations and of "nation states." If, as has been famously claimed, "print capitalism" was the precursor of the nation, it is certainly the case that broadcasting has been one of the major mechanisms by means of which these "nation states" have made the difficult transition to mass democracy. There is no obvious European equivalent of the journals of record which are supposed to define public opinion: the *Times* is the London *Times*, *Le Monde* is the world as seen from Paris, and *El Pais* in question is the Spanish state. In broadcasting, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) is a quite different kind of organisation to the BBC, YLE, or TF1, or RTE, or ZDF or whatever national broadcaster one might name. These are organisations whose very initials symbolise their role in the construction of a particular national polity. The EBU, on the other hand, is a federation of these nationally based broadcaster, and it has relatively few programming functions. The few European media that have been attempted, for example *The European* among newspapers and *Euronews* in broadcasting, have not prospered. The only modest successes, and are very much in niche markets, like *The Financial Times* and *Eurosport*. Relating to this problem, Hans Kleinstüber in this volume suggests, that if there is to be a European public sphere, the public broadcasters of the different states will have a central role to play in its creation.

From the point of view of a need for a universalist representation of issues in a European public sphere, the problem is the deep-rooted nationalistic structural features of the existing media system. The way the media are organised and funded, the training of their journalists and editors, the expectations of their audiences, the political and economic pressures under which they labour, even the very languages that they use, are all primarily defined in terms of the system of sovereign states. This means that no "European" media really exists, there a no "newspapers and periodicals, radio and television programmes, offered and demanded on a European market and thus creating a nation-transcending communicative context" (Grimm 1997, 252).

For the foreseeable future, the future of Europe will be discussed in what remain essentially discrete and potentially conflicting forums rooted in national states.

Thus, in theory, a transnational public sphere in a European scale seems not only a rather improbable prospect but almost a contradiction in terms. Thus far, the only kind "general interest" that an even reasonably popular mass media has been able sustain has remained within the borders of the — arguably contradictory — idea of "national universalism." The "bottom line" of looking at the facts about this or that issue has been, and to a large extent still seems to be, "the nation," with its interests in economics and security. Before abandoning the issue as hopeless, however, one should bear in mind that the "national" public spheres have also functioned as sites of political struggle. To a degree, they have also been useful for those who have not agreed at all with the contemporary dominant definitions of "general interest." The powerful fiction of arguing through "general interests" may have often acted as a mode of exclusion and of pejorative categorisation in national debates, but the fiction has also served as a potential base for criticism of the public of representation various groups and their interests. This is the reason that despite the lack of truly European media it is worth taking a closer look at the notion of "the public sphere" in the European context.

The Public Sphere and Its Critics

Rather than emptying the debate about the public sphere, the new challenges of European politics might then invigorate the need to take a critical look on the potentials and pitfalls of the notion of public sphere. In this tradition largely grown around Habermas' contribution, the public sphere has a normative status of being the space within which the affairs of a state could be subjected to public scrutiny. As public affairs, broadly interpreted, have outgrown the boundaries of the state, so the need for a new, supranational, public sphere comes to be every more urgent (cf. Garnham 1992).

Even though the concept of the "public sphere" is influential, it needs to be adopted with some degree of critical examination. There is no space here to offer an exhaustive review of the already existing criticism. However a brief inventory of at least some of the more obvious and better known problems present in the English-language discussion about the "public sphere" will help us frame the questions with which we are faced.

The Real vs. the Ideal Public Sphere? The historical accuracy of Habermas' original presentation has been widely discussed. It has become obvious that something roughly corresponding to the ideal public sphere hardly ever existed (cf. Curran 1991). The actual "public spheres" of history rested largely on the systematic exclusion of class, race and, most notably, gender (cf. Fraser 1992). There are also counter-arguments to Habermas' critique of the refeudalisation of the public sphere by the 20th century intervention of the state and the private sector. It has been argued that the commercial press and public service broadcasting in fact rendered the public sphere much more inclusive than it had been during any imagined or real classical period. Although the historical evidence is more mixed here, it is clear that the development of properly mass media did introduce a much wider layer of the population to the political process in an approachable form (Le Mahieu 1988, Scannell 1989).

