HABERMAS AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE: FROM A GERMAN TO A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This article examines the nature and relevance of Habermas' theory of the public sphere in the present European situation. The paper notes that the current debate in the English-speaking world is not matched by a similar discussion in Germany. This is partly because Habermas' classic text was first published in Germany in 1962, and the considerable discussion it provoked ran out of steam some years ago. The Anglo-Saxon debate differs from its German predecessor in two important ways. In the first place, the choice of the phrase public sphere as a translation for the original *Öffentlichkeit* introduced issues into the English discussion, notably the spatial metaphor, that were absent from the German original. Secondly, in the German-speaking world there has been a much longer and broader discussion of *Öffentlichkeit*, lasting for more than two centuries, and concentrating particularly on literary and aesthetic issues. Very far from appearing as a startlingly original insight, as it did in the English-speaking world, Habermas' work was understood in Germany as a small part of this more general tradition.

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Introduction

We are in a fascinating situation. There is an intensive discussion of Jürgen Habermas and his theory of the public sphere going on in most of Europe, and only few observers in Germany realise this and participate in it. Even more striking: A debate about the necessity of a public sphere for Europe has started, and German politicians and academics are the first to advocate its establishment. Among them is the German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, who started his political and intellectual carrier in Habermas' Frankfurt, and is well aware of the theoretical contributions of the Frankfurt School. In this paper, I want to review the state of discussion over the public sphere in contemporary Germany, and enquire as to why discussions on this topic only rarely make reference to Habermas' important theoretical work.

One first explanation of the situation might be this: Habermas book on *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, published in 1962, was intensely disputed in Germany for many years, and then the debate more or less came to an end, and the paradigm seems to be exhausted. Even though thinking about a public sphere is still prominent in Germany, Habermas is no longer in fashion. This article attempts to analyse why this is so and what Habermas' argument means in a German, and after that in a European context. I start with a few remarks about wording: How did the German term *Öffentlichkeit* become, in other parts of Europe, *the public sphere*?[1] After that, I discuss Habermas' contributions to the theory of the public sphere, with special emphasis on what he has to say about Europe and its national states. After a brief overview of the long debate over Habermas' theory in Germany, the article finishes with an analysis of its strengths and weaknesses in illuminating the problem of a European public sphere and its importance for the success of the project of further European integration and democratisation.

Some Etymological and Transcultural Remarks on *Öffentlichkeit* and the Public Sphere

The original term that Habermas used in his study of 1962 is *Öffentlichkeit*. It was — if I am correctly informed — first translated into *public sphere* in the English version of one of Habermas' earlier articles in 1974, and entered the international debate with the translation of his book on *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* in 1989, 27 years after it was published in Germany. The phrase "public sphere" seems to be a recent construction, selected by a translator to find a label for a word that has been in regular use in Germany since the 18th century. The German-American scholar Peter Uwe Hohendahl, who is the only author dealing competently with the transcultural aspects of the wording, calls public sphere a "decidedly artificial term" that did not exist in the English language of the 18th and 19th century (Hohendahl 2000, 1).

My impression is that this translation is somewhat misleading. A more accurate translation that is able to carry more of the original connotations of the German word would have been "openness" or "openicity" (or perhaps, as Slavko Splichal recently suggested, "public/ness"; Splichal 1999). In order to understand this, it is necessary briefly to explain the history and meaning of the word *Öffentlichkeit*, and relate this to the phrase *public sphere*. *Öffentlichkeit* is based on the old German words

offen and *öffentlich* that can be found in medieval German. It is related to equivalents like *open* in English and *ouvert* in French. When it was used during the second half of the 18th century, it referred to places that were open for citizens' access, like court proceedings, religious services, and sometimes also academic lectures (Hölscher 1979). The core of Habermas' analysis describes developments in Germany at the time of the Enlightenment, when leading philosophers, intellectuals, journalists and artists demanded an extension of this type of *Öffentlichkeit* into the political domain.

