

Rethinking the Conditions for a Public Sphere in the European Union

Marianne van de Steeg

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE

Abstract

The central question of this article is how to deal (both theoretically and empirically) with the notion of the public sphere with reference to the EU. First the literature on the European public sphere is examined in order to disentangle various assumptions underlying the definition of the concept. Then, the concept of the public sphere is opened up by focusing on 'public discourse' instead. Following from this change in perspective, a different model is sketched that can be used to make sense of the public debate held in European media. Finally, the proposed approach is illustrated by applying it to the discourse developed on the issue of the EU enlargement in four weekly magazines, namely *Cambio 16* (Spanish), *Elsevier* (Dutch), the *New Statesman* (British), and *der Spiegel* (German).

Keywords

■ European Union ■ media ■ public debate ■ public sphere ■ transnational

The subject of this article is the public sphere within the EU as it is facilitated by the mass media. Within the academic literature, there is some debate on whether one can possibly conceive of a public sphere across national boundaries. In general, the possible existence of a European public sphere¹ is questioned, and consequently the prospects for active citizenship and democracy beyond the borders of the states that currently constitute the EU are also judged negatively. The widely cited statements quoted below serve as an introduction to this argument. These statements form the basis for my response to the debate on a European public sphere:

At stake is the minimal establishment of a European news agenda as a serious part of the news-consuming habits of significant European audiences who have begun to think of their citizenship as transcending the level of the nation-state. Without such conditions obtaining, we could not meaningfully talk of an enlargement of the public sphere at this level. The implication of the argument above is that, in the process of media reception, even a multilingual rendition of a single given European news agenda is more likely to be diversely 'domesticated' within each distinctive national or

language context . . . than it is likely to reorientate an audience towards a common European perspective. (Schlesinger, 1995: 25–6)

Europe is not a community of communication, because Europe is a multilingual continent – the most banal fact is at the same time the most elementary. The European peoples live in their languages as distinct ‘structures of perception and understanding’, and they will continue to live in them, when Europe remains Europe. (Kielmansegg, 1994: 27–8; translation by the author)

Prospects for Europeanisation of the communication system are absolutely non-existent. A Europeanised communication system ought not to be confused with increased reporting on European topics in national media. These are directed at a national public and remain attached to national viewpoints and communication habits. They can accordingly not create any European public nor establish any European discourse. Europeanisation in the communication sector would by contrast mean that there would be newspapers and periodicals, radio and television programmes, offered and demanded on a European market and thus creating a nation-transcending communicative context. But such a market would presuppose a public with language skills enabling it to utilise European media. That would be the case either if every journalist could use his own language and still be sure of being generally understood, or else – more realistically – if some European lingua franca alongside the mother tongues . . . could become established. The European Union is still a very long way away from that. Here, then, is the biggest obstacle to Europeanisation of the political substructure, on which the functioning of a democratic system and the performance of a parliament depends: language. Communication is bound up with language and linguistically mediated experience and interpretation of the world. Information and participation as basic conditions of democratic existence are mediated through language. (Grimm, 1995: 294–5)

The statements made in these quotes are straightforward, and at first sight seem rather convincing, as they are in concordance with our day-to-day experience of following public discourse via ‘our’ preferred medium of communication. However, the question of a European public sphere is treated simplistically by Grimm (1995), Kielmansegg (1994), Schlesinger (1995), and others who follow the same line of reasoning. Their claims are based on unsubstantiated assumptions concerning (1) the character of the public sphere, and (2) the connection between the notion of the public sphere and key-concepts such as language, the media system, and the state’s frontiers. Moreover, though the statements are couched in quite definite terms, given the lack of any substantial empirical research in this field, they could in fact be better qualified as conjectures.

In the same vein, the theses put forward in this article are also for now no more than conjectures: instead of claiming to know how things are, an attempt is made to develop some instruments that aid a better understanding of that which is currently taking place in the EU. My aim is to suggest a framework on both a theoretical and an empirical level, which would mean that one can deal more realistically with the public sphere within the EU.

Redefining the Concept of the Public Sphere

The assumption in most of the literature on a European public sphere is that each member state has its own national public sphere. In Figure 1 below, the individual national public spheres are represented by an ellipse drawn with a clear circumscription and detached from the other ellipses, so as to reflect the view of the (national) public sphere as being clearly identifiable and self-contained.

Sometimes a pan-European public sphere – usually regarded as being utopic – is included in the picture. A European public sphere should, in Schlesinger's (1995) words, imply 'a multilingual rendition of a single given newsagenda', and would, according to Grimm (1995), be 'a nation-transcending communicative context' based on an EU-wide media system. In other words, an additional level of public sphere is added to that of the national public spheres, i.e. the concept of the national public sphere (visualized as various ellipses) remains the same, with, on a higher level, a possible European public sphere. Should such a pan-European public sphere actually exist, then this all-encompassing public sphere would be linked with (the ellipses of) every single national public sphere (Figure 2).

The public sphere as seen from this point of view appears to be fairly clear-cut, homogeneous and stable. The notion that each member state has its own public sphere implies that one is easily able to differentiate between one public sphere and another. There seems to be a clear dividing-line which separates the various public spheres. Just as, following this logic, something can pertain to the 'German' or 'Portuguese' national public sphere, one can imagine that it could

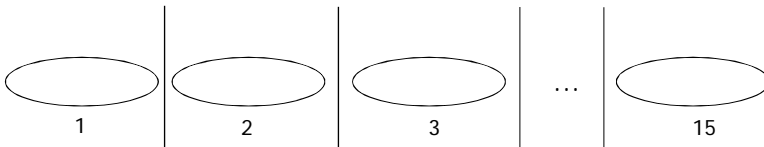


Figure 1 Schematic representation of the public sphere in the EU: 15 national public spheres

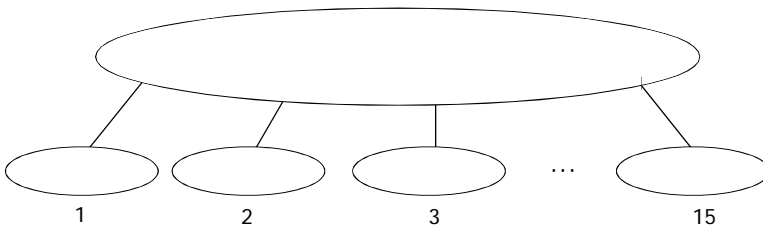


Figure 2 Schematic representation of the public sphere in the EU: an overarching European public sphere and 15 national public spheres

also be classified as forming part of a European public sphere. Moreover, a fiction is created of a (national) public sphere which is internally highly homogeneous. The image of a rather unitary national public sphere is created by referring to concepts such as *the* German public sphere, *the* national public, *the* national perspective, and *the* national communication habits. This fiction of homogeneity is further supported by problematizing and amplifying the heterogeneity on the European level. Finally, by definition, the public sphere is claimed to be founded on institutions, such as a media system and a language, which are thought to be fairly stable. The idea is that the public sphere is delimited by the state's borders, thus creating a space in which everything – the citizenry, language, the media, the national collective identity, the national interests, etc. – coincides. In the following, I will disentangle some of the assumptions contained within the concept of the public sphere (Table 1).

