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Energizing the European public space

Cultural journals come closer to the ideal of a European public space than any other media: they provide a forum where political, philosophical and aesthetic ideas can be discussed and exchanged. However, these journals reach only so far. Carl Henrik Fredriksson, *Eurozine's* editor in chief, calls upon the established national newspapers to promote a true European public space. What that requires more than anything is a dash of openness and the willingness to define their journalistic responsibilities in the light of new social conditions.



A tragicomic but sanguine passage in *Soll und Haben* (Debit and Credit), an otherwise hopelessly outdated 19th century epic German novel by Gustav Freytag, features a proud though insignificant provincial journalist describing what he's just written. With supreme self-confidence, he asserts that he has again managed to pen an article that will make the Tsar squirm the moment it rolls off the press.

How many journalists or intellectuals in today's European provinces are equally convinced that their words will unnerve the powers—that-be in Brussels or Strasbourg – or even anyone outside the narrow circle of their own compatriots? Unfortunately, far too few.

Swedish thinkers write for Swedish readers, French intellectuals write for Frenchmen and Estonian for Estonians. Maybe that's not so bad. But what's worse is that the subjects and perspectives of their musings are almost always peculiar to their own countries, to Sweden, France or Estonia.

Despite the successful adoption of the euro by many countries, the Europeanization of identities, lifestyles and frames of reference – or the advent of a common public space – still seems like a far-off dream. But the long-term prospects for a more meaningful European community turn on the emergence of those very trends. In an article on the construction of European identity, Manuel Castells recently formulated the dilemma as follows:

The technology is new; the economy is global; the state is a European network, in negotiation with other international actors; while people's identity is national, or even local and regional in certain cases. In a democratic society, this kind of structural, cognitive dissonance may be unsustainable. While integrating Europe without sharing a European identity is a workable proposition when everything goes well, any major

crisis, in Europe or in a given country, may trigger a European implosion of unpredictable consequences.

To put it another way, in the absence of a common identity, there is no true and sustainable European community. And any such common identity is vitally dependent on the existence of a pan-European public space. A European public space would be a realm in which transnational values and principles – or transnational practices if you will – can be defined, shaped and reshaped, and in which supranational political institutions can gain legitimacy.

About a year ago, one of the most ambitious attempts ever was launched to discuss Europe's common future on a transnational level. On 31 May 2003, seven European newspapers published articles by well-known intellectuals addressing the question, "What is Europe?" Umberto Eco wrote in *La Repubblica* (Italy), Gianni Vattimo in *La Stampa* (Italy), Adolf Muschg in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Switzerland), Richard Rorty in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Germany) and Fernando Savater in *El País* (Spain).

The article that turned out to be most momentous and widely discussed was written by Jürgen Habermas – who had initiated the entire project – and co-signed by Jacques Derrida. Both *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany) and *La Libération* (France) published the article.

That the two most influential European intellectuals of recent decades took the pragmatic step of brushing aside their differences and speaking in unison was a remarkable development in itself. Normally their philosophical approaches are worlds apart. Just as astounding was the politically charged concretion that marked their analysis.

Discussions about the possible foundation of a common European identity tend to get lost in the fog of cultural or religious history. Vague notions of democracy and freedom grow even more amorphous when the chattering classes suggest that Europe has some kind of patent on them. The challenge identified by most people who are looking to define a distinguishing characteristic that can hold Europe together seems to be to invoke a kind of *re-enchantment*, a way to cast a mythological and mysterious glimmer over a continent that has been reified and reduced to an economic project. The hollowness of the symbols such longings give rise to virtually hits you over the head when you glance at the imprecise architectural motifs of the euro notes. Where can you find a European identity in the five euro note's nebulous viaduct? Does it have any emotional resonance or symbolic density? What collective dreams does it evoke or convey?

From that point of view, the Habermas/Derrida article was a miracle of substantive contemporary history. However, at least as interesting as the article's analysis and conclusions is the event itself. It was a kind of intervention, a performance manifesto that cried out for that which the text both is and conjures forth: a European discussion about Europe – a European public space.

Public space in its broadest sense takes in both the old popular movements and the new NGOs that are sprouting up at the same dizzying pace as established institutions prove incapable of fulfilling their original purpose. But its pre-eminent vehicles are still radio, television, newspapers and magazines – digital or otherwise. If Habermas regarded the antiwar demonstrations on 15 February 2003 as the opening bell for a European public space that includes

the street, his manifesto was also an attempt to resurrect its media complement. But his initiative appears to have been a failure in that respect. A broad, transnational discussion has been conspicuous by its absence. Instead we've been treated to a new demonstration of the way that public discourse falls hostage to national and linguistic divisions.

Spain concentrated primarily on Savater's article, Italy on Eco's and Vattimo's. Though the most responsive of all, the German press displayed little interest in what had been written in Italian and Spanish. Countries that hadn't been involved in publication of the original articles were even more detached: not a single word in *Financial Times*.

