TRUST AND SOCIAL COHESION BEYOND POLARIZATION: PERSPECTIVES ON THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract

This contribution explores the possibility of building a European public sphere within a context marked by global challenges, disinformation, and growing polarization, reflecting on the connections between the public sphere, public discourse, and public opinion. The construction of a European public sphere entails not only institutional responses but also cultural and communicative transformations. One of the main risks lies in the convergence of political and communicative populism, which amplifies fears and promotes representations of antagonistic identities, fueling conflict and societal divisions. Simplified and disintermediated forms of communication reduce the capacity of public discourse to mediate complexity and manage crises. In facing these phenomena, it becomes essential to acknowledge our vulnerability and interdependence – elements that not only define our shared humanity but also characterize the condition of European and global interconnectedness. Reclaiming the public sphere as a space for shared interpretation and cultural mediation may represent a possible path toward fostering trust and cohesion in the face of uncertainty and ongoing transformation.

Key words: European Union, Vulnerability, Trust, Public sphere, Media, Polarization

Whether Europe is destined to remain an «imagined community»[1] is, as we know, a question that continues to affect the debate on European integration and beyond, and one that becomes all the more significant in light of new international scenarios. In Benedict Anderson's well-known theoretical framework, national imagined communities are those that

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[1] B. ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities. Reflections* on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (1983), rev. ed. Verso, London 1991.

display a certain degree of linguistic, institutional, and cultural homogeneity[2]. Imagining the European Union in terms of cohesion based on a community-type social bond seems, in this sense, even more difficult. The perception of an imminent reconfiguration of global structures, however, reinforces the need for anchoring in community-type ties, which can be directed either nationally or supranationally. The Trump-era shift in the United States and its foreign policy, the role of Russia, the war in Ukraine, and Europe's positioning are all events bound to deeply affect EU citizens' sense of belonging to the Union, as these developments redefine the aims, interests, and actions concerning mutual relations among European states. If these elements reshape the boundaries of proximity and mutual action, they also simultaneously redefine the foundation of the social bond[3]. If it is difficult or even impossible to predict the political and cultural direction that change will take, it may be useful to begin with some reflections on the context in which this change takes shape, in order to make room – however marginal – for a cultural orientation that both expresses and encourages participation in the public sphere.

A specifically European mode of *being-together* is not grounded in fixed identity categories, but rather in the perception and awareness of this very *being-together* as an ongoing social process. In this regard, Simmel's conceptual framework may remain particularly relevant. The experience of belonging does not stem in fact from a cognitive grasp of what "being European" is, but from an awareness of the social bond itself:

> Perhaps it should be called a knowing rather than a cognizing (besser ein Wissen als ein Erkennen). For in this case the mind does not immediately confront an object of which it gradually gains a theoretical picture, but that consciousness of the socialization is immediately its vehicle or inner significance. The matter in question is the processes of reciprocation which signify for the individual the fact of being associated. That is, the fact is not signified in the abstract to the individual, but it is capable of abstract expression[4].

Within complex social systems – characterized by a high level of technological mediation and progressive disintermediation affecting both political in-

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[2] *Ibid.*

[3] G. SIMMEL, *How is Society possible?*, in «American Journal of Sociology», XVI, 1910-1911, pp. 372-391.

[4] Ivi, p. 377.

stitutions and epistemic authorities – the «consciousness of being associated», or the awareness of the social bond, is more than ever tied to dynamics of trust. At the present stage, is it possible to refer to a – so to speak – "European state of consciousness" arising from processes of recognition or self-recognition, both internal and external to Europe, linked to social participation and to the symbolic effectiveness of its institutions?

