

[Jonathan White](#)

## European integration by daylight

**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:** White, Jonathan (2010) *European integration by daylight*. [Comparative European Politics](#), 8 (1). pp. 55-73. ISSN 1472-4790

DOI: [10.1057/cep.2010.4](https://doi.org/10.1057/cep.2010.4)

© 2010 [Palgrave Macmillan](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/33111/>  
Available in LSE Research Online: February 2016

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

# European Integration by Daylight

Jonathan White

White, Jonathan (2010), 'European integration by daylight',  
*Comparative European Politics*, 8 (1). 55-73. ISSN 1472-4790

*It has become common to highlight the desirability of a more 'politicised' EU so as to counter the low visibility of its policy-making and the disaffection this may breed. Endorsing this view, the article argues existing contributions to the topic tend to give insufficient attention to the relationship between institutional settings and everyday life, and to underplay the significance of how political actors interpret and reproduce the social and political world. The article explores how one might reconsider these questions, drawing on some of the insights of cultural and pragmatic sociology to suggest that the important obstacles to further politicisation may be rooted in contemporary political culture. A contribution is thereby intended both to the topic in question and to a wider effort to supplement institutional perspectives in EU studies with those drawn from sociology.<sup>1</sup>*

'Politicisation' has become a term used widely in EU studies, an organising theme even. Sometimes the intended meaning is descriptive, as in the observation that the Brussels institutions have accrued responsibilities extending well beyond the socio-economic tasks of market creation (the latter understood as non-political), or that matters European have become controversial in the domestic politics of EU member-states (Hooghe & Marks 2008) (van der Eijk & Franklin 2004). Just as often it is understood as a *goal*. Politicisation in this sense is advanced as a remedy for a Union in malaise – a malaise originating in the way policy-making is pursued and the way citizens respond to it (Hix 2008). These meanings are clearly entwined, but this article accepts the focus of the latter. At its core therefore is a political-theoretical concern, not just an empirical puzzle.

The common thread of these more normative approaches to politicisation is the desirability of EU policy-making being further subject to contestation.<sup>2</sup> In a political system where non-elected institutions heavily inform policy-making, the practices of government take on a technocratic character that tends to conceal the value choices embedded in decision-making (Tsakatika 2007). That the public good might be a matter for clashing and competing interpretations, and that this might be essential to democratic politics, is commonly pushed to one side, either on the grounds that there exists a broad consensus on the objectives of policy-making, or with the notion that the 'effectiveness' of outcomes would be unacceptably harmed if dissenting views were acknowledged and engaged at each stage. Integration is in this sense 'by stealth' (Hayward 1996). Some may treat this as a matter of concern outright, and one can pursue an explicitly evaluative line of reasoning that seeks to show why such a set-up is undesirable and why politicisation is intrinsically of worth. Such

---

<sup>1</sup> Comments on an earlier draft were kindly offered by Volker Balli, Lea Ypi, Virginie van Ingelgom and fellow participants in the sociology workshop at the 2008 ECPR Joint Sessions in Rennes. The author additionally thanks the editors responsible for this issue, two anonymous referees who helped improve the piece, and the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung for funding a research fellowship at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

<sup>2</sup> Such approaches are based on an adversarialist conception of democracy; its normative appeal is beyond the scope of this article, but a good introduction is (Muirhead 2006).

an approach extends the ‘normative turn’ experienced in EU studies from the mid-1990s, in which the EU’s compatibility with democratic norms has been assiduously probed (Bellamy & Castiglione 2003) (Chrysochoou 2000).<sup>3</sup> Much of the existing literature on politicisation instead adopts a scientific perspective, arguing that the current arrangement has a negative effect on citizen attitudes towards the EU, and thus that politicisation is *instrumentally* relevant to the sustainability of European integration. To synthesise a number of arguments, the thesis is as follows: since the current EU regime offers few opportunities for organised political opposition, and those which exist have traditionally been weakly structured along partisan lines, citizens who are dissatisfied with events in Brussels have only the options either to disengage from political developments altogether, or to oppose the very idea of a European polity (Mair 2007). For a minimum of consent to appear one would instead need to see adversarial debate over opposing political programmes, for only then would it be possible for dissent to be expressed towards EU policies without this entailing a rejection of the polity outright (Hix 2008).<sup>4</sup> To be sure, even a politicised regime might ultimately come to be rejected, on grounds unrelated to the substance of its political programmes, but such an outcome would express greater nuance and democratic clarity than existing conditions permit. European integration, one may summarise, suffers if it lingers in the shadows.

Contributions to this topic tend to give some accent to the significance of views and practices beyond the Brussels institutions. The significance of public opinion, as something wider than the interplay between decision-makers and a small number of interest groups, is emphasised as a relevant factor in the EU’s development (Hooghe & Marks 2008), whether on purely empirical grounds or normative grounds also. To a degree then, the advent of the politicisation problematic in EU studies already marks something of an endorsement of sociological lines of thought on the EU (de Wilde 2007). If one can accept that a turn towards the wider European population(s) marks a shift towards the study of ‘society’, already one might want to speak circumspectly of a ‘sociological turn’, rather in the spirit of this special issue. However, such a turn has so far been cursory. There remains a need to study more closely not so much the behaviour of political representatives in Brussels but the extent to which citizens more widely attribute significance to this behaviour, and are invited to do so by the schemes of interpretation on which they draw. Moreover, there is a need to rethink more generally the nature of the relationship between political actors and society, and to introduce a more reflexive and less functional conception of actors such as the political party.