Despite its grandiose pretensions, the Habermas initiative has become a striking example of the difficulties confronting the modern Babylon that goes by the name of Europe in establishing a transnational discursive and deliberative space worth its salt. There are many other examples as well.

That such aspirations can be costly is illustrated by the fate of *The European*, a shipwrecked project launched by newspaper magnate Robert Maxwell in 1990 under the motto "Europe's First National Newspaper." At its height, the paper had a circulation of 180,000, more than half of which in Britain. Circulation in Sweden – one of the European countries where it attracted most attention – never reached more than 5,000, i.e. on a level with established but "small" and "elitist" magazines like *Ord&Bild* and *Arena*. In the mid-1990s, Andrew Neil turned *The European* into a weekly that could just as well been called "The Anti-European." And finally it went belly-up, mourned by few and light-years from the original vision of an all-European newsmagazine aimed at a broad readership. The escapade, which lasted hardly a decade, lost an estimated 70 million pounds.

When the eminent bilingual German/French television station *Arte* recently celebrated its tenth birthday, it could bask in the glory of having garnered no less than 1,260 awards. But it was still nowhere near its goal of carving out a meagre 1 per cent share of the market. Although *Arte's* proud slogan is "Europe watches TV," its prospects for finding a third major partner – apart from Germany and France – appear remote. Not even in those two countries has the channel managed to fashion a profile or a trademark sufficiently strong and appealing to lay the groundwork for anything that might resemble a European public space.

It's hardly a coincidence that cultural and political journals have taken it upon themselves to make the articles by Habermas et. al. available to Swedish, Turkish, Slovenian and – just recently – Polish readers. Those publications comprise the very media segment that has most nearly approached the ideal of a European public space. They spread political, philosophical, aesthetic and cultural ideas from language to language, both inside and outside transnational publishing networks. *Le Monde diplomatique*, which is run largely from France, has editions in close to 20 different languages. Though less synchronized, *Lettre internationale* is also a good case in point. The *Eurozine* network consists of some 50 partner publications, as well as 60 others that are more loosely connected, for the exchange of articles and ideas. But while individual articles that are translated and distributed inside and outside the *Eurozine* network may have a total circulation of over 1 million, the cosmopolitanism of the cultural journals is small in scale. They may represent a partial, contrarian public space, but their scope is much too limited to nurture a forum that can shape public opinion and steel people's wills, a place in which

crucial issues can be framed and discussed in earnest. A public space in and through which a common European identity can emerge and serve as the basis for the legitimization of new transnational polities will have to be broader than that.

In conclusion, it would appear that there is only one path open to meeting the challenge posed by a heterogeneous collective of nationally oriented viewers, listeners, readers: a European public space spearheaded by established national media, whose translations – of both language and context – can offer "foreign" thinkers and concepts a seat at a table where Swedish, French and Estonian readers all feel at home. Serious newspapers like *Dagens Nyheter*, *Le Monde* and *Postimees* have a decisive role to play in this regard. But any momentum in that direction will require at least a dash of openness on the part of the leading media, which still have at their disposal the format and the will to interpret their journalistic and civic responsibilities in the light of new social, political and cultural conditions. If, as Castells alleges, the state is a European network, then the fourth estate needs to redefine its task. Not a single Swedish intellectual of significance has dedicated a coherent analysis to Habermas' provocative manifesto. One possible conclusion is that Swedish intellectuals have been derelict in their duty, but a more fruitful approach would be to ask what this unresponsiveness says about the ability of leading Swedish media to spot and hone in on discussions that start outside their own country.

Instead of regarding their little siblings, i.e. the journals, with an odd mixture of envy (format and prestige) and disdain (circulation and impact), the national newspapers throughout Europe might take the initiative for a collaborative effort that would begin opening the gates to a wider world. That could entail a lot more pre-printing and reprinting of abridged or unabridged magazine articles, or syndication agreements with foreign publications – and not only English ones. Though that is already being done to a certain extent, there is still a long way to go. Such a move would highlight, further and take advantage of the journals' potential for constructing a transnational public space. Meanwhile, the larger newspapers would have greater input and incentive to meet their responsibilities as critical forums for the shaping of public opinion in a world where the leading thinkers no longer congregate in any one country – be it Sweden, France or Estonia. Particularly when it comes to setting up publishing networks that transcend national and corporate boundaries, the daily newspapers have much to learn from magazines.

A European public space may be a prerequisite for a united Europe, but unity should not be confused with uniformity. Quite the contrary. Swedes don't need to write like Estonians, or Estonians like Germans. The true challenge is to take diversity seriously and make room for new perspectives – whether in word or thought. Only such a rich and freewheeling dialogue has the potential to forge a common identity and put it to the proof. We can still laugh at the Swedish counterpart of Freytag's provincial journalist, an editorial writer for the little local paper *Smålands Allehanda* who insisted on his place in the public sphere by giving Bismarck a good dressing down: "We have already warned the German Chancellor against persevering in his current policies, and we now repeat that warning..."

As funny as this posturing may strike us, there's no denying that such pure audacity has an appeal all its own.

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