

## **Eclipse of ‘the Public’**

From the public to (transnational) public sphere:  
Conceptual shifts in the twentieth century

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### **The disappearing public ...**

In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey wrote of a public in eclipse because ‘there is too much public, a public too diffused and scattered and too intricate in composition. And there are too many publics’ (1927/1991: 137). Since more recently, we may speak of another eclipse—eclipse of the very concept of ‘the public’ that is largely being substituted by the concept of ‘the public sphere.’

With Rousseau and particularly Bentham, the concept of ‘the public’ as a sort of popular tribunal expressing opinions and representing the general will gained prominence in political-philosophical discourses. The concept of the public was also essential for theorizations of public opinion in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Early normative-political theories of public opinion may be defined as *substantive*, in contrast to what Francis G. Wilson later named *adjective theories* (1962). In adjective theories, the term ‘public’ is used as an adjective denoting the specific quality of an (individual or collective) opinion. In contrast, the conceptualization of public opinion as ‘opinion of the public’ stresses a firm, authoritative singleness of ‘the public’ as a (universal) collective subject expressing *the* public opinion—as opposed to the irrational, emotional, and even violent behavior of its antonyms—the crowd and the mass.

When public opinion—or public opinion tribunal as it used to be called—became the superior authority and replaced that position in the king, it was considered a process by which individuals incorporated into the public expressed approval or disapproval of any actions in particular places. In the eighteenth century, some references were made to authentic bearers of public opinion of the time. The concept of the public did not denote the people or citizenry at large but rather a small fraction of them, such as groups of erudite individuals critically discussing the matters of literature and art, and reading and occasionally contributing to newspapers. These were considered the men of letters, newspaper journalists and their editors who supposedly represented the new bourgeois class. When specific ‘tasks’ of public opinion were referred to, surveillance of the execution of power and formation of the unified will were in the limelight.

Yet the concepts of ‘the public’ and ‘public opinion’ were not used primarily as descriptive concepts—to identify its concrete constituents or bearers; they had primarily a normative and critical sting. The public has challenged and eventually replaced the monarchic power, while it has also captured and retained its transcendental nature of the supreme authority. Public opinion was considered an almighty impersonal ‘tribunal,’ and the voice of the public, or public opinion, was nearly identical to the divine voice once exclusively belonging to monarchs. Tocqueville believed that ‘the King still used the language of a master but in actual fact he always deferred to public opinion and was guided by it in his handling of day-to-day affairs. Indeed, he made a point of consulting it, feared it, and bowed to it invariably’ (Tocqueville, 1856/1955: 174-5). In theory, public opinion ‘replaced the powers of heaven and earth in returning men to possession of their decisions’ while preserving the appeal to a divine authority that can never be disrespected (Ozouf, 1988: S11, S13). Tönnies (1922) even compared the role of public opinion in *Gesellschaft* with that of religion in *Gemeinschaft*, as did many scholars before him.

Bentham conceived of publicness as a necessary precondition ‘for putting *the tribunal of the public* in a condition for forming an enlightened judgement’ (1791/1994: 590; emphasis

added).<sup>1</sup> In Bentham's theory, surveillance over political power could only be exercised by concrete, physically existing social group(ing)s, 'the body of the curious at large—the great *open committee* of the tribunal of the world' (1787/1995: 47-8). In Bentham's view, the 'Public Opinion Tribunal' consisted of all 'auditories' at meetings and assemblies dealing with political questions, and all individuals 'taking, for the subject of their speeches, writings, or reflections, any act or discourse of any public functionary, or body of public functionaries belonging to this state' (1830/1983: 36). The public was clearly detached from those in power, who were subject to its surveillance. At first, however, the concept of the public was very elitist: only those wealthy enough to spend time in 'non-productive' activities such as the arts, leisure, and politics constituted 'the public.'<sup>2</sup>

By the beginning of the twentieth century, two distinct theoretical paradigms had been established: (1) the normative-democratic paradigm linking the public and public opinion to political participation and democracy (represented by Tarde, Tönnies, and Dewey among others), and (2) the authoritarian paradigm emphasizing the repressive role of public opinion that hinders individuals' freedom of expression (e.g. Tocqueville, Bryce, Ross, and Lippmann). Both paradigms nearly crumbled in the face of the polling industry, which challenged traditional theories of public opinion.

Gabriel Tarde conceived of the public as 'a purely spiritual collectivity, a dispersion of individuals who are physically separated and whose cohesion is entirely mental' (Tarde, 1969: 277). For Tarde, the public could not exist without the press, since reading newspapers creates individuals' 'simultaneous conviction or passion and in their awareness of sharing at the same time an idea or a wish with a great number of other men' regardless of his or her specific location (p. 278). No less important are private conversations among them, in which they discuss and interpret news that newspapers provide. Thus, on the one hand, 'the press unifies and invigorates conversations, it standardized them in space and diversified them in time'; on the other hand, it helps cultivate conversation from mere gossip:

The newspaper [...] began as only a prolonged echo of chats and correspondences and ended up as their exclusive source. [...] The newspaper has thus finished the age-old work that conversation began, that correspondence extended, but that always remained in a state of a sparse and scattered outline—the fusion of personal opinions into local opinions, and this into national and *world* opinion, the grandiose unification of public mind (Tarde, 1969: 318).

Tönnies followed Tarde's conceptualization of the public as a social category of mentally connected people. Unlike earlier theories which have focused on the public as it occurs in specific social places (e.g., as a tribunal, a visible group), Tönnies conceptualized 'the public' beyond the

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Bentham's concepts 'publicity' and 'public opinion,' see Splichal (2002, pp. 35–63).

<sup>2</sup> Bentham draws a distinction between three segments of the public: (1) the most numerous class is formed by those who can hardly occupy themselves with public affairs because they 'have not time to read, nor leisure for reasoning,' (2) those who borrow judgements from others because they are not able to form opinions on their own, and (3) the elite, i.e. those who are able to judge for themselves (Bentham 1822/1990, 58). The latter—those 'by whom actual cognizance is taken of the matter in question in the first instance'—represent the 'Committee' of the Public Opinion Tribunal; those who join their publicly expressed opinions form 'the body of public opinion at large,' which may consist of any number of members up to the total number of members of society (p. 121). See also Tönnies (1922).

boundaries of physical settings as a form of imagined intellectual grouping, whose members share similar ideas and opinions without interacting directly, with the ‘republic of the learned’ (*Gelehrtenrepublik*) at its core.

Tönnies conceived of ‘the public’ (*die Öffentlichkeit*) as a transitory social formation, a group like the mass or ‘dispersed crowd’ (*getrennter Haufen*) and ‘present crowd’ (*versammelter Haufen*). The ‘republic of the learned’—individuals who have ‘educated opinions’—constitutes the core of opinion of the public, and around them the ‘large public’ emerges. According to Tönnies, a physical bond is neither essential nor typical for the public (although possible for a short period of time); rather, it is the spiritual connection among members of the public that is decisive. What distinguishes the public from an incidentally connected, dispersed, or present crowd is its capability to clearly articulate opinions. In Tönnies’s words, ‘the subject of opinion of the public is a fundamentally connected totality (*Gesamtheit*), politically in particular, that has been united by thought and judgment, and that is precisely why it belongs to the public, to public life.’ However, it ‘is not assembled as a public or as a subject of opinion of the public, except in spirit—and is normally much too large to be conceived as an assembly’ (Tönnies, 1922: 131-132). Even if the public is becoming very large and dispersed (i.e., composed of a ‘limitless mass of people’), it represents those ‘who, in spite of being dispersed and infinitely diverse, may think and judge similarly’ (p. 84).

For Dewey, the public was more than a simple social category of individuals sharing the same information provided by newspapers and discussing them in small groups in the cafés, and more than people who think and judge similarly. He conceptualized the public as a large body of persons having a common interest in controlling the consequences of social transactions in which, for any reason, they did not participate. It consists of ‘all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for’ (Dewey, 1927/1991: 15-16). Since almost every transaction generates important consequences for those not directly involved, those people to whom ‘the public’ refers comprise a continuously emerging, overlapping, and disintegrating group.

The lasting, extensive, and serious consequences of associated activity bring into existence a public. In itself it is unorganized and formless. By means of officials and their special powers it becomes a state. A public articulated and operating through representative officers is the state; there is no state without a government, but also there is none without the public (Dewey, 1927/1991: 67).

