

ANDREAS LANGENOHL
Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen*

A CRISIS OF PUBLIC CRITICISM. THE ACTUALIZATION OF CENTER-PERIPHERY SEMANTICS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Abstract

The paper approaches the current condition of the European Union as a crisis of public criticism from a theoretical perspective. This crisis consists of the clash between current peripheralist criticisms coming from national governments, opposition parties and quasi-social movements and often combining with exclusivist demands, and the EU's insistence on a continuation of its rationalist and modernist political project. The nature of this European project can be more closely analyzed if viewed as a political correlate to Jürgen Habermas' model of rational public political deliberation. This analysis is then confronted with an alternative view on public criticism as found in postcolonial theory. In particular, this discussion engages Gayatri Spivak's critique of peripheralist representations that deem themselves critical. On the basis of the theoretical juxtaposition between Habermas and Spivak, this paper distills a regulative idea for public political criticism that differs from Habermas' conception of communicative rationality – namely, the regulative idea of self-criticism. Self-criticism is conceptualized as a way to account for potentially problematic aspects that may accompany peripheralist criticisms, to understanding them as an expression of the metropolitan political public dynamic, and thus to assume responsibility for them. For the current crisis constellation, this would mean rephrasing peripheralist criticisms as part and parcel of a genuinely European public political dynamic, thus overcoming the chasm created by the reciprocal consolidation of peripheralist and centralist positions.

* Professor of Sociology with a Focus on General Comparative Studies, Institut für Soziologie; e-mail: andreas.langenohl@sowi.uni-giessen.de

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INTRODUCTION: YET ANOTHER CRISIS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

A series of major crises have recently shaken the institutional structure, but also the political imagination, of the European Union: the financial and sovereign debt crisis that continues to challenge the common currency of the Eurozone and implicit assumptions about solidarity among European national economies; the conflict between Ukraine and Russia that brought the specter of war in Europe back into the public imagination; the issue of (forced) migration into the EU, which has crystallized a wave of anti-Islamism and xenophobia throughout Europe; and, of course, ‘Brexit’, which has destroyed the idea of the EU’s historical finality. These crises have inspired fundamental criticisms regarding the policies of European bodies such as the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the European Monetary Union. Throughout the EU, governments, political parties, organizations, and quasi-movements have blamed European institutions for dominating national governments and populations. These accusations – which have sometimes been mixed with collective, especially national essentializations – invoke the picture of an EU center that has driven nation-states into peripheral positions, and claim for themselves the right of the periphery to fight against subjugation by the center.

This politicized center-periphery semantics is not new. Reconstructions of the re-ordering of the world system since early modern times have argued that the most important characteristic of the modern system has always been an asymmetrical arrangement of centers and peripheries in terms of economic exploitation, political domination, and ideological hegemony [Wallerstein 2004; Buzan, Lawson 2015]. Moreover, center-periphery semantics have been shown to represent a powerful grammar according to which political identities, aspirations and claims have been organized in the accession process of new member states to the EU [Krossa 2005: 45–61, 123–134]. In the case of the current political dynamics within the EU, center-periphery semantics challenge European institutions and are often combined with exclusionist rhetoric such as demands to close the EU borders to refugees, anti-Muslim rallies, or manifestations of xenophobic nationalism. The periphery’s claim to have the right to fight metropolitan domination is thus asserted independently of actual geographical, economic, or political peripherality: it has been staked by national governments in newer EU member states (as in Hungary

and Poland), significant opposition parties in historical EU core states (such as Germany, France, the Netherlands, Austria and the U.K.), or quasi-movements on the extreme right (as in Germany and Greece). These claims have been publicly refuted by representatives of the EU as compromised by a relapse into nationalism, exclusivism, and xenophobia.

The European Union has always been a deliberately rationalist, and thus a *modernist*, political project. It has based its legitimacy on the ability to receive consensual agreement from both political elites and populations, to regulate conflicts on the basis of the consensus principle, and to engage its citizens in projects based on an understanding that European integration is something Europeans cannot *not* want. This understanding is fundamentally challenged by protests that combine a rejection of European integration as domination by a center with an essentialization of national collectives that transforms divisible conflicts over the allocation of rights and resources into non-divisible, identitarian ones [Hirschman 1995]. This leads to the emergence of a deadlock between criticisms that radically valorize peripheral positionalities, and the rejection of such criticisms by European institutions on the grounds that such criticisms are unacceptable due to their incompatibility with the political modernism of European integration. This constellation is as much a symptom as it is a trigger of yet another crisis in the EU: namely, an inability to find ways to start a dialog about what would constitute a viable way to critically address the EU's shortcomings. In this sense, critical political signification in the EU, is itself in crisis.

This article attempts to address this problem area by engaging with the academic and political current that has most ardently dealt with the dilemmas of criticisms from peripheral positionalities: postcolonial critique, which has often been seen as a possible source of criticism that is both locally effective and contextualized by considerations of global inequalities [cf. Buchowski 2006; Langenohl 2007; Kerner 2014; Biskamp 2016]. While many current accusations of the EU invoke postcolonial imagery (presenting themselves as peripheral criticisms of an imperial center), and have indeed often been framed in terms of postcolonial and decolonial theory,¹ this article specifically addresses the self-reflexive and self-critical capacities of postcolonial theory. The core of this theoretical discussion consists of a dialog between Jürgen Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* – a foundational model of the rational political deliberation so emphasized by EU institutions – and Gayatri Spivak's *Critique of Postcolonial*

¹ Cf. Michael-Matsas [2012] and Fouskas, Dimoulas [2012], critically discussing austerity politics in Greece.

