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A cosmopolitan temptation

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ABSTRACT

For some, the transnationalisation of political action and communicative space in the EU heralds an emergent cosmopolitan order. Need that be so? There are supranational institutions in the EU as well as transnational political and cultural spaces and cross-border communicative flows. However, the Union's member states remain key controllers of citizenship rights and purveyors of collective identities. And for many purposes they still maintain strongly bounded national public spheres. Because the EU's overall character as a polity remains unresolved this has consequences for the organisation of communicative spaces. The EU is a field of tensions and contradictions that is inescapably rooted in institutional realities. Wishful thinking about cosmopolitanism can get in the way of clear analysis.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism; European Union; collective identity; nation; public sphere; state

Introduction¹

This essay considers the extent to which the development of the European Union has opened up the prospects of a European public sphere and a new cosmopolitanism.

The EU is a regional bloc of 27 European states, each with distinctive political, bureaucratic and judicial institutions. What makes the Union so interesting for social and political theory - as well as for empirical research into communication and culture - is that it is a unique experiment because it is a regional economic formation with a developed political superstructure. Its uniqueness lies both in its scale and the recurrently articulated ambition in some political quarters of the Union to create a federal political entity.

The theoretical challenge for thinking about the public sphere lies both in the EU's unusual status as a polity and in its unresolved nature – its ambiguities, its liminality. The Union is a supranational entity caught between two models – on the one hand, intergovernmental cooperation and on the other, a possible federalism. At present, it operates as a regulatory regime for its member states. Its ultimate federal vocation remains uncertain. In April 2007, the former German foreign minister, Joschke Fischer, pointed to the EU's present lack of legitimacy and stasis over institutional reform and cautioned against possible melt down. At this time of writing (June 2007) the German Presidency of the EU under Chancellor Angela Merkel is attempting to address the constitutional deadlock. The impasse came about in June 2005 when, in referenda held in both their states, the French and Dutch electorates rejected the process of ratifying a Constitutional Treaty for the EU.

Why be concerned about the effort to produce a constitution? One key reason is that the developing Euro-polity has stretched received concepts of statehood and extended notions of citizenship and identity – however gingerly - beyond the nation-state. The full engagement of citizens in a European public sphere (or, much more probable, in an interconnected sphere of publics) would change the present balance of relationships between the Union and the member states. Common action in a common space (or interlinked spaces) would have consequences for conceptions of collective belonging to the body politic.

Of course, this perspective is open to dispute, as from a theoretical point of view the EU is a screen on which different normative models are continually projected. It follows that the significance of much empirical work including that on the role of media and communication in contributing to the possible construction of a European public sphere - is open to diverse interpretations.

A new cosmopolitanism?

The Union's present trajectory has engaged major social theorists such as Ulrich Beck, Manuel Castells, and Jürgen Habermas. All – in different ways – have signalled the EU's cosmopolitan potential. Beck (2006: 3), for instance, has defined the cosmopolitan outlook as comprising a:

‘[g]lobal sense, a sense of boundarylessness. An everyday, historically alert, reflexive awareness of ambivalences in a milieu of blurring differentiations and cultural contradictions. It reveals...the possibility of shaping one’s life under conditions of cultural mixture...’

While in this conception Beck signals the general importance of ambivalence for a cosmopolitan *Weltanschauung*, in the case of Europe he is far too ready to try and resolve the contradictions. It is understandable that the creation and elaboration of a supranational political formation encourages reflections both on post-nationalism and transnationalism. However, there is a crucial difference between developing a critical awareness of the unconventional nature of the EU as a polity and seeing the Union as necessarily becoming a nascent cosmopolitan space that allows an escape from the prison-house of nationalism.

The ‘cosmopolitan temptation’ of my title, therefore, concerns the detectable desire to over-read the EU’s post-nationalist possibilities. We cannot deny that far-reaching new relations, which might transform the national instance, could emerge as the Union develops. Although the political imagination can and should be deployed to envisage a future good society it is dangerous to cast off the moorings of an analytical intelligence that pays careful attention to developments on the ground. To be sure, the cosmopolitan alternative is tempting, given the huge destructiveness of the dark side of nationalism in Europe during the twentieth century and continuing ethno-national struggles in the twenty-first. But acts of will cannot abolish the continuing significance of the national dimension.

We need to discipline our reflections about the possibility of cosmopolitanism by showing due analytical respect for the continued existence of the state system and the historico-cultural weight of the nation in thinking about the future of the public sphere in Europe.