It should be recognised that the German language also offers words that are based on the Latin *public*, so what is in English a *publication* would be translated as a *Publikation* in German, and would mean the same in both languages. The differences between *open* and *public* may become clearer if we think of the respective contrary words: the opposite of *open* is *closed* whereas the opposite of *public* it is *private*. It is not always easy to distinguish both words, so *publicity/Publizität* today means the same thing in both languages, whereas *public opinion* is *öffentliche Meinung*, and *public relations* is *Öffentlichkeitsarbeit* in German. Perhaps one could say that *Öffentlichkeit* refers more to a process or demand (like opening up something), whereas *public* refers more to a fact or structure. Problems of translation also happen in the other direction: The English-American wording of *public* is usually translated into German as *Öffentlichkeit*, which again creates difficulties. The book by John Dewey on *The Public and its Problems* (Dewey 1927/1996) was recently translated as *Die Öffentlichkeit und ihre Probleme*. It is interesting to note that Habermas, who writes extensively about Britain and France, never refers to these transcultural problems of his central wording.

The same is basically true for the translators (Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox) of Habermas, who seemingly introduced the term *public sphere* in a first article in the *New German Critique* in 1974 without reflecting on the fact that this was a decision that would have far-reaching consequences. An interesting interpretation on this choice of wording was offered by Bruce Robbins in a footnote: "As the most frequent translation of Habermas's *Öffentlichkeit,* or 'publicity,' the English phrase 'public sphere' has a music that recalls the noun's early celestial connotations" (Robbins 1993, XXV). To understand the shift in meaning that goes with the introduction of the term *public sphere*, it seems reasonable to look at both words separately:

Public: As it was said above, *Öffentlichkeit* had originally to do with events that, contrary to closed occasions, are open and accessible for everybody (Habermas 1990, 54). In addition the term includes meanings like "making something public" or "discuss in public." Specific other connotations are not possible in the German language, especially those that refer to the republican tradition of public, based on the Latin word *res publica*. In German, the public sphere cannot be related to a re-publican sphere. Contrary to what Habermas himself claimed, I cannot see that his analysis of the public sphere has any special affinities to theories of democracy. He rarely mentions democracy in the study of 1962, and his valuable contributions to democratic theory are based on later publications.

Sphere: The term is used quite often in the original version of Habermas' book, but certainly not as a substitute for *Öffentlichkeit*. Instead, it refers to several quite different phenomena: e. g. public interventions into the privatised household through taxes that led to the creation of a "critical sphere" (Habermas 1990,

82). By introducing the term *sphere*, itself a physical metaphor that describes special spaces, the *public sphere* is sometimes connected to a spatial understanding (seen as a public space), which leads away from Habermas' original argument. In French, the translation is even more space-oriented: *Öffentlichkeit* is seen as *espace public* (Hohendahl 1990, 2). But when Habermas wrote his study, space was not high on the theoretical agenda, and any reference in this direction was a later imposition upon the original study.

The etymological problems that are involved here cannot be resolved. Habermas himself refers to them, complaining that even in the German language no precise wording is available (Habermas 1990, 54). There is a much greater problem when we encounter the transcultural transfer of ideas through translations into living languages. In the rest of this article, I will use the term *public sphere*, but the reader should be aware that the context determines whether the German meaning of *Öffentlichkeit* is referred to, or if a newer meaning that evolved in an Anglo-American context is appropriate.

The Public Sphere and Europe

The intention of this article is not to give another reinterpretation of Habermas' work on the transformation of the public sphere. Rather, the I will present some of the results of a re-reading of Habermas' work of 1962 (here quoted in an edition of 1990) looking especially at what he has to say about Europe and other European countries. The aim is to discover if we can find clues that help us to prepare the path to a future European public sphere.

The result of a first reading is clear: Europe was not one of Habermas' interests. In fact, Europe is not mentioned in the index of the book at all. Instead, he concentrated on three core European countries Britain, France and Germany, and discussed the emergence of the public sphere in these states. Interestingly enough, he did not explain to the reader why he selected these three countries, nor did he explain on what methodological basis his comparison was made. At the centre of his attention is a conception of how history moves ahead in situations of transformation, and the three countries serve mainly as illustrative examples. They have been selected to demonstrate that bourgeois society, growing in influence and attacking the feudal class, created a public sphere, first in Britain, later in France and last in Germany.

