Democracy in Movements:
Analysing Practices of Decision-making
Within the European Social Forums Process Using the Public Arena Model.

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1 Introduction

Decision-making in social movements has rarely been studied systematically. Trying to grasp this relevant aspect of movement organisation, a general concept is needed which comprehends the manifold structures and cultures of decision-making within movements. This paper demonstrates that the concept of the public sphere (Öffentlichkeit) is useful for the analysis of decision-making processes within movements. If we do not limit the concept of public sphere to the mass media (as is often done) but include other levels such as assembly publics or simple encounters (Gerhards & Neidhardt 1990), then we can look at group-meetings, movement assemblies as well as mailing-lists and other media used among activists as public arenas in which speakers engage in discourse before an audience. Because of the close connection between concepts of democracy and concepts of the public sphere an analysis of public arenas on the movement-level can help to assess practices of decision-making within social movements.

In this paper, I will first address briefly the relation of democracy and the public sphere. Then I will secondly describe the arena-model of the public sphere and how it may facilitate the analysis of public debate within movements by firstly looking at the functions of information gathering (input), information processing (throughput), and information application (output) and secondly by considering the underlying structures such as distance of speakers and audience, role of prominence and prestige, specialization of roles, type of agenda and other characteristics conditioning the debate in a specific public arena. Third, I will look at the case of the preparatory process for the European Social Forum (ESF), describing the functions of its public sphere. Finally, these results will be discussed in the light of several democratic theories, distilling as a hypothesis the main dimensions influencing the quality of public discourse.

2 Democracy and the Public Sphere

Most theories of democracy emphasize the importance of the public sphere for collective decision making. Both normatively and empirically public opinion which is produced within the public sphere can be regarded as a source of legitimacy or at least a potential counterweight to those in power. Even dictatorships are dependent on the public sphere to remain in power. This is why such regimes necessarily try to control access to and content of the public sphere. This includes the mass media but also public assemblies, demonstrations
and unorganized encounters in the street, the supermarket, the pubs or on the bus.\(^1\) Accordingly, Gerhards & Neidhardt (1990: 52–55) have pointed out that historically in liberal democratic societies each of these three levels of the public sphere can be associated with a specific democratic right: On the level of encounters, the public sphere is protected by the right to *freedom of opinion and expression*. The level of assembly publics is protected by *freedom of assembly and the right to demonstrate*. Finally, the highest level of organisation of the public sphere, the mass media, are granted the *freedom of the press*. However, Gerhard’s & Neidhardt’s main point, which I want to emphasize here, is that all of these levels are part of the public sphere. What encounters, assembly publics and the mass media have in common, is that they create the “publicness” that makes the public sphere a *public sphere*. In the following chapter, I will draw on this very characteristic of all three levels to define the concept of the public sphere. But let us first address the question of (1) how democracy relates to the public sphere and (2) how both relate to decision-making in social movements.

The answer to the first question depends on the model of democracy you apply. Ferree et al. (2002a) have roughly distinguished four different normative approaches, each of them with a specific conception of how public discourse should be: the representative liberal, the participatory liberal, the discursive and the constructionist tradition (*table 1*). In their typology Ferree et al. (2002a) do not simply refer to specific democratic theories such as Anthony Downs’s *Economic Theory of Democracy* or Anne Phillips’s *Engendering Democracy* but they group similar theories together arriving at four general types of democratic theories.

*Representative liberal* theories are described by the norm of limiting access to the public sphere to elites representing a certain constituency. The relevance of each speaker within public discourse should be by proportionality of organisational strength. Public discourse should be a free marketplace of ideas and ensuring transparency of the activities of the elite. Speakers should refrain from emotions in public speech (*detachment*) and not inflame passion or permit personal attacks upon other speakers (*civility*). When a decision has been taken, public discourse should not continue to debate this issue but move on to pending problems (*closure*).

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\(^1\) During the *Third Reich* the Nazis maintained an extensive system of undercover agents, often ‘ordinary’ people, reporting on informal talk in public houses, amongst neighbours or generally about the morale of the population (for a comprehensive collection of these “reports from the Reich” (*Meldungen aus dem Reich*) see Boberach, 1984).
Table 1. Normative criteria in democratic theory (Source: Ferree et al. 2002a)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory types</th>
<th>Criteria for good democratic public discourse</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who participates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative liberal</td>
<td>Elite dominance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory liberal</td>
<td>Popular inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discursive</td>
<td>Popular inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructionist</td>
<td>Popular inclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Participatory liberal* theories are described by the norm of popular inclusion, promoting wide participation in public debate, encouraging empowerment of citizens and allowing a range of styles, sometimes even rejecting civility as too restrictive. They are sceptical about any closure of debates imposed by elites. Instead, citizens should always be able to address any issues, even if a decision has just been taken.

