The Everyday Politics of the European Public Sphere: Moving Beyond EU Policy Perspectives

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The Everyday Politics of the European Public Sphere: Moving Beyond EU Policy Perspectives

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ABSTRACT
While in the academic debate the idea of a European public sphere is seen from both consensual and conflictual perspectives, in the field of European Union (EU) policymaking it tends to assume the profile of a neutral and all-inclusive social space. By focusing on the street-level, this article suggests that such view is problematic because it fails to resonate with people's everyday experiences. The article contrasts EU policy on civil society engagement and immigration with examples of civil society reactions to immigration in two corners of Europe – on the Italian island of Lampedusa and in the city of Athens, Greece. In order for the concept of a European public sphere to garner meaning outside the EU policy process, it needs to be anchored in the everyday politics of social space in Europe. This means embracing an 'ethnographic approach' that is sensitive to difference, diversity and conflict, and to the daily (micro)political struggles that are played out in the public sphere.

KEY WORDS: European public sphere, civil society, everyday politics, social space

Introduction

The past decade has documented the European Union (EU) becoming increasingly attentive to issues that concern the social space it hosts, but this attention has been of a very particular kind. In policy terms this translates into a preference for an organizational view of civil society and social space, with primary attention on political parties, think tanks, media and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In academic terms this has translated to an interest in constructing an idea of a European public sphere around the communicative spaces and practices that link the national and European levels (Eriksen, 2005; Koopmans & Statham, 2010). What largely links the two endeavours is an emphasis on common denominators and a search for similar frames of reference, discourses and behaviours across Europe that will make the idea of Europe and European Union meaningful. This article argues that such an approach leaves us short-changed in terms of making the European public sphere concept a meaningful device for thinking about the lived experiences of social space on the ground.

This recent interest in the development of a European public sphere stands in stark contrast with the fact that for decades the idea was conspicuous by its complete

absence in the debates and policymaking processes surrounding the European project. It was the nature of the early European cooperation that made this both unavoidable and tremendously useful (de Beus, 2010). Broadly speaking, the post-Second World War reconstruction of Europe had great faith in the planned modernization processes that came with the Marshall Plan and the ability of the political elite to keep the course towards political stability and economic prosperity (Dedman, 1996). This was combined with a remarkably low public interest in the European project, as Europeans 'busied themselves with the life of getting and spending' as Alan Milward notes (2004, p. 462).

In fact, democratic decision-making in the EU has often played catch-up with decisions that have already been taken and implemented by the bureaucratic machine (Bellamy & Castiglione, 2000). Since Europe's first supranational community – the European Coal and Steel Community – was formally established by the Treaty of Rome in 1951, European integration became increasingly reliant on the 'Community method' (or the 'Monnet method'). It was a strategy of incremental integration through the everyday policy processes and administrative decisions made by the political and bureaucratic elite. Consequently the process of European integration has not required a democratic consensus to propel itself forward; rather, the incremental bureaucratization of the process has generated its own momentum through, for example, the growing number of committees (Joerge & Everson, 2000). This has also meant that where the idea of European public sphere has gained traction in recent policy discussions, it has adhered to the existing processes that are depoliticized and technical. This, the article argues, has significant consequences for how the European public sphere is understood in the EU policymaking context as a neutral, all-inclusive space.

However, as the public sphere debate clearly illustrates, the way the European public sphere can be conceptualized contains both consensual and conflictual trajectories (Della Porta, 2003, p. 5). For example, the extent to which formal civil society organizations in Europe can be regarded as a homogenous group is often questioned (Meyer, 2009; Dressler & Terrazzoni, 2011). Indeed, the diversity of opinions within the public sphere, or a plurality of publics, is often deemed valuable because this can challenge existing hegemonies and test the legitimacy of power (Eriksen, 2005; Lacroix, 2009). However, such investigations remain rather narrowly focused on a particular segment of actors within civil society that already participates in national public spheres or the emergent European public sphere.

The focus of this article is rather on those experiences that take place closer to the ground, in the nooks and crannies of social space and among civil society actors that are often absent from the debates and discussions that take place in the public sphere. This becomes highly pertinent in the context of the current disillusionment with European integration. Should we explain this despondency towards Europe in terms of an underdeveloped European public sphere, or is it more prudent to look at the way the European Union has chosen to operationalize this concept and disconnected it from individual experiences of Europe? The historical absence of any interest in fostering citizen participation in EU politics has also meant that the recent interest in the development of a European public sphere relies heavily on concepts of public sphere and civil society as they are used at the national level. The article therefore introduces the notion of European social space as an alternative means of conceptualizing the European public sphere as a more nuanced and pluralist space.

