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Hans-Jörg TRENZ*

The European Public Sphere in Times of Crisis: Disentangling the Debate. Introductory Remarks

Over the past two decades, the European public sphere has emerged as one of these scientific meta-narratives (like European identity or European democracy) with a potential to bridge theory and practice and define a common interdisciplinary agenda in European studies. Academics, intellectuals and political reformists have been united in the attempt to lay the social foundations of European integration and confine its ‘unity in diversity’. There has been a long debate whether a European public sphere is feasible and desirable and what could be its possible mechanisms of emergence and manifestations. In the most fundamental sense, this debate has been linked to the unfinished constitutionalisation of the EU, i.e. the question of how the EU should consolidate as a political order and on which basis or through which principles its legitimacy should be grounded (Habermas, 2006). The broad literature on this topic has proposed different models of a European unifying public sphere or differentiated Europeanised public spheres (Schlesinger, 1999; Trenz, 2007; Wessler *et al.*, 2008; Koopmans & Statham, 2010). Through expanding forms of communication and debates, Europe should be made salient and relevant for the citizens. Participation in meaningful and shared communication was seen as a precondition for citizens’ inclusion and possible identification as members of a political community. The public sphere, in short, should turn European citizenship meaningful and consequential. It should not only empower individual citizens to make use of their civic, political and social rights but also bind them together and engage them in a process of public opinion and will formation.

Little attention has been paid instead to the fact that a public sphere is not only needed for the consolidation of political order and the integration of a political community. Public sphere dynamics can be also made responsible for the breakdown of political order and the emergence of new conflicts and cleavages that divide social groups. The current economic and political crisis fundamentally impacts on how citizens, media, public intellectuals and political elites perceive the legitimacy of the project of European integration. Given the multidimensional character of the current crisis, which affects citizens differently and generates diverse responses across the European political space, the ‘Euro-crisis’ has an extraordinarily high potential for generating a deep and ongoing politicization of the EU within and across national domestic politics (Statham & Trenz, 2012). Understanding how contestations of the ‘Euro-crisis’ in different public arenas (Eurozone and non Eurozone countries) interrelate is, therefore, particularly pressing. In this new scenario, the people of Europe do not necessarily *unite* in opposition to established EU power and hegemony. The new resistances against European integration also *divide* the people of Europe along traditional left-right and new

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pro- and anti- European cleavages. Opposition and support with the project of European integration find expression through traditional offline and new online media formats within and across national public spheres. Mediated public debates can influentially translate the Euro-crisis into: conflicts within a country; conflicts between EU countries, or blocs of countries (North versus South, East versus West or centre versus periphery); or over democracy (elites versus citizens), or between social constituencies (winners and losers of debt reduction measures). Interdisciplinary public sphere research is useful here to understand how redistributive and identitarian conflicts overlap and shape belonging of the European citizens and public perceptions of the legitimacy of the EU as a political project.

In line with the 'cultural turn' in European integration studies in Europe and worldwide, this issue of the *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations* collects contributions that deal with recent transformation of political communication, public sphere, the media, protest and mobilization, empirically and theoretically. The issue on 'The European Public sphere in times of crisis' opens a forum for cutting-edge research in the fields of political communication, the media, collective identity formation and the socio-cultural dynamics of European integration. In particular, through the focus on public sphere transformations in Europe we aim to advance interdisciplinary research in European studies on the topics of a) media, citizens' participation and democratic legitimacy; b) the transformation of citizens' allegiances and identities; and c) the reconfiguration of the political space between the nation state and Europe.

The economic and financial problems that the EU and the Eurozone currently face have re-opened the debate on the possibility of a European public sphere and its socio-cultural prerequisites. The new round of constitutional and institutional reform that has been initiated by the heads of states and government in response to crisis will have perhaps the most intriguing influence on the possible shape of a European space of communication. In light of these challenges, it seems that the prospects of a genuine European public sphere have turned rather bleak. Public debates in response to crisis are driven by new re-nationalising dynamics of contestation. Furthermore, the new rounds of intergovernmental negotiations and the strengthening of the executives are perceived as contributing to Europe's *democratic deficit* instead of reducing it; nation-state interests and politics have been more visible and more definite than the European interests, and the national political sphere still remains the primary arena of public debates over the future of the EU.

On the other hand, European Union and its member states are expected to join their efforts to deal with the crisis and to recognise their shared interests and identity. We also observe that public debates and contestation of the 'Eurocrisis' are manifested in redistributive and identitarian conflicts which are interlinked in a particular way to allow for cross-cutting allegiances across the European space. At this point, we propose with this issue to recapitulate and further advance the debate on the European public sphere. The contributions collected in this issue describe current trends of public sphere and media developments in times of crisis. They help to conceptualise the Europeanisation or re-nationalisation of existing public spheres and media. These insights are needed to discuss the role for the New Media in the current transformation of the European communicative and identitarian space. Readers will further find answers to the political and normative questions of how a European communication space should look like and how it can be promoted. We hope that this debate between scholars from different disciplines and from different educational and cultural backgrounds will in itself be a contribution to the proliferation of a European public sphere that is not on-

ly confined to the consolidation of a European identity and solidarity but also contributes to the mobilization of political and social action.