As will be argued, insofar as sociology can enrich this discussion, it requires that one resist reducing it to what some may consider its disciplinary core – the search for regularities of behaviour and the elaboration of non-individualist explanations for these – but that one treat it as a pluralistic

---

<sup>3</sup> For a treatment of these issues consistent with the concerns of this article, see (White, 2010 a).

<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this article, let us set aside those who fear it may prove unfeasible to politicise the substance of EU policy-making – its political ends – without politicising the procedures by which these are sought (Bartolini 2006).

discipline in which certain strands may be more appropriate to given tasks than others. The article therefore discusses the *kinds* of sociology that should be brought into discussions of politicisation, and seeks to undermine an image of sociology either as consciously disengaged from questions of political theory, or as so intent on causal explanation that little theoretical space is preserved for the exercise of creative agency. The merits of an interpretative political sociology are advanced, and some lines of empirical investigation centred on the language and imagery of political action described. Indication is thereby given of how one might study the politico-cultural factors likely to influence the success of efforts to expose European integration to greater scrutiny and debate.

### Rethinking Politicisation

Much of the existing literature on the EU's politicisation proceeds from a focus on the decision-making of its institutions, principally (though not solely) the behaviour of representatives in the European Parliament.<sup>5</sup> It is supposed that if parties in the Parliament are able to consolidate themselves by strengthening their organisational structures, forming stable coalitions with one another, and displaying consistent voting behaviour amongst their members, then a clear set of electoral choices will emerge which the voting public can engage with and thereby develop confidence in the EU as a political arena. The Parliament would then be in a position to push for greater powers vis-à-vis the other Brussels institutions and to subject more areas of policy-making to parliamentary scrutiny, thus moving closer to the politicisation of the 'governance practices' of the EU. Accordingly, empirical studies have looked at the stability of party groups in the Parliament, the extent to which these regulate the voting preferences of representatives, and how far the relative distribution of these preferences is consistent with their supposed distribution in the populations of the EU member-states. Researchers have conducted a series of sophisticated analyses of the voting patterns of MEPs seeking to establish whether a left-right axis can plausibly be projected onto their behaviour (Hix 2008) (Hix 2002), or whether new lines of contestation have emerged (Hooghe & Marks 2008).

Given that the premise for discussion is that many citizens are disconnected from, or hostile to, the processes of EU politics, this focus on the European Parliament may seem a suspect point of departure. Important as it is to examine whether conflict between political representatives is in some way structured, and whether those structures match those ostensibly found in the wider populations of EU member-states, this can hardly be the basis for a full account of politicisation. For even if one were able to show a numerical correspondence between political structuring at the 'elite' and the 'mass' level, whereby political groupings such as left and right were equally represented in each, this

---

<sup>5</sup> Decision-making in the Council and Commission is more rarely the focus, but see (Hix 2008).

would not be sufficient to indicate an active relation between the two. One would want to know not just whether there is adversarial debate taking place in Brussels that is *consistent* with wider political alignments, but whether such debate has public *resonance*. Specifically, one would want to know more about the extent to which citizens are aware of the conflicts taking place in Brussels, and the extent to which they look to them spontaneously as ‘their’ conflicts – i.e. conflicts in which they themselves are subjects, rather than just disputes between obscure and/or foreign elites. One would also be interested in the extent to which they see the policies these conflicts lead to as meaningful for their own experiences. Matters of perception are crucial. As or more important than whether political actors adapt, as organisations, to the new ‘political opportunity structure’ the EU offers to them (Beyers and Kerremans 2004) is the social meaning attributed to the conflicts they engage in.

This need not be an argument for the superiority of ‘bottom-up’ over ‘top-down’ approaches to the EU. While some sociologists favour this language (Favell 2006), it is misleading if taken to imply a separation of spheres (e.g. the political and the social, or the elites and masses) or a direction of causal dependence.<sup>6</sup> There is no reason to accord a priority of ontology to the views and experiences of ordinary citizens over those of their political representatives, since arguably some political actors – political parties at the national level, for instance – may have a critical role to play in *shaping* common understandings and perceptions rather than simply responding to existing ones. Parties need not be thought of as passive mechanisms of representation, any more than lay citizens are a passive audience to their activities. The key point is not that one should focus more on the ‘bottom’ than the ‘top’, but that one needs to focus on the relations that exist or do not exist *across* the various sites of activity.

This connects to a second demand, which is to avoid the temptation to conceptualise political reality in terms of given, pre-political elements. Most of the existing literature adopts an *aggregative* perspective on politics, whereby political outcomes are decided by changes in the quantitative distribution of certain units, whether these be ‘interests’, ‘preferences’, or, in more constructivist approaches, ‘identities’ and ‘values’. Public opinion tends to be conceived as the sum total of these given elements, and politics as what happens *after* they have made their appearance on the scene; after, for instance, preferences have been ‘revealed’. Political parties are understood accordingly as the means by which these pre-existing units are aggregated and promoted in conflict with those who oppose them, enabling them to be represented proportionately in the legislative chamber and, after a process of bargaining, to exert due influence on the course of policy-making (Lord 2006). What tends to be given insufficient attention is the significance of the process by which these units are formed (or in some cases left ill-defined), and the combination of constraints and possibilities for political conflict this opens out.

---

<sup>6</sup> Similarly problematic is the familiar distinction between ‘demand-side’ and ‘supply-side’ accounts of political behaviour.