The obvious lesson for thinking about Europe is, of course that whatever the European public sphere in its concrete manifestations might look like, it will never really exist as an ideal public sphere. In terms of actual access and participation, chances are that it will be based on some sort of systematic exclusions. However, in terms of the usefulness of the notion itself, the crucial question concerns partly the rhetoric surrounding the practices of access and participation. If a democratic "fiction" about a European public sphere as an inclusive space of free arguments about political issues emerges, it will at least somehow, however insufficiently, allow its own practices to be challenged on those terms. It is perhaps in the impossibility of its own actualisation that the real progressive power of the idea of "a public sphere" really lies. In this sense, as an attempt to formulate principles that allow radical democratic interventions, the Habermasian project is viable and an important one. For arguments about the tasks that must be accomplished in order to reduce the "democratic deficit," for instance, one certainly needs a fiction of this kind. It is perhaps worth remembering, even though the public sphere historically speaking seemed to evolve in a explicit relationship to the state, and even tough it was tied to the struggle for democratic rights, the order of thing is not necessarily that simplistic. Both the Habermasian phenomena of the classical bourgeois public sphere and (even more so) the plebeian embodiments of critical reason (cf. Curran 1991) originated *before* the corresponding democratic structures were present. In the historical record, the public sphere is a precursor and catalyst of democracy, rather than the other way around. Perhaps the fiction, in turn, is a precursor of the practices of the sphere on a European level.

But at the same time, one has to admit, it is not easy to recognise forces or trends that would support the rise of such a fiction. For instance on the purely economic front, the logic that directs the future trends of "mass media" has for some time now been diverted from the search for mass audiences into more and more specialised, tailor-made target groups. This is a mainly exclusive logic, and has little need for legitimising its operations with a reference "general interest" at a European or any other level. So, if the "original" concept that Habermas built on was developed to support the practices of the European bourgeoisie, in the 21st century Europe one is also forced to ask: "Who is in need of (an idea of) a European public sphere?." Judging from the evidence presented in Anu Kantola's article in this volume, notions like "the public" or "public discussion" have lost a lot of their plausibility with politicians and bureaucrats, and whatever it is they refer to is seen as something that obstructs the rational elite in decision making.

One or Many? The historical questions lead to debate about the supposed *unity* of a public sphere. According critics, the unity attributed to the public sphere in its classical phase any longer corresponds to the reality of the contemporary diversity of political movements (Keane 1995). The implications of this charge are much more problematic, despite having been accepted by Habermas himself as substantially correct (Habermas 1992). At least occasionally, of course, one might accept that there are distinct bounded groups amongst whom more or less "private" discussions take place. But, in the end, the formation of the "public will" must necessarily be an inclusive activity, an activity that presupposes the presence and participation of all others. The only alternative is that the public will is formed by that group that exercises the most political power.

Thinking of Europe, then, if we are ready to accept that particular groups, to take the commonly cited examples, those constituted on the grounds gender, ethnicity, political orientation or whatever, may deliberate in isolation, then there do not seem to be reasonable grounds for criticising the existence of such deliberations on the bases of the sovereign states of Europe. The issue of a European public sphere is only significant if one accepts that the common policy decisions of the EU need to be subject to the scrutiny of Europeans, rather than the citizens of states deliberating on the national advantage that can be pursued in a particular case. Just as there is no reason to try deny the deliberations of smaller groups, there is no need to deny the deliberations of nations. The crucial question from a European perspective, however, would be that these deliberations are of "public character." Even if things are thought and debated in smaller national contexts, the deliberations may or may not be based on knowledge of a larger arena or field, in which the results of these deliberations are to be represented. The implied presence of all other "Europeans" is what would make national deliberations genuinely public in a European context. With no such idea, and certainly no such reality, of a public space of this kind existing, a European citizenship rooted in the lifeworld of different kinds of Europeans cannot come into existence through the national public spheres. In this sense, if the "democratic deficit" is — as David Ward argues in the volume — essentially a "communication deficit," it seems in important ways to begin on the "home front." Much, if not everything, in this sense depends of the ability of the national media apparatuses to communicate the presence of a transnational perspective.

