

The pursuit of the European Public sphere: Is deliberative democracy a start?

La búsqueda de la Esfera Pública Europea: ¿es la democracia deliberativa un comienzo?

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Abstract

The European Union is facing the collapse of traditional democracy. Immersed in an unprecedented economical crisis, new thesis are emerging that indicate that it might be time to move forward to a new kind of more communicative and participative government. This paper examines whether there is a single or multiple European public spheres, and proposes deliberative democracy as the starting point for reforms.

Resumen

La Unión Europea se enfrenta a al colapso de la democracia tradicional. Inmersa en una crisis económica sin precedentes, nuevas tesis están suscitando que tal vez sea hora de avanzar hacia un nuevo modelo de gobierno más comunicativo y participativo. En este artículo se analiza si existen una o varias esferas públicas europeas, y se propone la democracia deliberativa como el punto inicial en la que las reformas podrían comenzar.

Keywords

European Union, Public Sphere, Deliberative Democracy, Participation, Habermas

Palabras clave

Unión Europea, Esfera pública, Democracia deliberativa, Participación, Habermas

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Persons do not become a society by living in physical proximity, any more than a man ceases to be socially influenced by being so many feet or miles removed from others. Individuals do not even compose a social group because they all work for a common end. What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge -- a common understanding.
(John Dewey in Democracy and Education, 1916)

1. Introduction

For the past three decades, there has been an increase in the number of articles, reports, and other documents focusing their research on the European public sphere, as a result of the unstoppable growth experienced by the European Union since the 1980s (Baldwin, Haaparanta, Kiander, 1995; Elvert, Kaiser, 2013). It is argued that the Treaty of Maastricht is under quarantine due to a democratic deficit within European countries. The possible reasons for this include the deficiency of transparency in governments, the lack of media reforms, and the absence of a common public sphere. These causes have made European citizens develop an unexpected level of scepticism towards their respective local governments, and ultimately towards the European Union. Along these lines, Martin Kettle, an associate editor of *The Guardian* and a renowned journalist in the area of European politics, media and law, wrote in 2005, long before the economic crisis hit Europe, an open critique on the public discourse: “the art of talking, the thing that makes human beings what they are, has become a refuge for recusants. The current public discourse has become unworthy of the name and will remain so unless and until we decide to change it” (Kettle, 2005).

When the European Union countries were preparing to achieve one of the Union’s long-standing aspirations, its own currency, several authors discussed that lack of integration between them and how this was a serious threat for future European endeavours (Andersen, Burns, 1996; Rommetsch, Wessels, 1996; Wincott, 1998). Their research found that becoming a democracy and accessing to the European Union was not equivalent to a complete, not even progressive, integration into the Union (Brzinski, Lancaster, Tuschhoff, 1999; O’Neill 1999; Schmitt, 1999). We now sense that time may have just proved them right. Any person following European news knows that each of its member states has different laws in all kind of social matters. Many analysts have claimed that the different European regulations (or, actually, lack thereof) have created an exceptional climate in which the economic crisis has grown beyond expectations much to the dissatisfaction of European citizens. Now, the following question arises: if the European Union is unable to enact a common policy on its own social issues, how could it be possible for a European public sphere to truly exist?

When Kettle wrote his article, the biggest crisis in Europe was yet to come: the economic crack of 2008 and beyond, a crisis provoked precisely due to the lack of a common regulation. The years have passed by and, at the time of writing this article, the European Union does not just seem far from emerging from the economic crisis, but is also immersed in heated debates over its future moves as a union. It has also become noticeable to the public that each of the European countries has a different approach to ending this crisis. Far from displaying an image of unity, the European Union is currently perceived by international media as a sinking ship –an actual metaphor used by *The Wall Street Journal* in 2013– that cannot really address the actual lack of unity between its members in a satisfactory manner. On the flip side of the coin, however, there is an intense ongoing work from scholars, professionals and public institutions to push forward a common European public sphere. It is argued that, within this common sphere, most, if not all, of the issues that the European Union is currently facing could be resolved in more successful ways.

This paper accomplishes two main purposes: (1) it analyses the most notorious literature on the Habermasian notion of public sphere, including some of the most relevant critiques and updates to his theory, as well as the recent approaches to a potential European public sphere; and (2) embraces some of the most significant discussions revolving around the theory of deliberative democracy and presents it as a possible departure point for a democratic reform that would ultimately lead to an actual European public sphere.

