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EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE: DELIBERATIVE OR RADICAL DEMOCRACY

This paper is part of a larger project "European Public Sphere(s): Uniting and Dividing" (Academy of Finland 2005–2007), hosted by the Department of Communication, Helsinki University. Its members include altogether 12 media and communication scholars in different capacities, nine of whom are also presenting their papers in this conference. My role in the project is to review earlier research and academic discussion on the European public sphere.

Four approaches to imagine European Public Sphere

Basing on an initial reading of research literature we have adopted a four-ways division of approaches to the European Public Sphere. These are:

- Europe of citizens: This approach subscribes to the ideal of a European Public Sphere. It is supposed to be transnational in character, i.e. it should cross the borders of European nation states. This approach has strong relations to ideas of deliberative democracy and a Habermasian way of understanding the public sphere.
- Europe of networks: According to this approach, public spheres are always in plural, not in singular. Europe is made on multiple public spheres – local, regional, national, sub-European, European, global.
- Europe of governance: This approach treats the European Public Sphere from the point of view of efficient public communication. As an answer to the EU's deepening legitimation crisis, Europe needs more effective information and communication. The European Public Sphere is seen as constructed from above, as a part of "good European governance".

- Europe of markets: From the perspective of media and communication markets, European public sphere is seen as a market place for media products and services. Openness and diversity mean better market opportunities.

Europe of citizens: towards a European Public Sphere?

In this presentation I will concentrate on the first approach mentioned above, "Europe of citizens", which includes the normative claim of the possibility of transnational deliberation, i.e. critical and open debate across the national and cultural borders of Europe. My question is: is transnational deliberation possible? I will pose two criticisms toward this type of thinking, the first I call pragmatic and the other normative.

First, however, we need to clarify what do we mean by the European Public Sphere. It has many different definitions and ways of understanding, depending who defines it.

- In one end is an understanding inspired by Jürgen Habermas and others who defend the idea of deliberative democracy (see e.g. Habermas 2002; Calhoun ***),
- In the other end it is understood in terms as expressed e.g. in the EC's "White Paper on European Communication Policy" from last February (see White Paper 2006; Wallstöm 2005). The main aim of the White Paper is to improve the efficiency of EU's communication and information activities, which makes it very much a governance based perspective.

However, there is a common core in at least most of the definitions. It includes the following preimises:

- There is a severe gap between EU and European citizens. Even the European Commission documents speak of "communication gap" and decreasing trust of citizens in the EU.
- There are common issues uniting all Europeans, such as environment, energy, globalisation, social security, employment etc.
- There is a need to create inclusive means and methods for European-wide debate and will-formation.
- At the moment such methods and necessary infrastructure do not exist.

Europe of citizens: deliberative democracy

Most of the scholars of the European Public Sphere subscribe to at least some concept of deliberative democracy. As mentioned earlier, in the background we can see the Habermasian ideal of public sphere, but now applied to post-national conditions.

Basing on Habermas's classic distinction between the literary and political public spheres, the anatomy of the European Public Sphere might be described as follows. First, we have to make an analytical distinction between two dimensions of the public sphere:

- 1) cultural-social dimension, which concerns European identity, and
- 2) political dimension, which concerns power.

1) Cultural-social dimension of European Public Sphere: includes such topics as

- identity: refers to a distinction between we as Europeans and "them" as non-Europeans,
- solidarity: refers to Europe understood as a community of fate; includes recognition of common concerns uniting Europeans; feeling responsibility for strangers-in-need
- trust: refers to belief in reciprocity and mutuality, of being not left alone, as a basic feature of European way of life.

2) Political dimension of EPS: includes such issues as:

- recognition of common concerns: answering to what are the issues which unite us as Europeans,
- will formation, action coordination: answering to what should be done, which course of action should be taken,
- decision making: following that our representatives follow the democratically formed guidelines,
- controlling and monitoring: ensuring that the execution of decisions fulfil the commonly agreed guidelines.

Difference between a public space and a public sphere

One important distinction must yet be done in order to understand the basic logic of the public sphere. How do we make the difference between the concepts of public space and public sphere?

- Public space refers to common domain – where even strangers can meet and coexist without any specific relationship or commitment to common issues,
- Public sphere refers to more binding relationship, it includes a commitment by its members to common issues and concerns; it is a thick network of trust and solidarity.

