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"Ach Europa"

Questions about a European public space and ambiguities of the European project

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European transnational exchange is far from blossoming, argues Bernhard Peters: The national public sphere has proved remarkably resilient against attempts to create a European space. In addition, transatlantic communication flows between North America and individual European countries continue to dominate the cultural and media landscape. What does this mean for the future of the much debated European public space?

Are we observing the development of a *European* public, or cultural, space?
Are we taking part in it? Should we *promote* it?

The question may seem odd. Should we not be paying attention to other European publics and cultures? Should we not be keeping up a conversation with our neighbours? Of course we should. Don't we have magazines and other publications with a European orientation? Don't we have lots of conferences, meetings, festivals about our common European culture, past and present? Of course we do.

However, let us take a look back to the late 60s, where during my formative years, I did not grow up in a European cultural space. In fact, I grew up within a *Western, transatlantic* public and culture place. I did have my French phase, of course, as many intellectually ambitious young Germans had in the 50s and 60s. There was Sartre and Camus, Jacques Brel and Juliette Greco, the *nouvelle vague*. A little bit later, Great Britain came up strongly with a vital youth culture, pop and rock, which was already channelling and transforming American influences. But there was also an important intellectual monthly, *Der Monat*, featuring many contributions from American intellectuals and critics. There was Jazz. There was Faulkner, Dos Passos, and the Beat Generation. There was the Civil Rights Movement and the movement against the Vietnam War. There were teach-ins and civil disobedience, and a little bit later feminism and environmentalism. There was the *New Yorker* and other little magazines on display in the *Amerikahäuser*. There was America, a New World.

Maybe this was just a temporary phenomenon, confined to post-war Germany and to a generation looking for a fresh start, for an escape from a horrible past and a stifling present. But I am not so sure.

What is a public sphere?

Let us take a somewhat more theoretical look at public spaces or spheres. Studies of the public sphere that are to some degree inspired by Jürgen Habermas' pathbreaking formulation are not primarily interested in all kinds of cultural production and exchange. They are not interested in the reception of literary works or of other forms of art or popular culture. Nor are they primarily interested in the public distribution of *information*. Instead, they take a particular interest in public *discussion* or *debate* and the formation of opinion.

Debate has to do with giving reasons, presenting interpretations and analyses, justifying evaluations and criticisms and so on. If we look for *public* debates, we find them partly in discussions during informal encounters and in public meetings. In the mass media, deliberation is almost swamped by various forms of entertainment, on the one hand, and by mere information or reporting of "news" on the other. But in the electronic media, there are forms of news commentary, news magazines, and documentaries with elements of analysis, commentary, and sometimes advocacy, as well as various discussions and talk shows (many of which, however, are mainly for entertaining or self-expression). In the print media, we find much deliberative content in non-fiction books as well as in the periodical press in the form of newspaper commentary, opinion pieces, analytical or advocatory reporting, essays, or other genres of more sustained argument. In Germany, in particular, there is the "Feuilleton" section, as there are often other special sections of daily or weekly papers, or – *hélas* – in intellectual or cultural magazines. This *media* discourse is certainly the most important and influential part of *public discourse* in general.

By public debate, I do not merely mean political debate in a narrow sense, of course. There are important debates across many issue areas that concern not only pending political decisions or problems, but also more general cultural assumptions, individual and collective self-understandings, social and cultural criticisms, interpretations of the past and aspirations or concerns regarding the future, "diagnoses of our time" and so on.

Public discourse mostly takes place in certain bounded spheres – in separate, mostly *national*, "public spheres" or "spheres of public discourse". National laws and regulations and national languages put their stamp on each public sphere. National politics, governments, parties, intermediary organizations, and associations provide topics and input. National mass media function as channels or carriers of public discourse. This is an insufficient description, however. There are more elements of cohesion and boundedness than these mostly external conditions. There are important forms of internal differentiation. And, obviously, there is mutual exchange and mutual observation between different national publics or public spheres.

To start with *differentiation*: Public discourse does not take place within a homogeneous public. The general public is differentiated into several ways. A public, let's say a national public, is differentiated in *political* or *ideological camps*, *regional* publics, and/or into *issue publics* with particular interests concerning certain topics or issue areas.

