

## Chapter 3

# European Public Spheres and the Challenge of Radical Pluralism

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Although the institutional reforms associated with deeper political integration in Europe are still contested, few if anyone oppose wider public debate as a means of strengthening the legitimacy of the emerging European polity. Often captured in the notion of the “European Public Sphere”, the role of communication and public debate has gained prominence in both political and academic discourse. Yet in political philosophy, the normative baggage associated with the very notion of the public sphere is highly contested, and there are different conceptualisations of the role and functions of public debate for transnational democracy.

Despite its popularity, the notion of a European public sphere has not brought consensus as to its definition or component parts. In empirical, media-centric studies in particular, the European public sphere constitutes a broad, highly elusive conceptual category, whose analytical force often remains unclear. In some contexts, the public sphere constitutes a normative god term of communication and democracy, referring to all things good. In more empiricist and reductionist usage, the public sphere is simplistically equated with media coverage, implying that the existence of the European public sphere depends on the perceived Europeanization of news agendas.

However, if the public sphere is to retain any critical potential as a normative concept, one should avoid, as Nancy Fraser (2007: 46-47) argues, both an empiricist approach, which simply adapts theory to existing realities, and an externalist approach, which invokes an ideal theory with which to condemn social reality (see also the chapter by Hans-Jörg Trenz in this volume). As Iris Marion Young (2000: 10) has argued, the ideals of critical political theory are neither descriptions nor blueprints and correspond neither to present nor to future reality. Instead, their value is in reflecting on reality from a distance, revealing deficiencies in contemporary political arrangements, and envisaging alternative possibilities. In this sense, theory is useful only to the extent to which it enables us to examine critically the claims made both by academics and by politicians.

In the absence of a European media system or a common political culture, the analytical value of the European public sphere can easily be questioned.

Yet the purpose of this article is not to assess the empirical viability of this concept; nor is it to assess whether anything like the European public sphere actually exists. Neither will I try to construct a new theory of the public sphere that would better fit the emerging transnational context. Instead, the focus is on the different normative assumptions and visions of democracy behind the current European debate. The assumption here is that it is important to engage with democratic theory, not only to highlight the gap between the ideals and the reality, but also to question critically the normative claims made in both academic and political debates.

The main tension considered here is that which exists between the frameworks of deliberative democracy and its radical-pluralist critics, and the consequences of this tension for conceptualising the European public sphere as a normative ideal. In academic debates, much of the discussion continues to lean upon the framework of deliberative democracy and the Habermasian concept of the public sphere as an arena of rational-critical debate. Yet reflecting on the broader emphasis on pluralism and difference in political theory, normative models of deliberative democracy and the public sphere have increasingly been criticised for overemphasising social integration, unity, and rational consensus. The emphasis on rational deliberation and consensus is seen to ignore relations of power, the depth of social pluralism, and fundamental value differences, thus offering a limited basis for democratisation – on either national or transnational levels.

In this chapter, radical-pluralist or agonistic theories of democracy refer to theories in which the public sphere is conceived as a site for political struggle and conflict, and not only as a site for the formation of the common will, common identity, or consensus. While such critique of deliberative democracy has recently gained prominence in political philosophy, few theories about the consequences for the debate on the European public sphere, let alone any institutional or concrete political questions, have been formulated. This has led many to doubt the practical relevance of the radical-pluralist approach. In fact, it seems that a lack of institutional proposals or of interest in concrete political questions is a widespread feature of various post-modern theories of radical difference and pluralism (McLennan 1995: 85). Instead, radical-democratic perspectives have been used more as oppositional discourses or to criticise the biases and flaws in the existing normative frameworks. In this chapter, some of the radical-democratic critiques of the deliberative approach are reviewed and an assessment provided of what prospects, if any, these perspectives might provide for the project of European democracy.

## The Paradox of the European Public Sphere

Much of the debate on the European public sphere is characterised by a tension between commonality and unity on the one hand, and pluralism and diversity on the other. Reflecting the “unity in diversity” slogan of the European Union

(EU), the public sphere debate often combines the goals of enhancing social integration and establishing a political community or a European identity with acknowledging and fostering Europe's cultural and political pluralism.