So, how then to define a European Public Sphere, what would be its preconditions? According to several scholars (see e.g. Erikssen 2005; Schlesinger & Fossum 2005; Trentz 2004; van Steeg 2002) it requires that:

- the same issues,
- are discussed and debated simultaneously,
- with approximately similar consideration and intensity,
- from the same major perspectives – i.e. argumentative orientations,
- transnationally in different European countries,
- transgressing purely national and regional standpoints

The European Public Sphere does not presuppose:

- pan-European media, i.e. that there would be a European tv-channel or a European newspaper,
- pan-European communication infrastructure, i.e. that there should be only one language and a EU-supported system of communication and information (e.g. European Ministry of Information).

However, the European Public Sphere does presuppose:

- existence of cultural-social dimension of public sphere, as described above – that is, that people or at least the majority of people identify themselves as Europeans and feel somehow connected to their fellow-Europeans: they have at least some degree of common identity, solidarity, trust, reciprocity (amounting to something like European citizenship). (See e.g. Habermas 2001; Calhoun 2002.)

How can we achieve this kind of situation? According to Jürgen Habermas (2001, 2006b) the primary means to achieve this should be European Constitution:

- He sees the European Constitution – which should define clearly citizens’ rights and responsibilities – as a necessary procedural condition for European citizenship.
- For Habermas, European Public Sphere is a process: socio-cultural preconditions for transnational European identity, solidarity and trust develop through common debate – and the Constitution gives the necessary framework for this.
- From this point of view, the process can be seen as parallel to the development of European nation states, such as Germany or Finland to that matter: first constitutional structure, then nationhood and citizenship.

Two points of criticism

I promised earlier to present two types of criticism to the kind of thinking described above:

- 1) How realistic is the concept of transnational identity? – This I call pragmatic critique.
- 2) How democratic is deliberative democracy? – This I call normative critique.

1) Pragmatic critique: National vs. European identity

The essence of pragmatic critique here is to weigh the empirical evidence of citizens’ attitudes towards Europe and Europeanization against the ideals of the “Europe of citizens” approach. Do we see a movement towards a European identity in citizens’s attitudes and beliefs? Is there increasing trust in European institutions?

I can here show only some recent results from Finland, but I take them roughly being representative of the popular attitudes in different European countries.

Let us first study how much Finns trust in different institutions:

Table 1. Finnish attitudes: ”Trust in institutions” (YLE 2003)

Seven most trusted institutions (scale 1—5):

- President of Finland 4,1
- Police 4,1
- National Defence Forces 4,0
- Red Cross 4,0
- School system 3,9
- Universities 3,8
- Finnair 3,8

Seven least trusted institutions:

- Government 3,1
- civic organisations 3,1
- employers' unions 3,0
- Parliament 3,0
- media, mass communication 2,9
- European Union 2,6
- political parties 2,4

Interestingly, all institutions which deal with politics and political issues are on the bottom of the ladder. Only national political parties fare worse than the EU. And even more interestingly, on the top are the institutions of sanctioned violence – the police and the army.

We will study next the Finnish attitudes towards Europe and European Union.

Table 2. National vs. European identity, Finnish attitudes (EVA 2005, 2006):

- "I feel myself to be not only a Finn but a European" (%)

	1990	1998	2004
Yes	44	43	47
No	36	38	38

- "The Finns should effectively protect their culture against increasing globalisation"

	1990	1998	2004
Yes	69	71	69
No	19	16	17

- Attitudes toward Finland's membership in EU:

	1998	2002	2005
Positive	43	38	33
Negative	25	32	31

- "EU listens the public opinion in its member countries and does not strive to develop EU against that"

	1995	2001	2005
Agree	14	11	11
Don't agree	43	58	61

- "Despite its problems, EU is the only power that can positively steer and govern Europe"

	1995	2001	2005
Agree	39	36	41
Don't agree	28	38	33

- Attitudes towards EU's enlargement in 2004:

	2000	2003	2005
Positive	24	34	27
Negative	40	32	32

What seems very interesting is the consistency of attitudes: they do not change very much from 1990, except that Euro-scepticism or criticism has slightly increased during the years.

In short: we cannot see any major shift towards a European identity in Finnish attitudes, nor are there any signs of increasing solidarity or trust in Europe and European institutions. Another question is, if these questions can be answered through these methods at all.