'Public Sphere' used Interchangeably with 'Media System'

Statements such as there can only be a European public and a European discourse 'if there are newspapers and periodicals, radio and television programmes, offered and demanded on a European market' (Grimm, 1995), or the idea of 'a multi-lingual rendition of a single given European news agenda' (Schlesinger), all hint at the need to make the same newspaper article, the same television programme available to a European-wide audience. This implies that in order to have a 'real' European public sphere, a single European media system covering all the member states has to be in place. Since, it is rightly pointed out that neither at present, nor in the foreseeable future, does such a pan-European media system exist, the

Table 1 Two notions of the public sphere

STANDARD MODEL IN THE LITERATURE	A CRITIQUE
1. <i>Stability by definition.</i>	1. <i>Evolving.</i>
1a. public sphere equals media system	1a. public sphere is not synonymous with a media system
1b. public sphere delimited by language	1b. language is not the same as communication
1c. public sphere based on a shared culture and identity	1c. conditions for a public sphere generated in the public sphere itself
1d. nation-state as a norm	1d. both the national and the European public sphere put to a test
2. <i>Unique and unitary.</i> internally homogeneous, externally heterogeneous	2. <i>Heterogeneity.</i> plurality and difference
3. <i>Clear-cut, one or the other, separate</i>	3. <i>Ambiguity</i>

logical conclusion would seem to be that there is no European public sphere. However, this conclusion is already enclosed in the implicit definition of the concept, for 'public sphere' turns out to be equated to 'media'. Given that the presence of a pan-European media system is considered to be a sign of having a European public sphere, the form in which public debate is held is given a central position, thereby obscuring the possibility that content-wise an EU-wide public debate might be held.

In contrast, I would like to propose that 'public sphere' and 'media' be viewed as two different, but related concepts. The media is an actor (e.g. the *Sun* newspaper announcing just before the elections that it was in favour of another Blair government) as well as a container, or carrier of a mediated public sphere. While recognizing the crucial importance of a media system for the public sphere, the two should not be reduced to the same thing. The public sphere, in fact, is the debate held in public by several actors who are in one way or another in contact with each other, for instance, through the pages of a newspaper. Having this in mind, it is not sufficient to look at the configuration of the media system; one has to analyse what is happening inside the nationally²-based media systems to be able to learn more about the public sphere within the EU.

Boundaries of the Public Sphere Set by a Variety in Languages

The variety of languages is usually portrayed as the biggest obstacle to a European public sphere. To support this thesis, three types of arguments are used. First, it is maintained that a difference in language makes for a different way of seeing the world. Language is depicted as 'specific structures of observation and understanding' (Kielmansegg, 1994), a mediator of experiencing and interpreting the world (Grimm, 1995), or a 'context' in which news is domesticated (Schlesinger, 1995). However, it can be questioned to what extent a language produces a specific and unique view on the world. It is true that, for example, Italians see 'azzurro', 'blù' or 'celestè', where an English-speaking person would only be able to identify different shades of the same colour 'blue'. Or another example, more relevant to the context of the EU, it is true that Germans and English have a different connotation of the term 'federalism', which has caused some misunderstanding and political problems. Nevertheless, to conclude from this that a difference in language entails such a difference in understanding that communication is inhibited and leads to total incommensurability, pushes the matter too far. Clearly people with different language backgrounds have to make more of an effort to understand what is being said, and to be understood, but this will not prevent them from communicating with each other.

Second, language is equated with communication; because of the variety in languages, the EU citizens are said to be unable to communicate with each other, meaning that one of the basic conditions of democracy cannot be fulfilled in the context of the EU (see, for instance, Grimm, 1995). If the minimal requisites of communication as a basic condition of democracy are 'to be able to talk to one

another' and 'to have the possibility of speech',³ then it is a *mediated* public sphere which is at stake, for to be able to talk with one another and to have the possibility of speech does not necessarily need to imply the sharing of the same language. In the case of a mediated public sphere, language and communication are not the same thing. Since the media is the intermediary between the actors in the debate, each can speak his/her language and still communicate with the others. As Habermas (1995: 306–307) points out in his remarks on Grimm's article, to consider the EU as a polity:

entails public communication that transcends the boundaries of the until now limited national public spheres . . . Given the political will, there is no a priori reason why it cannot subsequently create the politically necessary communicative context as soon as it is constitutionally prepared to do so.

It is communication, not language, that matters. In other words, depending on the manner in which the (nationally based) media reports the news, communication can take place across language boundaries (Eder and Kantner, 2000).

Third, it is considered an obstacle that there is neither a *lingua franca*, i.e. a language spoken by every EU citizen, nor a fluency in all EU languages. According to Grimm (1995), what is lacking is 'a public with language skills enabling it to utilize European media', which would imply that either 'every journalist could use his own language and still be sure of being generally understood', or else that there would be a single language spoken throughout the EU. This argument contains two assumptions that do not even hold on the level of the national public sphere. First it assumes that everybody within the national borders speaks and/or understands the same language. This is not necessarily the case in all European member states. Second, and more importantly, it suggests that in order to share a public sphere, we all have to be *able*, as far as our language skills are concerned, to read and watch the same media reports. It can be questioned whether this is what is really at stake here. What if, for the sake of argument, we all shared the same language, but kept our current preferences, thus a Dutch citizen watches the news by a Dutch broadcaster and a French citizen by a French one (both rendered in the all-EU language). Though language-wise both are *able* to watch the same news-cast, this hypothetical situation would not qualify for a European public sphere, because Grimm's (1995) statement does not only imply the requirement of *being able to understand* any fellow European, or any news-report, i.e. the question of having access to any contribution to the debate made by any other European, but contains also the demand of actually *using* this ability to have access to the same news sources. Since within the national borders not every citizen reads the same newspaper, or watches the same news bulletin, and still, the existence of a national public sphere is not questioned, then neither can this be demanded from a European public sphere (see also Eder and Kantner, 2000: 312).

