

The Genesis and Development of a Global Public Sphere¹

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Abstract: The paper points to the fact that the emergence of a public sphere in eighteenth century Europe and its interpretation as a global public sphere are co-occurrent phenomena. From its beginnings the public sphere was conceived as a European public sphere to which competing claims of European states were addressed. A public sphere is defined in the paper as the internal environment (*milieu interne*) of a system. A global public sphere then probably means the internal environment of the arising system of world politics. The paper looks at audience roles and the paradoxical concept of public opinion in such a global system. It then focusses on the two different but complementary meanings the mass media and the internet contribute to the present-day understanding of a public sphere: The world public sphere of the internet is a distributed system which functions without any need for simultaneity and thematic homogenization. It is the other way around with the mass media which somehow find their culmination in simultaneously congregating hundreds of millions of people observing the same pictures of a world event.

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I Introduction

The emergence of a public sphere and the emergence of a global public sphere are nearly simultaneous phenomena. The same eighteenth century in which the idea of an abstract public arises even produces the idea of a European public which is addressed by the monarchical states of Europe. To this European public the European states present their competing and conflicting claims, and already in the reign of Louis XIV an extensive use of printed propaganda for an international public is documented by which states try to support their conflicting claims.² In his semantical analysis of the idea of Europe Denys Hay points to the fact that the peace of Utrecht from 1714 was the last and in its semantics somehow anachronistic treaty which mentioned the *Respublica Christiana* as the warranting frame of the treaty concluded.³ Ever since the idea of Europe and of the European public functions as the secular substitute of the *Respublica Christiana* and as the internal environment of the system of European states and that means it functions as the forum for conflict communications. Of course, the concepts mentioned here are concepts related to the idea of Europe and not to the concept of a world society. But as it is the case in many other respects the transfer to concepts related to world society here, too, happens by transferring components of meaning which were related to Europe in the first place to global contexts of meaning and communication afterwards.⁴

This parallelism in the genesis of the public sphere and the European public sphere which once more points to the fact that national state and world society are not at all competing forms of structure formation but that they arise as two facets of one and the same process will bring me to point out some structural aspects of the genesis of this new phenomenon public sphere/global public sphere. In doing this I will accentuate common aspects of these two concepts and some significant differences will become visible which point to respects in which the concept of a global public sphere is different from the classical understanding of a public sphere emerging in late eighteenth century society.

II The Concept of the “Public Sphere”

A first important aspect regards transformations in what is conceived as being “public”. It is well known that in early modern Europe “public” meant those circumstances and institutions which immediately belong to the sphere of the state. The king and certain persons of noble status were called “public persons” as their personality was thought to be consumed in serving the state. Correspond-

² Cf. Baker 1987, esp. 213-4.

³ Hay 1957, 118-9.

⁴ Cf. Stichweh 1995.

ingly the officials working for them were conceived as “public servants”, and the education given by educational institutions belonging to the state was called “public education”. The radical transition in the concept of the public in the late eighteenth century now precisely consisted in the “public” no longer meaning the sphere of the activity of the state itself but instead pointing to a sphere opposite to the state which observes and controls the state. There are numerous transition formulas for this rather sharp discontinuity. I will quote an example. In a school treatise from 1791 Philipp Julius Lieberkühn, a German educator, demands a “public spirit” which is supposed to embrace either the “whole humanity” or at least “our fellow-citizens” and which has to understand “their well-being as our most important affair”. This is described as an expectation which he addresses to “writers, scholars, artists”, but with especial emphasis and historical consciousness Lieberkühn demands public spirit from those who “according to a very venerable name are vested with a public office.”⁵ This changeover of the concept of the “public” from the side of being a servant of the state to the side of observing and finally criticizing the state is one precondition for the idea of the public sphere disengaging oneself from being tied to a concrete, individual state. For the global public sphere of our times as well as for the European public sphere of the eighteenth century it is characteristic that they are not related to an individual state as their counterpart and addressee but consist from a network of observations which may as well refer to individual states in the world as to interdependencies and interactions in the global system of states.⁶

