

The Media, Democracy and Public Spheres in Europe

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ABSTRACTS

Session I: The Evolution of Public Spheres

Civil society in the post-communist world (Jan Kubik)

I review the state of scholarly knowledge on civil society in the post-communist countries of Europe and Asia. After a critical review of the most influential studies and key databases, I offer several remarks on persistent theoretical and methodological obstacles that continue to plague this field of study and propose some ways of overcoming them.

The key debate is whether post-communist civil societies are strong or weak. The (near) consensus is that they are weak, but much of the existing literature relies on a narrow conceptualization of civil society and underspecified theory, and employs a limited set of methodological tools (for example, attitudinal data from the World Value Survey). Three key problems are noted: (1) frequently overlooked tremendous intra-regional diversity; (2) the understudied area of civil society's equivalents; and (3) excessive theoretical focus on quantity (of organizations) coupled with a relative neglect of the studies on the quality of civil society (organizations' actual impact on the performance of democracy).

I offer a fresh look at the existing data, suggest some theoretical reorientation, and show the usefulness of employing underused methodologies: event analysis (of protest) and ethnographic case studies.

Transnationalization of the public sphere and the fate of the public (Slavko Splichal)

The idea of a transnational (post-national) political public sphere contains an enlightened humanist ideology focused on its emancipatory potential but it may also denote the fabrication of a fictitious 'public sphere' dominated by elites without citizens if not deep-rooted in the concept of the 'strong' public sphere. The central questions remain to what extent transnationalization of the public sphere departs from the nation-state model supposedly hidden in the original concept of the public sphere, and why the concept of 'the public sphere' became ubiquitously so important while the formerly fundamental concept of 'the public' is almost rooted out. These challenges are discussed with specific reference to the processes of 'Europeanization', the possibilities of the development of transnational publics and public spheres under global governance, and some issues and illusions of empirical research in the field. In practical-empirical terms, transnationalization of the public sphere is exemplified with the processes in Europe or, more specifically, the European Union as it has emerged after its widening to the Central and Eastern European (formerly communist) countries in the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Session II: Democracy and the Media

Democracy and the media in a historical perspective (Marc Plattner)

Today the world is undergoing a communications revolution, though its course is uncertain and difficult to predict. This makes it an opportune moment for broad reflection on the relationship of the media to democracy and how both have evolved over time. The first democracies, those of the ancient world, were cities small enough for the citizens to communicate face to face; hence they did not need 'media' in our sense of the term. Modern representative democracies, by contrast, were born in the age of print, and their much larger extent made liberty of the press essential. But while free media are indispensable to modern democracy, they, like political parties and the associations composing civil society, lack formal constitutional status, and thus are susceptible to great variation both across countries and over time. Until recently, it seemed as if the democratic world was converging on a model that emphasized 'critical professionalism' and a weakening of ties between media organizations and other political and social groups. Today, however, the emergence of new technologies may be leading to a reversal of these trends.

The quality of democracy, accountability and the media (Leonardo Morlino)

If we accept the analysis of and proposal on how to conceptualize and measure the qualities of democracy (see Morlino, *Changes for Democracy*, forthcoming, chs. 7 and 8), we can assess the various different qualities as a whole, or at least detect a web of qualities for each country. This also allows us to check both procedural dimensions and result dimensions, and how these two substantive dimensions can combine to configure various models of democratic quality. From this perspective, democracies can vary according to the greater or lesser realization of each of the main qualities (rule of law, electoral accountability, institutional accountability, participation, competition, freedom, equality, responsiveness).

This analysis, however, seems to forget one of the key components or actors of every contemporary democracy: the media. In addition to introducing an analysis of the media within this conceptualization of democratic qualities, this paper addresses the media as an institution and tries to assess the autonomous role the media can play through the empirical quantitative analysis of a set of European and Latin American countries.