The public is also heavily *stratified*. There is a structure of inequality or hierarchy in the public sphere. All in all, there is a structure of stratification both among speakers (or writers) as among audiences. *Public speakers* have very different amounts of *influence*. Segments of the *audience* can be more or less *attentive* and informed. *Media outlets* can be distinguished by circulation,

but also by *intellectual prestige*. The notion of *public influence*, which is somehow related to, but not identical with intellectual prestige, is more difficult to apply here, because we would have to distinguish between short term and long term influences or effects. I will come back to this later.

The notion of prestige may be slightly less difficult to apply, but it is still tricky enough. As an example of the kind of prestige that I mean, consider the phenomenon of national quality newspapers. There are widely considered as opinion leaders (*vis-à-vis* political, social or cultural elites and *vis-à-vis* other media), although they do not normally have a very high circulation compared to popular or regional presses.

Another kind of prestige is more narrowly confined to the cultural or intellectual sphere. Here the cultural magazines, among others, come in with very small readerships, a questionable influence on everyday opinion, as it were, or on the current public agenda, but with high respect among the educated classes and possibly a long-term influence on wider cultural developments that is very hard to assess empirically.

For our discussion here, let us simplify things and differentiate merely between layers of public discussion or debate: namely, between *general discourse*, aimed, say, at the average reader of the national quality press (already a special segment of the national population, of course), and *high* or highbrow discourse, directed at cultural or intellectual, but in other versions also at technical, economic or political elites. I make this very simplified assumption because it is important for our discussion about emerging transnational, or European, public spaces. Cultural journals will of course belong to the sphere of *high discourse* in this sense.

In what way can a bounded public sphere with all these kinds of differentiation or even segmentation still said to be *integrated*? In the first place, any bounded and integrated sphere of public discourse (a national public sphere) is characterized by a high density of communication flows – a higher density of *internal* flows than of cross-border flows, as the late political scientist Karl Deutsch has pointed out. Public spheres are also integrated by dominant *agendas*, sets of issues or topics that turn up simultaneously in the various mass media and other forms of public discourse. In addition, there is a considerable amount of *common understanding* on what the debated issues are about, how different positions may be understood and interpreted, what the important and disputed aspects are, and what is more or less taken for granted.

Now, in what sense can we speak of the *transnationalization of public discourse* – and more specifically: of the development of *transnational public spheres* or public spaces, for instance, the emergence of a *European public space*?

We can speak of a shared universe of discourse within a certain geographic area, e.g. Europe, only if there are communication flows, flows of ideas and arguments, flows of books, periodicals, articles, films and other cultural artefacts across national borders, crisscrossing the whole European sphere.

To some degree, these processes of cultural diffusion and exchange are taking place between many national publics around the world. To speak of a *European public space* requires the fulfilment of at least two additional conditions. First, such communication flows *within Europe* or more precisely, between the member states of the European Union and its respective publics,

should be *markedly denser* than communication flows across the outside boundaries of the EU (e.g. more dense than communicative exchanges between EU member states and the United States). This will probably require some convergence of the public cultures of the member countries in order to facilitate mutual understanding and the coordination of debates.

And second, there should be something like a *common public identity* as a background to the debates. In national public debates, we often not only find references to one's own national political entity and political institutions, but also an implicit or explicit self-identification as a national public endeavouring to form an opinion. A critical condition for a genuine Europeanization of public debates would be the enlargement of the imagined collective "we" beyond national borders (for example, to "Europe" or "the Western community") – and possibly also a growing importance of corresponding *dissociations* (of the "East" or "Asia", to use one important example, or of "America").

What future for the European national sphere?

Is such a genuine European communicative space developing? And if so, to what degree and with what speed? On the matter of empirical fact, the jury is still out. Published empirical results are meagre, inconclusive, and partly contradictory. Our own research (at my university in Bremen) seems to show that trans-border communication flows are increasing slowly at best, and that a common European "we" as a permanent background or reference point of public debates does not really exist. However, there is some kind of *segmented* Europeanization in some areas of what I have called higher discourse. There is, for instance, the international financial press, that has become pretty transnational in outlook and circulation. And there is a more lively cultural exchange and genuinely international debate in the elite cultural and intellectual media, like the cultural magazines. It is unclear, by the way, if this latter kind of "high" cultural exchange is more developed compared to levels of communications flows within national publics at the second half of the nineteenth century.

What can we expect for the future? What are the causes of this situation? And *is it to be regretted?*

My guess is that in the near future, say, within the next two decades or so, the Europeanization of public discourse will remain quite limited and will be mostly restricted to certain elites, or to *segmented transnationalization*, and in no way comparable to the density and intensity of national discourses. Behind this expectation are certain theoretical assumptions about the *causes* for these developments or non-developments.