The Public Sphere: Founded on a Shared Culture and Identity

Just as there has to be a media system and a common language, it is often stated that a shared culture and a collective identity have to be in place before one can even consider the idea of a European public sphere. However, the relationship between a shared collective identity and culture, on the one hand, and democracy and the public sphere, on the other, is not as straightforward as is usually suggested. The notion that such a prerequisite has to be already present for democracy to work, is contested.

Elsewhere (van de Steeg, 2000), I came to the conclusion that whether or not identity is claimed to be an a priori condition for a public sphere, is mostly a matter of definition. It is precisely those authors who use a 'thick' definition of collective identity who also claim that a shared European identity, i.e. a certain homogeneity of the EU citizens, has to be in place before we can even start considering the existence of a European public sphere. Instead, other authors who use a less absolute, more fluid definition of identity – namely identity as in the various objects with which a citizen can identify, thus identity as a series of identities that can co-exist parallel to each other – are also those who maintain that democracy is precisely about citizens organizing their differences,⁴ and, moreover, that a sense of community is developed within the democratic process (in a broad sense) by citizens acting as citizens. In this latter view, demanding that a stable, strong collective identity has to be in place before we can consider a constitution, or a public sphere for the EU is similar to setting the cart before the horse.

What matters – as far as the argument developed in this article is concerned – is to observe the disputability of the thesis according to which there already has to exist a collective identity that is sufficiently strong (1) to support majority decisions and solidarity efforts, and (2) to capacitate the community in question for communication about its goals and problems. At this point, I do not want to question the importance of a shared (political) culture; instead, I wish to underline that the thesis that such a shared culture or identity should be considered as a *conditio sine qua non* is still open for debate. In my view, the political culture and values necessary for a public sphere to thrive are produced in the interaction itself, and thus need not be there in advance.

Taking the Concept of the Nation-State as a Norm

It is not a coincidence that, respectively, 'the public sphere' and 'the media system', and 'communication' and 'language' are used interchangeably, nor that the public sphere is seen to be connected with a specific national collective identity and national culture; or, to sum this all up, that the public sphere is considered to be limited by the state's borders.⁵ The idea one has of the national public sphere is the norm on the basis of which the possibilities for, and the existence of, a European public sphere are evaluated. In sum, if there was a European public sphere, it should be like the national public sphere which we believe we know so well.

Taking the concept of the national public sphere as the lens through which to judge the public debate within the EU has three consequences for the definition of the concept. First, it confers a sense of stability to the public sphere. Since language, culture and identity are considered to be the foundations for the public sphere, and, at the same time, are not prone to change and supposed to be deeply embedded in a population, it can be expected that the public sphere itself also will be fairly constant. Second, as a European public sphere is measured against the standard of the national public sphere, it is bound to fail the test, because an EU-wide public sphere is not seen in its own right. While the public sphere on the European level is portrayed as being too diverse and too heterogeneous, the national public sphere is seen as being rather unique, unitary and homogeneous. Third, linked with the previous point, given that the notion of the national public sphere is taken as a standard, it is not scrutinized itself. In fact, a rather idealized account is given of the national public sphere. Because the description of the national public sphere does not originate from an analysis of the actual content of the debate in the national media, the heterogeneity, variety and difference within what is deemed to be the national public sphere is missed.

In addition, by reasoning on the basis of these assumptions, while at the same time also including the possibility for a European public sphere, a theoretical inconsistency is introduced. The problem is that if the public sphere in general is considered to be stable, internally homogeneous and detached, then there is nothing in this conception which could account for a *European* public sphere to emerge from the EU member states' *national* public spheres. This inconsistency, difficult to discern in a purely textual treatment, can be clarified diagrammatically. Returning to Figures 1 and 2, it should be noted that the principles ruling these two figures do not contain an explanation for the transformation of Figure 1 into Figure 2, namely how, out of the 15 separate, isolated ellipses representing the various national public spheres, an overarching ellipse representing a pan-European public sphere could come into being.

By contrast, a transformation towards a European public sphere becomes theoretically possible if the public sphere is thought to be more dynamic, containing internal differences, and possessing a permeable circumscription which enables mutual contact. This concept of the public sphere cannot be visualized in a figure in which a public sphere is represented by a single ellipse. Thus, the two representations of the public sphere developed in Figures 1 and 2, and the assumptions entailed in them, have to be rejected. How one could approach the public sphere instead, is sketched out in the second part of this article.

Another Approach to the Public Sphere

So far, we have seen that the way the public sphere is conceived does not help much in understanding its constitution within the EU. First, assumptions are invoked which after closer scrutiny are found to be untenable. Second, when this concept of the public sphere is made explicit in a diagram, the possibility of

public opinion formation on an EU-level should be dismissed from the very start, if not, we would be left with a logical inconsistency. What is more, discussing the public sphere within the EU induces us to make statements on matters about which neither Grimm (1995), Kielmansegg (1994), Schlesinger (1995), nor I have any real knowledge, because (as far as I know) there is no empirical material⁶ that gives us more insight into how the public sphere within the EU is constituted.

In spite of this, it would be unwise to ignore the concept altogether. Leaving room for manoeuvre, the public sphere in general can be specified⁷ as consisting of actors who debate in public a topic which they consider to be in the public interest, i.e. of concern to the polity. At a certain point in time, the same topic is discussed by actors who are, in one way or another, in contact with each other. Moreover, the actors are aware that they are observed by a public. It is the presence of a public which makes the interaction 'on stage' resonate. Finally, a debate can be regarded as public if, at least in principle, anyone from the public can come on stage and take an active part. If the public sphere is understood in this way, then our task is to study how this takes place within the EU.

In order to deal with this question, it is important to make sure that the contours of a possible answer remain completely open. For this purpose the concept of the public sphere itself is unfit, because it is too loaded with meaning. Using this concept when making a research design would already lay down in which direction an answer should be found. To make sure that the field of vision is not restricted in advance, judgment must be suspended as to what effect a language, the state's frontier and the media system might have on the character of the public sphere as well as how the relationship between the national and the European levels are to be defined.