Take for example cleavage theory, a common analytical perspective in the EU literature which sees the emergence of political preferences as a function of societal cleavages, notably those based on class, religion, and centre-periphery relations. In the classic rendition, such divisions are understood to be highly stable or ‘frozen’ (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), while in more recent accounts some emphasis is placed on the gradual emergence of new cleavages resulting from the shift to post-industrial society (Marks, Wilson and Ray 2002). The politicisation of the EU thus involves politics at the European level coming to be structured by these societal cleavages. Such an approach has a certain appeal, in that it keeps focus on the substantive ends around which political conflict takes place, something that may be a key factor in its wider resonance. Yet it neglects the extent to which societal cleavages are susceptible to purposeful re-description. Political actors arguably have a decisive role in *interpreting* the social and political world, and thereby elaborating the terms on which political conflict takes place. Their decisions are an important influence on which images of society are maintained and reproduced, which fall out of currency, and which new ones emerge. The danger of a cleavage-based perspective is that it downplays these choice-laden and potentially creative interventions.<sup>7</sup> It tends instead towards a kind of ‘groupism’: citizens come to be seen primarily as a function of their background – as the bearers of economic and socio-cultural structure, whether in the form of ‘interests’ or ‘identities’. Equally problematically, political conflict comes to be conceived in sedimented and dualistic terms without sensitivity to the ongoing possibilities for its transformation.<sup>8</sup>

Aggregation of some kind is always likely to be a central feature of democracy, given the importance of voting and the principle of majority rule. But some of the most politically significant developments occur well before the moment of aggregation, in the constitution of the field in question. A richer account of politicisation requires that one look into the formation of ‘preferences’, and further that one do this in ways that avoid reifying certain social divisions and associated social groupings. One needs to keep open, and make the subject of study, the construction of the constituencies to which political actors appeal and the ends which they seek to promote on their behalf.

This may be particularly so for two reasons. First, one of the widely observed tendencies in contemporary democracies is the rise of electoral instability, i.e. the decreasing willingness of citizens to display blind loyalty to one party but to reconsider their attachments from one election to the next, and for parties likewise to target new voters. Socio-cultural cleavages seem to be

---

<sup>7</sup> The more sophisticated accounts recognise this point (Hooghe and Marks 2008, p.23), but generally maintain it as an axiom rather than a pointer to one of the key aspects of political conflict.

<sup>8</sup> Note that there is a further dimension to this, to do with the epistemological commitments of political science which weigh strongly in favour of causal explanation as the goal of political analysis. Explanations and predictions of behaviour require the starting assumption that it is fairly structured and that orientations are durable across time. There is a strong temptation then to treat these as a function of socio-economic and cultural facts, and thereby as regulated by larger principles. The significance of interpretation, and the openness to re-interpretation, causes problems for a rigidly scientific perspective.

decreasingly reliable as a guide to voting behaviour and party politics (Mair 2008). This should already alert us to the potential importance of more interpretative perspectives which make fewer assumptions about the nature of social ties and their implications for political action. But second, also the peculiarities of the transnational context invite one to be particularly sensitive to departures from the conventional socio-cultural groupings. Adversarial political conflicts at a European level, insofar as they develop, are likely to entail the emergence of new forms of collective identification, new ways of understanding collective interests, and new narratives that invoke the EU as a plausible means to address shared political problems. When studying the prospects for the EU's politicisation, one needs to be particularly sensitive then to how the social and political world is interpreted and re-interpreted – and thereby changed, transformed or reproduced – and the factors influencing this.

Rethinking how one theorises politicisation is likely to require rethinking the methods by which it is empirically researched. Much of the work on this subject relies on data drawn from opinion polls and voting records, whether centred on party representatives or lay citizens. These techniques seem insufficient for a number of reasons. First, they sit uneasily with the starting assumption that large numbers of citizens are weakly engaged in the activities of the EU. If this is so, opinion polls are likely to tap rather superficial opinions, while voting data will inevitably report on the behaviour only of an active and engaged minority (cf. the low percentages that vote in European elections). These are problems essential to the method: polls necessarily direct the respondent's attention towards the topic of research interest, and are therefore always liable to inflate the respondent's level of concern with it. Rather than asking people for their opinions on 'Europe' and the EU, and classing responses with cluster-terms such as 'euro-scepticism', what is needed are studies that explore the extent to which these form natural reference-points in people's everyday lives. One needs methods that can study *dis*-engagement and *in*-action, i.e. the behaviour of a silent majority.

Second, polling methods are ill-suited to studying matters of interpretation and the ideational world, which are central to the study of political conflict. Polls are designed to aggregate succinct items of information which can then be analysed for patterns of correlation and compared across time and space: hence the focus on responses to short-answer questioning. If, on the other hand, one wants to study people's level of involvement in political conflict and the extent to which they feel implicated in its outcome, one will want to examine a whole series of complex issues to do with how they understand the nature of politics and political agency, how far they connect problems in everyday life to wider struggles, how they define the 'we' who is engaged in these struggles, and how far they see these problems as susceptible to collective address. Likewise when looking at organised political actors, one will be interested not simply in whether labels such as 'left' or 'right' can be feasibly attached to certain individuals, nor even whether those individuals themselves accept such labels, but in the deeper patterns of assumption in which such concepts are enmeshed, and

which enable and constrain the engagement in adversarial politics. Crucially, these are all aspects of tacit understanding, part of the taken-for-granted practical knowledge that structures behaviour and the formation of opinions. Opinion-poll researchers do not engage in the in-depth probing required to uncover these tacit aspects – this is not goal they set themselves – and therefore an alternative, more interpretative set of methods is likely to be necessary. As will be indicated below, certain ethnographic approaches developed in political sociology are of particular relevance here.