Reason, which theorizes about the conditionalities of peripheralist criticisms. These two works address public political criticism in two different ways. While Habermas, with his social-theoretical model, places hopes in the auto-corrective forces of modernity to be realized through rational public deliberation, Spivak engages in a cultural-theoretical critique of peripheralist critical interventions as having side effects that undermine and compromise the criticism's cause. Habermas and Spivak can thus be seen as poles between which the current drama of criticism in the EU is unfolding. Habermas' social theory provides the theoretical foundation for a modernist and rationalist polity such as the EU² that has difficulties coping with criticism from peripheralist positionalities. Spivak analyzes the potentially problematic tendencies of criticisms that take peripheralist positions. So, while a precise analysis of the failings of Habermas' model might help us better understand the helplessness of a rationalist apparatus facing radically peripheralist criticisms, confronting his model with Spivak's enables us to capture the cultural framework within which those criticisms become major challenges to the European Union in the first place.

HABERMAS AND THE IMMANENT CRITICISM OF MODERNITY

Jürgen Habermas' conception of the public sphere and public political deliberation can still be regarded as the most influential position on an issue that has been discussed in a wide range of scientific disciplines, all the more so since the publication of the English translation of *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* [1962].³ Not only is *Structural Transformation* regarded as a foundational text for, "the recovery and extension of a strong normative idea of publicness" [Calhoun 1992: 42], but it has also served to center and crystallize debates surrounding the public sphere by providing a model that could be critiqued from various points of view. Since the 1990s a number of papers and volumes have been published that point out shortcomings in Habermas' theory of the public sphere.⁴ One main thrust of such criticism is that Habermas did not take the cultural dimension of the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere into account. This argument has been made from a historical perspective – showing how Habermas' early work is characterized by the, "remarkable absence of nationalism" [Calhoun 1991: 34;

² Habermas has regularly appeared as a theoretician of European integration and governance, and has referred to his theoretical considerations of deliberation [see, for instance, Habermas 2001].

³ For a brief history of the reception to Habermas' work in Anglophone scholarship, cf. Eley [2002: 219–24].

⁴ Cf. for a comprehensive summary of criticisms Crossley, Roberts [2004].

cf. Eley 1992; Baker 1992] – as well as in more conceptual contributions, which contend that Habermas underestimates the imaginary dimension of publicness and neglects the relevance of identity in the contemporary public sphere and symbolic politics [cf. Warner 1992; Dean 2001; Ku 1999]. Another area of criticism points out that his historical reconstructions and his speech act-theoretical elaborations systematically exclude certain groups from being considered as part of the public [e.g., women and workers], or that they downplay the relevance of alternative forms of lifeworld interaction, such as every day conversation, carnivalesque appropriations of rational arguments, or aesthetic performances [cf. Fraser 1992: 112–118; Benhabib 1992: 88–95; McCarthy 1992; Gilroy 1993: 40–59; Gardiner 2004; Hirshkop 2004; Roberts 2004]. Lastly, regarding new forms of publicity such as social media, some have argued that the public sphere in the singular is an outdated model that fails to integrate the multiplicity of medially formatted public practices [Haas 2004].

In illustrating the descriptive and analytical shortcomings of Habermas' theory of society, however, many criticisms fall short of demonstrating what they mean for his project of a *critical* theory of the public sphere. This theory can be understood as a form of immanent criticism of modernity grounded on social theory, that is, as an analysis of the basic functions of societal processes that reconstructs normative categories which can then be used to criticize empirical society itself. In this sense, Habermas' project is genealogically Marxist: instead of being 'philosophically' articulated and derived from transcendental principles, criticism must reflect the reproductive conditions and mechanisms of society. Unlike Marx, however, who depicted the foundations of the social in the conditions of material reproduction, Habermas places the symbolic aspects of the reproduction of the social at center stage.

Given this context, critiques of Habermas sometimes miss one of the main implications of his argument: namely, that the public sphere represents the structural location for modernity's own self-criticism. As an extension of the "lifeworld", the structures of the public sphere do not always empirically contribute to a rationalization of quarrels and arguments. Nonetheless, they do institutionalize the normative ambition (grounded in the speech act) that a voluntary agreement on social norms can be achieved, and they transfer this ambition into the self-image and self-ambition of modern societies.⁵ The validity of self-criticism as a counterfactual norm is not situated at the same societal

⁵ Habermas' political writings continuously provided examples for this understanding of the public sphere [cf. Habermas 1976, 1978a, 1978b].

level as the social closures that have empirically accompanied the emergence of the public sphere and that many critics have taken issue with. As a norm whose institutionalization has historically vacillated between rudimentary beginnings and advanced stages of decline, Habermas sees his point of departure not as a descriptive account, but as an *immanent criticism* of society that does not predefine critical norms but rather deciphers them from the symbolic foundation of social practices.

I intend to confront Habermas' approach with postcolonial positions on the public sphere and thus to add to the debate on the reformulation of critical theory.⁶ Postcolonial theorizing represents one of the most radical contemporary criticisms of modernity, building its epistemology on a program of giving authority to peripheral representations in order to critically comment on the center's policies and epistemologies. In a recent contribution, Floris Biskamp [2016] has suggested a combination of Habermas' critical project and postcolonial criticism which capitalizes on the mutual complementarities of the two theoretical strands. He argues that Habermas' lack of any theory of signification, which is also the concern of the present paper, might be supplemented by postcolonial theory that specializes in signification. In the other direction, Biskamp also asserts that postcolonial theory's lack of a political theory can be supplemented by social-theoretical foundations as laid out by Habermas [Biskamp 2016: 203, 259]. In this article, however, I want to focus on a more specific discussion of forms of criticism within a conflict constellation structured by imaginations of the center-periphery asymmetry, as is the case in the contemporary EU.