Session III: The Mediation of Power

Power in political thinking: a performative practice (Michael Freeden)

Current research on power as a feature of political discourse is weighted heavily towards the forms of social power that are projected through language and for which language is a vehicle. Those approaches, as in critical discourse analysis, tend to regard power as oppressive and dominating. Underexplored, however, is the role of power in language as a fundamental feature of the political, as a performative act typified by varying levels of intensity or power surges, irrespective of its constraining or emancipating evaluations. Political language endeavours to create impacts on its targeted audiences or readerships that may either succeed or fail. It aims at producing the finality to which the political aspires, yet that always eludes it. The public sphere is a major site of competition over that attempted control of political language, and thus of public policy, through intensification practices. On a micro-level the power in language is conveyed through employing modulators that activate and sharpen messages. On a macro-level it presents itself in four forms: the rational persuasive force of its argument, the rhetorical attractiveness of its vision, the appeal of its emotions, or the menace of its tone.

Media management, mediatization and mediation in the political process (Aeron Davis)

This paper maps out three, contrasting accounts of the relations between the media and politics. In one approach, scholars delve into the evolving relations of journalists and politicians, recording the attempts of parties and governments to manage the media and public opinion. For another group of researchers, the key focus of enquiry has been on the media as an increasingly powerful influence on political processes and outcomes. Politics is being 'mediatized' as political behaviours and decision-making are driven by 'media logic' and new ICTs. 'Mediation' suggests something between these two processes is taking place. Politicians and institutions are inadvertently adapting their activities, relations and discursive practices in response to an evolving media environment. Media, social practices and politicians are 'co-determining'. Having sketched out these three perspectives the paper then expands on the third, 'mediation of politics' approach. Using examples from the author's recent research it suggests the varied ways UK politicians have adjusted their daily thinking, behaviours and practices at Westminster, in relation to the presence and interventions of mass media and political journalists. Party power structures, political agendas, public debates, inter and intra-party conflicts, and information flows have all been subtly altered and, accordingly, shifted democratic political processes and outcomes in the long-term.

Session IV: Pluralism and Transitional Societies

Media and political parties: what parallelism? (Paolo Mancini)

This paper offers some sort of 'noble view' of political parallelism. Starting with a possible difference between internal and external pluralism, the paper argues that political parallelism may be an instrument to ensure and to foster political pluralism, and therefore may help the work of a democratic public sphere within which matters of general interest are discussed and negotiated. The definition of 'party parallelism' proposed by Colin Seymour Ure in 1974 has been replaced by that of 'political parallelism', implying lighter and less important party organizations and ideologies. The paper discusses different conditions that are linked to different ways and levels of political parallelism, and then focuses on the situation in Central and Eastern Europe. The weakness of political parties and their volatility in this part of the world does not represent a good pre-condition for political parallelism. This has been replaced by some sort of instrumentalization of the media, which are perceived and used as instruments of intervention in the decision making process, and not as a means of improving the processes of political socialization.

Media pluralism in Central and Eastern Europe: new conditions (Beata Klimkiewicz)

Structural media pluralism normatively corresponds with a media system as a whole, and refers to the existence of a wide range of media outlets, organisations and services reflecting various points of view, recognising diverse cultural representations, and offering different ways of interaction and use. This framing also implies an existence of diverse ownership, not only in terms of various entities owning media outlets, but also presupposing different 'types' of media ownership. In current media policy debates, however, structural pluralism is being increasingly challenged. New technical and industrial circumstances are seen as threatening well-resourced journalism, and it is argued that there is little point in promoting structural solutions, when the very structures themselves are in danger of extinction. This paper will argue that diversity of media structures remains important: deliberative legitimization processes in complex societies can only be generated through a self-regulating media system, where different constituting elements of the system itself are autonomous, independent from its social environment and at the same time, simultaneously 'located' in different functional, segmentary, geographical, cultural and control 'sites'. The presentation offers an empirical assessment of different dimensions of structural media pluralism in four Central and Eastern European countries in a diachronic perspective.

Session V: The Rule of Law, Clientelism and Corruption

Socio-legal reflections on post-communism and the rule of law (Martin Krygier)

A central theme of a tradition of socio-legal reflection born in the pre-post-communist region is well captured by the remark of Marc Galanter, one of its more penetrating contemporary heirs: '[j]ust as health is not found primarily in hospitals or knowledge in schools, so justice is not primarily to be found in official justice-dispensing institutions. People experience justice (and injustice) not only (or usually) in forums sponsored by the state but at the primary institutional locations of their activity – home, neighbourhood, workplace, business deal and so on.'