Habermas was confronted with a structural problem: How could he describe a phenomenon that has only a clear name in Germany, but which he searched for and found in the two other countries mentioned. He claims that the German word *Öffentlichkeit* was introduced in 18th century Germany as an analogue term to *publicité* in France and publicity in Britain (Habermas 1990, 55f). If this is correct, it means that words to describe the public sphere did first exist in the countries where it actually evolved, but later these words changed their meaning (*publicité* today describing advertising), whereas the original meaning of the wording survived in Germany. This is an interesting claim that calls for further research.

With regard to Habermas' own work, it seems he did not recognise the transcultural problems that arise when he described developments in European history using a vocabulary peculiar to the German language. One could say more generally that Habermas shows little sensitivity concerning the cultural differences

of Europe, not informing us what the respective wording (and subsequent changes of meaning) mean in the history of different European cultures. This criticism does not, however, apply to his chapter on *öffentliche Meinung*/public opinion/*opinion publique,* where he demonstrates how the concept evolved, how it was transferred across borders into Germany, and how different European cultures stimulated each other (Habermas 1990, 161ff). We can see it as a good demonstration of how ideas were created in certain parts of Europe and quickly moved from country to country, even in an era when communication was poor and transportation very slow. These passages demonstrate that historical Europe may be described as a common "communication space," with an extremely high density of information exchange, even during pre-industrial times, that seems to be unique in the world (Kleinstüber and Rossmann 1994, 9-58). Habermas, however, just offers the example, he does not follow the argument further. One possible reason being, ironically enough, that perhaps he was not interested then in the spatial aspect of communication.

Another element of Habermas' work is also striking: He reproduces the idea of a rather homogenous state. This is extremely interesting, as the emergence of the public sphere began before the creation of the modern national state. Habermas talks consistently about England (meaning the United Kingdom) and claims implicitly that regional, and therefore cultural, differences are of little importance. The idea here is that political conflicts were based mainly on classes, not on regions, so the special situation of Scotland was outside the scope of his interest. In fact, details like this were of little concern to Habermas. His not very thorough description of Britain bears out the criticism that his understanding of the British model was mainly based on the study of just one book (by Cecil S. Emden) that he quoted extensively (Jäger 1973).

The argument becomes even shakier when we take into consideration that a distinct Germany did not exist at the time of his historical focus. The situation around the complex of issues involving press freedom, freedom of criticism, and the existence and influence of parliaments, was extremely diverse in this part of Europe. I should remind the non-German reader that, inside the territory that we call Germany today, there were various monarchies of different degree of absolutism, but there were also old established republics like the City States of Hamburg and Bremen. The Senatorial political system of Hamburg — to give the example of my place of work — was clearly one in which wealthy bourgeois families were in total control of political power, and they took very little interest in a strong public sphere. If Hamburg was (at times) an important place for media production and distribution, this was because its port functioned as a market for information. It was also important that publishers, under pressure from censorship in Hamburg, could escape to the sister city of Altona, which was until 1864 under the rather liberal regime of the Danish crown. All in all, Habermas does not demonstrate much concern for the diversity of the European continent and the variable situation inside the states he was interested in.

In order to understand Habermas and the rather cavalier relationship of his study to the history and diversity of Europe, a consideration of the general scope of his position is required. In the tradition of interpreting history in terms of universal tendencies as suggested by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, in his idealistic fashion, and developed by Karl Marx with a materialist approach, Habermas was focussing on the transformations during a whole epoch (Habermas 1990, 195ff).

He held that history is determined by large waves of development that lead to certain characteristics, which seem to be much more dominant than any cultural variations. Quite differently from Hegel, and more in accordance with Marx, Habermas saw economic changes as the driving force behind history. As bourgeois society (Marx would have said "bourgeois class") gained strength in economic power, it used the development of a specific public sphere as an instrument to exert pressure upon the feudal class that controlled most of the state apparatus of that time. This was a universal tendency that took place in the most progressive parts of Europe (Britain, France and Germany). Obviously, this needed little explanation: Habermas used the three states more or less as illustrations of his general theory.

