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What do we mean by a European public sphere?

Hannu Nieminen

1. BACKGROUND

In recent research literature differing accounts of the European public sphere (EPS) have been offered. We can find at least four ways to understand the concept:

- The EPS understood as an agora, as a space of critical debate and opinion formation which is open to all European citizens and has established structures and procedures;
- The EPS understood as a special way of organizing relations between an individual and society, historically shaped and matured in Europe;
- The EPS understood as distinct from national public spheres, consisting of all public debates and discussions which concern Europe and European issues;
- The EPS understood empirically, consisting of all public representations that the European media produce.

Most research seems to have centered on the first approach, although from different standpoints. Where the followers of deliberative democracy have adopted the European public sphere as a positive regulative idea (see e.g. Habermas, 2006), the advocates of radical democracy criticize its forced homogeneity and propose instead a pluralized concept of the public sphere (see e.g. Mouffe, 2000).

The second approach, which is perhaps best articulated by Charles Taylor, has been less discussed (Taylor, 1992, 2004). Although having a strong affinity to the ideals of deliberative democracy, it takes the debate to a more general level. According to Taylor his approach is based on a ‘cultural’ theory of modernity, in contrast to an ‘a-cultural’ one referring to an empiricist-positivist approach (Taylor, 1992).

The third and fourth approaches are less theoretically developed. The definition of the EPS as distinct from national public spheres appears in
the documents of the EU (see e.g. Wallström, 2005); the EPS as an empirical totality of European media contents is sometimes used in a cultural-critical sense to contrast the dominance of commercial interests in the mainstream media to the participatory-democratic potential of the counter public spheres of activist networks.

For the purposes of this chapter I will concentrate here only on the second or ‘cultural’ approach. Although I will adopt some of Charles Taylor’s conceptual and theoretical tools, I will apply them freely in building up my own theoretical framework.

2. NORMATIVE-PRESCRIPTIVE VS. CULTURAL-DIAGNOSTIC APPROACH

First I need to clarify the distinction between the first and second approach a bit further. As I mentioned above, the first approach presents the EPS as a regulative idea: It is an ideal which may never be fully realized but which can act as a normative framework for critical evaluation. The EPS as an ideal would require an institutional framework for the creation of European public opinion and will formation, inclusive to all European citizens. The EPS would thus give necessary legitimization for European decision-making and governance, which are now in great difficulties. I call this approach normative-prescriptive.

From this point of view, the main obstacle for the EPS is the historical anchoring of the public sphere to the narrow and limited frames of European nation states. This is not only a practical problem, concerning the actual functioning of public institutions, but also a theoretical and conceptual problem which concerns critical research (see e.g. Fraser, 2000). The task of critical scholarly debate is to bring about the conceptual and theoretical means to realize the potential and establish a transnational European public sphere.

From this point of view, the question is: How best to create the conditions and institutional framework for as extensive and inclusive formation of European public opinion as realistically possible? To what extent do elements of this already exist, and what is the role of the media? What should or what could be the role of the EU in this? Etc.

Many scholars have aptly criticized the ideal of a (European) Public Sphere for its allegedly naïve understanding of power relations (see e.g. Mouffe, 2000; Gould, 1998). In the context of this chapter, I will not go into this discussion.
The difference between the first and second approach is not so much in their normative outlooks but in their analytical emphasizes: If I called the former approach normative-prescriptive, the latter can perhaps be characterized as cultural-diagnostic. (Another and perhaps more apt would be historical-sociological.) The main difference between them can be put in the following way: In order to make prescriptive judgments we need a better understanding of the historical and sociological (pre)conditions of the phenomenon that we call the (European) public sphere.

Thus, we need to ask such questions as: What is our shared understanding of Europe and Europeaness, and from where have we adopted it; how do we speak of Europe and of being Europeans in contrast to other countries and communities; what kind of status do our conceptions of Europe have in our everyday life; how are the public discourses on Europe and Europeaness produced; etc. A key question naturally is: Who are ‘we’ from whose point of view the above questions are articulated; whom do we include in the ‘we’, whom we exclude.

