



Transnationalisation, Public Communication and Active Citizenship. The Emergence of a Fragmented and Fluid European Public Sphere

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Abstract

This paper is focused on the emergence of the European public sphere debate. This discussion has become more and more prominent between scholars of European Studies who have given it both normative and empirical attention. This is due to a variety of reasons, but in particular the increase in research about the legitimacy of European integration, which has been the subject of a wide debate since at least the beginning of the 1990s. Firstly, the article critically assesses the normative arguments that have supported the development of the European public sphere, by focusing on the social, political and cultural dimensions of European integration. After having assessed this debate and underlined current challenges emerged in light of recent events (such as the euro-crisis, the rise of euroscepticism and the rise in far right movements), the article then introduces the empirical research on the europeanisation of the public sphere, by looking at the development of an agenda that has more and more concentrated on the fragmentation and fluidity of such construct. This discussion is key to introduce the final part of the article, which focuses on the role of civil society in the broader European constituency and in the public sphere. The article highlights some of the ambiguities inherent to the current research agenda, by calling for a more comprehensive approach to study active citizenship in Europe that departs from a consideration of the NGOs activists as the main locus of analysis.

Introduction

The debate on the European public sphere has become more and more prominent between scholars of European Studies who have given it both normative and empirical attentions. This is due to a variety of reasons, but in particular, the increase in research about the legitimacy of European integration, which has been the subject of a wide debate since at least the beginning of the 1990s. This issue is related to the dilemma concerning the relationship between the European project as an institutional and political enterprise and the public as a whole.

The basic assumption of this article is that European integration has had an impact on the Member States arena changing the modalities of conceiving the social spaces (Soysal 2002), the structures of meanings of individuals, their perceptions and their cognitive aspects of being part of the transnational community. This is one of the essential elements of the constructivist perspective on European integration that has emerged at the end of the 1990s (Christiansen et al. 1999). The emphasis on European integration as a continuous process that entails social, political and cultural *transformations* is quite important. As a consequence of this the European public sphere is being continuously forged and constructed through the interactions between different actors on the basis of their influence.

A sociological approach to the study of European integration entails a wide range of considerations of the processes of transnationalisation going on at different levels of the system of European governance. The dispersal of power and authority between territorial (the European, the national, the regional, the local) and functional levels (media, civil society, interest groups, policy networks) has produced a radical change in how European social spaces are conceived.

The development of European governance is enhanced and favoured by the *transnationalisation* (Faist and Özveren 2004, p. 3) of European territory into thematic networks no longer linked to the Member States. This entails a drastic transformation of the public sphere and a new conceptualisation of the processes of europeanisation going on at different levels.

This article starts by offering an overview of the normative debate on the European public sphere by unpacking first of all three interrelated dimensions, which are *social*, *political* and *cultural* integration. The second section presents an overview of present empirical research that has been conducted in order to study the European public sphere and provides an outline of a research agenda that has more and more enabled the study of the europeanisation of the public sphere in Europe. The final paragraph addresses a critical discussion on one of the main actors that takes part in the formation of the European public sphere, the Organised Civil Society. It also provides an overview of the current research agenda that has been looking at the establishment of active citizenship in Europe. In acknowledging the validity of current approaches to civic engagement and political participation in the public sphere, the article advocates the necessity of bringing the current research agenda a step further, by focusing more on the actual factors that motivate the practice of active citizenship in Europe by non-state actors.