Dewey’s definition of the public is based on the assumptions that public conversation is essential to participation, and that participation is intrinsic to democracy. Both communication and democracy are closely linked with education, which is as essential to social life as ‘nutrition and reproduction are to physiological life. [...] This education consists primarily in transmission through communication. Communication is a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession’ (Dewey, 1916/2003). The knowledge one needs to participate in political life is continuously generated in the interaction of citizens among themselves and with experts, politicians, and others, through the mediation of the press. In his model—which is in contrast to the long tradition of normative theory—the public is related directly to the state, which provides the necessary means for the public to become organized as a distinct entity. However, Dewey did not use the term ‘state’ in the Weberian sense of an organization that has a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical constraint to enforce its order over the population in a given territory,

but rather in the sense of the general regulatory and administrative functions that have to be performed in any society.

Early normative theories considered publicness one of the fundamental principles of democratic governance and emphasized the principal role of the public as the fourth power or watchdog maintaining surveillance over the government. In the late eighteenth and early twentieth century, the term 'the public' retained its constitutive status in the public opinion theories of American pragmatists Park and Dewey, and European sociologists Tarde and Tönnies. Dewey, for example, defined public opinion as 'judgment which is formed and entertained by *those who constitute the public* and is about public affairs' (Dewey, 1927/1991: 177; emphasis added). Even in the beginning of the twentieth century, when 'the public' had lost its strictly political and rational character, it remained an 'elementary and spontaneous *collective grouping*' (Blumer, 1946/1966: 46-50, emphasis added; also Park, 1904/1972: 57).

The 'authoritarian paradigm' disentangled itself completely from the public in its conceptualization of public opinion. Since the mid-1800s, control over the ruling authorities by the public has been increasingly substituted by control over individuals as the main function of public opinion. It was Tocqueville who first realized that public opinion was not only a safeguard against the misrule of those in power, but also a means of coercion in the hands of the majority against any minority of those who would not share the majority opinion. In contrast to Bentham, who believed the primary task of the public was in its surveillance of political representatives who could otherwise fail to advance the public interest, the re-conceptualization of public opinion in psychological and sociological theories emphasized the impelling power of public opinion to discipline the people liberated of their critical function an active part in forming public opinion. Edward Ross, one of the proponents of the new dominant stream, believed that public opinion was merely a 'primitive technique' that became 'simply one coercive agent alongside of others' (1901/1969: 98). Similarly, Tarde recognized that 'the need to agree with the public of which one is a part, to think and act in agreement with [public] opinion, becomes all the more strong and irresistible as the public becomes more numerous, the opinion more imposing, and the need itself more often satisfied' (Tarde, 1969: 318).

Tönnies clearly identified controversial conceptualizations of public opinion and required not only a strict separation of different meanings of 'public opinion,' but also distinct concepts for them. He differentiated between 'unarticulated' public opinion (*öffentliche Meinung*) and 'articulated' opinion of the public (*die Öffentliche Meinung*). The former is 'a superficial whole of multifarious, contradictory opinions, which are publicly voiced,' and the latter denotes 'a uniformly effective power' (Tönnies, 1922: 131).

For both concepts, public manifestation and references to public, primarily political issues remain essential. Yet in the former case—concerning public opinion—the general public is implicated in so far as 'all' individuals participate somehow actively or passively in publication of opinions. In contrast, for opinion of the public, *the subject is a substantially, for the most part politically united public*, which has agreed to opine and judge in a particular way and which, therefore, belongs naturally to the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*), to the public life (Tönnies, 1922: 131; emphasis added).

Tönnies's remarkable *Critique of on Public Opinion* (1922) and Dewey's classic *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) were the swan songs of classic substantive theories of public

opinion. The 'authoritarian' paradigm had already paved the way for eclipse of the public as the subject of public opinion. The shift to adjective theories of public opinion after the 1930s indicates the ultimate 'theoretical disillusionment' with a rational-critical, 'politically united' (bourgeois) public of the Enlightenment. The early dominant paradigm of close connections between opinion of the public, political democracy, and freedom of the press was overwhelmed by the empirical current, which rejected the traditional normative-theoretical conceptualization of public opinion and focused on public opinion polls, propaganda, and public relations. Sigmund Freud's nephew Edward Bernays, who ingeniously used his uncle's ideas to manipulate the masses, considered public opinion 'a term describing an ill-defined, mercurial and changeable group of individual judgments. Public opinion is the *aggregate result of individual opinions*—now uniform, now conflicting—of the men and women who make up society or any group of society' (Bernays, 1923/1961: 61; emphasis added).

The public as a subject of public opinion, meaning a group composed of politically reasoning individuals, was substituted with a disperse mass or just any group of individuals. Childs suggested that 'the word "public" and the word "group" are for all practical purposes interchangeable' (Childs, 1965: 13). The social-psychological conceptualization made public opinion equal to the sum or average of attitudes on a (controversial) issue held by members of a social group of any size.

'Group' abstracts from the multitude of social and historical conditions, as well as from the institutional means, and certainly from the web of social functions that at one time determined the specific joining of ranks on the part of private people to form a critical debating public in the political realm. 'Opinion' itself is conceived no less abstractly. At first it is still identified with 'expression on a controversial topic,' later with 'expression of an attitude,' then with 'attitude' itself. In the end an opinion no longer even needs to be capable of verbalization (Habermas, 1962/1995: 241).

Soon after the invention of opinion polls, Allport completely eliminated 'the public' from the definition of public opinion as 'superfluous for the purpose of research' (Allport, 1937: 9) and reduced public opinion to a 'multi-individual situation,' as earlier suggested by Bernays, and opinions to mere 'reactions of individuals.' Finally, Helmut Bauer bluntly questioned the meaningfulness of the very concept 'public opinion,' stating that it should be conceived of as 'the sum of all relevant individual opinions' and identical to 'summing of equal or at least similar opinion expressions of citizens inquired by ballot or opinion polls' (Bauer, 1965: 121).

### **... and the rising (confusion with) public sphere**

The concept of the public sphere was introduced into English written works with the translation of Habermas's book *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962), translated as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), and it rapidly and almost completely eliminated the traditional concept of 'the public' from critical-theoretical discourse. Ebscohost's 'Communications and Mass Media Complete' database documents four scholarly journal articles referring to 'the public sphere' in their titles in the period from 1900-1984, 11 in the period 1985-89, and 343 in the period 1990-2005. Of 265 book titles that include the words 'public sphere' displayed at the amazon.com Web site, seven were published before 1990 but none before 1984. The once prominent concept of 'the public' that dominated for two hundred years—think of Tarde, Tönnies, Dewey, Park, Lippmann, Blumer, Mills, not to speak of Bentham—almost disappeared from theories dazzled with the splendor of the new concept.

The controversies over the historical-descriptive and explanatory value of the concept 'public sphere' are partly related to the troublesome translation of the German word *Öffentlichkeit*, which became a problem with the late translation of Habermas's *Structural Changes* into English. The book challenged the English-spoken frameworks of thought prevailing in the U.S.-lead international academic community because the conceptual capacity of the traditional English term 'the public' is much narrower than its German counterpart *Öffentlichkeit*. Not only are the two terms far from being synonymous; the German term actually stands for entirely different concepts—as Tönnies has argued already—that are represented by different terms in English.

Due to the multi-dimensionality of the German concept *Öffentlichkeit*, its comprehensive and all-embracing translation into English and many other languages<sup>3</sup> is not possible. Nevertheless, the noun *Öffentlichkeit* is mostly—and quite arbitrarily—translated into English as 'public sphere' or even 'public space' but hardly ever as 'the public' or 'publicness,' even if 'public sphere' is often not only inappropriate, but directly misleading, since the spatial metaphor—public sphere—is hardly present in the German term (Kleinsteuber, 2001). 'Publicness' may be a less awkward translation, but it still excludes the meaning of 'the public' as a social category or actor. Another choice would be the term 'the public' as Hannah Arendt (1958/1989) used it (i.e., as opposed to 'the private'), which at the same time signifies the public as a social category of people—but it could also trigger even more confusion.

The German concept *Öffentlichkeit* concerns unofficial rather than official aspects of social and political life; it 'is not clearly demarcated; it is essentially polemical: what was once not public should become so' (Adorno 1964/2005, 121). It refers to discursive actions of opening issues to public scrutiny and discussion, and often presupposes the existence of a critical public. The term *Öffentlichkeit* signifies four interrelated but distinct concepts:

(1) *The state of being public*—a specific *nature* of a particular activity or object that can be seen, heard or accessed by everybody; the characteristic or state of publicness; e.g., public speech, public rally, public service broadcasting, public utilities, public schools;

(2) *Public realm (der öffentliche Raum, der Raum der Öffentlichkeit, die Sphäre des Öffentlichen)* is 'the public world, in contrast to the private,' which is common to all of us, but 'is not identical with the earth or with nature, as the limited space for the movement,' and has long-term interests of its own (Arendt, 1958/1989: 52-54). Whereas the English term 'the public sphere' refers—or at least alludes—to a natural space at a certain point in time, the original '*Öffentlichkeit*' transcends 'our life-span into past and future alike.' When entering the public realm, individuals want 'something of their own or something they have in common with others to be more permanent than their earthly lives' (p. 55).