Findings from 2022, conducted as part of the *European Values Study*[5], show that in some countries, including France and Germany, the percentage of «people's feeling of closeness to Europe» decreases across generations: the younger generations, the so-called Generation Z, feel less of a sense of belonging to Europe compared to previous generations[6]. Still with respect to this parameter, in general, Germany is one of the countries where the sense of «closeness to Europe» is strongest, while among the weakest in this regard is Italy, which shows the lowest level of "European feeling" among the 21 European countries included in the study[7]. In all the countries analyzed, «national pride» clearly exceeds «feeling European»[8]. Is Europe, then, an imagined community? It is – but imagination, as an activity of producing images, can also assume a cognitive and critical function that is essential for the transformative interpretation of reality, allowing us to conceive new and different configurations and constellations. This function of imagination is closely linked to the dimension of the future, especially insofar as it supports a critical view of the present[9] and outlines alternative scenarios. Data from a Eurobarometer survey conducted in early 2025 provide additional insight by highlighting social expectations regarding Europe's positive role in addressing change. The fundamental values associated with the EU and its "historical mission" are peace and democracy. For many of the European citizens interviewed: «peace (45%), democracy (32%) and human rights (22%) remain the top three values

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[5] L. Halman-T. Reeskens-I. Sieben-M. van Zunder (Eds.), *Atlas of European Values: Change and Continuity in Turbulent Times*, European Values Series, vol. I, Open Press TiU Tilburg University, 2022, doi:10.26116/6p8v-tt12.
[6] *Ivi*, p. 13.
[7] *Ibid*.
[8] *Ivi*, p. 16.
[9] Th.W. Adorno, *Die Aktualität der Philosophie* (1931), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, hrsg. von R. Tiedemann, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1973, Bd. 1; Id, *Intellectus sacrificium intellectus*, in *Minima moralia*, trans. by E.F.N. Jephcott, New Left Books, London 1974, pp. 122-123.

that people want the European Parliament to defend»[10]. A large majority expresses confidence in the European Union: «89% believe that more unity is crucial to tackle global challenges. Consensus is high with 75% or more citizens agreeing with this in every Member State»[11]. However, this data is accompanied by widespread negative expectations about the future: «33% expect their standard of living to decrease over the next five years. That's seven points more than right after the recent European elections (26%) and goes back to the level of spring 2024 (32%)»[12].

Imagining a Europe with a level of social cohesion comparable to that of a community bond means, first and foremost, imagining such a bond and placing it within a temporal horizon capable of taking shape in the historical process. The public space is the privileged site for the construction of social bonds and social cohesion – a process that is both imaginative and productive: a shared space that can be conceived in terms of a European public sphere[13]. Thinking about a European public sphere requires careful consideration of the interconnections between the public sphere, public discourse, and public opinion, as they manifest in the current historical and cultural phase.

The construction of a European public sphere faces several challenges – notably, that of confronting a cultural and communicative populism which captures and amplifies social fears and identity-driven impulses, triggering a vicious cycle of communicative polarization and conflict radicalization. As we can still infer from the studies collected in the *Atlas of European Values*, the societies that emphasize security and "survival values" «are generally characterised by low levels of trust, intolerance towards out-groups and low support for gender equality [...] feelings of insecurity, fear, or alienation» are spreading which, «may be the result of globalisa-

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[10] EUROBAROMETER, *Executive Summary*, Winter Survey 2025, https://europea.eu/Eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3492.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] AA.VV., *Mapping the European Public Sphere. Institutions, Media, and Civil Society*, edited by C. Bee and E. Bozzini, Routledge, Abingdon, New York 2016, 2ª ed.; AA.VV. *The European Public Sphere. From Critical Thinking to Responsible Action*, edited by L. Morganti and L. Bekemans, Peter Lang, Brussel 2012; AA. VV., *The Making of a European Public Sphere. Media Discourse and Political Contention*, edited by R. Koopmans and P. Statham, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010; AA.VV., *The European Public. Sphere and the Media*, edited by R. Wodak, A. Triandafyllidou, and M. Krzyzanowski, Palgrave, Basingstoke 2009; H.J. TRENZ, *The European public sphere: contradictory findings in a diverse research field*, in «European Political Sciences», IV, 2005, pp. 407-420.

tion, economic crises, the rise of flexible labour contracts, climate change, or migration. These (perceived) threats can cause a return of traditional and "survival" values. The rise of nationalistic and populist movements fits this trend of cultural turnaround or backlash»[14].

