

## European versus American Public Spheres: Negotiating Differences and Similarities in Times of Crisis

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### Abstract

*European social thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann wax eloquently on the importance of having a well-developed public sphere, a kind of “fourth power” or social sphere separate from government where ideas are freely exchanged, “discontents” find a hearing, and new social compromises or at least understandings are generated. In order to overcome the current crisis of the European unification project, Europe needs a common, transnational public sphere which, despite some efforts, still doesn’t exist. This article compares the current status of public spheres in the United States and the European Union, which it finds to be substantially different. In the United States, there is a real sense of nationalism (the existence of a single “country” identity) and highly developed media outlets, which these days reflect and amplify severely polarized left/right political identities. By contrast, in (Continental) Europe, a true transnational media sphere has not yet developed; media outlets remain primarily national in orientation. We contend that while few would wish for the political polarization that exists in the United States, the EU urgently needs a genuine public sphere that would help transcend the existing 28 national identities. In Europe, unlike in the U.S., the “cultural” unification which is the (still undervalued) basis of the political project can’t consist of “melting” languages, national myths, historic memories or ethnic habits, but only in the generation of a joint, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-national public sphere. The creation of such a sphere is not a priority of European governments, nor of the European Commission-but it should be. However, such a joint public sphere cannot develop until there is greater institutional integration, that is, an advance of European federalism at the governmental level to a much higher degree.*

*Keywords: European Union, Unification project, Public sphere, Contextual politics, Media, Transnationalization*

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## I. How Can the European Project be Saved?

“Only a transnational public sphere can save us.” Such is the lament of Jürgen Habermas and other contemporary European thinkers when it comes to the current trends in Europe toward re-nationalization, the divide between winner and loser countries of the euro, the desolidarization between Euro- and non-Euro nations, the legitimacy problem of the European unification project as a whole, and the democracy deficit of the existing European Union now in its eighth consecutive year of crisis. As the European integration process is moving as much forward as backward on different levels with different speeds through acrid economic, financial and fiscal disputes, the structure of cultural and social union at the basis of political unification remains ambivalent.

Contrary to the (probably overly optimistic) hopes of the pre-crisis expansion years, the European project of today is not progressing, but rather finds itself in stagnation, if not in the midst of a slow but steady regress, including a creeping delegitimation process that is undermining the credibility of European unification efforts. This is the case not only in the United Kingdom under David Cameron, which apparently always felt more as a part of the “great family of Anglo-American peoples” (Margaret Thatcher) rather than as part of Europe, but now also among average Continental Europeans, who in principle were sympathetic with the unification project.

The rise of new, not necessarily nationalistic but explicitly anti-European movements in not only crisis-ridden Southern Europe countries such as Greece, Spain and Italy but also in clear winner nations of the Eurozone like export champion Germany, which is enjoying one of the wealthiest periods of its economic performance after World War II, (for example with the remarkable result of Bernd Lucke’s party “Alternative for Germany” at the German parliamentary elections of 22 September 2013), are signals of political, social and cultural (re-) fragmentation. (Not to speak of the further gains of the traditional nationalist and right-wing movements who, in many cases, like in the framework of the parliamentary elections of Austria on 29 September 2013 with Heinz-Christian Strache’s “Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ)” reaching 20.51% or billionaire Frank Stronach’s “Team Stronach” achieving 5.73% at the first attempt; or Marine Le Pen’s “Front National” in France which since 2010 has constantly increased its votership, reaching 13.6% in 2012 and up to 47% in single cities like Béziers in Southern France in the framework of the municipal elections of March 2014). All these parties built the core of their victorious electoral campaigns on anti-European sentiments-harvesting outstanding success at the polls and making huge gains at the expense of pro-European parties. The rise of anti-Europeanism is obviously not simply a matter of crisis psychology, nor is it directly dependent of the development of wealth, given that, for example, Austria, according to Eurostat, is the second-richest country of the European Union, just behind Luxembourg (Eurostat, 2013: 1). Almost all anti-European movements took advantage of the fact that their campaigns addressed populations who in large parts were consulting (and consuming) mono-lingual national media only, and who were not informed by different European realities and viewpoints, but in the large majority (over 70% of the voters) relied mostly on widely domestic discussions of national problems and viewpoints.