III The Public or the Audience

Perhaps the most important concept in our context is the concept of the public as “the audience”. Looking at the concept of “audience” we can give a social structural or a role-based description of the public sphere. First of all an audience is constituted by not being actively involved in a certain pursuit or in organizing this pursuit. Instead an audience is looking at certain events and participates in them in the status of an observer. There is in Johann Wolfgang Goethes “*Dichtung und Wahrheit*” a critical remark on the overestimation of the public opinion in which Goethe says that such an overestimation is “foolish, as there exists no public at all to which an executive force is given”.⁷ This remark precisely points to the public always being somehow detached from the acting statuses of the respective kind of activity. In a sociological understanding of what a public is expected to mean one would speak of the institutionalization of

⁵ Lieberkühn 1791, 157.

⁶ Cf. more circumstantial on the semantical and institutional transformation in the concept of „public“, Stichweh 1997.

⁷ Goethe 1811, 483. The respective text passage registers precisely the turning away from the world of public offices: “as it recently still was the case that one went to the university to get access to public offices; now one was going to play the supervisor of the officials, and the time was not distant, when the writer of plays and novels preferred to choose his bad guys among ministers and officials.”

audience roles which happens in many social systems. These audience roles are supposed to be accessible to any person whomsoever who is not able to take over one of those achievement roles which are defining of the identity of the respective system.⁸ All those persons who are not actively involved at the moment in the political formation of collectively binding decisions are at least part of the political public.

The modern concept of the public sphere is based on an understanding of “the public” which presupposes the accessibility of a public space for any person whomsoever.⁹ This is supposed to be true for the public of a judicial court,¹⁰ the political public, the public of sports, mass media publics and many other publics more. The non-exclusiveness of access includes the accessibility for strangers,¹¹ and by this it is to be seen that a public is principally unbounded and is not at all limited by forms of spatial integration of society. From this already an inherent tendency towards globalizing the public sphere may be derived.

Arbitrary others who can be conceived as members of a public are anonymous others at the same time. One is not going to know them by name, and in any kind of observation which is directed to a public, there will never arise the intention to individualize the others in a way that it would be meaningful to know their proper names. By this it is still undecided if the members of a public are conceived as individuals at all. In this respect there are two divergent understandings in modern society. The one of these understandings conceives the public so to speak as a *mass* which is little differentiated in itself.¹² By understanding the public as a mass one points to fashions, infections and other epidemiological phenomena, and to discontinuities in collective feelings. All these are interpretations which do not see the public as consisting from individuals. The other alternative which obviously is the more modern one regards the public more as a *population* in a sense which is near to the biological understanding of this term. A population consists from a diversity of individuals which differ from one another by a number of characteristic traits, and a population is described by a dynamics which continuously shifts the equilibrium of these characteristic traits. It is obvious that the modern extremely extensive research on public opinion only makes sense in these terms of publics being conceived as populations.

⁸ Cf. Stichweh 2005, esp. pp. 13-44.

⁹ Cf. repeatedly Luhmann 1996, 184; Luhmann 1997, 314; Luhmann 2000, 284.

¹⁰ Cf. on the key role of the publicity of the judicial court in nineteenth century Germany Fögen 1974.

¹¹ See on the interrelation of „being public“ and „accessibility for strangers“ the text passage from an American newspaper from 1913 (January 13, 1913, „Cushing Independent“) which refers to a small city which suddenly became important for the oil industry: “nearly every home in the city has been opened to the public and taken in a stranger” (cit. by Wilke and Liesman 2000, A1).

¹² Cf. Mac Iver 1955, 23, referring to Tocqueville.