Allow me to elaborate. Talk about the European public sphere is very often conducted in a certain frame that we could call the *cultural lag* frame: Transnationalization, or Europeanization, in particular, so it is assumed, is more advanced in the areas of economics and in official or regulatory politics (politics from above, as it were) than in the sphere of cultural exchange and public discourse in the area of democracy or politics from below. All this produces a *democratic deficit*, or a *deficit of legitimacy*, for the European Union. That there are some elements of truth in this interpretation cannot be denied.

In general, however, the picture rests on rather questionable assumptions about the character and the prospects of the European Union. I will not go into this in much detail, let me just say that political unification or centralization within the EU is still more limited than is often assumed, that the role of national states remains much more important than is often assumed, that it seems unlikely that this is going to change very soon or very deeply, and that it is quite questionable whether we should aim at changing this soon or deeply.

To give a much abbreviated, staccato explication of these claims, let me mention a recent article by Harvard political science professor and EU specialist Andrew Moravcsik, who argues that the EU is still basically an economic union, or a free trade area with appropriate regulations and deregulations. As he says: "Much is thereby excluded from the EU policy agenda. Absent concerns include taxation and the setting of fiscal priorities, social welfare provision, defence and police powers, education policy, cultural policy, non-economic civil litigation, direct cultural promotion and regulation, the funding of civilian infrastructure, and most other regulatory policies unrelated to cross-border economic activity ... At first approximation, the EU does not tax, spend, implement or coerce and, in many areas, it does not hold a legal monopoly of public authority." (Moravcsik, A. M. (2002). "In Defense of the 'Democratic Deficit': Reassessing Legitimacy in the European Union." *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40(4): 607). What does this mean for legitimacy, democracy and the role of the public, or of public discourse? Again, the matter is too complicated to be discussed here in full, so I will point to just one consequence by referring to Moravcsik once more who says that the topics or issue areas that the European Union is dealing with are precisely those areas that do not attract much public attention on the national level either. As he says: "Of the five most salient issues in most West European democracies – health care provision, education, law and order, pension and social security policy, and taxation – none is primarily an EU competence" nor is, I may add, foreign and security policy, that is, matters of war and peace.

Moravcsik concludes: "Lack of salience, not lack of opportunity, may impose the binding constraint on European political participation." Now we can of course deplore this lack of salience, but given our limited attention span and limited cognitive (and maybe affective) resources this would only amount to a plea for a shift of attention to these mostly rather technical and technically complex matters of regulation with which the EU deals.

Of course, we could make an argument that competences of the EU should be enhanced considerably, allowing the salience of EU policies to rise. But that opens another debate: What are the real reasons for supporting further political integration in the framework of a European Union? While I cannot even start this debate here, I still must point out that there actually is surprisingly little actual public debate and controversy about these matters on an advanced intellectual level. Euroscepticism, as it is called, seems largely to be treated as intellectually disreputable, as an affair of unenlightened masses misled by populists, as well as of some insular British conservatives led by Lady Thatcher and by some equally insular French state-centred Leftists still pursuing a project of socialism in one country.

Intellectual circles of the Left, the Centre and even the moderate Right just do not seem to see a problem here. But is it not at least somewhat surprising to see so many left and liberal intellectuals and publicists being in favour of *more political centralization* on a truly grand scale? There was a time, at least, when considerable parts of the Left were very much in favour of decentralisation, not

least as a reaction to state socialism.

I will, however, leave it at that and just state that I sense a problematic closure of public debates, an unquestioning support of a European political and maybe cultural project, which would certainly need a more open and critical airing.

The staying power of the national sphere

What explains the inertia, or stickiness of the staying power of the public spheres? Typical EU politics do not have enough sex appeal, as it were, to become a matter of widespread public attention, but there are causes beyond this which I would like to outline in the following:

National public spheres are characterized by specific communication infrastructures as well as by cultural features that manifest themselves in interpretation patterns, relevancy structures, collective memories and other cultural resources, etc. But these differences do not exist independently from other features of the respective national societies. In many cases they are linked to social practices and institutional structures that impact the character of the public sphere and the mode of cultural reproduction.