(3) *A/the public*—a specific *social category* or *collectivity (das Publikum; e.g., in the works of Gabriel Tarde, Ferdinand Tönnies, John Dewey, and Jürgen Habermas)* that appears and acts as a social actor or agent, particularly in relation to some important social issues (often in contrast to the crowd or the mass) that should be processed by decision-making authorities (e.g., the state);

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<sup>3</sup> Some languages, e.g., Slovene, have fortunately a perfect conceptual equivalent to the German term *Öffentlichkeit* ('*javnost*').

(4) *Publicness*<sup>4</sup> as an abstract concept, the ‘incarnation’ of publicness imbedded in a *principle* or *norm* and as a universal *human right*, thus representing the foundations of public opinion and the doctrine of sovereignty (*principle of publicness*).

The translation of Habermas’s book *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* into English, French and many other languages had an important ‘collateral damage’: the English (and French) word ‘the/le *public*,’ which had dominated academic discourse for the last two centuries, has been largely—but mistakenly—substituted with ‘*the public sphere*’ or ‘*sphère publique*.’ Reducing *Öffentlichkeit* to ‘the public sphere’ misses the fundamental distinction between ‘the public’ and ‘the public sphere’: while the public is a social category, whose members (discursively) act, form, and express opinions (similarly to nationality or political affiliation)—a social category into which one falls due to her/his specific characteristics, and to which one believes to belong, provides a self-definition essential to the self-concept—, the public sphere is only its infrastructure. Of course it is more than just ‘technical’ in the sense of availability of communication channels; it also comprises important political, cultural, and economic components, but nevertheless, it remains ‘just’ infrastructure. It is not that ‘[t]he public sphere *requires* a “forum” that is accessible to as many people as possible and where a large variety of social experiences can be expressed and exchanged’ (Verstraeten, 1996: 348); the public sphere *is* ‘a forum.’

Bentham’s main concern was how to make sure that all transactions in the political assembly would be subject to surveillance by the public and its main organ, the newspaper. Arguing that ‘systematically and critically checking on government policies is the primary task for [the] public sphere’ (Verstraeten, 1996: 348), rather than for the public, simply denies fundamental ontological differences between ‘the public’ and ‘the public sphere’ as two distinct entities and concepts. Darnton makes a point that ‘French historians have attributed agency to this “space” and made it the crucial factor, more important than ideas or public opinion, in the collapse of the Old Regime. In fact, spatial metaphors have proliferated so much in historical writing that they are choking out other modes of analysis’ (Darnton, 2000). As Darnton ironically states, ‘A researcher who sets out to discover the public sphere is likely to find it wherever he or she looks and then perhaps to reify it—that is, to construe it as a force at work in history, an active agent which produces palpable effects, possibly even the French Revolution.’ Indeed, the conceptual replacement of ‘the public’ by ‘the public sphere’ implies the disappearance of the body public through a discursive process.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I prefer to use the term ‘publicness’ over ‘publicity’ for the abstract concept of *Öffentlichkeit*. The word ‘publicity’ that was once used in English, e.g. by Bentham, to refer to (publication of) reasoned debates, has been later overshadowed by ‘the activity of making certain that someone or something attracts a lot of interest or attention from many people’ (*Cambridge International Dictionary of English*) or ‘a type of public relations in the form of a news item or story which conveys information about a product, service, or idea in the media’ (<http://www.powerwriting.com/terms/#P>).

<sup>5</sup> Strydom believes that we witness not only ‘the emergence of the public in the early modern communication revolution, followed by its institutional organization,’ but also ‘the recognition of the authority of the public in late 20th-century communication societies’ (Strydom, 1999: 3). This is only true if by ‘recognition’ it is meant that ‘we’ (the author) ‘have come to recognize that the public plays an active part even at the level of mass communication.’ In the wider academic community, however, quite the contrary is the case: ‘a proper sociological understanding of the role of the public [...] in communication societies nevertheless still seems to be lacking’ (p. 2).

Of course, Habermas himself cannot be blamed for the confusions deriving from translation, and even less for the outcast of the traditional concept of 'the public.' He actually clearly defined 'the public sphere,' in contrast to the public, as 'all those conditions of communication under which there can come into being a discursive formation of opinion and will on the part of a public composed of the citizens of a state' (Habermas, 1992: 446). Clearly, a public sphere cannot act, it cannot communicate, but a public can. The public sphere is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a/the public to emerge; an infrastructure that enables the formation of the public as the subject, the bearer of public opinion ('opinion of the public'), which is clearly separated from the realms of the state and private property.

The long intellectual history of the disappearance of 'the public' proves that the widespread conceptual confusion with 'the public sphere' is not just a problem of translating the German term *Öffentlichkeit* into English and other languages. Terminological and conceptual changes (and perplexities) that took place during the last century reflect wider and deeper social changes and shifts in research epistemologies. We will limit our discussion here to some important theoretical and practical-political implications for the relationship between the two concepts—'the public' and 'public sphere'—brought about by the 'invention' of opinion polling, governance, and globalization, and the re-invention of civil society in the late twentieth century.

The public sphere is commonly understood as a specific sphere, domain, or 'imagined space' of social life existing between, and constituted by, the state and civil society, which represents an infrastructure for social integration through public discourse—a kind of 'opinion market'—in contrast to political power in the sphere of politics and market mechanisms in the sphere of economy, both of which represent specific forms of social integration through competition. It is activated in the communicative interdependence and rational-critical discourse among citizens potentially affected by transactions in which they do (or did) not participate—thus creating the public as a social category—where the legislated laws of the state and the market laws of the economy are (or ought to be) suspended. Public sphere represents the locus where private citizens engage in 'the public use of reason,' as conceptualized by Kant.

The growing popularity of the concept 'public sphere' was given a strong impetus by rapidly growing computer-mediated communication of the Internet in the 1990s, which also brought about new puzzles about the public sphere concept. In contrast to the 'mediated publicness' based on the operation of traditional, non-interactive press and broadcast media, the Internet and intranets offer new opportunities for participatory communication. The Internet technology further expands the process of the transformation of an individual opinion into public opinion. With the new interactive networks it has created, the Internet substantially increased the feasibility of citizens' participation in public discourse. It helped develop a deterritorialized (transnational) public sphere not bound to particular locality. In this way, the Internet had a constitutive role in the development of informal global communication networks of individuals, organizations and movements, which may help create an international civil society aspiring at a genuinely cosmopolitan public.

In its early period, the Internet was believed to radically challenge hierarchical, top-down mass communication model typical of traditional media, and to democratize not only communication but also political relations in general, irrespective of all other (former) impediments. It was thought to offer new possibilities for political participation leading to a kind of direct democracy not only locally but even at the national level: a genuine or 'strong' electronic democracy was expected to oust populist democracy dominated by traditional mass

media, particularly television. Similar hopes are invested in digitization of television. While there is no doubt that new types of engagement are made possible by new communication technologies (in developed societies), it is much more questionable if they indeed stimulate and revive political participation and civic engagement, and the development of a genuine public sphere.

The public sphere is the arena in which civil society informs itself and exchanges ideas and opinions with other social actors 'representing' the two remaining realms, those of the state and the economy. The concept of civil society is closely related and often confused with that of the public sphere<sup>6</sup> since the central part of civil society is occupied by associations that form opinions and serve as a hub for an autonomous public sphere. As Calhoun argues:

the importance of the concept of public sphere is largely to go beyond general appeals to the nature of civil society in attempts to explain the social foundations of democracy and to introduce a discussion of the specific organization within civil society of social and cultural bases for the development of an effective rational-critical discourse aimed at the resolution of political disputes (Calhoun, 1993: 269).

Civil society is the social realm—a pattern of social organization—established between, and different from, the state, the economy (the market), and the private domain of family, friendship, and intimacy. It is constituted by uncoerced associations, organizations, and activities that reach beyond economic and political 'consumption,' through which citizens as economic and political beings contribute to the production of economic (profit) and political power. In contrast, in civil society opinions are formed and goals defined to influence opinion formation and, consequently, decision making in given institutional and normative frameworks. Civil society is often seen as a locus for limiting the power of the state and capital, but it does not seek to replace either state or private actors. Its institutional core 'comprises those non-governmental and non-economic connections and voluntary associations that anchor the communication structures of the public sphere in the society component of the life-world' (Habermas, 1996: 367).

