The European Public: between National Spheres and a Deterritorialized Space

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The conceptualization of the European public sphere is widely undertheorized. As Koopmans observed in 2004 if “one looks for a genuinely transnational European public sphere, there is not much to be found” (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004:99) and - this is a recent note! - the Europeanization of “public” communication is mainly concerned “with the transformation of national public spheres and their long term development” (Trenz, 2010:17).

These two quite pessimistic observations are surprising. They are surprising as debates about broad parameter of a European democratic space emerged already in the mid 1990’s. For example, some of these debates were concerned with European citizenship (e.g. Eder & Giesen, 1999), others with multinational governance structures within European Federalism. Beyond these quite enthusiastic thoughts which began to configure the constituencies of a trans European democracy, it is Juergen Habermas who envisioned a European “postnational” constellation as a closely linked democratic space between Europe and the nation. Habermas defined a postnational “European nation-state” where the civic sphere of supranational republicanism serves as a mechanism for accountability of otherwise national sovereign governance, and – this is Habermas’ main point – as a counterbalance to local nationalism (Habermas, 2001, 1998). However, despite these and other diverse paradigmatic angles of possible trajectories of European democratic culture, a somewhat ‘common denominator’ across these conceptions constitutes the notion of a ‘democratic deficit’ as a particular ‘European dilemma’: a deepening space between national territorial publics and supranational European actors which, I am following Thomas Pogge’s (1998:162) notes, creates a “lack of democratic participation” on various levels but mainly “of political decision-making for the EU” as it reduces the European civic sphere to an ‘elite’ sphere (Kumar, 2003). An elite sphere where a Euro-polity of ‘suprastatism’ as a “whole” ‘overrides’ “national peculiarities in the name of a more general public interest” (Schmitter, 1998:18). In a slightly more optimistic spirit, Gustavsson suggests to solve the arising democratic deficit simply by conceptualizing a “normative double asymmetry” where the “government of the day must be accountable … to the electorate (which mean, in the case of the EU, a European electorate)” (Gustavsson, 1998:111).

Two long decades later, we are now in 2011, where not only the ‘old’ European Union of 12 nations has been enlarged to a ‘new’ Europe of 27 nations but where the ‘network society’ has formed new types - of as some argue - ‘network states’ and complex globalized digital representations of public connectivity, the ‘democratic deficit’ as the space of supranational public accountability has even widened. The European wide financial crisis - in official Euro jargon a national ‘sovereign debt crisis’ - reflects almost on a daily basis not only the lack of inter-European conflict resolution but the increasing influence of the European Union on national economic policies through almost deepening complexities of European governance structure. A European governance structure which relates to a ‘triad’ set of political legitimacy: a system of supranational institutions bound to
intergovernmental decision making processes, tied to the national legitimacy of election cycles of twenty-seven counties. The debate about a European constitution in 2004, the formation of a European ‘foreign policy’ vis-a-vis the NATO military intervention in Libya and the consistent Euro crisis reveals – again and again – the lack of public discourse among European citizens – in consequence the lack of a formation of a democratic trans-European public legitimacy.

Given the pace of today’s trans-border, trans-national, supra- or subnational communication spheres, the ‘democratic deficit’ of the European public discourse relates no longer to a linear accountability process between civic spheres and European institutions but rather to a complex space of multilevel globalized forms of public engagement, participation and discourse. In times of a new geopolitical role of Europe within a globalized order with rising nations in Asia and transformed former superpowers, a globalized Europe with new financial, military and economic responsibilities, the conceptualization of a European public space as a sphere of deliberation is needed for the formation of European political legitimacy in a multicultural Europe which is – and this is often overlooked – situated in the trajectories of various globalization processes. In this sense, such a European public space is not only a space of internal ‘within’ public discourse but also of deliberation in a ‘beyond’ sphere.

However, despite these much needed conceptions of European public discourse as a supra- and subnational space, the construction of European political legitimacy is addressed through a Europeanization of national identities where, “a sense of European community is expressed in various national colours”, however, these “are largely complementary and tap into similar meanings and interpretation of what ‘Europe’ signifies” (Risse, 2010:38).

