

***THE CHANGING TOPOLOGY OF POLITICAL
ENGAGEMENT***
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THE CHANGING TOPOLOGY OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

- where should we look for political agency?
- what sorts of spatial contours do the processes we call political agency/engagement have?
- should we think differently about the *spatiality* of public communication and political engagement?

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Moving beyond nation-based thinking

- John Ruggie (1993) on the need for an ‘unbundling’ of territoriality
- Ulrich Beck (2000) on the need to end ‘methodological nationalism’ which assumes all important dynamics occur within the imaginary ‘container’ of national society
- That is, seeing different sets of things as existing *together* in a larger causal pattern whose epicentre is *not* the nation-state and its politics
- But the counter-force of ‘platform-based’ thinking driven by social media: for critiques, see Couldry (2014) ‘The Myth of Us’, *Information Comm. and Society*; Rodriguez et al (2014) *Media Culture & Society*.
- Moving beyond the ‘inscription fallacy’ (Couldry 2014) to see the *gaps* in our accounts of the *social context* of online political activities
- Our inherited sense of what shape political agency is likely to have

THE CHANGING TOPOLOGY OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Nancy Fraser's work on the challenges to the national public sphere

- the *symbolic* dimensions of political conflict and social exclusion
- ‘Rethinking Recognition’ (2000): misrecognition as symbolic domination based in *material* inequalities
- ‘Reframing Justice in a Globalizing World’ (2005): more attention needed to globalization’s impacts on ‘who is in, and who is excluded from, the circle of those entitled to a just distribution and reciprocal recognition’ (2005: 75). . .
- That is, attention to ‘injustices of framing’, a ‘meta-political injustice’ (2005: 77) that require ‘a transformative politics of framing’ (2005: 81).
- ‘Transnationalizing the Public Sphere’ (2007): reformulates the concept of the public sphere *for a transnational scale* . . .
- How can a transnational public sphere meet the tests of normative legitimacy and political efficacy?
- But does Fraser’s argument itself underestimate the *complexity and diversity* of the processes which might go towards *transnationalizing* the public sphere?

THE CHANGING TOPOLOGY OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Fraser on Transnationalizing the Public Sphere

- various factors that challenge the Westphalian model of nation-state, and to the public sphere conceived on that national basis
- But does Fraser's approach divert us from thinking about how *existing* local and national public spheres might be transnationalized?
- Problematic nation-based presuppositions: identity, membership, topics, language . . .
- Underlying presupposition that the aim of the public sphere is 'the democratization of the modern territorial nation-state' (2007: 10).
- But what if (Fraser) the 'communications infrastructure', the assumed languages, are not bound by the nation-state?
- Risk of underestimating national features of public sphere and of *habits* of everyday media use (Couldry Livingstone and Markham 2007; Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2005).
- The key question: how might *national* public spheres be 'transnationalized'?
- 'the national is often one of the key enablers and enactors of the emergent global scale' (Sassen 2006: 1).

THE CHANGING TOPOLOGY OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Moving beyond Fraser's critique

- The point: not to give up on public sphere concept at transnational level but ...
- to attune our thinking about the public sphere concept *more effectively* to the changing spatial distribution of public engagement.
- Need to think about *combinations* of transnationalizing processes on *multiple* scales
- What would it be to *transnationalize* our existing local and national public spheres that operate with their largely *national or local* media infrastructures?
- The rarity of migrant workers' as actors with agency in national news. Exception: Ken Loach's *It's a Free World* (2007).
- Rethinking how the 'all affected test' of PS legitimacy operates in national contexts: Balibar on need to put the term 'community of citizens . . . back into action' so takes account of 'the contribution of *all* those who are *present* . . . in [a] social space' (*We the People of Europe?* 2004: 50).

THE CHANGING TOPOLOGY OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

How to rethink what counts as a national/ local issue and the persons 'affected' by it?

- Focussing on the transnational dimension in the *most local* of acts
- transnationalizing forces complicate irreversibly the *topology* of the public sphere, that is, the range of nodes and levels that must be *articulated together* within it
- no single* configuration of representational resources is the 'right' configuration to capture the scalar complexity of contemporary politics, and political engagement
- many *linked* scales in a changing *topology* of the public sphere
- Topology (in mathematics) as about complex *invariance* under multiple transformations (not merely about fluidity: see Martin and Secor (2013)'s critique of eg Lury.
- irreducible spatial (ie transnational) *complexity* in the formation of political engagement

THE CHANGING TOPOLOGY OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

More complex thinking about political space

- ‘action is not likely to be organized simply on the scale of humanity as a whole, nor in “global” connection of the largest and smallest units. It will involve the forging of solidarity on a range of scales’ (Calhoun 2010: 605)
- ‘not only nations, “localities”, but also subjective civic spaces are deeply entangled into globalized formations’ (Volkmer, *The Global Public Sphere* 2014: 17): a ‘debracketing’ of old spatial boundaries of political awareness
- James Bohman on public communication ‘in the social and political interstices of the global . . . division of labor’ (2000: 64) . . . and
- on how ‘the space opened up by computer-mediated communication supports a new sort of distributive rather than unified public sphere, with new forms of interaction’ (*Democracy Across Borders* 2007: 77).
- ‘the global public sphere should not be expected to mirror the *cultural unity and spatial congruence* of the national public sphere’. (2007: 76)
- The transnationalization of the ‘acts and discourses for producing commonality’ (Rosanvallon’s (2007: 250)

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Conclusion: the implications of the EU 'migrant crisis'

(1) A changing topology of communications

- multidirectional flow of images and narratives from *many* sites
- . . . generating news sources across many media processes (news that reaches us by multiple transnational routes)
- A more complicated *sourcing of presence* that changes the *topology* of public communications.
- i.e. it is now a topological question whether today's complexly configured national public sphere is *the same topologically*, as yesterday's simpler national public sphere, *in spite of* today's 'rescaling effects' (Sassen)
- Back to Susan Booker-Gross (1983) on the 'spatial aspects of newsworthiness', but with a twist!

THE CHANGING TOPOLOGY OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT



Conclusion (2)

• Yet all this filtered still by *national* public spheres on the basis of very different *selections* from what is potentially news:

• http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2015/09/03/actualidad/1441279075_345000.html

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Conclusion (3)

. . . And national public spheres continue to reflect this fractured reality:

- ‘there is hardly any more of a European public sphere today than there was . . . 40 years ago: So there is not just one Greece, but 28 different ones, according to the country you are in. . . few Germans would recognise their country in the Greek media’s “Germany”.’

Timothy Garton Ash *Guardian* 9 July 2015

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/09/28-versions-europe-eurozone-grexit>

- injustices in the framing that underlies the possibility of news: the role of comparative research

THE CHANGING TOPOLOGY OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Conclusion (4)

- an ethics of news that thinks (and seeks to extend) the *limits* of the process of transnationalizing national public spheres?

New research project on European Migration and Refugee Crisis by LSE Department of Media and Communications:

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/news/newsHome.aspx>

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/Home.aspx>