Contested Distinctions I: Public vs. Private. A widely discussed and accepted criticism of Habermas states that the boundaries of the public and private identified in the classical concept of the public sphere reified bourgeois social relations. From the perspective of the proletariat, the public sphere is quite differently constituted (cf. Negt and Kluge 1993). This issue points to the relatively arbitrary way in which matters are admitted to the public sphere, and underlines the fact that these boundaries between public and private are a matter of contestation and historical revision (Koivisto and Väliverronen 1996). In this sense, the criticism points to a central issue at stake in the European case.

Susan O'Donnell's article in this volume studies the ability of new media technologies to enhance the plurality of public spheres, as well as their ability to help grassroots groups to contest the public/private boundaries. Looking at a special case study through a framework that connects social movement communication to the public sphere, she comes up with contradictory evidence. In her account, a relatively simple mailing list can at times serve as a site for contesting and overcoming the boundaries of the private and the public. At the same time, however, even in a social movement context, communication in the list is vulnerable to the same social and cultural pressures as are present in other forms of communication. When a mailing list begins to grow (and when it begins to resemble in some ways a depersonalised public sphere), many participants begin to shy away from thought experiments. The ability of this communication forum to articulate the lifeworld experiences of its participants and offer challenges to mainstream definitions of things grew smaller when the number of participants grew bigger.

These kinds of experiences not only pose fundamental questions to many vi-

sions of technological utopia but, more importantly, they should make us think twice about whether the "plural" criticism of the public sphere in the end can offer a model in which one does not need at least the *idea* of *a single* public sphere. Perhaps in the European case, this should also make us modify our expectations of different modes of communication. We should not expect that alternative public spheres will explicitly show the signs of being "small" public spheres, or that they will in their own communication habits somehow explicitly cultivate the virtues of *a* public sphere. Their important role in enhancing democratic communication might be to allow diverse perspectives to grow stronger. The task of mediating and translating the challenges of these perspectives to the wider spheres is perhaps a different one.

*Contested Distinctions II: Reason and Rationality***.** It is rather clear, that the *stress upon reason* present in the classic formulations represents a cripplingly inadequate account of the necessary reality of public discourse. In fact, interest and passion, which are among the obvious categories that Habermas wishes to exclude from public deliberation, are not only in practice present in all existing political situations, there is no strong warrant to exclude them. On the contrary, the central function of reason is to arbitrate between the claims of interest and passion. As Dewey (1922, 194-196) would argue, in good deliberation "more passions, not fever is the answer ," and that "reasonableness is in fact a quality of an effective relationship among desires rather than a thing opposed to desire."

In trying to retain the normative strength of the universalism of the concept of the public sphere *without* ending up in exclusive criteria of participation, it is of utmost importance to see this *mediating* role of reason in public discourse. Otherwise the reality of interests and passions will render the use of reason (as a pure rationality) unrealistic and idealistic. Then, having lost faith in reason, one is left with no alternative but to accept that the public good is determined by something other than reason, namely the will of the powerful once again.