Certainly, the construction of a European public sphere also requires engaging with the limitations of a political liberalism based solely on the negotiation of procedural rules and on overlapping or intersectional consensus[15] – an approach that starts from national spheres of interest, thereby narrowing the possibilities for effective integration on cultural and value-based grounds. Furthermore, the political model rooted in contractualist traditions has historically shown critical weaknesses both in managing conflict and – closely related to this – in excluding many social groups from the public sphere as a space of political decisions[16]. Meanwhile, a reflection on the nature of conflicts is required, which, in turn, calls for a reflection on dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, if we take as objectives the construction of an inclusive public sphere. Building an inclusive, participatory, and politically proactive public sphere is, more than ever, tied to the quality of public discourse. In this regard, even a Habermasian approach[17] proves problematic, as it asserts a communicative paradigm that, like the tradition of political contractualism, risks excluding individuals who do not share – due to age, health conditions, or cultural reasons – the same standard of logical-argumentative rationality. Alongside the ongoing need to expand the public sphere of decision-making by promoting rational argumentation from an informed public opinion, it is necessary to introduce further elements of reflection aimed at addressing the transformations and transitions we are undergoing, and their genesis and expression in the public space.

It is therefore essential to take into account the role of mainstream media communication as well as the communicative and informational structures of the web and digital platforms, in their interplay with various forms of populism and political illiberalism[18]. The way in which public discourse

[14] L. HALMAN-T. REESKENS-I. SIEBEN-M. VAN ZUNDER (Eds.), *Atlas of European Values,* op. cit., p. 37.

[15] G. MARRAMAO, *La passione del presente*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2008, p. 40.

[16] M. NUSSBAUM, *Frontiers of Justice. Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2006.

[17] J. HABERMAS, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1981.

[18] V. ŠTĚTKA-S. MIHELJ, *The Illiberal Public Sphere: Media in Polarized Societies*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2024.

develops can, at various levels of analysis, impose strong limits on democracy and restrict the participatory sphere[19]. In the media and information systems, analysis and mediation processes are often replaced by an emphasis on risk factors, the representation of danger, and social fears: consider, for example, in the last decade, the portrayal of terrorism, migration phenomena, and the role of crime news in mainstream media. Not only is fear used as a persuasive agent – as seen quite explicitly, for instance, in the representations of migration phenomena – but such communication approaches also fuel insecurity through mechanisms of simplification and polarization of reality, due to a lack of explanation that stimulates immediate emotional responses, detached from mediation factors, expert-driven interpretation criteria, and, therefore, removed from processes of reflection, distancing, and critical understanding[20].

One need only think, for example, of the use of binary themes and categories that primarily affect the spheres of identity and values, simplifying the represented reality through mechanisms of polarization and promoting alignment with, and identification to, opposing factions. Simplification and polarization prove to be incapable of meeting the cognitive and interpretative needs of the audiences[21]. Communication in which identity categories have a high degree of denotative indeterminacy promotes the representation of simplified identities, which take on an emergency and potentially conflictual character[22]. Polarized and polarizing categories pro-

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[19] J. HABERMAS, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1962; E. HERMAN-N. CHOMSKY, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Pantheon, New York 1988; N. FRASER, *Rethinking the Public Sphere: a Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy*, in AA.VV., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by C. Calhoun MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1992.