Here is the point where the basic question of the public sphere comes into play. A common public sphere, able to integrate differing views on the least common determinant

in a shared communicative process is the classical embodiment of culture in secular, rational and enlightened civilizations, ie in today's civilizations of the Western, liberal-democratic world. As the developments of the past have shown, the European political process remains weak and fragmented because there is still no common, transnational public sphere. If such a sphere is supposed to come into existence and sustain, or even further, the long-attempted European integration, it might be useful to take a comparative look at the functioning of this increasingly crucial "contextual" political factor on the other side of the Atlantic. Our claim is that Europe can learn from the U.S. both in terms of how to build an integrative public sphere with efficient contextual political power, and in what to avoid in building it specifically for the potential "United States of Europe". Both the teachings and problems on the two sides of the Atlantic will have to be negotiated with and pondered. They must then be adapted to the specific European needs of the present moment of transition by actively considering the crisis mode, in and through which Europe is navigating.

## II. The Public Sphere: Key Institution in "Mature" Open Societies

Since the 1960s, the public sphere has been conceived by leading European social thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel and Niklas Luhmann as one key social sphere in "mature" open societies in so far as it ideally functions as a catalyst towards rationalization. As such, it is one of the core democratic institutions and the "fourth power" of open societies, shoulder to shoulder with the three classical powers—executive, legislative and judicative. Due to its crucial role, the public sphere should be independent from economic power and the bureaucratic state, and not in any direct way linked to political decision-making. In this sphere, in contrast to most others like the economy, party politics, religion or technological innovation, arguments are ideally put forward openly, and ideas are exchanged without restriction regarding the improvement of the political organization of society. Thus, the public sphere—directly or indirectly—necessarily serves as a "dialectic" birthplace for various forms of social associations (e.g. parties, unions, employees versus employer movements). Emphatically, the progressive, positively transformative function of this communicative sphere in mature, technologically informed democracies has been described "as the communicative engine of democratic politics" as well as the "discursive infrastructure and normative lubricant to any well-functioning civil society" (Salvatore, 2007: 1).

But the public sphere also fulfills a third core duty. It is a "sounding board" of social psychology since it creates awareness of the discontents in society, therefore assuming the signal function of a political seismograph. In addition, it exemplifies the problems and puts pressure on the political system to take action through public understanding: "Besides the 'signal' function, there must be an effective problematization" (Habermas, 1996: 359). The goal of "effective problematization" is the solution of the problem.

Although the details of the concept of the public sphere are contested, and despite there being no universally acknowledged definition of it to this day, there is, at least in the transatlantic sphere, a general agreement about its function in differentiated, modern

societies. It is the realm where political discussion takes place, arguments are exchanged and public opinion is formed, which in turn engages the political decision-makers. The generation of public opinion through discursive processes in the public sphere necessitates the political decision-makers to explain their policies to the public and seek its agreement. The process of looking for legitimation-explaining policies and seeking agreement-shapes the political process as such, as John Dewey famously pointed out, and this discourse is even more important than the simple majority rule as it creates a political culture with “antecedent debates, modification of views to meet the opinions of minorities” (Dewey, 2012: 154). The key question then in our contemporary days is the adoption of this process to mass populations.

### **III. The Legitimation Problem: Phrases in Dispute**

The days when public debates relevant to European societies mainly took place in coffeehouses and table societies among the bourgeois elite are gone. Discussion and discourses are now mediated by the mass media. These are producing and reproducing the public sphere and public opinion in a constant flow of change. Public opinion takes on different forms depending on the media used. From print to television to the internet, the public sphere has fostered different inclusive and exclusive mechanisms, non-aligned ways of creating unity from the plurality of opinions, and various ways of influencing the public. It has also developed conflicting measurements of what quality and truth is, and what should be published and what shouldn't. From peer reviews to “open access” publications, the variety of participation and evaluation modes has increased, and the pros for this process are as many as the cons.