While civil society consists, in principle, of self-governing organizations and activities detached from the state and the market, we can often experience relatively deep interpenetration between the three realms. Think of such organizations as universities, non-commercial media, churches, trade unions and workers movements, associations of 'men of rank' and charity, movements and associations of national and ethnic minorities, professional associations and chambers. In all of them, people may freely associate and communicate not to gain profit or power, but in order to socialize and/or promote a common cause. But they can be heavily influenced by bureaucratic structures of the state, political parties, and private for-profit

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<sup>6</sup> 'Public sphere' and 'civil society' are not always considered compatible concepts. Jodi Dean, for example, argues that 'in light of the possibilities and dangers posed by the new digital technologies, [...] critical and democratic theorists [should] jettison the idea of the public sphere and adopt a more complex model of civil society' (Dean, 2001: 247). Hannah Arendt is perhaps to be blamed most for 'attacks' on the concept 'civil society' because of her extremely negative view of what civil society is supposed to mean—'that curious and somewhat hybrid realm which the modern age interjected between the older and more genuine realms of the public or political on one side and the private on the other' (Arendt, 1990: 122). Whereas publicness promotes freedom in politics, the idea of civil society protects citizens from politics and thus promotes political freedom as a nonpolitical phenomenon, or, 'freedom from politics,' as Arendt argued.

corporations as well.<sup>7</sup> They can also quite frankly—publicly—promote their private (commercial) interests or support political parties.

Although constantly under the pressure of capital and political power, actors in civil society participate in a genuine (re)production of publicness—in contrast to organizations, political parties, interest groups, and similar actors who occupy an already constituted public sphere in order to use it, and the media as gatekeepers who set the agenda of public discourse and who control the access of contributions and authors to the mass media. In other words, civil society is constituted by social actors who historically set up the public sphere and whose participation in it is still unavoidably constitutive. Actors constituting civil society—if truly independent of both public authorities and private economic entities—are capable of deliberating about collective actions in pursuing their interests. Their engagement proceeds from specific interests and experiences but always casts an eye over the brim of personal or group interests and experiences to care for general well being.

Civil society generates the public sphere in which different social actors express their opinions while citizens can make the exercise of power by those actors more accountable. Through public discussion and persuasion civil society influences regulative forces of the state and corporate institutions. The communication structures of the public sphere enable actors on the periphery of civil society, who, in contrast to those at the political center (the state), often have a higher sensitivity for the identification of problems, to activate new political and nonpolitical themes. Through often-controversial discussions in the media, these new themes can become public themes. In contrast to the classical model of the liberal public sphere as a realm where people are individually included in the rational discussion, the contemporary public sphere is predominantly characterized by the appearance of identity politics, as manifested in nationalistic, ethnic and religious movements, feminism, youth movements, and so on, which shape a sort of secondary public. In short, against the state there does not stand an undifferentiated, unified public sphere, but rather a network of 'specific publics' that preserve their borders with the general public and have relatively strong internal cohesion based upon their concern for public good rather than private interests.

When civil society or one of its components is connected with a particular kind of public discourse taking place in the public sphere, it becomes 'the public' or 'a public.' There is no public sphere without civil society, but also there is none without the public. However, in addition to the public(s) there are many other actors appearing in the public sphere, whose interests significantly differ from those of the public or civil society.

Mass media are the case in point for a dual and controversial role in the public sphere. Newspapers, film, radio, television, and the Internet significantly contribute to the organization of the public sphere. Ever since Bentham, first the press and later other media were considered constitutive of the public. Bentham thought of the press as 'an appropriate organ of the Public

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<sup>7</sup> Public service broadcasting is a typical case. It is supposed to be an autonomous not-for-profit organization, thus independent from the state and commercial influences. Yet it is surrounded by the private economy, which substantially limits its production autonomy. As a consequence, public service broadcasters behave as business companies: the results of the measurement of audiences determine the value of programming; they are managed similarly to any commercial company; and they are directly involved in transactions with commercial suppliers of programs and equipment. To make it worse, it is often the state that decides on the licence fee since the state (in most countries) is the primary income source of public service broadcasters and politics that (directly or indirectly) appoints management organs.

Opinion Tribunal,' and 'the only constantly acting' organ of public opinion (Bentham, 1822/1990: 45). In his essay 'On the Liberty of the Press' (1820), he equalized the rule of publicity with 'the liberty of the press [which] operates as a check upon the conduct of the ruling few; and in that character constitutes a controlling power, indispensably necessary to the maintenance of good government.' In 'Securities against Misrule,' Bentham even suggested that a newspaper editor is not only one of the 'leading members' or 'Presidents,' but also 'the President of the Presidents' in the 'Committee of the Public Opinion Tribunal,' thus having the power to arbitrate on behalf of the entire Public Opinion Tribunal (1822/1990: 61-64).

As the press developed into 'a link in the chain of modern commercial machinery' (Bücher, 1893/1901: 216) and became strongly influenced by political parties, newspapers lost their leading position in the 'Public Opinion Tribunal'; as Tönnies argued, instead of being organs of the public to represent its opinion, newspapers became organs of political parties. The subsequent development of new media—from film to the Internet—and the enormous increase in the size of audiences made the controversial role of the media in relation to 'the public' undeniable. From the normative point of view, mass media became one of the actors in the public sphere with particular (private) interests not necessarily congruent with their 'duty' to (re)present public opinion. Consequently, the concept of 'the press' (or mass media in general) had to be clearly detached from the concept of 'the public,' as not all 'mass media' act as 'media of the public' (for example, as 'public service media'). The difference between the media, which are 'organs of the public,' and those whose main task is to influence the public (or rather, audiences), may be used as an indication of the polarization taking place in the public sphere between those constituting the public sphere (= the public) and others appearing in the public sphere before the public to derive their legitimacy from it.

In his early work Habermas rather clearly differentiated between the public consisting of the *bearers* of publicness (and of public opinion) and the public sphere as a *sphere* regulated by the principle of publicness, in which the public is acting together with other actors. Nevertheless, 'apart from introducing a greater internal differentiation of the bourgeois *public*,' later he also seemed, in reaction to his critics, to 'admit the coexistence of competing *public spheres*' (Habermas, 1992: 425). Does indeed a 'plurality of competing publics' necessarily entail the 'plurality of public spheres' as the critics suggest (Fraser, 1992: 116-7)? I would disagree even if the relation between competing publics were conflicting. Public(s) and public sphere(s) are not the same thing. Referring to Habermas in this context is perhaps misleading. It is quite clear that the interchangeability of the two concepts, 'the public' and 'the public sphere,' in Habermas's 'Further Reflections on the Public Sphere' (1992) is merely a slip caused by the translation of the term *Öffentlichkeit*. For example, Habermas is explaining why he marginalized the 'plebeian *public sphere*' in his *Structural Transformations*, whereas in the preface to the German edition of *Structural Transformations* (1962/1969: 8) he spoke, in fact, of the beginnings of 'the plebeian public' (*die plebejische Öffentlichkeit*)!

A/the public is a specific grouping that appears or is imagined as a social actor or agent (once a 'tribunal') in relation to some important and controversial social issues (traditionally conceptualized in contrast to crowds or the masses) and based in already existing social groups in civil society. The existence of a public sphere is vital for a public to become visible through public opinion, and an acting public is a necessary condition for a public sphere to really exist. There is no public without a public sphere, and no public sphere without a public. They are inseparably connected to each other—like a system and its component that must produce results congruent

with the defined goal—or else they are ‘dysfunctional’ Nevertheless, the difference between the two is important and we have to draw a clear distinction between them.

As Garnham (2001) suggests, the idea of the public sphere builds a bridge between Marxist theories of ideology and the liberal free press tradition, which Marx in his early works also defended (Splichal, 2002). The concept revalidates ‘the specificity of the political, by giving due weight to the emancipatory potential of liberal bourgeois concepts of free assembly and debate, and by shifting attention from worker to citizen’ (Garhnam, 2001: 12586). But the idea of the public sphere also follows Marx’s critique of the bourgeois idea that the press might attain its freedom more easily and fully by adopting the laws of free economic operations that rested on the right to private property, which paved the way to the subordination of the press to freedom of ownership as a peril no less dreadful to a genuine freedom of the press than ideological censorship (Splichal, 2002: 113, 115).