This articulation of a European public as a somewhat ‘synchronized’ one coloured configuration across national publics is reflected in most constructions of a European public sphere. For example, the European public is understood as an extension of nation-state publics: a national extension which incorporates two trans-national trajectories: in a ‘horizontal’ direction, it relates to a Europeanization as an “intensification of national public spheres” (for example about transnational issues, such as the War in Iraq, see Demesmay, 2007). In a ‘vertical’ direction, the Europeanization of the public sphere as – this is an interesting term in itself - relates to an “infiltration” of European “actors and issues” into national public spheres (see Koopmans & Erbe, 2006). Other examples of ‘vertical,’ national contexts of a European public conceptualize the representation of Europe in national media such as newspapers (e.g. Downey & Koenig, 2006) and transnational television (Griprud, 2007). In addition, the construction of the European public as an amalgamation of national publics vis-a-vis European citizenship, European identity or supranational policy themes, such as ‘security’ and ‘integration’ might serve as another example. Beyond these conceptions of public trajectories across ‘horizontal’, i.e. transnational and ‘vertical,’ i.e. national constructions, a
third debate identifies the parameter of a European public as a ‘side-by-side’ model of inter-national communication space. Lingenberg (2010), for example, has identified structural layers of a European public: a European-wide media system and citizens with a strong European identity, simultaneous reporting of European issues in national spheres,” and “a pluralistic issue oriented public” (Lingenberg, 2010:50).

Leaving conceptual nuances to one side, it seems that despite a transformation of national mass media to new spheres of network societies, the European public sphere is mainly conceptualized around a ‘normative’ framework of public deliberation, not only embedded but deeply, and - it sometimes seems ‘hopelessly’ - entangled in the structural nexus of an increasingly ambiguous ‘methodological nationalism’ where the nation-state is constructed as the sole and exclusive site of a place-based public territory. A public territory, understood through the lens of nostalgic imagination of normative collective consent within the territorial boundedness of national democratic actors and – this is rarely raised - established sets of majority-minority state relations where ‘foreignness’ translates into a powerful public stereotype in national publics. Publicness is constructed through such a ‘normative’ majority/minority consent within the territorial parameter of a national ‘community of fate’ as a deliberative national discourse sphere - a demarcated territory of twenty-seven nations vis-a-vis surpanational European and other transnational institutions.

The deliberative ‘core’ of such a consent-based national construction of political legitimacy within a European context which had its republican epistemic ‘moments’ in the time of nation-building through the deliberative mechanism of national collective ‘fate’ (from Max Weber to Martin Heidegger) is deeply challenged by at least two complexities. Complexities which reveal the ‘unbundling’ of the nation-state in contexts of transnational public communication and help to further illuminate the multiple deliberative parameter of not only democratic but ‘public deficit’ space.

One set of complexities relates to the almost universal model of ‘normative’ consent in public sphere conceptions. In the reality of different types of societies across the ‘new’ Europe, the assumption of a ‘universal’ nation-state within the European Union seem to be misleading - in particular in debates about public communication. The main underlying issue of these ‘modular’ - we might even call them ‘mechanistic’ - approaches which are often also used in communication research, is the conceptualization of territorial bound-ness of the political and civic relationship of polis and demos (the voting public) which is a crucial component of ‘modern’ national normative legitimacy. Although these ‘modular’ approaches of a same-ness of such a relationship across European nation-states are often justified through the Habermasian public sphere theory (which - in all fairness to Habermas - he related mainly to England, France and Germany), the bounded-ness of sovereign territory relates – strictly speaking - back to the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) and to a lesser extend the Treaties of Utrecht, signed in 1713-1714 - both of which are regarded in political science as the
basis for the modern international system, not only of sovereign ‘states’ but of ‘sovereignty over territory’ (e.g. Clark, 2005, Nash, 2010). These ‘sovereignty over territory’ conceptions have influenced the understanding of national information sovereignty and, in consequence, public discourse and political ‘legitimacy’ within a sovereign (constitutional) state. This process has shaped the – what I call - ‘bracketing’ of state and society or ‘polis’ and ‘demos’ through public communication cultures. However, these formations of ‘bracketing’ of the state/society nexus are quite diverse - not only across Western and Eastern European states but also within these regions. A recent study by Zielonska and Mancini (2011) of the media landscape in ten countries of Central and Eastern Europe reveals the great diversity of national configurations of this state-society ‘bracketing’ of media, i.e information sovereignty space. Furthermore, the structural European governance which mainly addressed polities of ‘harmonization’ and ‘free movement’ in the early days of the European Union, has gained increasingly influence on states and even on national parliaments through an increasing ‘embedding’ of European governance within national sovereign spaces. These are forms of an ‘intra-national’ extension of European territory which in terms of political legitimacy, opens up a new ‘democratic deficit’ space even within the compounds of national territories.