By comparing EU policymaking on civil society and immigration with two short case studies from the Italian island of Lampedusa Island and the city of Athens

in Greece, the article demonstrates the disconnect that exists between policy frameworks and lived experiences of immigration and civil society. In other words, the way in which differences and conflicts present themselves through these street-level examples allows us to problematize the EU approach that chooses to focus on the neutral and consensual side of social space. In so doing, the article argues in favour of a more pluralist and agonistic understanding of what is meant by a European public sphere.

The remainder of this article consists of three substantive sections. The first section makes the case for reconceptualizing the approach to the European public sphere harboured within the EU institutions and discusses the range of academic literature dealing with the idea of a European public sphere, thus positioning the formalistic and technical understanding of the European public sphere supported by the EU as only one of many approaches found in this field of research. The second section illustrates the dominance of public sphere-inspired policy interventions through examples from EU policy on civil society engagement and immigration. The third section then contrasts the EU policy approach with experiences of immigration on the Italian island of Lampedusa and in Athens, Greece.

A European Public Sphere?

As Slavko Splichal has insightfully observed, it is not easy to agree on what it is that we take to be the European public sphere. Because each conceptualization relies on distinct empirical evidence, the shape and size of the European public sphere inevitably differs between the models (Splichal, 2012). Nevertheless, the common denominator for much of the public sphere debate today comes from Jürgen Habermas' seminal opus *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere). His observations are founded on the quantity of public participation and the quality of the public discourse therein. Habermas drew on the experience of the seventeenth and eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere where participation was determined by the merits of the argument rather than the social position of the individual (Habermas, 1992, pp. 27-8; Calhoun, 1992). Whilst this tended to limit the participants to well-educated males with sufficient wealth to possess the luxury of time, the fact that all rational-critical arguments were welcomed purely on their merits opened the door for a multiplicity of actors to participate. Though the process through which public opinions emerge in the first place can be spontaneous and organic, the process of communicating ideas to the wider world that follows is more procedural, requiring more formal actors and channels of communication.

The criticisms of the Habermasian public sphere tend to focus on its incompatibility with the needs of a modern, pluralistic society. These criticisms, as Hohendahl (1992) has pointed out, may be sourced less from the communicative interpretation of the public sphere than from a more general disagreement with the uncritical application of European liberal values in understanding social practices. A pluralist point of view highlights the importance of thinking about public space as an agonistic space, prone to competition and struggle between different voices (Benhabib, 1992). Seen this way, the communicative approach to understanding the public sphere tends to define *a* public as *the* public, rather than considering the full range of competing counterpublics that occupy the wider social space (Fraser, 1992). Although the communicative perspective does not necessarily preclude the existence

of counterpublics, by and large the way in which the concept is utilized in the field of EU policymaking aspires for a sense of commonness. In the very least, the conceptual terrain tends to be rather limited in its consideration for such alternative representations of the public sphere.

These limits to how the European public sphere is conceptualized arise from an existing preference for highly procedural and technical policy interventions. Given that the post-Second World War existence of civil society and public sphere has been limited to the national domain, the conception of a European public sphere has naturally taken the national experience as its starting point. But is this necessary? Should our perception of what the European public sphere ought to look like be unnecessarily dominated by the path taken by national public spheres in Europe since the 1950s?

The problem with this approach, as this article argues, is its exclusive nature. If we think of the public sphere as the communicative space where a range of voices from civil society engage in a public debate on social issues, we need to consider the rules of inclusion in this sphere. Participation is largely limited to formal and well-established civil society organizations able to engage in the policymaking process while interests organized informally or located outside of the mainstream political agenda are less likely to be represented, making public debate an unnecessarily sanitized affair. While at the national level there exist ways to circumvent the exclusivity of the public sphere – such as fringe political parties and local grassroots campaigns – it is much more difficult to address this issue at the European level. The notion of European social space attempts to reconceptualize the debate about the European public sphere in a more rugged fashion and offer an alternative understanding of the space available for communicating and engaging with European citizenry.