*Discursive* theories also promote popular inclusion but focussing on the style of public communication. By promoting mutual respect, civility and a dialogical relation between speakers is supposed to contribute to a process of deliberation where arguments prevail and power among speakers is aside and ignored. Accordingly, public debate should continue, as long as no consensus among speakers has been found.

Finally, *constructionist* theories, focusing on the expansion of the political and avoiding any closure which does not include the full diversity of views, are in favour of popular inclusion and promote especially the recognition standpoints and political identities empowering

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² I suggest to specify this to some extent and state that in a participatory liberal public sphere, different ideas are expected to be presented in order to win the sympathy of the audience in basically any way so that the range of styles may be described as agitatory, courting or competitive, not excluding however other styles.
minorities and excluded groups. While actively opposing the norm of expertise, non-experts should speak from their own experience and use creative means of expression, coherent with their own identity.

What does this have to do with decision-making in movements? Democracy is a form of collective decision-making and other than politicians as well as political activists often assume, it is not only a normative question of how democracy (should) work but it is also an empirical question of how it can work. Of course, both questions are interrelated and it is in social movements where both can best be studied because they are not only “promoters” and “protagonists” of democracy on the macro-level of society (Ibarra 2003) but also practitioners of democracy on the micro-level of their own affairs in the sense that within movements collective decisions are being taken all the time. Not all of them are made publicly (i.e. before an audience) but we know (or at least we suspect), that the main locus of decision-making in movements is in group meetings and bigger assemblies of all kinds (Polletta 2002). Linking this back to what we said about the public sphere, we can see that within social movements the public sphere plays a part in the process of collective decision making (cf. Kriesi 2001), just like on the macro-level of society only that at the micro-level of social movements mediated “publicness” obviously plays a lesser role than the public arenas created in face-to-face meetings.³

In this paper, I want to elaborate on this idea of regarding movement assemblies as public arenas and their analogy to other public arenas on the macro level (as for instance the mass media or the parliament). In this sense, I am looking at social movements as laboratories of democracy and suggest to study them as a “critical case” (Yin 1994: 38–40) which will help us understand better the opportunities and constraints for democratic decision-making related to the “can-question” as well as finding which forms of democracy are preferred by activists for what reasons which is related to the “should-question” of democracy. The arena model of the public sphere which will be described in the following facilitates this approach by providing a conceptual framework for the analysis of discourse in public arenas as well as making the results we get from any specific arena comparable to any other public arena, no matter on what level of the public sphere it is located.

³ However, with the internet becoming increasingly important as a medium of communication within movements, this hypothesis remains to be empirically investigated.
3 The Arena Model of the Public Sphere

The public sphere has often been conceptualized simply as the set of all public arenas in a given society (cp. Ferree et al. 2002b: 10; cf. Gerhards & Neidhardt 1990: 49). On the other side, authors like Gitlin (1998) have challenged the idea of the public sphere because it is suggesting a unitary public space that is empirically hard to find and normatively not adequate to pluralist societies. In fact, an emerging transnational perspective in social research such as the various studies inquiring the existence or non-existence of a European public sphere (see e.g. Koopmans & Erbe 2004 for an overview) suggests that it should remain an empirical question, whether a given set of arenas (such as the national mass media of a number of countries) really does make up one single public sphere (such as a European public sphere) or whether it would be more adequate to speak of a plurality of „public sphericules“ (Gitlin 1998) in a fragmented public sphere. Another lesson we can learn from the ongoing research on the European public sphere is that it depends largely on the conceptualization of the public sphere whether a set of arenas empirically form one public sphere or not (Gerhards 2002). It is not the aim of this paper to decide about the existence or non-existence of the European public sphere, but we do need a clear concept of the public sphere when we want to study the role of the public sphere in collective decision-making. Because of the above mentioned doubts against the concept of a unitary public sphere I will start from what is evident: the concrete arenas of public discourse. After having outlined the concept of arena, I will then come back to the question of how the concept of public arena relates to the concept of public sphere.

3.1 Basic Concepts

The arena model uses the metaphor of a stadium in order to be more accessible and easier to grasp (figure 1). In this metaphor, a public arena is the space where speakers engage in public discourse in front of an audience which is situated around the arena on the gallery situated around the arena, like the ring in a circus is surrounded by the audience. All these elements (in italics) together make up a forum. The backstage is the area outside the stadium where would be speakers prepare for their public appearance.4