The public sphere debate: social, political and cultural integration

Normative arguments on the development of the European public sphere have been instrumental in stimulating a lively debate around the study of a process of transnationalisation of public communication across Europe (Eriksen & Fossum 2000; Schlesinger 1999, 2003; Schlesinger & Kevin 2000). When looking at these arguments, the literature has pointed to positive elements that such a construction would offer for European integration, in particular for providing input legitimacy to EU policy processes and for improving the EU system of governance (Trenz & Eder 2004), but also for favouring the social, cultural and political integration between Europeans. All these issues are of great importance for the discussion that is presented here, and help to unpack the debate regarding the reframing of the process of EU democratisation. When thinking about the centrality of the public sphere in fostering the demos of a polity, the literature widely acknowledges its importance for shaping key concepts such as the sense of belonging, citizenship and social, political and cultural identities. On this account, Eriksen stresses, the importance of the public sphere by arguing that it is 'a precondition for the realisation of popular sovereignty because, in principle, it entitles everybody to speak without limitations, whether on themes, participation, questions, time or resources' (Eriksen 2004, p. 1). This assumption implies the acknowledgment of the right to interact and communicate for citizens and to have a say on issues of public concern. It fully embodies the establishment of one of the prerequisites of a polity, the expression of free will for citizens and the shaping of a demos. As many authors note, this has traditionally been an essential component of modern state formation and the shaping of modern democracies (de Beus 2010; Fossum & Schlesinger 2007; Habermas 1989; Van de Steeg 2002). Trenz for example notes that the notion of a public sphere 'has been developed by reference to language, territory and authority' (Trenz 2008, p. 273), outlining that so far research on the European public sphere has been biased because it has put too much emphasis on modern state configurations; and therefore, it is afflicted by methodological nationalism when it comes to applying such a model on a transnational scale.

The issue of legitimacy is pivotal to the debate that surrounds the academic discussion on the democratic, cultural and social deficits afflicting European Integration. From a political sociology perspective, it is important to further explore these three dimensions as they are central to the debate on the European public sphere and at the same time have fostered the current research agenda. On the one side, normative arguments have pointed to the development of a

communicative space as being central in order to enhance forms of cultural, political and social integration. On the other side, empirical research has studied these dimensions and their meaning in regard to the development of a transnational polity. Traditionally, the social, cultural and political dimensions have been discussed separately in EU studies, but it is believed that their interconnection is key in understanding the complexity of the sense of belonging to a supranational polity and to understand the mechanisms through which full participation in the wider public sphere is activated (see for example Eder 2013; Trenz 2010; Salvatore et al. 2013). In what follows, an overview of the debate in regard to key concepts and findings related to the social, political and social dimensions of the European integration is offered. The aim is to provide a brief outline of the core arguments used by key scholars in order to frame the debate on the European public sphere as well as to outline some key challenges that are currently emerging in light of current interconnected events (such as the financial crisis, the fostering of euroscepticism and the emergence of far right movements in Europe).

Social integration: the contested nature of the European Social Dimension

In the first instance, it is believed that a common function that an EU wide public sphere would perform is that of favouring social integration between European publics. This argument looks at the centrality of the public sphere for enhancing forms of *transnational social solidarity*. Cahoun (2002, 2003), for instance, looks at the link between the public sphere debate and the social dimension of the European project (see also Eder 2013; van de Steeg 2010). This entails a concern for the enforcement of mutual solidarity between societies at the European level and the recognition of the role of civil society in this. Calhoun (2002) widely discusses the public sphere as a form of social solidarity created and reproduced through discourses and mutual discussions between citizens and institutions. The fostering of a social imaginary based on a shared sense of belonging to a territorial, cultural and political space is pivotal in this sense. By consequence, the development of the European public sphere is essential for mutual recognition and for integration between individuals. It is worth remembering here that the debate on 'Social Europe' revolves around the enhancement of social rights and has been related to the processes of participation and active engagement in the framing of European public policies. The establishment of non-state actors that have, for example, promoted anti-discrimination has brought to the foreground new important realities that are part of the wider set of Umbrella organisations currently present in Brussels. Ruzza (2004), for example, looks at the emergence of advocacy coalition networks at the European Union level having the function of shaping core values in specific areas (such as anti-racism or environmentalism). The findings of his research prove evidence of the fact that the process of engagement with wide policy networks that act in the EU has become an essential part of EU policy making. This helped European Institutions to shape the agenda around specific frameworks that touch upon anti-discrimination law, integration policy, intercultural dialogue and gender equality. The recognition of core values encompassing different Member States is pointed to as a constituent part of framing the European Social Dimension (Giddens 2006; 2007). As Giddens points out, however, the development of the social dimension has not resulted in a single unifying set of social policies or a single model of European welfare. This framework is still shaped by the different ideological traditions that characterise the families of welfare models in Europe (Esping-Andersen 1990). This results in the lack of activation of core principles that shape social integration, first and foremost social solidarity between social groups and individuals. This debate has also become particularly prominent in light of the euro-crisis. The emergence of different social and political tensions that have been undermining, rather than favouring, social solidarity is quite significant in light of the discussion addressed in this paper, with a clash, for example going on between

