ON THE NATURE OF THE BEAST:
RE-CHARTING POLITICAL GEOGRAPHIES
OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

by
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ABSTRACT. This review paper begins with the premise that since the European Union remains a process of construction with no agreed or pre-designated end-point, its power structure is open to a diverse range of interpretations. Moreover, the apparent novelty of the EU renders it hard to characterize according to familiar taxonomies. The novelty lies in part in the complex territorial configurations of authority in the EU. Different conceptualizations of the EU are varied readings of the structure, balance and scales of authority – which thereby invoke different actions and *spaces* of possibility.

Key words: European Union, multi-level governance, networks, regions, territoriality, scale, geopolitics.

Introduction

> Paradoxical as it may seem, the emergence over the last few years of a process of political unification in Europe and the debate over the best forms of 'integration' appear to have heightened the uncertainty about the nature of the European territory. To the point that it can be maintained that Europe is anything but a territory. This uncertainty results above all from an excess of possible European territories in the future; or better, from an excess of geopolitical scenarios, each of which attempts to project its peculiar character on European space.
>
> (Boeri, 2001, p. 357)

This paper explores literatures on the shifting political geographies of the European Union. Although the enlargement of the EU from fifteen to twenty-five members alters many of these (Agnew, 2001; Kuus, 2004; Moisio, 2002; Smith, 2002) and underpins ongoing debates about the proposed EU constitution, neither enlargement nor the constitutional proposal provides the focus here. Instead, the focus of the paper is the chal-lenges that the EU poses for conventional understandings of the ensemble of relations between *territory–government–power* that have traditionally lain at the heart of political geography. Even so, the range of potentially relevant material is vast. What follows is inevitably a highly selective and partial review, focused on English-language literatures. The aim however is to outline the main currents of debate and analysis.

The EU lends itself to a wide diversity of interpretations about its *modus operandi*, structure and relationships to sovereignty and territory. Thus, as Church and Phinnemore (2002, p. 2) note:

> the EU is an unusual construction. It is not a single body but…one resting on several 'pillars'. …Hence, it is partly 'supra-national' in that its collective decisions have authority within the member states. At the same time it is 'intergovernmental' in that it is based on, and structured through, specific strategic agreements among the member states.

Early on, the paper notes the apparent strangeness of some of the interpretations of the EU that are in circulation (for example, fundamentalist Protestant readings of the EU based on biblical prophecy). While far from most mainstream views and social science analyses, such readings do serve to illustrate the ways that the EU lends itself to creative interpretation. With the range of these in mind, the bulk of the paper reviews and explores the consequences of a range of theorizations of the political geography of the EU and, insofar as they also inform these political geographies, it necessarily also ventures into the economic[1], social-cultural[2] and urban[3] geographies of the Union.

However, a focus on the political geography of European integration offers insights into the European polity, since the complex territorial configurations and scaled narratives of authority constitut-

ing the EU are arguably significant parts of what renders it distinctive. The next section reiterates the ways that the apparent novelty (and complexity) of the EU enables a diversity of interpretations of its political character and dominant scales of action. I go on to explore the insights and consequences of different readings of the EU, beginning with those that concentrate on the actions and scale of 'national' member states. Following this, I examine other scales of reference, considering, in turn, (both sub-state and macro) regions, networks and the interactions of multiple levels. It notes both how regions – including city regions and urban networks – have been the most durable alternative reference points, although diversity of regional modes of governance defies easy summary. The conclusions return to what is at stake in distinguishing between different interpretations.

My overall task is enabled by prior critical exploration of EU/European territoriality, such as the review by Paasi (2001), Hellström's (2003) account of border-making processes in European integration and the suggestive analysis by Anderson (1996) on which – to adapt some of the metaphors characteristic of European integration (see Clark, 2001; Shore, 1997) – this paper 'builds', 'enlarges' and 'deepens'. Prior collections and texts on the European Union's geographies provide useful points of departure (e.g. Blacksell, 1977; Graham, 1998; Heffernan, 1998; Hudson and Williams, 1999; Jönsson, Tägil and Törnqvist, 2000; Lee and Ogden, 1976, McNeill, 2004; Parker, 1983). However, over the past couple of decades, the range[4] and richness of wider scholarship on the EU has grown greatly. Inevitably I cannot be comprehensive and the focus here is on English-language texts. What follows therefore makes forays into a vast multi- and interdisciplinary literature and teases out some key aspects of the political geographies of European integration.

An unknown beast?

Writing about Russian[5] relationships with the European Union, *The Economist* (2005, p. 48) magazine recently noted that, unlike the Baltic states (which are already members) and Ukraine (whose leadership now speaks openly and often about its ambitions to join the EU):

> A country with recent memories of being one of the world's two superpowers cannot contemplate the relatively humbling idea of being

just another member of the European club. The Brussels ideology, with its emphasis on 'shared sovereignty' and the dismantling of borders, is unappealing to a Russian leadership that is more comfortable with traditional ideas of power and territory.