2) *Normative critique: Deliberation vs. radical democracy*

The most serious critique of deliberative democracy has been posed by the advocates of radical democracy (see Mouffe 2000; Fraser 2005; Young 1996). Their basic claim is that all theories of deliberative democracy include an assumption that:

- There is a common will waiting to be uncovered,
- The method for this uncovering is deliberation, i.e. informed critical debate where all relevant voices are heard and taken into consideration,
- As a result, we can find a solution to all our problems, acceptable to all parties affected.

From the point of view of deliberative democracy, the crucial question is then: How to remove the present obstacles and hindrances which restrict full and open deliberation, i.e. conditions of inequality which are caused by socio-economic (education, income, age etc), cultural (ethnicity, religion, language etc), and gender-based (glass ceiling, public/private etc) factors? For deliberative democrats, the answer is: through deliberative politics – expanding the Public Sphere, promoting openness and inclusion, increasing plurality and diversity.

However, according to radical-democratic critics, common will is seen as a delusionary ideal: it is an ideological construction which includes a claim of homogeneity instead of plurality. The claim from consensualism in communicative action leads inherently to suppressing differences: only such opinions are promoted which can help to strive for consensus.

In this sense, the belief in deliberative ideal can lead to two kinds of perils: to our submittance to and/or acceptance of expert governance (implying inherent bureaucracy and secrecy) and tyranny of majority.

- 1) As deliberation must be based on the best information available, experts are naturally the key resource. The problems Europe faces today are so complicated that we must necessarily trust in specialised knowledge and assessment. Furthermore, the problems concern more and more private economic interests (e.g. in energy policy, environmental policy etc.) so that they cannot be publicly discussed and democratically voted but have to be left to expert consideration and decision. Besides energy policy, the war on terror is another example of this.
- 2) Especially when the security of community is under threat, or when the leaders claim that such a threat exists, pressure for unanimity increases. This often results to suppression of particular interests (group identities, transcommunal solidarities etc.) for communal interests, i.e. particular interests are defined as a threat to the survival of community. This can be exemplified by the case of the US-led campaign War on Terror: demand for unanimity has led many European governments to re-negotiating their allegiance to human rights and to silencing of dissidents).

The radical-democratic critique demands the recognition of non-resolveable or antagonistic conflicts. They include at least two types of conflicts, cultural (value-based) and socio-economic (interest-based).

- 1) Cultural conflicts. These are based on the existence of antagonistic value systems within the society, exemplified by different religious communities (different sects of Christians, muslims, etc.). Communities may have conflicting values e.g. concerning the individual's position and relations to community. In concrete terms, conflicts may concern such issues as female circumcision, honour killing, forced marriages, corporal punishment etc.

Here the question is not of common deliberation, as any sort of communal violence or physical interference are in principle non-negotiable on the basis of European concepts of human human rights. The question is, how to arrange peaceful co-existence in a situation of non-communication or denial of common/mutually binding citizenship rights and responsibilities?

- 2) Socio-economic or interest-based conflicts. These are based on conflicts of interests between those controlling societal resources versus those dependent on these resources. Today this is exemplified e.g. in the case of economic globalisation. One concrete instance is the shifting of industrial production from Europe to the countries with lower labour, leading to a massive reduction of industrial jobs in a number of European countries. The immediate daily interests and needs of those unemployed cannot be consensually resolved with those who benefit from this.

These kinds of conflicts cannot be resolved by consensual means, i.e. critical deliberation cannot bring out a solution which would be equally acceptable by all parties. Instead of consensus, the question is how to forge out compromises which allow the least bad solutions to most members of society.

From the point of view of radical-democratic critique, the European Public Sphere could best be perceived as:

- a multi-layered construct,
- with a core or Euro-elite's public sphere, representing the decision makers (strong publics, see Erikssen 2005),
- circled by a multiplicity of challenging but weak public spheres: some are dominant national public spheres, some are national counter-public spheres, some are transnational counter-public spheres, some are also alternative public spheres creating their own networks and procedures.

The problem is still, however:

- if we acknowledge the need for democratic European policies in such areas of common concerns as energy, environment, employment, social security etc.,
- how to create such a strong European counter-public sphere or such strong counter-public spheres which could really contest the dominant Euro-elites and their policies?

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