In fact, the voluminous discussion in “postmodern” real time media and among many academics often tends to read this development as a history of decline towards media-generated apathy, fragmentation, trivialization and commercialization. On the other hand, increasing participatory options, interactivity and growing inclusiveness are trends that cannot be denied neither by qualitative nor by quantitative analysis. Both sides agree though on the importance of an inclusive public sphere in general, able to generate legitimate public opinion and taking progressive effects on the legislative process.

Nevertheless it remains disputed what “legitimate” and “progressive” may mean in general, and in particular within given processes and contexts. Since the main characteristic of open societies is continuous change, “serious” plurality and-sometimes radical-“difference,” any relative and temporary “legitimation hegemony” of some discourses over others can't be set as absolute because of inherent features of viability, “reality fit” or truth. Instead, it remains a “dispute between phrases” of, in principle, equal legitimacy that strongly depend on context, relationship and language. It has therefore to be considered a never-ending, open process, whose most important issue is not how to “solve” the dispute between phrases in order to create uniformity, but how to provide a self-adequate language to those who don't dispose of it on their own right, like those socially disadvantaged or less educated (Lyotard, 1988).

#### **IV. The Communicative Role of the Public Sphere in Open Societies: Help to Live with Differences-by Connecting, Not by Reconciling Them**

Living with radical differences, including those of legitimacy and legitimation processes, is the very basic characteristic and crucial feature of the public sphere in open societies. That doesn't make things easier but more multi-faceted, versatile and complex. Nevertheless, it adds creativity to the system to an extent incomparable to centralistic, homogenizing, illiberal, autocratic, patriarchic or even monolithic societies.

Despite this character, the public sphere also plays an important connective function in open societies. Open societies are by their sheer nature highly fragmented and differentiated. They are split between a myriad of groups related to interest, skill and specialization. In political arrangements that are friendly to such a constellation and try to further individualism and freedom as public goods to the advantage of the whole, communication-understood as "communicative action," i.e. as a political act in itself (Habermas, 1985)-holds society together by leading to public opinion through the antagonisms of conflicting beliefs and convictions. How?

By making sure they stay in constant communication. Fractions and stripes in open societies might strongly disagree about something; yet, they keep a common-national and legal-frame of reference, on which they fundamentally agree. This is the principle of open communication in public without restrictions or taboos. Even non- or anti-democratic discourses are allowed to participate in this sphere, as long as they don't try to undermine its principle as such (Lyotard, 1988).

#### **V. The U.S. and Europe: Two Different Rifts in the Open Public sphere**

The present fear of social fragmentation both in Europe and the U.S. in times of Western economic, social and legitimation crises is, in contrast to what many believe, not primarily about different judgments or strong disagreements between different groups of society. Rather, it is about the dissolution of the web of communication between these different groups.

On the one hand, there is without doubt an increasing "ideological polarization" particularly in the U.S. (Fukuyama, 2011), which is to some extent mirrored by an increasing draw between left and right electorates in most European countries, with problematic consequences for governability in Italy, France and Spain. In both cases, the system of public opinion as a whole is affected by paralysis (Fukuyama, 2007). Nevertheless, the respective problems are inverted if Europe and the U.S. are compared with regard to the basic mechanisms in play. In the U.S., the split is primarily ideological, not systemic. Or, as Fukuyama puts it:

"the problem doesn't lie in the system, but in the underlying polarization of American society, which is divided over basic governing ideology and increasingly angry in its public discourse. There has been a huge amount of literature on

polarization and its sources, which is blamed on electoral districting, residential self-segregation, an ideologically compartmentalized media and the like.” (Fukuyama, 2011: 1).