To prove his point, he identified the positions of leading thinkers, and examined the main controversies of the epoch and reinterpreted them. These thinkers were mostly philosophers, and sources of economic and social history were of secondary importance to him. Many of the studies that were stimulated by Habermas' work criticised him for not being bothered about details. This, to take one example, is the central criticism of the historian Andreas Gestrich, who studied political communication during the 17th century (Gestrich 1994). Gestrich was interested in small facts and used them to uncover interesting developments concerning Europe. He identified the surprising number of six publications in German that all carried the word 'Europe' in their title. All were published during the years 1720-1730. Among them were *Theatrum Europäum*, *Europäische Fama*, *Der Europäische Postillion*, *Das AllerMerkwürdigste in Europa* (Gestrich 1994, 186-187). Information like this lets us ask questions about the roots of a European public sphere — but this is another topic. Even though it is certainly true that Habermas' approach was based on very limited empirical evidence, in my view his book still stands as a very general interpretation of that fascinating era of (Western) European economic, social, intellectual and media history.

The Concept of Public Sphere in Germany

The English speaking reader of Habermas' study should be aware that the book only opens a tiny window onto a rich German tradition of reflecting on the necessity of, and the conditions for, a public sphere. Habermas himself underlines this by grounding his argument in the theoretical writings of the three leading German thinkers: Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Karl Marx. They might not have used the German word *Öffentlichkeit,* but they all were concerned with the power of public debates and their transformation into political criticism. The foreign reader should know that several hundred books have been written on the public sphere and related concepts in Germany, many of which have little interest in the social and political aspects that Habermas was concerned with. Much of what has been discussed under the term is centred on discourses of aesthetics, literature, theatre and art, and how they relate to the audience (in German, interestingly enough: *Publikum*, derived from public). German-speaking writers usually separate the social and political discourse about the public sphere from the literary one, even though both approaches are concerned with the public criticism of politics. Very recently, a comprehensive history of *Öffentlichkeit* has been published that covers more than two hundred years during which the term has been used in Germany (Hohendahl 2000). Habermas is mentioned in it on a few

pages as a person that wrote a history of public sphere in Germany, as author of a normative approach to public sphere, and as a commentator of recent politics. (Hohendahl 2000, 93ff)

Habermas gives the impression to his reader that he was the first to write a comprehensive history and theory of the public sphere.[2] In fact, the academic discussion in Germany has been long and intensive. Many books about *Öffentlichkeit*, *öffentliche Meinung* and related topics, have been written before and after him (Hohendahl's book includes a bibliography of 50 pages). But Habermas study on the *Strukturwandel* opened a very intensive debate that resulted in the publication of many reactions, both political and academic. Some of his prominence is due to the time when he wrote the study. These were years of structural transformation in Germany, especially on the political Left (where Habermas belonged). It was highly significant that, just three years before the publication of his book, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) had finally abandoned its Marxist traditions and adopted an openly reformist programme. They claimed that gradual change was possible, but that commercial activities endanger this development, which is exactly what Habermas said about the public sphere in contradiction to Marx and his idea of the inevitability of revolutions. In the academic world, quite a number of studies took up Habermas' argument and discussed it, mainly in philosophy, sociology, history and political science. A majority offered a rather critical appraisal of Habermas' work. The main opposition to Habermas is usually associated with Niklas Luhmann, the systems theorist and leading conservative sociologist, who expressed a much more sceptical view about the reflexivity of discourses as an ingredient of the public sphere (Luhmann 1990).

This is not the place to offer details of this intensive debate that resulted in several dozen books about Habermas' theory. It is significant, though, that Habermas is mainly seen as a philosopher and a political commentator of the moderate left, whereas in communication studies his views have been rarely accepted. American approaches dominate the scene here. The recent German debate about the public sphere, which is mostly driven by sociologists such as Friedhelm Neidhardt and Jürgen Gerhards, and by Cultural Studies (Uwe Hohendahl), sees Habermas' approach as just one among a number of others (Neidhardt 1998; Gerhards and Neidhardt 1993; Hohendahl 2000).