The Economist goes on to note how (and here it citing an article in the influential Moscow-based *Russia in World Affairs* magazine) key Russian commentators have: 'concluded that 'the European Union is just a new kind of empire': one that threatens to continue to expand into Russia's historic sphere of influence'.

As is detailed below, these Russian critics are not the only source of designations of the EU as an empire. However, the apparent novelty of the EU's process and structures, and the open-ended Europe on the move (enlargement, fast-tracks, accessions and blockages to the east), renders it hard to characterize according to familiar taxonomies. Europeanization is also 'a fashionable but contested concept' (Olsen, 2002). Most analyses agree that the EU is not a state (even allowing for the variety among them). Yet nor can the EU be credibly designated merely as a traditional intergovernmental or international organization. Others point out that it can never be a state, since these are conventionally understood – despite some 'state-like characteristics' (e.g. flag and anthem, economic and monetary union, and moves to a common defence and citizenship provisions in recent European treaties). Thus, in Helen Wallace's (2000, p. 66) terms, the EU 'is not a state and there are few areas of policy in which it is the exclusive location for generating collective action or solving policy dilemmas'. Furthermore, as Nugent and Paterson (2003, p. 103) remind us:

> The citizenship provisions in the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties are extremely modest and complement rather than threaten state-based citizenship provisions. Similarly, the defence conclusions of the Nice Treaty fall a very long way short of a European army, with it as yet being unforeseeable that the European Union could enjoy the monopoly of physical coercion which has long been seen to be a defining feature of states. As for EMU it is often forgotten that the Irish Republic had a long standing currency union with the United Kingdom and that Benelux was also a currency union.

Beyond mere wariness, however, of the EU as a proto-state (something that has been evident in many political debates and polemics), the European Institute of Protestant Studies in Belfast, directed by Ian Paisley, Leader of the Ulster Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), interprets the EU as a conspiracy directed by the Vatican. Invoking the authority of biblical prophecy they characterize the EU as a plot by the papacy:

> aimed at reclaiming all those regions of Europe which were wrested from Rome through the Great Schism of the eleventh century, the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth, and, more recently, the communisation [sic] of Eastern Europe….Thus Romanism can again be seen rearing its ugly head as the one constant force that has bedeviled all European history and politics and conducted a vicious campaign against Protestant Britain for centuries.
>
> (Noble, 1998, p. 9)

While certain aspects of the Vatican's role, for example, in Poland and Croatia, are widely acknowledged features of European 'geopolitics', and although it shares common ground with wider British 'euroscepticism', the vision of the European Institute of Protestant Studies appears to belong more to the domain of conspiracy theories: the worlds of alien abductions, *The X-Files* and, more sinisterly, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Yet Shirlow's (2000) research on fundamentalist Protestant politics in Northern Ireland indicates that variants on this position circulate widely in the charged and uncertain context of Ulster. Such conspiracy theories are perhaps all too easy to dismiss on the part of secular-minded social scientists. For as Mitchell (1998, p. 89) points out:

> Scholars associated with the Fundamentalism Project (American Academy of Arts and Sciences) have recently focused on how small groups of true believers in different nations and historical epochs manage to captivate large parts of the body politic….It turns out that in almost every known movement we can find leaders formulating dramatic eschatologies of an impending cosmic upheaval – even in cultures that have no prior tradition of sacred apocalyptic texts.

Noting that visions of the EU as the 'Antichrist' also circulate in some popular African religious texts/tracts, Ellis and ter Haar (1998, p. 179) comment that:

> Their meaning is to be sought less in a refined deconstruction of their symbolism, although the symbols used are indeed informative, than in considering how entire cultures come to consider reality in specific ways, including in terms of interaction between the visible and invisible forces, which they believe to constitute the world and to determine its evolution.

Moreover, 'softer' variants of the 'Vatican conspiracy' version of the EU have been more widely active. Sassoon's (1997, p. 176) account of the West European Left in the twentieth century notes that in the UK after 1945:

> The twin pillars of Labour [government and party] foreign policy were anti-Europeanism and pro-Americanism. The first was exemplified by Labour's scorn for the Schuman Plan (which would lead to the setting up of the European Coal and Steel Community, the first major step towards the EEC), condemned by the 'intellectual' organ of the Left, the New Statesman, as a conspiracy headed by French and German industrialists and the Pope.