3. ON HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

My starting point here is that our conceptions of Europe and Europeaness form an indistinguishable part of our background knowledge of the world (see Taylor, 2004). We think Europe as ‘our’ continent, Europeaness as ‘our’ culture in distinction to America, Asia, Africa, which all are ‘different’, each in their own ways. We have adopted our European identity through many institutionalized practices which support each other: childhood socialization, school education, the media and other forms of our symbolic environment.

As historians have emphasized, Europe as an idea, as ‘our’ Europe, is not a modern invention. It began to take shape early in Ancient Greece, when the division between Europe and its ‘others’, Asia and Africa, was first articulated (see e.g. Pagden, 2002; Rietsbergen, 2006). This basic distinction was strengthened and institutionalized especially by the Catholic Church, and has been interwoven in many ways into the European mythologies.

The public sphere, on the other hand, is clearly a modern phenomenon – although its historical roots have often been placed in Ancient Greece too. The public sphere as a distinct mode of social relationships, as it is for instance conceptualized in the works of Jürgen Habermas (1989) and John Dewey (1994), seems to be a phenomenon which is uniquely part of modern European cultural and political history (also in
its North-American varieties). It is seen as one of the cornerstones of individual moral autonomy, characteristic to the Western modernity (see Taylor, 2004).

In Habermas’ presentation, the concept of an autonomous individual subject is developed in the battles of the emerging urban middle classes (or bourgeoisie) on the one hand, against the autocratic King and his/her court, and on the other, against the religious conservatism of the church. In these battles the public sphere (Öffentlichkeit, openness, publicity) was effectively used both as a means and as a motto, and its idea became indistinguishably embedded in the self-identity of the emerging bourgeois middle classes.

Since then, both as a means of democratic governance and as a regulative idea, the concept of the public sphere was adopted as part of the self-understanding of modern liberal democracy. How it has been institutionalized in the European level can be observed e.g. in the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1950).

An interesting perspective on the historical constitution of the public sphere is offered by Juha Partanen’s division between the four borders surrounding what is understood as the public sphere (1985). In his account, on the first side are the things which are considered private and intimate; on the second side are the things which belong to secrecy; on the third side are the taboos, the things of which it is forbidden to make public representations; and on the fourth side are the things which are still unknown and as such non-representable and non-conceptualizable.

The borders between the public sphere and the four areas are in a constant flux. Historically, the division between public and private has changed greatly, as has the divide between public and secret. Old taboos have become public and new taboos are established, new unknown areas are delineated, etc. Although the borders are flexible, they can yield to both ways, which means that there is no automatic historical expansion of the public sphere. We have seen lately that in the name of the War on Terror the public sphere has been challenged from all four borders e.g. (see e.g. BBC, 31.7.2006). The question becomes then: Who controls the borders, and why and how are they controlled.

4. EUROPE AS A PUBLIC SPHERE OF NETWORKS

I have claimed above that there is a certain historical background knowledge which, at least in a loose cultural sense, unites all educated Europeans despite their language and nationality. It is embedded first of all in the institutions of socialization, education and the daily media. The ques-
tion is, however, that as these institutions are mostly firmly national in character, bound by the customs and laws of nation states: How are they supposed to promote a common understanding on Europe and Europeanness?

We can seek for an answer in the fact that Europe actually consists – and has always consisted – of numerous transnational networks of cooperation (on global networks, see McNeill & McNeill, 2003). Many of them have developed over several centuries and are anchored firmly as part of European and global relations. One of the oldest and most powerful networks is the Catholic Church. Other traditional networks are also those functioning in the area of art and humanities. Lately the economic and commercial networks – with their ever-expanding arms of financial institutions – have gained a more and more dominating role in defining Europe and Europeanness both in our continent and globally too.

These networks have evolved simultaneously with the gradual emergence of the nation states, having been reined sometimes more strictly and sometimes more loosely by the governments. Mostly, however, the networks have developed autonomously, being able to establish their own inner cohesion with the functional logics and criteria of efficiency of their own. Each network has also been able – at least to certain degree – to define its own criteria concerning the borders between what is public and what is private, secret, taboo or unknown.