Opinion media like *Fox* on the conservative side and *MSNBC* on the liberal, which both constantly mix news with opinion brewed from ideological judgment, therefore making the distinction between objective event and ideological view difficult or impossible, have played their role in accentuating ideological polarization, and in ripping the public sphere apart. In doing so, they short-circuit information, to partly manufacture their own facts, and to some extent even create parallel realities “cleansed” of the inevitable contradictions of the “real” reality out there. Today more than ever these two distinct, clearly opposed and in their attitude hostile stripes of conservatives vs. liberals battle for dominance over the public sphere in the U.S., with little inclination to respect and promote the “middle ground.” In doing so, they undermine the overall “intermediate” public ratio of the system. They threaten the fundamentals of the open and pluralistic public sphere because their basic attitude is always close to cutting the bridge of acknowledging the fundamentals of open communication between different groups, no matter what the argument and the objective is. That must lead to a state of pseudo- or non-communication, sometimes put into the phrase: “When you don’t believe what I do you are not an American” (or similar, like, for example, it could be heard in the recent U.S. presidential election campaign 2012).

By contrast, such strong “opinion media” do not exist in similar ways in Europe, and are not even remotely as influential. Here, the divide of the public sphere is not ideological but systemic: it is formed by a lack of a common European civil religion, as well as a joint government that must negotiate the interplay of 28 member countries. The different national treatments of European citizens, when it comes to taxation, labor and employment, as well as access to Union member states’ national facilities, have created at least three classes of European citizens: those of the winner countries of the Eurozone (Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and to a certain extent France), those of the loser countries (like most of the others) and those of the non-euro countries, but Eurosceptic EU-members like the UK. In addition, a deep split has opened between the UK and the rest of the European member nations, with the threat of a popular vote potentially bound to leave the European Union in 2017. These divides are due to the lack of a common culture, which has prevented Europe from developing a joint public sphere, a fact that in turn hinders the continent in developing a joint set of views, habits, and communicative rules indistinctive of all its citizens.

## **VI. A Complex Crisis**

The systemic crisis of Europe features one key mechanism, which has been identified by large parts of the world-except by Europe itself.

The economic and political problems across Europe are, at their core, the result of a crisis of government legitimacy. In Europe, a common economic zone and currency -the euro-have been created without an accompanying federal government. This is an

arrangement that in the long term cannot work. Imagine California and Louisiana sharing the same currency without a federal government to ensure balance and a joint overall economic and political strategy. In addition, some of the national powers of member states have been transferred to the European Union, which at the same time is allowed to control less than 2% of the combined national GDP's of the 28 EU member states and is thus largely inoperative. That leads to an administrative and operational power vacuum between the nations and the EU due to a power distribution which is neither flesh nor fowl (fish nor fowl is more common phrase). National governments, those directly elected, remain legitimate but bound to a Union that is powerless, while this transnational unit remains not directly accountable to the people because it is not elected by the European people but appointed in complex negotiations between the national governments. As, for example, the recent Italian elections of February 24-25, 2013 have shown, the resulting feeling of over-complexity, power vacuum and immobility currently in Europe is leading to an increasing self-perception that Europe is exhausted and worn down, as *Pimco's* Mohamed al-Erian recently put it. In turn, this feeling leads to a loss of confidence of large parts of the European electorates in the traditional parties and in institutional politics. It breeds protest movements, making for example Beppe Grillo's anarchic "Five Star Movement" Italy's biggest political party with 25.5% of the votes since the general election of February 2013.

In short, the lesson of the European crisis is, as Angela Merkel put it, "Europe needs more Europe and fewer nations" in order to establish its own transnational public ratio. That doesn't mean that Europe needs more Europe and less government though; and it doesn't mean that Europe needs more Europe and less states. It is the *national* element that is missing on the European level in the emphatic sense of Benedict Anderson's famous phrase of an "imagined community."

Ironically, Europe's new leading power Germany (which claims to be a "leading power against its will") had to fill the vacuum left by the 'withdrawal' from the continent first of the U.S. under the Obama administration since January 20, 2009, and then of the UK under the Cameron government since May 11, 2010, but it has proven to be the most skeptical of all in terms of attempts to strengthen European joint institutions. It also prefers "rescue funds" to the establishment of a serious joint government and functional joint financial system, including a fully operational European Central bank. This is because it feels that given the stubborn crisis of Southern European countries such as Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece, Germany is the only firm pillar in a system threatened by breakdown. It therefore thinks it should not give up too much of its national sovereignty in order to continue to be able to protect itself and all other powers instead of sharing responsibilities with poorly trusted partners that have proven to be bad stewards of their own nations throughout past decades.