### Towards an Interpretative Political Sociology

So far little has been said about the need for more ‘sociological’ perspectives and the kind of sociology which might be required. Perhaps from the perspective of a student of politics this will seem natural enough: other disciplines tend to seem more homogeneous than one’s own, and many political scientists may feel they have a good sense of what a ‘sociological account’ would entail. But this may be because the penetration of political study by sociology has so far been limited to a rather narrow range of sociological ideas. By far the most common appropriations have been from Talcott Parsons’ structural functionalism, leading to a large number of political-scientific works whose sociological component is an emphasis on norms and values (Favell 2005). This represents of course just a small fraction of sociology’s intellectual resources, and arguably one which is disconnected from contemporary social-theoretical developments (Reckwitz 2002). Moreover, they may be amongst the least appropriate for incorporation into political study. The figure of *homo sociologicus* as the passive follower of law-like norms and the unreflexive creature of values seems remote indeed from the ideas of human freedom that underpin even the most minimalist understanding of democracy. A sociology whose prime concern is with the identification of behavioural regularities, and which therefore has determinist implications, is likely to fit awkwardly with research that has a political-theoretical dimension. Particularly a research field such as the present one, to do with the polity-forming effects of adversarial conflict, resists combination with such a perspective, given that collective political struggle involves a critical disposition towards the status quo and a degree of reflexivity about the ends worthy of pursuit.

Some of the more promising work may instead be found in recent contributions to cultural and pragmatic sociology (Lamont and Thévenot 2000) (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) (Sewell 2005). At the most general level, the appeal of these approaches lies in their combined attention to, on the one hand, the macro features of the symbolic world which lay down certain parameters to what people are able and willing to do, and which encourage certain courses of action over others, and on the other hand the possibilities which remain open to individuals in specific situations to exert some level of choice in their actions and thereby to influence and reshape those same social

structures. The notion of ‘cultural availability’ is used to give a sense of both structure and agency without prioritising one to the exclusion of the other, and without parcelling up the social world into neatly defined groups marked by high levels of internal homogeneity. The result is a perspective which avoids an a-sociological tendency to voluntarism, since it is recognised that actors proceed from a limited range of ideational resources, yet which also allows space for interpretation and creativity, and thus the exercise of political will – two prerequisites of an adequate approach to a topic such as politicisation.

Moreover, to a greater degree than earlier formulations of the duality of structure, these approaches translate well into programmes for empirical research. As several works have indicated, the study of symbolic boundaries, cultural repertoires, orders of worth, discursive practices, and modes of justification and critique, can be brought together with rich results (Lamont and Thévenot 2000) (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006) (Lamont and Molnár 2002). In one notable instance, using as case-studies two environmental disputes in France and the US, Laurent Thévenot and his co-authors examine the varied logics of argumentation actors pursue when seeking to justify their political positions and the wider cultural patterns these express. As part of their findings, they show how participants to dispute generally seek to ground their views by appealing to the public good, and that how they construe this good varies in culturally significant ways. Actors show a marked tendency to evoke certain evaluative registers and forms of evidence more frequently than others: in the US case (more so than the French one), market-based conceptions of worth are regularly offered, backed by cost-benefit data emphasising the potential revenue and economic growth offered by a certain course of action and the dubious worth of opposing proposals. How this register of evaluation comes to be matched against alternative ones also differs across settings: in the one, a market-based notion of worth comes to be articulated with civic and green notions, as public opinion and environmental sustainability are invoked as supporting ideas, while in the other market values are regarded as antithetical to these notions and explicitly *criticised* from such viewpoints (Thévenot, Moody and Lafaye 2000). The study provides a rich empirical indication of how political actors may deploy cultural resources to pragmatic effect in the micro situation while at the same time exhibiting dispositions that are ordered at the macro level. While presented as a cross-national comparison, its more general significance lies in highlighting the role played by prevalent structures of meaning in shaping the forms that political conflict takes. Interpretative research methods such as these offer good possibilities for combination with established approaches inspired by ethnographers such as Erving Goffman (frame analysis in particular) and with the wide range of textualist approaches inspired by the philosophy of Austin and the later Wittgenstein.

How might such ideas be brought to bear on the study of political conflict in the EU? First they are suggestive of how one might re-conceptualise the conditions for politicisation. Adopting the idea of cultural availability, one can propose that political adversarialism at a European level

requires the widespread availability in EU populations of those ideational resources that can ‘make sense’ of the EU as a political arena and invite citizens to participate in efforts to influence its political agenda. Amongst such elements will be, for instance, basic assumptions about the existence of political problems in need of address; ways of seeing these problems (e.g. their origins and their effects) such that proposals to tackle them at a specifically European level can be made to seem justifiable; and certain forms of collective identification which cut across national boundaries and thereby give meaning to political conflict at a transnational level. Such elements need not be cognitivised and treated as the properties of specific individuals (as beliefs, identities, personal values, etc.), but can be seen as repertoires commonly available to them as part of the social world they inhabit.

