Jonathan White
Europe in the political imagination

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Europe in the Political Imagination

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'The idea was to build up the markets there. That was the point of the thing I think, the enlargement of the EU – Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia etc. – to build up new markets there, so that the people there can also, how should I say, boost the economy here, so they can buy the products which are produced here. It was already noted even back then – I can remember – in the political discussion that things would turn out as they have now, with this migration [of companies] to the East. It was known even then, when all this was opened up. It was done anyway though, and now … you asked earlier what can be done about it, it sounds very hard and sad when I say it, but actually nothing. It has its own dynamic, the door has been opened and now it's open! You can't close it any more.'
Ralf, taxi-driver, Würzburg (Germany)

In normative debates on the European Union, the argument is sometimes made that the allegiance of citizens to a transnational polity should be based on the opportunities it provides for promoting political goals. Rather than locating community in some 'sense of Europeanness', centred on facts or perceptions of cultural commonality, or a supposed identity of constitutional values, this view holds that the collective bond should be that of a 'community of projects' (Nicolaidis 2004, p.103); also (Morgan 2005). Such a view need by no means imply a technocratic understanding of the polity – plenty of scope may be afforded for deliberation and dispute concerning the goals to be pursued and the policies appropriate to them – but the suggestion is that citizens should regard the polity as something that responds to substantive concerns rather than something expressive of a unity of attributes or beliefs.

This paper presupposes there are good reasons for adopting this perspective on EU citizenship, but does not seek to engage directly in this normative debate. Rather it explores how far there exists the ideational background necessary for such a perspective to resonate with EU citizens. At a general level, it proposes that only if such a perspective sits well with existing understandings of what may be achieved politically, or if these are adapted to accord with it, is it likely to achieve plausibility amongst a wider population. Empirically, the paper examines some of the recurrent motifs of political

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understanding voiced by a series of EU citizens in interaction, and how these relate to the political significance they ascribe to the EU.

A project-oriented conception of the EU would seem to demand that citizens regard decision-making at a European level as appropriate to tackling at least some of the political problems they consider important. For these, Europe-wide measures would have to make sense in principle, even if the EU in its current form were thought deficient. One can rephrase this as a two-step requirement. First, citizens would need to assume that the problems of significance to them are susceptible to *some kind* of organised address, whether centred on governmental institutions or collective action with other citizens, and that they are not simply unavoidable 'facts of life', or issues that can be sufficiently dealt with by individual adaptation alone. Second, for at least some such problems there would need to be the conviction that it is both feasible and necessary for them to be tackled at a European level, rather than in a context more local or more global.[2]

The study presented here looks at the perspectives expressed in a series of group discussions with taxi-drivers in Britain, Germany and the Czech Republic. It examines how speakers talk about the political problems of significance to them, notably their origins and susceptibility to remedy, and the ways they evoke, or choose not to, the relevance of the EU. Important variations across issue-area are highlighted using the empirically-derived categories of *Economics*, *Relations between Peoples*, and *Society and the Law*. The paper shows how the way problems tend to be explained, combined with expectations concerning their susceptibility to address, generally forecloses common action at the European level as a convincing proposition. Rather than contributing to the EU's political credibility, these patterns of understanding invite it to be seen as largely irrelevant to certain sets of problem, while powerless to control, and indeed liable to exacerbate, others. The paper thus develops a variegated picture of how far, and in what ways, 'Europe' and the EU are spontaneously invoked as reference-points when citizens make sense of their everyday circumstances (Meinhof 2004).

Such an approach differs sharply from quantitative studies in this area. When polls are used to probe views on the EU, the goal is to identify positive or negative attitudes towards a clearly defined

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[2] Other potentially relevant dispositions include willingness to regard citizens elsewhere in the EU as sufficiently like-minded to be partners in pursuit of these goals, and decision-makers sufficiently trustworthy to act on 'our' behalf. These are beyond this paper, though cf. (White 2010a) and (White 2010b).

object, whether European integration as a whole, its constituent policies, or the citizens of other member-states (Kohli 2000) (Hooghe & Marks 2007) (Duchesne 2008). Political community is conceived in terms of citizens' willingness to express explicit support or affective engagement. Conversely, studying interventions in a conversational setting, one can refocus attention on the assembly of reference-points people take for granted and the underlying repertoires of interpretation that structure (or inhibit) the formation of attitudes – on the 'political imagination', as it may conveniently be described.[3] One can examine, for example, not just whether speakers consider EU enlargement good or bad, but the sense in which they consider it, like Ralf in the extract cited, almost inevitable, something with 'its own dynamic' scarcely responsive to political deliberation. Drawing on political-sociological approaches rarely applied in the EU context (Gamson 1992; Perrin 2006), the paper investigates how the EU is conjured in the patterns of everyday political talk.

Why Talk to Taxi-Drivers?