The public sphere "works" for Habermas because he assumes normative agreement arising from affective relations in the life-world outside of the realm of public reasoning. (Although the shadowy literary public sphere might be implicated in norm formation.) As he put it in the *Theory of Communicative Action*:

> *acting communicatively always come to an understanding in the horizon of a lifeworld. Their lifeworld is formed from more or less diffuse, always unproblematic, background convictions. This lifeworld background serves as a source of situation definitions that are presupposed by participants as unproblematic. In their interpretative accomplishments the members of a communication community demarcate the one objective world and their intersubjectively shared social world from the subjective worlds of individuals and (other) collectives. The world-concepts and the corresponding validity claims provide the formal scaffolding with which those acting communicatively order problematic contexts of situations, that is, those requiring agreement, in their lifeworld, which is presupposed as unproblematic* (Habermas 1984, I, 70)

The "nation" is obviously one of the major categories that effects such definitional functions of agreement, exclusion and self-evidence. It is also notoriously a category that carries a major charge of affective identification. It is difficult to see the

European Union as providing an alternative source of normative unanimity. But at the same time one should note, that whatever the nation means or has meant in terms of identification and affections, it can hardly be termed "unproblematic." Perhaps the ways in which "nationhood" is today challenged is a sign of how discourses around it have begun to be built on the supposed presence of other definitions of that national identity, both from inside and outside its own boundaries.

In a more historical vein, one can speculate — with for instance Stephen Toulmin (1990) — on the observation that historically speaking, principles of national sovereignty (a la Westphalia) and the emergence of certain kind of narrow, decontextualised and abstract reasoning (a la Descartes) took root hand in hand in the early 17th century Europe. Historically, the definition of rationality as a particular kind of abstract thinking, and the principle of nations as the natural units of moral sovereignty, preceded the idea of the "classical" public sphere. In Toulmin's project, being *reasonable* (rather than rational) grows from an appreciation of the Renaissance ideal: a state of being at the same time modest about one's own capacities and being tolerant of cultural, social and intellectual diversity:

> *After 1620, many Europeans found this intellectual and practical tolerance inconclusive, permissive, and open to abuse, and adopted other, stricter ideals of rationality instead. For Descartes, rational thought could not rely on inherited tradition: empirical procedures rooted in experience rather that theory were in his view compromised, since they perpetuated the folklore of a given culture and period, and rested finally on superstition, not reason. He felt that if everyone cleaned their slate, and started from the same sensory "impressions" or "clear and distinct ideas," there would be no need to ask what personal or cultural idiosyncrasies each of them brought to their common debate, Whenever possible, then, the "rational" thing to do was to start from scratch, and to insist on the certainty of geometrical inference and logicality of formal proofs. Only so could a way be found, he believed, to avoid the interminable quarrels of the dogmatic theologian* (Toulmin 1990, 199).

The way in which the principle of the moral sovereignty of Nation-States ruled our minds after Westphalia perhaps made it possible for the State and the boundaries of the Nation to be elevated to the status in which this kind of rational attitude could in fact operate. Certainly, the inclusiveness of the "national public spheres" was restricted by a somewhat similar attitude to that of Descartes and his followers. And almost paradoxically, these moral entities served as unforeseen markers of identity and action. As John Peters aptly pointed out in the seminar from which the contributions of this volume came, the nation state can be seen as by far the most effective mobilisation device for personal sacrifices and altruistic behaviour.

Discussion vs. Action — Spheres vs. Issues . Finally, and partly as a result of many of the criticism above, one should say that the relationship between public sphere, public opinion and political action is poorly defined in any of Habermas' accounts of his position. He identified the major instance of the bourgeois public sphere as existing in a pre-democratic society. From this, it logically follows that there is no necessary link between the function of the formation of critical public opinion and the exercise of a determinant public will established through the procedures of democracy. Although, as he rightly points out, communicative action is indeed

action, it is not at all the case that all classes of action are identical in their nature or effects. This point was very obvious even to that apostle of free speech, John Stuart Mill:

> *No one pretends that action should be as free as opinions. On the contrary, even opinions lose their immunity when the circumstances in which they are expressed are such as to constitute their expression a positive instigation to some mischievous act. An opinion that corn-dealers are starvers of the poor, or that private property is robbery, ought to be unmolested when simply circulated through the press, but may justly incur punishment when delivered orally to an excited mob assembled before the house of a corn-dealer, or when handed about the same mob in the form of a placard* (Mill 1859/1962, 184).