In summary, if the U.S. problems with the public sphere in keeping "unity in diversity" (which the core concept of public sphere demands from open societies) are ideological, the European ones are systemic. The *de facto* lack of a real political union beyond an economic trading zone and a monetary union makes sure that a real common European public sphere still doesn't exist-despite all promises made with the introduction of the euro in 1999 (virtual) until 2002 (physical).

## VII. “Naked News Reporting” versus “Long Story Opinion Making”: Opposite Developments in Europe and the U.S.

The development of the media and related public spheres on both sides of the Atlantic mirror the different kinds of crises in Europe and the U.S. In short, the overall development of the past decades was to a certain extent inversed in comparing Europe and the U.S. In the 1990s, both the U.S. and Europe had at least two dimensions of media: “objective” or “neutral,” “naked” news fact-based reporting on the one hand, and in-depth “long story” opinion pieces on the other, where fact and interpretation are consciously connected, and in some cases mixed. While Europe, with the exception of a few outstanding media outlets like *Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ)* in Switzerland or *Die Zeit* in Germany, not to speak of the *Guardian* and the *BBC* in the UK, which strictly speaking aren’t European issues though since the UK is a case for itself and not representative of the Continental European situation, never fully adapted to the “long story” principle. The Anglo-American public for a long period of time after WWII had the choice between two different but complementary kinds of news: the naked information, and the “long story” principle as the in-depth interpretation of essayistic character, as exemplarily demonstrated in its full value by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and, more recently, the *Huffington Post*. But in the 2000s, things have changed on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the U.S. the trend was a move away from neutral news towards opinion-based reporting. Today, the dichotomy is between channels like *Fox News* and *MSNBC*, i.e. between rightist and leftist, or conservative and liberal reporting. Anyone tuning in to one of these channels knows they are getting “opinion reporting,” i.e. news filtered and proposed from a clearly rightist or leftist view. In between these channels, those deemed neutral like *CNN* are struggling to keep viewers. Despite statistics that show “neutral” media gain viewers when it comes to dramatic breaking news and live broadcasts of catastrophes, disasters, terror attacks or dramatic rescues, the overall trend towards ideological reporting is largely undisputed among investors and media strategists. The reason is simple—from the mindset of the average viewer the world is complicated and the media landscape is extremely differentiated, but when you switch on your preferred “opinion channel” things are clear and have been prepared to fit your viewpoint. By contrast, “neutral” reporting provides different angles and forces viewers to form their own opinion, which is often difficult due to a lack of insight or simply time and effort.

Therefore, most users, in times when they have to “save time at all costs, which has become *the* cultural principle of participation” (Lyotard, 1990) choose *either Fox or MSNBC*, departing from their pre-existing convictions and inclinations. They don’t watch both, they don’t compare them, and under normal, non-exceptional circumstances they are always less likely to choose “in-between” channels like *CNN*, even though the latter still dominates parts of the politically correct public sphere like hotel breakfast rooms or airport television screens. This is because after decades of “balanced” reporting, most “post-modern” U.S. consumers feel that departing from a given, clear viewpoint adds depth and truth to news reporting. Interestingly, both sides feel the same is true on the other side. Average “conservative” viewers appreciate *MSNBC* more than *CNN* because they feel they can learn more, ie they will get more of an in-depth look from the opposite view than from a “neutral” perspective. And vice versa. As a reaction, “neutral”

channels like CNN respond by seeking-often artificially-to create as much sensational live broadcasts, even for stories of minor importance, in order to gain viewers.

Some of the main problems in the U.S. can be identified as:

1. traditional national media (the three major networks ABC, CBS and NBC) have lost most of their viewers.
2. much of that lost audience has shifted to other outlets for their information, most of it based on the internet or other forms of communication; and
3. political actors now use alternative modes of communication (Twitter, Facebook, email) at least as much if not more so than they use traditional media through which to communicate with their potential audiences.