4 Even though the term suggests that this area is outside the forum it should be analytically clear that most speakers preparing for public appearance will (also) be in the audience, witnessing what other speakers have said. This is however not necessary and in the case of a politician sending a press release to dozens of media outlets this is perhaps not the case. It is however especially analytically instructive to distinguish between backstage and gallery because both serve different functions: the gallery gives spectators (rather passive)
A simple image however is not sufficient for a clear definition. It is important to be explicit about the definition of each element of a forum as well as their interrelation. The term ‘arena’ is often used without any explicit definition, probably because the metaphor conveys enough evidence. Those who explicitly did defined it, did not always have in mind a definition of the public sphere.\(^5\) Ferree et al. (2002b: 9–10) define public arenas as the space in which public discourse takes place amongst various actors. In their study however they are interested in public discourse so that it remains open how the boundaries of an arena are defined in order to delimit concrete arenas empirically. They merely mention that there are various thematic fields of discourse such as the “religious forum”, “the scientific forum”, the legal forum” or the “social movement forum” (Ferree et al. 2002b: 11) but we don’t know how these forums are actually defined. Is it the content of the communication (e.g. ‘All public talk about religious issues makes up the religious forum’) or is the affiliation of the speakers (e.g. ‘All speakers from a religious background make up the religious forum’) or is it something else? For Ferree et al. (2002b) this question is not vital, because they subsequently focus on “abortion discourse” which is defined thematically by the talk about the controversial issue of

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access to the communications in the arena while the backstage gives would-be speakers access to engage actively in communication in the arena.

\(^5\) See for example Clarke (1991) for the influential concept of social arenas and social worlds developed by Anselm Strauss.
abortion. Rucht (1988), probably one of the first to use the term ‘arena’ in social movement research, uses it to describe “an action system in which, under the eye of the public, a major fight between a social movement an its opponents take place” (Rucht 1988: 322). While this definition makes it easier to track down an arena empirically because it is clearly defined by the presence of a specific actor (a social movement), I think it makes sense to use the term ‘arena’ in a wider sense, not limiting it to the arena of social movements and not only limiting it to conflictual communication. I do however agree with Rucht about the importance of the audience in a public arena because of which “the opponents are not only engaged with each other, but they devote much of their energy to the public bystanders” (Rucht 1988: 322). This is precisely why I consider the presence of an audience the crucial and defining element of public communication and thus of the public sphere as the space where this communication takes place (cf. Neidhardt 1994: 21). Consequently, I suggest to define an arena neither thematically nor otherwise in relation to the content of the communications taking place within it nor by any characteristics of the speakers, but by its audience emphasizing the common communicative space shared by the spectators (not only the speakers). A public arena is thus defined as the space of communication shared by an audience. An audience in turn can be defined as a social entity constituted by all recipients of a set of communications which at the time of speaking is not organised in such a way that would make it capable of acting collectively, i.e. to respond as a single collective actor to the communications within the arena.7 An arena in this sense can be a TV-channel, a newspaper, a scientific journal, an email-list or an assembly of activists because all of these have an audience witnessing the same communications at the same time or within a certain time frame. The fact that any of these arenas is likely to host specific thematic discourses (e.g. a sports channel or a movement assembly on water privatization) or subscribe to specific ideological frames of reference (e.g. a conservative newspaper or a scientific journal of critical theory) should not tempt us to make these themes or frames the defining element for the arena because (1) it will lead to confusion as to whether a sports magazine is part of the same arena as the sports channel or whether a the parliamentary debate on water privatization belongs to the same arena as the movement assembly on the same issue. Or if all conservative newspapers of the world

6 It seems, that the term arena conveys to actually refer to a public arena since the image of an arena automatically conveys the presence of an audience so that I will use both synonymously.

7 The restriction of the audience not being able to act collectively is necessary because if the whole audience were a collective actor, then we would have a speaker talking to one collective actor with no audience left to make it a public situation. Note that this limitation does in no way theoretically restrict the general ability of any part of the audience to become an active speaker. To what degree in any specific setting this might actually be restricted due to a “structural differentiation between of arena and gallery” Haug (2006: 7) is entirely an empirical question.
constitute one single arena. What would be the criteria to answer these questions? (2) Detaching the notion of public arena from its audience will make it questionable in what sense it actually is a public arena. By focusing on the content of the communications their public character tends to be neglected as trivial and it seems to make no difference who is actually witnessing them. Instead, the interaction between various speakers might become a focal point while ignoring the fact that they speak in front of an audience. For these reasons, I prefer to call such thematically or ideologically defined series of communications specific public discourses (such as the discourse on sports, the religious discourse, conservative discourse or the discourse on water privatization) rather than discourses in a specific public arena. This also seems intuitively plausible that the ‘same’ discourse can take place in various arenas and in quite distant settings. Furthermore, such a definition is appropriate to the fact that communications can be analytically clustered in many different ways, depending on the level of analysis. For example, while in one study it might be sufficient to distinguish the conservative discourse from the libertarian discourse it might be necessary in another study to distinguish different kinds of conservatism as well as different kinds of libertarianism. This is adequate for the content of communication (discourse) but not for the space in which it takes place (arena).

\[3.2\] Density and Publicness of a ‘Public Sphere’

So far, we have been talking about the concept of arena only. As proposed at the beginning, I reserved it to concrete (but not necessarily physical) spaces of communication. The public sphere is obviously a wider, more general concept. How does it relate to the concept of arena defined above?