Communicative space

The idea of communicative space is central to how we think about the workings of the contemporary political public sphere. When used in this context, the spatial metaphor designates what must, in the end, be a bounded figure whose internal and external relations are in each case subject to a specific range of determinations. A public sphere is typically conceived as a domain constituted for the exercise of critical judgement, where writing, publishing, visualising, talking, listening and deliberating are means of engagement in matters of public interest. In the era of the modern state, the principal space of political communication has commonly been equated with the territorial limits of a national community. In Ernest Gellner's (1983) phrase, the state provides the 'political roof' for a national culture. The mediated discourses of political actors have a key role in giving shape and texture to the public sphere.

Slavko Splichal (2006) has noted that the Kantian principle of publicity makes a universal claim that necessarily extends beyond a national or indeed, a European, political framework. In line with this, for cosmopolitans, public communicative space is precisely potentially global in scope. Consequently, states have become relativised as communicative spaces and containers of political action. However, it remains important to note that states have not been transcended as the principal controllers of citizenship, the purveyors of key collective identities, or the deliverers of a myriad of services and demands that shape the everyday lives and experiences of their inhabitants.

Thus, when it comes to conceptualising the public sphere, two broad perspectives – the statist and the global – are now the grand polar variants in play. This dualistic characterisation may simplify and dramatise; but it does offer us a clear entry-point into arguments about the EU.

If 'the state' and 'the globe' describe distinct conceptions of political space, polities that are neither clearly the one nor the other offer a particular challenge to such categorisation. In a binary conceptual framework, their ambiguity simply cannot be resolved. The European Union is in this sense a conceptual anomaly. Less all embracing than the globe, it is also much more territorially far-reaching than the state.

And it is precisely this ambiguous figuration that makes it so open to a cosmopolitan temptation.

As the political scope of national communicative communities in the EU is no longer completely defined by the member states' boundaries, to analyse emergent European communicative spaces, we need to shift our focus to the supranational arenas centred on Brussels and consider how these work for their constituent publics.

Is the European public sphere manageable?

How are we to think of 'publicness' in the multi-level complexity of the EU? Both national and 'European' discourses and institutions co-exist. The EU's policy making is a major constitutive part of member states' domestic political agendas and also of their legal and economic frameworks. Yet for most citizens the Union is still another place, a different political level and an external locus of decision-making more than it is an internal one. Political scientists' label for the widespread public alienation from the EU is the 'democratic deficit'. And there is now growing official recognition that this is accompanied by a 'communication deficit'.

Unease at the top was signalled by the European Commission's (2006) White Paper on Communication Policy. The Commission envisaged engaging recalcitrant publics via a 'partnership' encompassing 'civil society' across the member states. This entails an implicit theory not only of political communication but also of social communication. Civil society is only in part to be conceived as operating in the political domain. It is also a socio-cultural hinterland and a realm of everyday life. The territory of social communication encompasses 'thick' social relations. To some extent this concerns the official world of political and other institutions. But more significant, perhaps, are our everyday attachments to localities, workplaces, associations, our shared tastes and pleasures, the familiar and the engaging. It is our routine situatedness that produces a sense of belonging and the emotional attachments that are still part of national life in European states. As contemporary debate about the future of multiculturalism amply testifies, the national public sphere is the terrain of considerable conflict. What matters for present purposes, however, is that rather than identify an emergent Europeanism with cosmopolitan potential, the EC's proposed approach to citizen mobilisation has gone with the grain of the nation and the state.

In fact, unbeknown to its progenitors, this social communications approach has at least a century-old pedigree. At the turn of the 1900s, the Austro-Marxist theorist, Otto Bauer (2000), wished to entrench national cultural autonomy in the multinational Habsburg empire. He conceived of the nation as linguistically and culturally self-contained, or at the very least, as tending towards communicative closure. But it could not be an autarchic space because it also operated within the wider political formation of imperial Austria-Hungary. This was an early statement of a social communication theory of the nation that has left its conceptual imprint on how contemporary theories of nationalism address the public sphere.

Take Karl Deutsch (1966: 19-20), an early theorist of European union influenced by Otto Bauer, who argued that nations and nation-states are strongly bounded by their patterns of interaction. To put it differently, social communication produces collective cohesion and identity – and invites us to share in a common fate.

This simple – but compelling - idea is reproduced in a number of influential theories of nationalism. In practice, Ernest Gellner's (1983: 37-38) view that culture is 'the distinctive style of conduct and communication of a given community' and that it is 'now the necessary shared medium' of the nation is, at root, a social communications theory of cohesion. For Gellner, the national education system is the key agency that diffuses a literate 'high culture'. Media are seen as sustaining the political community, as providing it with its deep codes for distinguishing between 'us' and 'them'.