[20] S. BENTIVEGNA-G. BOCCIA ARTIERI, *Voci della democrazia. Il futuro del dibattito pubblico*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2021; M. BELLUATI-R. MARINI, *Ripensare all'Unione Europea. La nuova ecologia del suo spazio comunicativo*, in «Problemi dell'informazione», I, 2019, pp. 3-28, doi: 10.1445/92853.; W. QUATTROCIOCCHI-A. VICINI, *Polarizzazioni. Informazioni, opinioni e altri demoni nell'Infosfera*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2023; L. MALKNECHT, *Il rischio dell'identità. Etica e comunicazione nella web society*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2015.

[21] S. CHERMAK, *Marketing Fear: Representing Terrorism After September 11*, in «Journal for Crime, Conflict and the Media», I (1), 2003, pp. 5-22; L. SERAFINI, *La partecipazione polarizzata: informazione popolare e discussione democratica nella sfera pubblica digitale*, in «METIS», XXVII (2), 2020, pp. 93-114; A.L. SCHMIDT-A. PERUZZI-A. SCALA, *et al.*, *Measuring social response to different journalistic techniques on Facebook*, in «Humanities and Social Sciences Communincations», VII (17), 2020, doi: https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-0507-3.

[22] L. MALKNECHT, *Terrorismo mainstream: bisogni informativi e costruzione delle identità nella narrazione dell'emergenza*, in AA.VV., *Vincere la paura. Una nuova comunicazione*

vide reassurance by simplifying a reality that, in this way, seems more accessible, just as the creation of factions provides provisional identities based on differentiation, which are all the more radical the less they are rooted in historical-cultural, and therefore political, terms. In this way, the circularity of communicative populism and political populism encourages the construction of an "imagined" or generalized enemy – foreign countries, migrant people, and even Europe itself:

> So being neither right-wing nor left-wing, being against the caste, being against traditional politics falls within a narrative that creates a sharp opposition with everyone else. We are the new, and everyone else is the old. We are the people, and everyone else is not, and sometimes the others are immigrants, Europe, the political class, the powers that be and the international lobbies, historically identified in the collective imagination as the Jews[23].

These dynamics, which are fueled by both the logic of mainstream communication and highly disintermediated communication systems and contexts, make public discourse unable to assume a mediating function that could facilitate the understanding and management of situations with a high degree of complexity, including, of course, crisis situations. The simplification of complex situations indeed generates a sense of instability and insecurity when events occur that introduce unpredictable variables into social life, which is thus exposed to a process of reconfiguration[24] that would, on the contrary, require an increase in the interpretative and narrative capacities of individuals. Emergency narratives in public discourse and the emotional narratives that correlate with them are particularly detrimental to the segments of the population that are less socially and culturally protected, namely those who suffer from a lack of cultural mediation and from an intentional and responsible approach to the narration and representation of phenomena on which social resentment often gathers – a convenient premise for political developments that Martha Nussbaum

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della sicurezza contro il mediaterrorismo, a c. di M. Gavrila e M. Morcellini, Egea, Milano 2022, pp. 91-102.

[23] C.G. HASSAN, *Populism, Racism and the Scapegoat*, in AA.VV., *Clockwork Enemy. Xenophobia and Racism in the Era of Neo-populism*, edited by A. Alietti and D. Padovan, Mimesis International, Udine-Milano 2020, pp. 221-239, p. 224.

[24] L. MALKNECHT, *Terrorismo mainstream*, op. cit.

has effectively marked with the formula «monarchy of fear»[25]. Emotional approaches based on identity and defensive claims reflect the lack of influence, and therefore, the full social integration of individuals, and institutional weakness. When the lack of cultural mediation, but also institutional mediation, is compounded by the absence of points of reference and the multiplicity of crisis levels that mark institutions and social bonds in recent modernity, individuals are relegated – especially those who are culturally disempowered – to a condition of powerlessness and isolation, both social and cultural, which makes the population more vulnerable to the "strong effects" of the media, as well as to the persuasive rhetorics enacted by the «politics of fear»[26]. The state of exception risks, on one hand, granting the mainstream a sort of *plenitudo potestatis* in the symbolic and value-based restructuring of society, but, on the other hand, it relegates individuals to a condition of cognitive and cultural deprivation that fuels fears and insecurities[27]. To find anchoring elements and points of reference, the easiest, but also the most unstable and dangerous path, is identity withdrawal itself, which draws strength from the opposition to an enemy that is all the more undefined and generalized the more it serves as reassurance through reinforcing pseudocommunitarian traits or – evoking Michel Maffesoli's categories[28] – "neotribal".