2. Debating the public sphere

Debate on the concept of public sphere is not new. Ever since the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas extensively theorized about it in his 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in the past few decades several authors –some of which are cited here– have put forward different theses revolving around the possibility of a common public sphere for the European Union. As will be seen further on, these theories range from a single, elite-oriented public sphere to a multiple range of public spheres, each of which would consist of multiple layers. While the form of the sphere appears to be different in each thesis, the substance remains the same, and could be summarized with the aim of helping political and social processes move towards a major democratization.

At the time when Habermas published his conceptualization of the public sphere, it was only his second book to be published, and the first to be written by him alone. His work had immediate repercussions, and his theories served as the central pillar to many other sociological, political, and communicational theories that are still studied today. Some of the names that will be cited here include James Calhoun, Thomas McCarthy and Seyla Benhabib, as some of the most

prominent thinkers on the Habermasian notion of public sphere. This is how the German sociologist envisioned the sphere in his early studies:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people coming together as public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour (Habermas, 1989: 27).

Habermas thus defined the public sphere as a space comprised of individuals who take active part in state authority. Note the word *bourgeois*, as it becomes central to understanding both the praise and critiques that the German sociologist has received. According to his studies, the first traces of the public sphere are found in 18th century society. At that time, the literacy rate was rapidly increasing, and a new type of more rational and critical journalism was successfully emerging. All together, these causes helped to foster a new kind of educated and informed bourgeois that began to question the absolutist power. In a 1991 MIT Press re-edition of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, McCarthy observed the new paradigm of the epoch, consisting of a totem of power that could not be reached, nor discussed within a public sphere: “In its clash with the arcane and bureaucratic practices of the absolutist state, the emergent bourgeoisie gradually replaced a public sphere, in which the ruler’s power was merely represented before the people with a sphere, in which state authority was publicly monitored through informed and critical discourse by the people.” As noted by Habermas and McCarthy, the emergence of the bourgeoisie changed the individuals in the public sphere from mere observers to active and critically thinking subjects.

In his work, Habermas observes a rise and decline of the public sphere in two separate stages. Needless to say, the prominent influence of his mentors Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer can be seen in his words, although he would subsequently differentiate his thought from theirs. According to his theories, the first shift in the public sphere occurred throughout the 18th century until the late first half of the 19th century. The German sociologist cites several thinkers as part of this early bourgeoisie shift: Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Kant, among others. They all belong to what he defines as pre-industrial capitalism. The second shift occurred in the 19th century with the actual expansion of consumerist capitalism and the rise of new theories as described by Hegel, Marx, Mill, and Tocqueville as some of the most prominent thinkers. This second shift, Habermas argues, destroyed the bourgeois public sphere. Along with the emergence of new media (*new* at that time), the public sphere, he says, developed into a space of

commercialization and manipulation of ideas. In other words, Habermas notes that in the earlier, liberal development of the public sphere, public opinion was formed through political debate comprised of common interests, shared between the members of the bourgeoisie, whose aim was to form a valid consensus useful to all. However, in the contemporary stage of capitalism, he sees the public discourse flourishing among dominant elites that represent, for the most part, their own particular and private interests. In such cases, he concludes, the consensus of the common good is rendered non-existent.

Another aspect Habermas touched upon was that, if there is a public sphere, there must be a private sphere. Since the fall of absolutism, it has been a constant trend in political theory to separate politics from the private space, on the basis that if the public space is related to political issues, then the private space has to be non-political. For instance, the German-American political theorist Hannah Arendt is one of the thinkers that have proposed this differentiation. Arendt (1985) goes back to Ancient Greece to construct her argumentation. Back then, the Greek society was divided into two realms, she says: the public realm, which included policy-related activity, and the private realm. For Arendt, freedom could be gained in the public realm (an idea first put forward by Aristotle, who is often quoted in Arendt's books). The private realm, on the other hand, is comprised of private needs ranging from reproduction to economy. In short, while the private sphere represents necessities, the public sphere represents freedom.