These conceptual problems can be by-passed by introducing two steps which cement the theoretical concept of the public sphere by drawing it closer to the empirical reality. First, in this article, the public sphere is studied to the extent that the mass media is a forum for it. Admittedly, besides the media there are other fora of public sphere, for example, public meetings where there is true face-to-face contact between, respectively, the actors themselves, and the actors and the public. Instead of other possible fora, I have chosen to focus on the media, because the media amplifies as well as condenses public discourse. It does this by enabling arguments and statements to reach a wider public. In the end, what the general public gets to see of the public debate is that *which* is reported by the media, and, especially, *as* it is reported by the media (see Gamson, 1992), thus a political reality is created. The media also condenses public discourse, since in its reports, the discourse pronounced in various public and non-public places is intertwined. Through the media, contact is made between actors who are not necessarily in the same place physically.

Second, the object of this study, the public sphere, is opened up by employing instead the more empirical concept of public discourse, the conceptualization of which encounters fewer problems. 'Public discourse' can be defined as the 'texts' emanating from the interaction of people in public debate. In this case, the 'texts' of public discourse to be studied are the contents of media texts. An analysis

of articles from newspapers and weeklies can answer the question how (as far as the case that is studied is concerned) political opinion formation takes place within the EU, and thus how its public sphere (for this case) can be characterized.

This change in perspective from the 'public sphere' to, respectively, 'public discourse' and the media as its specific forum, will be elaborated further by developing a diagram that breaks completely with Figures 1 and 2. The new diagram, Figure 3, is composed of five elements. First and most important, in order to introduce variety and dynamism into the model, the relationship between the symbol used and that which it represents is no longer 1 to 1; i.e. the principle of each ellipse representing a single public sphere is left behind. Instead of representing a public sphere, each ellipse represents the public discourse developed in a certain medium of communication, or, in other words, the contents of the articles from a single medium. For example, in my case, there would be four ellipses, one for each weekly from which I analysed the articles on EU enlargement with the Central and Eastern European countries. The fact that in Figure 3 the ellipses stand for the public discourse developed in a medium of communication, and not a specific public sphere, means that the principle on the basis of which this figure is drawn is radically different from that in Figures 1 and 2.

Second, the more specific empirical concept of public discourse is related to the wider theoretical concept of the public sphere. The aggregate of the media ellipses, which put together constitute the public discourse, is embedded in the public sphere as a whole, for the case of public discourse that is to be analysed is a particularity of the broader and more ambiguous concept of the public sphere. By focusing on the 'texts' of public discourse, light is shed on the public sphere, which itself remains in the background.

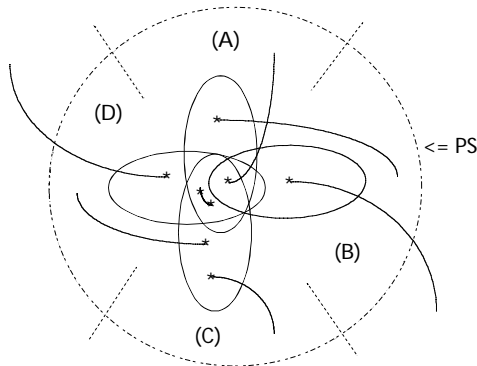


Figure 3 An alternative diagram which takes public discourse as the point of departure

Note. Each ellipse stands for the public discourse developed in a specific medium of communication; the asterisks for points of contact; (A) to (D) for the geographical location of a medium; the dashed circle in the background for the public sphere as a whole; outside the circle that which does not pertain to the public sphere.

Third, while for the time being the characterization of public discourse (and, subsequently, the public sphere) as 'German', 'Spanish' or 'European' is to be left open, it is not difficult to point out the geographical provenance of a medium of communication. For example, in the case that I will analyse, *der Spiegel* is obviously a German weekly, *Cambio 16* Spanish, *Elsevier* Dutch and the *New Statesman* British. A medium is connected with a specific member state via the people by whom and for whom it is produced, the company by which it is published, and the language in which it is written. That is to say, the forum in which the public sphere unfolds can be located in one of the EU member states. This element is, like the public sphere itself, placed in the background of the figure. Subsequently, in order to represent the idea that, as yet, we do not know what effect the geographical location of a medium has on the process of public opinion formation carried within it, the lines dividing the geographical 'compartments' are potentially highly permeable, for they are dashed and do not divide up the centre of the figure.

Fourth, although it is theoretically possible to imagine that the manner in which a debate unfolds in one medium is absolutely unique and completely isolated from that in other fora, certainly in the case of EU enlargement which is analysed here, it is safe to discard this option from the start. Consequently, it can be assumed that to a certain extent in the different media there is an overlap in the content of the public discourse. It could be that the same issues are discussed, the same facts and arguments are presented, but also that there is a common frame of reference. This phenomenon, namely that, for instance, in all four weeklies the issue of 'widening and deepening the EU' is one of the most important aspects which is debated in connection with the EU enlargement, or that in both *der Spiegel* and *Elsevier* much of the debate circles around the costs of enlargement, is symbolized in the diagram by making the ellipses representing the respective media overlap. The area where two or more ellipses overlap indicates that, as far as this aspect is concerned, the public discourse in these specific media coincides.

In those cases where the public discourse developed in several media is found to coincide, it can be said that here, at this specific point, a similar system of meaning is used. Identifying the points where a similar system of meaning in the various media (and thus fora) is employed, helps in answering the question of the character of the public sphere. The reason is that the extent to which there is similarity (or overlap) in the system of meaning between the discourse from several media (and, especially, when there is more of it between that from certain media than that of others) is an important indication for the extent to which the actors developing this discourse participate in the same public sphere.

This assertion is founded on the notion that by analysing discourse as the outcome of a process of public opinion formation, evidence can be found that both public and non-public interactions have taken place, even though the specific interactions themselves are not reproduced. For public discourse is a social phenomenon which, simplified to its essence, consists of speaking, listening and reacting to what has been said before. Actors who participate in the same

debate are inclined to use, as time goes by, similar concepts and definitions, to bring up a restricted number of issues, and to develop a similar perspective on matters. When someone puts forward an opinion or perspective that differs from the status quo until that point, this 'new' element will, in one way or another, be related back to what has been said before, for instance, by introducing it as a reaction to what has been said by other actors, or by indicating the differences between this 'other' position and the status quo (take a look at the way this article is structured). The social rules that guide the development of a conversation (or, for that matter, a discussion) ensure that, in time, the contributions of each individual actor converge towards each other, or, in other words, become geared to one another. Thus, when there is affinity in discourse, it can be inferred that in one way or another there has probably been some kind of interaction.