The European public sphere is likely to face a similar tension between *the* European public sphere and the counterpublics that are excluded, which raises the important question of how diversity and conflict are properly accommodated. The remainder of this section presents four perspectives on European public sphere research, which is done for two reasons: first, to offer three perspectives on the 'mainstream' debate on European public sphere and how diversity and conflict are taken into consideration, and secondly, in the form of a fourth perspective, to discuss the added-value of introducing a street-level experience of social space into these debates.

A Structural Approach

First of all, the formal realm of institutions and organizations that inhabit this space is a common focus in European public sphere research, aimed at understanding the relationship between the national and transnational publics. For example, Koopmans and Statham identify three processes through which the European public sphere can take shape in the sense of transcending the national space without bypassing the European space: a *supranational European public sphere* that consists largely of European institutions and EU-related themes; *vertical Europeanization of public spheres* where communicative links develop between the national and EU level; and *horizontal Europeanization of public spheres* that focuses on the communicative linkages between European countries (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004; Koopmans & Statham, 2010).

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Eriksen offers another three-fold conceptualization of European public sphere by referring, in the first instance, to *overarching general publics* that refer to 'communicative spaces of civil society' such as 'European audio-visual spaces' of television (Euronews) and print media. Second, *transnational segmented publics* are formed by policy networks that are populated by actors with common interests in particular matters. Third, *strong publics* are made up of legal frameworks, institutions and discourses that are engaged in political decision-making such as the European Parliament (Eriksen, 2005).

The above contributions represent an impressive effort to give order to what is recognized as a fragmented, differentiated and contested space. However, as useful as these conceptual frameworks are in terms of thinking about the range of spaces and the variety of ways in which European public sphere can exist, they tend to focus on a rather limited set of relations that exist between political parties, think-tanks, media outlets, NGOs and other actors that are very much part of the formal, organizational character of social space. Focus on such a fixed range of organizational forms means that links with actual lived experiences of social space and how people across Europe come to experience this space or to engage with it are more tenuous.

A pluralist perspective would suggest that we need to look at a more diverse range of identities, interests and needs of subordinated social groups (Fraser, 1992). In other words, we need to be more attuned to the notion of multiple public spheres or counterpublics, where voices in the public sphere oppose or exclude each other and in so doing struggle against the idea of an overarching unitary sphere (Schildt & Siegfried, 2005).

Communicative Approach

Second, the communicative character of the public sphere is an important focus of research. A discursive framework is a more flexible way of thinking about connectivity within the public sphere and has potential to be an inclusive and open method for engaging in debate on European matters. Newspapers and other media play a key role in the analysis of the communicative character of the public sphere (Bee & Bozzini, 2010; Koopmans & Statham, 2010; Meyer & Moors, 2006; Triandafyllidou, Wodak & Krzyzanowski, 2009; Trenz, 2004). Some indeed take the view that media is the fulcrum of the European public sphere, seeing it as a 'proxy for the (non)existence of a European public sphere' (Risse, 2003, p. 1). Risse goes on to present three communication-based counterfactual tests for the presence of a European public sphere: if the same themes are discussed at the same time across national public spheres; if similar frames of references and meaning structures are used; and if a 'transnational community of communication' develops where participants acknowledge each other as legitimate voices (Risse, 2003). Mass media is what makes EU policies visible to the public and the medium through which policymakers receive feedback. Indeed, it is often the only connection between the distant EU institutions and the public and therefore an important route for civil society organizations to participate in the public sphere and thus give rise to the emergence of nuanced versions of the public (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004; Meyer & Moors, 2006).

The focus on the role of media suggests a more fluid notion of a European public space that is less concerned with normative ideas about what it ought to be. Rather, its existence is connected to particular issues that transcend the national boundaries and give rise to a 'pan-European discourse' where it is possible for citizens of different countries to participate in a discussion on the same topics at the

same time (Eriksen, 2005, p. 258). Whilst this position by no means precludes a contested and pluralist space, the communicative approach is still somewhat constrained by its focus on the media. It helps us understand certain means through which issues migrate from the European arena to the national, and how frames of reference and meaning structures of transnational origin are 'naturalized' in local contexts and vice versa. Yet it is less able to say something about the lived experiences that underlie the development of new debates and contested concepts.