Given the close connection of the European public sphere debate with the goals of further political and social integration, it is hardly surprising that the concept includes a strong emphasis on commonality and unity. For Habermas (2001b: 16), the European-wide public sphere is a key condition for the emergence of a European identity and a shared solidarity, which in turn are seen as requirements for further integration and harmonisation. In short, the notion of the public sphere is a central element of an imagined post-national form of social integration that no longer relies on national identity, but on the civic identity of "constitutional patriotism" (Habermas 2001a).

The goal then is to build a genuinely shared political culture that allows "different cultural, ethnic and religious forms of life to coexist and interact in equal terms" (Habermas 1997: 408). Based on a distinction between common civic identity and the particular ethnic or cultural identities of specific subcultures or nations, the notion of constitutional patriotism proposes that democratic citizenship no longer requires citizens to share the same language or the same ethnic and cultural origins. Citizens only need to be socialised into a common political culture based on liberal constitutional principles. (Baumeister 2007: 483-484.)

The notion of constitutional patriotism and the socialising function of the European public sphere can be seen as attempts to provide a solution to the solidarity gap arising from the lack of a common European identity. The public sphere as a theoretical concept thus implies both socialisation of citizens into a political community and the potential for collective self-government through discussion. In the debate on the European public sphere these two functions are often intertwined: the function of the public sphere is seen as the forging of a common identity that can serve as the basis for collective decision-making aimed at "the European collective good" (see, for instance, Eriksen 2005). In other words, the democratic process itself can now serve as a source of both legitimacy and social integration. This view seems offer a neat solution to the integration problems facing the EU.

Yet for many critics, the identification provided by constitutional patriotism is too thin and too abstract to generate a genuine sense of solidarity and belonging (Baumeister 2007). Furthermore, in a complex, large-scale polity such as the EU or even most nation-states today, the unitary model of the public sphere has given way to a more pluralistic and differentiated model of multiple public spheres. For reasons of both theoretical critique and empirical barriers, the public sphere theory in general has taken a marked pluralistic or anti-essentialist turn. Arguably, this has also contributed to a certain impasse in the debate on the European public sphere. While it has become commonplace to give up the unitary model of the public sphere and speak of public spheres in the plural, it can be argued that at some point the emphasis on diversity and pluralism runs against the basic imaginary presuppositions of democracy and

the public sphere theory itself. In other words, there is an inherent tension between pluralism and “publicness” (McLennan 1995: 92). Similarly, Chantal Mouffe (2000: 64) speaks of “the democratic paradox”: how to envisage a form of commonality strong enough to institute a *demos* but nevertheless be compatible with true religious, moral, cultural, and political pluralism?

While Habermas’s constitutional patriotism offers one possible solution to the democratic paradox, its sharp distinction between political and cultural integration is rather problematic. Instead, the “no *demos*” question often raised in European politics clearly points to questions of culture and identity. The paradox then refers to the viability of a European identity in a cultural sense (Tassin 1992; Stavrakis 2005). This, of course, is a central question for the European public sphere if its main problem is considered to be the lack of a “cultural substrate” required for collective will-formation (Eriksen 2005).

Aside from questions of European identity, however, the democratic paradox also concerns the presuppositions of democratic theory and the perceived political functions of the public sphere. In particular, the paradox will be approached here from the perspective of the tension between unity and difference in democratic theory. In many ways, problems associated with the fragmentation and differentiation of public spheres have become more acute on a transnational scale. If public spheres now overflow national boundaries and dissolve into networks whose publics no longer constitute a *demos* of political citizenry, what becomes of their critical function of checking governments and democratising governance? Furthermore, the tension is intensified by developments of media systems, given that national media have been accompanied by various sub-national and transnational niche media.

In effect, it has been argued that these processes of individualisation and pluralisation are eroding the social-structural conditions for political consensus, which until now have made collective political action possible, at least in the theoretical imagination. As summarised by Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2001: 29), with a multiplication of issues and fields of action, the closed space of the public realm no longer exists, and the public spheres are instead constituted from conflictual spaces that are individualised and defined in opposition to each other.