The combination of these trends and the respective answers is decisive, if we think about the future of media, and the future of the public sphere in the U.S. in general.

In Europe, the development has been inverse. Here, the trend was clearly towards the extinction of “opinion reporting” to the advantage of “neutral news”. This is the reason there are no “long stories” in European media anymore, why the essay principle has been reduced, and why in general Europe is more neutral than ever with regard to world developments. On the one hand hiding its own inner contradictions and political dialectics (which are sharper than ever), and on the other becoming ever more difficult to find on the chess board of global strategy, including the Western alliance vs. China. While in the U.S. opinion media are gaining the upper hand, in Europe it is neutral news reporting that seems to be the only one surviving the restructuring process of the media landscape due to the economic crisis which drowned many traditional media channels such as newspapers, essay magazines, printing houses and news corporations. In Germany, with the failure of *The Financial Times Germany* and the lurch towards bankruptcy in 2012 of the *Frankfurter Rundschau* (close to bankruptcy in 2012, despite Germany doing well economically, with in essence only the weekly *Die Zeit* and *Le monde diplomatique* remaining as organs of the long story principle), the trend towards short and sober reporting is most obvious. The widely contrasting development in the underlying media sector of public opinion in comparison of the U.S. and Europe is in many ways symptomatic of the development of the Western alliance as a whole.

## **VIII. Over-Complex Problems Due to Advancements in Technology?**

Overall, the concept that the public sphere is a fourth power crucial to the development and maintenance of democracy holds up, with different strengths and weaknesses, in both the public spheres of the U.S. and Europe. Both the media and audience in the public sphere in the U.S. is substantially fragmented, and while not as much as in Europe (understandably since the “European” audience is made up of national audiences that are often without a common language), it is one of the main reasons why American politicians feel the need to spend so much money reaching out to

voters. On both sides of the Atlantic, the contours of the public sphere appear to be driven by numerous forces, and we should not discount at least two additional critical forces: public policies governing the media and technology, and thus technology itself. Public policies in the U.S. regarding equal time provisions, requirements for balance, etc., were eliminated in federal law and administrative procedures partly due to the argument that technology had created so much competition with the traditional media that these regulations were not needed, give rise to substantial changes in media. Policies regarding technology (internet, Wifi, cable, accessibility to smartphones) have led to the huge proliferation of media and the disintegration of a truly national audience for most news.

By contrast, the EU is making substantial attempts to streamline the convergence of some of these technologies across EU space (e.g. reduction and/or elimination of expensive roaming charges). Countries like Italy have implemented strict laws that guarantee political parties equal access to media, including both public (national) and private owned media, eg the *Norma sulla par condicio* in Italy which led to the *Disposizioni per la parità di accesso ai mezzi di informazione durante le campagne elettorali e referendarie e per la comunicazione politica* (Equality of access to media during general elections, Law 28, 2000). These laws are of relevance especially when it comes to run-up phases of elections, given that the majority of media in countries like Italy are concentrated in the hands of family trusts (specifically, the Berlusconi owned *Mediaset* and *Mondadori* groups which Berlusconi uses for political goals in combination with other publicly highly visible enterprises like his *Milan* football club). Nevertheless, many key issues in Europe remain unresolved: the absence of a joint European political strategy of technology and media development, the non-existence of a common medium of communication, fragmentation of technological and media spheres by state sovereignty, the lack of a common language, the lack of a unified political structure, and the lack of a joint civil religion informing these issues. In short: the lack of commonality, or even care, regarding most aspects crucial to the public sphere of a unified Europe.

## **IX. Stating the Obvious: Europe and the U.S. are “All Different, but All Equal”**

Considering these similarities and differences between the U.S. and Europe, any constructive comparative analysis of the public sphere on the two sides of the Atlantic will add the many similarities in the legitimation process of open public opinion in terms of equal access, mind- and community-building, and of its efficacy to bring about legislative change. Comparing the European Union and United States public spheres has, when it comes to these similarities, first of all to state the obvious. The concept of nationhood in its emphatic sense as practiced by the United States as constitutive part of its public sphere is not comparable with the difficult transition from the individual member states of the European Union to an integrated European government, with all the consequences on the young public sphere of Europe-if such a sphere exists at all. Thus, the key issue in Europe is about how a European public sphere can come about, a question which is closely related to the EU’s democracy deficit. This question doesn’t exist in the U.S.-which makes the situations on both sides of the Atlantic very different.