Moreover, conspiracy theories building on Christian eschatology purporting to expose the EU circulate in 'popular geopolitics' in the USA and, albeit to a lesser extent, among many fundamentalist Christians elsewhere. A few moments on the internet searching with terms such as Bible prophecy, revived Roman Empire, New World Order and European Union will yield dozens of accounts. More widely, Herman (2000, p. 23) notes that those conservative American Protestants who believe in the literal truth of the bible and read it in prophetic tone:

> have long been fascinated by Europe. Theologically, premillennial belief is based primarily upon interpretations of the Revelation of John – the last book of the New Testament…. The Revelation is seen to mandate that the Roman Empire will revive, that it will likely be led by the Antichrist, and that this new Empire, and its leader, will meet their ends in Israel at the hands of the returning Christ and his saints.

The EU is read among such believers as the New Rome in the process of becoming. Exploring how

and why they envision Europe in such ways, Herman acknowledges that the topic may seem obscure or trivial. However, he cautions that it is neither. He notes that over 60% of Americans are in no doubt that Christ will return, and prophecy belief permeates strands of popular culture and animates the religious Right (see also Bower, 1992). The 'Beast' and the 'Antichrist' of Revelations are blended with Old Testament prophecy to populate a fantastic geopolitics of fears and expectations:

> Conservative premillennial eschatology informs many of the political positions adopted by the Christian Right (CR) in the United States. For example, the CR's enthusiastic support for Israel…particularly in light of its continued anti-Semitism, makes little sense without an understanding of the role Jewish people must play at the world's end…. Similarly, the CR's pro-defence and patriotic stance is, for many, linked to the pre-ordained role the United States is destined to play in the final days….Understandings about Europe…are also importantly shaped by endtimes belief….During the twentieth century, from the first stirrings of European integration, conservative Protestant prophesiers in the United States became both intrigued and horrified with European developments. European union both seemed to fulfil prophecy, creating the potential for the 'ten nation confederacy', [predicted, it is said, in Revelations] and played on old, evocative, and, in many respects, anti-Catholic beliefs about Roman power.
>
> (Herman, p. 28 and 30, 2000)

Herman goes on to chart the debates among the millenarians about the centralization of power in the EU, the number of members and their (pre)designated roles in 'God's plan'.

While such religious analyses proliferate and circulate in popular culture, and narratives about the EU circulate widely in diverse political contexts (Nicolaïdis and Howse, 2002), accounting for and analysing the nature of the EU has also long posed challenges to social sciences. While not quite *The Beast* of millenarian prophecy, when it comes to theorizing the EU, there is nevertheless a widespread sense that we are dealing with something challenging and new that requires fresh interpretations. And there are no shortages of these. Thus one recent book-length survey of *Theories of European Integration* noted: 'the sheer range and vibrancy of theoretically informed work touching upon the European Union and European integration, much of which has appeared during the time of writing' (Rosamond, 2000, p. xi).

However, another text on *Theorizing European Integration* comments that: 'Having welcomed the new millennium, and after nearly five decades of uninterrupted theorizing about European integration, international scholarship is still puzzled as to what exactly the EU is or may come to resemble in the future' (Chryssochoou, 2001, p.1).

The subsequent sections of this paper therefore continue to investigate 'the nature of the (EU) beast'. Although Bornschier (2001, p. 187) recently called the EU ' a somewhat strange hermaphrodite – something between a confederation of states and a federal state', metaphors of the Union as an 'unknown animal' have been around for over thirty years. Puchala (1972) thus described efforts at theorization of European integration and the emergent European polity via the parable of the blind men and the elephant. None of the blind men know quite what kind of creature it is they are touching, but those who feel the trunk will describe a very different beast to those who touch other parts of its anatomy. More recently, Chryssochoou (2001, p. 15) has revisited this confusing comparative zoology:

> The 'elephant', however, to recall Puchala's colourful metaphor, is not easy to manipulate in theoretical terms: it often turns into a 'chameleon' adjusting itself to the actual requirements of the day. In other words, it may not only be the case that various integration theorists are aware of a rather limited picture of a barely describable and, hence, conceptually evasive political animal, but also that the creature itself may indeed change so rapidly as to render the whole process of its study (including both sector-specific analyses and system-wide theorizing) an exercise that is ultimately misleading.