If taxi-drivers are worth speaking to, perhaps the reader will assume this is because their views are held representative of a social group of particular significance. Such an argument can certainly be made: the majority of taxi-drivers in EU members-states occupy the socio-economic space extending, on a conventional stratification scale, from the working- to the lower-middle classes, and while theories of mobilisation weigh their significance differently (Eder 1995), such classes and their political dispositions are from many perspectives important. But there is no need thus to suppose either that taxi-drivers across the EU form a coherent social group, or that they themselves are actors of special consequence. A better argument centres on the kinds of experience taxi-driving exposes its practitioners to: on the one hand they are in a position of heightened sensitivity to political developments such as changes in prices or spending behaviour, criminal activity, or the arrival of immigrant labour, while on the other they are exposed to a wide range of opinion stimuli – newspapers, radio, conversations with clients – ensuring theirs is not an isolated speech community. Furthermore, the *self-understanding* (Brubaker & Cooper 2000) of many taxi-drivers is arguably as

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[3] The term is metaphorical, since we are dealing with trans-individual patterns of meaning rather than private cognition.

people of commonsense; whereas academics or artists may set store by originality, taxi-drivers seem less inclined to emphasise the distinctiveness of their views. Furthermore, their daily experiences do not invite unusually strong sympathy or antipathy towards the EU. There is therefore reason to suppose that – alongside certain idiosyncratic concerns peculiar to taxi-drivers – one may find in their discussion, in a particularly concentrated form, some of the tacit assumptions and interpretative motifs dispersed more widely amongst citizens.[4]

For this research, conducted between October 2004 and August 2005, groups of three to four drivers were assembled for two-hour discussions in ten mid-sized European cities – Reading, Swansea and Norwich in Britain; Plzeň, Liberec and Ostrava in the Czech Republic; and Erfurt, Lübeck, Kassel and Würzburg in Germany.[5] These cities exhibit geographical spread and historical diversity, notably regarding the consolidation of democracy and the experience of foreign rule, yet continuity in the character of taxi-driving: it tends to be a full-time occupation, involving long-term residents rather than recent arrivals. The study's aim was to identify patterns of discursive practice widely present across the different sites, together with some of the salient variations between them. Using group discussions allowed the researcher to minimise his interventions so as to study the kinds of knowledge and understanding participants expect of each other (Duchesne & Haegel 2007) (Gamson 1992).

The discussions were loosely structured. Approximately the first twenty minutes involved a categorisation exercise, designed to provoke a discussion in which one could study the importance speakers attributed to various political problems, how these were assumed to fit together, and the concepts used to link them. Participants were invited to cluster a series of thematic index-cards according to 'what goes naturally with what', justifying their choices as they did so, and then to discuss how best to summarise each grouping with a heading.[6] The researcher probed where necessary to encourage speakers to clarify their criteria of categorisation, recording the new headings

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[4] How these may be found in differing proportions across different social groupings is not the focus here, but is explored in an ongoing project on 'Citizens Talking about Europe' (CITES) in Britain, France and Belgium – cf. 'Conference on European Citizenship Revisited', Oxford University, 23rd June 2008.

[5] There were 37 participants in total. Those in each group were generally acquaintances, and often in conversation when approached.

[6] Seventeen cards designed by the author were used, each consisting of two images and a verbal caption as follows: Peace & War, Treatment of Outsiders, Overseas Aid, Medical Care, Education & Training, The Legal System, Policing, Health & Safety Standards, The Environment, Science & Research, Transport, Money & Prices, Purchase of Property, Markets & Production, Taxation, Corruption, and Work. Participants were invited to create supplementary cards where necessary, but this option was not pursued. For further details, see (White 2009a).

on additional cards, and noting disagreements where they arose. This then fed into an open discussion led principally by the participants themselves, during which they selected certain problem-areas to explore in depth according to those considered most pressing. The card arrangements from the preceding exercise, which remained on the table, acted as a form of topic guide, allowing a basic level of thematic order to be sustained and a diversity of topics to be discussed, while still respecting speakers' inclination to focus on some topics over others and to explore cross-cutting themes. In this open phase, the researcher intervened occasionally to bring participants into discussion, to ask speakers to elaborate with examples, and to ask questions to do with causality and political agency of the kind described below.[7] Importantly, no attempt was made to draw conversation towards the EU or 'things European' until the discussions were near conclusion.