This brings us back the commonly used definition that the public sphere is the set of all arenas in a society (or any other social entity). As mentioned above, this is assuming too much as to be analytically fruitful when studying the public sphere empirically. The question therefore is: Under what conditions can a set of public arenas be considered a public sphere. To answer this question, I would like to pursue further the idea of measuring the “degree to which we can speak of a nationally confined public sphere” (Koopmans & Erbe 2004: 103 [italics added]).

What Koopmans & Erbe are suggesting for national (and transnational) public spheres may be extended to public spheres of any kind. This means, that when it comes to

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8 Also, I do not however follow Koopmans & Erbe (2004: 103) when they measure this degree “by the relative amount of all communicative action that conforms to … [an] ideal-typical national pattern of claim making” since for us it is not the communication (claims) that constitute the public sphere but the audience.
decide whether a set of arenas constitutes a public sphere, I suggest to speak of public spheres of various ‘densities’ according to the degree that these arenas share the same audience. For example: In a school, every lesson that a class takes constitutes a public arena. But as far as that class shares a number of different lessons, these arenas also constitute a common public sphere which might even include the breaks and other activities in which all classmates communicate in a way that allows all of them to witness all communications. Obviously there is a big difference between the density of the public sphere of a class, which has a rather constant audience and that of the whole school, since there is usually only little communicative space shared by all pupils of a school. This example also demonstrates that public arenas are often fleeting and thus public spheres tend to be so even more. Many public arenas simply ‘occur’ because people happen to meet and communicate in a shared space. But most arenas need some organizational effort in order to be realized. Once some arenas have been built, a public sphere emerges when these arenas are extended either in time or in space, meaning that the same arena (with the same audience!) comes to exist several times in a row (e.g. a class meeting daily, a weekly staff meeting or a daily newspaper) or that the same audience participates in another arena elsewhere (e.g. a class taking part in the schools Christmas play, an activist group going to a big rally, or the subscribers of a life-style magazine watching the same TV-channel). Since such ‘proliferations’ of whole audiences is more likely under some conditions than under others, we will usually only find only partly overlapping arenas constituting a rather thin public sphere (or a public sphere with only a certain density). With this concept of the public sphere, which builds on the core characteristic of public communication – the audience – we can analyse the public sphere of any collective social entity and measure its density, rather than theoretically assuming its existence. If it turns out that the density of a public sphere is very low, it makes more sense to speak about the concrete arenas or those ‘public sphericules’ within a public sphere, where arenas are more densely connected. Every arena is a public sphere but only those public spheres with a density of 100 percent are (idealtypical) arenas.

So what’s the point in analysing public spheres in movements with such a confined definition of public sphere? Obviously, we cannot grasp all communications within a movement with this concept of public sphere. This is simply, because movements rarely constitute a unitary

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9 With the loudspeaker-system as the most effective medium constituting such a public sphere being controlled by the headmaster…

10 The density of a public sphere may be described as the percentage of all actors which are members of the audience of each and every arena of this public sphere.
public sphere, meaning that there is rarely a public communicative space through which all ‘members’ of the movement can be reached. But we can distinguish thinner and denser public spheres within movements, i.e. movements which consist of rather diffuse groups which don’t share a lot of communication vs. movements in which different groups share a lot of common communicative spaces. This adds a public dimension to the network perspective on social movements. With the arena model of the public sphere we can analyse the public dimension of movement discourse while network theory helps us understand the private aspect, i.e. communication through interpersonal networks. Figure 2 illustrates this idea.

![Figure 2: Two parameters of the public sphere](image)

Publicness is high, when communication takes place in an arena, i.e. before an audience. The circles represent the audience of public arenas: the density of the public sphere is high when there is a big overlap between the audiences of different arenas and it is low when the connections between the arenas are only through small segments of the audience. In personal networks publicness is low (because most communication takes place without an audience). The nodes (black dots) of the network are individuals. The density of communication is higher the more individuals are linked through communication. Summing up, we can say that when we look at what is frequently called public communication, we can distinguish

When we analyse communication in a public sphere, the arena model helps us to be clear about two aspects of the public sphere which have previously been ignored: Its density and its
publicness. The density tells us to what degree it is appropriate to talk about a public sphere (rather than numerous public sphericules) and the publicness tells us to what degree we can actually speak of a public sphere (as opposed to the private sphere of personal networks).

### 3.3 Functions of the Public Sphere

Having defined the basic concepts of the arena model as well as two general parameters of the public sphere, we can now look at the functions of the public sphere and the structures conditioning them.\(^\text{11}\) The public sphere can be regarded as an “intermediary, public-opinions-producing communication system” (Gerhards & Neidhardt 1990: 42; [my translation]). Three basic functions of this system may be distinguished: information gathering *(input)*, information processing *(throughput)*, and information application *(output)*. Any public sphere or public arena can be analysed regarding these three functions and compared to either other public spheres or (democratic) norms, such as those outlined in Chapter 2 with reference to Ferree et al. (2002a). I will briefly describe these three functions by stating the questions related to each of them *(table 2)*. They will be dealt with more concretely in Chapter 4 when looking at a concrete case study.