While none of these things are entirely new or confined to contemporary Europe, Chryssochoou usefully marks how continuing uncertainty as to how to categorize and characterize European integration derives, in part, from the particular and novel complex territorial configuration of authority that is the Union. This is not a classic state, even if it has features in common with federal state structures. Moreover, different conceptualizations of the EU

are, in part, different readings of the structure and balance of scales of authority. This is not to say that ideas focused on the roles of European states do not remain influential. In such literatures, classical notions of the primacy of the sovereign nation-state and the balance of power are presented as underpinning the dynamics of the EU and its institutions. In the academic literature about European integration, early theoretical statements of this position (Hoffmann, 1966) have been elaborated in recent years (Moravcsik, 1991, 1993, 1998) and also revisited by historians of European integration (Milward, 1992, 1993; Milward *et al*. 1993). In Milward and Sørensen's (1993, p. 21) words:

> our argument runs like this. Nation-states have a certain portfolio of policy objectives which they will try to realize in the face of economic and political internationalization. These policy objectives are almost entirely shaped by domestic political pressures and economic resources and will therefore vary from country to country over time. In order to advance these objectives nation-states will attempt to use what international framework there is at hand. Many of these objectives can and will be pursued by expanding what we have here called the inherited framework of interdependence, traditional governmental co-operation among states. However, as we have argued, some fundamental objectives after 1945 could not be achieved through such a framework and were therefore advanced through integration.

Yet the Union also reconfigures (or as it is sometimes put, 'hollows out') its member states. For William Wallace (2000, p. 532) therefore, the European states are now 'post-sovereign' given that the EU: 'spills across state boundaries, penetrating deep into previously domestic aspects of national politics and administration'.

In ways that approach ideas of multi-level governance (to be reviewed below), Wessels (1997, p. 273) also interprets the EU as an evolution in European sovereignties: 'it is a crucial factor and dynamic engine of the fundamental changes in the statehood of western Europe'.

Chryssochou's (2001, p. 19) survey describes this and similar accounts of the 'Europeanisation' of EU member states in the following terms:

> Arguably, this is a much more complex role than that of merely 'rescuing the nation state'

along the lines suggested by Milward [YR] ….This particular interpretation of 'fusion' as a merger process chimes well with the properties of the German system of 'interlocking' federalism or *Politikverflechtung*.

Others have focused on the way the Union transforms the roles of local governments in member states, in large part by providing a funding agent through which networks and connections are promoted as agents of the internationalization of the European state (Goldmann, 2001). All these register a more complex political geography than interlocking states and the imagination of a demarcation of inside and outside, which reduces the EU to an expression of a priori bounded entities of territorial states.

Regions, cities, networks and levels

In characterizing the modes and scales of political power associated with the EU, references to regions have probably been the most durable scale of reference aside from the member states. Political decentralization and attendant constitutional changes in many EU member states have reinforced this. The latter was most marked under socialist governments in the 1980s in the two large hitherto centralized states of France and Spain. However, this coincided with a shift towards greater authority of *Länder* in West Germany and the project of the EU Commission envisaging a 'Europe of the Regions' as a mode of integration. Thus Michael Keating (1998, p. 16) notes how: 'A new impetus was given to regionalism in Europe during the 1980s and the 1990s by economic restructuring, state reform, globalization and especially by European integration'.

However, this has long been (and remains) fluid and uneven (Applegate, 1999). Keating (1998, p. 28) therefore concludes that:

> In this context there are some regions which can impose a territorial order and intervene as actors in these complex new systems. In other cases, large cities will take the upper hand. Elsewhere strong states will maintain their power, albeit challenged by new territorial and sectoral power centres. Finally, there are territories which do not have the capacity to impose their own logic and will be forced into dependence on the state or on the international market. Regionalism is a complex phenomenon which cannot be reduced to the notion of a 'level' in the new territorial hierarchy.

Some confirmation of this may be found in empirical studies of regions that do not have strong coherence or identity. There are many of these across Europe, places such as the East Midlands (UK), Castilla-La Mancha (Spain), Auvergne (France), Midlands (Irish Republic) and Centro (Portugal) that have relatively little sense of regional distinctiveness. Often these regions came about as part of larger territorial devolutions and reorganizations – either where regions with much stronger identities were granted autonomy (as in Spain, for example), meaning that other segments of the national state territory were granted regional autonomy status too, or as a result of rationalizations and modernist planning schemes for 'functional' regions (as in the 1974 territorial reorganization in the UK, for example). Writing about the trajectory of one of these peripheral UK regions, Gibbs *et al*. (2001, p. 104) note that:

> the Humber Sub-region itself is a particularly 'messy' entity. Rather than a coherent territorial ensemble of production structures, the Sub-region is in practice a disparate mix of industries, towns, cities and rural areas. The present Sub-regional boundaries are relatively recent ones, and not all of the Sub-region has been eligible to receive European funding. However, we suggest that the Humber case has much to say to assertions about governance and institutional capacity – discussions which not only have been based upon limited empirical evidence, but have also tended to focus upon 'successful' or 'transitional' rather than 'less developed' regions, and regions with a dominant metropolitan centre as opposed to areas containing an urban–rural mix.