Allowing participants to determine the categories by which the discussions were ordered served a purpose in the subsequent analysis: it allowed the researcher to choose an analytical scheme with an empirical basis in the texts. While no two groups produced the exact same ordering criteria, and the analyst is inevitably an active interpreter, one can arrive at a series of thematic headings reflecting the topics discussed in greatest detail across the interviews and the ways these tended to be clustered in the exercise and open discussion. Three headings are used in the following analysis: *Economics* (understood to include, amongst others, problems of (un)employment, wages, price rises, taxation, inequality, and social security), *Relations between Peoples* (encompassing problems of intergroup conflict within and between states – often linked by speakers – and problems concerning the unwanted encounter with those deemed culturally different), and *Society and the Law* (including matters of crime, corruption, policing, the judicial system, social misdemeanour, and schooling).[8] In formulating these headings, and selecting material for citation, special attention has been paid to the way speakers interacted and chose to acknowledge and pursue (or not) the interventions of others. Following (Gamson 1992), passages in which multiple participants were active and mutually

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[7] The researcher also made probes unrelated to this paper: 'who is affected by such problems?', or 'does anyone gain from that?', were asked to enable study of the evocation of social groupings. Additionally, participants were asked about media consumption – not a topic relevant to this project, but a useful means to disguise the research focus.

[8] The concerns raised in these interviews broadly correspond to those identified in a large-scale coterminous study of the EU-25 populations (OPTEM 2006, pp.7-8). The list above is not exhaustive of the topics discussed – other problems, e.g. environmental, were occasionally mentioned – but represents the core of those articulated and developed throughout the discussions. Note that the fact certain topic-cards were widely neglected in discussion – e.g. 'Science & Research' – suggests that, while the cards were useful aids, they did not predetermine the discussions' content. For more on the elaboration of the analytical categories, see (White 2009a).

responsive are preferred to those where one speaker dominated and where evidence of reciprocal understanding is thus lacking.[9] Taking these three headings as the units of study, the analysis focuses on the explanations speakers invoke when discussing these problems, the expectations they express concerning political agency, and, in the section thereafter, the ways these motifs are deployed when conversation touches on European integration.

Explanatory Motifs and Expectations of Agency

'Explanation' can be conceptualised in multiple ways (Antaki 1988).[10] From the logician's perspective, it may mean reported causality: explanations involve the explicit giving of reasons for the emergence of a problematic situation. As a feature of everyday talk, where points may be made incrementally by multiple speakers, a looser definition is needed. Indeed, even in the purest cases, a good portion of explanation lies not in explicit reason-giving but semantic meaning and assumptions of relevance. There is a sense in which one may hear almost *any* utterance as explanatory depending on its context and the questions one asks of it (Draper 1988, p.16) (Antaki 1994 p.4). We shall focus on patterns in *what is deemed relevant to understanding a given set of problems*. These explanatory motifs may be thought of as culturally-available interpretative resources, employed by speakers to make sense of situations and experiences (Lamont & Thévenot 2000; Swidler 2001; White 2009b) They appeared spontaneously as speakers articulated and discussed the problems under consideration, but were also elicited by the researcher. Direct questions, such as 'how do you explain that problem?' or 'why does it arise?', were combined with indirect ones exploring the attribution of responsibility and blame. Such questions are ambiguous on the criteria of what is relevant, and so – given no response can include *all* possibly significant factors – force participants to exercise discrimination.

Expectations of agency were likewise embedded in the flow of discussion, but were further elicited using probes such as 'can that problem be avoided?' and 'can something be done about it?'

Where the possibility of action was affirmed or denied, of interest would be the agents mentioned; further probes examined the expectations associated with these. A useful sensitising framework is Perrin's threefold distinction between expectations of agency centred on *government*, the general *public*, and the *private individual* (Perrin 2006, pp.63-4; pp.116ff). The first involves the expectation that government officials can adopt policies to tackle the problems in question, and may be judged according to their willingness and success in pursuing these. The second involves society-focused collective action such as the formation of social movements, the organising of boycotts, or the use of media to communicate to a wider public. Both such approaches entail organised collective action, and offer a potential rationale for the polity as either the apparatus by which desired ends are sought or the space in which groups of citizens may coordinate for common purpose. Conversely, a *private* approach involves moves to *avoid* problems rather than a coordinated effort to resolve them. This last perspective, which supposes certain concerns can be addressed only by individual adaptation, offers few resources for making sense of a polity in terms of the pursuit of political projects.

Let us then move to the empirical material, looking at the explanatory motifs and expectations of agency identifiable for each of *Economics*, *Relations between Peoples*, and *Society and the Law*.

Economics

One of the first notable things about problems to do with *Economics* is that many of them elude explanation. They form a large proportion of the discussions, and are discussed with urgency, but also with a certain mystery concerning their origins. Dean in Swansea is not atypical when expressing amazement at how 'the purchase of a house can go from … £50,000 to £200,000 in two years. It's ludicrous … more debt, more stress, more everything … [Author: Why are the prices going up so much do you think?] Why has it gone up? … I don't know, I can't answer that. […] Whether it'll start coming down I don't know. […] But you know, everything's got to come to a head hasn't it.' With similar uncertainty, when the Norwich group reports long-overdue improvements in the local economy, these are accounted for on the grounds that luck inevitably changes. Vagueness on the causes of economic change need not produce the fatalist assertion they are beyond control – one can

imagine the view 'it's not our business to know, but someone in power ought to' – but it seems probable that a lack of explanatory resources undermines the capacity to identify forms of political action able to influence such mechanisms and the inclination to associate these with public policy (Gamson 1992, p.6). Absent certain basic tools of understanding, citizens would need to fall back on a strong and uncritical faith in the superior vision of political elites.