A second set of complexities relates to the transformation of the nation-state itself. This is the more surprising as, in a globalized context, the implications of new spheres of – depending on the paradigmatic angle – ‘transnational,’ ‘supra- and subnational’ or ‘networked’ public communication on spheres of national deliberation and legitimacy in addition to nationally diverse conceptions of “cosmopolitanism” (e.g. Held, 2010), “global citizenship” or around transnational activism (Cabrera, 2010) are rarely addressed. The nation-state, however, as Saskia Sassen has argued – is a “site of globalization” (Sassen, 2006) where globalization processes “take place deep inside territories” which are “largely” constructed “in national terms”. These are, in Sassen’s view, “multisited, transboundary networks and formations which can include normative orders; they connect subnational or ‘national’ processes, institutions and actors, but not necessarily through the formal interstate system” (Sassen, 2006:3).

Beyond these conceptual levels, the Realpolitik of public communication across Europe, however, reveals multiple layers of lively not only transnational but globalized communication terrains which – I should add - is rarely debated in public sphere contexts. A Eurobarometer study where respondents were asked in 2006 whether they were interested in knowing the opinion of citizens in other EU member states on various political and social issues. Results show that more than 60 percent agreed (see citation by Gripsrud, 2007:484). Instead of having a European communication platform available (a successful trans European news channel does not yet exist), European public communication arises as a public ‘intersection’ across multiple transnational public spaces which
are dynamically changing sites of deterritorialized discoursive ‘contractions’ around themes, events, social networks and activist movements. In order to create a common European communication platform, various approaches have been made in the early 1990’s. The European as a trans-European newspaper was launched in 1990 in Britain for a European audience and was closed down a few years later; Euronews, launched with high hopes by the European Broadcasting Union (the organization of public service broadcasters in Europe) as a European CNN has remained far beyond expectation. The Internet and mobile communication (for example apps) deliver, however, a landscape of television and radio content across Europe, from the BBC to a local radio station Sicily.

Despite these digital public formations, satellite communication constitutes the main platform for transborder communication in Europe and is today a highly complex, however, vastly under-researched area of public communication. Since the liberalization of national media markets across Europe in the early 1990’s, satellite communication as a direct-to-home service constitutes key platform for television channels delivery via 9 Intelsat, 9 Eutelsat, 16 Astra, 2 Tuerksat, 2 Arabsat-satellites. However, the commercial organization ASTRA and EUTELSAT, a European consortium, are the main European satellite provider in Europe. In the mid 1990’s about thirty satellite channels delivered mainly national and a few transnational channels to roof top dishes across Europe, today, highly specific channels from within Europe and beyond target simultaneously audiences in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Eutelsat as sort of ‘public service’ European satellite provider launched a first satellite in 1993 and operates today nine satellites which provide 3800 television channels, 1100 radio stations to about 220 million households across Europe. These channels are delivered not only across Europe but into North Africa and the Middle East and are delivered in languages such as Arabic, Chinese Hindi, German, Malayalam, Swedish, Russian, Tamil, Italian, French, Albanian, Bosnian, Serbian, Hindi, Farsi, Polish, Kurdish and many more.

