PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE EUROPEAN PROJECT

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Corinne DORIA

ABSTRACT

The existence and characteristics of a European public sphere, considered as indispensable in the process of European construction, have been the subject of a debate dating back to the 1950s. Formulated based on the Habermasian concept of *Öffentlichkeit* (public sphere), the European public sphere is considered in turns as having always existed, as being currently under formation, or as impossible to carry out. It has therefore proven to be a shifting concept beset by a permanent process of redefinition.

Piazza del Sole, Posta, Stazione (Bellinzona)

The European public sphere is a shifting concept that is difficult to grasp. The existence of a European public sphere is considered as being indispensable in the process of European construction. Considered a potential sphere because it is currently incomplete—which is one of the reasons for Europe's democratic deficit—it is all the same in the process of being formed, as demonstrated by numerous indicators such as symbols of Europe (the European flag, stamps, the Ode to Joy), the common currency, the free circulation of people and goods on European territory, programs for cultural cooperation, the increased space given to European news in national media, and sporting events such as the European football or athletics championships. Only when this process is finished, it is believed, will European integration finally be accomplished, for there will finally be a European identity and *demos* (people). The process leading to the creation of a European public sphere is presented from a teleological point of view, as being connected to the success of the European project itself, whose failure, despite

the growing number of doomsayers, is out of the question.

Public Sphere: Polysemy of a Concept

The concept of a European public sphere relates to the concept of public sphere, a notion that has now been broadly adopted by numerous disciplines (political science, philosophy, sociology, communications studies, architecture) in order to understand the political and social world, and that has also entered into everyday language. This category has continued to inform debates since the publication of Jürgen Habermas's *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* in 1962 (English translation: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society,* 1989). The Habermasian *Öffentlichkeit* (public sphere) refers to a practice that was put in place during the eighteenth century in France and England. At that time, the bourgeoisie showed a need for interaction and communication (initially for essentially economic reasons), which led it to become interested in the functioning of the state, the law, and taxation. A series of forms and places of sociability appeared (salons, cafés, newspapers), which when taken together constitute what Habermas calls *Öffentlichkeit*. In *Öffentlichkeit*, private individuals meet, discuss and enter into relations as equals. In this sphere and through these practices, opinions exit the private sphere and circulate, informing a collective debate. Through discussion, opinions are transformed into rational and consensual affirmations (public opinion), while those taking part in the debate (and who make free and public use of reason) clarify their ideas.

Among the subjects taken up in *Öffentlichkeit* are the actions of political authorities, which are discussed, subjected to criticism, and exposed to the scrutiny of public reason, that which is exercised by cultured individuals who aspire to nothing other than the public good. This forces authorities to abandon secrecy and confront interlocutors; hence politics can no longer be the domain of secrecy and arbitrariness and thus rediscovers it original etymological meaning of *res publica* (public thing). *Öffentlichkeit* is thus configured both as a sphere of *rapprochement* and of differentiation between the state and civil society.

This configuration changed at the end of the nineteenth century. Beginning with the intervention of the state in areas where it was previously content to act as arbiter (especially the economic sphere), the distinction between political and civil society—which was one of the conditions for the existence of the Habermasian *Öffentlichkeit*—started becoming less clear. The modes and places of *Öffentlichkeit* incidentally experienced a change in their sociology, for on one side we see the emergence of a minority of specialists, and on the other that of a less-informed mass. This led to a change in the role and function played by *Öffentlichkeit* previously. The public ceased being an interlocutor of power and became a target to be conquered by the politicians, who sought solely to gain its trust by sometimes purely utilitarian means, and for whom the question of the public good became an instrument of persuasion, even manipulation.

The success of Habermas's work is linked to the exceptional heuristic potential of the concept of *Öffentlichkeit*, which the different translations of his work have enlarged. The changing of *Öffentlichkeit* into "*espace public*" in the French translation of 1978 (*L'espace public: archéologie de la publicité comme dimension constitutive de la société bourgeoise*), "*opinione pubblica*" in the Italian version published seven years earlier (*Storia e critica dell'opinione pubblica,* 1971), or "public sphere" in the English edition of 1989 brought about a distance with respect to Habermas's original thought. This nevertheless made it possible to begin a debate in the scientific community about a category that several disciplines found functional for their field of expertise. Philosophy, political science, sociology, communication studies, architecture and urban studies appropriated the concept and gave it a definition adapted to their needs.

Political science and political philosophy were among the first disciplines to adopt the concept of public sphere. This is not surprising, considering the fact that the political dimension is given priority in Habermas's analysis. This sphere includes any place in which civil society encounters and communicates with the political sphere, such as

the meeting of a head of state or a minister with citizens, or of a member of parliament with voters, as well as newspapers, radio and television programs, internet, etc. It is primarily a media space, or all media spaces for political debate taken together. Political philosophy theorized public sphere as an element of legitimization of democracy. The public sphere is hence the place where politics simultaneously presents itself to citizens, announces its intentions and programs, and subjects its acts to the democratic scrutiny of the principle of publicity. Public sphere thus becomes not only *a* place, but *the* place for legitimization of politics. Political science also provided a more narrow definition of public sphere, which it identified with the places of power in the strict sense, that is those places where political activity takes place, and where official meetings are held on the national and international levels between ministers, heads of state, or members of parliament—in a word between the "professionals" of politics. This political sphere is embodied in physical places such as ministries, parliaments, UN conference rooms, etc. It is possible to see a shifting meaning in this definition in relation to the broader definition mentioned earlier: more than the places where the civil and public spheres meet and communicate, it involves an aspect that is specific to a particular community (that of the "professionals of politics")—of whom citizens are aware but to whom they do not have access—and which becomes public by metonymy, for in democracy everything that falls under politics is, and also must be, public.

