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Introduction

The European public sphere seems to be a very appealing topic to political scientists, media scholars and philosophers. Besides all the books that have already been published, the recent special issue of the European Journal of Communication is further confirmation of the interest that academicians are devoting to this topic. There are several reasons for this increasing interest: first of all, there is the perception that we are facing a dramatic change of a very practical and actual nature that will affect our lives and the lives of our children. At the same time this change implies a shift in our cognitive and epistemological criteria, as Ulrich Beck has demonstrated (Beck 1997), that many observers perceive in a very clear way.

The overcoming of the idea of nation-state is very clear to most social scientists and this will imply different forms of aggregation, different ways of social interaction, and different types of communities. Consequently, the ways of thinking will change. Within the idea and the reality of globalization, the process of European construction is placed so that over a more or less long period of time the places, the symbolic constructions and the identity to which the people of Europe have been used to for centuries will change. The processes of communication and, therefore, also the idea of public sphere, are part of this

radical change and, according to many, such processes should give rise to a new form of aggregation and social institutions.

More recently, the enlargement of the Union to many Eastern European countries has created new topics of discussion and new problems mainly relative to the integration of cultures that only a short time ago emerged from incomprehension if not explicit belligerence and competition; cultures characterized by considerable distances in terms of habits, customs and symbolic identities. A great curiosity has developed on the part of the newcomers; expectations, that are often exorbitant, have been born in terms of possible economic improvements. The awareness of having become part of a world that up to then had been perceived as being inaccessible spread all around. This atmosphere of growing expectations has also captured the attention of researchers who have been more and more focusing their studies on the new cultural horizons and possibilities associated with the perception of becoming part of a new community.

Another reason for this growing interest in the European public sphere can be traced also to the policies of promoting the construction of a European identity. Thanks to numerous initiatives and instruments, a

great deal of attention is being paid to those changes that are mostly of a cultural nature, which have been and are accessories to the process of European integration; it is enough to bear in mind the importance that the Erasmus exchanges cover in the member countries' education. Due to the policy of research funding, the subject of European integration has become the centre of attention of many researchers and many Universities, and this has shifted the sights of researchers towards the European public sphere, a theme which, up to then, had received little of their attention.

This has certainly given a significant thrust towards the creation of a common ground of perceptions, expectations, cultural projects and mutual symbolic identifications. However, at the same time it has caused a certain gap between expectations and perceived reality that also appears evident in the collection of essays edited by Aukse Balcytiene, Kristina Juraite and Jolanta Reingarde. In most of the scientific literature on the theme of the European public sphere that I know, the researchers' dissatisfaction regarding its level and functioning seems evident. A more active public sphere is requested. The most diffused complaint obviously regards the lack of widespread participation in the debate on European integration; its still mainly local nature, linked with the "old" idea of nation-state, is also lamented. The dissatisfaction that reflects the frustration on the part of all those who expected and still expect a higher level of knowledge of European issues is also very diffused.

To a considerable degree, this dissatisfaction also depends on the fact that, in most cases, the point of reference is Habermas' idea of public sphere. It is not just a question of definition; the ideal-typical nature of Habermas' formulation of public sphere (that will be even more evident in his writings after "Strukturwandel der Oeffentlichkeit") returns continuously. The normative dimension of Habermas' definition of public sphere often prevails over the interpretative and descriptive one. According to Habermas, the public sphere is not only a way of being or a condition but also, and above all, a "must be", and this predisposition is very often shared by all those who have tried to apply the ideas of Habermas to different contexts and situations.

The critical or bourgeois public sphere, observed by Habermas in the first years after the birth of the liberal society, allowed knowledgeable and rational public debate on the issues of general interest. This is not the case of the European public sphere: as all the papers in this special issue demonstrate there is no debate of rational nature around European issues and thus dissatisfaction towards the present situation prevails every time that Habermasian theory is used to discuss whatever would be appropriate and correct in the EU.

There is a further reason that justifies the very often recriminatory nature of the analyses on the European public sphere. In Habermas, the critical or bourgeois public sphere, at least in its ideal formulation, was seen as an opportunity and instrument to control and limit the powers of the absolute monarch. In other words, there was a clear and easily identifiable power who chose and decided and to whom the rising civil society could

address criticism and towards whom actions of refusal, opposition and limitation could be activated. In other words, in its ideal-typical formulation the Habermasian public sphere foresees a subject or an institution towards which actions of criticism and or incentive are addressed and to which approval or disapproval can be asserted.

European institutions do not have such substance; they do not have the power to directly affect the lives of the citizens in the way in which, instead, still have their national institutions. The European Parliament does not yet carry out a significant legislative power. On the other side, those who should debate within the European public sphere do not have an immediate power of choice of European governors; they cannot elect them, they do not contribute directly to the construction of European institutions, they cannot directly limit or direct the decisions of these institutions. They can do that through their national institutions.

European institutions are not chosen or nominated directly by the citizens who should animate public debate and who continue to exercise a power of choice only on national institutions and this objectively limits any involvement in the European public sphere. Participation in the European public sphere assumes an essentially voluntary character with no corresponding immediate and direct power. Consent towards Euro-

pean institutions seems to be something that is mediated through other institutions and essentially through still national institutions. This situation is clearly perceived by those common citizens who animate or should animate the public sphere. In this way European institutions that are supposed to interact with European public sphere are seen as distant, far away, difficult to be affected by public debate.

In this I find myself in the "impossibility school"; the absence of any real legislative power in the European institutions makes them weak and, very often, it appears useless to address an action of criticism, incentive or limitation to them by European citizens.

However, there are other citizens and other organized groups: entrepreneurs, financial institutions, interest groups, that are more directly involved in the European Union's choices in the field of commerce and the economy. They participate in different ways in the decision making process. They seem to have an influencing power in the European institutions through lobbies and other types of pressure. Indeed, they are participants in a supranational public sphere that is also based on several means of communication (e.g. The Financial Times) that have some power in orientating the choices of the European Union. This might be, returning to Habermas' formulation, the prototype, at a very embryonic stage, of a future European public sphere.

REFERENCES

Beck, U. 1997. *Was ist Globalisierung*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.