### Table 2: Summary of questions related to the three functions of the public sphere\(^\text{12}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Qualitative</th>
<th>Quantitative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Input</strong></td>
<td>who? / what?</td>
<td>carrying capacity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Throughput</strong></td>
<td>style of communication?</td>
<td>degree of syntheticizetion of diversity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(Individual)</strong></td>
<td>type of discourse?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Output</strong></td>
<td>mode of decision? / relation to delegated decision?</td>
<td>rate of delegation?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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\(^{11}\) It should be noted here, that the analytical approach suggested here does not assume a causal relationship in the sense that the functions are determined by given structures. Structures are neither per se given nor do they determine action but they are those conditions which have been produced by the actors and which show some persistence over time. They influence the functioning of the public sphere but it is entirely open how they do so.

\(^{12}\) Even though I have formulated the questions relating to each of these three functions as normative questions (“should”), the same questions can also be asked regarding the real world practice. When studying public spheres empirically, we should look at (1.) the norms held by certain actors or groups of actors, (2.) the norms prevalent within each public arena (public opinion), and (3.) the actual practices taking place in the real world.
The input-function refers to the question: *Who may or must speak or what may or must be said?* This question points out, that the input-function really has two sides: One is regarding those actors who *want* to enter the arena but might be excluded. The other is regarding those actors who *do not want* to be in the arena but are demanded or even forced to be. Looking at issues instead of actors, these questions refer to agenda setting: Which problems should be discussed? Apart from the quality of input addressed by these questions, also the quantitative aspect of how much information can a particular public sphere handle. Hilgartner & Bosk (1988: 58) have termed this the “carrying capacity” of arenas.

Looking at the throughput-function, i.e. the processing of information within the public sphere, two questions may be raised. One regards the individual speakers or acts of communication: *How should the speakers behave or how should the communications be brought forward?* The other question regards public discourse as a whole: *What should be the prospect of the communication-process as a whole?* Or: What type of discourse do we expect in a particular public sphere? Both questions are closely interlinked because the speakers’ individual behaviours will influence the type of discourse. But for analytic reasons, it seems adequate to distinguish the individual and the collective aspect. Again, there is also a quantitative aspect to this function: To what degree can or should the original diversity of opinions be synthesised within the public sphere?

Finally, regarding the output-function the question arises of *what should be the relationship between discourse and decision-making?* Or put differently: What are the criteria to terminate the debate and (how) should a decision be taken? The answers to these questions will often depend on the institutional context and on how a specific arena is interconnected with other arenas. For example, in representative democracies certain decisions are delegated to certain decision-making bodies such as the parliament. Very often, these decision-making bodies will also constitute a public arena which in turn can be analysed with the framework of the arena model. The quantitative dimension of the output-function refers to the decision-making capacity of a specific arena or public sphere: How many decisions are delegated to another body and how many decisions are taken within the arena itself?

### 3.4 Structures of the Public Sphere

In order to be able to participate in public discourse actors need access to the specific public sphere they are interested in. This is the question of *accessibility or openness* of a forum. It addresses the issue of who is actually able to become part of the audience and witness the
Communications going on in the arena. For example, certain actors might be excluded from even from passive participation in a specific forum because of a lack of resources (knowledge or material), because of language problems or because there are other formal rules of exclusion (e.g. membership) which are enforced by physical force etc. Gerhards & Neidhardt (1990: 46) have argued that public communication is lay-communication because it is aimed at everyone. But this is true only for the general public sphere constituted mainly by the mass media. If we look at other public spheres, such as public spheres within movements, communication is not lay-oriented but movement-oriented. Similarly, a sports channel on TV attracts only those interested in (watching) sports. People who are not interested in this kind of communication are not maliciously excluded but the type of communication within the forum keeps them away from it, even though they would possibly be granted access if they wanted. The question of accessibility is often closely linked to the input-function of the arena because access to the forum is a prerequisite for access to become a speaker in the arena.

But to have access to a forum does not necessarily mean to have access to its arena. As Gerhards & Neidhardt (1990: 64) have pointed out, different kinds of forums are characterized by the a varying degree of structural differentiation between arena and gallery: While in simple encounters on the street or at the hairdressers role-switching from speaker to audience and back is quite easy, even within the same discussion, the roles are already much more set in stronger organized arenas such as group meetings, discussion events or a rally. In the sphere of the mass media finally, the gallery is clearly distinguished from the arena and spectators have only few possibilities to change role and leave the audience to become the speaker. While this is true as a general observation, we will also find differences within these different levels of the public sphere, i.e. between different kinds of assemblies etc.