Similarly, Benedict Anderson (1991) has contended that the collective consumption of mediated communication (based on a common 'national' language) creates and sustains a sense of common belonging. Michael Billig (1995) has also endorsed and extended this broad social communications viewpoint. As nationals, he suggests, we live less in a state of perpetual mobilisation than one of the banal assimilation of everyday symbolism and categorisation.

This variant of social communications theory is much challenged today when – precisely under conditions of multiculturalism - it is hardly so clear that all citizens' cultural boundaries are defined by national public spaces. Moreover, all national systems of communication are influenced by what lies outside. National cultures are usually permeable, even when censored and controlled, and in the age of the Internet,

mobile communications, social networking, and satellite broadcasting, such relative openness is necessarily greater than ever before.

Recognising this, contemporary cosmopolitans reverse the terms of the old Austro-Marxist conundrum. In his time, Otto Bauer tried to address nationalist demands from within the overarching framework of a multinational state. His problem was how to ensure more play for national culture within the carapace of the existing supranational state - in order to head off separatism at the pass. Current cosmopolitan writers, however, would wish to leave the as yet incomplete EU behind. Instead of playing within the boundaries, they emphasise the transcendent potential of the emergent European framework, the capacity to connect to a new global order that needs a public sphere to match.

But there are some obvious obstacles to the creation of a general European public sphere, whose installation could indeed be a major step on the cosmopolitan road. For instance, there is considerable linguistic diversity in the EU (currently, 23 official languages) and a fragmented intelligentsia (still largely bound to national cultural systems). As has been amply documented, the language question in Europe has generated both complex policies and baroque politics (Castiglione and Longman (eds) 2007). True, English is emerging as an unofficial lingua franca. But arguably that process principally addresses functional needs rather than building a collective identity.

The EU's actually existing cultural complexity is far-reaching. Indigenous regional or minority languages, often with supporting institutions and media systems, operate at a sub-state level, where particular publics are constituted on the basis of linguistic or cultural distinctiveness. Besides, continuing migration and diasporic links have ensured that, as elsewhere, further linguistic and cultural diversity – partly sustained by transnational media consumption - are part and parcel of the contemporary landscape of the member states. The politics of language and its relationship to media is central to this discussion (Cormack and Hourigan (eds), 2007; Jouët and Pasquier, (eds), 2001; Moragas Spà et al. (eds), 1999).

To recognise such internal diversity as inescapable is one possible move; another is to try and close the EU's door to further difference. Both of these involve strategies of political management. How 'unity in diversity' (aka minimal cohesion) is conceived will differ in respect of the stance taken towards new migration and existing multiculturalism.

Currently, debates about national belonging have centred particularly (although certainly not exclusively) on the Muslim presence in EU states. Alongside episodic media coverage of various forms of female Muslim attire, the high point of resonance came during the so-called Mohammed cartoons affair in 2005. Muslim religio-cultural identities have become enmeshed in contemporary struggles over post-Enlightenment secularism, where the battleground has also brought Christians and humanists into collision.

It is not surprising in a political formation such as the EU that national conflicts also resonate on the European plane. In the EU Constitutional Convention's debates (from 2002-2004), there was extensive discussion of whether or not the Union should underline its Christian spiritual heritage as an integral part of its identity. The ensuing reactions showed that this project was of concern to Europe's non-Christian minorities and to humanists.

It is a particularly moot question, given proposed Turkish accession to the EU. Other states on the European continent are waiting to join the club. Most are post-communist. However, that is not the case for Turkey, formally a secular state with a largely Muslim population. Turkey's continued secularism is, at present, an object of acute political struggle. The country's long-standing efforts to accede to the EU have focused renewed attention on the quite far-reaching divisions over what is meant by a 'European' identity. The enlargement of the Union eastwards has reinforced the lobby that wants to emphasise Europe's Christian heritage and embed that collective identity in a future EU constitutional treaty. One such attempt has already been made and there is no reason to think that this line of argument is passé in the discursive politics of EU boundaries and identities (Schlesinger and Foret, 2006).

Ulrich Beck has described the identification of Europeanness with a particular religious heritage as a retrograde exclusionary tactic. But it plainly will not go away and has been raised with regularity by various EU politicians and in March 2007 by Pope Benedict XVI.

Do political institutions matter?

The debate over spiritual values and religious heritage shows that we can't escape from politics, high or low. That means we do have to take the EU's institutions seriously. On this score, cosmopolitans divide into two main camps: institutional and post-institutional.