Sociology adopted a much more flexible definition of public sphere. In this discipline, it indicates a society's field of experience, including "all that is important for its members, whether this importance be real or imagined" (Oskar Negt, 2007). The public space is thus that which allows different elements of society (individuals and groups) to enter into relations on the basis of common interests, and which makes it possible for communities (who by definition are partitioned and whose members share a common space) to form a society.

Communication studies, which took up this category fairly recently, have made it one of their primary research tools. The main studies in this area are the work of Bernard Miège who, in his *La société conquise par la communication* (1996) and *L'espace public contemporain. Approche Info-Communicationnelle* (2010), has identified four major models of communication that structured a public sphere between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries: opinion newspapers (mid-eighteenth century), the commercial press (beginning in the mid-nineteenth century), audiovisual mass media (since the mid-twentieth century), and widespread public relations (since the 1970s).

Architecture and urban studies identify public sphere (or public spheres, as the vocabulary specific to these disciplines tends to use the expression in the plural) with the physical places open and accessible to all on a free basis. It thus concerns plazas, streets, gardens, parks, the road network, in other words generally those places that enable relations and communication between human beings.

This depiction takes the polysemy of the concept of public sphere squarely into account. It should also be noted that the definitions we have just reviewed concern only the scientific use of this category, and that the meanings given to the term by researchers do not necessarily correspond to those in everyday use. Public sphere has thus proven to be characterized by complex semantics, with meanings that are tangled and overlapping. This is probably what prompted researchers toward a "minimal" or "essential" definition of public sphere. Éric Dacheux (*L'Europe qui se construit: réflexions sur l'espace public européen,* 2004) defines it as a sphere of mediation between civil society, the political-institutional system, and the economic system, three spheres that are not airtight but porous in relation to one another. The public sphere is therefore the place where a common and shared vision emerges through debate and confrontation, and sometimes conflict. Robert Frank defines the public sphere as a "concrete or informal space of circulation of ideas and information, of deliberation and debate, of circulation of collective emotions whose cohesion is based on the simultaneity of the subjects and questions that inform conversations, discussions, and moods" (*Un espace public européen en construction,* 2010).

The debates surrounding the European public sphere

The debate on the European public sphere began in the 1950s with the process of European integration, and underwent phases of unequal intensity: very intense during the 1950s, it flagged from the 1960s to the 1970s, when questions connected to the Cold War and decolonization focused debate on the subject of Europe's decline as a world power, and its place on the international stage. The question regained importance during the 1980s and 1990s, especially through research developed in communication studies that conducted quantitative and qualitative analysis on the presence of European news in national media. The European public sphere has been the subject in recent years of numerous research projects undertaken by teams of transnational researchers. One of the most important was conducted by the *Espace public européen Research Group* (EPE), an interdisciplinary team consisting of specialists from political science, sociology, and communications studies, whose goal was to depict the political and media communication strategies used by socio-political actors in the European Union, and to redefine within a European framework concepts often created in national contexts. The results of EPE's research have been published in the works *Vers un espace public européen? Recherches sur l'Europe en construction* (2003) and *L'Europe qui se construit: réflexions sur l'espace public européen* (2003).

Current debate regarding the European public sphere is organized along the following lines. According to a first point of view, especially adopted by historians, a European sphere of communication has existed since the Middle Ages, in the form of the communication networks of scholars, clergy, artists, men of letters, and diplomats. Hence it designates a transnational sphere of communication on the European scale, focusing on subjects relevant to the common interest, and subject to discussion among all. The "republic of letters" was therefore the first form of a European public sphere.

A second position asserts that a true European public sphere has never existed. The only public spheres that have existed were partial spheres—whose historical and political reality was limited to the nation-state—or spheres specific to certain determined categories (politicians, scholars, women, ethnic groups, experts, etc.). There are consequently numerous public sub-spheres in Europe, but not a single European public sphere. It is worth noting that this position describes a common space—in the sense of a space belonging to a particular community—more so than a public space in the strict sense (Étienne Tassin, "Espace commun ou espace public? L'antagonisme de la communauté et de la publicité," *Hermès* 10 (1991): 23-37.)

A third branch considers the European public sphere as not yet existing, but destined to appear. The question then arises as to whether this will be done in top-down fashion, through deliberate action on the part of institutions, or from the bottom-up, as a spontaneous outburst on the part of civil society. Partisans for this position are divided among those, on the one hand, who adopt the "cultural functionalism" viewpoint, and who consider public sphere as a consequence of the cultural heritage and shared values on the European level (in other words, as the product of a European cultural identity that will progressively become better defined, and that European citizens will increasingly recognize as theirs); and those, on the other hand, adopting a perspective of "proactive institutionalism," and who believe the intervention of institutions is necessary in order to implement a public sphere that otherwise would never see the light of day.

A final position claims that a European public sphere does not exist, and that it will be very difficult to create for lack of the necessary preconditions, such as a common language or a European identity experienced as such by citizens. Proof of this lies in the fact that despite the existence of European economic and political institutions for over sixty years, as well as the increasing space given to "European news" in the media, national identities remain the identity of reference, and in the end prove much stronger than the European one.

Past and current debate and research clearly show the extent to which the European public sphere is a crucial category for understanding the process of Europeanization. What obviously emerges is the difficulty of using this

category in a functional manner, for lack of a shared definition. Most research focusing on the European public sphere begins by asserting the necessity of defining this category, without necessarily taking into account preceding work, and concludes by proposing a new definition, making their results difficult to compare. The category of “European public sphere” is therefore beset by a permanent process of redefinition.

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