Democratic Legitimacy Approach

Concerns over the European project, namely questions of democratic (de)legitimacy of the European Union, are another important entry point to the discussion on the European public sphere (Giorgi, von Homeyer & Parsons, 2006; Peters, et al., 2005; Risse, 2003, 2010; Wessler, 2008; Koopmans & Statham, 2010; Eriksen, 2005; Bärenreuter, et al., 2009; de Beus, 2010). The European Union lacks a common, recognizable core structure – either social or political – that EU citizens would readily identify with in a similar way that they identify with a nation state. The aloofness of the EU bureaucracy in turn leads to an emotive disconnect with the European project in the sense that there does not exist a unifying sense of 'Europeanness'. The argument connecting the dots between a public sphere deficit and a democratic deficit contends that there is, in the first instance, an organic link between the democracy deficit and a subsequent legitimacy deficit (Giorgi, von Homeyer & Parsons, 2006; Bellamy & Castiglione, 2000). It follows that if we are looking for a treatment for the EU's ailments, any remedy would need to go beyond institutional solutions and address an underlying disconnection between the EU and its citizenry (de Beus, 2010).

      The European public sphere is injected in this debate as a remedial formula for overcoming the legitimacy crisis. Europe lacks a political 'interface' that connects the citizens with the politicians and political institutions (Risse, 2003). For many researchers, the intellectual curiosity lies in the fact that the EU provides a unique test-case for the existence of post-national democracy and in its slipstream, for post-national public sphere (Eriksen, 2005; Wessler, 2008; Eriksen & Fossum, 2000). Since at the national level this role is fulfilled by means located within the public sphere, a simple extrapolation makes it the obvious candidate for democratic legitimation beyond the nation state.

      However, as Chantal Mouffe (2000) makes clear, the very idea that the rational public sphere could be non-exclusive and non-coercive is problematic. In describing what she terms as 'democratic paradox', Mouffe argues that if we are going to remain truthful to the notion of pluralism, then we also need to be much more aware of the politics of difference and the implications this has on what we take democratic consensus to mean. In practice, this means that we need to re-introduce antagonism, violence, power and repression into our democratic model which is something the procedural approach to the public sphere fails to deal with.

Accounting for Lived Experiences – An Ethnographic Approach

Mouffe's argument is a particularly useful entry point to thinking about role of lived experiences and everyday politics of social space in the public sphere debate. In the closely related field of civil society studies, many are critical of the 'deodorization' of

the concept (White, 1994) where the political edge of civil society is eroded by the instrumental use of the concept as a tool of policymaking (Bebbington, Hickey, & Mitlin, 2008; Howell & Pearce, 2001). In the same spirit, in order to challenge such flattening and overly consensual usage of the term, others have argued that civil society space should be seen as a site of 'struggle, multivocality and paradox' (Glasius, Lewis, & Seckinelgin, 2004). If we are to explore these dynamics more closely we need to look beneath the shiny veneer of formal civil society organizations and engage with the unvarnished surfaces of everyday politics.

This very same point is relevant for public sphere research. The evidence suggests that there is hardly any expectation of European policies producing homogeneity in the near future (Foret, 2010). Nilufer Göle (2006), for example, points out how the inclusion of new social groups requires an understanding of how the limits of the public sphere are being constantly renegotiated through everyday politics.[1] This process, she insightfully observes, is likely to be political and confrontational because it deals with *mutual* change, rather than integration. An ethnographic approach allows us to enter the field of everyday politics and understand how the plurality of experiences generates differences that lead to confrontation and conflict.

EU Policy and Social Space

The EU, through policy that deals with issues such as governance, civil society, participation and immigration, positions itself in a particular way in these debates regarding the European public sphere. The aspirations behind EU policy can tell us about the normative positions that inform the policymakers, and the processes contained in these policies in turn tell us who, in their view, inhabits the European public sphere and what are the best mechanisms to engage them. The policy documents indicate that despite the existence of highly nuanced research on the subject where public sphere is understood also as a source of differences and as a space for conflict, the EU perceives the concept almost purely as a mechanism for reaching compromises and generating commonalities.