POSTCOLONIAL THEORY: A CRITIQUE OF CRITICAL REPRESENTATION⁷

One of the aims of postcolonial criticism is the deconstruction of key analytical categories in western social-scientific, philosophical and literary thought. This intention is one part of postcolonial theory's more general program, namely to, "narrativize the constitution of the self-consolidating other," in the historical west [Spivak 1999: 409–410; cf. also Sakai 2001, 2009]. The main line of argument

⁶ Feminist approaches must be mentioned here, cf. in particular the contributions by Benhabib [1992: 89–95], and by Fraser [1992: 118–37]. Furthermore, Nick Crossley [2004] has suggested that Habermas' project can be critically continued by turning to a Bourdieuan kind of analysis.

⁷ Due to a lack of space, I cannot fully detail all of the relevant indications here, and must restrict myself to illustrations and examples of postcolonial theory's structure of articulation [for a reconstruction see: Langenohl 2007, 116–249].

is that most of the categories developed by European and (as its descendent) North American social and cultural theory implicitly rest upon a confrontation between western and non-western cultures, traditions, and ways of life. Cultural features ascribed to the non-west are regularly represented as being inferior to western ways and, thus, may be legitimately repressed and subordinated. This representation of the non-west – the discourse of “Orientalism”, to use Edward Said’s [1995 (1978)] famous term – thus serves to legitimize political, economic and cultural domination, and at the same time allows the west to consolidate its self-image by distinguishing itself from this constructed representation. In this context, the social sciences have been complicit with the project of western imperialism, which first (from the 16th century on) took shape in the economic exploitation and political colonization of the non-west and then, in the 20th century, transformed itself into the economic and political domination of former colonies by the states from the former imperial centers [Connell 2007; Bhabra 2008; Sakai 2001].⁸ An instance of this complicity can be seen in the development of sociological modernization theory, of which Habermas’ theory is a prominent example. Many influential versions of this theory operate with the categorical juxtaposition of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ societies and the idea of a universal path of societal development.⁹ According to this paradigm, western societies reached the stage of modernity earlier than non-western ones, which, as a result represent a more primitive status and can therefore be legitimately subdued (even after formal political decolonization) through western developmental aid, policy counseling, secret service activities, and most recently military interventions [Prakash 2000: 164–167 and 171–179; Chatterjee 2000: 19; Spivak 2002: 60–61].

Postcolonial theory, as it has appeared since the 1990s, has assumed and institutionalized a distinctly self-critical form of academic debate. It can be traced back to discussions in English literary studies at the end of the 1980s that questioned the hegemony of the traditional Commonwealth literary canon and the dominance of analytical instruments developed in the historical context of the western literary classics.¹⁰ Separately, the publication of Edward Said’s

⁸ A radicalization of postcolonial critique, which calls for the decolonization of epistemologies in the humanities and the social sciences, terms itself ‘decolonial criticism’ [see Mignolo 2000; Quijano 2000].

⁹ Jeffrey Alexander [1995: 71] traces this influential branch of U.S. American modernization theory, of which Talcott Parsons is the most distinguished representative, to the 1950s and 1960s and terms it “romantic liberalism”.

¹⁰ These discussions surface, for instance, in the following early volumes: Slemon, Tiffin [1989]; Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin [1989]; Tiffin, Adams [1990].

Orientalism in 1978 gave impetus to a series of studies in what was to be called Colonial Discourse Analysis. These studies explored the self-affirmative construction of the non-west in western colonial discourse, be it literary, journalistic, diplomatic or academic [Bhabha 1994; Spivak 1987; Mudimbe 1988]. In the first half of the 1990s, these two branches of academic literary and epistemological criticism merged into “Postcolonial studies”, a loose category covering not so much a specific disciplinary approach or a concrete pool of data, but rather an intellectual and scholarly style of conversation that was critical of the literary and theoretical discourses it analyzed, and self-critical with regards to its own possible collaboration with these discourses [Childs, Williams 1997: 218; Moore-Gilbert, Stanton, Maley 1997: 1–2]. The fierce debates in postcolonial criticism about whether it should attempt to critique representations of the west or that of the former colonies, or whether it is being written for a metropolitan or a peripheral public, are quarrels that are part and parcel of postcolonialism’s self-criticism [Langenohl 2007: 155–212].

Postcolonial theory has thus established the *critique of critical representation* [Langenohl 2007: 164] as the norm for academic discourse: a sort of critique of the second order. In this respect – and despite the fact that postcolonial theory is eager to question and reject an unconsidered use of theoretical categories in the humanities as developed in the historical west – it can be seen as the empirical manifestation of a discourse-ethical approach to the public sphere in which the norms of critical statements are constantly being reflected upon as to their potential affirmative, hegemonic and exclusionary tendencies. An apt example of how postcolonial approaches constantly engage in the critique of critical representation is Gayatri Spivak’s work. An early instance is her critical engagement with western feminism, which she accuses of taking a critical position toward patriarchal structures at the expense of non-western colonial female subjects, who are often represented in feminist criticism as being passive and subordinate to patriarchy [Spivak 1986]. Spivak’s work also lends itself to challenging Habermas’ assertion of the self-corrective forces of modernity, because her work sheds light on power effects while devoting attention to cultural dynamics and macro-societal and institutional structures alike (see, for instance, Spivak [2003], and Biskamp [2016: 167–204]). My analysis will focus on her book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* as a work that, even in its title, expresses the self-criticism of postcolonial theory, and that addresses various instances of an (if unintended) self-subversion of public criticisms articulated from postcolonial positionalities within metropolitan societies. According to Spivak’s analysis, these criticisms are infused with hegemonic power differentials, which causes marginalization

and the symbolic exclusion of groups located at the historical peripheries of the European empires that have no access to metropolitan resources. In this way, she critically confronts postcolonial criticism for its entanglement in the very power structures that it has sought to confront and criticize in the first place.