A last conclusion which definitely results for an understanding of public phenomena based on the concept of the public as a population is that the public is neither a collectivity nor a system. To a public one can not attribute actions as one can do with any collectivity whatsoever. And a public is no system. It has no autonomous operative basis which would allow a differentiation process generating a system. A public is much more a collection of observers, observing the processes of a system whose public it is. Then a public has to be conceived in an understanding introduced by the nineteenth century French physiologist Claude Bernard as the *internal environment* (“milieu interne”) of a system. Or, in a second formulation which I wish to introduce to take account of the complicated observational forms on which a public sphere is based: *a public sphere is a second order mirror*. This proposal refers to the theory of a market formulated by Harrison White. White describes a market as a mirror in which market actors observe themselves and observe the actions of other market participants and derive their strategies from these mutual observations.¹³ Compared to this understanding the self-observation on which a public sphere is based seems to be much more indirect and not to be based on a mutuality of observations. In the medium of the public sphere – in contradistinction to a market – one can not observe oneself. Instead the self-observation of a system which is made possible via its public sphere is made possible by the system observing others in observing the system and from these observations of others the system takes informations regarding itself. Second-order mirror then means a mirror in which one can never see oneself, but incessantly sees others who observe oneself.

If the public sphere is in the way just described a second order mirror or an internal environment of a system the next question we will have to look at is the following one: Is there any system of which it can be said that the emerging global public sphere is its internal environment? Obviously the answer has to be that this is the system of world politics. This system consists from plural classes of actors among which there are about two hundred states, some thousands of IGOs, and some ten thousands of INGOs. This multiplicity of INGOs is not identical with the global public sphere; this is a common misunderstanding which is shared by many of these INGOs. But the INGOs distinguish themselves by addressing their communications more frequently than it is done by other actors to the world public and by claiming more often than it is done by other actors that their actions are somehow supported by opinions which they ascribe as opinions to the world public.

¹³ White 1981.

IV Public Opinion

Nearly simultaneous with the modern concept of the public sphere arises in eighteenth century society the concept of public opinion. In a first approximation this concept of public opinion is based on an improbable combination of two contradictory terms. If one looks at the tradition of the concept of “the public” this concept always meant universalistic, objective circumstances. In contradistinction the concept of “opinion” was constantly associated in the European tradition with connotations which pointed to something being somehow instable, short-lived and merely subjective.¹⁴ This new and improbable combination *public opinion* seems to balance out these two contradictory concepts. By this it is made possible to give to the concept of the public sphere which is a structural term a basis consisting from operations. The public sphere consists in its operative infrastructure from communications which inform about opinions. Opinions have to be understood as something which always combines an informational and an evaluative component. Opinions are neither pure informational statements nor do they simply consist from the communication of value commitments. Once more the aspect of the reflexivity of opinions is prominent. The opinions which another person has are not known as a matter of course, and often they can not be accessed in an easy way. They are often more easily and more trustworthy to be observed in the *form of opinions regarding the opinions of others*. This is well known to opinion researchers, and research on public opinion often is most successful in taking this more indirect route in looking into opinions.¹⁵ Public opinion is furthermore characterized by the fact that there is no inbuilt force to be responsive to it. This makes a difference to some communication types in the function systems of modern society – especially communications based on money or power – which are characterized by inbuilt pressures to accept an attractive offer or follow a command. With public opinion it is different. One can not ignore it (this is true at least for the persons in the achievement roles of the function systems) but one need not follow it. Given the multiplicity of forms of public opinion and the temporal instability built into it such a will to follow public opinion would not generate a stable orientation anyway.

Public opinion can be a worldwide or global public opinion. There are numerous indicators for the hypothesis that such a collective phenomenon – which again should be interpreted in populationist terms – exists or is supposed to exist.¹⁶ But this hypothesis seems to be fraught with more difficulties than is the case for the hypothesis of a global public sphere. In my opinion the most important reason for this is that the concept of *public opinion* today is closely related to the methods of empirical social research which have been developed for its observa-

¹⁴ See Baker 1987, 243-5, referring to Jacques Necker.

¹⁵ Cf. Marx Ferree 1985, 434-6.

¹⁶ See the American lawyer who travels for a human rights organization to Uruguay and who is there addressed by the persons to whom he speaks as a kind of representative of “international public opinion” (Kennedy 1993, 458).

tion. But until now there are no comparable instruments for doing research on worldwide public opinion.