While explanations are often thin on the ground for *Economics*, they are certainly not absent. Importantly – the second point to emphasise – where present they tend to be broad and transnational, indeed global, in scope. They evoke factors extending far beyond the local environment where problems are encountered, and often considerably beyond Europe. A passage from Reading brings this out, with participants building on each others' points:[11]

> Malik: … England for example is not a manufacturing country any more. Hi-tech, yes, but like the old stuff, it's moved away from that into these lovely nice business parks and things and everybody's in a nice suit and everything … Everything's changing, and you have to like sort-of [change with it]… If you say 'I'm a rag-n-bone man, I want to stay a rag-n-bone man', you can't be because rag-n-bone man's out the window. Same like with the guy that used to have the horse and cart and drives the coal … You know, it's all changing, so you have to change with the time.
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> Hanif: There used to be a Huntley-Palmer factory [in Reading] … They made biscuits …
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> Malik: Huntley-Palmers, yeah […] Also for example now, right, like with the new one, Prudential, right, they've taken their call centres over to India. Why? Because it's cheaper. Same with manufacturing. I mean, if I had a factory and I was paying …
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> Saeed: So, like, hang on, they pay the work to the Indians … so it's less work in England then, isn't it?
>
> Derek: 'Course, yeah … but the economy for that company Prudential … they're having a laugh …

As Malik then summarises, 'they pay pittance over there and we want minimum £10 an hour.' The world of cheaper wages further east, whether in Eastern Europe or Asia, is a common motif across the groups when problems such as unemployment or the decline of industry are discussed.

The fact that explanatory factors are remote, where given, is probably an important reason why the possibilities for *governmental* agency are assumed limited. The drivers of change lie principally 'over there', leaving few options for influence 'here'. Inevitability is a common theme, and cost imbalances are held decisive: 'it's supply and demand,' says Malik, '… unless you start paying everybody 10p an hour for their jobs, you can't compete with other countries now.' A consensus in

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[11] This passage appears 35 mins into the interview (15 mins into the open discussion). It follows discussion of the social security system and the availability of work, and marks the beginning of a lengthy discussion on changing economic conditions in Britain, western Europe and east Asia.

the Würzburg group is that politicians are 'puppets' when it comes to the economy. Another motif holds that while yesterday's politicians had opportunities to act decisively, e.g. by rejecting privatisation, today's are powerless and it is *too late* to alter things. Speakers in Kassel emphasise the government is unable to control the movement of manufacturers: 'That doesn't work any more,' says Peter; 'it's simply too late …', says Hans; 'in the past … in the past,' chips in Dieter, 'we've got no chance now. The train has left the station.' While viable in the past, governmental action today is implausible. To these widely diffused patterns one may add local variations: speakers in the Czech groups emphasise the dependence of economic conditions in their country on the health of neighbouring economies such as Germany's,[12] while the Czech state's weak finances are further said to undermine its capacity to alleviate hardship. Such concerns intensify the sense of powerlessness found more widely across the groups.

Positive proposals are occasionally heard. Some speakers suggest individuals should adapt to new economic circumstances by learning new skills (cf. Malik above) – a *private* response, in other words – though rarely is it suggested this would be sufficient. Individual consumer action against departing firms is also occasionally advocated, yet considered hindered by the way economic processes extend far afield. Peter in Kassel notes a limit to what consumers can do: 'if I had an account with Deutsche Bank, I'd cancel it. I'd boycott such firms. The thing is, everything's so interwoven these days, you don't really know … [Dieter: yeah] … where they all work, where they produce … Whatever you do, the glasses will come from somewhere, you can't say "I'm not drinking that any more because the glass doesn't come from Germany." That's the problem, because ultimately you simply can't separate it out.' Not only this but organised action of a *public* kind, such as a collective boycott, is cast in doubt with scepticism regarding the firmness of other citizens. Even if people like 'us' were to take the initiative, the danger is the rest would not follow.

In sum, the dominant pattern across the groups holds there are few possibilities for action on problems of *Economics*. With these treated either as a matter of puzzlement, or seen as heavily dependent on distant processes, the prospect of organised collective action, *governmental* or *public*, is

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[12] A similar sense of dependence is identifiable in the Erfurt group (i.e. that in the former East Germany), with a sense of governmental agency little stronger.

considered heavily circumscribed. Speakers generally invoke 'the government', 'politicians' or 'the state' as the most relevant reference-points, but regularly to write off their capacities.