To put Habermas' theory of the public sphere into a wider perspective, it has to be emphasised that it was often seen — and in my eyes misinterpreted — as a theory of democracy. Habermas himself claimed this at times, but his important work on public discourses in a "deliberative democracy" was developed and published much later (Habermas 1992; 1992a). In his original works on the public sphere, he follows very much a German tradition of limiting political demands to the opening up of the political realm for public debate, and permitting criticism of the authorities in public. *Öffentlichkeit* that follows this tradition does not accompany bourgeois demands for political participation but substitutes for them. The emphasis on the public sphere in Germany was mostly intellectual, philosophical and normative. It was not practical. The typical citizen outside the political process demanded transparency concerning the political dealings of the feudal class, but rarely — at least compared with neighbouring countries — did he require that somebody like himself conquer political positions. The total failure of the German revolution of 1848/49 was partly the result of it being dominated by endless de-

bates of the many professors and educated men in the rudimentary parliament, which substituted for actions for the protection of newly acquired democratic rights. In his comparative study of *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Barrington Moore described how "conservative modernisation," the result of an informal alliance between the feudal and the bourgeois segments of the German society, prevented real revolutionary change (Moore 1966). Comparative studies in political culture revealed that, even after the Second World War, German political behaviour had a subjective character. In Germany, a good citizen tends to be well informed about political events but does not participate, because, as an old saying goes, "politics is dirty."

The German Tradition of Public Literary Discourse

This strong tradition of intellectual debate without political consequences is still alive today. It is carried on in a special section of the high class daily and weekly press that is called the *feuilleton*. This is a segment of the paper where traditionally the leading thinkers of the country offer their opinion on culture, politics, soccer, natural sciences… It is, as the *Feuilleton*-Editor of the leading weekly *Die Zeit* describes it, a "place for utopias" and he explains that the "political, you would better say the politicising, *feuilleton* owes its existence not to a genuine interest in politics, but to an interest in finding explanations that inevitably reach out to political themes" (Jessen 2000, 35). In the *feuilleton*, even generally conservative papers traditionally tolerate critical analysis, as long as it is written in a highly abstract language that limits the understanding of the debate to the intellectual elite. The *feuilleton* (derived from the French *feuillet* = little page) emerged during the first half of the 19th century, exactly during the epoch that Habermas discussed, when the bourgeois public sphere was established under a generally repressive political rule, as a place for an open, but encrypted discussion. The *feuilleton* had a special location in those early newspapers. It usually covered the lowest third of the second page, separated by a printed line from the rest of the paper. Its writings were "under the line" (Haacke 1951).

Habermas himself never mentioned the *feuilleton* in his study of 1962, but his style of writing combines classical German philosophy with the best traditions of *feuilleton*-journalism. It comes at no surprise that Habermas' influence in German politics is not based primarily on his (very heavy to digest) philosophical works but his regular articles in the style of the political *feuilleton* (mainly in *Die Zeit*). In these he stimulated some of the great controversies of the last decades, e.g. the "historians debate" about the uniqueness of Nazi crimes. Habermas is not just the scholar who studied the public sphere; he probably represents more then anybody else the tradition of the grand public debate. Interestingly enough, this public discourse in Germany always occurs in written form, not in public speech. This goes well with the strong philosophical and weak parliamentary strains in German culture. Rhetoric and oral exchange have a weak history in Germany, as they belong to the communication style of a parliament. Also, it should be noted that Habermas is a brilliant writer of German prose, but an extremely bad orator.

It is clear that Habermas, in idealising the culture of criticism in a former epoch, created a huge debate, and that is what he wanted to do. He answered many of his critics in a new 40-page preface to the republished book on *The Structural Transfor-*

mation in 1990 (some of this self-criticism appears also in Habermas 1992a). A central and often repeated point is that he did not emphasise enough the role of the strong German state as an organisation of the repressive rule of the king, bureaucrats, the military and, partially, the feudal class, nor its total separation from society. In fact, Germany did better in creating a bourgeois public sphere than in developing a civil society.