The European Union is in this context not only an example for a highly developed satellite environment but for a satellite environment which reaches across twenty-seven nation-states and where new forms of temporally dense supranational ‘public discourses’ are articulated - a process which has not only implications for sovereignty but conceptions of public ‘belonging’ – and through this process – political legitimacy across national terrains. These highly diverse satellite cultures create public discourse spheres in a deterritorialized space in supra- and subnational communicative forms.

The conceptual construction of satellite platforms should not only be considered in a macro-structural perspective, as an additional public space, side-by-side of national publics, but as a dense trans-national communicative micro-structure which helps to conceptualize the social and cultural implications of such a supranational communicative sphere on societies. In this sense, the approach
of trans-national information sovereignty where satellites constitute components of a globalized communicative sphere vis-à-vis the state, has implications on societal communication cultures. This angle challenges not only traditional frameworks of – mainly national – information sovereignty but helps to remap political implications in the dynamic transnational sphere of “markets for loyalties” (Price 2002; 1995). The highly diverse satellite cultures in Europe (multi language and ‘simulcasting’) seem to shift the approach of Price’s notion of “markets of loyalties” away from the political economy of national information sovereignty to what might be called “networks of loyalties”, i.e. to conceptions of subjective supra- and subnational communicative public forms (see Slade & Volkmer, 2012). In this sense, satellite communication constitutes no longer simply a ‘platform’ module but a networked component – a ‘node’ – of a transnational environment, along with other communicative platforms, which shapes ‘communicative loyalties’ in the subjective network of a trans European sphere. This is the paradigm shift of satellite communication from a ‘mass medium’ to a network structure where specific thematic, often culturally and politically ‘authentic’ content constitute a powerful ‘ritualized’ component of integrated subjective network communication structures.

In this context questions need to be asked how such a dense supranational public communication sphere transforms the understanding of national political legitimacy which is - through subjective supranational communication spheres - a recalibrated relationship of polis and demos, meaning that the accessibility of not only various forms of national but also local and transnational political communication which open the bracketing of the state/society nexus in new sphere of transnational deliberation and legitimacy. A subjective supranational public terrain, involving a new set of political actors which Nancy Fraser (2007) might describe as “interlocutors.” These include highly specific political satellite channels, from Al Jazeera to Radio Kurdistan which constitute ‘communicative interlocutors’ of trans European public discourse which, for example, defines national legitimacy through such transnational discourse. A process which has implications on forms of interrelated public communication across various public sectors in Europe of which national communication is only one.

It is quite interesting that one particular area where this form of a transnational public dialectic is most visible is within so called ‘diasporic’ communication. However, despite emerging supranational structures of diasporic discourse which, in such a transnational context appears no longer as a minority, it is somewhat surprising that formations of ‘diaspora’ are often still situated in an (identity) space between ‘subnational,’ ‘displaced’ minority cultures and hegemonic national identity. The term ‘diaspora’ - a paradigmatic relict of the modern mass media culture of the nation-state – highlights the imbalance of socio-cultural identity politics within the modern state – minority relationship.
Not only globalization and the positioning of ‘diaspora’ as spheres of resistance between the ‘local’ within the ‘global’ but today’s dynamic transnational networks of intersubjective loyalties and political agency, dynamically fluctuating within and beyond boundedness of nation-states, have however, created new forms of public spheres of migrant communities. The phenomenon of transnational compressed communicative spaces have – in vague terms - been addressed in various theoretical contexts: in globalization theory as ‘time space distanciation’ (Giddens, 1990), in political theory as the ‘spatial reach’ (Held & McGrew, 2000) in diasporic debates, as ‘trans-local’ formations, and more recently transborder societies as ‘living with one foot in two places’ (Kivisto & Faist, 2010:142). Transnational ‘migrant’ publics are no longer romanticised ‘expatriate communities’ but dynamic transnational ‘networks of loyalties’ which not only constantly communicate across national boundaries of ‘home’ and ‘host’ country, but – in a micro perspective - communicatively intertwine the political agenda of dual national public spheres as an inter-national public reflection. Such a ‘reflective dichotomy’ of trans-national public formations as a form of deliberation relates to the work of the German sociologist Ferdinand Toennies (1957) who famously identified forms of such a deliberative dialectic between ‘Gemeinschaft’ (boundedness of kinship/community) and ‘Gesellschaft’ (boundedness of a rational/moral society) in modern societies and Saskia Sassen has shown how global cities constitute the ‘locality’ of migrant cultures as a subnational presence of a globalized community.