The sociologist Simon Susen (2001) has tackled the public-private dichotomy asserting that "since human actors cannot escape the various socialization processes imposed upon them by their environment, the purest form of privacy cannot eliminate individuals' dependence upon society. Individuals can assert their privacy only in relation to, rather than in isolation from, the existence of other individuals." From her sociological approach, Susen concludes that the public sphere becomes nothing but the socialized expression of individuals' reciprocally constituted autonomy: individuals are autonomous in relation to one another. From his words it can be concluded that, even if a public sphere and a private sphere existed separately, there would always be a certain degree of space for private concerns in the public sphere. While we believe that this collision has not been studied enough in terms of a European public sphere, we will further argue that deliberative democracy may be able to successfully overcome this dichotomy.

3. Critiques to the public sphere of Habermas

The main critiques on Habermas' conception of the public sphere revolve around the fact that, in order to be part of the public sphere, individuals must be well educated and trained, which was largely impossible considering the living conditions in the 18th century and beyond. These assessments range from those

that discuss Habermas' idea of the public sphere to those that deny its existence. Susen wrote in this regard that "to reduce the complexity of the modern public sphere to the singularity of the bourgeois public sphere means to underestimate the sociological significance of alternative —i.e. non-bourgeois— collective realms that contribute to a rational, critical engagement with the world" (Susen, 2011, p.52). In the same vein, theorist Nicholas Garnham elaborates: "[Habermas] neglects the importance of the contemporaneous development of a plebeian public sphere alongside and in opposition to the bourgeois public sphere, a sphere built upon different institutional forms" (Garnham, 1992, p.352). Author Sean Cubbit appears to be even more pessimistic in this respect: "To some extent, the public sphere has never existed, or has existed only by dint of its exclusions: the poor, women, slaves, migrants, the criminalized, and in the current context animals. The public remains an ideal form, and though our conceptions have changed since Kant, that ideal is still to a grand extent what Habermas might call an unfinished project of modernity" (Cubbit, 2005, p.93).

Susen and Garnham remind us of the need to think of the public sphere as a wide open space with sufficient capacity to contain the majority of the society, understanding this majority as one that has the capacity to communicate and access several mediums of communication. Otherwise, an analysis limited to the study of the bourgeois public sphere runs the risk of excluding other, equally important, public spheres from the picture. Not to mention that, implicitly, a 21st century only-bourgeois conception of the public sphere would not meet the needs of the vast majority of citizens that do not fall under the bourgeois classification—let the "We are the 99%" motto serve as an example. Conversely, Cubbit's pessimism may be understood as a call to action to make the public sphere actually visible and capable of accommodating a wide range of opinions. Such critiques, we believe, are essential in the building of a European public sphere, one that should not know any social boundaries. As a side note, Habermas' work has also been questioned in terms of historical account (Baker, 1992; Schudson, 1992), and the neglect of minorities (Fraser, 1992). He has also been criticized for believing that mass publics are widely manipulative, as his mentors Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) had suggested before him. It seems odd that Habermas, who drew an elite-driven public discourse, was thought to be "too left wing" by his colleague Horkheimer (Wiggerhaus, 1995), and yet at the same time he was criticized for the elite connotations of his thesis. In any case, it becomes clear under the light of history that as ancient regimes, such as monarchies, lost power (i.e.: The French Revolution and The Independence of the United States), more people became involved in political discussion, turning them into active citizens.

From the middle of the 20th century and beyond, the scrutiny that individuals exercised on politics demanded a different way to present political processes to people. As noted by many authors (Postman, 1985; Bourdieu, 1998), television changed the way politics used to work, and made them hostage to

the mechanics of entertainment and electronics, mostly trivializing public opinion (Revel, 1988). Those were the ages of multimedia news. video, audio, and images combined for a brand new approach to politics with its pros and cons, widely touched upon by the aforementioned authors, and others such as McLuhan, Castells and De Kerckhove. After television, we would still have to wait four more decades for the next greatest shift of all: digital media (Pavlik, 2008; Levinson, 2009). The Internet and the subsequent influx of information technology and digital devices that have been developed to date have marked the latest switch in political discussion. The public sphere has expanded farther than ever, and individuals within it have taken the influence of public opinion to a whole new level as well. In parallel, the increase in the flow of information leads to a concept that is rarely discussed and that we would like to touch on briefly: misunderstanding. There have been countless times when journalists, politicians and other institutional officials have had to rephrase or retract their words due to one or more agents in the chain of communications misunderstanding their significance and therefore understanding a completely different message. In fact, this is a recurrent exercise in any communication class. Tell a student one sentence containing valuable information, have him or her retell it to another student, and so on until the message gets back to the original sender. The chances are that the returned message will probably have little resemblance to what was initially sent out. Be it an unconscious misinterpretation of the words or a deliberate reframing of the sentence, yet in the end the message has changed substantially. Lack of attention and reframing are extremely serious issues as yet to be corrected (Iyengar, 1991; Bennett, 2011). In this sense, we may conclude that while it is true that campaigns increase public attention to politics (Hix, 2003), these campaigns might not necessarily push public opinion in the direction that was originally intended. Due to these cognitive limitations, the question arises of whether or not we can trust the current public sphere as a rational or even critical one—an idea that will be further addressed in Section 4 of this paper.