The problem of freedom, and in particular the freedom to discuss not only the nature of society but also the appropriate forms of social action that might transform that society, for Mill, had to be considered in reference to the concrete social conditions in which it was situated. Mill quite unequivocally limits freedom of speech at the point when it might lead directly to harm to private property, and possibly also life. We can generalise this dilemma by saying that all discussions of public speech are, ultimately, discussions also of social action. Any consideration of the kinds of speech that are appropriate to a democratic society are thus also discussions of the kinds of social arrangements that are necessary to permit such speech to be realised.

Since speech and action, debate and the context that makes it possible are so intimately interconnected, the implicit idea of a "sphere" somehow separated from the social reality which it is used to discuss, is (socio)logically very difficult to sustain. This problem might lead us to take on board some of the theoretical contributions of the thinkers who developed Dewey's logic of publics as particular kinds of social formations. For instance Blumer's (1946; cf. Park 1904) attempt to define the public as particular kinds of interaction constituted by common *issues* or *problems*, would put less emphasis on questions like: "which media is or would be able to construct a European public sphere?" Instead, more emphasis would be placed on questions like: *which issues and problems would be able to constitute the beginning of European publics?* An issue, or problem, based definition of the public would in fact necessarily contest the distinction between communicative and other action.

Rebuilding an Adequate Concept

In order to construct a version of the public sphere adequately robust to illuminate the European situation, we need to begin from the fact that the concept has changed over time, not only at the hands of commentators, but also in the various revisions proposed by its originator, Jürgen Habermas. Broadly speaking, these constitute an evolution from a critical to a liberal viewpoint, and involve an increasing stress upon the procedures for arriving at a rational consensus. We might describe this shift as being from a category grounded in historical sociology to one grounded in linguistic philosophy.

The concept "public sphere" was first introduced into the essentially monoglot world of Anglo-Saxon communication scholarship with the short 1964 formulation from the *Fischer Lexikon*. This was published in *New German Critique* in the

autumn of 1974, and reprinted in 1979 in volume one of *Communication and Class Struggle*. It was not until 1989 that an English translation of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* itself became available. It was the shorter text that influenced, for example, Nicholas Garnham in his well-known mid-1980s account of the relationship between the public sphere and public service broadcasting (Garnham 1990, 106-09). While the substance of the two accounts is certainly very similar, the abbreviated form has a significantly different emphasis from the full account.

In the first place, the very strong stress upon the rational character of discussion in the classical bourgeois public sphere, which is central to the long version, is almost absent from the shorter version. On the other hand, the short version makes a much more definite statement of the continuing existence of the public sphere, albeit subject to a "trend towards…weakening." The shorter version there is also a clear stress upon revitalising it through reforms that involve "the rational reorganisation of social and political power under the mutual control of rival organisations committed to the public sphere in their internal structure as well as in their relations with the state and each other" (Habermas 1974, 55). At the same time, the substance given to the concept itself is in the shorter version is much more positive than that of the longer work:

> *By the "public sphere" we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, not like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion — that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions — about matters of general interest. In a large public body this kind of communication requires specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Today, newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere…The public sphere as a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion, accords with the principle of the public sphere — that principle of public information which once had to be fought for against the arcane policies of monarchies and which since that time has made possible the democratic control of state activities* (Habermas 1974, 49-50).

In its positioning at the very opening of the essay, as much as in its stress upon universality of access, its insistence on complete absence of censorship, and the importance accorded to an equality of opportunity for all citizens in both receiving and expressing their views, this is quite clearly extremely important to the balance of the overall argument. What had been more or less restricted to the concluding note about C. Wright Mills' distinction between "public" and "mass" in *The Structural Transformation* is here the starting point of the discussion (Habermas 1989, 249). It is reasonable to say that the overall impression given of the nature and implications of the concept that can be derived from the shorter version is one that is much more obviously radically democratic than the longer one.