Relations between Peoples

Descriptions of problems to do with intergroup conflict and the unwanted encounter with cultural difference are not immune from a sense of mystery. Peter in Kassel is not the only participant to fear war ultimately as arbitrary: 'all you need is for someone who's a bit hysterical to come to power and someday he presses the [nuclear] button.' But aside from assertions of contingency one *does* find explanatory motifs, the difficulty being that not only are some rather disturbing, but they encourage the problems articulated to be regarded as unsolvable.

Two sets of motif recur, both primarily externalising responsibility for bad relations onto others. One points to the unequal global distribution of power and resources, causing conflict as those in a position of inferiority seek gains. That 'it's all about power' is a common refrain. Another set, perhaps more common, focuses on 'other peoples' expressing supposedly intrinsic characteristics, be it extremism, intransigence, or an undue attachment to religion and 'ideology'. Wars are generally projected onto far-away places of contrast like Africa or the Middle East, where – as participants in the Lübeck group put it – 'there are fanatics on both sides', people are 'stubborn' and 'unwilling to sit down with each other and work out a compromise', so 'they get each other more and more worked up until it becomes really extreme.' Contemporary Europe and 'the West' are generally considered places of peace. Yet conflict intrudes. Immigration is the obvious way speakers make this link, with the suggestion that those arriving from afar bring their natural characteristics with them. The problem tends to be cast as the unwillingness or inability of such peoples to compromise on their differences, seeking instead to impose their customs and ways of life. As Zbyněk in Ostrava put it, in a formulation echoed widely, 'Muslims don't know how to compromise. It's a completely different mentality.' Such motifs are applied to a range of developments, from the building of mosques in the local area to acts of violence and terrorism.

The possibilities for amelioration are again considered limited, probably in part because the way they are understood implies they are out of 'our' hands. Rarely does one find the idea relations can be improved through dialogue or mutual understanding. 'You're never gonna stop war,' says Derek in Reading, and 'I can't do nothing about it.' Instead, the idea of irreconcilable difference is emphasised: for Peter and Dieter at Kassel, 'people's opinions are simply too different'. Conflict is normalised, and tackling these problems tends to be presented as a matter of reducing exposure. *Governmental* action at the national level remains the principal reference-point: stricter immigration policies are a predictably well-cited possibility, accompanied by concerns they would be ineffective due to the ingenuity of those arriving and the numbers already 'here'. *Public* approaches, and those based on individual action, are scarcely mentioned. The tendency to assume problems experienced at a local level also play out on a wider scale is probably a contributing element in the scepticism, in that it implies such problems transcend polity boundaries. They are neither purely local and therefore susceptible to local address, nor purely distant and therefore susceptible to a policy of disengagement.

Society and the Law

For problems such as crime and social misdemeanour, explanations are found reliably – there is less the sense of mystery here. Such problems tend to attract focus on the behaviour and mentalities of *local* actors, with explanatory factors including family upbringing, school discipline levels, and the willingness of law-enforcement agencies to apply the rules. Transnational factors are rarely cited, even though in principle one might imagine references to wider phenomena such declining religious faith in modern societies, the impact of technological change, or the rise of criminal networks.

The sense that something can be done varies, but is generally stronger than we have encountered so far – perhaps precisely because the focus is more local. Improving the national education system so as to raise honest citizens is widely regarded a credible objective. Punitive measures against criminals are a second way *government*-led action is affirmed. More police on the streets, together with stronger criminal sentencing, are obvious expressions of this sentiment, with the national government sometimes actively blamed where these expectations are unmet. 'We were

promised three strikes and you're out, weren't we,' says Malcolm in Norwich, 'that was one of the reasons I've voted for this government.' All fellow participants assent to his suggestion that higher taxation would be acceptable to see the laws properly enforced. The exception to this more affirmative tone is found in the Czech groups, where the weakness of state finances is again deemed a constraint, as likewise the prevalence of corruption: indeed, here the legal system is sometimes described as another *expression* of rule-breaking rather than a potential solution.

The possibility of society-led *public* approaches is raised in several groups. Other citizens are to be encouraged to ostracise misbehavers, and if people will 'stand up for the rules' then positive change is possible. Such ideas are heard frequently amongst the British and German groups; in the Czech and Erfurt groups, one encounters a distinctive form of fatalism based on the notion that a large proportion of society remains morally tarnished by its association with communism, and that the arrival of a 'new generation' is needed before a wider change in attitudes can be expected.

To summarise, the sense of agency for these problems, while still qualified, is stronger than elsewhere. Especially amongst the British and German groups, education and law enforcement are considered convincing *governmental* approaches – though the authority involved is national or sub-national, and there is no reference to a transnational context.