As mentioned before, in the early works of Habermas and Arendt, it is possible to sense some disappointment with the 20th century public sphere, as both authors agree that it may have been seriously corrupted by capitalism and self-needs. In his most recent work, however, Habermas (2009) appears to have reconciled himself with the potential of the sphere. The differentiation of the spheres is not made any more in terms of public and private—terms clearly attached to a specific political thought belonging to the 20th century—but uses instead the words “institutionalized” and “informal.” While the former represents the political system, the latter embraces citizens. Institutionalized bodies (i.e., governments) have the responsibility to act and exert power on a quick basis, depriving them of deliberative processes—this idea will be taken up again further on. At most, informal spheres can have a broader flow of information and communication processes capable of unveiling the critical potential of citizens. That is, of course, if citizens are willing to collaborate with and participate in communication power.

After reviewing an extensive literature on the public sphere and the arguments for and against it, we propose a classification of what we consider to be five distinguishable stages in the formation of the public sphere in contemporary history: (1) An initial stage: individuals in the public sphere could only see the power holder but could not discuss the issue any further due to an intentional lack of information; (2) A youth stage: after absolutism, democracy allowed for literate individuals to participate to some extent in the public sphere with critical yet elite-oriented discussions on power; (3) An intermediate stage: coming hand-in-hand with the expansion of literacy and the goods of the electronic age, people began to take an active part in the political discourse and public opinion gained enormous influence; (4) A mature stage: digital media now allows for live coverage of and discussion on the political discourse, opening the way to citizen activism, gatherings and protests, ultimately leading to a scenario where the public space can have an actual influence on power; and finally (5) A full circle stage: the public discourse reaches higher-than-ever levels thanks to transparency, media reform, and cooperative deliberation (this last characteristic will be covered in more depth below), allowing for a true, critical, rational and transnational public sphere.

We maintain that we are now living in the fourth stage, essentially at the very beginning of it. The collapse of the economy, and the impossibility for current democracy to address the problem, has encouraged the birth of many movements aiming to change democratic processes for the better. For instance: the Arab Spring demonstrations, the *Indignados* in Spain, and the Occupy Wall Street movement. As studied by many theorists, these activists owe much of their success to the social networks. While it is impossible to summarize the complexity of social networks in few words, it is nonetheless remarkable that in the same way that they have exposed politics to public scrutiny, these networks have also allowed for the aforementioned bottom-up associations to gather and disseminate their ideals within the new media. The mediation that these activists have constructed around the most modern and non-traditional channels such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, and dedicated projects such as Anonymous or WikiLeaks, have certainly set a milestone in history, as they have made the old and traditional media turn to them as well, instead of reporting on the official agenda only. Hence, many steps are taken on a daily basis towards a mature democracy, or post-democracy, if preferred, but this stage has yet to be implemented and become tangible. The fourth stage, bursting with cooperation and information sharing, is just the beginning.

4. Europe and its own public sphere

In spite of the political kaleidoscope of the different governments in Europe, and whether they lean towards the left or the right, current democracy is faithful reflection of liberalism: free people, free market, and the winner takes all.

Citizens come together on the basis of their political affiliation and use their vote to allow political parties to alternate in government. While local politics are clear to everyone, the European governments still have to synergize with one another. In the meantime, current liberal democracy assumes that the opinion shared by the majority will *democratically* prevail over all other opinions, producing the mirage effect of a cohesive, common public opinion. The resulting public sphere is adopted as a faithful representation of standard western democracies, where social policies are seen as the guardians of freedom and equality, and where governments aim to interfere as little as possible in the private sphere. While this may sound pretty acceptable in theory, the reality has proven otherwise, as denounced by Julian Assange and Edward Snowden, among others. Information leaks have marked a before and an after in governmental transparency and also in the way journalism is practised (Brevini, Hintz, McCurdy, 2013). While a description of the pros and cons of transparency is not within the purpose of this paper, it must be noted that, no matter what liberal, social, or any other democracy exists, transparency must play an essential role in it as both a right and a duty. It makes societies and governments more efficient and dynamic, and prevents misinformation. Furthermore, transparency has an ethical attractiveness that fits perfectly into the (already ethical) processes within public spheres.