This "radical" reading of Habermas was undoubtedly wrong, in the sense that the body of his work, both in the original formulation of the concept of the public sphere and in the later re-workings of the idea, fits much better with the standard "liberal" reading advanced by most writers. The issues at stake, however, are not the exegetical ones, but of constructing a serviceable concept that can help us illuminate the questions surrounding the possibilities of a European pubic sphere.

Emphasising the "radical" reading and taking into account some of the criticism above, would lead us at the some of the following preliminary conclusions

1. Questions of European public sphere — or any public sphere for that matter — should not be posed with too narrow definitions of rationality. For good and for ill, it is the interests and passions of various kinds of political stakeholders that give any public debate its motivation, viability and its ability to articulate experiences. In a public sphere of this kind, reason has to do with reasonableness.

2. The national public spheres are not necessarily to be seen as contrary to the development of European spheres. Despite its long common history with the more narrow forms of formal rationality, the category of the "nation" carries with it an unsurpassed amount of potential for political mobilisation. Inasmuch as the national spheres cultivate reason in the above sense, they cultivate democratic politics. Inasmuch as they are based on the *idea* that there is a European presence in national deliberations, they contribute to the European public sphere. Thus, if there is a European public discourse to be discovered and evaluated, it is to be found — and developed — in the context of national and local media outlets that domesticate European issues.

3. In a radical democratic reading, the public sphere is less about finding the truth and more about democracy as such. It is about seeing public spheres as potential sites of participation and potential contexts of actualising certain kinds of public behaviour. Any public sphere is, in this reading, as much a forum for practising reasonable citizenship as an end in itself. Saying that it is an end in itself does not mean that there could be interaction "in itself." Quite the contrary, issues and problems constitute publics and thus, in order to look for the European public sphere, we should look for issues and the publics around them, instead of merely pondering about the "location" or "media" of the public sphere.

4. A more radical and less liberal definition of the public sphere would also would allow us to see, appreciate and study how various communication modes in Europe and in the national contexts are able to transgress and contest the oppositions between emotions and reason, private and public, rational and interest-driven — and also the boundaries of national identities. Any future mechanism of public accountability and the rhetoric about its usefulness need this kind of knowledge badly. This would also help us to see the value of the plurality of actual public spheres, without arguing that they should be submitted to narrow, abstract or formal criteria of process.

5. Finally, the more radical reading of the notion of public sphere would allow us to retain at least a fraction of what remains the most viable part of the notion: its usefulness as a common frame in which critical claims for political representation can be made.

Dewey managed quite well without the notion of "sphere" in his thinking about the problems of the public. Whatever shortcomings his views include, his words

about the changing times resonate nicely with some of the challenges we face today in thinking about the public.

> *The new public which is generated remains long inchoate, unorganized, because it cannot use the inherited political agencies. The latter, if elaborate and well instituted, obstruct the organization of the new public. They prevent that development of new forms of the state which might grown up rapidly were social life more fluid, less precipitated into set political and legal moulds. … An epoch in which the needs of a newly forming public are counteracted by established forms of the state is one in which there is increasing disparagement and disregard of the state. General apathy, neglect and contempt find expression in resort to various short-cuts of direct action. And direct action is taken by many other interests than those which employs "direct action" as a slogan, often most energetically by intrenched class-interests which profess the greatest reverence for the established "law and order" of the existing state. By its very nature, a state is ever something to be scrutinized, investigated, searched for* (Dewey 1927, 30-31).

A radical version of the notion of a public sphere, a sphere for the action of publics, seems at least a promising lead in our search for the reasonable possibilities of the necessary realities of European publicness.

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Note:

1. This essay is the work of two authors who have, as the reader will observe, rather different views about the issues under discussion. We do not want to pretend to unanimity that we do not possess, and have therefore taken a conscious decision to leave the tensions that are apparent in this text present for all to see. We hope that this will prove more stimulating of further discussion than the imposition of a bland and false homogeneity.

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