These points are summarised in the table below. Rendition in boxes risks excessive simplification and a sense of determinism. It deserves emphasis that while discursive practices are patterned, attempts to express these patterns are procrustean, since speakers may sometimes diverge from them, and – relatedly – since new patterns are always in generation. Nothing said so far excludes the possibility individuals may question or reject some of the motifs they encounter.

Principally it is *governmental* action which speakers mention: 'politicians' (generically, and as individual leaders), 'the government' (in the abstract, and in the guise of ruling parties) and 'the State' are the main reference-points, while reference to *private* and *public* approaches are rarer.[13] Yet often

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[13] Other than some isolated remarks about taxi-driver organisations, there are two references in total to NGOs – and these as examples of embezzlement. This indifference towards organised civil society may be a European specificity: cf. (Perrin 2006), in whose US groups *public* action is more prominent.

political actors are assumed lacking in power, especially where the problems faced are traced out to a global level.

TABLE 1

	Economics	*Relations between Peoples*	*Society & the Law*
Explanatory Motifs	Often lacking. Alternatively very broad, stretching beyond Europe – global price & wage inequality, the 'cheaper East'. *Variation*: in CZ, 'the East' starts further east (e.g. Ukraine).	Generally broad, stretching beyond Europe – global inequalities of power and resources; intransigent impulses of opponent 'peoples'. *Variation*: less discussion of these topics in CZ than GB and D, though similar motifs appear.	Generally local – mentalities & conduct of local actors; declining levels of discipline; weak institutions of enforcement. *Variation*: in CZ + Erfurt, references to communist past as further source of problems.
Possibilities for Action	Governmental: Little. Sense of inevitability; global price / wage inequalities assumed conclusive; 'too late' to act. *Variation*: in CZ + Erfurt, references to constraining effect of weak state finances and economic dependence on western Europe. Public: Little. Boycotts mentioned, but problems of identifying who to target, and getting others to cooperate. Private: Some. Individual adaptation (e.g. acquiring new skills); enlightened consumerism where feasible.	Governmental: Little. Conflict largely inevitable. Can reduce exposure, e.g. with immigration controls. *Variation*: occasional reference in GB (not D / CZ) to use of military force where necessary. Public: Not mentioned. Private: Not mentioned.	Governmental: Some. Improve schooling; stronger law enforcement. *Variation*: in CZ, references to constraining effect of weak state finances and corruption. Public: Some. Ostracisation of rule-breakers – if others in society willing to 'stand up'. *Variation*: in CZ, need to await new, uncorrupted generation. Private: Some. Better home education; personal action (inc. vigilante-style) against rule-breakers.

Abbreviations: GB – Britain; D – Germany; CZ – Czech Rep.

Europe and the EU in Discussion

At this point we can resume focus on the matter of political authority at a European level. As the reader will recall, at stake is not the general question of what citizens think of the EU but a more targeted one to do with political justification: with what degree of credulity is a project-oriented rationale for the EU likely to be received? Looking at how 'Europe' and the EU are evoked in these discussions allows examination of the significance of the patterns identified so far – how they may 'carry over' to the idea of a European polity. Of particular interest, given speakers' emphasis on

governmental forms of action and their perceived limitations, is the extent to which the EU comes to be regarded as an augmentation of, even a substitute for, governmental agency at the national level, or conversely is assumed to be suffering from the same – and perhaps additional – shortcomings.

As indicated, the researcher made no concerted effort to steer these discussions towards Europe-related matters until the interviews were near conclusion. In each discussion references to these did appear naturally at some stage, featuring a range of terms, principally 'the EU' (the most common term in the German groups, and amongst the Czechs in the expanded form of 'the European Union', though rare amongst the British) and 'Europe' (used fairly frequently as shorthand for the EU, especially in the British discussions).[14] These references were considerably more common than those to other transnational political arrangements such as the United Nations or to transnational economic institutions.[15] They were significantly *less* common though than references to governmental actors at the national level.[16]

For the purposes of analysis a distinction can be made between two kinds of EU-related reference. The first involves the direct expression of opinions concerning the Union's institutions, decision-making procedures, and the transfer of sovereignty, separate from the context of substantive political problems. An emblematic example would be the complaint made by Alan in Swansea about the money wasted ('£20 million or something') each time 'Brussels' moves from Brussels to Strasbourg. Such opinions, though conceivably an influence on perceptions of agency, are not the focus here, since they were rare and appeared mostly in response to the researcher's direct questioning about the EU late in discussion. Of close to 100 EU-related references in the data, only nine were detached in this way from substantive concerns. Perhaps this relative infrequency is because such

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[14] The terminology itself is interesting: greater familiarity (perhaps not approval) seems implied by the frequency of the abbreviation 'EU' in the German groups, while the use of 'Europe' by British speakers suggests a more distant relationship. Occasionally one finds other terms too: 'Brussels' (used sometimes amongst the British, generally pejoratively), the 'common', 'internal' or 'European market', and 'the euro countries' (this appearing occasionally in the British discussions to indicate a wider political grouping beyond the eurozone). For simplicity, the umbrella term 'Europe and the EU' is used to summarise. References to specific countries or regions in Europe, e.g. in the form of transnational comparisons, are not examined here, though cf. (White 2009a).