Put differently, public spheres have a social and cultural foundation that extends well beyond the framework of media markets and media organizations. Many other structures that affect intellectual production and its reception, collective interests, and problem definition play a role here. These structures include educational and research facilities, journalism and other professions, networks (and cliques) of producers of cultural and intellectual property, structures for interest articulation and aggregation such as political parties, interest groups, and social organizations and milieus. One reason for the relative stickiness even of intellectual, or high discourse, to the national level may have to do with the fact that it has to a large degree become a matter of speakers based in national academic or media institutions.

Now all of these interlocking infrastructural conditions are not all easily reproduced on a European level. Of course, this is no argument at all against cultural exchange, or against efforts to increase cultural exchange, dialogue and cooperation. It just means that it is unlikely that we will get a comparatively tightly integrated public sphere on the European level any time soon.

European versus transatlantic communication flows

Finally, we still have to consider another interesting aspect of the transnationalization of public discourse. If we map trans-border communication flows, in particular of communication flows in the area of public discourse or debate (although the more general picture of communication flows does not seem to be much different), a certain pattern seems to appear – a pattern that is relatively constant over time.

There appears not really a *European*, but, more markedly, a *transatlantic* sphere of increased trans-border flows of communication and of ideas.

That means, cultural exchange, flows of ideas and arguments, flows of books, magazine articles, newspaper pieces as well as newspaper reports, references in articles and so on are markedly more dense between many European countries and North America, or more specifically with the US, than are flows

between many European countries. I am referring here to preliminary collections of data that we have undertaken at the university of Bremen – especially data on "imports" of articles or references to other countries in articles published in national quality newspapers. The data are not very precise yet, but the overall pattern seems to be clear and also seems to correspond to our own everyday experience. There is really a grid of communication flows across the whole West, including North America and Europe (since 1989, also the central European post-communist countries).

There are marked asymmetries, of course. Special affinities exist between certain European countries or their public spheres and those of the US, with Germany and Britain being examples of such strong cultural linkages with the US. Another feature of this overall picture is that communication flows within this transatlantic region are much stronger by several magnitudes than similar communication flows across the borders of this area.

There are also certain kinds of asymmetry with regard to the cultural items that are exchanged between the US and Europe – asymmetries in that the US seems to have something of a trade surplus. And this includes not just mass cultural items, as is sometimes maintained, but also serious books, serious political and intellectual journals and magazines, as well as serious intellectual contributions in other forms. We have come to deplore American dominance in most areas of mass culture (for better or worse reasons). But if we look at high culture, in particular academic and scientific culture, and if we look at high discourse, the United States again plays a major role, if not an equally dominant role as in the area of mass culture.

To sum up: If we look for transnational public spaces, spaces of public discourse in the aforementioned sense, that consist of cross-border flows of public communication or discourse, we will not find a European, but rather a *transatlantic public sphere*. So my own biographical recollection does not look so unique after all.

Now what do we make of this? Is there a lesson to be learned here? We could, of course, complain, and talk about cultural imperialism, the need to check America's dominant position, and to form a cultural bloc that could be a counterweight to American hegemony. Whatever the merits of such considerations in the field of *Realpolitik* or in the field of general cultural, including mass cultural, exchange in the areas of cultural *discourse*, with respect to intellectual *debates* and the *exchange of ideas*, they do not really seem to make sense. Maybe I am missing a point here. But it does not really seem to make sense to compete for intellectual market share by forming national alliances or muster something of a transnational, maybe European, cultural and intellectual camp.

Intellectual and cultural competition, if it makes sense to use this term at all in this area, does not work by forming alliances or by building trade blocs or something like that. Intellectual and cultural creativity can be enhanced, among other things, by cultural exchange. But this does not lead to any particular advantage of primarily regional intellectual cooperation and exchange. Interest in cultural productivity and innovation should lead us to be open to *all* possible influences and intellectual inputs which can enrich our debates.

This does not necessarily mean, on the other hand, that we should not take cultural affinities into account. Cultural exchange on a daily basis, as it were, is much easier and on average more rewarding, if there are common cultural

understandings, a shared cultural repertoire, as well as compatible social and institutional infrastructures of public debate and cultural exchange. So we should certainly strive to be cosmopolitans, to open up to the world at large, but still we will go on reading mostly European and North American quality newspapers, journals, magazines and so on, and for good reason. In fact, we already form a community of communication and discourse of some sort, and we should develop this further by building on the foundations that are already there. This is not necessarily more important than building cultural bridges toward other parts of the world. But it is a *different task*.

