

Triandafyllidou, Anna; Wodak, Ruth; Krzyżanowski, Michał (Hrsg.): *The European Public Sphere and the Media. Europe in Crisis*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2009. ISBN: 9780230210424; 286 S.

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Among the numerous and often normative debates about the emergence of a united Europe and its administrative and symbolic constituents, that on the (non)existence of the so-called „European public sphere“ has been particularly vehement. Other features of the European condition – such as „European memory“ or „European identity“ – enjoy a certain qualitative flexibility innate to many objects of cultural studies. Most scholars interested in social memory and collective identities agree on the constructed nature of such phenomena: „Europe is a discourse“, wrote the Swedish historian Bo Stråth, „which is translated into a political and ideological project“¹. Indeed, we can observe that the alleged existence of a European identity has generated an academic sub-field only after the Document on European Identity had been signed in 1973 by the then nine European Community-member states. European memory, too, became subject to (both critical and affirmative) scholarly research when the memory boom in human sciences coincided with the diagnosis of an evidently polyphonic and even competitive mnemonic arena of group-specific discourses on history in Europe.² In both cases, researchers have had to be permanently aware of the narratively constructed and, for that matter, political nature of their subject, as well as of their own part in this process of construction.

Public spheres, on the other hand, have tended to be the measurable domain of social sciences. They are generally understood as the field of communicative interaction between opinion-forming elites, media and a broader public, be it on a local, national, or supranational level. The print-run, circulation and reach of print- and electronic media are calculable, as is – to a certain degree – the influence of specific political tendencies on such media. The historic transformations of the

public have, in turn, been analyzed by sociologists and historians, with Jürgen Habermas' work as the probably most influential contribution. Most recently, the nature of public spheres has been discussed from the perspective of national *versus* transnational framings. This concerns Europe in particular, i.e. the question whether a European public sphere exists and, if yes, to what extent national and transnational media are contributing to it.³ It is this debate, into which a new book co-edited by the eminent discourse-analyst Ruth Wodak and with an evidently strong influence by historian Bo Stråth intervenes from a new angle: that of a history-incented qualitative analysis.

The slim, but dense volume springs from the European Union-funded project EMEDIATE (Media and Ethics of a European Public Sphere from the Treaty of Rome to the „War on Terror“), with its headquarters at the Robert Schuman Centre at the European University Institute in Florence and partners in Athens, Lancaster, Utrecht, Dublin, Berlin, Saint-Denis, Budapest and Ljubljana. It features two theoretical contributions: One by Stråth and Wodak on the interdependence of European political, media, and discourse analysis (introducing Pierre Bourdieu on public spheres as overlapping fields of agency and Reinhart Koselleck on the historical functions of crises, among other references). And one by Paschal Preston and Monika Metykova about the role of media in a European public sphere, again emphasizing the structural importance of crises as triggers of communication events. In fact, the profound discussion

¹ Bo Stråth, Introduction: Europe as a Discourse, in: Bo Stråth (ed.), *Europe and the Other and Europe as the Other*, Brussels 2004 (first edition 2000), pp. 13–44, here p. 14.

² For an overview on the most prevalent topics used to frame such a common, but heterogeneous memory: Claus Leggewie, *Battlefield Europe. Transnational memory and European identity*, in: *Eurozine*, <<http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-04-28-leggewie-en.html>> (16.5.2010).

³ Hartmut Weßler et al., *Transnationalization of Public Spheres (Transformations of the State Series)*, Basingstoke 2008. Cf. also the selected bibliography of the Social Science Research Council, <<http://publicsphere.ssrc.org/guide/political-scale/national-versus-transnational-public-spheres/>> (16.5.2010).

of this notion is one of the merits of the book. The empirical section, too, is opened by a historical chapter on this second key term, written by Florence-based historian James Kaye. At first, the laconic definition of crises as „disruptive moments in history“ (p. 6) may seem unsatisfying in the light of the term’s central importance to the book. But the three overarching contributions make up for this initial thriftiness.