> *This historical background shapes the context for the special interest in a public sphere, that only becomes politically functional as it empowers the economic citizen to become a political citizen by equalising and generalising their interests and as such bring them to bear, so that the might of the state liquefies to a medium of the self organisation of society* (Habermas 1990, 22).

The later Habermas emphasised much more the need for a civil society that is opposed to the might of the government. He limited the public sphere less to an observational role, and related it more to political participation and action (Habermas 1990, 23ff). In my opinion, it is this strong reliance on reflection instead of action that contributed to the catastrophes in German history, and even contributed to the failure of much of Germans academic community during the times of dictatorship. It was finally overcome only in the years after 1945.

Habermas and the Coming of a European Public Sphere

In this section, an attempt is presented to relate this original — one may say "teutonic" — version of a public sphere to the recent problems of the European integration process. Habermas describes an epoch in Europe's history when the monopoly of the feudal class in the executive power was challenged by a bourgeois society that was gaining economic power and demanded political "cohabitation" (to use a recent term). It was the special contribution of Habermas to underline that this process did not usually culminate in a bourgeois revolution (as the Marxists claimed) but that "structural transformation" was a better term to describe the gradual changes that actually took place. It also becomes clear that this evolution was a slow process that (in the Western part of the continent) occurred at various times and places, and possibly never took place in the East. This general restructuring of power was accompanied by the creation of a new and more developed type of public sphere, which is the central focus of Habermas' study. He describes this transformation — and in this he follows a Marxist logic — as a universal process that is determined by a kind of historical law to which there are only limited variations based on specific historical circumstances. In terms of comparative methodology, he looks for similarities, not for differences.

One might say that this process of the emergence of a new public sphere followed very different lines in core European states. In France, it was linked to alternations between revolution, repression and reform. In Britain, a model of press freedom evolved slowly. In Germany, the bourgeois class and its intellectuals rested content with an uncensored discourse and the opportunity of public criticism. It is still an unfulfilled European duty to analyse this transformation in other parts of Europe, e.g. in the Netherlands, where the first modern bourgeois society was established, or in Scandinavia with its pragmatic attitude to reform, in Republican Switzerland, and in the countries of Eastern and Southern Europe, where the influence of Enlightenment was very limited.

This is not just of interest for a better understanding of Europe's past. The specific charm of Habermas' work lies in the fact that Europe is in a somewhat similar situation today as the one that it encountered at the beginning of the second half of the 18th century. Of course, history never repeats itself, and the institutions, actors and decision-making processes are vastly different today from what were present during those years. Nevertheless, we are confronted with a European Union, which has a peculiar institutional framework that looks all too familiar. A strong bureaucracy, in the form of the Commission, represents the political Europe. A "government," institutionalised as the European Council, decides behind closed doors, and a weak European Parliament performs mostly symbolic functions. It is rarely respected as a powerful actor. The bureaucrats and the governmental actors in Brussels prefer to keep internal information tightly secret and do not make it easy for Members of Parliament and journalists to see what they are up to. The media systems in Europe are (completely differently to the 18th century) highly developed, but only on a national (and perhaps local) level. European media with a distinct European Union focus are nearly non-existent. A strong and opaque executive, a weak and mainly symbolic legislature, and no working European public sphere — does this not somewhat resemble the power constellation of another epoch?

It is interesting to note that during the last two years or so, we may observe a rapidly intensifying debate about the future of the "European project," led by politicians but including intellectuals, academics and journalists in all parts of the Union. These discourses are always limited to a minority. They are the concern of an "info-elite" of highly motivated and informed thinkers and actors, similar to what we found more than 200 years ago. A grand debate has begun over what has to be done to move ahead in Europe. The central topics are human rights, constitutional provisions, subsidiarity, direct elections, and federalism. To put it in Hegelian terms: the situation is ripe for the creation of a European public sphere. This debate is not primarily a parliamentary debate, as the European Parliament is not seen as a major stage on which to initiate discourses. Instead, communication among actors in Europe is mainly conducted with the printed word that, up to a point, follows the tradition of the *feuilleton.* A completely new factor is the reliance on translations, and the accompanying problems of transcultural communications.