Fifth, sometimes it feels as if the contributions made in the process of public opinion formation on stage can be followed 'live'. In a media article, this sensation is created by, for example, putting the statements of several actors next to each other and, thus, making the actors appear to 'react' to each other. These instances are grouped together under the label 'discursive interaction', and are symbolized by asterisks in the diagram.

The asterisks represent explicit points of contact between the medium in question and other fora of debate. Usually, they consist of references to statements made by actors somewhere in the space outside of the media public discourse (either in the public sphere at large, or not in public at all). For example, a speech by Jacques Delors to the European parliament around which David Marquand writes his article for the *New Statesman*, or a declaration of Klaus Kinkel after a French–German summit reported in *der Spiegel*. Less often, an explicit link is made with the public discourse developed in another medium. This happens, for instance, when an article is (translated and) reprinted, or when within the context of an article a thesis developed somewhere else is incorporated, e.g. a journalist from *Elsevier* quotes from an article by Joris Voorhoeve published in the *Internationale Spectator* to indicate Voorhoeve's position on the enlargement.

Having established the elements of this different way of visualizing the public sphere within the EU, the new diagram can be used to formulate some propositions. For, of course, the manner in which ultimately the figure is drawn depends on the particular case that is being analysed. Two extreme cases can be imagined, one in which the public discourse has mainly a national character, and another one in which the discourse created in the media of several countries is fused together.

First, in Figure 4, there is some similarity in the system of meaning in the discourse from the media from the same country. However, there is hardly any overlap with the discourse developed in the media from other countries. Moreover, the discursive interaction is limited to the national context alone. In this figure, it would not be so problematic to extend the dashed lines into the centre, and partition the public discourse up into neat national sections.

On the contrary, in Figure 5, an attempt to compartmentalize the public discourse would run into trouble, for the dashed lines cutting into the circle, to

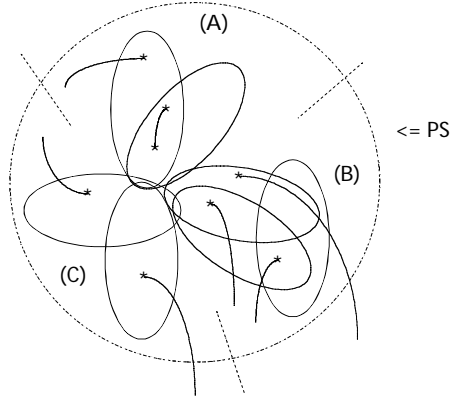


Figure 4 Public discourse takes place mainly within the country's borders

indicate the geographical provenance of a medium, count for little. Not only is the amount of overlap between the discourse from the media of different countries almost as much as that between the discourse from the media in the same country, but also the explicit interactions come from everywhere. In this (extreme) case, the public discourse is unbounded, for the line dividing 'foreign' and 'domestic' has faded away.

A way to test the validity of the model that I am proposing here is to try to connect its two (contrasting) variants, which have been presented in Figures 4 and 5, with the representation of the public sphere given at the beginning of this article. Though drawn in a completely different manner, both Figures 4 and 1 (i.e. of the public sphere in the EU as consisting of 15 independent, decisively national public spheres) express the same vision of the character of the public

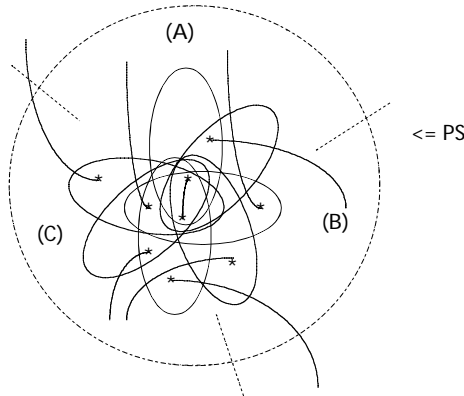


Figure 5 Public discourse unlimited by borders

sphere within the EU. However, Figure 5 does not find its counterpart in Figure 2, which is the one that contains a European public sphere linked with the independent national public spheres. The fact that these two figures which were supposed to express the same idea are not analogous confirms the earlier conclusion that something is wrong with the principles on the basis of which Figure 2 was drawn. The problem is that Figure 2 is a derivative of Figure 1, which in fact, is the figure that denies the existence of a European public sphere. Therefore, the alternative model that enables the whole gamut of possibilities to come to light will serve better to find out what really takes place in the public sphere within the EU.

An Empirical Illustration

In the last section, I want to demonstrate how the approach introduced in this article can be used in practice. It will be instructive to see what kind of diagram would result from the analysis of a real public discourse. If the conjectures of Grimm (1995), Kielmansegg (1994) and Schlesinger (1995) presented in the first section prove to be correct, the diagram should be rather similar to that of Figure 4.

The case of public discourse I want to present is the debate on EU enlargement with Central and Eastern European countries in a British (the *New Statesman*), Dutch (*Elsevier*), German (*der Spiegel*) and Spanish (*Cambio 16*) weekly for the period June 1989 to 1998 (for more information on the empirical analysis see also van de Steeg, 2002). Unfortunately, I have to emphasize that only a small number of texts have been analysed,⁸ and, moreover, that for each country only one medium is taken. Because of this, it is difficult to explain the variance between the weeklies and attribute it to, for instance, the left–right dimension, the general manner in which this issue is debated in the country in which it is published, or any other explanation. In fact, for the question of the European public sphere, it is crucial to be able to sort out these variances. Since the amount of material that is analysed is limited and is derived from only one source per country, the status of the results presented here is nothing more than tentative, and no final conclusion can be drawn from them.

At this point, I have to stipulate that the objective of the data presented here is not to provide empirical evidence for the thesis that there is something like a European public sphere. I am aware that currently the research project is empirically in too much of an embryonic state to be able to make any assertions on the character of the public sphere in the EU. The aim of this section is merely to present an analysis of the public discourse on a specific case in order to *illustrate* how, on the basis of the theoretical notions developed in the previous sections, one can study the public sphere in the EU empirically.