[15] The UN was mentioned just once, while the IMF, World Bank and WTO were never mentioned. Note also that not only were such structures absent in name but the *concept* of them (e.g. of global government) was also un-mentioned. NATO was mentioned once.

[16] In total, 254 mentions of governmental actors at the national level (including 'the government', 'the State', political parties, or individual politicians and heads of state) were counted, and 94 mentions of the EU or related terms (cf. fnt. 13). In addition to this basic difference in visibility, virtually none of the latter kind distinguished between the EU institutions, mentioned Euro-parties or party groupings, or identified EU-related individuals. (These figures are indicative: where one speaker repeated a reference twice in quick succession, only one was recorded; also, judgement was required to distinguish mentions of 'Europe' with political content from those referring simply to a geographical space.)

references concern phenomena specific to the EU's institutional configuration, about which public levels of knowledge are notoriously low and of which ignorance is often conceded.[17] Even *criticising* the EU on procedural grounds requires a familiarity with its institutions which may rare. Perhaps infrequency also reflects diminished concern. While questions of the mechanisms and 'finality' of integration will properly be of salience to scholars, it seems natural those without a professional interest may prefer to work outwards from problems of immediate concern, and to invoke 'Europe' only where it is assumed to have bearing.[18] We shall focus on these problem-related references.

It will have been anticipated from the preceding section that for one set of problems – *Society and the Law* – the significance ascribed to the EU is basically non-existent. These are problems given prominence across the groups, but attention is on the domestic, with explanations local in focus. One sees relatively positive assumptions of agency, with roles ascribed to national government and fellow citizens. Importantly, such a perspective implies speakers are not reflexly cynical about all forms of political agency – government 'has its place', at least for certain problems. Nor is it a perspective *incompatible* with a European polity, since the possibility of decentralising authority is expressed in the EU's principle of subsidiarity. But undoubtedly it is a perspective which invites little positive significance to be ascribed to the EU – instead it is overlooked.

In discussion of *Economics* (especially) and *Relations between Peoples* (somewhat), 'Europe' and the EU are invoked more.[19] That a connection is made on both reminds that the meaning ascribed to the EU cannot be reduced to a single register of evaluation, whether economic or cultural-geopolitical. It also implies the absence of references on *Society and the Law* is no mere artefact of the interview format, since otherwise one would expect similar reticence across the full range of topics discussed. Yet this was not the case: for *Economics* and *Relations between Peoples*, such references did appear. Surely linked is the fact that both sets of problems are described transnationally, with explanatory motifs including factors extending well beyond the local environment. This would seem to suggest some of the ideational 'raw materials' are in place for speakers to make positive sense of

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[17] See e.g. (OPTEM 2006) on knowledge levels and attitudes to the EU institutions.
[18] The focus on substantive problems might also be suspected as a reason, but note that one of the problems discussed – 'corruption' – provided considerable opportunity for a discussion of the EU in these terms if desired.
[19] The prominence of economic perspectives on the EU is also evident in the findings of the 'Citizens Talking about Europe' (CITES) project; see also (Díez Medrano 2009).

the EU. Yet when one recalls more closely the patterns identified above, the difficulties will be apparent. While speakers do occasionally raise the prospect of political action at a European level (understood in *governmental* terms, for society-based forms of action at a European level are not mentioned), it is generally with severe doubts attached. Furthermore, references to 'Europe' and the EU are not always references to the (im)possibility of political action, but to the unfolding of problems themselves.

Fully consistent with the emphasis on irresistible forces at a global level, speakers give little suggestion that European approaches may succeed where conventional ones fail. The EU is very rarely mentioned in these discussions as a means of addressing economic problems which cannot be addressed by national government. Nor is it much blamed for *failing* to act, something which might imply the possibility. Given the underlying understanding of the problems in question, the EU would need to appear as a kind of *deus ex machina*, an unexpected rupture from the narrative frame, in order to be seen as a decisive and positive influence. It comes closest to this in the Czech groups, where credit is occasionally given for infrastructure improvements: Robert in Plzeň notes judiciously that 'it can be said that in the time we've been in the EU the situation's improved.' Michal confirms: 'the Union's contributed to the construction of every bridge here, large and small.' It remains doubtful however whether such EU-led action is seen as an expression of agency rather than a welcome but mysterious change in fortunes. Generally, with most economic problems linked in discussion to global factors far beyond the borders of Europe, little positive role is accorded to a European polity.