On addressing an alleged European public sphere, scholars have long questioned whether it exists or not, and if it does, how it works. Schlesinger (1997) and Kevin (1997, 2000) have concluded, on the basis of both empirical and theoretical considerations, that there will never be just one European public sphere, but rather a multiplicity of public spheres. Of all these multiple spheres, one that attracts our attention for professional reasons is an academic sphere, separate from other public spheres. This possibility has been both denied (Shils, 1997) and asserted (Griffler, Varghese, 2004), although always as a consequence of something else. Judging from the great number of European scientific journals, conferences, and other meetings it seems rather plausible to argue that an academic sphere actually exists and that it is dissolving national boundaries. The European Parliament is heading in this direction every time it appoints a panel of experts, where scholars are invited to participate in a transnational discussion on relevant issues. But it definitely needs to do more. In order to have a European public sphere, citizens must first transcend their own nationality. If citizens put their birth nationality before their European nationality, they are limiting an already limited European public sphere: "A European public sphere can arise only if the national public spheres become responsive to one another, which would also remove the obstacle of multilingualism" (Habermas, 2009: 87).

The importance of journalistic media is out of discussion. Ever since Edmund Burke coined the phrase in a debate in the House of Commons of Great Britain back in 1787, the press has become the fourth state (or the fourth power, as it is sometimes known), on which citizens should be able to rely (Schultz,

1998). But can they? Several studies have argued that the majority of European media is either national or sub-national, and also that the few supranational channels that indeed exist are either targeted at political or economical elites or are too specialized to attract a broad audience (Billig, 1995; Kevin, 2004; Zimmermann, Koopmans, 2003). One such example can be seen in the news channel Euronews. At the moment of writing this paper, Euronews broadcasts in 13 languages. The network started broadcasting in six languages on 1 January 1993: English, French, Spanish, German and Italian. Twenty years on, Euronews also broadcasts in Portuguese, Russian, Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Ukrainian, Greek and Hungarian, the latter being its most recent addition since May 2013. The possibility to watch Euronews in Serbian is also in the works, and is expected to be introduced in November 2013. This will bring the total up to 14 languages. If we take into account that the total number of official European Union languages is 23, 14 is definitely not a bad number. Theorist Sue Wright (2000) suggests that Euronews goes against the argument that a language barrier is hindering the construction of a European public sphere, which is an issue often raised by Habermas (2009). On the one hand, Schlesinger and Kevin (2000) are optimistic, as we are in this study, that media like *The Financial Times*, *The Economist*, and of course Euronews, have to be seen and understood as truly pan-European media, with which to transcend national borders and ascend to a Europeanized cognitive space. This could certainly help in the creation of the much-anticipated European public sphere, but it certainly would not be enough. On the other, theorist Jochen Peter appears rather pessimist about the possibility of a European public sphere and uses his television-related research to assert that “on the map of television coverage, the European Union resembles an unknown territory, in which the European Union citizen may find him/herself lost. It seems that European Union citizens have to orient themselves about the whereabouts of the European Union by solely relying on the position of the sun while they urgently also need a compass” (Peter, 2003: 173). He concludes that a European public sphere does not exist, but admits that there are traces of it in some elite and international media. While translational communication may be occurring to some degree in the media and also within an academic sphere –as we will note further below– it does not seem to have an equivalency on an institutional level. Along the same lines, several studies have analyzed the roles of public statements and PR efforts by individuals and institutions in this regard, and have concluded that there is still a long way to go before developing a proper Europeanized institutional communication keyed to expanding trust, knowledge and collaboration among the European states (Peter 2003, Slaatta 2001).

Koopmans and Statham (2010) have also tackled the European public sphere from another medium: the press. From 2001 to 2004 they conducted an analysis of several newspapers from seven countries. Among their findings, they concluded that while the European Union and its institutions enjoy a broad

operational functionality, European journalists seem to lack the interest or time to report on European Union policies. The authors likewise conclude that a European public sphere does exist, alluding to the importance of the policies and prominence of its institutions, but they also admit that the sphere is not as inclusive as it should be. The lack of inclusion is easily identifiable: a glance at the participation rates in the European Parliament elections in each country, and also in the European Constitution referendum, shows very high levels of abstention. This enormous lack of interest in European issues expressed at the polls is precisely what makes us believe that the European public spheres is not yet a reality –as will be elaborated on in the conclusions.