Today, these debates either merge as varied forms ‘cosmopolitanization’ (Beck, 2006:4) and ‘banal transnationalization’ or - in the narrow context of diasporic debates - shift towards a transnationally compressed almost post-global, however, dense and highly specific ‘resonance’ on subjective networked communication. In recent sociological debates, the reflective dichotomy of migrant cultures is constructed through ontologies of transboundedness: ‘double consciousness’ and ‘bifocality’ (Faist)

Within the sphere of dense fragmented ‘authentic’ satellite channels and web sources such a ‘communicative density’ emerges not only through constant options of live ‘connectivity’ to public communication in ‘home’ and ‘host’ country but through layers of ‘reflective linking’ of national publics which not only construct new transnational public spaces but has implications for legitimacy. These forms of reflective linking are often overlooked when transnationalization of public communication is discussed as an extended national public or an amalgamation of national publics.

In this sense, we might describe these public forms as reterritorialized proximity as they directly reflectively engage with two publics: reflecting one through the other. Whereas former studies of diasporic media address mainly popular television cultures, the conceptual framework of ‘reterritorialized proximity’ allows to capture nuances of political networked communication and the civic relevance of social networking sites and specialized satellite channels. The framework of
reterritorialized proximity repositions migrant communication in the larger parameter of a transnational networked culture. In this sense it could be argued that reterritorialized proximity represents one epistemological space of transnational communication which shifts the experience of citizenship from notions of ‘diaspora’ as a ‘modular’ ‘deterritorialized’ political passive subnational sphere to a networked sphere of ‘world experience’ often linking quite diverse sets of ideologies political values and national civic cultures.

It seems that in the advanced stage of globalization, not only forms of networked communication within nations become a key area of the debate about renationalization but it is important to gain a deeper understanding about the positioning of the subject/citizen within communicative networks in a dialectical or reciprocal process of network structures and space based communities.

In such transnational public territory (and this applies to other world regions as well), the conception of political space “as largely synonymous with territory” poses “a barrier to theory-building in global politics” (Ferguson & Mansbach, 2004:74). In political science, Ferguson & Mansbach have suggested to consider an alternative to the ‘Westphalian model’: Europe’s medieval system ‘of segmented territorial rule’ reflecting “a patchwork of overlapping and incomplete rights of government.” (p.76) which lacked state authority but also a distinction between ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ (Ferguson & Mansbach, 2004: 76). Although such a model of public ‘tribal’ communication might help to further conceptually investigate new forms of transnational public ‘density’ and ‘authenticity,’ it delineates from the notion of public communication as a deliberative discourse where the inside/outside dichotomy constitutes an important dialectic of transnational deliberation in a national context.

A new understanding of the European public within the nexus of not only trans-European but globalized political communication would help to identify – and this is in my view the crucial transformation - the transnational public space between citizens and ‘the state’. This is where the communicative debracketing of the state society nexus widens and where models are needed to reflect this new opening diverse public space back on the national level. It is this dialectic of a European and the national public which is the space of deliberation in a functioning European Union. ‘Reterritorialized proximity’ might serve as only one model for a deeper understanding of the diverse forms of European public sphere where not only the national lens of European governance but many colorful voices across Europe help to build the ‘European state’ within a globalized and a national context.

**Bibliographical References**


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