Neidhardt (1994, 16 [my translation]) mentions prominence and prestige (or opinion-leadership) where prominence is “the generalised capacity ... to attract attention” and prestige “is the generalised capacity ... not only to produce attention but also consent” (ibid). Prominent speakers can assume public interest not only for themselves but also for issues which are important to them. Speakers with high prestige are considered trustworthy so that the audience is likely to believe without scrutiny in what they say. Seeing that both prominence and prestige are scarce goods, their distribution will lead to stratifications.

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13 As argued before, it remains to be seen empirically if it is adequate to speak of one public sphere here.
14 Similarly, Ferree et al. (2002a: 13, 86 et seq.) mention the “standing” of speakers in specific arenas.
amongst the actors of a specific arena and consequently to struggles for these goods between these actors (ibid: 17).

Other structural characteristics influencing the functioning of the public sphere are *specialized roles* like journalists who are *organizers* of communication because they gather information from various actors (re-)assembling them in the arena of their medium. Moderators in assembly publics are also organizers because they play a similar role in their context. The possibility to structure public communication in a specific way and even decide who and what is allowed or forced into the arena seems to give organizers enormous power. However, in certain cases moderators might simply enact previously agreed rules which limits their personal influence. Similarly, research in mass communication has shown that in professional journalism individual power is reduced by professional standards (“news values”), and editorial statutes and guidelines. *Public relation specialists* in turn use this ‘logic of media production’ to strategically organise the claims of their *sponsors* in a way to achieve audience consent most effectively. In a public sphere with a high degree of *specialization* it will be difficult for 'ordinary' actors with no special skills (or *financial resources* to hire these) to bring forward their claims successfully. Likewise, a lack of *technical knowledge and resources* can exclude or limit certain communications as well as restrict the forms of expression (e.g. no colour-pictures because no colour-press available). This leads to the question of what feedback-channels are available to the audience.

*Feedback-channels* are a very weak form of allowing role-changes from the gallery to the arena because they preserve an existing differentiation of arena and gallery. In many cases the feedback is not even public and reaches only the speakers themselves, the organizers or PR-specialists.

Asking the question of accessibility of the arena in a more general way, we will find various *structures of demarcation*: Even though the idea of an arena suggests an open space allowing any random processes of communication, it is evident, that any real world arena will have some structures framing the actual communications taking place. Some arenas have a formal *agenda*, defining what issues will be discussed in a certain time or space (programme, issue, session etc.). But even in cases where normatively no confining structures are foreseen, the processes of communication will produce some kind of structure which might remain invisible to the participants. Some structures of the public sphere are quite fixed and cannot be directly modified within the public sphere itself i.e. by communication (non-discursive structures), while others — such as cultural — can be contested and changed by public claim-
making (discursive structures). **Taboos** are an important discursive structure defining the outer boundaries of the arena. Correspondingly, there might be a set of **expected behaviours** (rituals, presuppositions of communication etc.) which positively defines 'what's inside'. In between these outer boundaries and the inner core of consensus in a public sphere lies what Hallin (1994: 54) has called the “sphere of legitimate controversy”. Another way of including certain actors and excluding others is by the **type of language** used.

Summing up, we can formulate a set of basic questions which we might ask when trying to grasp the structural characteristics of any given public sphere or arena:

1. How accessible is the forum? What prerequisites must be fulfilled to enter?
2. To what degree is the arena differentiated from the gallery?
3. Are there any actors equipped with prominence or prestige?
4. Who are they? And where are they situated within the stratification of authority?
5. Is there a specialization of speaker-roles (organizers, PR-specialists, sponsors, experts)?
6. What feedback-channels are available to the audience?
7. What resources are required to participate and how do technical preconditions condition form and content of communication?
8. Is there a formal agenda and how is it set?
9. What other mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion are there? (e.g. What happens when a taboo is broken or the formal agenda is not followed?)

### 4 Public Spheres in Movements: the Case of the EPAs

I will now turn to the European preparatory assemblies (EPAs) as a concrete example of a public sphere in a movement and which is relevant for democratic decision-making in the European social forum process because these meetings are formally the highest decision making body of the process. Everyday decisions in the practical organizing process are delegated to the national organising committee on site in Athens.

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15 These assemblies take place several times a year in various European countries in order to prepare the next European Social Forum (ESF). The account given here is based on systematic participant observation of the EPAs for the 4th ESF in Athens held in Istanbul (September 2005), Vienna (January 2006) and Frankfurt (March 2006), guided interviews with old stagers of the process, as well as written and oral reports from participants of preceding EPAs.
The account given here only reflects the work-in-progress of my PhD-Thesis and is not yet based on systematic data analysis so that these preliminary results should be regarded as hypotheses yet to be confirmed. I use them here to demonstrate the analytic potential of the conceptual framework provided by the arena model of the public sphere.