Without going into the debate on the consequences of general social pluralisation and individualisation, the above serves to highlight the background in which claims are made about the European public sphere. For given the social imaginary of increased pluralism and cultural decentralisation, attempts to accelerate Europe’s social and cultural integration from above are easily dismissed as either academic idealism or dangerous attempts at elitist social engineering.

In this situation, many have argued that the Habermasian ideal of rationalising democracy through public deliberation and constitutional principles is too utopian and too academic as a whole. Just as Habermas’s early work was criticised for ignoring the practical-historical limits that prevented the materialisation of the all-inclusive public sphere, so many critics see the present-

day advocacy of the European public sphere as hopelessly ignorant of such barriers as unequal relations of power, cultural heterogeneity, and differences in political traditions. Thus, many have argued that the role of public debate and criticism should be recast as a contestation of hegemonic power instead of rationalising decision-making. Hence, it is argued that transnational circuits of public debate and interest-negotiation can make transnational public powers more accountable and transparent without the need for an all-compassing notion of a universalistic public sphere (see the chapter by Hannu Nieminen in this volume).

It is in this context that the radical-pluralist approach has seemed to offer an interesting alternative to the conceptualisations of deliberative democracy. Given the normative critique and the empirical barriers to a European public sphere in the Habermasian sense, an approach that emphasises the aspects of contestation and dislocation of hegemonic powers (instead of the utopia of rationalising society through some universal principles) understandably seems attractive for formulating the theories of European-wide democracy.

### From Deliberative Democracy to Agonistic Pluralism

In discussing the ideal of a European public sphere, most studies seem to take as their general point of departure the Habermasian conceptualisation of the public sphere. This probably has to do in part with Habermas's own active role in the European debate. While some still draw inspiration from Habermas's early work on the structural transformation of the public sphere, more often the notion is used more broadly as a general context for the interaction in which public discussion takes place, ideas are circulated, and the political order is criticised. In a very broad sense, it is relatively unproblematic to argue that democracy requires such a critical communicative space.

Yet there are crucial differences in conceptualising both the functions and the ideal forms of such communicative space. As the theoretical framework that has dominated much recent democratic theory, the idea of deliberative democracy characteristically tries to reconcile the aforementioned "democratic paradox" by making the discursive formation of the public sphere the essence of political community. In contrast to liberal-pluralism or communitarianism, the deliberative approach thus denies the pluralism of fixed differences (individual or community) that lead either to an aggregation model of individual interests or to irreducible community identities. Instead, the emphasis on difference is complemented, and qualified, by an emphasis on the strong public sphere of rational-critical deliberation (see, for instance, Dahlberg 2005).

The previously discussed notion of "constitutional patriotism" can be seen as a prime example of this belief in the integrating and socialising power of the public sphere and civic participation. For Habermas and his followers, the pan-European public sphere is thereby seen as the key solution to the solidarity gap caused by insufficient social integration. In line with Habermas's earlier work on

deliberative democracy and communicative reason, it presents the ideal of free and unconstrained discussion as the ultimate criterion of political legitimacy.

In approaches informed by deliberative democracy, the role of the European public sphere is then conceptualised in terms of the public use of reason by free and equal citizens. It provides a norm for rational-critical deliberation, which is inclusive, reflexive, and aimed at understanding and agreement. Since certain institutional arrangements apparently encourage this type of communication more than others, deliberative democracy has also provided an explicitly normative framework for assessing political structures and institutions, including the media.

The ideals of deliberative democracy, however, have not escaped criticism in political philosophy. For many, the rational-critical basis of the public sphere delivers an overtly rationalist conception, which fails to provide adequate theories about unequal relations of power. Drawing from many post-modern theorists, critics see that the deliberative emphasis on communicative reason inevitably leads to support for the *status quo* in terms of existing exclusions and inequalities. Such emphasis fails to acknowledge the normalising tendencies involved in the designation of a particular form of communication as the rational and democratically legitimate norm (see, for instance, Villa 1992; Fraser 1992; Gardiner 2004).