EU perceptions on the question of public sphere are set out in a 2006 publication, *White Paper on European Communications Policy*, which sets out the aim of developing a European public sphere. The document justifies this endeavour in terms of the challenge presented by the current 'communications gap' between the EU and its citizens and suggests that the development of a European space for debate and dialogue would help to close this gap. The document opines that European citizens, apart from electing the members of the European Parliament, have limited opportunities to exercise their voice on European matters, not least because 'there is no obvious forum within which they can discuss the issues together' (European Commission, 2006, p. 5). All political debates viewed important by the public take place at the national level, engendering a sense of alienation from Brussels despite the fact that many important policy decisions are in fact taken at the EU level. The solutions proposed by the document are structured around themes such as: 'defining common principles', 'working with the media and new technologies', 'understanding European public opinion' and 'doing the job together' (*ibid.*). The themes alone suggest that there ought to be an agreed set of objectives and a shared toolbox that stretch across the member states. The more specific policy proposals focus on efforts at civic education that inform citizens about public policy and the establishment of

forums that will breathe life into the debate around these policy issues. In other words, this suggests that once citizens are more aware and informed they are more likely to agree on common principles and working together towards common goals, through the language, discourses and frames of meaning established by the EU. These policy aims indicate that the concept of a European public sphere within EU policy deliberations is seen as a decontested and inclusive space for all EU citizens to participate in.

Similar attitudes are reflected in other EU policy documents that relate to discussions of European public space and civil society. The *White Paper on European Governance* suggests that the European public lacks confidence in the EU because it is complex and poorly understood (European Commission, 2001a). The document also conveys the belief that greater public participation is an intrinsically good outcome; that greater involvement of civil society is naturally democratizing by because it gives people a voice, or at least amplifies it. A working paper that helped to inform the White Paper on European Governance, called *Consultation and Participation of Civil Society*, suggests that public involvement could be facilitated by formulating an accreditation system for European NGOs that wish to participate in consultations and by developing a comprehensive database for all NGOs available for consultation when relevant issues arose (European Commission, 2001c). A second working paper entitled *Broadening and Enriching the Public Debate on European Matters* points in particular to the linguistic barriers that exist in the way of a European political culture and identifies the need for a 'common narrative when discussing the history, development and objectives of the European Union' (European Commission, 2001b, p. 3). Indeed, taken together these policy documents suggest that EU policymakers largely stick to the consensual, rather than the conflictual trajectory of public sphere research, and in so doing ignore the rough edges and fractures that can be found beneath the smooth surface of civil society. In this sense the policy examples above seem to lack traction with the diversity of experiences that characterize civil society, because the documents present a rather instrumental view of how individuals engage in policy processes. Given that such a view is likely to gloss over any agonistic relations within street-level politics that determine the means of inclusion and exclusion in these processes (Bebbington, Hickey & Mitlin, 2008), one is compelled to ask how much traction such policies really have.

EU Integration and Immigration Policy

The perception that the European public sphere is a space largely devoid of conflict is also communicated through EU immigration policy. The suggested policy interventions propose to address immigration questions through technical solutions that focus on methods of controlling immigration and on tools that help with both economic and social integration. While the overall aims are largely unproblematic, these policy interventions seem to assume a non-exclusive public sphere where a neutral consensus is possible.

In a document entitled *A Common Agenda for Integration*, the Commission's aims are clearly framed around an ambition for a 'common, comprehensive, consistent and coherent' policy (European Commission, 2005). The document suggests that through education focused on what are regarded as 'European values', such as human rights and tolerance, as well as through an increased interaction between third-country nationals and EU citizens, it is possible to achieve greater integration. What we find here is an expectation that the uptake of European values

will naturally follow from an education program and, secondly, an assumption that interaction, by virtue of being interactive, will help integration regardless of its content.

In order to further operationalize the integration agenda, the Commission has since published a communication entitled *A Common Immigration Policy for Europe: Principles, Actions and Tools* that sets out ten action points constructed around three common principles: 'prosperity, solidarity, and security' (European Commission, 2008). Immigration is approached from the positive perspective of economic prosperity, where it is pointed out that immigration can make a great contribution to the European economy as long as the skills of those entering Europe are matched with existing needs. This positive potential, however, is realized through successful integration that emphasises the 'practical intercultural skills for effective adaptation as well as the commitment to fundamental European values' (European Commission, 2008, p. 7). The second principle, 'solidarity', refers to border management at the EU periphery and to the nature of integration policies. Given the EU's open internal borders, the only way to manage immigration effectively is by working together and this justifies an EU-wide immigration policy that includes all member states. The third principle of 'security' aims to reduce the number of illegal immigrants entering Europe through measures such as improved border controls, biometrics, and tighter visa regulation. The protective and preventative policies captured under the security principles are viewed as enabling, because these policies effectively limit the arrival of immigrants in the EU to those that live up to the expectations of the first two principles.