Their historical and contextual study of this 'region' and reviews of other work on the articulation between local and regional governance in the UK and EU strategies (e.g. Lloyd and Meegan, 1996; MacLeod, 1999; Martin, 1998) leads to the conclusion that:

> Existing work has tended to assume a direct link between the regional scale and the development of institutional capacity in particular places. In our view, spatial scale is highly contingent. Particularly in areas characterized by significant political and economic fragmentation, notions of 'the region' cannot be taken as given.
>
> (Gibbs *et al*., 2001, p. 116)

Other regions, such as the English Southeast and central France, are characterized by weakly developed institutional coherence and formal identity, although few are so large and fragmented as the Southeast (John *et al*., 2002). The Southeast also bears witness to the ways that: '"regions" only exist in relation to particular criteria. They are not "out there" waiting to be discovered; they are our (and others') constructions'. (Allen *et al*., 1998, p. 2)

In parallel terms, and echoing Duncan and Goodwin (1998), Swyngedouw (2000) points out how regionalizations in Europe – located in response to capitalist restructuring and (broadly neoliberal) political-projects may erode democratic accountability as emergent regional formations and levels are structured and captured by fractions of capital.[6]

In such contexts, Grasse (2001) points again to the *heterogeneity* of regional level, or what others have termed 'third level' (Bullmann, 1997) structures in the EU. For, on the one hand:

> Interregional and cross-border cooperation on the part of subnational authorities is now an established feature of everyday politics, as in the case of the presence of regional lobby groups in Brussels….The establishment of the Committee of the Regions (CoR), the fixing of the subsidiarity principle in the Maastricht Treaty and thus the supposed anchoring of the regions as a definite third level of European politics, as well as Commission policy addressing the regions directly as objects of policy… – all these factors can be taken to indicate an apparently irreversible and uniform trend towards regionalisation in Europe.
>
> (Grasse, 2001, p. 80)

On the other hand:
> Regionalization is not a unified theory, which can be put into practice in exactly the same way everywhere, but rather one which remains linked with circumstances and developments, power bases and interest groups of the individual countries concerned.
>
> (Grasse, 2001, pp. 89–90)

Moreover:
> the 'third level' will continue to paint an exceedingly heterogeneous picture. With Eastern enlargement of the EU imminent, and the very different traditions and minority issues this will bring with it, the picture will become yet more complex. (op. cit., p. 92)

These complexities may to some extent be accommodated in political discourse and practice through a language of 'subsidiarity' and 'flexibility'. Reviewing these, Diez (2001, p. 95) suggests that, while the change registered in the widespread use of these terms (indeed their incorporation into the treaties of the EU and the community laws and practices known as the *acquis communautaire*), appears relatively marginal: 'these seemingly marginal changes might bring with them more fundamental transformations in that they lay out a linguistic trace that can be seized upon by alternative constructions'.

Thus in recent years an EU sponsored vision of European macro-regions has also added another dimension to the regional level. In the early 1990s, Gripaios and Mangles (1993) drew attention to the European 'super-regions' that were being envisaged by the EU Commission's Directorate-General XVI for Regional Policy and Cohesion (on the longer trajectory and politics of EU regional policy, see Bache, 1998). Since then, the elaboration of what Sparke (2000) terms 'anticipatory geographies' has culminated in the publication of a report on European spatial development (known as Europe 2000+) in 1995 (Albrechts, 1997; Williams, 1996) and the adoption, in 1999, of a European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) (Jensen and Richardson, 2001, 2004; Richardson, 2000; Williams, 2000, 2001). Jensen and Richardson (2001, p. 706) thus identify:

> The core ESDP vision is centred on a policy triangle of economic and social cohesion, sustainable development and balanced competitiveness, iterated in the final document as: the development of a balanced and polycentric city system and a new urban–rural partnership; securing parity of access to infrastructure and knowledge; and sustainable development, prudent management and protection of nature and cultural heritage.

The ESDP, its forerunners and elaborations, notably the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON) established in 2002, also articulate what James Scott (2002) has termed a 'strategic cartography' of connection and networks, within what Jensen and Richardson (2004, p. x) call 'a single overarching rationality of making a "one space", made possible by seamless networks enabling frictionless mobility'. In addition, they invoke transnational Euro-regions (see Fig. 1), and
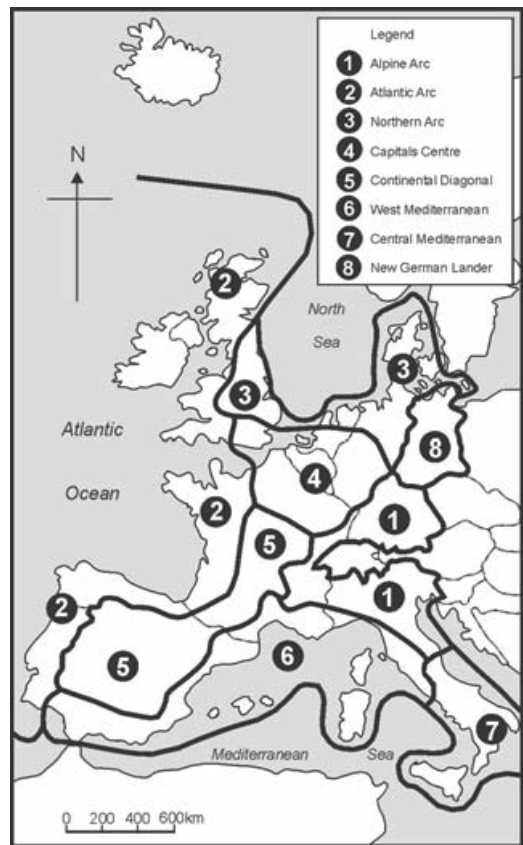