Furthermore, the emphasis on rational consensus is widely seen as underestimating the depth of societal pluralism and the fundamental nature of value conflicts, both in the sense of cultural differences as well as structural conflicts of interest. The general thrust of deliberative democracy is thus considered too dependent on the view that a benign social order must be grounded in the ideals of unity and consensus. While European social reality is increasingly characterised by diversity and pluralism, the insistence on rational consensus is seen as too idealised, too unrealistic, and too academic.

For many critics the type of identification provided by constitutional patriotism is too thin and abstract to generate a genuine sense of solidarity and belonging (Baumeister 2007). Slavko Splichal (2006: 701) has argued that just as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was criticised for ignoring the exclusionary tendencies of the historical bourgeois public sphere, so the project of a pan-European public sphere may also be used to justify the fabrication of “the fictional Europe of elites without citizens”. In short, the emphasis on consensus and the universal criteria of rationality is seen as leading to an over-centralised model of the public sphere that is incompatible with societal pluralism and inevitably ignores inequalities between social groups and their specific needs. Iris Marion Young (1997: 401) among others has argued that the defining characteristic of a public is plurality and that the public is irreducible to a single denominator. Therefore, a concept of publicity that requires its members to put aside their differences in order to uncover the common good is seen to destroy its very meaning. Or as Bauman (1997: 202) bluntly puts it: “Habermas’s ‘perfect communication’, which measures its own perfection by consensus and the exclusion of dissent, is another dream of death which radically cures the ills of freedom’s life”.

In light of the above criticism, the radical-pluralist, or agonistic, theories of democracy have recently emerged as one of the most prominent alternative imaginaries in democratic theory. Radical-pluralist theories of democracy typically maintain that civil society is neither harmonious nor unitary, but rather characterised by conflicts of interest and an irreducible pluralism of values. Consequently, any system of rational consensus is seen not only as utopian, but also as being dangerous and necessarily exclusive. If the theories of deliberative democracy have essentially tried to reconcile the tension between pluralism and commonality by placing emphasis on solidarity and agreement among rational inquirers, then the agonistic model of democracy can be seen in many ways as its counter-narrative. As a prominent advocate of “agonistic democracy”, Chantal Mouffe contends:

For a radical and plural democracy, the belief that a final resolution of conflicts is eventually possible, even if envisaged as an asymptotic approach to the regulative ideal of free and unconstrained communication, as in Habermas, far from providing the necessary horizon of the democratic project, is something that puts it at risk. (Mouffe 1993: 8)

While deliberative democrats conceive of the public sphere as an arena of rational and critical debate leading to consensus, many radical democratic theorists today argue that democracy should instead be conceived in terms of agonistic confrontation or contestation. Another central point in the agonistic approach is that the public sphere is conceptualised as a site for the formation and contesting of opposing social and political identities, not simply as a site for creating social unity. Consequently, the radical-pluralist approach has been used to criticise the rationalist politico-economic focus of mainstream European studies, for instance, and to promote a model of the public sphere that takes into account not only rational debate, but also emotions, passions, and identities (see Stavrakis 2005).

It must be admitted that even within the framework of deliberative democracy, theorising about the public sphere has taken a pluralistic turn. The most notable implication of this is the rejection of a universal or singular idea of the public sphere in favour of a plurality of public spheres, conceptualised as a complex field of multiple interconnected publics, a revision endorsed by Habermas himself. In this sense, it can be argued that much of the “radical-pluralist” criticism is arguably based on a rather simplified reading of deliberative democracy and especially of Habermas’s later work, which can be seen as advocating a much more pluralistic conception of public spheres (see Brady 2004; Dahlberg 2005). Thus, acknowledging the contemporary fact of pluralism and conceiving the public spheres as plural, rather than singular, no longer seems to be so salient a critique.