More recently the European Commission has resolved to implement what it calls the 'tracking method' that will lead to a centrally collected set of migration data from all member countries that enables annual comparisons as well as suggestions for improvements in how legal immigration is organized – by identifying the priorities, needs and reception capacities of each member state. Described as a 'stepping stone towards a comprehensive EU migration policy', the document outlines a method for organizing legal immigration, controlling illegal immigration and making border controls more effective (European Commission, 2009, p. 2). All in all, in its pursuit of a common immigration policy the EU has taken a route that favours technical solutions that focus on coordination and cohesion of the rules of entry to the EU rather than on the experience of immigration in the recipient EU member states.

Whereas the academic research on the public sphere is quite attentive to the range of different views represented in this space, as well as to the potential conflicts that arise from this, the approach adopted by the EU lacks this nuance. The policy interventions are designed for a technical context where non-exclusive and non-coercive social relations prevail. For this reason EU policy is in real danger of remaining disconnected from the broader European public, because the policy interventions do not relate to local experiences of social space. This disconnect is elaborated further in the next section.

The Challenge

Since the legitimacy deficit that the EU faces is an important motivation for the public sphere-inspired debates, it is important to explore the characteristics of this deficit in more detail. One way to capture some of the most relevant elements of this multifarious phenomenon is to think about it in terms of Euroscepticism. Although

widely studied, the interpretations of the term have tended to gravitate towards the role of political parties and political systems (Conti & Memoli, 2011; Taggart, 1998; Kopecký & Mudde, 2002; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008). However, as the rest of this article suggests, it is also possible to identify counterpublics that exist at a much more local level, where the groups' sense of Euroscepticism is based on personal experiences of immigration, for example.

Éric Fassin and Judith Surkis (2010) have argued that the EU is being made redundant in the national level debates on immigration in two important ways. The first is the direction of the broader narrative on immigration among the far-right groups in Europe. Over the past two decades we have witnessed a shift in the way third-country nationals have been framed as immigrants, for they are no longer excluded on the bases of binary or essentialist claims. Rather the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are defined by establishing a certain package of citizenship rights as *the* liberal values that ought to be universally accepted (Joppke, 2008), which is problematic (Dressler & Terrazzoni, 2011). At the extreme end of this scale we find aggressive, hard-line integration, along the lines of 'Schmittian liberalism' that rejects the idea of negotiation and compromise found in the multicultural variants of the liberal value-based attitudes. Schmitt (1996) argues that only by identifying clear boundaries between friends and enemies can a polity become aware of its distinctiveness where the perception of a threat heightens citizens' sense of their own identity. Whatever we think of the tone of this argument, it rightly draws our attention to the politics of these societal relationships.

The second way has to do with the manner in which liberal European values become appropriated as a rationale for exclusion and intolerance. The definition of insiders and outsiders is shifting away from a national to a post-national frame of reference. The objection to immigration no longer arises as a national reaction that is based on origins or biological descent, as this is not necessarily the first port of call in identity construction. Instead the EU, and the type of Europe this represents, becomes one side of the binary categorization, posed against non-European migrants. In the case of Muslim immigration for example, instead of asking 'whether Muslims can be good Germans, Italians, or Danes … they question whether Muslims can be good Europeans' (Fassin & Surkis, 2010, p. 499). Ironically, while this is exactly the kind of value-based integration that the EU has been advocating, here it transmogrifies into a criterion for exclusion (Antonsich, 2008) and serves as an example of how local politics generate fragmentation and exclusion rather than compromises and inclusion.

Immigration at Europe's Perimeter: Lampedusa Island and Athens

The experiences of immigration offer an illuminating case study of the discordant everyday political encounters between the newcomers and their European hosts. These experiences tell us something about the way immigrants, by merely inhabiting the social space of their host country, foster conflictual and discordant responses. Their mere presence spawns a range of political reactions from the local public who are prompted to react to this (Göle, 2006). The two cases in question are Afghani immigrants in Athens and Tunisian immigrants on the Italian island of Lampedusa, both being sites located at the frontline of the EU's struggle against illegal immigration (Frontex, 2012).