To analyse the public discourse, I have identified two categories of indicators: 'system of meaning' and 'discursive interaction'. These were already mentioned in the discussion of the various elements contained in Figure 3. 'System of

meaning' is reflected by the areas of the ellipses that are overlapping (or not), and 'discursive interaction' is indicated by the asterisks symbolizing points of contact. Others doing empirical research in this field came up with some of the same indicators, for instance, Kriesi (1992), Koopmans et al. (mimeo), Díez Medrano (2002), and Kantner (2002). However, most of them only used indicators which would fall under the heading of the category 'system of meaning'. This is understandable, for this aspect of public discourse is more obvious, and easier to analyse. However, in my view, it is not enough to point out that in different places the same issues are discussed, or the same frame of reference is used. To make sure that this is not a mere coincidence, one should also demonstrate that there are various points of contact between the different places where debate is developed. The two indicators have been elaborated further in Table 2.

In the case of EU enlargement with the Central and Eastern European countries in the four selected weeklies, the picture that emerges from the two categories of indicators is different. The analysis of one of the indicators points

Table 2 Elaboration of the indicators for the analysis of articles on EU enlargement

<i>System of meaning</i>	<i>Discursive interaction</i>
<p><i>1. Discussing the same topic, at the same time, at the same level of relevance</i></p> <p>Comparing:</p> <p>a. the number of articles on enlargement over time</p> <p>b. the number of articles that deal completely with enlargement</p> <p>c. the most and least important themes</p>	<p><i>1. Direct contact: the transplantation of public opinion</i></p> <p>a1. outside author (other country, other background, from expert public spheres, variety of opinions)</p> <p>a2. article reprinted from another medium</p> <p>b. the actors that populate an article</p> <p>c. position of countries (especially reports on the debate in other places)</p> <p>d. use of the language of the other</p> <p>e. statements from other media</p> <p>f. benchmarking</p>
<p><i>2. Frame of reference</i></p> <p>Four possible patterns:</p> <p>a. Similar in all media, all countries</p> <p>b. Similar in some media (e.g. only right-wing press), or in some countries (e.g. only net-payers)</p> <p>c. Specific for all the media from just one country</p> <p>d. Specific for the medium in question, thus the pattern is variance</p>	<p><i>2. Virtual contact: inclusion of the other in the demarcation of the polity</i></p> <p>a. referent of the 'we' (and possibly the 'them') in the text</p> <p>b. the group with which the author or speaker identifies</p> <p>c. indication of the community of fate</p> <p>d. addressee</p> <p>e. referent of the 'self' in 'self-interest', whose interest is said to prevail?</p> <p>f. heading of the section: the EU enlargement as something 'foreign' or 'domestic'?</p>

more towards a (possibly national) compartmentalization of public discourse, while that of the other points towards a certain amount of Europeanization.

First, it can be said that in the text samples the (visible) discursive interaction generally takes place within the state's borders, and as far as contact is made with public opinion developed outside the frontier, only a handful of (actors from) other countries are mentioned.⁹ Nevertheless, it is difficult to generalize, because the way discursive interaction takes place in the four weeklies is very varied. The public discourse developed in *der Spiegel* and the *New Statesman* clearly hints at a national public sphere.

As far as *Cambio 16* is concerned, it has reprinted several articles from the German *Focus*, the French *L'Express* and the Italian *Panorama*. Here, public opinion is literally lifted up and transplanted from one debate into another. However, this is done in such a way that in reality no 'discursive contact' is made, and thus it remains rather sterile. Though the perspective of the other is incorporated, and a contrasting point of view is made available, the two perspectives 'talk' past each other because a comparison and a direct, explicit confrontation is not made.

Of the four weeklies, *Elsevier* is the only one about which it can be said that explicit discursive interaction consistently takes place across the national frontiers. In *Elsevier*, the point of view of many persons from different countries and various backgrounds is cited. It is the only weekly in which, via the headers of the sections, the EU enlargement changes from being categorized as something 'foreign' to something 'domestic'.

At this point, we have some idea on how to draw the diagram of this particular case (see Figure 6). First, there is no instance which links the debate between precisely these four selected weeklies. For *der Spiegel* and the *New Statesman* the points of contact are mainly situated within the German and the British compartment respectively. Apart from the *Focus* articles, which provide *Cambio 16* with a clear link with the German public sphere, the discourse in *Cambio 16* functions similarly to that in the previous two. *Elsevier*, however, makes contact with debates taking place in many different locations, although it has a preference for Germany.

Second, in contrast with the rather bleak picture as far as discursive interaction outside of the national frontiers is concerned, the analysis of the system of meaning demonstrates that besides differences, and even contrasts, a considerable part of the debate is held in the same terms. In the four weeklies at the same time, the same topic, with more or less the same level of relevance, is discussed. Comparing the development of the number of articles over time, it can be seen that in all four weeklies the topic follows, though very roughly, the same pattern. In 1989–1991, the interest in the topic was on a medium level, subsequently in 1992–1994 the enlargement was mentioned much less often, to rise in the period 1995–1998 to a high which was reached somewhere in 1997/98.

Also, when taking into account the various themes that are discussed within the larger debate on the enlargement, a picture of both similarity and variance emerges. For all four weeklies, first, the proposals for the start of the negotiations and the moment when the new countries should become members, and second,

the issue of deepening and widening are amongst the themes which are considered most relevant. Similarly, in all four weeklies, first, the issue of the position of the citizen in the EU and democratizing the EU, and second, the link between the end of the 1996 Intergovernmental Conference and the date for the start of the negotiations are not considered worthy of much attention, at least not in the context of the EU enlargement.

However, there are also differences between the four weeklies, in which a specific pattern can be distinguished. First, themes which are significant in *Elsevier*, *der Spiegel*, and the *New Statesman* are dedicated much less space in *Cambio 16*, and vice versa. For instance, the manner in which the enlargement to the East might affect the relationship between the EU and other regions, i.e. the relationship with the Mediterranean and the countries of the Treaty of Lomé, is completely insignificant to the Dutch, German and British weeklies, but, gets quite a lot of attention in the Spanish weekly. Second, when comparing the *New Statesman* with the other three, it is noticeable that in the British weekly much less media attention is paid to themes that deal in a rather concrete way with the impact that the enlargement might have on the EU, such as the need to reform the EU institutions because of enlargement.