different parts of Europe as a result of the austerity measures (Degryse et al. 2013; Lodge & Sarikaris 2013; Meijers 2013). This provides evidence of the ambiguous nature of the *European social model* and the fragmented nature of the European public sphere.

Political integration: key issues in debating legitimacy in the EU

In terms of political integration, it is argued that the development of the European public sphere is important because it enhances the basis of *participatory democracy* at the European level. In a series of essays Habermas (1994, 1995, 2001), advocates the development of the European public sphere as a possible solution to the democratic deficit itself. His work inspired a research agenda related to the broader issue of the democratic deficit and the lack of legitimacy of the EU (Bellamy & Castiglione 2001; Kohler Koch & Rittberger 2007) that considers this as a reflection of the lack of public support for the European project as a whole. In this regard, a shared normative argument for scholars that study the public sphere development is that the public sphere in itself is a necessity because it is a basic democratic driver, since it entails the full right to participate and express opinions in regard to public matters. It is not by chance that the establishment of the European Public Sphere at the EU level is strictly linked with the development of deliberative and participative forms of policy making (Bellamy & Castiglione 2011, 2013). The concept of *input legitimacy*, in this regard, is considered to be a key driver of democratisation as well as a solution to the issue of the democratic deficit (Eriksen and Fossum 2000, 2002; Schlesinger 1999, 2003). According to the deliberative conception of democracy, political institutions are called upon to take into account the results of deliberative processes, channel them into policy making and by consequence allow for the gathering of inputs throughout the different stages of the policy process (Chambers 2003; Crespy 2014; Dryzek 2000). This process has been enhanced at the EU level as a consequence of the 2001 governance reform that implied the shaping of new forms of policy making by strengthening the role of the public sphere. The European Commission policy action has been particularly significant in this regard and has been shaped throughout the years in order to facilitate the channels through which citizens can engage with policy makers (CEC 2005; 2006; 2008). In particular, the association drawn between a democratic deficit and a communicative deficit has polarised the attention of policy makers as a result of the ambiguous process of the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 (see for example Statham & Trenz 2013a). In the first Barroso Presidency (2004–2009), in particular, the construction of the public sphere was put forward as a policy response to the wide sense of mistrust towards European integration emerging from public opinion. It is not by chance that, in this time context, participatory democracy has become a primary objective that entailed the reconfiguration of the DG Communication of the European Commission and the establishment of a structured system of public relations. Evidence so far has highly criticised this settlement (Brüggemann 2005; Bee 2010) as being prominently based on the institutional need to develop an artificial top-down model of the public sphere. Besides this, it is worth noting that the rise of euro-sceptical forces across the EU has radically challenged the development of a wide European public sphere, and research has more and more focused on the patterns of contestation to European integration (De Wilde and Trenz 2012; Usherwood & Startin 2013; Startin & Krouwel 2013), showing the highly ambiguous nature of European political integration.