V Mass Media

A principally new situation arises with the institutionalization of mass media in twentieth century society. The history of the public sphere always was in one relevant respect the history of *publications* that is the history of published communications which were addressed to local, regional, national or global publics and which tried to become public via these media of publication. But with the mass media you have for the first time in history a function system of its own which so to speak monopolizes the public sphere. Into the mass media there is built a certain tendency to consider oneself as being identical with the public sphere and the public opinion. There are remarkable effects of this. With the profession of journalist the status of being an audience of something becomes a professional status for the first time in history. That social role which always was supposed to be accessible only to lay performers of this role and which owes its semantics to the long tradition of the Greek *idiot* which was the person who had no specialization in any subject whatsoever and the Latin *laicus*, is now defined in a professional sense.¹⁷

There is then the social role of the journalist and there is a second new and quasi-professional social role, the intellectual, who ever since Émile Zolas "J'accuse" was and is closely dependent on access to publication in mass media. Both, the journalist and the intellectual claim to be representative of the public and publish their claims in the mass media. Simultaneously with the emergence of the social role of the journalist and the intellectual arises the critical attitude towards mass media. Since early twentieth century society this criticism characteristically objects that it is no longer possible to listen to what the public or the people have to say, because when one asks them for their opinion one only gets to hear what the people read in the journal of the same morning.¹⁸ By this public opinion becomes invisible and latent. From this point one can start endeavours which try to correct these effects. One can redefine the role of the journalist and can specialize oneself on speaking with those and reproduce the comments of those who are no professional producers of public opinion. When one reads

¹⁷ Cf. Stichweh 2005.

¹⁸ See remarkable Charles Péguy writing in 1913 and looking back to his youth in Orléans around 1880 (Péguy 1913): "C'était rigoureusement l'ancienne France et le peuple de l'ancienne France. C'était un monde à qui appliqué ce beau nom, ce beau mot de peuple recevait sa pleine, son antique application. Quand on dit le peuple, aujourd'hui, on fait de la littérature, et même une des plus basses, de la littérature électorale, politique, parlementaire. Il n'y a plus de peuple. Tout le monde est bourgeois. Puisque tout le monde lit son journal. ... L'ancienne aristocratie est devenue comme les autres une bourgeoisie d'argent. ... Quant aux ouvriers ils n'ont plus qu'une idée, c'est de devenir des bourgeois. C'est même ce qu'ils nomment devenir socialistes. Il n'y a guère que les paysans qui soient restés profondément paysans." (1047) "Et quand un ouvrier allumait sa cigarette, ce qu'il allait vous dire, ce n'était pas ce que le journaliste a dit dans le journal de ce matin." (1048)

American journals and newspapers one gets the impression that this is the American interpretation of objectivity, although it is obviously circular because there is no guarantee that the people do not tell you the same things they read in your own journal before. Perhaps still more consequential is the genesis of market and public opinion research which essentially tries to address those latencies and displacement effects which are ascribed to the mass media. Market and public opinion research is an attempt to find out or to provoke even those opinions which normally are not voiced in public situations. On the results of these researches one can again report in the mass media and thereby stabilize their self-identification with the public sphere.

Among the most important effects of the mass media is to be counted that they resolutely advance the globalization of the public sphere. Opinions spread by the mass media and the communicational formats used by the mass media can easily be copied and transferred worldwide. When journalists primarily read other journalists or speak to them and connect to the syntheses of information and evaluation worked out by other journalists, this produces condensates of opinion and confirmation effects which tend to understand themselves as world public opinion and to which this status can not easily be contested by competing claims.

VI Global Public Sphere and the Internet

With the rise of the internet there emerges a medium of communication which allows to address oneself with an unsurpassed simplicity to a public presumed to be worldwide. At the same time you can easily verify in the internet how ubiquitous the presupposition of a global public sphere is today. A simple search with the search machine most popular today (google.com) had the following results: If one looks at the German “Weltöffentlichkeit” one finds in November 2000 6.800 pages, in May 2002 14.500 pages, in September 2002 17.800 pages, in November 2005 315.000 pages and in April 2006 462.000 pages. In English it is much more difficult. One can try “Global Public Sphere” or “World Public Sphere”. But one has to limit one’s search by inverted commas to get meaningful results. Otherwise one has hundreds of thousands of pages in which these three words occur in random orders. But if one tries the limited search with inverted commas one primarily finds some academic papers on our subject.¹⁹ Therefore I make use of my German search. Even then one has to look at the pages selectively. But some instructive results are easily to be seen.

