The Making of a European Public Sphere: Media Discourse and Political Contention.

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Jan-Henrik Meyer, *Aarhus University*

When the issue of a European public sphere is discussed in the office corridor, or at a conference, the conventional claim of non-specialist colleagues is that there is none. This is surprising. In the face of the plethora of news stories about the Euro-crisis, it is difficult to ignore that under these circumstances the European Union (EU) and its policies have become a prominent – as much as a highly controversial – issue of the daily news coverage in EU member states. Nevertheless, even after more than a decade of theoretical debate across various disciplines and a flurry of empirical research, most academics and European practitioners tend to treat the issue of a European public sphere in black or white terms: Does it exist? Or: Is its existence possible at all? Yes or no? The findings of the various individual and cooperative research projects undertaken since the early 2000s have apparently triggered very little resonance outside the narrower circles of Europeanists. One reason might be an insufficient integration of these projects with the larger research agendas of mainstream political and social science, and their normative orientation.

The Making of a European Public Sphere can, however, hardly be accused of such introspection. It assembles the results of an international collaborative research project that brought together political scientists, sociologists and media studies experts. Drawing on the state of the art in these disciplines, it employs all of the combined man-(and woman-)power available to compile the largest comparative dataset on the public sphere in Europe to date. The data serve to address research questions relevant to different disciplines. The central part of the analysis consists of a comparative analysis of four newspapers each, from seven countries – including tabloids and regional newspapers. Employing the innovative method of *claims analysis* throughout, the study is able to reconstruct the communicative relations in a systematic manner. To put it

simply, the analysis elicits who addressed whom on what issue, spoke for or against whom, for what reason, how, when and where (p. 55). Additionally, a large number of journalists were interviewed. Thus the authors are able to shed light on the inhabitants of the public sphere, too, including not only journalists, but also social movement actors and political parties, and to explore their action. They also pioneered research on link structures on the internet. Since the empirical research was undertaken between 2001 and 2004, given the rapid changes in internet usage, these data are more or less historical by now.

However, the delay in publication has been made up for by a thoughtful discussion of the results, including the findings of the other projects published meanwhile. The passage of time allows the authors to step back from the sea of data and facilitates linking the results to broader issues, such as the consequences of globalization and Europeanization on party systems and systems of interest intermediation. If any book publication is able to spread a sophisticated understanding of the European public sphere to wide audiences, it is this one.

The authors conceive of the public sphere as an “intermediary sphere of public actions, affiliations and relations beyond the state and the market” (p. 14). While other researchers (such as Klaus Eder or Hans-Jörg Trenz) highlight the importance of the public sphere in observing, relating and addressing political institutions, or underline its role in identity change (such Thomas Risse or Bernhard Peters), Koopmans and Statham and their collaborators emphasize the role of the public sphere as a sphere of political action and strife: It is in the public sphere where citizens learn about, but also engage in politics, notably through involvement in civil society associations. In line with the normative expectations of political sociologists from Jürgen Habermas to Robert Putnam, the authors argue that it is through such practices that a meaningful and resilient mature democracy is ensured.

The public sphere is imaged by the authors to be a battlefield of opinions. Thus one of the book’s core research questions relates to the power structures reflected in the differentiated visibility of the different actors in the public sphere. Who dominates the public sphere with his or

her presence is an important normative concern. The second major issue is the Europeanization of the public sphere. This usually very fuzzy concept is convincingly operationalized in a threefold manner, against what was the standard null hypothesis at the turn of the millennium. It was usually claimed then that the absence of a European public sphere meant that the EU was invisible, dominated by governments trying hard to maintain an – albeit eroding – “permissive consensus,” a phrase made popular by Leon Lindberg and Stuart Scheingold. Thus, the first criterion for an operational European public sphere is the *visibility* to the public of EU institutions and EU policies. This is a prerequisite for voters to actually form an opinion. Secondly, *inclusiveness* describes whether different kinds of societal actors actually have a chance to make their voices heard in European policy debates. The third criterion is *contestation*: to what extent does the European public sphere become controversial. Can we observe a politicization of European affairs?

The book covers the issue of the European public sphere comprehensively in eleven chapters. In a first introductory section, Jos de Beus familiarizes the reader with the underlying conceptual and empirical issues, before the editors lay out the theoretical and methodological framework. In the second section Koopmans et al. present the main findings of the analysis of the public sphere. He traces its Europeanization over time between 1990 and 2002, across different policy areas and in terms of its references to nation states and the EU. Secondly, he analyses how inclusive the public sphere was of different (non-state) actors, and assesses the level of contestation. It is in the following two sections that the book reaches its full interdisciplinary potential, with chapters using different methodologies to analyze specific aspects of the public sphere. The third section focuses on the media: on the journalistic norms and practices of news-making (Statham), on opinion-leading editorials (Barbara Pfetsch et al.), on transnational communication on the internet (Koopmans / Ann Zimmermann) and on the framing of the European Union in national public spheres (Juan Díez Medrano and Emily Gray). In the fourth section, Hanspeter Kriesi et al. consider what collective actors do to make their voices heard,

while Statham et al. zoom in on the role Euroscepticism plays in party politics. Thus the book produces a very differentiated picture of the public sphere, its actors, structures, some of its causal logics and the action taking place within it.

Finally, what is the authors' verdict on the Europeanization of the public sphere? Statham debunks the myth that the European public sphere does not exist. The EU does not remain invisible. By comparison to national actors, European institutions and politics are adequately visible. Nevertheless, journalists have had a hard time making European news, largely due to the lack of editors' interest and the complicated issues at stake. At the same time, there is evidence of a democratic deficit. The European public sphere is insufficiently inclusive. Governments and media actors are grossly overrepresented, to the detriment of civil society. As governments and the media – with the exception of the British press – are generally supportive of European integration this structural bias translates into a European public sphere, in which contestation is much more subdued than in national public spheres. In the face of the current Euro crisis, we may wonder whether these findings continue to hold. Visibility and contestation seem more prominent than ever, while governments continue to (try to) run the show.