This paper begins by sketching some distinctive propositions drawn from that tradition. They are of the sort that as soon as they are enunciated one always knew them, but until then they were happily ignored. It then sketches a conception of the rule of law which seeks to heed those propositions. Then we move to 'the region', starting with pre-post-communism and then focusing on post. In that latter context I reflect on law, the rule of law, and their bearing on clientelism and corruption. I end by asking, though not adequately answering, Lenin's question: what is to be done? But then his answer was inadequate too.

The rule of law versus the rule of political parties: on the state of democracy and power corruption in Central Europe (Jirí Pribán)

This paper reflects on political, legal and social developments in Central European countries in the last two decades, especially their constitutional changes and emergence of multi-party democracy. The democratic rule of law, the constitutional state, and the system of justice currently experience strong pressures from political parties and private business groups that use general political and legal processes to facilitate their goals and protect particular interests. Moral and political dilemmas and irritations of 'dealing with the communist past' are being replaced by imminent risks and challenges of 'dealing with the capitalist present'. Recent constitutional and legal developments in Hungary, regular political attacks on the Czech Constitutional Court and the current crisis of the Slovak system of justice shall be discussed as specific examples of the post-EU accession structural and institutional weakness of individual countries of Central Europe.

Session VI: Media Freedom versus Political and Economic Pressures

Media freedom versus media responsibility (Katrin Voltmer)

While freedom of the press is one of the major quests in the struggle for democracy, it has been one of the most disputed arenas in the transition process from authoritarian to democratic rule. In this paper I argue that the norm of media freedom is ambiguous and does not have a clear-cut meaning across time and space. Rather, its meaning and practice is subject to ongoing negotiations between the media and their stakeholders – media owners, politicians and audiences. While this is true for all democratic societies, it holds even more for emerging democracies that are in the process of establishing and consolidating democratic institutions. In my paper I adopt Whitehead's (2002) 'interpretivist' conception of democracy according to which the meaning and practices of democratic politics, including press freedom, are socially constructed in a process of public communication. Material from semi-structured interviews with journalists in Bulgaria and Poland suggests that individuals use various, often contradicting reference points to come to grips with what press freedom means in day-to-day professional life: adopted standards from Western role models, experiences of the past, cultural norms and responses to situational problems. From this it can be concluded that the meaning of press freedom differs depending on the particular cultural and political trajectory of a country.

Rewriting the journalism rules: political pressures and media weapons (Alexandru Lăzescu)

Mass media never was simply a business like all the others. From Hearst to Murdoch and Berlusconi the influence that media tycoons have had on election outcomes and political decisions has created a significant room for debate. On the other hand, many politicians were, and are, tempted to meddle in editorial content whenever their interests were at stake. And in this sense, mainly but not at all exclusively in Central and Eastern Europe, the public radio and TV services have been a constant target. From Warsaw to Prague, from Budapest to Bucharest or Chişinău, this has been a constant topic. In Romania, for example, the last three Boards of Romanian public television have been dismissed, for obvious political reasons, before completing their regular four-year mandate.

On the other hand, the explosive growth of blogging and social media has not only eroded massively the power of traditional media as public opinion shapers and disrupted the traditional media business models, but has also disrupted the 'rules of engagement' in this territory. The Wikileaks phenomenon is just an expression of this enormous challenge the media is facing right now.

But while these are general trends affecting the entire media landscape there are significant differences throughout Europe, mainly in the Eastern part of the continent. In Romania, for example, the all-news TV channels are acting more as media weapons than as information vehicles. A leading Romanian journalist has depicted them as the 'number one instrument for social terrorism'. Some may consider that too radical a description, but it is a fact that during the last five years the mass media has dropped sharply in public trust. What are the main reasons for this involution; what is the impact on society; and what is to be expected in the future? These are some of the questions we will try to answer in this paper.