In the general course of the process of differentiation, which is characteristic for Western modernity (see Luhmann, 1982; Habermas, 1987), these networks have specialized and created their own normative systems, i.e. criteria of judging what is good and bad, right and wrong, etc. Sometimes these normative systems of different networks are close to each other or mutually supportive, as e.g. in the case of many religious movements (see the Ecumenical Movement, WCC, 2006) and the supporters of the social welfare state; sometimes they are exclusive, as is the case between the networks in arts and humanities compared to those in the stock market. In the latter case, an attempt to measure the validity and efficiency of the networks in arts and culture using the criteria applied in the stock market would be a violation of the autonomy of the networks in arts and culture.

It is obvious that in their own public spheres these networks also produce and introduce issues for other public spheres, including such public spheres which are addressed not only to the members of certain network but to publics at large. An example is the environmental movement who has its ‘own’ public sphere supported by journals and maga-
zines, websites and e-mail lists. At the same time it takes part in the debate in wider public spheres, both national and transnational.

The problem is that there are issues where the mere public debate is not enough but coordinated action is needed, as with the issues concerning environment, security, employment etc. In many cases transnational coordination of action can take place through voluntary agreements, as happens with many civil society associations (e.g. environmental organizations, trade unions etc.). However, when more formally binding mediation is required (energy, security etc.), the mediation shifts to the level of inter-governmental cooperation, with all its positive and negative aspect, as the experiences of the EU has shows us.

The fact that economic and commercial networks have gained a more and more dominating role in defining Europe and Europeanness has brought about an increasing tension between the autonomy of the networks and the urge to curve this autonomy in the name of better economic efficiency and productivity. The argument is that from the point of view of Europe’s global competitiveness, all areas of public activities – including civil society networks – should be brought to support the unity of the EU and its adopted goals. This can be paraphrased as the need to make the Union ‘the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’ (European Council, Lisbon, March 2000; see Euractiv, 2006; EPHA, 2006). From the point of view of the civil society networks, this would result in ‘streamlining’ the functional logics of different networks and their normative bases on the basis of economic efficiency. An illuminating example of this is the way how the goals of the EU’s 7th Framework Program for Research have been set (see Cordis, 2006).

Against this development several scholars have emphasized the capacity of the networks for self-defense, presented in the form of new social movements and civil society networks. Often-cited examples include the recent anti-globalization movement, environmental campaigns, etc. Using the potential of new information and communication technologies (Internet, mobile technology etc.), they have established transnational counter public spheres opposing the hegemony of the elite controlled public spheres. However, as these movements and networks are so diverse and constantly changing, it is not yet clear what their analytical status should be from the point of view of resisting the ‘streamlining’ tendency described above. (See Bennett, 2003; Dahlgren, 2004).
5. DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN TWO LEVELS OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

I have discussed above the general conditions of the emergence of the modern European public sphere. In the classic accounts of the development of the public sphere, it is usually linked with the birth of the press and other forms of mass communication. How should we accommodate the media with the diagnostic approach outlined above? In order to get a better analytical grip on the role of the media I propose a distinction between two levels of the public sphere:

- firstly, there is the realm of the social imaginary or shared background understanding, assumedly common to all European educated citizens,
- secondly, there is the public sphere proper, which is actual, media-related or media-constructed and works on a daily basis.

The public sphere proper actualizes when some issue or event becomes significant for us, when it captures our attention for a reason or another. In order to be meaningful and understood, the issue or event calls for interpretative elements from our shared conceptual reservoir. This can be illuminated by a piece of news of the situation in the Middle East. If we are missing the necessary background understanding of why and how the situation has come about, news about the Middle East does not make sense to us.

I have mentioned above the processes of differentiation between different areas of social life, characteristic to Western modernity. The resulting increasing autonomy of networks is reflected in many ways in the public sphere, too. One manifestation is the different evaluation criteria applied to different areas of social life and to the networks operating on these areas.

An empirical case of this differentiation is the historical process of the compartmentalization of content in the newspaper press (see e.g. Pietilä, 1980; Tommila & Salokangas, 1998). In the early history of newspapers there was no clear distinction between news, reports, columns, and other forms of content. Only gradually did the process of the division of news and other content into different sections of the newspaper take place: We got domestic news, foreign news, news on politics, economic news, sports, human interest and other sections. Another form of differentiation is the division between different modalities in content: We as readers can easily make a distinction between news reports, editorial opinions and commercials.
There is a close connection between the modern media and our understanding of citizenship. To a large extent our conception of citizenship has been informed by the media and their given understanding of the ‘proper’ and ‘natural’ relations between different areas of life. This also includes an implicitly adopted background understanding of the criteria of rightness and truthfulness, characteristic to each of the different areas and the respective networks.