Due to the project’s uniform methodology, the following eight case studies all approach the respective media coverage of important crisis-events in European post-World War II history in the same fashion. First, the event in question – the Budapest uprising in 1956, the Berlin Wall crisis in 1961, the events of 1968 both in Paris and in Czechoslovakia, the martial law in Poland in 1981, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the US-invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the debate on controversial Mohammed cartoons in 2006 – is contextualized in its national and international relevance. In a second step, the empirical sources are exposed, which include the reports of left wing and right wing newspapers in three or more countries. Finally, the research findings are presented: Following a highly differentiated discourse-analytic methodology developed by Ruth Wodak and her changing teams over the last decades, all media reports have been scrutinized for identity-constituting *topoi*. These metaphors and discursive strategies of self- and other-representation give insight into the perceptions and interpretations of political events by specific groups, thus allow to analyze their respective construction of national and transnational identities, and therefore indicate the range of those social frames of representation that are crucial for the description of public spheres.

The methodological approach of the volume leaves no doubt that the (possible) emergence of a European public sphere would have to be located „in the national media of several European countries at various critical times of post-war European history“ (p. 4). This point of departure implies the editors’ critique towards what they consider a “(rather questionable) ‘deficiency-model of an [European Public Sphere]’” (p. 3). Thereby, they

distance themselves from a potentially normative approach that analyses European politics from the presupposition of a triple deficit of democracy, identity, and public spheres on a European level⁴ and deplores the „missing of a European Public Sphere“ as a problem in itself.⁵

While such positions premise the European Union as the benchmark, and its institutional needs as the essential characteristics, of a European public sphere, the authors of „The European Public Sphere and the Media“ look into its emergence with an abductive/retroductive methodology. Although its title does not indicate it, historicity is a central category to this volume. History, identity, and the public sphere are presented as an interdependent and interdeterminant triangle. This hypothesis is translated into the diachronic exploration of public spheres by means of a series of international crisis events between 1956 and 2006. Through the analysis of national media discourses in different countries, the book approximates the divergences and convergences of identity- and historical reference-frames in Europe. Interestingly, throughout the period under observation, the central conclusion remains the same: Although common topics indicate the emergence of some elements of a public sphere spreading beyond nation state borders, the highly specific patterns of interpretation in each national arena leads the editors to diagnose an international rather than a transnational public sphere (p. 267).

By focusing on the qualitative analysis of media reports and not merely on quantitative characteristics (frequency, outreach, etc.),

⁴ David Tréfás et al., Europäische Öffentlichkeit und Identität (foeg research paper, June 2008), <<http://www.foeg.unizh.ch/staging/userfiles/file/Deutsch/fög%20research%20papers/Europäische%20Öffentlichkeit%20und%20Identität.pdf>> (15.5.2010), p. 3. This team around the historian and sociologist Kurt Imhof has been conducting research on – partly the same – European media events, following similar research questions. Cf. <http://www.foeg.unizh.ch/forschungsbereich/projekte/europäische_identität_und_öffentlichkeit.aspx&pageIng=2> (16.5.2010).

⁵ Jürgen Gerhards, Missing a European Public Sphere, in: Martin Kohli / Mojca Novak (eds.), Will Europe Work? Integration, Employment and the Social Order, London 2001, pp. 145-158.

and by emphasizing the historical context of each diachronic segment of the development of the „discourse of Europe“, the book makes a great achievement in terms of interdisciplinarity and non-normativity: While it helps to historicize the often-yearned-for European public sphere, at the same time it contributes to the emerging field of European contemporary historiography from a discourse-analytic perspective on public spheres.

Inevitably, one could identify certain shortcomings. To this reviewer, one consists in a misleading twist within the book's title, which ironically seems to suggest that the condition of the European public sphere be the *cause* of a European crisis – hence implying the very normative assumption of deficiency that the authors oppose. One may also wonder why, if Europe is indeed understood as a „common arena where the existence, shape and scope of Europe and Europeaness, European unity or conflict, similarity or diversity, are discussed“ (p. 5), non-European discursive agents are hardly mentioned. And, as always, some readers will criticize the list of selected events. But such minor reservations notwithstanding, whoever is interested in transnational European history is well advised to read this book.

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