These two cases have been chosen because they exemplify the difficulty of operationalizing the EU policy objectives on the ground (Bryman, 2008). They are examples of local experiences that illustrate the kinds of confrontations that can

surface around questions of immigration and as such demonstrate the fragmentation and discord surrounding debates in the public sphere. Until the beginning of 2011 Athens had been the main entry point for illegal immigrants looking to enter the EU. In the aftermath of the conflicts across North Africa, the main flow of immigrants has since then shifted to Lampedusa. The cases can therefore be regarded as a forming a 'critical case study' (Yin, 2003) that focuses on two salient but atypical events in order to see how such circumstances might fit within the current policy approaches. The data from which these accounts are constructed consist of newspaper, media and agency reports from an array of different sources, both local and international.[2] Whilst this is not an exhaustive treatment of the subject, these accounts open a door to thinking about how the lived experiences on the ground may not only highlight aspects of the EU public sphere research but also reflect on the appropriateness of the EU policy approach.

The local and the European reactions to the events unfolding in Lampedusa have been particularly illuminating of the way immigration debates take place on the ground. The press reports create an image of an island overflowing with North African immigrants, with as many as a thousand arriving on one day and over 22,000 in the first three months of 2011. This has led to extreme overcrowding in the island's only detention centre, leaving most of the entrants to live in makeshift outdoor camps, contrasted with the usual sleepy existence of the of the island's 5000 permanent residents, whose daily lives have been completely overturned by the North African arrivals (Reuters Africa, 2011). The fragile local economy that relies on fishing and tourism for income has ground to a halt. Residents interviewed on TV programmes express concern over hygiene at the detention centre and the camps.[3] These anxieties turn into angry protests where fishermen attempt to block the entrance to the harbour while another group of locals complain of the inhumane treatment of the Tunisian migrants (Al Jazeera, 2011). In all cases the target is the Italian government and its perceived inability to deal with the situation.

The media coverage, through its imagery and language, conveys a strong sense of emergency. The island is 'full' or 'overflowing', and reports are illustrated by pictures of rickety boats arriving at the Lampedusa harbour already occupied by hundreds of earlier arrivals. The reports often focus on the tension between the desperation of Tunisian migrants looking for a better life and the hopes they place on Europe as an answer to their woes. Virtually all of these reports focus on the figures that at least implicitly draw an image of a Europe being invaded: 5000 local inhabitants contrasts starkly with 1000 new daily arrivals, although in a Europe of 400 million this represents but a drop in the ocean (in the 1990s Germany received 250,000 Bosnians fleeing violence in their homeland) (Thomson & Bechir, 2011). Despite this broader context, the media successfully describes the situation as one where Europe's outer perimeter has been breached, where the EU is facing an immigration emergency, of either a legal or a humanitarian kind. These sentiments are then transposed to the national political agenda.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of these debates is the absence of an EU voice. The national positions have dominated the discussion while the European Commission has initiated meetings but without issuing an official statement that would lay out the Commission's position. This highlights the difficult position the EU faces in making itself heard in some of the critical discussions that are defining Europe. As immigration-related concerns remain highly politicized they resonate significantly more in their national political environments.

The second case, that of Afghan immigration to Athens, has developed more gradually over the past ten years where the presence of Afghan immigrants has developed into a particularly thorny and emotive issue due to the way these immigrants have come to occupy Athenian public space. Since at least 2007, entire public squares have been inhabited by families who have made these outside spaces their homes – hundreds of Afghan immigrants are living in one square alone. These spaces are located in areas with high immigrant populations, the squares surrounded by overcrowded apartment blocks, together generating an image of a city full to the brim and overflowing onto the streets and into the squares and parks of Athens (Al Jazeera, 2010).

More recently the response by local residents and right-wing activists has grown more aggressive. Over the past two years local vigilante groups have been formed that gather at the squares and parks with the intention of ejecting the immigrants from these spaces. Members of the militant neo-Nazi group Golden Dawn have supported these 'indignant' local residents. Together they have been able to mount an offensive against the immigrants, physically – and often violently – clearing out squares and patrolling them in order to make sure no one can return. In addition they have organized public demonstrations in protest of the growing number of immigrants arriving in Athens and Greece, where Golden Dawn members have marched in a military formation, each individual carrying a Greek flag (Athens-Macedonian News Agency, 2010).