The need for cohesion, which becomes more urgent in emergency conditions, risks ultimately resulting in defensive – and, in the end, divisive – strategies that highlight the lack of material, cognitive, and symbolic resources, as well as political and institutional ones, with which to face traumas or, in general, social transformations, and that expose any change to be perceived as a potential trauma. The mobilization of such resources involves the responsibility of a wide range of institutional subjects and intermediary actors in the relaunch of a cultural project, which cannot be

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[25] M. NUSSBAUM, *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis*, Simon and Schuster, New York 2018.

[26] J. SIMON, *Governing Through Crime*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007; B. GLASSNER, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things*, Basic Books , New York 1999; D. GARDNER, *The Science of Fear: How the Culture of Fear Manipulates Your Brain*, Plume Books, New York 2009.

[27] L. MALKNECHT-M. MORCELLINI, *Chi coltiva il virus della paura. Riflessioni conclusive dalla ricerca nazionale PRIN sui Mediaterrorismi*, in «Comunicazionepuntodoc», XXIII, 2020, pp. 11-16.

[28] M. MAFFESOLI, *Le temps des tribus,: le déclin de l'individualisme dans les sociétés postmodernes,* La table ronde, Paris 2000.

developed outside a shared space for discussion – a space from which to restore the foundations of trust and social cohesion: a public space capable of providing and building broad interpretative horizons, capable of developing projects not limited to emergencies and structural or contingent crises. This implies a change in perspective. To the extent that post-truth itself has proven to be a divisive and polarizing factor in public opinion[29], centres of knowledge production and trust in epistemic authorities[30] assume a fundamental role in social mediation to promote trust and rebuild social cohesion in a context marked by a profound change in the criteria underlying the processes of legitimating authority, knowledge, and even sources of meaning. Leveraging these aspects becomes all the more necessary as, in the era of digitalization, deterritorialization, and dematerialization, there is no longer a coincidence between the public sphere and public space. Public discourse is deterritorialized. This makes it more challenging to promote trust and social cohesion. However, only by fostering these conditions can narrow and obsolete identity definitions be abandoned, and change be addressed and oriented – without leaving it, on one hand, to purely systemic dynamics, and, on the other hand, to narratives that abandon the very processes of mediation and social interpretation. This also means supporting those dynamics of trust (in expert knowledge, institutions, and the social body) capable of reactivating projective impulses – both individual but especially collective – beyond emergencies. The activation of those devices of cognitive reappropriation, and thus active engagement with reality by culturally situated subjects, who appropriate the coordinates and points of reference – primarily value-based – cannot take place without adequate social and cultural mediation processes aimed at promoting trust and cohesion.

Above all, the path of trust allows for the removal of the reconstruction of social bonds from emergency identities, and thus from factors of apparent anchorage, which are more exposed to emotionality, volatility, and conflict. Highly mediatized social and political contexts, ex-

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[29] D. Palano, *La democrazia alla fine del "pubblico". Sfiducia, frammentazione, polarizzazione: verso una "bubble democracy"?*, in «Governare la paura. Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies», XXXV, 2019, doi: https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1974-4935/9413.