However, it can be argued that, despite acknowledging pluralism, Habermas continues to rely on rational consensus as a regulative ideal, which guides deliberation and legitimates the outcome of democratic procedures. Even

though genuine consensus is rarely attained, Habermas insists that participants must continue to assume that consensus is possible in principle; otherwise political disputes would forfeit their deliberative character and degenerate into purely strategic struggles for power (Baumeister 2007: 488). Therefore, despite developments in deliberative democracy, there remains a clear difference in emphasis between the concern with social cohesion and legitimacy and the radical pluralist emphasis on contestation and struggle. In this sense, it is at least partly useful to treat deliberative democracy and radical pluralism as two contrasting visions of democratic theory.

### Pluralisation and Its Problems

As the idea of the European public sphere as a unitary and cohesive space becomes increasingly outdated, greater stock is being placed on various social movements and networks and the forms of political contestation and criticism they provide. Following the established critiques of the Habermasian public sphere, most writers now seem to regard the proliferation of segmented publics and counter-publics not only as a way of enhancing the participation of excluded groups, but also as a way of establishing new forms of transnational democratic accountability.

Similar to overall pluralisation of the public sphere theory, the attention in European debates has turned to the plurality of overlapping publics, which do not require internal cohesion, but which do collectively contribute to various processes of transnationalisation and the creation of European transnational publics (Splichal 2006: 709-710). The plethora of publics is seen to increase the information level and contestation of different viewpoints and thus improve democratic accountability. More publics mean more debate and critique, which means that fewer voices are excluded and more questions are asked. Mirroring the shift in Habermas's thinking, the public sphere is thus seemingly relieved of the burden of collectively solving problems or having to produce a rational solution to political questions. Instead, pluralised publics are seen as vehicles of democratisation in the sense that they contribute to deconstructing hegemonic truths and prevailing consensus – a goal that seemingly comes close to converging with the radical-pluralist approach.

The pluralisation of the public sphere, however, has not provided solutions to all problems. First, in terms of social integration, it raises the question of whether the variety of public spheres based on different identities does not also disrupt and fragment the political community so that it relapses into “identity politics” and the disruptive effect of groups demanding recognition for their difference (Eriksen 2005). Secondly, the existence of networks of communication or various sub-publics does not resolve the question of political influence or collective decision-making. As Eriksen argues, there is a missing link between general public debate and institutionalised decision-making. The problem is not so much the lack of public spaces, but the inability to translate various

expressions of public opinions into political decision-making (ibid.).

In this sense, the democratic paradox goes to the core of representative politics. As Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim note, the number of negotiation systems cannot grow indefinitely, and it is not possible to admit more and more actors and views into political power, because that would only multiply the number of arenas of conflict without increasing the potential for consensus. It thus becomes apparent that the politicisation of society does not readily translate into activation of politics. Instead, the increasingly fragmented political structure also weakens the potential of political societies for the integration and aggregation of various public opinions into collective decisions. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001: 28-29.)

As Fraser (2007) reminds us, from the point of view of basic normative criteria in the public sphere theory, communicative power generated in civil society must also translate into laws and administrative policies. If the participants in the public sphere no longer constitute a *demos*, how can public opinion be mobilised as a political force?

If the function of the public sphere is to control and constrain political power, where is that power? Which publics are relevant to which powers? And who are the relevant members of a given public? As long as the public sphere is conceived not only as an arena of self-expression but also as a “system of influence”, these kinds of questions are hard to avoid. No matter how multiple we imagine the publics, they continue to be charged with relations of power and hierarchies in terms of their capacity to influence politics.

The pluralisation of the public sphere has perhaps made the concept more empirically realistic, but from the perspective of deliberative democracy, it has not really solved any of the associated normative problems. Consequently, most writers who depend on the ideals of deliberative democracy keep returning to the root problem of the lack of collective identification. As long as deliberative democracy has at its heart an ideal of self-government through public deliberation, the question of lacking commonalities remains central. Although public spheres are treated as being plural, their function is still seen as bringing about a collective identity strong enough to support collective will-formation.