Second, these social-theoretical ideas point to how any advance in politicisation will depend on the ability of actors in society to elaborate and diffuse new ideational resources of the kind described. One may suppose this type of innovation is most likely amongst those who are politically organised, who command media attention and have the opportunity to lend governmental authority to their ideas – amongst the activists who make up national political parties, social movements and certain think-tanks, for example. Yet seeing politicisation as ultimately a matter of discursive innovation allows one to avoid a purely institutional focus, and the attendant separation of the social and political spheres, since one need make no overarching assumption about the lesser significance of other sites of activity. Furthermore, this perspective allows one to sidestep the tendency towards a groupist ontology: not only can one avoid seeing the basis of political conflict in terms of fixed social configurations ordered by material determinants in the manner of cleavage theory, but one can also see the protagonists themselves as complex ideational constellations rather than bounded social units. Parties and social movements, for example, can be treated not so much as unitary actors whose behaviour is structured by clearly defined organisational interests, but as evolving compromises between different sets of symbolic boundaries and evaluative registers, the different elements of which may come to the fore differently in the particular situation.

Third, this perspective directs attention towards the constraints on those who would seek to introduce and promote the kind of innovation described. It suggests these constraints may consist not so much in unambiguous social facts but in the ways the social and political world comes to be represented and experienced (Lamont and Thévenot 2000). One may suppose that the ability of politically motivated citizens such as movement activists to re-imagine the social and political world, and thus engage in adversarial politics to promote new ways of conceiving it, is limited by the ideational conditions in which they find themselves. For like all citizens they operate within a field of sedimented meanings and taken-for-granted ideas – a field that depends largely on their choices for its reproduction, but one constraining to the individual actor nonetheless. The ability to articulate challenges to the status quo – the essence of politicisation – depends on the availability of vantage-

points in this field from which to develop critiques (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006). At risk of overstating its uniformity, one might speak of this field as the *political culture* such actors inhabit. Not the least of its sources will be the successful ideational initiatives of other political actors past and present, whose achievements determine their point of departure.

A common objection to perspectives such as these is that they are insufficiently attentive to the *non-symbolic* forms of social structure apt to bear on political action just as much as does the distribution of ‘repertoires’, ideational resources, and the like. The way in which, for instance, economic, institutional and legal structures relate to structures of symbolic practice is arguably under-explored in these approaches, notwithstanding some of the positive consequences of this neglect – notably that the space for political agency is not closed prematurely – and notwithstanding the fact that it need not deprive these approaches of their potential relevance to social and political critique (Silber 2003). Sociologists in the Bourdieusian tradition will want to know more about the kinds of social structure which grant added authority to the efforts of some actors to order and capitalise on the symbolic world, and about the kinds of influence bound up in the properties of the speaker (Bourdieu 1991). Such concerns need not however trigger a return to the familiar array of sociological approaches which set up a hierarchy of structures and make it axiomatic that the symbolic-ideational is determined by factors external to it. Instead, what is needed is the study of the interplay between material and symbolic aspects of reality in the particular moment. Asserting that the structures of the ideational world are never fully determined by institutional, legal and economic structures by no means precludes the examination of how, in given historical instances, changes in the latter may open up or narrow down the possibilities for change in the former (Thévenot, Moody and Lafaye 2000). Moments of political and economic crisis, whether in the extreme cases of war, revolution and economic catastrophe, or in the more prosaic cases of political scandal and economic uncertainty, may be when understandings of the social and political world are most susceptible to change.<sup>9</sup> Ideational structures may thus be ‘disciplined’ by changes in the material world without being sharply determined by them.

### Some Lines of Empirical Research

There are a number of research projects which might proceed from these reflections. The first would be to study the extent to which, in the sense outlined, contemporary EU politics can be judged as (de)politicised. An existing line of research has examined for instance the degree to which ordinary citizens recognise problems needing public address, the extent to which they see political institutions

---

<sup>9</sup> An absorbing study of the interplay between ideological and socio-economic practices in the wake of the French 1968 is (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006).

as a plausible means to tackle them, and how far they invoke the EU as the relevant political arena. A tendency to evoke ‘problems without solutions’ suggests the ideational resources required to make sense of political conflict and political agency may be somewhat lacking, and the ensuing political fatalism poses a challenge for political authority at the national as well as the European level (White 2009) (White, 2010 b). A second field of study would look at some of the obstacles that exist to the emergence of more positive ideational resources. Principled euro-scepticism is undoubtedly one: those opposed to the idea of a European polity clearly have no incentive to make available the kinds of perspective that would support it. In other cases, insights can undoubtedly be drawn from some of the existing accounts of politicisation that point either to the internal dynamics of parties (Ladrech 2007), to the incentives created by the allocation of institutional competences within the EU regime (Lord 2006), or to the constraints posed by existing ideational commitments developed within the context of the nation-state (Bartolini 2005). But, drawing on the sociological approaches outlined above, it should be possible to identify further factors of significance to do with key features of contemporary European political culture. Without pre-empting its systematic study, one might point to a few sensitising ideas as follows.