Cultural integration: challenges and issues in the process of identity building

The multi-layered and multi-faceted composition of the European governance structure has also brought into the fore new interesting insights about the development of transnational identities and is strictly interlinked with the discussion that looks at the development of cultural

integration and *European identity* (Friedman & Thiel 2012; Hermann et al. 2004; Risse 2010). The focus of the analysis is the discursive challenges put forward by European integration as well as the communicative practices developed through processes of *social interaction* and *socialisation* happening in the public sphere. This particular aspect, put forward by social constructivist scholars, has been extensively explored. Diez, for instance, argues that discourse and communication are the way in which actors make sense of the world they live in and impose meaning onto their activities (Diez 2001). Risse has looked to affirm this position by claiming that 'Actors' interests, preferences, and the perceptions of the situation are no longer fixed, but subject to discursive challenges' (Risse 2009, p. 149). This helps to highlight that the influence regarding European identity is not a bargaining arena among states asserting their power and interests but can be discursively impacted by the culturally and socially constructed nature of the environment that the actors are a product of. It has thus been argued that communication, discourse, norms, structure and agency make up the core elements of the development of a cultural polity (Checkel and Katzenstein 2009). The production of a shared European imaginary as a consequence of the enhancement of dialogic communicative practices in the EU, and the shaping of a cultural pattern of integration has primarily been promoted by the European institutions and enhanced through the establishment of communicative ties, producing mutual knowledge between individuals and collectivities. This happened throughout a process of identity building that started at least in the 1980s (Banus 2002; Bee 2008; Laffan 2004; Sassatelli 2009; Shore 2000), when the European Commission developed symbolic instruments aimed at enhancing the sense of belonging to Europe. In this regard, it is worth remembering that there are a large set of EU funded projects that enhance transnational ties between collectivities (such as cities, regions and municipalities) in the fields of culture and education. For example, research on the European Cities of Culture has paid attention to the processes of transformation of urban spaces into transnational realities that developed a European dimension (Lähdesmäki 2012; Sassatelli 2009). The development of multicultural spaces at the core of a European Imagined Community is to be conceived of as a construction (Shore 2000) functional to integrate and tie together European citizens under the umbrella of the motto 'Unity in Diversity'. In this regard, Sassatelli has been one of the main scholars to draw attention to the limitations and critiques of this motto, claiming that 'unity in diversity is viewed not only as a formal solution with no substance, a superficial if successful slogan, but also as containing, if anything, a thinly veiled renewed Eurocentric triumphalism' (Sassatelli 2009, p. 36). This critique is based on the assumption that if multiple identities exist, this may lead to a hierarchy of allegiances, in which, being European would be seen as progressive and more advanced than the others. Despite these critiques, the European Union has stressed the importance of adopting the position of unity in diversity, which stresses the cosmopolitan aspect of European identity promoting the idea of a common cultural heritage as the roots of the development of a European public sphere as a space for mutual recognition between individuals. However, the limitations of this approach are rather evident. In the aftermath of the euro-crisis, the rise of far right movements and political parties across Europe (Halikiopoulou et al., 2013; Vasilopoulou 2011) and the rise of discrimination towards minority groups put into question institutional attempts to promote intercultural dialogue and the overall scopes of cultural integration challenging the scope of activities, between others, of non-state actors that represent minority groups (Ruzza 2011).

Empirical research on the European Public Sphere: researching patterns of europeanisation

It can be argued that the empirical research on the European Public sphere has been looking to the 'feasibility' and 'reproducibility' of a model of the public sphere beyond the boundaries of

the nation state (Harrison and Wessels 2009; Schlesinger 1999; Van de Steeg 2002). With regard to this concern, different scholars have neglected the existence of a wide pan-European public sphere and have instead pointed to the fragmentation and fluidity of this construct (Wessels 2010) calling for the employment of ad hoc analytical instruments finalised at understanding how and why public spheres are changing following the pressures of the europeanisation process (Trenz 2008, 2010). The lack of a common media, or a shared language, or of a shared political culture but also of a wide and representative civil society are all valuable arguments drawn against the formation of an homogenous European public sphere. On this account, Eriksen (2004) takes account of the complexification of the European public sphere, by looking at the fragmentation of the publics that act at the different levels of European governance and have an influence on policy making. By accepting that a public sphere based on the nation state as the main locus of public life is not feasible, he affirms that 'the European public space is currently fragmented, differentiated and in flux' (2004, p. 18). The discussion has thus been looking prominently at the development of a *multi-level public sphere* following the widespread consensus that national, unitary models of the European public sphere cannot simply be transposed to the EU level (Soysal 2002).