Do we nevertheless have good reasons to advance Europe as a common cultural project, to advance the project of a shared European public or cultural space as our preferred alternative to a further development of an already existing transatlantic public and cultural space? Of course, we can have very good pragmatic reasons to do something for specifically *European* intellectual cooperation and exchange. These pragmatic reasons may reach from the simple fact of geographic proximity to a marked interest in certain problems and concerns which are specific for the region or of specific importance – e.g. the legacy of the communist past in certain parts of Europe, to name just one example.

But such considerations refer only to certain areas of public discourse, to certain topics or thematic fields. Are there reasons to think about a European discursive or cultural project beyond that?

One possible argument would refer to objections to American dominance or to specific American policies. Now we can readily see that there are very good reasons to oppose the atrocious policies of the current American administration. But beyond that I am doubtful. I leave aside the question in what sense it could be meaningful to oppose American economic and military preponderance by European bloc building. But I do not quite see why and how that opposition to governmental policies should lead to something like an intellectual or cultural form of bloc building.

Let us consider a call to assemble Europe's progressive cultural forces to form a counterweight to the United States that is based not only on political, but also on cultural grounds. Something like this has been put forward by Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida. They seem to call for a defence of a unique European political and cultural model against what they describe as a hegemonic, neoliberal and unilateralist model associated with the US. They refer to differences in value patterns regarding social programs, the acceptance of inequalities, the role and mandate of the state, the shape of penal policies and multilateralism in foreign policies. Now there can be little doubt that certain differences in value patterns and policy orientations between any European country and the US do exist. But they are probably no larger than differences within the European camp. And they are to a large degree outweighed by basic commonalities in outlook, orientations, political commitments and even historical experiences. But even if there was a growing rift, not only on matters of international politics, and not only on matters of domestic policy in the areas of public provision or criminal justice, but also in a more general cultural realm – and even if (a very big if!) this rift included not just political and economic elites in the US, but also the intellectuals, academics, journalists, writers and magazine makers which would be our primary conversations partners – should this not rather prompt us to try to increase cultural and intellectual dialogue and exchange rather than turn inwards primarily to our European neighbours? (And I think Habermas himself

would very much support the former alternative.)

Conclusion: the role of cultural journals in the European public sphere

Let me end with a somewhat less controversial topic: the public or societal role, as it were, of intellectual and cultural magazines. In a sense, making, reading and enjoying such publications does not need any justification in public or societal terms, nor reasoning about broader social or cultural effects. I take it that these are worthy as well as pleasurable activities in themselves. As a social scientist, however, I am still curious about these broader cultural and intellectual functions or effects. In particular, I would like to pursue the hypotheses of a cultural and intellectual trickle-down effect. Small and dedicated groups of cultural or intellectual aficionados do not have much immediate political or cultural impact on the broader social, cultural and political scene, as is usually and probably correctly assumed (and sometimes, and maybe unnecessarily, deplored). If we take a longer perspective from a slightly different angle, things might look somewhat different. If we look at deeper cultural changes and innovations, the development of influential public ideas, and indeed at the practical consequences of such developments for political affairs as well as for private everyday life, the picture might change. In fact, there have been important changes in these areas of the last two centuries or so, and I think they have indeed been influenced by those minority discourses in the cultural and intellectual fields. If we take only the last decades or so, consider changes in public thinking about war and peace, world poverty, human rights, gender and family relations, our relations with the natural world, our relations with our own bodies and with our bodily offspring, as it were, about the position of social and cultural minorities, all elements we find important to our cultural repertoire. There have not always been changes of majority opinions, and certainly we have no lessening of disputes and disagreements, but changes in the spectrum of publicly articulated and defended ideas, the development of novel frames and arguments, in short: a different shape of the intellectual, cultural and, finally, intellectual landscape. Not all of this was affected by what I have called high discourse. Changes were effected by collective experiences and social conflicts as well as by changes in patterns of working and living. But those changes would not have been possible without the production and probing of ideas and arguments within these smaller and, in some ways, elite public spheres. The ideas had to come from somewhere. This much we can assume. Beyond that, we know very little about just these processes of cultural production, dissemination and change.

We also do not know a lot about the kinds of networks and informal or semiformal arrangements that foster cultural and intellectual exchange across borders, or that even make the production of cultural and intellectual journals and magazines possible in the first place. I would certainly like to see more cooperation between social scientists and, let's say, cultural producers and publicists in attempting to shed more light on these processes. *Eurozine* and its members might become a forum also for this kind of exchange.

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