Formally speaking an EPA usually consists of two long plenary sessions with an audience of about 120-250 participants from about 30 countries, mainly ‘delegates’ from various groups and organisations but also individuals without affiliations. An EPA formally consists of two plenary sessions taking place during the whole of Saturday and Sunday until early afternoon. However, before the official start of these plenaries, various smaller workgroups and networks meet on Thursday and Friday in order to prepare the decisions to be formally taken during the weekend-plenaries. So in terms of the arena-model, the public sphere of the EPAs consists of several arenas being the plenary sessions as well as the various meetings taking place beforehand.16 Because of their formal status as decision-making bodies, I will focus here on the plenary sessions. Due to limited space, I will also limit my analysis to the parameters of publicness and density and a description of the processes (functions) of the EPA-public sphere and not elaborate on their structural conditions or their interrelations.

4.1 Publicness and Density

Even though we the plenary sessions formally take all the decisions we can find a lot of important communication outside the arena of the plenaries: There are officially announced meetings of workgroups (open to everyone) as well as informal talk in the lobby or a restaurant. Newcomers to the EPAs soon realise the decisive importance of informal talk amongst a group of insiders. These informal communications are a mixture of dialogues in personal networks (thus non-public in our terms) and informal meetings (public arenas) to which only a small group of insiders has access. Due to this, the public sphere of the EPAs can be described as rather dense but only partially public, i.e. low publicness.

The most interesting aspect of the publicness of the EPAs however is, that it seems to be evaluated quite differently by different groups of activists. It seems that for some a high publicness (and even a high density) of the public sphere is vital while for others personal networks are more important. This might be a new dimension relevant for understanding the conflict between different organizational ideologies previously termed “horizontals vs.

16 Several mailinglists used for communication amongst participants between the EPAs and the www.fse-esf.org website constitute further relevant arenas.
verticals” (Harrison 2006; cf. Doerr 2006; Papadimitrou, Saunders & Rootes 2006; Reyes, Wainwright, Fuster I Morell & Berlinguer 2004). For example, there seem to be three different ways of evaluating the decision-making processes at the EPAs: The first believes that the meetings are equally open to all and that everybody’s voice is heard. The second sees the problem of accessibility especially due to informal structures but still believes the process to be sufficiently open and democratic. And thirdly, there are activists who mention the democratic deficit and the lack of accountability before you even explicitly ask them. Apparently there is a mixture of a generational divide and different organizational socialization to explain these different observations. These different democratic cultures might also be related to different views of the public sphere in collective decision-making as mentioned in table 1 above. Further investigation is needed in order to analyze these cultures and the identities connected to them.

4.2 Functions
(1.) Who may or must speak and what may or must be said? At the beginning of the sessions, usually members of the organising committee and/or speakers from the group-meetings give information on the state of the process and what problems are to be solved. They also formulate proposals to the discussed in the assembly. Anybody can walk up to the microphone and make their point. However, it is obvious that not all speakers get the same amount of attention from the audience and from other speakers. Activists from various political backgrounds stated in interviews, that people representing a certain constituency or mobilising capacity as well as minorities connected with important issues will receive more attention than individuals speaking for themselves. This points to an informal stratification of authority based on prestige. Sources of prestige seem to be mobilization potential and intellectual credibility and esteem. There is also a norm that speakers from Central and Eastern European countries as well as migrants should be encouraged to participate and listened to in order to enlarge the scope of the ESF to central and eastern Europe. So, taking table 1 as orientation, we can say that there is a strong norm of popular inclusion as held by the participatory liberal, the discursive and the constructionist tradition of democratic theory. This norm is also put into practice in the sense that everybody can speak. If we take into consideration however who is listened to, public discourse at the EPAs clearly resembles the representative liberal model: Elite dominance, proportionality (according to mobilization potential) and expertise (from the experienced old-timers).
(2.) How should these speakers behave or how should the communications be brought forward? Broadly speaking, the atmosphere at the EPAs adheres to the norms of the WSF Charter of Principles (WSF International Council 2001) which asks for “understanding and mutual recognition among its participants” (ibid., No. 10) and “condemns all forms of domination and all subjection of one person by another” (ibid.). As part of a dialogical attitude speakers should listen to the arguments of the others and not stubbornly insist on their position but give in to arguments when a consensus is emerging. There should be no personal attacks, upholding a norm of civility. Personal narrations which are not related to the debated issue such as interventions of former political prisoners from Turkey do not evoke any reactions other than friendly applause. Detachment is not expected from speakers however; now and then passionate speeches are even welcomed. These norms relate to the discursive and the constructionist democratic theory (see table 1). Whether and how these norms are put into practice is at the core of my current research (cp. Haug & Teune 2006) and detailed results will be available later. At this stage, it appears that in the big plenary sessions there is often a rather agitatory or even competitive tone (as fits best with the participatory liberal tradition) to be heard amongst the speakers. In smaller meetings of various workgroups, a dialogical and civil style of mutual respect (appropriate to the discursive tradition) is more dominant.