We may think of the public sphere as a kind of communication framework of the ‘body public,’ a sphere of channels of opinion circulation binding and protecting its constituent publics. In addition, it includes publics. It would be delusive, however, to equate ‘the public sphere’ with ‘the sphere of publics.’ Beside ‘the public(s)’ whose participation is constitutive of the public sphere, two major groups of powerful actors confront the public(s) in the public sphere: (1) state authorities, political parties, interest groups, commercial corporations, and similar actors who provide information subsidies and, thus, ‘occupy an already constituted public domain in order to use it’; and (2) media gatekeepers who set the agenda of public discourse and control the access of contributions and authors to the mass media that control the public discourse (Habermas, 1992: 440, 453–54). This is why a constant danger exists of equating any “‘public activity” of elites—especially the creation, transformation, and running of local “civic” organizations—with a political public sphere’ not only in China, to which Calhoun (1993: 277) refers here, but in general.

In a more recent essay that focused on the empirical findings and pathologies of political communication, Habermas took up an even more critical and thorough position on the issue. He lengthened the list of ‘intruders’ with seven (partly overlapping) additional key actors ‘who make their appearance on the virtual stage of an established public sphere’ rather than (re)produce it: (1) journalists, (2) politicians, (3) lobbyists, (4) advocates, (5) experts, (6) moral entrepreneurs, and (7) intellectuals (Habermas, 2006: 416). But the list is not exhaustive yet. First, in addition to ‘politicians’ (the legislative and executive branch of power), we should add the judiciary. Then the list should be expanded with (at least two) distinct groups of interest in the performance of mass media—(1) media owners’ interest in using their media as a means of self-expression and profit maximization; (2) the general interest of capital to advertise commodities on an ever larger scale—which are able to materialize their interests *through* the media, which they historically did very effectively. All these actors acting ‘on the virtual stage of an established public sphere’ potentially imperil publicness of the public sphere in the measure that they bring manipulative publicity in the public sphere by subsidizing information and setting the agenda of public issues and framing the public discourse. On the other hand, a clear interest in the (re)production of a genuine public sphere derives from less numerous and less powerful actors, which may be classified into three main categories: (1) audiences’ demand for media uses and interest in receiving information and opinions; (2) various civil society groups’ interest in having access to the media to publish their opinions; (3) a general (ethical) interest of citizens in maintaining the citizen rights and in the media performing their public service functions. Citizens *qua* citizens—either as

'publics' or as 'audiences' do not seem to be among key actors in the public sphere anymore but rather, as in the old Lippmann's theorization, spectators observing from the balcony. Nevertheless, the public sphere is safeguarded only when economic and social conditions giving everyone an equal chance to meet the criteria for admission to the public sphere are effectively met.

### **Did public opinion polls kill the public?**

A natural consequence of the defeat of the public and the rise of the public sphere was a further dissociation of public opinion from the public and the de-socialization of public opinion, which imploded into public opinion polls. It is true that the theoretical de-socialization of public opinion through polling historically preceded the subordination of the public to the public sphere (this really began in the 1930s), but the neutralization of the public by the public sphere gave to the process a new and strong impetus.<sup>8</sup>

The historical decline of the public observed by Dewey in the 1920s was soon confirmed by a revolutionary invention in empirical research: the development of surveys and opinion polling brought about significant changes in the conceptualization of public opinion, which was completely separated from the public. Before the invention of polling, it was always assumed that public opinion was defined as opinion that was publicly debated and circulated and that represented a significant number (group) of people. In the new understanding of public opinion, which is closely connected with the rise of polling, the public as the subject of public opinion ('tribunal') composed of politically reasoning individuals was substituted with a dispersed mass or even any group composed of just two or more communicating individuals: 'Theoretically, the number of possible publics is the number of groups of two or more individuals that may be selected. The word 'public' and the word 'group' are for all practical purposes interchangeable' (Childs, 1965: 13). Public opinion was thus reduced to nothing more than 'collections of individual opinions.'

The invention of polling had an immense influence on conceptualizations of public opinion. Converse was convinced that 'the firm establishment of a public opinion polling industry [...] homogenized the definition [of public opinion] and stabilized it for the foreseeable future' (Converse, 1987: S13). Polling was often considered not only a research technique (a scientific instrument) to 'measure the popular will' but also a political artifact—a new institution of (political) democracy. Formerly, social sciences made rather unsuccessful attempts at scientific operationalization of normative concepts of 'public opinion' and 'the public' (see Blumer, 1948). But pollsters believed that with polling, the concept of 'public opinion' seemed to have achieved a satisfactory degree of empirical validity, whereas the concept of 'the public' became superfluous.

Swapping the term 'opinion polls' for 'public opinion' reveals the same type of reasoning as swapping 'the public sphere' for 'the public.' As Darnton (2000) suggested, the concept of the public sphere was often used in the way that attributed agency to the 'sphere' that certainly cannot act, and 'made it the crucial factor, more important than ideas or public opinion.' 'Public

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<sup>8</sup> The discussion of polling and its relation to public opinion is based on my earlier paper on this issue 'Från opinionsstyre demokrati till globala styrelseformer utan opinion' published in O. Peterson (ed.), *Medierna : folkets röst?* SNS Förlag, Stockholm 2008.

opinion polls' produced a similar effect: George Gallup (1940), for example, attributed to polling a democratic counterweight to the growing independence of political representatives and, therefore, a separation of representation from popular rule; it was thus considered not only a research technique or scientific instrument, but a new instrument of political democracy—a new actor, a 'mandate from the people' to the government (Splichal, 1999: 238).

In his article on 'Meinungsforschung und Öffentlichkeit' (1964/2005), Theodor Adorno criticized the misunderstanding of public opinion research, which undermines the very assumptions about the public/ness on which that research should rest. Essentially, Adorno followed Blumer's criticism 'that the formation of public opinion can only occur as a function of a society in operation, largely *through the interaction of groups* rather than individuals, which imply that the study of public opinion must reflect *the functional composition and organization of society*' (Blumer, 1948: 543; emphasis added).

For Blumer, equating empirical *opinion research* (or *polling* for that matter) with *research into public opinion* was a perfect example of the invalid dismissal of interaction—the direct reciprocally oriented social action—as the social basis of public opinion. As groups and individuals with varying amounts of influence interact as a 'public,' they create and express public opinion that might be voiced through a variety of 'mechanisms' other than surveys, such as letters, telegrams, petitions, resolutions, lobbies, and delegations (Blumer, 1948: 545). In particular, he criticized 'the inability of public opinion polling to isolate 'public opinion' as an abstract or generic concept which could thereby become the focal point for the formation of a system of propositions,' because only '[w]hen the generic object of study is distinguishable, it becomes possible to focus study on that object and thus to learn progressively more about that object' (Blumer, 1948: 542).

Whereas Blumer pleaded for more intellectual efforts to understand 'the functional composition and organization of society,' which he believed would eventually provide a 'better definition' of public opinion, Adorno argued in his article '*Meinungsforschung und Öffentlichkeit*' (1964) that due to the nature of publicness (*Öffentlichkeit*) such a conclusive (operational) definition is actually impossible:

The vagueness, however, with which, certainly in Locke, the ideas of 'public' and 'public opinion' are tainted cannot be corrected through precise verbal definition. Publicness is not clearly demarcated; it is essentially polemical: what was once not public should become so. Only in this sense is the point to understand, as a criticism of absolute cabinet politics, how the inverted aristocratic orders allow—and contemporary elite theories even celebrate—the secret (Adorno, 1964/2005: 121).

Adorno reproached the German term 'opinion research' (*Meinungsforschung*) with dropping, 'for the sake of brevity, a key adjective, which alone identifies its concern: research on *public* opinion [that] refers to the idea of the public' (p. 120). Technically speaking, dropping the term 'publicness' and swapping the term 'public opinion' with mere 'opinion' may 'solve' all the problems related to 'publicness'—without articulating the theory of public opinion (meaning, as the opinion of the public). Of course, that was not Adorno's solution. On the contrary, he suggested that public opinion polls should 'not be a mere technique, but just as much an object of sociology as a science that inquires into the objective structural laws of society' (p. 122).

In the discussions on the validity of polls, critical suggestions such as those formulated by Blumer and Adorno have been largely disregarded, while opinion polling has been increasingly

treated synonymously with 'public opinion.' The core controversies were about reliability and partially about the validity of the method, not theory. In the extreme case, what Blumer considered the main fallacy in public opinion research—that the polling procedures are creating the object of study instead of being derived from it—is even celebrated as a major scientific achievement by a competing paradigm modeled upon natural sciences. The Gordian knot of public opinion's operationalization that Blumer addressed (and that his intellectual heirs elaborated on but were not able to untie), was 'cut' by the idea that polls are actually not a possible operational definition of public opinion but public opinion itself. '[P]ublic opinion is created by the procedures that are established to 'discover' it. The phenomenon of opinion is an artefact of the technical procedures that are designed to capture it. It is determined by *technical* considerations ... the artifactual aspect of public opinion brings it closer to the model of the successful natural sciences' (Osborne & Rose, 1999: 382; emphasis original).