Following this debate, researchers began focusing on the analysis of different components of the public sphere and investigated issues such as the comparison between media reporting on EU issues and politics in different European countries (de Vreese 2002; Gleissner & de Vreese 2005; Liebert 2007; Koopmans & Statham 2010; Sift et al. 2007; Trenz 2005, 2007; Triandafyllidou et al. 2009; Statham and Gray 2005; Wessler et al. 2008); the role of mass media in the politicisation of European issues on specific key matters and policy issues or developments (Statham & Trenz 2013a; Statham & Trenz 2013b); the emergence of forms of political mobilisation and political contestation in respect to European Integration (De Wilde et al. 2013; Della Porta 2009; Marks & Steenbergen 2002); the definition of bottom up processes of europeanisation and the role of civil society actors acting transnationally and making claims on the European structure (Liebert et al. 2013; Perez Diaz 1998, Ruzza 2004); the structure of political communication in the EU (Seoane Pérez 2013; Schlesinger 1999); the models of communication policy put forward by European institutions, either through public or online campaigning (Bee 2010; Brüggemann 2005; Michailidou 2010; Sarikaris 2005); and the role of political journalism in constructing debates about European issues (Statham 2007, 2008; Balcytiene & Vinciniene 2010).

This growing agenda provides evidence of the fact that European scholars have been advocating for a reframing of methodological nationalism and for investigating instead the mutual overlaps between different public spheres in terms of topics and themes but also representations of political actors and mechanisms of contestation to EU issues, policies and practices (Ruzza and Bozzini 2008). In short, the literature has tried to foster analysis and analytical dimensions that look at the transformations ongoing in Europe (Trenz 2008; 2010) both at the supranational level and the domestic levels.

In relation to this, it is worth underlining that the empirical study of the European Public Sphere has implied a wide reflection on the best ways to conceptualise the impact of the europeanisation process (Exadaktylos and Radaelli 2012; Sanders and Bellucci 2012). A mainstream definition of europeanisation considers this term as referring to: 'Processes of (a) construction (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalisation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, "ways of doing things" and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU decisions and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies' (Radaelli 2003, p. 30). As underlined further by Börzel and Panke (2013), the study of europeanisation implies, on the one side, the analysis of how EU politics are shaped by the member states as well as, on

the other side, the impact of the EU normative system in triggering social and political change at the domestic levels (2013, p 116). The ambiguous nature of europeanisation and the variety of ways through which these two processes can be conceptualised has produced a wide and lively debate in EU studies (Cowles et al. 2001; Olsen 2002; Thomson 2011).

In public sphere analysis, the basic dominant perspective (Koopmans and Pfetsch 2003; Koopmans & Erbe 2004) recognises the necessity to look at effects of *top-down* processes of europeanisation as well as *bottom-up* processes (from member states to European institutions). This is a categorisation that has been discussed, put forward and criticised in a number of prominent research articles that have studied processes of vertical europeanisation and horizontal europeanisation (Koopmans and Statham 2010). The process of vertical europeanisation operationalises the complexity of the relations that exist between territorial levels, whether on issues, topics or policy actors that address specific issues related to European Integration. The process of horizontal europeanisation looks instead at the reciprocal influences that exist between different public spheres in the EU (see for example Marks & Steenbergen 2004). This categorisation is aimed at focusing on the complexity of the reciprocal relations that are inherent to processes of participation in the EU and is directed at understanding both what is changing in national public spheres and at how these changes are happening (Trenz 2010). The wide discussion on the conceptualisation of europeanisation has cut across a number of research projects that have tested empirically this notion, by reflecting through empirical lenses, upon the best ways to measure effectively the europeanisation of the public spheres in Europe.

