



Call for Papers

The Democratic Public Sphere – Current Challenges and Prospects

International conference,

November 5-7, 2015

Aarhus University, Denmark

Confirmed keynote speakers: Mark Warren, Nick Couldry, Donatella Della Porta, and Stephen Duncombe

As a basic principle of the democratic public sphere, political decisions must be able to legitimise themselves in relation to the dialogical opinion formation among free, autonomous citizens. Not only does this principle hold a central position in modern political philosophy, it has furthermore been implemented as the normative foundation of the institutions of democratic nation states.

Today, however, even in well-established democratic societies, the legitimacy of the political system appears to be at risk. A political process in which opportunities of participation are unequal (in terms of gender, ethnicity, social class), in which wide-reaching decisions are presented as being “without alternative”, and in which public political communication has been conquered by spin, seems to discourage civic engagement. In some cases, this disengagement and the accompanying erosion of institutional legitimacy results in antidemocratic, populist currents gaining ground. Furthermore, economic, technological and politico-administrative relations

today transgress the boundaries of the nation state. The associated decision processes are thus taking place beyond the classical, nationally defined public sphere, and a transnational public sphere able to match these developments has not yet evolved.

Reflecting these circumstances, the fundamental research questions of this conference are: *How can civic engagement in the public opinion formation of contemporary democratic societies be enhanced? And which institutional innovations are liable to strengthen this line of development and thereby the legitimacy of the political decision-making?*

The social science traditions on deliberative democracy (Habermas 1992, Fishkin 1995, Dryzek 2010) and civil society (Cohen & Arato 1992, Young 2000) have delivered valuable analyses in the field. Building on these achievements, the conference aims at supplementing them with research perspectives from the humanities (e.g. media theory, cultural theory, aesthetic theory). The working thesis of the conference is that plausible institutional answers to the sketched challenges will need to build on and combine sources of experience and knowledge stemming from a variety of existing, more or less fragmented practices in public space:

1. The experimental experiences with *deliberative citizens' forums* as an institutional innovation of the democratic process. A variety of practical experiences of this kind have been made in local, national and transnational contexts (Mansbridge & Parkinson 2012). Crucial questions are the generalizability of these experiences, their delicate interplay of conflict and consensus, and the possible role of the mass media in disseminating them in constructive ways. Keynote speaker: Mark Warren.
2. The experiences with public intercourse on the *Internet* and especially *the social media* that are increasingly establishing themselves as significant forums of public interaction in addition to mass media (Couldry 2012; Fuchs 2014). The nature and role of net communication calls for analysis in order to estimate its strengths and weaknesses in respect to facilitating genuine deliberation and its potential contribution to developing a general, democratic public sphere. Keynote speaker: Nick Couldry.

3. The experiences with public communicative action of contemporary *social movements*. The analytical question is concerned with which elements of institutional innovation – with regard to the democratic public sphere in general – can be derived from the practices of contemporary social movements (Della Porta & Rucht 2013). Can social movements in this perspective be considered laboratories for the development of new types of public, democratic participation transgressing the frame of the nation state? Keynote speaker: Donatella Della Porta.
4. Experiences with *artistic interventions* in the public sphere (as opposed to power-oriented interventions) by artists and activists using artistic expressions in their public communication as dynamic resources for provoking dialogue and challenging the reflective identity work of citizens. Are artistic interventions likely to constitute institutional innovations on their own terms? Or should they primarily be regarded as possible contributions to qualifying the deliberative process by opening new, ‘estranged’ ways of perceiving and reflecting the issues at hand (Duncombe 2007; Nielsen 2014)? Keynote speaker: Stephen Duncombe.

These four fields of experience all represent existing societal resources and approaches to democratic politics that emanate from the perspective of the citizens thus transcending or supplementing the systemic view of party politics. They will form the thematic structure of the conference, and abstract proposals should address them and position themselves in relation to one or more of them.

Please note that the organizers regard it is a mark of personal courtesy and professional respect to your colleagues that all participants should attend for the full duration of the conference. If you are unable to make this commitment, please do not submit an abstract for presentation.

Practical information

Abstract proposals of no more than 200 words and a short bio (100 words) should be submitted before 01.05.2015 to democraticpublicsphere@gmail.com

Authors will be notified of paper acceptance or non-acceptance by 01.06.2015 (pre-notification is possible on request if necessary for funding of travel costs etc.). Papers based on accepted abstracts should be submitted before 15.10.2015 to:

democraticpublicsphere@gmail.com

Registration – including payment of a conference fee (including conference dinner) of 200€ (150€ for PhD students) – is due on 03.08.2015 via the conference website:

<http://conferences.au.dk/dps2015>

Participation without paper is welcome as well – however, we kindly ask that you register and pay conference fee via the conference website before 03.08.2015.

Organiser: AU IDEAS Pilot Center for Research on the Democratic Public Sphere (www.offentlighed.au.dk): Jørn Loftager, Mads P. Sørensen, Christina Fiig, Thomas Olesen, Lasse Lindeskilde, Rikke Alberg Peters, Jan Løhmann Stephensen, Henrik Kaare Nielsen

More information about practicalities etc. will be posted on:

<http://conferences.au.dk/dps2015>

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