Therefore, is it enough just to add more subaltern public spheres to the mix? Although advocates of the European public sphere largely acknowledge as inevitable the fact of pluralism and the value-conflicts, they continue to depend on rational consensus as a universal regulative ideal that guides deliberation and legitimates the outcomes of democratic procedures. In other words, although the numbers of arenas and levels of public debate have multiplied, there continues to be but one public reason, one universal standard of rationality. Similarly, the problem of a democratic deficit is still one of bringing the system under the control of civil society by means of some universal standards of communicative rationality and establishing the institutional structures that guarantee this. By recognising pluralism, but retaining the regulative ideal of rational consensus and orientation towards the common good, it can be argued that the debate on the European public sphere has come to grips with the fact of pluralism

but not with “radical pluralism”, a view in which political life is characterised not by a search for the common standard but by persistent conflict between incommensurable interests and values.

According to the radical-pluralist view, the universal-rationalist public sphere approach underestimates the challenge social and cultural pluralism pose both (1) to the ideas of shared collective identity, all-encompassing political culture, and political consensus, and (2) to the possibility of common procedures or forms of deliberation that are purportedly value-neutral. While the revisions made by Habermas and his fellow deliberative democrats seem to address the first point to some degree, the second point remains a central issue of disagreement between the deliberative democrats and their radical pluralist critics.

As Mouffe contends:

The belief in the possibility of a universal rational consensus has put democratic thinking on the wrong track. Instead of trying to design the institutions which, through supposedly “impartial” procedures, would reconcile all conflicting interests and values, the task for democratic theorists and politicians should be to envisage the creation of a vibrant “agonistic” public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted. (Mouffe 2005: 3)

To clarify the argument, the main points of the radical-pluralist approach are briefly reviewed here in reference to Mouffe in particular. For one thing, radical pluralism must be distinguished from the naïve celebration of all multiplicity and differences. While Mouffe criticises the essentialism of the unitary and universal-rationalist forms of political theory that tend to fix social identities in a closed political community, she also criticises its opposite: a type of extreme post-modern fragmentation that puts exclusive emphasis on all kinds of heterogeneity and incommensurability.

While arguing for agonistic confrontation as necessary for democracy, Mouffe (2000: 103) acknowledges that there will always be a need for a certain degree of consensus in liberal democracy – hence, “the democratic paradox”. However, this need not and cannot be a rational consensus based on a common will envisaged by deliberative democrats. Rather, she stresses that every consensus is provisional and exists as the temporal result of a provisional hegemony, a stabilisation of power, and always entails some form of exclusion. What the deliberative models deny, she argues, are the dimensions of this undecidability and the ineradicability of antagonisms, which are constitutive of democracy (Mouffe 2000: 104-105).

In this sense, the key to the democratic paradox is that it is not soluble. For accepting the final truth would mean the elimination of conflict and contestation. In addition, if conflict and contestation were accepted as central to democracy, then its realisation in a reconciled way would mean the end of democracy. In other words, a fully achieved democracy is a conceptual impossibility, and for Mouffe, the substance of radical and pluralistic democracy is found in the

open-ended contestation of all normative principles, not in their final definition or actual realisation.

The radical-pluralist approach is thus best interpreted, not as praise of multiplicity as such, but as a call to recognise the aspects of power and exclusion inherent in all conceptions of the public sphere. For Mouffe, the key task for democratic politics is to make the relations of power visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation. This then puts emphasis on political conflicts and choices among real political alternatives as the essence of democratic politics.

### Some Implications for the European Public Sphere

The purpose of the above discussion is not so much to argue for the superiority of any given theoretical framework and even less to arrive at a revised theory of the public sphere or to offer a solution to the EU's democratic deficit. Rather, it can be argued that identifying and analysing the theoretical premises may help to illuminate some problematic assumptions in the current debate on the European public sphere and point to some less obvious questions.

Public sphere ideals are often dismissed as mere academic utopianism that offers no practical political guidance. However, with the naïve ideal of a rational-consensual public sphere, in which all Europeans deliberate as equals, losing its credibility, a more palpable danger today seems to be that the critical potential of the concept of the public sphere dissolves altogether as it is used more and more in European policy rhetoric. This complacency is only underlined now that the public sphere has surfaced as a rhetorical tool in the EU's communication strategies, such as the *White Paper on European Communication Policy* and *Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate*, both of which envision the creation of "a European public sphere" by means of better communication, use of new technology, and so forth. In line with national contexts, it is important to note that the investment of governments and public institutions in communication and public relations is rarely aimed only at genuine public deliberation. Rather, it aims at rhetorically producing an illusion of legitimacy and of uncontroversial or harmonious consensus (see Axford and Huggins 2001).