In *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak handles the critique of the public sphere as a critique of representations or significations. Among others she uses the example of discourses on multiculturalism in western societies and most prominently in the U.S. Here, she identifies an acceptance by many postcolonial migrants of western culturalist discourse – especially within the frame of U.S. multiculturalism – that supports an interpretive pattern in western public opinion which attributes economic exploitation and political domination in the global system to ‘cultural differences’ between the west and the rest. Postcolonial migrants are complicit in establishing a discursive separation of western and non-western public spheres by implicitly agreeing to serve as proxies for non-western ‘cultures’ at the periphery. Americans of Indian origin, for instance, are made to represent ‘national India’, Asian Americans are made to stand in for ‘Asia’, etc. For Spivak, postcolonial migrants and their descendants thus have a special responsibility to undermine these representations:

[T]he hyphenated Americans... might rethink themselves as *possible* agents of exploitation, not as victims; then the idea that the nation-state that they now call home gives “aid” to the nation-state that they still call culture, in order to consolidate the new unification for international capital, might lead to what I call “transnational literacy” [Spivak 1999: 357].

In the present context, the notion of “transnational literacy” can be recast as a rejection of the claim that national public spheres can be juxtaposed with each other and be reduced to container-like ‘cultures’. Spivak has continued this critique in a more recent work, where she takes issue with reconstructions of transnational confrontations that put ‘culture’ at center stage while at the same time lacking the competency to capture complex cultural representations, like literature, in their capacity to subvert the container epistemology of ‘culture’.¹¹ The normative orientation that gives shape to this critique comes from an appreciation of those voices that are regularly *not* heard in the public spheres – either within metropolises or on the peripheries – namely the repeatedly exploited and marginalized subalterns (for Spivak, one example includes “the poorest women

¹¹ Spivak [2003: 1–23]. Here, Spivak critiques Cultural Studies in particular for entertaining an over-simplified notion of culture unmoored in an intimate familiarity with non-metropolitan literacies and literatures. She instead calls for a re-ordered cultural anthropology that could in principle do justice to the cultural particularities of peripheral contexts.

of the South” [Spivak 1999: 416]). Spivak’s earlier assertion, that despite attempts to theorize the subjective motivations of subaltern subjects they, “cannot be heard or read,” and, “cannot speak” [Spivak 1988: 308], highlights the point of her critique as a theoretical project. Here, she confronts a Foucauldian understanding of the political intellectual who launches their criticism by speaking on behalf of subordinate individuals and groups. Theory thus cannot help but criticize other theoretical criticisms precisely because it cannot claim to speak on behalf of any subaltern subjects; it can merely outline the possibility that the subalterns might speak for themselves by criticizing theoretical attempts to speak for them – for instance, in critical multiculturalist discourse, culturalist theory unwittingly appropriates the voices of the subaltern at the periphery.

Given that postcolonial criticism is based on self-critical conversations among an academic-intellectual public critiquing representations that deem themselves already critical, it is interesting to take a closer look at the architecture of the concept of ‘representation’. This concept also links Spivak’s and Habermas’ theoretical projects. Furthermore, the concept of ‘representation’ is shaped as part of a discussion about Marx, in both Spivak’s and Habermas’ writings. I will thus directly confront the different appropriations of Marx by Habermas and Spivak as they appear in connection with reasoning about representation in the public sphere.

REPRESENTATIONS AND SIGNIFICATIONS: DIFFERENT READINGS OF MARX

At its core, Habermas’ theory of society is based on an argument that the structural history of western European modernity allows for the reconstruction of an universal model of differentiation at a societal level. According to this model, the formation of territorial states and the establishment of a sphere of economic circulation in Western Europe are regarded as historical crystallizations of a general mechanism of societal evolution, namely the differentiation of two societal spheres that are functionally integrated: political administration and economy. These spheres are characterized by the fact that the actors’ action orientations that constitute them are not directed toward the motives underlying other actors’ actions, but solely toward the effects of their actions. Habermas argued with Mead and Durkheim that the prerequisite for this development is a certain degree of post-traditionalism in value-orientations and modes of communication within the lifeworld. Only if traditional norms, values and orientations have already been subjected to communicative rationalization (as happened first, Habermas argues, in European

bourgeois households at the end of the 18th century [Habermas 1989: 28–50]), can the integration of agency systems be decoupled from traditionally established normative judgments.

This process of decoupling action orientations from normative evaluations, and their crystallization into functionally integrated societal subsystems, opens lifeworld communication to the possibility of further communicative rationalization, until a point is reached where the validity claims of arguments can in principle be judged against the normative background of a potentially universal consensus. That this consensus can never be fully reached does not prevent it from structuring empirical conversations as a normative horizon. This model implies that communicative action holds the potential to put any topic on the agenda and to include any person because the empirical norm of argumentative rationality does not permit the exclusion of any topic or any person in itself [Habermas 1989: 36–37].¹² The evolutionary achievement of the public sphere is thus that it makes any issue subject to communicative rationality in a public deliberation that is (in principle) capable of the universal inclusion of all stakeholders. Modern public spheres are thus viewed by Habermas as arenas where the unfinished Enlightenment project is constantly driven forward through self-confrontation with its blind spots. Social movements, minority groups etc. successively put topics on the agenda that had until then been ignored by the general public, thus guaranteeing the continuation of a rationalization of public debate that is normatively grounded in the possibility of voluntary consensus.¹³

Still, the liberation of lifeworld communication from instrumental action motives, made possible by such motives' crystallization in the societal subsystems of the economy and political administration, comes at a price. According to Habermas, the fully fledged subsystems have the potential to impact the life world, and thus also the communicative potential underlying the public sphere. Because there can be, "no rational political will-formation unless it is supported by a rationalized lifeworld," [Habermas 1990: 208, author's translation],¹⁴ any restrictions put on lifeworld structures and their potential to unleash the potential of communicative rationalization must be detrimental to public political culture.