Perhaps the most obvious and most important finding is that the “world public” primarily functions as a presupposition which is introduced into communication

¹⁹ There are more instructive results if one looks for „world opinion“ or „opinion mondiale“.

to mobilize support for positions which are controversial positions. Insofar the “world public” has to be seen as a communicative fiction of admittedly considerable strategic relevance. At the same time the “world public” is substantialized and endowed with the qualities of an actor. The world public sphere is a stage or a scene from which one can retreat (in one example: the Dalai Lama). One can criticize the staying away of the world public, as it did not look after the wars in Africa. In other cases it raised its finger in warning, and someone else reacted on this (in one example the IOC). Finally the world public is expected to make up its mind and then to decide how to act.²⁰

Another noticeable observation – which is by the means known from other research projects on the Internet – is that the world public is primarily called from somehow extreme positions. If one looks for revisionists who deny that Auschwitz was an extermination camp, or for internet versions of the “protocols of the sages of Zion”, or finally for believers in UFOs who indict the American government as it allegedly conceals its considerable knowledge from the world public, one will easily find these groups if one takes the search route via “world public”.

A further observation is that even from the internet it is easily to be seen that there has to exist a plurality of world publics. There is a quantitative dominance of political usages. But one finds economic communications which for example present a new passenger car (in this case the Hyundai Accent) to the world public, communications related to sports events, health informations – and finally private homepages in which families present themselves to the world public which probably means that they presuppose that there exists a global connectedness of private affairs which constitutes a public sphere of its own. The pluralization of function systems obviously generates a pluralization of public spheres all of which produce self-descriptions which describe them as global public spheres. This understanding qualifies the hypothesis that the global public sphere is the internal environment of the world polity. Instead we are directed to the more general point in sociological systems theory which says that in all function systems of modern society there arises besides the level of professional roles constitutive of the system a second level of audience or lay roles.²¹ The global collectivity or better global population of all those addressed in these audience or lay roles may be called the “world public”. In this sense it may even be possible – although it sounds a little bit strange - to look at an individual family and to call its global environment of all the other families the world public of the system of families or the system of intimate relations.

²⁰ See remarkable because of the numerous actor qualities attributed to the world public the „Botschaft an die Nation des pakistanischen Premierministers, Nawaz Sherif, vom 12. Juli 1999” (Sharif 1999).

²¹ Cf. Stichweh 2005.

VII Internet and Mass Media

The last examples demonstrated once more that there exist at least two institutionalised variants of the world public sphere. The world public sphere of the internet is a distributed system which functions without any need for simultaneity and synchronization. It presupposes that for any subject and opinion whatsoever one will in the depths of the internet find a significant globally distributed number of participants who share the interest in these subjects and these opinions. Insofar one encounters in the world publics of the internet an apt representation of the extreme diversity of world society. It is exactly the other way around with the mass media, especially television. The mass media include the possibility and in many respects this possibility is the culmination of mass media effects that they simultaneously congregate hundreds of millions of participants observing the same pictures of a world event. The world public sphere in this understanding nearly functions as an interaction system in the understanding of this term worked out by Erving Goffman and Niklas Luhmann. Such a world public sphere is homogenized by the common “response focus” of hundreds of millions of persons²² and the main difference to a conventional, local interaction system consists in there being no mutuality of the observation of the participants. In this latter respect homogeneity and not diversity is characteristic of world society and the world public sphere. This world public homogenized by mass media can become the actual addressee of political action. It is possible to study this in looking at the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. One can not interpret them as an act of the exercise of political power, or as a part of destructive military action, or as an act of intended psychological disruption of an enemy. These terroristic acts only find their effectiveness as a dramatic visual symbol addressing a world public unified by global mass media.²³

²² Regarding this concept Goffman 1983.

²³ Cf. Münkler 2001.

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