Institutional cosmopolitans use the language of rights and duties. Habermas's rights-based, supranational conception of the EU connects to a global perspective. He portrays the public sphere as potentially unbounded, as shifting from specific locales (such as the nation) to the virtual co-presence of citizens linked by public media. Habermas (1996: 373-374) argues that communicative space is to be understood in terms of 'a highly complex network...[that] branches out into a multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local and subcultural arenas'.

A European public sphere, therefore, would be open-ended, with communicative connections extending well beyond the continent. But what this leaves unresolved is whether or not convergent communicative practices might produce some kind of cultural cohesion, resulting - to use Bauer's phrase - in a European 'community of fate'.

Habermas's response is to propose that EU citizens become 'constitutional patriots'. This post-nationalist, rule-based form of identification implies an order of preference and at least some distinction between 'us' and 'them'. It carries inescapable echoes of an older, interstate, conception of political order. If a social communications approach to the public sphere insists on the 'thickness' of the values and practices that sustain the political culture, constitutional patriotism presumes 'thin' relations. However, it does also necessarily presuppose certain affinities with other patriots if only, say, in a common belief in the importance of the rules of the game. So, the EU's cosmopolitan potential is still anchored in a web of affiliations.

That is why Habermas emphasises the importance of a European constitution. This demarcates a distinctive political space and provides ‘a common value orientation’. Constitutionalism remains central to how a European public sphere might be imagined: linked upwards to more general structures of governance and downwards to more particular ones.

Habermas (2004: 27-28) sees the ‘constitutive process [as]... a unique instrument of cross-border communication’. He stresses the key role of a ‘Europe-wide public sphere of political communication’ and ‘the creation of a political culture that can be shared by all EU citizens’. Today, we might question whether the constitutional process – which ended in the 2005 debacle - was really an effective form of transnational communication. More striking was the national framing of the debate and how national considerations played into rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands.

Habermas’s attempt to navigate between the free flight of cosmopolitan potential and gravitational pull of institutions is akin to Manuel Castells’ (1998) approach. Castells sees the EU as a precursor to a new political order, to new forms of association and loyalty: the emerging Euro-polity epitomises what he calls ‘the network state’. The EU is imagined not only as a political-economic zone but also as a specific kind of communicative space. Castells focuses on how networks, facilitated by communications technologies, transcend borders.

He argues that the EU has different ‘nodes’ of varying importance that together make up a network. Regions and nations, nation-states, European Union institutions, together constitute a framework of shared authority. They define the boundaries of the putative European communicative space – and therefore the potential public sphere (Castells 1998: 330-331).

This approach implies that what Karl Deutsch once called ‘communicative complementarities’ can emerge out of the informal processes of making the Union. The globalising pull of communications technologies is countered by emergent patterns of social interaction in the European Union’s space. Cosmopolitans are

challenged to recognise the varying significance of particular fora (or public spheres) within such a network model.

Let us put the institutional cosmopolitan position in context. Over time, we may agree, the EU has developed a special interactive intensity that, in some sectors of public life, favours internal communication and creates an internally differentiated referential boundary, with stronger and weaker forms of institutionalisation. This may, and does, co-exist with global networking and the development of transnational governance. As a counterweight to cosmopolitan potential, however, in the present intergovernmental model national public spheres remain central to political life. There are indeed also transnational spaces of communication. But there are particular rather than general: political and economic elites and expert communities (including academics, by the way) tend to dominate these.

For Ulrich Beck (2006: 164), the EU's struggle with its political future is actually an 'institutionalized failure of the imagination' that does not live up to the cosmopolitan dreams of its founding fathers. The Union, he maintains, lacks political pragmatism and radical openness. The present tensions between the regulatory and federal models, which are actually of vital explanatory importance, are swept aside by Beck (rather oddly) as denying Europe's diversity (2006: 171-172). Instead, Beck (2006: 167) argues, 'The political union must be conceived as a cosmopolitan union of Europe, in opposition to the false normativity of the national'. The prospect held out is variously that of a 'cosmopolitan state' or a 'cosmopolitan cooperative of states'. But beyond these slogans it is not clear how power would actually be exercised, how post-territorial politics would function or how support for tolerant ethno-cultural diversity might be secured. There is certainly little realistic engagement with institutional politics.

For instance, according to Beck, the EU has inaugurated 'a struggle over institutions with the aim of confronting European horror with European values and methods'. After World War II and the Holocaust, he believes, one of Europe's most positive achievements is to stand for the protection of human rights. He further asserts that commemoration of the Holocaust is an institutional foundation for the EU's identity and indeed for a wider Europe. However, Beck's position takes no account of

Holocaust denial, or how opposition to acts of commemoration is now connected to the politics of the Middle East, or of the differences between official acts and popular sentiment, or of the present-day competition over post World War II victimhood throughout Europe.