It is this sense that Stavrakis (2005) criticises the "complicity between mainstream European politics and academia". Both are characterised by a certain modernist standpoint that discusses European integration in terms of building consensus and unity without giving much attention to more radical aims. Similarly, perhaps the most important difference between the approaches of deliberative democracy and those of radical pluralism lies in their general tone, or ethos, of theorising. As Bonnie Honig (1993: 2) writes, a radical pluralist approach finds its justification above all as a critique of political theorists who measure their success by the elimination of dissonance, and conflict, and thus "confine politics to the tasks of stabilising moral and political subjects, building consensus, or consolidating communities and identities". While much of the

debate on the European public sphere, and the EU in general, has arguably been oriented towards the search for such “political closure” or stabilisation, the radical pluralist approaches explicitly endeavour to shift the emphasis of democratic politics to the processes of dislocation, contestation, and resistance.

Given the lack of radical proposals or modifications to the general European project in both academic and political rhetoric, it seems fair to question whether the aim of the European public sphere is only to shore up the EU’s legitimacy or actually to envision new forms of democratic accountability or political contestation. It also seems relevant to ask whether too much emphasis is placed on communication and discussion, and too little on the democratisation of political institutions and other power hierarchies inherent in the integration process. For it is exactly due to this separation of the communicative realm from systemic spheres of money and power that John Dryzek (2000: 26), for instance, has concluded that, if Habermas’s theory of deliberative democracy provides no sense of how political and economic structures should be further democratised, then it is difficult to regard it as a contribution to critical theory.

In this sense, it can be argued that the debate on the European public sphere requires further radicalising rather than yielding to empirical or political realities. Rather than bureaucratic attempts to educate European citizens into accepting the superiority of the European collective good, the radical pluralist approach puts emphasis on the need for more politicisation and contestation of official goals. In short, the focus of the radical-pluralist perspective would be to emphasise as the root causes of the lame public debate, not the lack of unity or insufficient social integration, but the lack of political alternatives and politicisation in general.

For Mouffe, an open conflict of interest and a vibrant clash of political positions are not only necessary for healthy democracy, but also can work as buffers against confrontations between non-negotiable moral values and essential identities. As a concrete example of the dangers of consensual logic, Mouffe (2005) recently discussed the rise of right-wing populism across Europe as a reaction to the lack of credible political alternatives in mainstream politics. It is tempting to apply the same idea to European politics and public debate in general. Perhaps the general indifference and even antipathy towards the EU can be taken as a sign that the EU itself is not sufficiently politicised. It has not succeeded in offering sources for opposing political identifications and passions. The problem is not insufficient social integration or lack of common will, but rather the lack of contestation of official goals and the lack of alternative political visions for the future of the EU.

A related problem in the mainstream debate is the assumption of a causal direction between the emergence of the European public sphere and the democratic deficit. For Habermas and others, the democratic deficit can only be eliminated if a European public sphere comes into existence. Yet the causal direction between democracy and publicness can easily be reversed. While Habermas and his followers suggest that the democratic deficit can be overcome by establishing a European-wide public sphere, it can equally well be

argued that it is the deficit in democracy that has generated the deficit in publicness in the first place (see Splichal 2006: 701). Problems in procedures and transparency of decision-making, a lack of genuine European political parties or opposition, and the lack of civil society's participation in the procedures of decision-making all seem to be clear contributions to the lack of politicisation and political passion on the European level. Altogether, it seems highly unlikely that an autonomous European public sphere would emerge as the result of enlightened journalism or sudden civic mobilisation. It remains important to note that barriers in the ways of the European public sphere have to do not only with culture, language, or identities, but also with institutional problems, such as technocratic decision-making, and a dearth of political alternatives or oppositional political structures.

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