It seems that the politicians, who up until now far preferred traditional clandestine dealings behind closed doors in Brussels to public debate, are now prepared to open up and discuss matters with whoever shares their interest. Even more, they campaign to find political advice and support in a public that — for the first time — is taken seriously, because they have never been so disoriented about Europe's future. To give an example: The German weekly *Die Zeit* and the French daily *Le Monde* organised a dispute between the German Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, and the (then) French Minister of the Interior, Jean-Pierre Chevénement, in which all the major questions of Europe's future where touched. I will give just one quotation out of this rather controversial debate. In the words of the Frenchman:

> *I observe, there is no European people today. European citizenship is, if I may state my personal opinion, a joke. For that we first need a European public sphere, a common space, in which the debate over European questions takes*

> *place. One cannot create institutions before we have discussed them. The debate has to come before the institutions* (Fischer and Chevenément 2000, 16).

This dispute also made it clear that the European discourse can only flourish if it is seen as an exercise in transnational communication, in which ideas and concepts are being explained in the context of national experiences. Words like "federalism" or "nation" mean something completely different in Germany and France, and the debate offers the chance for communication and explanation to end previous misunderstandings and fears. (And Chevenément demonstrated his knowledge of European philosophers by mentioning and criticising Habermas' concept of "state patriotism" as being inappropriate for the understanding of European national states.)

It is especially encouraging that politicians themselves started the debate, offering conflicting positions not in order to polarise but to inform themselves and others about forthcoming options. Wherever the peaceful transformation in Europe in the 18th and 19th century took place, this proved possible because there was a sense of compromise on the part of both the feudal and the bourgeois class. Today, you might say that something similar occurs between the European political class and concerned European citizens.

If all this sounds a little idealistic, it is certainly meant to, since Habermas' argument stands in the line of the German idealistic school. It is based on the hope that a very plausible idea, if it is well represented, will be able to change reality. The approach is normative in the sense that it offers a vision for a more democratic and more open Europe, but will have a chance only if powerful actors keep moving in this direction. It is also quite pragmatic, as it points to real problems, like the fact that only Europe-wide media will be able to provide the platform to discuss common concerns. The above-mentioned cooperation between *Die Zeit* and *Le Monde* (on this and similar discourses) demonstrates how European media may contribute to the evolving European public sphere. The papers follow a federal and subsidiary strategy of horizontal cooperation — at least in the German understanding of these words.

European Media and the Creation of a European Public Sphere

In this final argument, I will attempt to discuss the question of how a structure of European media might be established. In Habermas' analysis, the bourgeois public sphere profited from the expansion of the print media of that epoch. It later deteriorated under the influence of commercialisation, which changed the political functions of the press, because the journalism of writing by private people became perverted, and ended in a structure where selling and publishing advertisements became the leading function of the public sphere (Habermas 1990, 225-342). The publisher as businessman endangered the very idea of the creation of a critical public sphere that had been built up during the years of the bourgeois struggle for free and influential debate.

If we apply this kind of thinking to the media policy of the EU, we find an interesting reversal of historical stages. In the 1980s, the EC's media policy was born, first with a debate in Parliament about the necessity for a European TV-chan-

nel. In 1986, four public service-broadcasters from Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland and Italy jointly established the Europa TV-channel. This ended after a short period because of lack of funding. Transmission was limited to satellites, and programming was still experimental, when the venture broke down completely (Vollberg 1999). After this, special interest channels, financed more or less commercially, went on air for news (Euronnews 1993) and sports (Eurosport 1989). Both have a number of independent sound tracks to cope with Europe's language problems. Arte is a symbol of cooperation between countries that speak either speak the German or the French language, but is limited to cultural programming. Up to today, public broadcasters are only marginally involved in producing joint European content for Europeans and as such creating a European communication space.

European media policy moved into a very different direction. The Commission began its policy with the Green Paper on "Television without Frontiers" (1984) and later introduced a corresponding directive (1989). The need of a "common audiovisual space" was established, but its introduction was seen entirely in economic terms. The policy was based on the principle that media activities were economic by nature (not cultural and not political), and that Pan-European media companies were the prime movers in the process of European integration. Both assumptions proved to be wrong. Instead, markets grew along language spaces and the larger, economically stronger countries tended to dominate the smaller neighbouring countries with a programme offensive.