(3.) What should be the prospect of the communication-process as a whole? As already suggested by the expected individual behaviours, deliberation is highly valued and a culture of consensus and friendship is clearly prevalent. In interviews, several individuals endorsed the norm of empowering the passive part of the audience to participate in the discussion; others said that there should be more transparency regarding the backstage activities of informal leaders. These are mainly the norms of the discursive and the constructionist traditions while the demand for transparency might be explained by the existence of factual representative liberal structures, without transparency though.

In practice, the plenary sessions resemble a free marketplace of ideas with a variety of perspectives on the process itself. The two main and often conflicting perspectives are those of the discursive and the constructionist tradition: With some people having Deliberation or cooperative compromising in mind when they speak, others seem to be more personally affected, trying to be recognised as what they are, rather than coming to a consensus of some sort. In more general terms, this relates to the issue of democracy and difference (cp. Benhabib, 1996) or deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism (cp. Mouffe 2000). It will
be interesting to see in further analysis to what degree and under which conditions both concepts of democratic discourse and their related attitudes are compatible.

(4.) What should be the relationship between discourse and decision-making? Delegating decisions to other bodies is very common. In case of delegation, the question we should answer on the output side refers to how and when within the process of public discourse the delegation takes place and whether after delegation discourse continues with the same topic or moves on to another one. In other words, we should analyse whether if a delegation of decision is connected to a delegation of discourse. In the case of the EPAs there rarely is formal delegation from the plenaries. Most delegations are informal which makes it an ambitious task to trace the whole process. Officially, there is no delegation of decisions (except to the organising committee). In this case, what we want to know about the output function is how discourse should be transformed into a decision. In the case of the EPAs, decisions are supposed to be taken by consensus. However, this does not mean that everybody has to publicly agree but that nobody publicly disagrees. In the arenas of the EPA this means that at the end of the discussion, a prominent speaker (usually the facilitator) makes a proposal and either assumes that this is a consensus (as long as nobody protests) or he explicitly asks the audience if there is disagreement. This mode of decision has been termed decision by interpretation by Steiner & Dorff (1980). To an observer, it often appears that the aim of most speakers in the arena of the EPAs is not to take a decision but to discuss or simply present their views. The facilitator rarely tries to actually facilitate decision-making by summing up, making or picking up proposals, demanding speakers to make clear proposals etc. The necessity to proceed in the preparatory process and actually take some decisions appears to be “artificially” imposed on the forum rather than emerging from it. In fact, when asked to describe what is happening at the EPAs, several participants stated that even though the official purpose of the EPAs was to prepare the next ESF, the more important part be the formal and informal discussions amongst activists from different European countries contributing to mutual understanding and sharing knowledge about struggles in the various countries. This indicates that although the EPAs are designed for decision-making, public discourse at the EPAs is in fact little decision-oriented, upholding the value of the discussion process itself. When it comes to decision-making, there is a clear consensus-orientation as in the discursive tradition but this is sometimes in conflict with the norm of avoidance of exclusionary closure upheld by the constructionist tradition since a consensus often includes “weighing the voices” (as some activists put it in their interviews) or building the consensus
in small informal meetings and then merely proclaiming it in the assembly. So again, there is a conflict between the discursive and the constructionist tradition.

5 Summary

The main aim of this paper has been to introduce the arena model of the public sphere to social movement research, opening some perspectives in the study of decision-making within movements. Starting from concrete arenas (defined by their audience) I did not simply join all arenas to form a public sphere but I used the concept of density to allow for thin as well as dense public spheres, depending on how much the arenas are ‘overlapping’. Since admittedly not all communication is public, I confronted the concept of the public sphere with the concept of network as two structurally antipodal types of communication. Since in the real world, most communication will take place neither in an ideal type public sphere nor exclusively in a network, the concept of publicness helps to describe a varying degree of publicness of a public sphere. In other words, I suggested to differentiate empirically what used to be simply called the public sphere, questioning both its unity (the public sphere) as well as its publicness (the public sphere). In the next step, I argued that a public sphere can be further described by the way it fulfils the basic three functions of input, throughput and output. These functional processes interrelate with (discursive and non-discursive) structures of the public sphere.

In order to illustrate the potential of the approach, I gave some preliminary results of my study of decision-making at the preparatory assemblies for the European Social Forum. Two main hypotheses can be drawn from these:

(1) Within the preparatory process for the European Social Forum, there are both conflicting democratic norms (‘discursive’ vs. ‘constructionist’) but also a discrepancy between the hegemonial norms (mostly ‘discursive’, also somewhat ‘constructionist’) and the actual practices of discourse (representative liberal and participatory liberal).

(2) The publicness and the density of a specific public are relevant parameters for the evaluation of collective decision-making. They will however be evaluated differently by different actors, depending on their respective cultural background.
6 References