¹² Although in more recent work, Habermas has argued that legal matters are confined to the public sphere and moral matters to private communication, Benhabib [1992: 89] notes that his own model of communicative rationalization undermines such categorization of issues.

¹³ This emphasis on social movements was missing in the earlier work of the 1960s [cf. Calhoun 1992: 36–37].

¹⁴ Original: "keine vernünftige politische Willensbildung ohne das Entgegenkommen einer rationalisierten Lebenswelt".

This diagnosis orients itself toward, yet at the same time takes issue with, Marx's analysis of commodification, namely that the *use value* of concrete labor is absorbed by the *exchange value* of abstract labor through its commodification in the labor market. In principle, this absorption of use value by exchange value can be rendered in Habermas' terms, as "colonization" (*Kolonialisierung*) of the lifeworld by systemic imperatives. The functional subsystems of political administration and economy, whose emergence was conditioned by a certain rationalization and de-traditionalization of the lifeworld, tend to expand their functional logic to societal contexts integrated by norms, and thus impact the lifeworld. This intrusion of self-sustaining functional logic into the lifeworld is not fully perceptible as such due to the process of the, "everyday consciousness... becom[ing] fragmented." From the perspective of the subjects, this means that, "the everyday knowledge appearing in totalized form remains diffuse, or at least never attains that level of articulation at which alone knowledge can be accepted as valid according to the standards of cultural modernity" [Habermas 1987c: 355]. This lack of articulation is a prerequisite for systemic colonization in the lifeworld. Still, in contrasting his model with Marx's theory of commodity, Habermas contends that the latter's theory detects only *one* of these colonizing relationships (that between capitalist economy and lifeworld) at the expense of the other (political administration – lifeworld). From the perspective of Habermas' lifeworld-system-differentiation, Marx misses the point that the danger of 'colonization' is not only typical for capitalist, but for modern societies in general [Habermas 1987c: 337–343].

This critique of Marx is coupled with a diagnosis of the crisis of social criticism in contemporary societies. According to Habermas, under the conditions of late-capitalist welfare states, the class conflict that Marx diagnosed loses its identificatory power because it no longer provides the categories for social identification (class identification). The class structure that separates different social classes in Marx's analysis – and thus different lifeworlds – from one another is transferred to the systemic sphere of society, for example in the conflict between entrepreneurial associations and unions moderated by state institutions. The class structure thus, "loses its historically palpable shape [*Gestalt*]" [Habermas 1987c: 348]. At stake is a social structure *past recognition*, the emergence of a public non-signifiability of the contradiction between different social classes. Although Habermas refers to the conditions of the late-capitalist welfare state in his diagnosis, it becomes clear that he recognizes the problem of signifying inequality (which is induced by systems logics) in Marx's work. Marx had tried

to address this problem with the transformation from the “class in itself” to the “class for itself”, that is, through the transfiguration of a structural contradiction to an identificatory mobilization: a representation-through-self-signification, as it were. In Habermas’ view, this concern with the signification of the class conflict, demonstrates Marx’s blindness to the general tendency of modern societies to separate themselves into different lifeworld and systemic spheres [Habermas 1987c: 499–500], thus risking the creation of “fragmented consciousness” [Habermas 1987c: 355].

Because Marx’s focus on the representation-through-self-signification of the working class was already mistaken, the signifiability of subalternity cannot be substituted by the alternative critical signification of a revolutionary collectivity. It is not the *signification* of an identity that must be rescued from the systemic logics of economy and political administration, but the possibility for participatory *political* representation. According to Habermas, the danger exists that participation will become nothing more than *rhetorical* representation, or the mere *signification* of representation [“mass loyalty”, Habermas 1987c: 350], with the role of the active citizen to be replaced by the roles of client to the administration and consumer of the economic system.¹⁵ This substitution is brought about by the aforementioned fragmentation of everyday consciousness: mass loyalty generated through symbolic politics is the signifiatory and identificatory substitute for real participation and representation in public deliberation. Habermas reconstructs Marx’s class consciousness in terms of collected *individual* consciousnesses. Thus, ideology is not false *signification*, but rather false *consciousness* – which correlates with Habermas’ suggestion that the threat to the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld through systemic colonization should be best understood as the fragmentation of consciousness in terms of distorted intersubjectivity.

Spivak, by contrast, directly confronts what she sees as the dual meaning of ‘representation’ in Marx, that is, cultural signification (representation in the sense of *Darstellung*) on the one hand, and political representation (*Vertretung*) on the other. In doing so, she touches on a theme developed earlier in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* There, she analyzed British and Hindu nationalist discourses surrounding a practice called *sati* in colonial India, a term used to signify the death of a wife on the occasion of her husband’s death. British colonial officers portrayed the practice as forced burning and thus as murder, while nationalists portrayed it as spiritually motivated self-immolation. This

¹⁵ “Legitimacy and mass loyalty form an alloy that is not analyzed by those involved and cannot be broken down into its critical components” [Habermas 1987c: 350].

discursive constellation, Spivak argues, was crucially based on the absence of the concerned women's voices, who figured either as passive victims that needed to be saved or as culturalized subjects who expressed their will only through their own death – a constellation that prevented the discursive positionality of women as 'speaking' and living subjects of their own lives from materializing. Moreover, with a critical view at attempts by contemporary Indian historians to rescue the 'voice' of subaltern subjects, she argues that it is impossible to speak fully on behalf of these women because their historical-discursive significance consisted precisely in their complete silencing [Spivak 1988: 308]. In other words, any critique of hegemonic imperial discourses has to proceed in a self-critical way, always reflecting on its own conditionality and possible complicity.