The negative reactions against the Afghan immigrants in particular have particularly Greek undertones that relate to the way public space is delineated along religious lines. There is not a single mosque in Athens, despite over 120,000 Muslims living in the city. The debate on building a mosque dates back to the run up to the 2004 Athens Olympics when a mosque was required in order to offer adequate facilities for Muslim athletes to carry out religious ceremonies. The mosque, planned to be constructed in the district of Peania 20 miles outside of Athens city centre, was never built, following protests by local residents and strong objections by Peania's mayor (Tzilivakis, 2002). The spokesperson of the Greek Orthodox Archbishop made the following statement at the time:

> The church respects every individual's particular religious beliefs, and because Islam is a well-known religion, it does not object to the creation of a mosque under certain conditions – namely that the mosque is not built in the centre of Athens because the average Greek cannot yet accept the idea of a minaret in the city centre (Tzilivakis, 2002).

The response by the Muslim community in Athens to these restrictions in the shape of public space has been, by way of protest, to conduct their Eid prayers openly in the public parks. There have also been more aggressive demonstrations where the Muslim community has been joined by left-wing groups and anarchist groups to claim back the squares they had been driven away from. The purpose of these public protests is to also express frustration over the difficulties immigrants face in receiving the appropriate documentation they believe they are entitled to as political asylum seekers, framing their case explicitly in the language of human rights and 'European' values. These events culminated over two days in January 2011 when hundreds of illegal immigrants took over the Law School at the University of Athens (Athens-Macedonian News Agency, 2011). University campuses in Greece enjoy immunity meaning that police cannot enter the grounds without receiving an invitation to do so.

This was a highly effective form of protest that brought the immigrants' claims to the epicentre of the public eye while out of the authorities' reach. The more radical members of this group continued the protest with a hunger strike.

In such street-level contexts, it is impossible not to question the resonance of EU integration policy. The everyday experiences and understanding of migration by both immigrants and locals are far removed from the rational and technical policy proposals set forth by the EU, underlining the widely different sociocultural context from which national experiences of immigration rise.

Conclusion

The above examples stand in stark contrast to the efforts by the EU apparatus to devise EU-wide policy initiatives that resonate with the everyday lives of EU citizens. Whether we look at the policy on immigration or the development of a European public sphere, the EU plans stick too close to the consensual trajectory, inflating its policy with assumptions about the non-exclusive nature of its policies that are incongruous with reality. This approach relies largely on a selective reading of the existing public sphere research, choosing to focus on the procedural mechanisms – such as communications – through which democratic legitimacy can arguably be addressed. Not only does this approach instrumentalize the European public sphere to deliver particular policy goals, it also ignores the wide array of relationships that take place in the public sphere as well as those excluded from it.

As the examples from Athens and Italy show, the public sphere is shared across a diverse range of actors, often with very different views on given subjects that lead to conflictual and antagonistic relationships. Moreover, the outcomes of these struggles are often coercive and exclusionary. It is therefore important to be more attentive to the conflicts and to begin our analysis of a European public sphere from the characteristics of the social space that give rise to it. An ethnographic approach that is sensitive to the everyday politics that get played out in this space is critical for such an analysis, as it would take as our starting point a plural, diverse and conflictual notion of European social space. If the EU is serious about addressing its legitimacy deficit by reconnecting with its citizens, it is almost certain that this needs to begin from a more serious consideration of locally relevant experiences of Europe.

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Endnotes

[1] These issues are also explored in a research project under the Seventh Framework Programme entitled EUROPUBLICISLAM, which is applying a largely ethnographic methodology that proposes to study 'the assemblages that bring together cultural differences in proximity and in confrontation across national public spheres, following a transnational dynamics'. For more information see http://cordis.europa.eu/search/index.cfm?fuseaction=proj.documentandPJ_RCN=10331471

[2] These include *Athens News, Al Jazeera, Euronews, France24, RAI, Reuters,* reports from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), as well as blog entries and video documentaries from reporters and citizen journalists.

[3] See for example 'Lampedusa Tensions – New Migrants Land on Island' report from Al Jazeera http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyyPa9HTE-sandNR=1 and 'Italy's Lampedusa left in crisis after Arab Spring' report from the BBC, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-13747558