First, it has been widely noted that political debate has come to be played out in the language and imagery of the individual. Parties, for instance, are styled increasingly around individual *personalities* rather than programmatic ideas: the projected image of party leaders – their supposed strength of character, their personal beliefs, their ‘back-story’ – becomes the key elements in the party ‘brand’, resulting in a trend towards so-called ‘celebrity politics’ (Meyer and Hinchman 2002). Parties tend increasingly also to articulate their constituency in atomised terms (as the *taxpayer*, the *consumer*, etc.) rather than as one or several collective agents.<sup>10</sup> Collective forms of subjecthood, such as those based on left and right, are deployed less frequently, and more weakly connected to distinctive political programmes (Furedi 2005). While political groupings based on left and right may persist as organisational denominations and intellectual constructs, they may slowly be being emptied of their wider resonance (a trend which, gradual and even temporary though it may be, is another reason to be sceptical of studies of politicisation centred mainly on the voting patterns of political representatives). Importantly, the decision to adopt such strategies is in no sense inevitable: arguably they are induced not so much by the demands of modern politics, the modern media, or by processes of globalisation, but by the *assumptions* which partisans and others make of these (Meyer and Hinchman 2002). The outcome is that political debate comes to be ‘starved’ of the collective forms of identification needed for will-formation and the advance of political claims. Political sociologists have observed that one of the crucial stimuli to political engagement on the part

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. for instance debates in European countries from 2007 onwards concerning whether to guarantee the survival of private banks with public funds: the key question was repeatedly framed as ‘will the taxpayer get their money back?’ Such formulations individualise the public, and emphasise the constraints and burdens that fall on individuals rather than a wider public, as well as positioning these individuals as passive spectators of developments elsewhere.

of citizens is the availability of a sense of ‘we’ who must act collectively to counter the political demands of ‘them’ (Gamson 1992). One may suppose that where mainstream parties fail to articulate a sense of collective political subjecthood and to affirm the possibility of collective action, citizens are likely either to become decreasingly politically engaged (perhaps seeking an ethnic form of collectivity which makes no claim on the political scene, or restricting their engagement to single-issue campaigns) or, as one sees frequently in contemporary European politics, to be attracted by those so-called populist parties which *do* construct their constituencies in collective terms (as ‘the people’), albeit in anti-democratic ways such that the established political system itself is positioned as the adversary. Lacking suitable modes of subjecthood, democratic forms of critique become difficult to articulate. Clearly the impact of such trends is likely to be felt on politics at the national just as much as the EU level, but they may be especially damaging in the context of a political arena requiring the formation of cross-national collective allegiances.<sup>11</sup>

A further idea of importance is the thesis that contemporary European politics is increasingly played out in a moral register (Mouffe 2005) or a technocratic register (Burnham 2001) rather than a political one. There is a tendency, in other words, for political choices to be framed and justified in absolute terms (‘right vs wrong’, ‘sensible vs nonsensical’, ‘efficient vs inefficient’) rather than in terms which accept the possibility of reasonable disagreement, again as in the sense of right vs left.<sup>12</sup> One may think of it as a disavowal of the conditions which make partisanship necessary, and it has evident consequences for the vitality of political adversarialism. First, when this way of thinking becomes prevalent amongst those with governmental authority, it may lead to transfers of decision-making powers to non-majoritarian institutions, since the necessity of political debate may be overlooked and political disagreement may come to seem unreasonable.<sup>13</sup> Rather than acknowledging plural and potentially conflicting conceptions of worth which must be adjudicated in the political process, a consensual model will prevail, supporting an institutional regime rather like the present EU where, formally at least, the potential for political conflict to inform policy-making in certain areas is quite constrained.<sup>14</sup> Second – and perhaps even more significant, given that such institutional transfers are reversible and tend anyway to leave considerable powers in the hands of politicians – is the depoliticising effect this way of framing politics may have on citizens themselves. Technocratic policy-making tends to rely on language

---

<sup>11</sup> Note that such trends may be particularly pronounced in the EU context, given the EU’s reliance on rights-based legislation addressed to the individual, e.g. as ‘consumer’ or ‘patient’ (Chalmers 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Cultural dualisms such as ‘moderate vs extreme’ also exert a limiting effect here, implying dissenting perspectives are dubious simply because in relative terms they are radical.

<sup>13</sup> Such transfers may be further encouraged by a separate widely-disseminated *leitmotif*: that narrow self-interest is the principal motivation of the ‘political class’ – cf. (Hay 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Analogously to the US case described in (Thévenot, Moody and Lafaye 2000), one could expect not just that one evaluative register comes to prevail (most likely that of the market) but also the expectation that its relationship with other registers (e.g. those associated with environmentalism and citizenship) is a harmonious one. Though such views may remain contested at the margins, they nevertheless undermine one of the important bases for political contestation: critique of one register by the logic of another.

unintelligible beyond a small circle of experts, generating mysteriousness about the logic it follows and the ends it serves, and dulling the critiques which might be made of it.<sup>15</sup> Further, when political elites adopt these moral or technocratic modes of evaluation, they discourage other citizens from sensing the necessity of political engagement: those who become convinced that they are ‘right’ and that all competing perspectives are either ‘mad’ or ‘bad’ will see little reason why they should press a political claim in support of their views, since it will seem that history is on their side and only patience is required. Politics in a moral or technocratic register tends to be coupled with a sense of the inevitable, and this is likely to encourage political withdrawal.<sup>16</sup> Times of crisis may be particularly worthy of study here: on the one hand it is in such moments that orthodoxies are questioned and that claims to know the right answers may be weakened, yet on the other this is when deterministic arguments appealing to immovable material constraints are most fervently advanced.