Civil society as a key actor in the public sphere: segmented publics, inclusion and exclusion

The particular angle that this article takes in this broad constellation of empirical work links with literature that has explored the drivers of engagement and participation in the European public sphere (Fossum & Trenz 2006) and that studied the role of civil society organisations in fostering public policies and promoting active citizenship (Balme & Chabanet 2008; Smismans 2006, 2009). Overall, it is worth underlining that some common research questions that characterise this set of academic work, looks at the actual implications of European integration in developing, or not, patterns of European political, social and cultural identification (Checkel 2009; Risse 2010) and give relevance to the processes of political socialisation and the determinants of active participation of citizens at the EU's level (Warleigh 2001; Sánchez-Salgado 2007), either in the form of coalitions of organised interests, pressure groups or social movements (Cohen 2007; Greenwood 2007; Ruzza 2004). The discussion on active citizenship has thus become prominent in the last few years (Boye 2010; Hoskins and Kerr, 2012), with a focus on the factors that motivate engagement and participation of citizens in an organised civil society.

The academic debate on this topic has mostly been concentrated on the functions performed by civil society for the improvement of standards in terms of input legitimacy to public policies and by consequence on the promotion of outputs based on participatory approaches. If, on the one side, research on civil society as a key actor in developing a European public sphere has significantly increased in the last decade, it is worth observing, on the other side, that this is in line with the institutional agenda that looks at the enhancement of governance principles by the European Commission and that more and more has become aware of the necessity to improve democratic performance by injecting input legitimacy. Policy actions aimed at developing a system of participatory democracy pushed forward by the European Commission (CEC 2005; CEC 2006; CEC 2008) are characterised by the attempt to improve engagement with organised civil society (Kohler Koch and Rittberger 2007; Greenwood and Halpin 2007) in order to provide a better basis of legitimization for policy processes. The goal declared by the

European Commission is to develop a basis for a model of civic engagement based on a citizens' centred approach (CEC 2006, p. 4) and on the development of a European-wide public sphere. The aim is to establish a means to engage more and better citizens with European affairs.

The launch of the Citizenship Programme 2007–2013 fits in this context and enhances the principles established by the previous framework for shaping European Active Citizenship co-ordinated by the DG Education and Culture from 2004 to 2006. The new strategic supervision of the programme under the DG Communication is worth noticing and is coherent with the overall strategy undertaken by the European Commission with the Plan D (CEC 2005) and the White Paper on Communication (CEC 2006). As remarked in the Citizenship Programme, the new actions regarding active citizenship are meant to shape the institutional relationship with the citizenry of the European Union and 'materialises the legal framework to support a wide range of activities and organisations promoting "active European citizenship", that is, the involvement of citizens and civil society organisations in the process of European integration' (CEC 2007, p. 3). The strengthening of the dialogic and communicative relationship between citizens and institutions is widely reaffirmed. Between the four core aims of the Citizenship Programme 2007–2013, it is relevant to point out the recognition of the necessity to give citizens the 'opportunity to interact and participate in constructing an ever closer Europe, which is democratic and world-oriented, united in and enriched through its cultural diversity, thus developing citizenship of the European Union' (CEC 2007, p. 4).

This dialogic relationship between institutions, on the one hand, and civil society, on the other, has recently been formalised by Article 11 of the Lisbon Treaty. This established that 'The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society' (Art. 11.2) and that 'The European Commission shall carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Union's actions are coherent and transparent' (Art.11.3). It is worth mentioning, however, that engagement in public consultations has been a common practice by the European Commission at least since the governance reform of 2001. In this regard, Article 11 therefore simply formalises an already existing practice of engagement between institutions and civil society.