The endeavor towards a pan-European public sphere faces a number of obstacles in light of the close ties of the given public sphere of Europe with a number of nation-state features which remain segregated from, if not hostile, to it. There are three requirements that can be identified for the formation of a European identity: the constitution of a pan-European civil society, the generation of a European public sphere, and the development of a shared political culture (Habermas, 2011: 16) or civil religion. In a circular movement, these aspects are reinforced mutually. For a pan-European public sphere, there are in particular two obstacles:

1. The mainstream public sphere theory presupposes a national citizenry constituting one *demos* communicating among itself about the political and economic issues of the state ideally in a shared national language. The concerns are then expressed in a public opinion and thus directly and indirectly address the national government (Fraser, 2007). In times of transnationalization towards a European public sphere, all these conditions need to be adapted to a changing frame of reference—a task that by no means is clearly mapped out in the existing inner-European development programs. Such significant political transformation is not required to further adapt the public sphere to changing contexts in the contemporary United States.
2. The political unification of Europe furthermore faces the challenge of bringing together models of public spheres across Europe with different media systems relating in different ways to the respective political systems. Depending on the institutionalization of civil society groups as primary actors in selected national public spheres, state intervention in mass media, the ties between journalists and politicians, and the sense of the “common good” prevailing in the citizenry play out differently in different national spheres (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Probing into the challenges of the public sphere on the two sides of the Atlantic has to limit itself towards highlighting some prevailing features of the question of legitimacy, and integration.

## **X. The Future of Transatlantic Public Legitimacy: Inclusion, and Beyond**

The legitimacy of public opinion is dependent on the inclusion of all individuals affected by a certain policy. Or put more axiomatically: “Public opinion is legitimate if and only if it results from a communicative process in which all potentially affected can participate as peers” (Fraser, 2007: 22). This inclusiveness points to the *equal ability* to participate in a discursive playing field. Individuals affected by policies should potentially *all* participate with the same level of *ability*.

Here, new differences between the Atlantic partners come into play and thus have to be considered. While in the U.S., differences in wealth and education hinder parts of the population to fulfill these criteria and to serve as active parts of the public sphere, in Europe this ability of participation is limited due to a lack of communication flows beyond language and national borders, the virtual non-existence of transnational European media, and—on the elective level—on the fact of only and exclusively indirect representation (in contrast, for example, to the non-EU-member state Switzerland).

However, the lack of transnational public communication does not preclude the lack of a public sphere altogether. Understanding the public sphere as a procedure rather than a structure allows the inclusion of citizens independent from a bottom-up communicative media infrastructure. A media infrastructure exists in as far as a shared set of topics is negotiated in the different media and to the extent in which a fair amount of cross-references take place (Kantner, 2004: 187ff). The Western financial and economic crisis in 2007, and consequently the debt crisis of Europe in 2010, have deepened the legitimacy crisis of the Pan-European project. Given the existing economic frameworks and necessities, public opinion of the Southern EU states is only antagonistically connected to the Northern European states, especially Germany. The accompanying power antagonism between South and North has important repercussions on the efficacy level of the public sphere of the EU as a whole.

In the United States, on the other hand, the struggle over public opinion is not contested between North and South anymore. This is due to comparably weak institutions in state governments, civil society and a bigger national media power that reaches out across regional borders in order to access the federal level. Mass media are “*the* primary actor of the U.S. public sphere in providing political interpretation” (Ferree et al., 2002: 295). The U.S. emphasis on individual liberty induces individual citizens to spend money for public causes—a tradition rare in most European countries; and the accompanying tradition of privatization, combined with fundraising often shifts the question of equal access to the public sphere towards the field of the “attention economy” (Goldhaber, 1997). The U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling of 2010 on lobby organizations like the so-called Political Action Committees, or Super PACs, officially known as “independent-expenditure only committees,” raises the inequality in access to the public sphere to levels still unimaginable in European politics. The Super PAC decision opens the gates for a change in “who” is included, e.g. to foreign interests and capital, and it affects the “how” individuals are included, given that special interests within the given economic power can increase their influence on public opinion.