Just as Habermas had argued was the case in an earlier epoch, commercial actors proved that the creation of a common public sphere was beyond their scope and interest. As they are driven by the profit motive, they follow national and trans-border language markets. A culturally diverse Europe is of no interest for them. They have no impetus to create public spheres that serve genuinely political and cultural functions. This all sits very well with Habermas' argument that purely commercial activities are a threat to the critical function of public spheres. The EC/EU-policy in fact hindered the transformation of national spaces into a European public sphere. One reason was that the media industry used heavy lobbying pressure to have it their way, but the Commission itself was (and still is) not too interested in creating the preliminaries for a European public sphere. The logic of a bureaucratic policy maker like the Commission favours a clandestine style of politics and avoids public spaces.

The experience of the last 15 years of a declared European media policy led to much stronger media actors, some of them "media moguls," operating in increasingly concentrated, but basically national markets. Companies might be active in different European countries, but they normally establish national companies, and seek an arrangement with the national government and political class. Wherever elements of an emerging European public sphere are visible, they are found outside of the large media actors that enjoyed EU-support for so many years. It is again within Habermas' logic that only non-commercial media are strong actors in the establishment of a public sphere. The public broadcasters of Europe — themselves a creature of Europe's traditions of public responsibility unlike the commercial model that stems from the US — have been hampered by European media policy for years, but they still offer the most potential to establish the platform on which a European public sphere might prosper. This applies not just to the national broadcasters (like BBC, RAI, ARD) but also to the foreign broadcasters with

their special expertise in transcultural communication (BBC World Service, RAI International, Deutsche Welle). The integration of Europe demands an investment in overcoming the language barriers. Public broadcasters should establish an alliance (perhaps on the base of the European Broadcasting Union, EBU) to provide a framework that communicates European concerns in a non-national mode inside as well as outside the Union, thereby creating a common image of the EU. This policy design lies very much in Habermas' tradition. He wrote that the electronic media in Europe "were organized as public and semi-public bodies, because this was the only way to sufficiently protect their publicistic functions bodies, because this was the only way one could sufficiently protect the publicistic against the private capitalistic functions" (Habermas 1990, 283).

Conclusions

These are certainly speculative ideas, but they take their stimulus from Habermas book, written a generation ago. Quite often it has seemed antiquated, outdated by developments in the real world, and often contradicted by empirical and historical research. But there is still a certain value in applying his historical methodology. This moment is the right time to discuss the overdue establishment of a European public sphere, and Habermas has a lot of insights and visions to offer that might foster that process. This is the real reason why discussing the theory of the public sphere is quite timely, and it would be helpful to the wider debate if some more of the German theoretical work on *Öffentlichkeit* entered the international arena. I do not think that Habermas would object. In a recent interview, the German Foreign Minister and leading Green politician Joschka Fischer was asked about the reactions that Habermas would have concerning the continuities in international politics with those of the former conservative governments, which Habermas had earlier criticised). Fischer answered: "He would not be jubilant, instead in the modest way typical of him, he would rather grin broadly" (Fischer 2001).

Notes:

1. I am aware that there are, however, European languages with words that match German *Öffentlichkeit*, for example *javnost* in Slovene (which happens to be the original name of the journal publishing this article).

2. In 2000 the American professor Ernest Mannheim turned 100 years of age, and he then received an honorary Ph.D. from the University of Leipzig. Mannheim, a cousin of Karl Mannheim, was born in Budapest and worked until 1934 in Germany at the University in Leipzig. He planned, and nearly finished but never completed, his *Habilitations*-thesis "The Holders of Public Opinion. Studies in the Sociology of the Public Sphere" (Die Träger der Öffentlichen Meinung. Studien zur Soziologie der Öffentlichkeit). As a "Jew and Foreigner" he had to cope with increasing problems at his university, and finally escaped from Germany and never returned to his original topic. The scope of his analysis — thirty years earlier — was extremely close to Habermas, emphasising the intellectual self-discovery of bourgeois society in corporative associations (Averbeck 2000).

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