Osborne and Rose claim that 'clearly *without* surveys and forms of measurement we would not know of public opinion at all; we would have no knowledge of what there is to measure without procedures of measurement' (p. 387), which is just the opposite to Bourdieu, who argues that public opinion may (or does) exist elsewhere but it does not exist 'in the form which some people, whose existence depends on this illusion, would have us believe' (Bourdieu, 1972/1979: 129); in other words, it does not exist in polls. Osborne and Rose suggest that 'public opinion does not exist in so far as there are technologies—and respondents attuned to the technologies—to ensure that it does so' (Osborne & Rose, 1999: 387). On the other hand, however, Osborne and Rose claim that 'the existence of questionnaires and surveys themselves promote the idea that there is a public opinion "out there" to be had and measured' (p. 387), i.e. these procedures suggest that public opinion exists 'out there' independently of the procedures. If a procedure is aimed at 'capturing' a phenomenon, it is implied that the phenomenon exists prior to and independently of measurement.

The suggestion that there could be no knowledge of public opinion without interview response data gathering is based on two invalid assumptions. First, it implies that the presentation of interview response data *is* public opinion, while in fact the description of an empirical procedure is at best its *operational* definition. Second, it suggests that there was no observable manifestation of public opinion at all (and thus public opinion was non-existing in empirical terms, or at least nobody was able to comprehend it) prior to the invention of polling, which is obviously historically incorrect. This would imply that, oddly enough, for two centuries at least, public opinion theorists have acted as if public opinion has existed when in fact it has not; and that all 'public opinion organs' discussed since Bentham have been mere illusions or phantoms. Were all dissertations on public opinion before the advent of polling discussing (1) 'In what form should political institutions recognize public opinion?' (2) 'What characteristics should public opinion possess?' and (3) 'What kind of political power should it be given?' (Althaus, 2006: 98) How could there be such discussions on what empirically did not exist? Althaus argues that 'empirical research, from the early twentieth century to the present, eagerly ran with the second question but punted the others to philosophers' (ibid.). Osborne and Rose deny that philosophers can say anything about the first question and make the other two irrelevant: there is only one form in which public opinion exists (polls), and the question of its characteristics and power is purely empirical rather than normative.

We may consider polling a great (scientific) invention, but we should not leave out other public opinion 'technologies' invented earlier in history and thus erroneously take the polls as

‘the proper *discipline* necessary for public opinion to exist’ (Osborne & Rose, 1999: 382). Besides polling, there were (and still are) other ‘technologies to ensure that public opinion exists.’ The idea that ‘the notion of opinion is the product of the particular procedure by which opinion is elicited’ omits the fact that opining—as a specific form of ‘holding for true’ which differs from believing and knowing—exists independently of any external ‘elicitation,’ and so are created personal opinions. People ‘know how to create that phenomenon called opinion,’ and they validate their opinions in communication even if they are not asked questions by pollsters to do so. They have known it for thousands of years.

In other words, it is not the measuring instrument that ‘establishes the objective field called public opinion,’ but the process of communication (including asking and responding to questions in polling) by which individuals express and validate their opinions. Arguing that public opinion can only exist with the technology of polling also implies that public opinion is merely a sum of individual opinions expressed privately to pollsters. Such a privatized conception of public opinion makes political relations, institutions, processes, and outcomes of democratic systems irrelevant to public opinion; what it counts is only the ways that individual citizens make sense of them. Yet, such a conception is methodologically very convenient, which is probably the main reason that the privatized concept of public opinion became so popular among many researchers, particularly with computer assisted telephone interviewing and online polls.

In a specific but unfortunate way, however, Osborne and Rose are right. Rather than ‘eliciting opinions’ from respondents, polls often do elicit ‘non-opinions’ or ‘non-attitudes,’ i.e. opinions that *appear* to be individual opinions because they were recorded by pollsters, but that did not exist prior to the polling procedure. According to Converse’s empirically tested nonattitude thesis, people’s opinions may be ‘extremely labile for individuals over time’ (Converse, 1964: 241); ‘large portions of an electorate do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis for intense political controversy among elites for substantial periods of time’ (p. 245). Only for ‘nonattitudes’ it is true that they are largely, if not exclusively, product of a particular procedure—which inspired Bourdieu to conclude that public opinion (as elicited in polls) in reality does not exist. The concept of nonattitude suggests that people’s opinions as identified in polls—in contrast to their true opinions—may change to a large extent randomly because they are simply too vague and instantaneously formed, but also as a consequence of ‘measurement errors,’ such as vague wording, order of questions, interviewer bias, scaling error, and the context in which questions are asked. The critique blames the tool of opinion polls rather than ‘the public,’ and the experiments with ‘deliberative polls’ carried out by James Fishkin and his colleagues at the University of Texas provide some strong empirical support to this criticism. Deliberative polls clearly suggest that when (additional) information is available to respondents, and if they participate in discussion, they are likely to form a more consistent opinion that is often different from the one instantaneously formed as a reaction to a question asked by an interviewer.

In a heretical perspective, we may consider the ‘technology’ of polling intrinsically similar and functionally equivalent (both epistemologically and ontologically) to some other institutionalized political processes such as elections and referenda. ‘Participating in a survey, either as investigator, interviewer, or respondent, is no less natural than voting, meeting in a town hall, serving on a jury, or any other political practice’ (Sanders, 1999: 256). The technologies of general (or, indeed, any) political elections, and referenda on important social issues differ from

polling on party preferences and/or political attitudes in only two respects: (1) polling has no direct political/legal consequences that elections have, and (2) polling is based on random sampling in contrast to self-selection in elections. Elections define the composition of parliaments and other (political) institutions; results of legislative referenda have direct legislative effects (enacting or suppressing a law). In contrast, consequences of polls in society are indirect, mediated by political institutions or other institutions participating in the governance. In polls, preferences are measured in a random sample of the electorate (with corrections related to the expressed intention of respondents to vote or not to vote), which demonstrates their 'scientific' character. In the authentic election 'respondents' are self-selected (and thus less valid or entirely invalid in scientific terms), and this process is considered political participation. Yet both are based on the very same idea of representation of popular will: the results of parliamentary elections and results of polling are assumed to fairly represent the general constituency.

However, why should the division between forms of the political process and a form of research be taken up as a matter of course? The most obvious argument for the thesis that *polls are part of the political process*, too, is the case of pre-election and exit polls. They 'measure' exactly the same thing as elections (citizens' votes for political parties and individual candidates for political positions) with exactly the same instrument (secret ballot), but with slightly different procedures and degrees of reliability and, for sure, different consequences. Polls are also similar to any other political process in that they are legally regulated. For example, in no country the publication of election polls' findings is allowed on the Election Day before polling stations are closed and the counting of votes begins, whereas in many countries the embargo is much longer and could extend up to thirty days before elections.

The fact that elections and referenda were invented as *parts of the institutionalized political process* and clearly not as a kind of research, whereas *polls were invented as a form of research* rather than a form of political institutionalization of public opinion, is quite irrelevant. Specific functions of polls are not their inbred characteristics; instead, they depend on, and are defined by, users and observers; they do not exist in a phenomenon as 'natural facts' irrespective of the human context but are always relative to observer and context. In short, functions in the sense of the performance of a social phenomenon to attain an effect congruent with the defined goal are social constructs and thus culturally specific. It may well be that polls have been designed by Gallup and others with the goal to develop a research procedure to 'measure public opinion.' However, the embeddedness of polls in the political system has resulted in specific political functions (e.g., fostering vs. weakening democracy) that have been assigned to polls irrespective of their scientific functions (e.g., measuring attitudes vs. public opinion). Both types of functions have been contested because they are related to value-laden goals; this always happens when we enter the field of 'institutional' rather than 'natural' facts.

### **The public and public sphere in global governance**

'The public' has long been considered as an exclusively, or at least predominantly, national phenomenon. However, in the period of globalization, the tacit assumption that the public (sphere) 'belongs' to the nation-state has been challenged. Contemporary ideas of the transnational public sphere and cosmopolitan democracy are obvious reactions to the development of the complex, interconnected but at the same time diversified and hierarchically

stratified world that we live in. Local, national, regional and global issues, policies and actions affect us individually and collectively, but mechanisms are lacking that would enable citizens to act effectively beyond the national frame. The relation between the nation state and national public (sphere) is significantly changing. The normative requirement of the public sphere to be both a forum for citizens' deliberation generating public opinion as well as a medium for mobilizing public opinion as a political force makes it necessary that a public sphere and a sovereign power correlate with each other.