Gerard Delanty has taken a more radical post-institutional line (Delanty and Rumford 2005: 20), seeing Europe mainly as a space of possibilities for new cosmopolitan attachments, where the challenge for the EU is to ‘create spaces for communication’ (2005: 68).

Communication is judged to be valuable principally in articulating connections beyond the EU, rather than in building it into a political community or a collective identity. From this point of view, the European public sphere is not so much an institutionalised space that might democratise the Union – or deal with Europe’s past – as a post-institutional launching pad for a new orientation to the world that increasingly sheds its European cast.

Europeanised political communication?

Such unresolved tensions in social and political theory are also reflected in current debate about political communication and the public sphere in Europe. Because EU policymaking impinges increasingly on member states, it also impacts more and more on the agenda of the mediated political discourse of national polities. How should we interpret this?

The central issue is the extent to which political communication may be judged to have a formative impact on citizenship, collective identity and patriotism, shifting these from their longstanding and often exclusive alignment with the member states (and nations) into a more inclusive ‘European’ citizenship, collective identity and constitutional patriotism.

The dividing line is over whether mediated communication is now leading to the creation of a European public sphere. What that means is itself a matter of debate. Is a European communicative space to be conceived as a single, general public sphere on

the model of the nation-state? Or, given Europe's complexity, is this better conceived as constituted by overlapping spheres of publics?

Some – Klaus Eder, for instance – have argued argue for a kind of spill-over effect, in which the dissemination of argument and diverse perspectives across national borders stimulates a wider, European level of political engagement through a collective learning process (Eder 2007; Trenz and Eder, 2004). However, we might note pertinently that hopes placed in the educative content of the constitutional debate have not so far been realised.

In this connection, it is surely time to revise assumptions about the capacity of elite media, or of public service broadcasting, to operate collectively across the member states as instruments of enlightenment. Broadcasting systems are increasingly fragmenting under the pressures of economic competition and digital convergence. Newspapers are making a complex accommodation to the Internet as they work out new business models. Indeed, increasingly, the evolution of the Internet has posed new questions about the conditions under which traditional media reporting might evolve. For political classes everywhere, the challenge of credibly addressing general publics by way of generally accessible media is only likely to grow and is being made increasingly difficult by a generational shift in media consumption patterns among the young. Splichal (2006: 703) rightly questions the negative impact of such trends on 'media democratization'.

While media in the EU may address similar issues at the same time in different member states, this does not necessarily equate to the widespread distribution of a shared European perspective. And even if the distribution of media content were uniform that would not stop it from being diversely interpreted. In the member states, national editorial values continue to shape reporting and commentary on European themes (Kevin 2003: 179). Even at key constitutional moments, coverage is framed principally in terms of national politics (Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005).

Consequently, if news agendas have become to a lesser or greater extent 'Europeanised' across the EU, for national publics this has not so far been translated into an irresistible invitation to become European. The continuing national pull of

journalistic practice and frameworks of reference explains the sheer difficulty of developing journalism for a Europe-wide general public. What pertains at the popular level also affects intellectual elites. No doubt, these now interact more as a result of EU-wide networking, encouraged and enabled by the Union's institutions as well as by other Europe-wide bodies. However, as Abram de Swaan (2007) notes, this does not, as yet, add up to the formation of a European intelligentsia with its supporting cultural panoply.

Can the mediated public sphere and a convergent news agenda significantly 'Europeanise' the EU's constituent national publics in the long term? This might happen, but only – it would seem - given numerous ancillary conditions such as a common pan-European politics, a common foreign and defence policy, widely shared linguistic and cultural competences, and so forth. In short, by taking major steps towards federalism.

A final word

The development of a European public sphere is ultimately based in the interaction between EU-institutions and the transnational networks that institutional development has bred. Not all institutions have the same centrality; not all networks have the same intensity of interaction. A relatively weak, transnational public space has indeed evolved around policy-making actors in the EU institutions. But this does not constitute a general European public sphere. Nor indeed, does it yet constitute something much less cohesive, namely a European sphere of general publics.

In fact, states, nations and regions remain crucially important as locales for debate and as sources of identity. Europeanisation is itself a profoundly ambiguous process. Who now – and who in the future - will be permitted to be a 'European' is an increasingly intense focus for struggles between inclusion and exclusion both within member states and at the borders of the EU itself. Because Europeanisation is a boundary-defining process as well as a transnationalising one, it does not of itself necessarily point to a cosmopolitan outcome.

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Notes

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