So, while Habermas critiques the fact that Marx privileged the question of signification at the expense of political participation, Spivak holds that Marx's use of the notion *Vertretung* is much more cautious and reflective of its own conditionality. Referring to *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* – in particular to a quote from that text in which Marx says about small peasant proprietors, a subordinated and exploited group, that they, "cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" [Marx as quoted in Spivak 1999: 259] – Spivak asserts that for Marx, political representation as a class does not follow from the immediate consciousness as a class. Rather, such, "strategic, artificial, and second-level 'consciousness'" [Spivak 1999: 262], always belongs to the realm of signification, which Marx aligns with the sphere of capitalist circulation: just as the exchange value of labor is the signifier of abstract and therefore objectified labor, so too is class consciousness a signifier of collective identity that threatens to objectify those in whose names it is articulated. Class signification must therefore be understood as being "discontinuous" with its carrier group's subjective identification and not an outflow of it: it is conditioned by the forced inclusion of this carrier group into a structure that, "is artificial to begin with – 'economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life'" [Spivak 1999: 261, quoting Marx], which thus undermines any claim to 'natural' signification, let alone political representation, of that group.

This interpretation of Marx – who in Spivak's view, "shows a cautious respect for the nascent critique of individual and collective subjective agency" [Spivak 1999: 261] – allows her to criticize the current identity politics in the United States' public sphere for signifying an essential collective identification as the point of departure in the struggle for public political representation. Such identity discourses do not emanate from a given collective's feeling of belonging, but are embedded into an economic order that is the historical successor to imperial

colonialism. Signification enters as a marginality producing factor of its own, and not (as in Habermas) as the heteronomous result of the invasion of the lifeworld by systemic logic. In Spivak's example, by participating in the critical multiculturalist discourse in the United States (as a neocolonial metropolis), and thereby achieving their acceptance as part of the different 'cultures' within the country, postcolonial migrants unwittingly help prolong the economic structures of subordination at the peripheries – that is, in the former colonies – by attributing inequality to 'culture' [Spivak 1999: 353–358]. By focusing on the power of signification and its discursive entanglement, Spivak's theoretical perspective, thus cautions against any 'empowerment' based on theoretical claims to represent subaltern groups as long as those claims do not include a gesture of self-criticism.

The lessons that Habermas and Spivak draw from Marx in their reflections on the public sphere are quite different from each other. To be sure, both have implications for a theory and diagnosis of the public sphere that regard themselves as *critical*, and thus must reflect the public criticism's conditions of existence. Both approaches discuss the relationship between signification and political representation in the public sphere, and both warn that theory must not commit certain fallacies when signifying this relationship. But this is where the similarities end; Habermas' and Spivak's elaborations on Marx formulate different impulses for the reformulation of a critical theory of the public sphere.

Habermas translates class conflict into a "colonizing" infiltration of the lifeworld by action orientations that constitute systemic social contexts. This means that the threatening potential of modernity takes empirical shape in distorted communication among lifeworld subjects. For a critical theory of the public sphere, this diagnosis implies an important norm of undistorted intersubjectivity sheltered from the direct influences of systemic logics. Because "colonization" does not produce a false, but rather a fragmented consciousness, it creates non-significations that cannot be challenged by any theorized ideology-critical signification. Habermas' model thus avoids a common semantic criticism of significations, because it considers them to be pathological in and of themselves ["mass loyalty", Habermas 1987c: 350]. The cure is found in immediate political representation within the public sphere, conditioned by an undistorted intersubjective consciousness that establishes the counterfactual norm of communicative rationality within the horizon of a potentially universal consensus.

For Spivak, who interprets Marx as cautioning against an identitarian-essentialist misunderstanding of the transformation of "class-in-itself" into "class-for-itself", the primary danger rests in the *domination of people's self-significations and self-representations* through cultural signification that is given

hegemonic weight; a phenomenon she identifies in colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial discourses alike. What stitches together colonial and neo-colonial discourses is not so much the persistence of certain public interpretive patterns or discourses of the “Orient” that vindicate its subordination under the west (as Edward Said would have it), but rather the interweaving of the West’s self-asserting images of the cultural Orient with the culturalist self-image of colonial and postcolonial subjects who are inserted into macroeconomic and macropolitical structures invisible to them. “Colonialism”, then, refers to a condition in which a transnational hegemonic publicness of signification-taken-for-representation exists that does not allow for the differentiation between practices of signification and practices of political participation. In this way, the categories of the hegemonic discourse – and above all, the category of ‘culture’ – are attributed to those subjected to this discourse. The implicit critical-theoretical norm that this model derives from analysis is to support others in their own signification and representation [cf. Biskamp 2016: 198–199], while self-critically acknowledging that any such support might turn out to be a part of the hegemonic discourse it had intended to criticize.

COLONIZATION AND PUBLIC CRITICISM

Both postcolonial theory and the theory of communicative action proceed from the possibility of counterfactual norms that structure public debate. Yet, as we have seen, these two theoretical strands arrive at incongruous conclusions regarding the role of public criticism. The different invocations of the term ‘colonization’ highlight this difference. While Habermas introduces the term only in passing and as a label to refer to general paradoxes of societal modernization, postcolonial theory itself is based on the term in order to question the categories of modernity and modernization *grosso modo*. More importantly, the different uses of the term indicate different ways of routing criticism and self-criticism in contemporary societies, and in social and cultural theory. More specifically, the two different theoretical programs stand for alternative ways of accounting for peripheral positionalities and the potentials of self-criticism.