In evaluating this approach to *civic engagement* and *active citizenship*, it is worth underlining that, even if welcomed, the strategy undertaken by the European Institutions, the European Commission in particular, has been subject to criticism in the literature on governance studies (Magnette 2003; Kohler Koch 2009; Smisman 2009). Overall, it is argued that the approach to governance followed by the European Commission suffers from being an account of political and civic participation that could be considered selectivist rather than inclusive of the whole of civil society. The emphasis on the term *organised civil society* is representative of this approach. This is a danger that Magnette noted when commenting on the principles of governance and the measures put in place to enhance civic and political participation in the time context following the governance reform. The scholar argued that these instruments 'are only designed to stimulate the involvement of active citizens and groups in some precise procedures and not to enhance the general level of civic consciousness and participation' (Magnette 2003, p. 5).

Moreover, as a consequence of the preceding consideration, another element for discussion emerging in the literature has to be noted. As Heidbreder argues, for example, the 'increased participation of civil society was not primarily the result of a bottom-up process in which civil society pressured for access into EU decision-making' (Heidbreder 2012, p. 16). This top-down development of organised civil society is thus stimulated by the European Commission's necessity to formalise procedures, norms and practices that enhance the possibilities to actually participate in the governance of the EU rather than stimulate an open and transparent system of participatory democracy. The limitations and the ambiguities of this approach to active citizenship are thus widely remarked. Kohler Koch, on this account, expresses quite clearly this

evaluation by arguing that: 'though European citizenship is a cherished concept in the EU, it is not linked to the idea of a politically active European civil society' (2009, p. 55).

When looking at the role of civil society in developing the European public sphere, it is quite important to underline that the different dynamics of engagement can fit into at least three broad conceptual frames that link the EU and civil society, that conceive of the EU as being either 'a regulatory political system with civil society involvement', or 'a system of participatory governance', or an 'an emergent polity with a social constituency in the making' (Kohler Koch 2009, p. 53). Only the last perspective conceives of civil society engagement in the public sphere in terms of dialogue that can be produced throughout deliberative practices as well as through a contestation and fragmentation of EU policies. In all the three perspectives discussed by the scholar, however, it emerges quite clearly the legitimacy function performed by this increasing role given to civil society organisations in the EU multi-level structure.

Bee and Guerrina (2014a; 2014b) addressed the issue of whether these considerations are true and whether the European approach to active citizenship is based on a simple formalisation of procedures and principles of mutual engagement, or whether, instead, there is a practice of active citizenship under development that is centrally orienting the background of the European public sphere. Their research mapped the dominant discourses on active citizenship in different European countries, by looking specifically at policy discourses targeting marginalised groups and provided an account for the counter-discourses emerging from activists in regard to EU public policies. This research emphasises the fact that the EU approach to these matters is still characterised by an overall ambiguity in the way the European Commission deals with the issue of civic engagement and participation, more specifically when it comes to marginalised groups. The scenario emerging from this assessment (Bee and Guerrina 2014b) clearly emphasises a passive rather than an active role played by civil society in policy making processes, and their conclusion speaks to the first scenario outlined by Kohler Koch (2009, p. 50), with a civil society that is mostly an intermediary in the EU political system.