## **XI. Outlook: Towards a Pan-European Public Sphere-Through Teachings from the U.S.?**

While such mechanisms may be in principle compatible with American culture and the tradition of its public sphere, such a development would be out of place in Europe, and it would further hinder the already complex and difficult process towards integration of the national European public spheres. It should therefore be avoided in the further European experience.

Instead, in Europe the most important measure to undertake is participation at all levels of interaction and exchange, because under the existing highly nationally fragmented European conditions, participation is a decisive value as such and in itself, no matter what the issues, the contents and the outcomes are. Participation in a communicative network always and unavoidably creates integration. If different members are exchanging arguments and ideas, even if they disagree about the issues, it creates a social bond. Only if the segmentation and stratification of society takes dimensions to the extent that

theses communicative links are no longer in place, the integrative function of the public sphere fades. It is precisely this rupture in the communicative structure that is expressed in the current German debate about “parallel societies,” which pertains to the exclusion of segments of society (among others immigrants of different cultural, linguistic and ethnic background) from the communicative practice and the formation of general public opinion. The exclusion especially of cultural and linguistic minorities from shared communicative practice in Europe demonstrates the limits of the integrative function of the single public spheres on the continent. Similar phenomena with regard to “parallel societies” can be seen in other European states. This question, not a main issue in the U.S., stands at the center of the European project and has to be resolved as soon as possible.

The main question about the integrative function of the public sphere in Europe, however, concerns its integration into a first true European commonwealth. Such an integration is underway, as far as political procedures are installed on the European level, which are discussed throughout Europe on the respective national media. Public opinion formation processes, in turn, may be directed towards Brussels. Thus, the European public sphere is at least to some extent underway, and does not necessarily need to be jump-started with a European Constitution, as Habermas claims. While the integrative function of the public sphere would certainly be fostered by such a constitution, it would also be fostered by stronger powers for the European parliament and its transnational media. Just as the integration project of the European Union is trapped in limbo due to rising neo-nationalist tendencies as a fall-out of Europe’s four-year crisis, such is the integrative function of a first European public sphere.

What might be learned from the U.S. is the role of popular culture in continental integration. A self-identification as European and a general concern for fellow Europeans cannot be generated on the political level alone. For most European citizens, this shared identity is never more tangible as in the annual “*Eurovision Song Contest*” and the *Champions League* soccer tournament. In particular, the former sees the population of each country vote for the “best song of Europe,” creating a (temporary) sense of identity that the political process fails to capture. Even the election of the European parliament takes place largely in national contexts and the national media covering them correspondingly. Learning from the U.S. in this regard means to use popular culture as a learning ground for taking a transregional and transnational perspective. Popular culture and sports can lead the way for the creation of a political public sphere beyond national boundaries.

The increasing polarization of the political landscape of the United States leads to a different framing of the question how and to what extent the public sphere can still fulfill the integrative purpose that is ascribed to it by its concept within open societies. Interesting, however, is the continuous social bond that keeps forming even in the most avid U.S. controversies. From a European perspective, the U.S. media have a “greater structure of dialogue” and a stronger inclusion of “the lifeworld of the ordinary citizen in public discussion” (Feree et al., 2002: 298) than Europe. It is therefore interesting to note that despite cultural minorities and political polarization, the United States has not addressed the question of the arguable failure of the integrative function of the public sphere in terms of the rise of “parallel societies.” Greater Europe should learn from the U.S. how to “nationalize” the public sphere to the point where even ideological polarization can harm it only beyond the “natural” tie between equal citizens that not as a concept or

as an intention, but as a practice remains widely intact in America to the present day.

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