It is an odd coincidence that in order to develop his central critical statement about processes in historically western societies, Habermas chose the term ‘colonization’, while at the same time (the beginning of the 1980s), literary criticism had just begun to view colonization as a historical and epistemological perspective that made it impossible to think about the western metropolis without imperial colonization, that is, as separate from the peripheries it had

created. Habermas did not use the term *Kolonisierung*, in the original text, but rather *Kolonialisierung*. The English term ‘colonization’, which is the regular translation of Habermas’ *Kolonialisierung* (instead of ‘colonialization’), erases the morphological and semantic, if imprecise, difference between the two lexemes. The particular meaning of this latter word, which vaguely connotes a more thorough and lasting impact than its morphologically simpler alternative, can be derived from Habermas’ own commentary on it:

In place of “false consciousness” we today have a “fragmented consciousness” that blocks enlightenment by the mechanism of reification. It is only with this that the conditions for a colonization [*Kolonialisierung*] of the lifeworld are met. When stripped of their ideological veils, the imperatives of autonomous subsystems make their way into the lifeworld from the outside – like colonial masters coming into a tribal society – and force a process of assimilation upon it. The diffused perspectives of the local culture cannot be sufficiently coordinated to permit the play of the metropolis and the world market to be grasped from the periphery [Habermas 1987c: 355].

Kolonialisierung, as distinct from mere colonization, encompasses not only the physical invasion of a given territory, group or social sphere and their subsequent assimilation to the invaders, but also the emergence of a structure that steers these concrete processes yet remains undecipherable – non-signifiable – to the colonized subjects. *Kolonialisierung* thus reduces the lifeworld to a periphery of systemic processes that characterize modern society. Precisely because the ‘invaders’ abstain from setting up an ideology disguising their schemes and plans, this absent ideology cannot be revealed and replaced by a ‘correct’ signification coupled with a ‘true’ signification by the subalterns themselves. What critical theory must do, “[r]ather than hunting after the scattered traces of revolutionary consciousness... [is] to examine the conditions for recoupling a rationalized culture with an everyday communication dependent on vital tradition” [Habermas 1987c: 355–356]. The colonization of the lifeworld creates a *crisis of critical signification*. Accordingly, from the very beginning a critical theory of the public sphere must be self-limiting with regard to the critical significations it sets up – it cannot resort to a strategy of establishing a public counter-signification. With this signification-critical argument, Habermas approximates postcolonial theory.

At the same time, however, Habermas absolves *Kolonialisierung* of its own consequences as a term for the crisis of critical signification, by maintaining the possibility of a universal consensus regarding moral-practical affairs, if only as a regulative norm, vouched for by undistorted communication and a de-fragmented consciousness in the lifeworld. Habermas thus disregards critical signification based on the counterfactual-normative potential for immediate political representation

undisturbed by dynamics of significations. Habermas drives home this denial of the relevance of significations of marginality and exploitation within the public sphere by insisting on an undistorted, intersubjective and pre-signified consciousness as the prerequisite for rational communication. But in this argument, peripherality (for Habermas, the entirety of the lifeworld) is disregarded as a potential site of effective criticism because it merely serves as an example of the effects of colonization. The periphery is denied the capacity to even *identify* the problem of colonization, let alone criticize it. Because Habermas devalues the theoretical category of signification (that is, ‘representation’ in the sense of *Darstellung*) in general (which he demonstrates with the pejorative notion of “mass loyalty”) he cannot include criticisms of such signification in his model of self-critical modernity.

The intervention of postcolonial theory, in this paper exemplified by Gayatri Spivak’s work, rescues this critique of critical signification – which Habermas implicitly acknowledges in his *Kolonialisierung* thesis without being able to fully appreciate it – for an analysis of public criticism. Colonization points to a permanent crisis of critical signification in contemporary societies that cannot be undone by the counterfactual norm of communicative rationality as holding the potential for a universal consensus. Instead, this crisis of critical signification itself has to be included in this norm. Spivak’s point that peripheralist criticism might play an active role in both prolonging as well as fighting colonization, calls for an approach to such criticism that neither valorizes nor dismisses it in a wholesale way. In conclusion, I want to suggest that the regulative idea of self-criticism, as an alternative to communicative rationality, may open up a way for the EU to approach peripheralist criticism (in all its problematic dimensions) as an expression of self-criticism – for which the EU must then claim responsibility.

CONCLUSION: THE CRISIS OF CRITICAL SIGNIFICATION IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

This paper began with the observation that the current climate of public political deliberation in the EU is characterized by a confrontation of peripheralist positionalities that blame the EU for subjugating their legitimate causes, and a public reaction by EU institutions to this criticism that consists of rebukes of nationalist atavism, anti-progressivism, and exclusivism. This climate maintains and aggravates the juxtaposition of centralist, metropolitan positionalities that claim progress and modernity for themselves and peripheralist positionalities that see themselves dominated by such progressivism. I have called this constellation a crisis of critical signification because criticism and anti-criticism enter into

a self-propelling discursive confrontation that shrinks the leeway for political negotiation capable of addressing the EU's shortcomings in a nuanced and differentiated way. This crisis of critical signification is at the heart of the current impasse in the politics of European institutions. They find themselves exposed to a radical, exclusionary, often problematic criticism that successfully attains peripheralist positionalities, and that cannot be transformed by a rationalist model of public deliberation. What emerges is a vicious cycle of rationalist rejections of peripheralist criticism of the EU center that then further fuels such criticism's radicalist and exclusionary aspects.