Koopmans and Erbe have rightfully proposed that the density of communicative activity within the sphere will eventually determine the existence and functionality of a potential European public sphere. It must be remembered, however, that not all political communication is calling for political action, and much less for social activism. As a result of the various types of information communicated through all the media channels, different spheres are created: informational, promotional, technical, and even propagandistic. And again, not all of them are expected to provoke an active response from the receiver. Now, it may be argued that these spheres are not many but just one, and that citizens are free to pick the information that they want from a gigantic, multi-layered public sphere. In fact, citizens who obtain their information from one single channel, or from a few that simply repeat the same messages, may exemplify this behaviour. The sole conduct of paying attention to a specific kind of information and source while omitting the rest is precisely what is fostering the birth of multiple public spheres. These numerous spheres flow between public opinion in parallel, and may or may not share information. If one resides in a sphere with no external input other than the official source or sources that sustain the sphere and channel its information through a single, straight conduit, the critical potential of such a sphere is completely lost, and it simply becomes an ego trip of self-reassertion. As a result of this, we may not consider all public spheres to have an equal critical value. Watch it from this perspective: in current democracy, the citizens elect their government, the press reports on the government and opposition, and later on the citizens elect either the same government or a different one. This has gone full circle; to wit, citizens are actively involved in political matters only once every four years or so. Authors like Hix (2003) suggest that this level of implication, although limited, allows for a public sphere to a certain degree, as the competition between rival candidates for political leadership promotes policy debates and deliberation on public policy. While this view could arguably be true, the final question arises again of whether or not this minimal public sphere is a rational and critical one, and therefore, whether or not it deserves to be called a public sphere. We certainly believe that the answer to the question of how to bridge this gap may be found in deliberative democracy.

5. Deliberative democracy as a starting point

Weber was right: rulers impose their will on others. In fact, current democracy has become one where one part of society rules over the other part for a specific period of time, and where consensus agreements are few and far between. All over Europe, governments range from the *quasi*-bipartisanship model, with two main parties taking turns to wield power every few years, to ungovernable parliaments in which many parties rule on the basis of striking highly clean-cut deals. The times when two or more parties reach an agreement are seen as a marriage of convenience, the result of which is more advantageous to the parties than it is to the citizens. The lack of understanding and reasoning within ruling parties and their inability to express their ideas in a coherent manner may have unconsciously *taught* citizens that no matter how they vote, politicians will always decide what is best for them. This idea can be illustrated by looking at the levels of abstention in European countries. For instance, in the last Spanish elections in November 2011, the abstention rate was 30.42% , just 0.08% below the number of votes obtained by the winning party (31,50%). In similar elections all across Europe, the level of abstention has been as high as 75%. In parallel, new and old radical parties have subsequently appeared on the European political scene, probably as a result of the sectarian culture of modern politics. Therefore, a pluralistic European public sphere is *urgently* needed. As opposed Weber, Arendt and Habermas envisioned a much more representative power linked to communication. The advent of new information technologies (IT) may have come about at the right time for citizens to exercise such power as a plural and well-informed community. As will now be seen, a good way of achieving a European public sphere may be through deliberative politics.

The term *deliberative democracy* was originally coined by Joseph M. Bessette in his 1980 work *Deliberative Democracy: The Majority Principle in Republican Government*, and its goal is to reach consensus by the agreement of all those affected by a decision (Bohman, 1998). According to Gutmann and Thompson (2004), no subject has been more discussed in political theory in the last two decades than deliberative democracy. In the early formulation of deliberative democracy in the 1980s, deliberation was opposed to aggregation, in the sense that the first resembled a forum, and the latter recreated a market (Knight and Johnson, 1994). Habermas is also among the first theorists to approach deliberative politics. He does so in his book *Between Facts and Norms* (1996), and again in several others of his most recent publications, such as *Europe: the Faltering Project* (2009). Habermas remarks that in a pluralist democracy the participating citizens “need at least a purposive-ration explanation for why the norms passed by the majority should be accepted as valid by the outvoted minority” (Habermas, 1996: 292). Because liberal and republican democracies do not have a process of this kind, Habermas defends a deliberative model of democracy that seeks

to integrate what he believes to be the best parts of the liberal and republican democracies, specifically individual rights and common moralities, while adding to them the reason-driven processes of deliberation and rationalization. These reasons can be neither merely procedural nor purely substantive, and shall be accepted by free and equal people:

Deliberative democracy affirms the need to justify decision made by citizens and their representatives. Both are expected to justify the laws they would impose on one another. In a democracy, leaders should therefore give reason for their decisions, and respond to the reasons that citizens give in return. But not all issues, all the time, require deliberation. Deliberative democracy makes room for many other forms of decision-making (including bargaining among groups, and secret operations ordered by executives), as long as the use of these forms themselves is justified at some point in a deliberative process. Its first and most significant characteristic, then, is its reason-giving requirement (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004: 3).

Fishkin (2009) proposes a shorter, but equally understandable, meaning of deliberative democracy: “to include everyone under conditions where they are effectively motivated to think about the issues.” While the substance is ethically commendable, deliberative democracy raises the following question: is it possible for all persons in a group to come to terms in a final and shared agreement? One of the authors that tackle this issue is James Bohman. He asserts that “whatever forms it takes [deliberative democracy] must refer to the ideal of public reason, to the requirement that legitimate decisions are ones that ‘everyone could accept’ or at least ‘not reasonably reject’” (Bohman, 1998). It is in the “at least not reasonably reject” where we find the closest appreciation of Habermas’ conceptualization of the public sphere: one that is critically and rationally driven. Within the current democratic model, legitimization is achieved through the political majorities and the representational system. However, this system does not provide the reasons why their decisions are good ones. Good reasons, according to Bohman (1998: 403), are those that are convincing or correct. These two adjectives sum up the purpose of a deliberative democracy: convincing and correct decisions shall be those that have been reached through a collaborative, critical and rational debate. Therefore, to reach a state where everyone’s opinion is arguably politically justified, the author proposes that citizens must go beyond their own self-interest, which is the core of the aggregation system (highly popular nowadays thanks to bottom-up social movements), and orient themselves to the common good (Bohman, 1998: 402). In this regard, theorist

Russell Hardin satirizes what he believes to be the most common procedure for people when voting –and we certainly share his view:

Many of those who vote do so for moral reasons of their duties or the fairness of their doing their part. But many seem genuinely to think in their own interest to vote. They invoke a rational choice version of the generalization principle in ethics. That moral principle is a response to the query: What if everyone did that? (...) Many voters seem to believe in a *pragmatic (non-moral) version of the generalization argument*. They feel responsible if, after they fail to vote, their party loses. And if their party loses after they do vote, they console themselves with the realization that at least they tried. If they had merely a moral commitment to voting, they should feel guilty for not voting independently of whether their party wins or loses. To feel regret because one's party loses makes no sense unless one supposes one might actually have made a difference (Hardin, in Fishkin and Laslett, 2008).

In spite of this, Hardin is actually optimistic and believes that deliberative democracy does indeed stand a chance and can expand through people since “it is easier to understand the logic of collective action and to apply it to real problems of choice than it is to understand, say, the theory of relativity, quantum mechanics, or the workings of DNA” (Hardin, in Fishkin and Laslett, 2008). In parallel, it has been argued that group deliberation may lead to polarization (Sunstein, 2002). Such claims have been reviewed and taken into consideration by many authors. The theorists that have reviewed Sunstein's results do not reject them, but rather accommodate them to the mechanics of deliberative democracy. For instance, Nabatchi, Gastil, Weiksner and Leighninger (2012) assert that, in spite of polarization, the outcomes of the deliberation process are still positive because they “tend to remind people that others' views are legitimate.” Fishkin and Laslett (2008) have also argued for the usefulness of deliberative democracy: “Data about opinion changes in the Deliberative Polls confirms that there are significant changes of opinion, that these changes are connected to the participants becoming better informed, and that these changes have a big effect on the voting behaviour of the participants.” Arguably, the conclusion is that deliberation is effective in the sense that contributing to the process makes a difference both to opinion and behaviour, and also that “there is at least some evidence that the participants have more highly structured preferences (in the sense that more of them are single-peaked, so that they are able to collectively avoid voting cycles) and that they become more public-spirited, in the sense that they become more willing to make at least