The states of the twenty-first century definitely lost the exclusive power of 'guardians of custom, as legislators, as executives, or judges' (Dewey, 1927/1991: 35) who may effectively protect public interest by regulating actions of individuals and groups. Traditionally, the state was indeed able to regulate direct and indirect consequences of transactions to which people not directly involved were exposed, but today states are not the exclusive regulators of those transactions. However, while they lost this exclusive 'privilege,' they (some of them at least) also acquired a new one: today decisions made by states have implications not only for their own citizens but also for others—who can hardly act as 'the public' in relation to a foreign state. In other words, while formerly there was a symmetrical relationship between national public(s) and the nation state that was held responsible to and by them, in the 'post-national constellation,' the state and public sphere have become much more vaguely associated.

The nascent global civil sphere has none of the institutions that, in a fully functioning democracy, allow public opinion to produce civil power and thus regulate the state, such as independent courts, party competition, and elections. Yet this nascent global civil sphere does have access to institutions of a more communicative kind' (Alexander, 2006: 523).

An often implicit understanding of the public, public opinion, and the public sphere as 'national phenomena' prevailed throughout history because they were all dominated by the pursuit of national 'public' interests eventually supported, organized and regulated by the state. Or rather, due to empirical circumstances, this question never attracted much theoretical concern. Nevertheless, it is hard to find any author for whom the state, and particularly the nation-state and national territorial boundaries, would have a constitutive role in theorizing the public (sphere). I would argue that the international dimension has never really been a blind spot in theorizing the public and public opinion. On the contrary, and explicitly, the public was not seen as existing exclusively under the safeguard of a nation-state.

Tönnies, for example, explicitly discusses an 'international public,' and even public opinion representing 'the entire civilized humanity' (Tönnies, 1922: 137). As a matter of fact, the earliest experiential forms of the publics in the middle ages were typically 'transnational' (or transregional, i.e. traversing administrative units), which was largely enabled by Latin as the *lingua franca* among intellectuals and actually imposed by the scarcity of literate individuals. A clear example is that of theologians who represented an international, educated public with internal differences in opinion. '*Zeitgeist*' is, according to Tönnies, another example of public opinion that transcends national borders and is international by its very nature.

Tönnies also explains why 'the public,' which is a purely spiritual collectivity that never physically assembles, mostly acts within the boundaries of a nation state. For Tönnies, 'the "great" public' is interested primarily in economic and political issues; it is therefore 'the political public' that is mainly influenced by political processes within the state. Nevertheless,

since the first world war it has not been difficult to see that 'world events' have increasingly generated 'an international public,' primarily in the spheres of arts, science, and technology, whose progress is much less confined by national borders, but also in the sphere of politics (1922: 84-85). 'If *the* public is not conceptually bound to a specific space and time, it is an idea of indefinable range and duration,' related also to the formation—primarily among elites—of global culture (*Bildung*) providing common understandings and interpretations of 'world events.'

In the last two decades, globalization has transformed social relations profoundly and loosened their confinement to territorial boundaries as well as the links between territory and collective destiny. Increased global interdependencies are most palpable in the economy ('the global marketplace'), but globalization also has significant social, political, and cultural dimensions and consequences. One of them is the challenge that globalization poses to the power of national governments and their role in international relations. National governments alone are not able to effectively regulate and control global developments in trade, finances, mass media, and ecology, not to mention global terrorism. Thus new institutional regulatory strategies and mechanisms are required to deal with the growing complexities of globalization.

Political globalization can also be observed in the foundation of transnational legal entities, such as the United Nations and the European Union, and a growing number of international conferences addressing global problems and cooperation. Hundreds of institutions and organizations regulate the global processes and issues of trade, telecommunications, transportation, health, the environment, and many others. Globalization is bringing about a 'global system' composed of a variety of combinations between national, international, and transnational political institutions, corporations, associations, individuals, and other groupings.

While globalization fosters independence of political elites from national citizenry (which can be clearly seen in a number of referenda across Europe where national 'publics' were less keen on shifting authority to the European level than national political elites), it also endangers their power to mobilize citizens for political participation. Globalization may be more fettering than fostering democracy. It is hegemonic inasmuch it is based on diffusion of neo-liberal ideological currents and developmental patterns from the most developed capitalist countries in Western Europe and North America to global peripheries and semi-peripheries (e.g., Central and Eastern Europe) rather than on the indigenous social groups engaged in building a new economic and social structure.

Globalization has two important consequences for citizen social and political rights. It shakes economic security and social equalities, and weakens citizens' participation in decision-making and democratic institutions. It also limits the scope and reach of actions of national governments, thus challenging sovereign states' responsibility for the common good. Globalization has brought about transnational social actors who 'denationalize' decision-making and undermine national decision-making authority but do not bear their responsibilities. With the exclusion of the public (which may not even exist on a transnational scale), decisional roles of governing individuals and collective bodies are less visible, less formally recognized, and less binding, and thus the decision makers are less accountable as compared to traditional national (political) decision-making bodies.

'Denationalization' may take different forms, in which responsibility of political institutions at the national level is transferred to those operating at the transnational level or delegated to private or semi-private organizations. In the latter case, issues previously subject to

formal political scrutiny by more or less representative political bodies are relegated to a market-driven deliberation and accountability, which brings about 'depoliticization.' Depoliticization in global governance is ultimately reflected in the absence of 'transnational' or 'global' *demos* and public(s). There is no such a thing as, for example, 'the people of Europe' or a 'European public' in the sense that there are 'the people of the United States' or the 'American public' in the USA.

Nevertheless, transnational networks also help people form identities along the lines of class, gender, and ethnicity that complement state-framed ethnic or national identities. Many people participating in collective actions on a transnational or global scale refer to fundamental civil and political rights, as well as to economic, social and cultural rights, and civic equality and protection against gender, religious, racial, ethnic or class discrimination as superior to state sovereignty.

Globalization denotes the formation of a 'global system' composed of a variety of combinations between national, international, and transnational political institutions, corporations, associations, individuals, and other groupings. Processes of globalization go together with the dispersal of authority in all directions, which is the core idea in the concept of 'governance.'

Like public sphere, the concept of governance is a fairly new addition to the vocabulary of the social sciences. Whereas globalization denotes the extension of social space, governance refers to the expansion of regulation beyond government. Broadly conceived, the idea of governance explores the changing boundary between the state and civil society. It denotes the transformation of government (or governance for that matter) in an increasingly interdependent world and reflects fundamental changes in the decision-making process compared with the classical model of government. In contrast to 'government,' 'governance' refers to both state *and* non-state forms of making *and* influencing decisions that significantly affect population in a particular locality or the entire world community. The idea of governance blurs the boundaries of the traditional dichotomy, 'the state—civil society,' or in the more recent trichotomy, 'the state—economy—civil society.'

In contrast to government, governance is seen as dispersed across multiple centers and levels of authority, both nationally and globally. Most agree that the central component of governance is decision-making, but it also includes processes and relations through which individuals and groups with an interest in the outcome of decision making (try to) influence it in different ways. Many of the power actors and stakeholders (including mass media) play a significant role in the global system, not by making decisions or determining the precise form of a process or action, but rather by subsidizing information and providing opinions to support the process and activate those not directly involved. This adds an important dimension to decision-making—that of representation and accountability. Typically, the 'civil society' forms of governance lack the traditional enforcement capacities of the state or power of capital—forms of coercion enforcing mandatory action by 'targets'—yet they may influence decision-making.

The conceptualization of governance comes confusingly close to the traditional concept of 'the public.' In their differentiation between two types of multi-level governance—basically, general-purpose jurisdictions vs. task-specific jurisdictions<sup>9</sup>—Hooghe and Marks define the latter:

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<sup>9</sup> In many cases, new 'jurisdictions' have been developed because of the failure of the traditional 'general-purpose jurisdictions' to offer new ways of problem solving. In that empirical sense, the term 'global

They are set up to *solve particular policy problems*, such as managing a common pool resource, setting a technical standard, managing an urban service, or shipping hazardous waste. The constituencies of [these] jurisdictions are *individuals who share some geographical or functional space and who have a common need for collective decision-making*—e.g., as irrigation farmers, public service users, parents, exporters, homeowners, or software producers. These are not communities of fate; *membership is voluntary, and one can be a member of several such groups* (Hooghe and Marks, 2003: 40; emphasis added).

This is almost exactly what Dewey had in mind when he defined the public as consisting of all those affected by indirect consequences of specific transactions in which they could not have participated, to such an extent that they consider it necessary to take some action.