I have argued that this constellation can be better understood if seen as a political-public analog to certain problems of Habermas' theory of rational political deliberation. By disregarding the signifiatory dimensions of public statements, this theory is only able to treat them within an analytical matrix that tends to short-circuit the peripheralist criticism's message with an allegedly limited worldview at the peripheries. The model thus implies an allegation that such criticism is a symptom of non-rationalized communicative structures at the peripheries, the so-called, "diffused perspective of the local culture" [Habermas 1987c: 355]. Today, it takes the form of accusations that peripheralist criticisms of the EU center are nationalistic and atavistic. In turn, this position can easily be interpreted by peripheralist positionalities as orientalism in Said's sense. The rejection of peripheralist criticisms on the grounds of a rationalist political modernism thus only deepens the divide that constitutes the centralist and peripheralist positionalities within the EU in the first place.

The question is how the theoretical elaborations presented in this article might be able to reframe and rephrase that confrontation. This pertains especially to Spivak's argument that peripheralist public criticism in metropolitan contexts is often inserted into discursive structures of domination that replicate the asymmetrical relation between center and periphery.

If, as Spivak argues, peripheralist public criticism in metropolitan contexts must be viewed as a part of hegemonic discursive structures – sometimes even utilizing categories whose effects it itself criticizes, such as center and periphery – it follows that we need to develop a regulative idea of public criticism that is different from the modernist idea(1) of rational political deliberation. This is because the modernist idea(1) presents a black-and-white picture of public criticism that is unable to differentiate between the hegemonic entanglement of criticism and its potentially productive impulses. I would argue that postcolonial thought has developed an alternative regulative idea of public criticism: namely the (self-)critique of critical representation. This norm holds the promise of allowing

for the differentiation between the critical capacity to work out the hegemonic entanglements of peripheralist public criticism and the critical capacity to rescue potentially productive strands and motifs of criticism from that entanglement. Only then is it possible to transform the deadlock between metropolitan and peripheral positionalities, which reinforce each other through the confrontation of radical anti-metropolitan criticism with its radical metropolitan and rationalist-modernist refutation, into a style of controversy where criticism can become the basis of association, as opposed to dissociation.

The contemporary EU, full of crises which are partially, if not mostly, homegrown, is in desperate need of this kind of criticism. It cannot allow itself a public-political self-affirmation that rejects peripheralist criticisms wholesale on the grounds of the atavism it attributes to them. A possible alternative would be to find ways to handle such criticisms, and all of the exclusionary aspects accompanying them, based on the regulative idea of self-criticism. This would involve viewing peripheralist criticism from within the EU, including all of its problematic aspects, as the *empirical expression* of public political deliberation within the EU – that is, to rephrase it as part of the EU’s own self-criticism. This is a difficult task, because it requires the recognition of the radical exclusivism that often accompanies peripheralist criticism as part of the reality of the European Union – a perception which is at odds with the self-stylized understanding of the EU as a rationalist political project. Yet, this shift in understanding might create a normative basis from which exclusivist forces can be more effectively battled, as they move into sight as fields of genuinely European responsibility.

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Andreas Langenohl

KRYZYS PUBLICZNEJ KRYTYKI. URZECZYWISTNIANIE SEMANTYKI „CENTRUM-PERYFERIE” W UNII EUROPEJSKIEJ

Streszczenie

W artykule podjęto teoretyczną refleksję nad stanem Unii Europejskiej w kategoriach kryzysu publicznej krytyki. Kryzys ten polega dzisiaj na zderzeniu krytycznych i połączonych często z żądaniami ekskluzywizmu opinii, pochodzących od rządów narodowych, partii opozycyjnych i ruchów quasi-społecznych z naciskami na kontynuowanie Unii Europejskiej jako racjonalistycznego i modernistycznego projektu politycznego. Charakter projektu europejskiego można rozpoznać bliżej, gdy potraktuje się go jako polityczny korelat sformułowanego przez Jürgena Habermasa modelu racjonalnej i publicznej deliberacji politycznej. Analiza ta jest skonfrontowana z alternatywnym spojrzeniem na krytykę publiczną, jakie znaleźć można w teorii postkolonialnej. W szczególności chodzi tu o dokonana przez Gayatri Spivak krytykę reprezentacji peryferyjnych, które same siebie uważają za krytyczne. Z teoretycznego zestawienia stanowisk Habermasa and Spivak autor wprowadza ideę publicznej krytyki politycznej, która różni się od Habermasowskiej koncepcji ra-

cyjności komunikacyjnej, a mianowicie regulatywną ideę samokrytycyzmu. Samokrytycyzm jest tu pojmowany jako sposób, dzięki któremu możliwe byłoby: unikanie potencjalnie problematycznych aspektów, które mogą towarzyszyć krytyce peryferyjnej; zrozumienie ich jako wyrazu metropolitalnej dynamiki polityczno-publicznej; i – w związku z tym – przyjęcie za nie odpowiedzialności. W odniesieniu do aktualnej, kryzysowej konstelacji oznaczałoby to przeformułowanie peryferyjnych głosów krytycznych jako nieodłącznej części prawdziwie europejskiej, publicznej dynamiki politycznej, i tym samym, przezwyciężenie głębokiego podziału, jaki powstaje w rezultacie obustronnej konsolidacji stanowisk głoszonych przez peryferie i centrum.

Słowa kluczowe: Unia Europejska, integracja europejska, krytycyzm, polityczna sfera publiczna, teoria postkolonialna