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The Emergence of Two European Public Spheres: Center vs. Periphery

Abstract: This article discusses a topic of great salience: the Eurozone crisis and its consequences on the future of the European project. The paper argues in favor of a divide triggered by the crisis between the center and the periphery of the EU. This gap impacts both on the economic and financial prospects of the Union as well as on the emergence of a European public sphere.

Keywords: eurozone crisis; centre vs. periphery; European public sphere.

1. Global periphery, European periphery

If we look closely at what is happening today in the European Union, we could summarise the situation like this: the “periphery” is questioning the center. “The periphery debt crisis threatens to engulf the core in huge bank capital shortfalls and fiscal liabilities, trapping both in protracted stagnation. This reflects possibly intractable eurozone design flaws” (Das & Roubini, 2012). The main question is this: which periphery? Traditionally, periphery used to have a geographic connotation, too. It was the same as the “Third world”, and from a spatial point of view it had the dimension of continents: Africa, Asia, and South America. We represent our planet in a more simple way: the “Center” (the Western, developed world) and the “periphery” (embodied, mostly, by the above mentioned continents).

Studies on the relationships between the metropolis (center) and the periphery examine the possibility for emancipation and development of the periphery. In essence, these studies show the following: the periphery processes messages coming from the center in accordance with certain specific contexts. The emancipation of the periphery is closely related to the quality of this transformation. In fact, the relationship between the two can be seen in terms of competition: the center wants to preserve its position (including benefits) and the periphery seeks to emancipate and to stop dependence on the center (disadvantages). Therefore, this relationship was often interpreted as one between the exploiters and the exploited. The latter

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category – be it persons, groups, or communities –, besides many disadvantages and obstacles, has a statute that keeps it alert. Immanuel Wallerstein, one of the fathers of the center-periphery theory, saw this with acuity: “In general, being in deep conflict, the exploited ones have a better understanding of the current state-of-affairs. It is in their own interest to have a correct perception and to expose the hypocrisy of leaders. They are less interested in ideological deviation” (Wallerstein, 1992, p.11).

The rise of the emerging countries, the shift of power from West to East represents a confirmation of this model. There is a “message” of the metropolis (of developed countries) embodied in what is called *globalization*. Today, few people still doubt that globalization has been built initially to serve the interests of the developed world, especially those of America. However, the real beneficiaries of globalization have been other countries. Here is what Kupchan says: “Brazil, India, Turkey, and other rising democracies are benefiting from the shift of economic vitality from the developed to the developing world... China is proving particularly adept at reaping globalization’s benefits” (Kupchan, 2012). It is true that globalization brings a series of new elements, such as cash flow, technology, which could not be controlled entirely by the developed countries. This gave the possibility to emerging countries to develop a more appropriate historical response to a completely new development context. Thus, the reaction of the “periphery” has surprised the metropolis and has surpassed it in strategic terms.

For some time, even in Europe one speaks of “periphery”; and not only in Europe but in the European Union, as well; not only in the European Union, but even within the eurozone area. What does “periphery” mean (or could mean) in the European Union? Willen Buitter (2011) proposes a specific criterion: countries facing serious financial difficulties. From this perspective, he speaks of five countries that would represent the “periphery”: Greece, Spain, Portugal, Ireland and Italy. The author also mentions a “soft” periphery, consisting of three other countries: Belgium, Austria and France¹. These are countries barely touched by the financial crisis; they were affected by its impact, but not in a profound way.

Why did the author use such a criterion? Facing the difficulties, these countries may have in mind the possibility of leaving the euro zone – each or all together, “an event to which I attach a probability of no more than 5 per cent”. If it were just about Greece, things would not be so serious; an exit by Greece alone would be manageable. Greece accounts for only 2.2 per cent of eurozone’s GDP and 4 per cent of public debt. A Eurozone exit by Italy would bring down much of the European banking sector. But if it were about all five, the gravity of the situation couldn’t be avoided: “Disorderly sovereign defaults and eurozone exits by all five periphery states – would drag down not just the European banking system but also the North Atlantic financial system and the international exposed parts of the rest of the global banking system. The resulting financial crisis would trigger a global depression that would last for years, with GDP likely to fall by more than 10 per cent and unemployment in the West reaching 20 per cent or more. Emerging markets would be dragged down too”. Exits by Germany and other fiscally and competitively strong countries would mean the breaking of the Union. In such a case, calculations would be useless.

¹ In the article “The driver and the passenger”, October 15th, 2011, *The Economist* affirms that France has a financial fragility which directly affects the eurocrisis. It has the largest debt and biggest deficit compared to GDP ratio among AAA rated countries, and its banks are most exposed in the south of Europe. It did not have a budget surplus since 1974. „France is the weakest of the strong, or strongest of the weak”. We have made these remarks in order to understand both the behaviour of France in the crisis, and the debates and political positions of this country, which could be understood by reference to its financial situation.