This public is organized and made effective by means of representatives who as guardians of custom, as legislators, as executives, as judges, etc., care for its special interests by methods intended to regulate the conjoint actions of individuals and groups (Dewey, 1927/1991: 35).

The concept of global governance treats governance as ‘the public’ in the Benthamian, Deweyan, Tönniesean, or Habermasian sense—as a network or (imagined) ‘tribunal’ of individuals and groups discursively engaged in global issues that seriously affect a significant part of the population in order to find a solution and/or come to decision, which may even be based on argumentative rationality.

However, there is one significant difference. The democratic participation of citizens, which is essential for any political conceptualization of ‘the public,’ is marginalized or even completely left out from the process of governance. The inclusion of non-state actors (e.g., nongovernmental organizations, but also private for-profit corporations) in (global) governance who act primarily in a non-hierarchical environment does not necessarily increase the communicative and decision-making power of citizens. The opposite scenario is the case, namely that the democratic participation of citizens is de-privileged or even restrained because of depoliticization.

Possibly, new forms of governance have been developed at local, national, and transnational levels also because of the growing ‘democratic deficit’—the failure of traditional decision makers or ‘representatives’ to offer new ways of democratic problem solving in the changing economic and political environment. In that sense, the term ‘global governance’ implies new actors or networks that could overcome the ‘democratic deficit.’ It comes close to Dewey’s concept of ‘the public’—a network of individuals and groups discursively engaged in global issues that seriously affect a significant part of the population, in order to find a solution and/or come to a decision, which may even be based on argumentative rationality. However, in the practical processes of governance, which are dominated by neo-liberal hegemony, the democratic participation of citizens that is essential for ‘the public’ is largely left out or, at best, is incorporated in a subordinated position. Participation of civil-society actors and non-state actors (e.g., nongovernmental organizations, but also private for-profit corporations) in a non-

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governance’ implies new actors or networks that could overcome the ‘democratic deficit.’ ‘Interdependence, flexibility, and complementarity’ seem to be ‘the three most important features of networks [...] that facilitate the transfer and use of knowledge and other resources of various actors in the global public policy-making process’ (Benner *et al.*, 2004: 196-7).

hierarchical environment of (global) governance does not necessarily increase the persuasive and decision-making powers of citizens. Global governance rests on very limited consent by those affected by the consequences of transactions in which they cannot participate; democratic participation of citizens is de-privileged or even restrained because of depoliticization and the lack of a fully developed transnational political community. As Zürn suggests, 'The absence so far of a fully developed transnational political community is incongruous with the existence of transnational social spaces, and poses a congruency problem that cannot easily be overcome' (Zürn, 2004: 261).

## **Conclusion**

An important consequence of globalization is manifest in the changing relation between '*ethnos*, the "people" as an imagined community of membership and affinity, and *demos*, the "people" as the collective subject of representation, decision making, and rights,' in Étienne Balibar's words (2003: 8). Historically, *ethnos* and *demos* were inseparably linked to each other; the creation of a democratic system was closely associated with a specific national affiliation. It similarly holds true for the formation of the public and the public sphere: these democratic achievements developed within the ethnic borders of nation-states at a time when they had already been firmly established (as non-democratic entities). Globalized governance has removed this 'natural' foundation and framework of democratic processes: the *ethnos*. This has different consequences for 'the public' and for the 'public sphere.' While new communication technologies, such as the Internet, make transnational communication channels easily accessible to all social actors including citizens, and thus support the transnationalization of the public sphere, they do not stimulate the formation of transnational public(s).

The very same development of communication technologies that reduces complexity also brings about its further growth. The question of how to master the growth of complexity was the core of the dispute between Dewey and Lippmann on the nature and capacities of the public in the 1920s. The 'law of growing complexity' still implies, as it did in the 1920s, that more and more 'world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined' (Lippmann, 1922/1960: 29). The development of computer mediated communication does not lead by itself towards the 'Great Community,' the noble Dewey's vision, but rather enables the development of those non-political forms of community life and scientific, religious, artistic, educational, industrial and commercial groupings that should be, according to Dewey (1927/1991: 26), strictly demarcated from the organized public. The greater the number of transactions among people, the smaller the proportion of transactions in which an individual can participate either directly or indirectly in the regulation of indirect consequences. The amount of information available is growing, information access is becoming easier—but at the same time, the gap between the amounts of produced and consumed information is deepening. The media supply is also growing, but it often does not imply a greater diversity; rather, homogenization of the supply seems to be a natural consequence of media concentration and competition for audiences.

A large number of Web communities have been formed both locally (nationally) and globally to enable people who share common interests and activities to communicate and share information. Yet the Web communities do not significantly enhance democracy because they are just as narrowly defined as traditional public factions defined by racial, gender, age, ideological,

religious, professional, and other identities and interests, and they rarely transcend group particularism. The democratic merit of computer mediated communication is mostly limited to the successful overturn of political suppression and censorship of authoritarian regimes that tried to control and repress (mass) communication and public opinion. In some cases, they may have contributed to the transgression of fragmented cultural and political interests, but they also may have deepened the fragmentation. The boom of millions of more or less specialized websites, blogs, chat rooms, forums, and networks of friends across the world do not lead to an inter- or supra-national public (sphere) but more likely to 'the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics' (Habermas, 2006: 423n).

The global advance of information and communication technologies makes—at least from the technological point of view—access to communication means much easier than any technological solution in the past. However, instead of providing only passive access to the consumption sphere, democratization implies primarily the development of conditions for active participation, that is, a direct and indirect incorporation of citizens into the production and exchange of messages in different forms of communication from interpersonal to mass communication in which the individual can realize his/her interests and meet his/her needs in collaboration with others. The actual democratization is defined by whether not only the number of active participants in the communication processes, but also the social basis of communication expands, that is, whether the new forms of communication and democracy contribute to the incorporation of, until then, excluded social categories and groups, for example, the young, women, socially, economically, or politically deprived groups, national, ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities, and so on. In other words, democratization should eliminate the major sources of distorted communications and external sources of inequalities, e.g., class and ownership privileges, gender and racial discrimination, age grade exclusion, and political or professional elitism.

As Balibar suggests, the core of the *aporia* is:

[...] the necessity we face, and the impossibility we struggle against, of collectively inventing a *new* image of a people, a new image of the relation between membership in historical communities (*ethnos*) and the continued creation of citizenship (*demos*) through collective action and the acquisition of fundamental rights to existence, work, and expression, as well as civic equality and the equal dignity of languages, classes, and sexes (Balibar, 2003: 9).

It is difficult to imagine how powerful transnational democratic institutions analogous to the democratic system of nation-states could be established. There are no empirical signs of 'transplanting' the model of centralized public regulation from the nation-state to the global setting. For instance, who is supposed to constitute the collective subject of representation—the people as *demos*—and how should they be represented? The principle of 'one state—one vote' would hardly be democratic since it would give (taking the European Union as an example) the citizen of Malta two hundred times more voting power than the citizen of Germany. Yet treating the European Union as a single constituency with majority rule does not seem any more democratic, because it would allow the representatives of a few large national constituencies to always outvote the majority of countries.

Nevertheless, the absence of a transnational institutional infrastructure, e.g., in the form of a public sphere, seems to be less a problem than the non-existence of a transnational *ethnos* and

transnational public. A realistic option seems to be building a more decentralized and diffuse system of governance, which ultimately depends upon the creation of an appropriate transnational public sphere. Global governance should provide opportunities and sites for public deliberation among stakeholders to expose the decisions of powerful actors to transnational public scrutiny. By having access to communication media in a global environment, citizens and non-governmental organizations may contribute to the formation of transnational culture. By participating in the public discourse, citizens and civic associations may even increase transparency, promote accountability, and enhance the democratic legitimacy of the rules and institutions of global governance. But this is not the solution.

The question remains as to whether a transnational public sphere would pave the way to the formation of transnational public(s), which could link the governance with deliberative democracy. As 'stakeholders' in global governance and/or actors in the transnational public sphere, transnational publics would breathe civic engagement into an anemic public sphere dominated by official state actors, expert elites, and mass media, thus strengthening its fourth and most vital dimension. This would reverse the process in which the dominant type of communication is mass media, and the publics are degraded to mere consumers in media markets. In 2003, after the beginning of the Iraq war, Derrida and Habermas recognized 'the demonstrating masses in London and Rome, Madrid and Barcelona, Berlin and Paris' reacting to the Spanish prime minister's invitation to 'the New Europe' to go to war against Iraq as 'a signal for the birth of a *European public*.' Perhaps it was 'a signal,' but there is a long way to go before creating an awareness and institutional environment for a vibrant European public, not to mention a world public.

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