[30] A. Bartsch-Ch. Neuberger-B. Stark-V. Karnowski-M. Maurer-Ch. Pentzold-Th. Quandt-O. Quiring-Ch. Schemer, *Epistemic authority in the digital public sphere. An integrative conceptual framework and research agenda*, in «Communication Theory», XXXV, 1, 2025, pp. 37-50, doi: https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtae020.

posed to the influence and power structures of platforms and new actors, make it necessary to relaunch a public sphere capable of generating and instilling trust in the social body and its political, institutional, cognitive, and cultural expressions. It is the democratic institutions and the very structure of democracy that tie their legitimacy to dynamics of trust, which need to be nurtured and strengthened in the public space. If we look at the most recent crisis factors, such as the pandemic, the environmental crisis, terrorism, and wars, in these contexts – despite their many differences – political, institutional, and social crises find unprecedented elements of convergence. In the face of these phenomena, in their various forms, the reaffirmation of an «immunitary paradigm»[31] – which is woven into the very fabric of modernity – has proven unfeasible. This paradigm is linked to a model of individual and collective subjectivity that primarily relates to the environment and contexts of action as an autonomous, self-sufficient, and dominant subjectivity, which defined the very project of the modern subject but also outlined the limits of its failure, at least in terms of the linearity of progress[32]. In light of these scenarios, it is essential to first acknowledge our vulnerability. This awareness is also an awareness of our interdependence, both as a constitutive element of our humanity and as part of the condition of European and global interdependence. It is from this realization of our vulnerability that we can strengthen intersubjective bonds as a starting point for reclaiming a space and environment that nonetheless reaffirms, sometimes in a tragic way, this condition of interdependence as something inescapable[33]. On one hand, the paradigm of the self-sufficient and dominant subjectivity proves no longer viable; on the other hand, its historical exhaustion reasserts as points of strength precisely social and institutional cooperation, relationships of responsibility, and mutual care. If we are not immune, we need to be cared for, we must care, and take care (the «care for our common home»)[34].

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[31] R. Esposito, *Immunitas. Protezione e negazione della vita*, Einaudi, Torino 2002.

[32] M. Horkheimer-Th.W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*, Querido Verlag, Amsterdam 1947.

[33] From different perspectives: M. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, op. cit.; E. Pulcini, *La cura del mondo. Paura e responsabilità nell'età globale*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2009; E. Morin, *Cambiamo Strada. Le 15 lezioni del Coronavirus*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2020.

[34] Francis (J.M. Bergoglio), *Encyclical Letter "Laudato si'. On care for our common home"*, Vatican Press, Vatican City 2015.

A practice of hope, in this context, seems to share the foundations of a «public discourse ecology»[35] that impacts a properly ethical dimension with strong political implications, because an ecological approach to public discourse corresponds to an "ecological mindset" – «An ecological mind thinks within the world and takes responsibility for its part in solving common problems»[36]. In contexts of communicative disintermediation, rampant post-truth, and a general crisis of sources of social meaning, thinking collectively «in the world» becomes an ethical and political task. If trust, like hope, are dimensions that are strengthened when they are put more at risk[37], they take shape in social interaction and its institutional expressions to enable and outline the co-construction of the socio-temporal horizon of action. Not only in the dimension of the project, but also in that of hope. Hope withdraws from possession, from the appropriation of the future because it encompasses within itself the limits and margins of uncertainty in planning, but the awareness of this limit – which is an awareness of the very vulnerability of the project and the individual or collective subjects who promote it – can constitute an element of trust that feeds on openness to relationships and perspectives that go beyond the projects in the present, in order to hope, precisely, for something we cannot plan, and which is entrusted to relationships and interactions that are not yet given, but that we can actively work to build.

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[35] A.L. Tota, *Ecologia del pensiero. Conversazioni con una mente inquinata*, Einaudi, Torino 2023, p. 182.
[36] *Ibid.* (own translation).
[37] B. Blöbaum, *Some Thoughts on the Nature of Trust: Concept, Models and Theory*, in AA.VV., *Trust and Communication*, edited by Id., Springer, Cham 2021.