As far as the frame of reference is concerned, I can only give examples of the three possible patterns. First, to a certain extent there is an EU-wide frame of reference. For instance, the theme of 'widening and deepening' is discussed in the four weeklies in a similar manner: the same rhetorical moves and arguments are put forward in a comparable quantity. Here, it does not matter much which one of the four weeklies one takes up. Second, to another extent there is a frame of reference that is shared by some, but not by others. The way that the theme of the costs and benefits of enlargement for the EU is discussed is a perfect example of this. This issue is seen from a similar perspective in *der Spiegel* and *Elsevier*, differently in *Cambio 16*, and yet again differently in the *New Statesman*. The way that this theme is discussed in, on the one hand, *der Spiegel*, *Elsevier* and the articles in *Cambio 16* which have been reprinted from the German weekly *Focus* and, on the other, in the original *Cambio 16* articles, seems to be diametrically opposed (however, only at first sight). Compared with the other three, the debate in the *New Statesman* takes place at a distance. Third, to yet another extent (possibly quite a considerable extent) the frame of reference is only commonly shared on the national level. For example, only in *Elsevier* (and, for that matter, in the other media in The Netherlands) is a whole debate held about the relationship between the EU and the NATO enlargement, while in the other three weeklies just some short comments are made.

Putting together what we know about the system of meaning that is employed in the enlargement debate, it is possible to complete the diagram (see Figure 6). While there is clearly an area in which the discourse of all four weeklies overlaps, some do so more than others. The various indications show that there is much more similarity between the discourse of *der Spiegel* and *Elsevier* than between that of the others. Where *Cambio 16* sometimes contrasts with the other three, the *New Statesman* is simply less present.

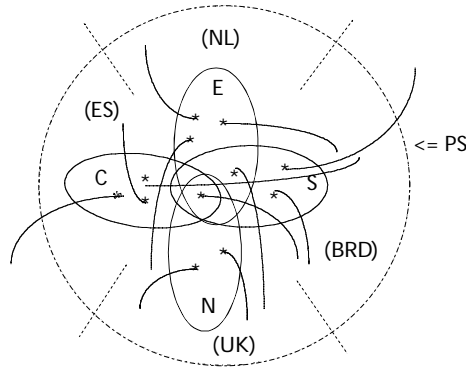


Figure 6 A visualization of the case of EU enlargement in four weeklies

Key: PS: public sphere; NL: the Netherlands; ES: Spain; BRD: Germany; UK: United Kingdom; E: *Elsevier*; S: *der Spiegel*; N: *the New Statesman*; C: *Cambio 16*.

Although, as I stipulated earlier, Figure 6 is drawn on the basis of only a very restricted analysis of the public discourse on a specific issue, and therefore it would not be wise to extrapolate these results by making a statement on the character of the public sphere in the EU, what is clearly revealed is that defining the public sphere stops being an easy exercise the moment that the empirical reality starts playing a role in the judgment. The variegated image conveyed by Figure 6 cannot be interpreted in a definite manner. Comparing Figure 6 with the reference points introduced in Figures 4 and 5, I would say that this particular case is closer to the national compartmentalization of Figure 4 as far as the points of contact, i.e. the discursive interaction, is concerned; but for the similarity in the discourse, i.e. the system of meaning, it is closer to the gradual Europeanization of Figure 5.

Reality proves to be much more multiform, and less pessimistic in respect of a possible EU-wide formation of public opinion the moment that we put aside the assumptions attached to the concept of the public sphere, and look at that which at the end of the day takes place *in* the media, *within* the national frontiers. Despite the differences in language, the debate on an issue that touches the EU's future is to a non-negligible extent held in shared terms. Though only a few points of discursive contact between the different places of opinion formation could be identified, the overlap in the system of meaning is not likely to be a mere coincidence. It is an indication that the public discourse developed in the four weeklies originates from the same discursive community. Although the EU institutions as such play a small role in the debate, the fact that they exist means that the weeklies from four member states display, to a certain extent, a similar system of meaning. The actors from each member state tap into the same discussion. They are forced to think about the same issues, i.e. to work on the same agenda.

Conclusion

Now it is time to return to the statements made by Schlesinger and Grimm quoted in the first section. According to Schlesinger (1995), before we can have an EU-wide formation of public opinion, we need to have the same news agenda rendered in various languages, and citizens who define their citizenship on the EU level. However, even if both conditions are fulfilled, this is still more likely to lead to a differentiated 'domestication' in each national or language context than to a common European perspective. Grimm (1995) too poses some tough preconditions, namely that we need to have a common media system and a political substructure, and in order to have these everything depends on the realization of the first and foremost condition of an EU-wide *lingua franca*. In their view a quite considerable number of (rather unlikely) changes have to be made before we can even start to consider an EU-wide public sphere. What I hope to have demonstrated by disentangling the assumptions in Schlesinger's and Grimm's concept of the public sphere, and by elaborating another approach to the study of the public sphere, is that it is not necessary to stop short at this essentializing view. By focusing on the public discourse that is developed in the media, we can learn about the character of the public sphere within the EU in all its variety and dynamism. Seen from this point of view, it becomes possible to imagine that even though the long list of preconditions is not fulfilled, that which appears to be only public opinion formation on the national level simultaneously generates public opinions on the EU level.

Notes

I would like to thank Patrizia Nanz and Peter Wagner for our discussions on this topic. Thanks also to the questions and remarks from the participants of the workshop on a European public sphere at the conference organized by the WZB at July 2001.