Fig. 1. 'Transnational 'Euro-regions' as proposed in the European Commission's '2000+ Report'.
Source: Redrawn after Wise (2000, p. 867).

what Mark Wise (2000, p. 867) terms 'motivating concepts' for the mobilization of linkages (with a financial *raison d'être* 'emanating from the centres of politico-economic power'), but with some 'shared competences' (Eser and Konstadakopulos, 2000) across the EU, member states and subnational authorities. As will be detailed below, over the past four years these visions have multiplied, in the forms of reports and maps prepared under the aegis of the ESPON programme.

Regions thus take their place in a burgeoning literature on the EU as a system of 'multi-level governance' (Adshead, 2002). One of the factors underpinning its influence is that this literature operates across a transdisciplinary (and of course, transnational) space of European studies. Its success lies partly in this sociology. As Andrew Jordan (2001, p. 201) notes:

The term MLG [Multi-level governance] is popular because it captures the mood of the times. By deliberately embracing the discourse of governance it also encourages a healthy dialogue with those studying cognate levels of the EU (such as national political systems), who have traditionally ignored the European dimension. Therefore, in an important sense, MLG successfully carries European studies into other subdisciplines....MLG has also helped pave the way to new research topics such as the governance of the single market...the Europeanisation of member state systems, and the regionalisation of the EU. MLG therefore facilitates synthesis and interaction within European studies, illuminating the interactions between and within different levels.

Such complexities and heterogeneities are embodied in other narratives about the EU. Building on Ruggie (1993), Anderson (1996, pp. 147–149) explores these complexities in historical and comparative perspective – considering Europe as an uneven and partial 'unbundling' of state territoriality:

Rather than focusing on an imagined final outcome, maybe we should focus on process and see European integration in terms of a territorial unbundling which is partial and selective....The overall result of the selectivity or partiality of unbundling is that within Europe there is now a complex mixture of old, new and hybrid forms – 'territorial', 'transterritorial', and 'functional' forms of association and authority coexisting and interacting. For some purposes, territoriality and 'territorial contiguity' are becoming less dominant as modes of social organization and control, and 'nonterritorial' or 'transterritorial' authority is regaining some of the importance it had in medieval times. But for other purposes state sovereignty defined by the same old territorial boundaries seems as firmly rooted as ever.

For other observers (e.g. Caporaso, 1996), the European postmodern polity is not easy to describe. Elements of European politics and governance occupy different sites and intersect. Mamadouh (2001, p. 434) thus notes that the EU has a complex and mobile capital city network, with 'command centres', as she terms them, at such nodes as Brussels,[7] Strasbourg and Luxembourg, with some EU institutions either 'itinerant' or 'dispersed'. Although there is

massive variation among them (see Brenner (1998), for a typology), capital and provincial cities are thereby envisaged as nodes within a fluid European network. This is an active vision in many municipal administrations, in tandem with a variety of 'world–city' discourses (McNeill, 2001). A particular vision of urban networks also crops up in the discourse of the European Commission. Jensen and Richardson (2001, p. 708) thus note how:

the idea of a polycentric urban system…has taken shape through a series of European Commission studies and reports in the 1990s….The polycentric urban system is seen as a necessary response to environmental, social, and traffic problems of increasing urban growth, by enabling horizontal integration and spreading specialization to a number of urban centres….Strategies for creating a new polycentric European space include the emergence of 'urban networks', including new integration scenarios for cross-border regions in particular….Co-operation between cities across borders may not only imply functional and economic advantages, but may also facilitate the vision of a Europe where national borders are criss-crossed by a new urban policy of inter-city co-operation.

Jensen and Richardson (2001, p. 716) go on to note how this is supplemented with 'infography', such as the figure reproduced here (Fig. 2), used to articulate the concept of polycentricity: 'Infographic framing can be seen as a powerful rhetorical and creative way of reproducing the discourse in new forms of spatial representation'.