Problems arise, when these borders are confused and traditionally applied criteria do not appear valid any more. One example is the claimed entertainmentalization of political journalism, allegedly a central feature of the tabloidization process of the media. Another example is the recent phenomenon of reality TV, which has bemused the audiences and confused traditional notions of the borders between fact and fiction. These tendencies have raised quite a lot public concern, based on the claim that a big part of the public does not have necessary competence to interpret the new hybrid program forms in a way that makes sense or in a way that the producers have expected.

6. FULL CITIZENSHIP?

The concept of citizenship includes the competencies an individual member of society needs in order to be able to rationally function in his or her interests. Full citizenship refers to the citizen as an autonomous subject who has the capacity to make necessary distinctions between different areas of social life and their respective functional logics, and apply them in a meaningful way. (See Painter, 2003; Lister, 2006)

The problem is that the concept of citizenship assumes a more or less homogeneous form of background knowledge of all the members of society. In real world this is obviously not the case: There are big differences between different social groups within any national society, not to speak of the whole of Europe. (Young, 1990; Kymlicka & Norman, 1994) As mentioned above, when speaking of ‘we’ we usually refer to the experiences and ways of thinking of the members of educated urban middle classes, from which also the members of national and European elites are recruited. These elites have a central role in how Europe and Europeanness are defined in the public sphere.

There is a considerable amount of literature on citizenship and on the competencies an individual needs in order to be able to claim and exercise her or his rights as a citizen (see e.g. Kymlicka & Norman, 1994; Feldblum, 1997; Painter, 2003). For the purposes of this chapter, I mention here only two factors which restrict (and facilitate as well) these
competencies: education on one hand and language and culture on the other. The better educated the citizens are, the more homogeneous is their social imaginary and with it their background knowledge.

The significance of language and culture is partly, but only partly directly linked to education. Members of linguistic and cultural minorities do not spontaneously have access to the same social imaginary and background knowledge as the majority communities do, and vice versa. Non-spoken values, norms, myths – often beyond public articulation – hinder the experience of full citizenship of the members of minority communities. As a large part of our background knowledge is ‘silent’ – i.e. non-spoken and non-cognitive – it cannot be formally taught and cognitively transmitted. Thus it is also excluded from the formal curricula of educational institutions. This means also that many issues in the public sphere proper are fully understood only by those members of audience who are advised in their interpretation through the common background knowledge.

7. DIFFERENTIATION AND CULTURAL INTERPRETERS

I have described above the processes of differentiation between the areas of social action and the problems which concern the establishment of functional coordination between them. As different areas of social action are based on different functional logics, their coordination requires specialized expertise and interpretation.

In democracy all social activities must be justifiable on the grounds of a common background understanding and shared value basis. This is why democracy needs interpreters who can reasonably explain the specialized needs of different areas of action in critical public debate, and can also produce respective orientative proposals of mutually coordinated action to the society at large.

We can see this interpretative orientation at work e.g. in the newspapers’ editorials, covering a number of areas of specialized knowledge and presenting suggestions for coordinated action or policy proposals. My example here is based on a sample of editorials in Helsingin Sanomat, the leading metropolitan paper in Finland, which in four days time covered a variety of issues such as the state of Russian oil industry, Finland’s state budget, Japanese nationalism, EU’s contribution to Congo’s elections, the dot.com boom in the stock market, and nursing ethics at Finnish hospitals (HS editorials from 28 to 31 July 2006).

In respect of the two levels of the public sphere as sketched above, democracy requires two types of interpreters: Those who specialize in
the matters on the level of background knowledge, and whom we can initially call ‘ideologues’, and those who specialize mainly in the matters on the public sphere proper and whom we can call ‘mediators’ (cf. Bauman, 1987).

The task of the ideologues is to upgrade and renew our background knowledge so that our basic values, norms and beliefs are brought in accordance with our new experiences of the world and that the background knowledge makes us able to make sense of the world. Main institutional forums for the ideologues are education, science and research, arts and culture.