Finally, an important influence on how politics comes to be articulated, and the extent to which adversarialism is engaged in, will be the meanings commonly attached to key concepts in the vocabulary of political actors. The patterns of language usage they encounter will encourage certain interpretations of the social and political world over others, in turn shaping what these actors project onto the wider society and the political programmes they are able to justify to citizens. The concept of ‘freedom’ – central to the political language of all democracies – is an interesting case in point. Contemporary political philosophers distinguish between different conceptions of liberty, sometimes termed liberal ‘non-interference’, communitarian ‘self-mastery’, and republican ‘non-domination’ (Pettit 1997). It is generally observed that, while there have been historical settings in which each has had a degree of pre-eminence, in contemporary western democracies the first of these meanings tends to dominate. It is, amongst other things, a master-element in the contemporary ‘spirit of capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006). This is likely to have implications for the politicisation of an EU polity long defined by its ‘four freedoms’ (Dobson 2004). Liberty as non-interference appeals to the personal freedom of the individual to proceed with his/her affairs unimpeded as far as possible by external, human-imposed obstacles. It forms the basis for constitutional rights, and is therefore an important component in the self-understanding of any democratic regime; yet taken on its own it offers little prospect for conjuring a sense of collective political subjecthood amongst citizens, and is liable to render most forms of governmental intervention initially suspect. Those who adopt this conception of liberty will then probably incline towards a minimalist understanding of the EU as an area of free movement rather than seek to encourage citizens to influence its political

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the Bank of England’s proposals on ‘quantitative easing’ in spring 2009, a term picked up widely in media coverage of the economic crisis but hardly likely to elucidate its origins or possible remedies. Obfuscation can of course be strategic.

<sup>16</sup> The moralising of political debate may also lead to a heightened concern with personal hypocrisy: whether an individual is morally *entitled* to make a certain argument, based on their actions or other statements, may come to seem more deserving of attention than the substance of the argument itself. Thus it may be decided for example that the most salient feature of a climate-change conference is the carbon footprints of the conference attendees. The ideas-based politics necessary for meaningful political conflict again becomes weakened.

agenda. It is the emphasis on freedom as self-mastery or non-domination which may better invite politicisation, since then collective political claims aimed at achieving such freedoms are likely to better resonate. But insofar as the one type of usage is encountered more than its alternatives, the ideological work required to reshape the concept's meaning rather than reproduce it will be all the greater.

Each of these constraints on the ideational change required to politicise the EU seems deserving of closer attention, together with others one might mention.<sup>17</sup> If some of these equally raise questions for democracy at the national level, this should serve to remind how the experiences of the two are entwined. As a fledgling polity, and one whose sustained viability requires new bonds of attachment to develop, the challenges facing the EU are more pronounced. But they need not be seen as peculiar to the one type of polity, for they are challenges for political association more generally.

## Conclusion

As several EU scholars have come to note, political adversarialism concerning the ends of policy-making is arguably a crucial part of democratic life, one that may serve not only the normatively desirable purpose of giving expression to the political grievances of citizens but which may additionally serve a polity-building role. It helps to bind citizens to their political institutions, and to create bonds of principle between themselves and sub-groups of their fellow citizens. While conflict over substantive ends may sometimes spill into conflict over procedures also, the chances of a full rejection of the polity are probably diminished if there exists the possibility to contest its policies rather than the necessity of accepting them wholesale. Organised political conflict is likely to be a necessary condition of any satisfactory consolidation of the EU. Yet political conflict which fails to resonate beyond the confines of an institutional setting can hardly perform this role. The activities of political representatives need to correspond to the inclinations of citizens more widely, not so much in the eyes of the detached political observer who charts an overlap in the preference-structures of the two, but in the eyes of protagonists themselves. Moreover, a sense of popular involvement in the political struggles played out at a European level is unlikely to emerge spontaneously based on a recognition of self-evident interests, but instead will need fostering by

---

<sup>17</sup> Such lines of investigation may be given further contextual sensitivity by examining how language and imagery are developed differently for different audiences, or are distributed unevenly across positions in socio-economic and organisational space – central concerns of pragmatic and structuralist sociology respectively. Exploration of such variations might be coupled with study of the destabilising effects of contradiction. (For a recent study of class variations, see Fligstein 2008.)

those political actors which choose to exercise their capacity for reinterpreting the social and political world and to expand their political struggles to a transnational level.

Bringing certain sociological ideas to bear on the politicisation problematic promises to enrich the conceptualisation of this process. It allows one to elaborate a perspective faithful both to the inescapable element of creativity and will that characterises political action, and to the constraints imposed by the actor's embeddedness in a certain ideational setting. Further, it enables one to conceptualise how the perspectives of ordinary citizens may relate to those of their most politically-engaged peers without evoking the somewhat determinist tones of cleavage theory. Drawing on empirical methods related to these approaches, one can trace how certain ideational features in particular may undermine the extent to which politicisation takes place, and explore how the variety of factors combine in the specificity of a given historical moment.

It may be that sociologists too can derive some benefit from this encounter with the concerns of another discipline. There is a sense in which anyone engaged in social theory is at once doing political theory at the same time, since where the social theorist sketches the boundaries of order and contingency is where they set the limits to the exercise of political initiative. The EU case generally is a stimulating one for sociology, as it forces a reappraisal of some of its most basic concepts – 'society' most notably – and their conventional association with the nation-state. The matter of the EU's democratisation through politicisation has the potential to be interesting in a further way, as it raises the question whether this reappraisal can be combined with an opening to political-theoretical concerns. For those sociological approaches most receptive to this challenge, it offers a context in which they may be developed and refined.