While many of the arguments surrounding this concept were developed in the early and mid-twentieth century by Christaller and Lösch, earlier notions of central places and urban networks were predominately visualized with the spaces of the nation-state (Rossler, 1989). Today, European state boundaries are in the background; to be transcended by these webs of interaction (Kramsch and Hooper, 2004; Sidaway, 2001; Walters, 2002). Over the past ten years, this also came to be envisaged as a framework extending eastwards and through which cooperative networks could be established in the context of EU enlargement (Turnock, 2002). Since its establishment in 2002, as a means of informing and fostering the longer established ESDP, the ESPON programme has played a key role in the dissemination of such ways

of seeing EU spaces, both through ESPON's focus on the territorial implications of enlargement and the way ESPON has combined notions of regions and regional development and networks (especially in the forms of infrastructure and connectivity) through the concept of 'polycentric spatial development'. The ESPON programme incorporates sixteen transnational project groups producing a wealth of maps and reports (see www.espon.lu). The area of study (termed EPSON space) includes the candidate countries for EU membership (minus Turkey), plus two non-member countries which have joined the programme: Switzerland and Norway. Citing ESDP policy, ESPON (2004, p. 10) claims that: 'polycentric urban systems are more efficient, more sustainable and more equitable than either monocentric urban systems or dispersed small settlements'.

In turn, it is argued that:

> The implementation of a polycentric development model calls for a shift of paradigm away from the centre-periphery thinking in European policies, as well as in national and local policies. Targeted assistance through EU structural policies, the creation of trans-national functional regions, support to specialised networks, and the specialisation of urban areas, as well as institutional setting, transportation and communication links are important elements for achieving a more polycentric Europe.
>
> (ESPON, 2004, p. 10)

Beyond such 'infographics' and their visualizations of (polycentric) networks of cities and urban places, the understanding of Europe, as constituted through networks, is envisaged by Barry (1996, p. 36) as:

> a political entity which is expected to be united as much by inhuman bonds as well as by social ties of a more traditional form. The Europe of the network does not claim to possess a centre, or a capital or a common culture: it is a surface of mobile and unstable linkages operating across a space within which national forms of regulation have become increasingly disrupted.

For Barry (1993), therefore, attendant spatial reordering is a key to understanding the mode of governance that the EU seeks to practice. More widely, Jachtenfuchs (2001, p. 253) comments that:

Fig. 2. Polycentricity represented in the ESDP's infographics. *Source*: Redrawn after Jensen and Richardson (2001, p. 714).

> In the policy-analytic literature of the last decade, 'networks' is one of the most frequently used terms. With its emphasis on informal, loose structures that extend across and beyond hierarchies, the network concept appeared particularly well suited to grasp the essence of multi-level governance in the European Union.

What conclusions may be drawn from this array of designations and conceptualizations? Each – so it seems – foregrounds an aspect of the European Union and thereby risks obscuring another. What is at stake in distinguishing between them? What else may be invoked when the political geography of the EU is discussed?

Conclusions: beyond the beast

Europe seems to be a very complex phenomenon. One might, for example, want to think about Europe in terms of political economies of production or the circulation of capital, or patterns of population movement and immigration, or the place of its largest cities, or the constitution of regions, or its flows of information, or its negotiations of an eastern boundary, or its struggles over specific sites of authority over this, that and the other. That is, one might want to begin *not* with assumptions about what and where Europe is but with some

sense of wonder about how it is that all those processes and dynamics that might be identified as relevant to an understanding of Europe can indeed be imagined in terms of a coherent geographical and ontological whole. As with concepts of a state or nation, it is all too easy to assume that Europe simply exists and thus to stop thinking about the conditions under which this assumption comes to be taken for granted or how this assumption is put into practice.

(Walker, 2000, pp. 18–19; italics added)

In the 1970s, Tom Nairn (1977, p. 306) could still condemn the then prevailing attempts to theorize European integration as follows:

All students of the subject soon become aware of one important fact: the monumental sterility, pretension and evasiveness of most theoretical discussion of the European Community. This is the topic on which modern 'political science' has concentrated much of its effort, and done its very worst.

Today things have changed and – as this paper bears witness – a much richer and diverse literature has evolved. Thus, for Jachtenfuchs (whose account of European networks and governance was cited above): 'In the last decade the study of European integration has definitely come through the "dark ages" of the 1970s and early 1980s.' (2001, pp. 245–246).