The task of the mediators – journalists, teachers, cultural critics, public intellectuals – is to offer answers to daily issues and phenomena, and interpret them with the help of the expert services of the ideologues, i.e. to refresh the daily functional competence of citizens. From the point of view of the European public sphere, this means that actual issues and daily events must be interpreted through the conceptual tools of the local and nationally shared background knowledge. Again, if the members of the public do not share – at least minimally – a common conceptual reservoir, only a part of the public is able to make sense of the public sphere.

From the point of view of the European public sphere, we can see several problems arising. One is linked with the work of ideologues. They can work only with the material that can be critically contested and from which justifiable arguments can be derived, and the conclusions should be acceptable by the criteria shared by the community.

Thinking of the recent developments in different European countries, including the results of the referenda on European Constitution in France and the Netherlands in summer of 2005, the questions concerning Europe and the future of the EU seem to be still too controversial and contested among the different elite groups that all attempts for simple answers are doomed to fail. No firm conclusions can be drawn which could be justified through a consensus, or at least by a widely shared majority opinion within the community ideologues. The concepts of Europe and Europeanness are still in flux, even so much that there is not enough shared background understanding to make common definitions possible.

This makes the work of the mediators problematic: It is difficult and often even impossible to make sense of the issues and phenomena concerning Europe and Europeanness as long as the common conceptual reservoir is lacking.
Another problem concerns the varied competences for citizenship of members of different social communities. Especially problematic is the situation of many immigrant communities. It seems that in many European countries the authorities are planning special models of ‘reduced citizenship’ for the non-European immigrant communities. The aim is not to promote full citizenship but instead, a more restricted one which would bring about the competence of a legal subject (or confirm an earlier imposed one) but would not give the rights of a full cultural, social and political subject. (See e.g. the debate in OpenDemocracy, 2006.)

8. CONCLUSIONS

What follows from the cultural-diagnostic approach that I have outlined above? Briefly put: our conceptions of Europe and Europeanness are always products of a certain situation-bound public discourse. Although our conceptions are anchored in our historically grounded background knowledge on the meaning of Europe and Europeanness, their definitions are not clearly marked. Dominant definitions are ever-temporary compromises between competing elites, both national and transnational. Through their battles and compromises also the borders of the European public sphere are delineated again and again – i.e. what is possible to say in public and what is not, which issues and which approaches are favored and which are not, etc.

The dominant definitions must however always be anchored to the commonly shared background knowledge, to the intersubjectively shared social imaginary, recognized by at least the majority of people. If not, the elite discourse of Europe and Europeanness does not make sense, does not appeal to the popular social imaginary, and does not find a connection with the lived experience of the European people.

It seems obvious that the latest attempts to establish a European public sphere have suffered from this type of elite bias. The dominant discourse of Europe, managed by the economic elites, includes the notion of Europe primarily as an economic entity which all Europeans should support and promote, which does not appeal widely to the popular background knowledge outside the elites, as shown in many recent opinion polls (see e.g. Eurobarometer 251, 2006; 255:2006). The result is that the mediators in the public sphere proper are not able to lean on the ideologues’ expert services, as the needed commonly shared background knowledge has not yet been formed.
If I try now to answer the question of the title of this chapter, my answer would be: There is a commonly shared background understanding of the relationship between an individual and society that we can call European and Europeanness. When I say ‘commonly shared’, I mean that this background understanding and the social imaginary arising from it, are shared by the educated urban middle classes, and that it includes more or less uniform sensibility of European history, European arts and culture, European humanism, European modernity. In this sense it also forms a kind of a ‘proto public sphere’, a proto-EPS.

This background understanding does not, however, include firm and solid definitions of what Europe and Europeanness mean in each instance and each situation. It is more like a reservoir of possible definitions and significations which actualize in different ways in different circumstances in the European public spheres proper.

Following from this, there is not a European public sphere in the sense that we could imagine the formation of a European public opinion or a European common will formation. There are no institutional structures nor are there democratic procedures to fulfill these functions. Instead, there are a variety of different European and transnational networks, exercising their own public spheres and bringing forward elements for European public discourses which realize in different forms and in different forums.

There is still one question left: Is a European public sphere proper needed, in the sense of European public opinion and will formation. This question belongs, however, to the area of the normative-prescriptive debate, and engaging with that debate has not been the purpose of this chapter.

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BIOGRAPHY

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