However, when looking at the actual engagement of the organised civil society at the EU level, the authors (Bee and Guerrina 2014a) provide evidence of 'pro-activity' played by the organisations in Brussels in shaping the policy agenda. In short, the whole set of pressures emerging from Umbrella organisations in Brussels that challenge this dominant top-down vision of a civil society at the service of the European Institutions results in social NGOs widely reflecting upon their role in the broader European constituency. They are confronting each other on the bottom-up processes than could drive the change from a system based on participation in EU governance to a system of European participatory democracy. This conclusion reached by the authors is believed to be in line with the second perspective outlined by Kohler Koch (2009, p. 51). The tension that emerges from the discourse produced by NGOs, and their 'pro-activity' is however moving towards a scenario that proves the willingness of civil society actors to become fully recognised in the public sphere (Kohler Koch 2009, p. 51). Organisations such as Social Platform, ENAR and the European Youth Forum have widely been reflecting on the best ways to shape instruments that are central for deliberative processes, such as the Civil Dialogue (Social Platform 2010). On this account, it is believed that some shortcomings of current research on the role of the European civil society in the public sphere rest on the normative assumptions (i.e. their legitimacy function towards the EU policy making) that are drawn and on the exclusive emphasis on the operationalisation of top-down processes of europeanisation rather than focusing on bottom-up dynamics. It is also believed that the research has mostly been concentrated and has primarily directed the focus of analysis, on the priorities of the European Institutions vis a vis the Civil Society rather than on the other way round. In this regard, it is worth remembering that recent research (Barrett & Brunton-Smith 2014) focused on the analysis of the dynamics that activate or hinder active citizenship and called

for broader considerations of the factors that drive patterns of civic engagement and political participation (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014: 13). At the same time, recent comparative work on active citizenship in Europe has observed that in different countries NGOs react differently to the forces of the europeanisation process. Activists see themselves as a constituent part of transnational forms of social, political and cultural integration that often challenge the assumptions drawn by normative definitions of the European public sphere and reject their role as actors resolute of broader deficits that still afflict the EU (Bee & Pachi 2014; Ribeiro et al. 2014; Sener 2014; Villano & Bertocchi 2014).

Conclusion

This article outlined how the highly idealistic notion of a public sphere seen as a functional source of democratisation and legitimisation for the EU is highly contested by the literature. The patterns of social, cultural and political integration, outlined in the first part of this article, that have been formulated in order to strengthen the argument that an EU wide public sphere is necessary all prove to be misleading. The European social dimension, constituted by core values that should tie Europeans together, is critically undermined when looking at the harsh questioning of social solidarity, which emerged as a consequence of the euro-crisis and the fragmentation going on between different public spheres in Europe. At the same time, a resolution of the democratic deficit to be found in the injection of forms of legitimacy into the European political project and by developing an artificial top-down model of the public sphere has proven to be a limited approach to stimulate political integration. The rise of euroscepticism in many different countries can be considered a product of and a reaction to the financial crisis but, at the same time, is a consequence of the lack of appeal the European project has for its citizens. Moreover, the multi-layered and multi-faceted nature of European identity, the ambiguity of the cultural integration project and the complexity represented by the variety of communicative ties and discourses taking places at different levels of the European model of governance prove that the idea of fostering a European imagined community based on a common public sphere is now superseded. The research that studies the europeanisation of the public sphere in Europe has shed light on the fragmentation and fluidity of the notion of the public sphere in itself. This is a research agenda that looked at the investigation of the processes of social, political and cultural changes going on in different European countries by providing an overview that looked at different angles of enquiry and operationalised this transformation through the measurement of the europeanisation process.

The particular angle that this article explored refers to the role of civil society in the public sphere. Research on this topic has widely emphasised the high functional focus given to the engagement of civil society in order to bring in forms of input legitimacy to European institutions and the overall policy process. By acknowledging the validity of this research agenda, the article argues for the necessity to bring a step forward further analysis. The argument is that current research has prominently focused on the analysis of civil society engagement as a factor normatively stimulated by European institutions rather than on the different factors that hinder or enable active citizenship *per se*. It is thus believed that, in order to gather a more profound understanding of the role of the civil society in the process of europeanisation, further research should be oriented on the study of bottom-up dynamics of engagement and participation and on the analysis of the complexity of active citizenship.

Short Biography

Dr Cristiano Bee is a lecturer in Public Policy at the School of Social Sciences of the University of Surrey (UK) where he holds the Jean Monnet Module 'Current trends in European

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