However, as has also been stressed here, there is little consensus about what the EU represents. Therefore, amidst the diversity of positions and views rehearsed in this paper, a way forward is to rephrase the question of what is the spatiality (or more narrowly, perhaps, the political geography) of EU governance towards critical scrutiny of how this is discursively constructed. Therefore, there is no single, stable, hegemonic understanding of the EU. Instead, a variety of visions exist in circulation and contest, embodying (though rarely in a straightforward or direct way) different social interests. The recent expansion of accounts of the social construction of Europe (see Christiansen *et al.*, (2001) for a survey) has made this more explicit. Therefore, as Diez (2001, pp. 91–92) notes:

any 'description' of European governance participates in the struggle to fix the latter's meaning, and is thus a political act….The power of discourse is that it structures our conceptualizations of European governance to some extent, rather than simply employing a certain language to further our cause. The multi-level language gives preference to actors on various 'state' levels….What happens if for a moment we employ a different language and speak of a 'network polity' instead? Our conception of the EU changes, and instead of 'levels', we find a more open political space, both geographically and functionally diversified, undermining the territorial notion of politics that is still upheld by the multiple levels concept.

Thus, the European Union has no straightforward sum and substance. It is rendered meaningful and real through complex systems of representation. Indeed, that it has no eternal essence is borne out in the open contest between different representations. Viewed through such an approach, it is not simply the case that EU member states are retaining 'power' or fading in their relative importance, nor is it sufficient to detect new levels or networks of governance. Neither the state, nor the Union, the region or third level or the network are ontological fundamentals or intrinsic truths. This is not to deny that these are useful categories of analysis, nor to assert that they are intangible or meaningless. Indeed, these categorizations and abstractions have formed domains of analysis and meaning here. But that reality may usefully be understood not as 'given' in the categories, but as unfolding or rendered in complex and contested movements of discourse. In terms therefore of different visions and theorizations of the EU, not only are these productive of what they purport to describe, but they thereby invite and invoke different actions and spaces of possibility for different subjects. Hence a key task of critical work is the specification of how different scaled visions are produced, circulate, and with what consequences.

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Notes

1   This paper mostly leaves aside the geographies of socio-economic disparity (versus convergence) in the EU. Suffice to note briefly here that a series of empirical studies by geographers point to a mixed pattern. Thus, in the early 1990s, anticipating the much-vaunted arrival of the 'Single European Market', Amin *et al*. (1992, p. 330) judged that: In the context of increased concentration and globalization of corporate activity, the focus of EC regional policy on developing indigenous potential…is an insufficient corrective against the centralization of corporate power and control in the core regions of Europe.

   More recently, Dunford and Smith (2000, pp. 170, 193–194) conclude that the 'map of economic inequality in contemporary Europe' shows a 'divide of quite significant and enduring proportions' and 'that differentiation is more apparent than convergence'. Agnew (2001) reflects on what this signifies for an enlarging EU in a Europe of socio-spatial disparity and proliferating uneven development. Similarly, Jones and MacLeod (1999, p. 308) note that in Britain and Europe: 'beneath (or perhaps above) all the celebratory discourses…hovers a capricious scenario of combined and uneven development, intense interterritorial competition, devaluation and overaccumulation'.

2   On cultural geographies of EU governance and policy, see Barnett (2001). Shore (2000) provides an original anthropology of the EU Commission.

3.   On European cities, scale, governance and European integration, see Le Galès (2002). Brenner (2004) provides a review of changing modes of urban governance in the contexts of Europeanization understood as a complex rescaling.

4.   The range of approaches being brought to bear on the analysis of European integration continues to broaden, with, for example, recent feminist (Hansen, 2000) and postcolonial (Böröcz, 2001; Kramsch, 2002; Kuus, 2004) work. In recent years, the journal *Geopolitics* has published a series of papers and special issues exploring 'The changing geopolitics of Eastern Europe' (6 summer 2001), 'The critical geopolitics of Northern Europe' (8 Spring 2003) and 'Postnational politics in the European Union' (9 Autumn 2004).

5.   On the ways that Russia (and other places associated with 'Easterness') form the basis of constructions of self–other in Western European narratives, see Neumann (1999).

6.   In the UK context too, subsequent work drawing upon regulationist perspectives has explored shifting technologies and rearticulations of governance, in the context of uneven power and influence and class-regional reconfigurations. The literature on the UK is too extensive and the theme too far from my core focus in this article to review extensively here; however examples are Edwards, *et al*., (2001), Gibbs and Jonas (2001), Goodwin and Painter (1996), Jones and MacLeod (2004), MacKinnon (2000), MacLeod (1998), MacLeod and Goodwin (1999), Peck and Tickell (1995). What emerges in these, and is foregrounded in Imrie and Raco (1999, p. 59), is the difficulty of conceiving 'of a generic form of local [or regional] governance – rather, there is a hybrid of possible (and potential) forms, incorporating a range of institutional networks and modes of policy development and implementation'. Giordano's (2001) account of Northern League regionalism in Italy also points to similar contingencies.

7.   See Baeten (2001) on the 'Europeanization' of Brussels itself.

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