## References

- Bartolini, Stefano (2005), *Restructuring Europe: Centre Formation, System Building and Political Structuring between the Nation-State and the European Union* (Oxford: OUP).
- (2006), 'Should the Union be 'Politicised'? Prospects and Risks', *Notre Europe Working Paper: Politics: The Right or the Wrong Sort of Medicine for the EU?*.
- Bellamy, Richard and Castiglione, Dario (2003), 'Legitimizing the Euro-'polity' and its 'Regime': The Normative Turn in EU Studies', *European Journal of Political Theory* 2 (1).
- Beyers, Jan and Kerremans, Bart (2004), 'Bureaucrats, Politicians, and Societal Interests: How is European policy making politicized?' *Comparative Political Studies*, 37 (10).
- Boltanski, Luc and Thévenot, Laurent (2006), *On Justification: Economies of Worth* (Princeton: PUP).
- Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Eve (2006), *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso).
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1991), *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity).
- Burnham, Peter (2001), 'New Labour and the Politics of Depoliticisation', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 3 (2).
- Chalmers, Damian (2009), 'Gauging the Cumbersomeness of EU Law', *LSE Europe in Question Series (LEQS)*, Paper 2.
- Chrysochoou, Dimtris (2000), 'Meta-theory and the study of the European union: Capturing the normative turn', *Journal of European Integration* 22 (2), pp.123-44.
- de Wilde, Pieter (2007), 'Politicisation of European Integration: Bringing the Process into Focus', *ARENA Working Papers* 18.
- Dobson, Lynn (2004), 'Conceptions of Freedom and the European Constitution', in Lynn Dobson and Andreas Follesdal (eds.), *Political Theory and the European Constitution* (London: Routledge).

- Favell, Adrian (2006), 'The Sociology of EU Politics', in Knud Erik Jorgensen, Mark Pollack, and Ben Rosamond (eds.), *The Handbook of EU Politics* (London: Sage).
- (2005), 'Review Article: Europe's Identity Problem', *West European Politics* 28 (5), pp.1109-16.
- Fligstein, Neil (2008), *Euroclash: the EU, European Identity, and the Future of Europe* (Oxford: OUP).
- Furedi, Frank (2005), *Politics of Fear* (London: Continuum).
- Gamson, William (1992), *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: CUP).
- Hay, Colin (2007), *Why We Hate Politics* (Cambridge: Polity).
- Hayward, Jack (1996), 'Conclusion: Has European Unification by Stealth a Future?', in Hayward (ed.) *Elitism, Populism and European Politics* (Oxford: OUP), pp.252-5.
- Hix, Simon (2002), 'Parliamentary Behaviour with two Principals: Preferences, Parties and Voting in the European Parliament', *American Journal of Political Science*, 46 (3).
- (2008), *What's wrong with the European Union and how to fix it* (Cambridge: Polity).
- Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks (2009) 'A Postfunctional Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus', *British Journal of Political Science* 39 (1).
- Ladrech, Robert (2007), 'National Political Parties and European Governance: The Consequences of 'Missing in Action'', *West European Politics*, 30 (5).
- Lamont, Michèle and Molnár, Virág (2002), 'The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28.
- Lamont, Michèle and Thévenot, Laurent (eds.) (2000), *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology* (Cambridge: CUP).
- Lipset, Seymour and Rokkan, Stein (eds.) (1967), *Party Systems and Voter Alignments* (New York: Free).
- Lord, Christopher (2006), 'The Aggregating Function of Political Parties in EU Decision-Making', *Living Reviews in European Governance*, 1 (2).
- Mair, Peter (2007), 'Political Opposition and the European Union', *Government and Opposition*, 42 (1).
- (2008), 'The Challenge to Party Government', *West European Politics*, 31 (1).
- Marks, Gary, Wilson, Carole J., and Ray, Leonard (2002), 'National Political Parties and European Integration', *American Journal of Political Science*, 46 (3).
- Meyer, Thomas and Hinchman, Lew (2002), *Media Democracy: How the Media Colonise Politics* (Cambridge: CUP).
- Mouffe, Chantal (2005), *On the Political* (London: Verso).
- Muirhead, Russell (2006), 'A Defence of Party Spirit', *Perspectives on Politics* 4(4).
- Pettit, Philip (1997), *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon).
- Reckwitz, Andreas (2002), 'Towards a Theory of Social Practices: A Development in Culturalist Theorising', *European Journal of Social Theory* 5(2).
- Sewell, William H. (2005), 'Refiguring the 'Social' in Social Science: An Interpretivist Manifesto', in William H. JR. Sewell (ed.), *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (London: University of Chicago Press).
- Silber, Ilana Friedrich (2003), 'Pragmatic Sociology as Cultural Sociology: Beyond Repertoire Theory?' *European Journal of Social Theory*, 6 (4).
- Thévenot, Laurent, Michael Moody and Claudette Lafaye (2000), 'Forms of Valuing Nature: Arguments and Modes of Justification in French and American Environmental Disputes', in Lamont and Thévenot (eds.) (2000), *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology* (Cambridge: CUP).
- Tsakatika, Myrto (2007), 'Governance vs Politics: the European Union's Constitutive "Democratic Deficit"', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 14 (6).
- van der Eijk, Cees, and Franklin, Mark N. (2004) 'Potential for Contestation on European Matters at National Elections in Europe', in Gary Marks and Marco R. Steenbergen (eds), *European Integration and Political Conflict* (Cambridge: CUP).
- White, Jonathan (2009), 'Thematization and Collective Positioning in Everyday Political Talk', *British Journal of Political Science* 39 (4), pp.699-709.
- (2010 a), 'Europe and the Common', *Political Studies* 58 (1).
- (2010 b), 'Europe in the Political Imagination', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 48 (4).