some sacrifices in the public's interest" (Fishkin and Laslett, 2008). And this is precisely how the public should react to deliberative politics if Habermas is right when proposing that a properly designed system of public communication can lead to a rationalizing effect on political processes of decision-making and, thus, have a greater influence on society. In this regard, it has been proved (Neblo *et al.*, 2010) that willingness to deliberate is much more widespread than expected. It must not be forgotten, however, that people are more likely to say that they accept a decision as a compromise than that they have changed their mind (Thompson, 2008). Therefore, the major challenge still lies in expanding deliberative processes in society and empirically proving to what degree it actually contributes to a more open society. If deliberative democracy succeeds, deliberation processes would have legitimized once and for all communication power as influential to democracy.

6. Conclusions

The first question to be considered in this paper was whether a European public sphere exists or not. We observed how this concept has been validated and rejected proportionately by many scholars, from the most sceptical dismissing any kind of public sphere at all, to the overwhelming optimistic suggesting that the European public sphere already exists. But, does it really? In light of our theoretical review, our first conclusion is neither a resounding *yes* nor a resounding *no*. While many authors have presented empirical works to support the existence of a European public sphere with case studies based on European media, it must be noted that these researches rest on a very specific quantitative methodology that, due to its own characteristics, cannot process the consequences of an ever-changing landscape between media and society. While enormously interesting and valid, these studies focusing on the tool and its contents still only represent a part of the greater picture that the potential European public sphere is or should be. These types of studies may as well be overlooking the fact that the media are just an instrument serving a specific power in a particular context –as Harold Innis defended in his communication theory essays. We still need major research on the people and their environment in order to be able to fully visualize the European public sphere. Therefore, the European public sphere may exist insofar we admit the existence of some transnational public discourses, but simultaneously, it may not yet exist if we consider these discourses not to be sufficiently extensive and profound.

It is also necessary to raise awareness that no matter how important the European Union policies have become to its member states due to the recent crisis, the many intellectual discussions on the European public sphere appear to have been totally disregarded. One of the major reasons could be the fact

that a European public sphere apparently is not on the European Parliament's agenda, and while the discussion exists, it also lacks a favourable environment so as not to go unnoticed. The Eurosphere project, a joint venture involving many scholars – some of whom have been cited in this work – is certainly an interesting effort to contextualize the European public sphere. Yet the comparative study of Eurosphere, signed by Hakan G. Sicakkan in January 2013, still admits that the diversity of the European publics and their complex relationships have yet to be overcome. In conclusion, we believe that while the European public sphere is most desirable, there are still many black holes of all kinds –mostly normative and communicative– for such a sphere to actually be representative and, more importantly, fully operative. The first major issue to be addressed is the notion of the European Union itself. Despite being a very inclusive union, its member states have yet to solve the serious problems affecting their internal regulations. In parallel, media reforms and transparency laws must be implemented as soon as possible in order to allow citizens to exercise their communicative power in a more coordinated and coherent fashion. In the meantime, a potential European public sphere can begin to develop, although it will continue to be invisible and brittle until it fulfils what is supposed to be its purpose: an interconnected and rational debate between Europeans.

The second question raised in this work was whether deliberative democracy can help to strengthen European links so as move towards a potential European public sphere. In this case, we conclude that deliberative democracy can indeed serve as a vehicle to accomplish the aforesaid purpose. Deliberative politics possess an incredibly powerful architecture capable of encouraging people to actively participate in trans-national and rational discourses. But what is just as important as its effects on society is the reason why we need a political model of this kind. If we attempt to briefly contextualize our current democracy, we observe the following: an apparent impossibility for consensus to be reached among the parties that have long resided in the left-centre-right conceptualization of politics; the perception that when deals are finally struck they are not in benefit of the people but in that of the parties themselves; and the inability to properly handle the so-called hot topics of multicultural societies. All this has resulted in a whole generation of citizens who are disenchanted with the current political systems. Some citizens have found an answer to this particular scenario in a radical reassertion of their own beliefs, subsequently leading to the rise of far-right and far-left movements, and threatening the basic principles of democracy. For others, this situation has led to a wide-open public debate that is recognizable in the transversal approach of social movements worldwide, movements whose core is intrinsically grounded on deliberative principles. Simultaneously, these processes are also central to an ideal, rationally driven public discourse. Therefore, deliberative democracy is certainly a start towards a European public sphere.

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