- 1 'European public sphere' refers to the possibility of a public sphere within the EU as a whole. I am aware that this would be more like half-a-European public sphere, since the EU encompasses only part of Europe.
- 2 Or, since in some countries the regional media is important, the nationally and regionally based media systems.
- 3 To sustain his argument, Grimm (1995) refers in a footnote, via a reference to Habermas (1992), to a section in which Walzer (1990) identifies these two aspects.
- 4 An example of this way of seeing the relationship between identity and democracy is Meehan, 1993 or Gunsteren, 1998.
- 5 In two instances, Grimm (1995) states literally that the public sphere remains bound up with the state's borders '... public discourse instead remains for the time being bound by national frontiers ... The achievement of the democratic constitutional State can for the time being be adequately realised only in the national framework (p. 296–297).
- 6 In a review of the currently available literature (Gerhards, 1993; Grimm 1995; Kielmannsegg, 1994, 1996; Lepsius, 1991, 1999; Scharpf, 1999; Schlesinger, 1995), I did

- not come across any empirical material that is more than tentative. Gerhards (2002) comes to the same conclusion. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that within a few years we will have much more knowledge about the public sphere within the EU. At the moment, as far as I know, there is an EU-funded project with partners in various member states (Koopmans, 2000), a project based at the Humboldt University (Eder et al. 2000), and cooperation between the European University Institute and the University of Konstanz (Giesen and Risse, 1999).
- 7 I would like to thank Sylvain Rivet, Barbara Grabmann, Hans-Jörg Trenz and Cathleen Kantner for their help on a definition of the public sphere.
 - 8 The following number of articles have been selected for the empirical analysis: 97 articles from *Elsevier*, 77 articles from *der Spiegel*, 51 articles from the *New Statesman*, and 29 articles from *Cambio 16*.
 - 9 The way the polity is demarcated does not provide much information and is therefore omitted. This problem is probably caused by the small amount of material. This being the case, in the light of the academic debate on the need for a strong 'we' community as a precondition for a European public sphere, it is still interesting to note that the polity with which somebody identifies proves to be varied and context dependent. It depends, on the one hand, on the person, and his/her role at that instance, and, on the other, on the argument that is being developed.

References

- Diéz Medrano, Juan (2002) 'Die Qualitätspresse und Europäische Integration', in Ansgar Klein and Ruud Koopmans (eds) *Öffentlichkeit und Demokratie in Europa*. Opladen: Leske & Budrich.
- Eder, Klaus and Kantner, Cathleen (2000) 'Transnationale Resonanzstrukturen in Europa. Eine Kritik der Rede vom Öffentlichkeitsdefizit', in Maurizio Bach (ed.) *Transnationale Integrationsprozesse in Europa*. Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, Sonderheft 40, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Eder, Klaus, Kantner, Cathleen and Trenz, Hans-Jörg (2000) *Transnationale Öffentlichkeit und die Strukturierung politischer Kommunikation in Europa* (DFG-Projektantrag). Berlin: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.
- Gamson, William (1992) *Talking Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gerhards, Jürgen (1993) 'Westeuropäische Integration und die Schwierigkeiten der Entstehung einer Europäischen Öffentlichkeit', *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 22(2): 96–110.
- (2002) 'Das Öffentlichkeitsdefizit der EU im Horizont normativer Öffentlichkeitstheorien', in Hartmut Kaelbe, Martin Kirsch and Alexander Schmidt-Gernig (eds) *Transnationale Öffentlichkeiten und Identitäten im 20. Jahrhundert*. Frankfurt/Main: Campus.
- Giesen, Bernd and Risse, Thomas (1999) *When Europe Hits Home: Europeanization and National Public Discourses*. Firenze: European University Institute.
- Grimm, Dieter (1995) 'Does Europe Need a Constitution?', *European Law Journal* 1(3): 282–302.
- Gunsteren, Herman van (1998) *Organizing Plurality: Citizenship in Post 1989 Democracies*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1995) 'Remarks on Dieter Grimm's "Does Europe Need a Constitution?"', *European Law Journal* 1(3): 303–7.

- Kantner, Cathleen (2002) 'Öffentliche politische Kommunikation in der Europäischen Union. Eine hermeneutisch pragmatische Perspektive', in Ansgar Klein and Ruud Koopmans (eds) *Öffentlichkeit und Demokratie in Europa*. Opladen: Leske & Budrich.
- Kielmansegg, Peter Graf (1994) 'Läßt sich die Europäische Gemeinschaft demokratisch verfassen?', *Europäische Rundschau* 22(2): 23–33.
- (1996) 'Integration und Demokratie', in Jachtenfuchs and Kohler-Koch, *Europäische Integration*. Opladen: Leske & Budrich.
- Koopmans, Ruud (2000) *The Transformation of Political Mobilisation and Communication in European Public Spheres*. (Framework program Europub.com). Brussels: European Commission.
- Koopmans, Ruud, Neidhardt, Friedhelm and Pfetsch, Barbara (n.d.) *Conditions for the Constitution of a European Public Sphere*. Mimeo.
- Kriesi, Hanspeter (1992) 'Öffentlichkeit und soziale Bewegungen in der Schweiz – ein Musterfall?', in Bernhard Schäfers (ed.) *Lebensverhältnisse und soziale Konflikte im neuen Europa. Verhandlungen des 26 Deutschen Soziologentages in Düsseldorf 1992*, pp. 576–85. Frankfurt: Campus.
- Lepsius, Rainer (1991) 'Nationalstaat oder Nationalitätenstaat als Modell für die Weiterentwicklung der Europäischen Gemeinschaft', in Rudolf Wildenmann (ed.) *Staatswerdung Europas? Optionen für eine Europäische Union*, pp. 19–40. Berlin: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft.
- (1999) 'Die Europäische Union. Ökonomisch-politische Integration und kulturelle pluralität', in Reinhold Viehoff and Rien Segers (eds) *Kultur Identität Europa. Über die Schwierigkeiten und Möglichkeiten einer Konstruktion*, pp. 201–222. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Meehan, Elizabeth (1993) 'Citizenship and the European Community', *The Political Quarterly* 64(2): 172–186.
- Scharpf, Fritz (1999) 'Demokratieprobleme in der europäischen Mehrebenenpolitik', in Wolfgang Merkel and Andreas Busch (eds) *Demokratie in Ost und West*, pp. 672–694. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Schlesinger, Philip (1995) *Europeanisation and the Media: National Identity and the Public Sphere*. Arena 7 working paper, 1995.
- van de Steeg, Marianne (2000) *The EU, a Political Community?* http://www.geocities.com/van_de_steeg.
- (2002) 'Bedingungen für die Entstehung von Öffentlichkeit in der EU', in Ansgar Klein and Ruud Koopmans (eds) *Öffentlichkeit und Demokratie in Europa*. Opladen: Leske & Budrich.
- Walzer, Michael (1990) 'The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism', *Political Theory* 18.

■ **Marianne van de Steeg** is PhD candidate and research assistant at the European University Institute (Florence, Italy). *Address*: European University Institute, Via dei Roccettini 9, 50016 San Domenico di Fiesole, Italy. [email: desteeg@iue.it]