Instead, across the groups, and particularly in the German and Czech discussions, various current EU policies come to be heavily entwined with such problems, such that the Union is treated as an expression or exacerbation of them. This can be seen in several instances. Discussion of the euro's introduction, for example, exhibits the familiar motif of inevitability. Participants in Ostrava talk of the prospect of the euro as a 'catastrophe', but are agreed it will come. For Pavel in Plzeň, 'the only question is when.' In a Lübeck passage, a specific grievance with discrepancies created by the EU is linked together with a more general sense of powerlessness before wider economic forces:[20]

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[20] The passage appears 26 mins into the interview (10 mins into the open discussion). The focus since the card exercise has been on economic issues: unemployment, price rises due to the euro, problems of mis-regulation, and the impact of

Jochen: All these Polish workers, the manual labourers – tilers, bricklayers, for example – they work here in such favourable conditions because they don't have to contribute social-security taxes [W: Right …] like a German labourer has to. A German labourer is checked to make sure he makes all his contributions. And a Polish worker comes over and says 'yeah, I'll do that,' but no-one bothers about him so long as he's not caught, so long as no-one catches him doing black labour, so he can afford to offer attractive prices. He can work as a bricklayer, a tiler, he's flexible. And naturally unemployment isn't going to get better like that, it's going to get worse.

Werner: I find it really, really bad, if that … what the EU Directive says, concerning the free movement of services, if that goes through, then Polish and Czech employees, or from Lithuania too … If they're allowed to work with us here under their own conditions then no small entrepreneur's going to be able to survive here. The German master-bricklayer, or the bricklayer, or the tiler who works for himself, he has to pay his taxes, his contributions to the professional association, he has to contribute his share to employees' health insurance, pension insurance etc., and none of them have that so they can set more attractive prices. And so that also disturbs our economy.

Author: Is there any solution to this kind of problem … can one do something about it?

Jochen: Well, the world is heading ever more towards globalisation, and globalisation is … in the future an equalisation between poor countries and rich countries … And this process won't be complete within the next few years, it'll be very, very slow, it'll last a really long time, until Uzbekistan has the same standard of living as we do, for example, as the Federal Republic of Germany. And then sometime far off in the distant future – fiction really – this problem will naturally be solved. But that'll definitely take generations.

Niklas: The standards are closing towards each other … Not everyone is going to get such a high standard as here ...

Werner: It'll go down here and go up for the others, that's clear.

Jochen: You can see that already in the EU. That some countries profit from it and other countries … [W: … suffer from it …] suffer from it.

Author: Which ones profit, for example?

Jochen: The ones who profit are the poorer countries with the low GNP. And the industrial countries, they basically have to step down from their level, surrender their achievements. To put it simply.

Author: What do you expect of the government in this context? [J: Difficult …] What can it do?

Werner: Very, very difficult … [N: … to find solutions …]

Jochen: Many say we should go back, we should have the Deutschmark instead of the euro, the borders must be … the walls must be erected again, then everything will be better again. But whether that's the solution, I'd strongly doubt it. [N: I don't think so either.]

Werner: This process is no longer reversible.

Changes associated with the EU, such as the opening of borders and the arrival of the euro, are described as symptoms of a broader process of globalisation and the loss of boundaries. Attempts to introduce barriers are likely to be futile, for it is an irreversible long-term process. Note 'you can see that already in the EU', implying the EU is the first or most immediate expression. The euro comes across as neither positive nor negative, neither a remedy nor a mistake, but the extension of a pattern. In this and other groups, participants do raise complaints about the *manner* in which it was introduced

immigrant labour. Subsequent discussion looks at how further EU enlargement may exacerbate problems of job competition and high taxes, and why manufacturers are moving to east Asia.

– 'no-one asked us, there should have been a referendum,' says Hamid in Lübeck – but this is not matched by a sense the outcome might have been different. The EU follows wider trends.

When discussion touches problems of *Relations between Peoples*, one finds further reference to 'Europe' and the EU. As noted, questions of intergroup conflict are generally not associated with the majority-peoples of 'the West' as these are constructed in discussion. Their relations are assumed peaceful, and war between them unlikely. As Ralf in Würzburg puts it, 'the only conflicts which are left are far away from us, and here in Central Europe, in Europe, in the EU area we have a very peaceful shared existence. I think that's very important, that's a historical step forward. Germany-Britain, the bombardment in the Second World War, this hard enmity is gone, gone once and for all.' Perhaps because this assumption is made readily, a role for the EU in coordinating harmonious relations – one of its classic justifications, after all – appears superfluous. When Ralf suggests the EU might be given credit for the emergence of peaceful coexistence, his co-participants are dubious, especially about such a role today.

Nor does the EU tend to be accorded a positive role as regards those inter-people relations quite clearly problematised. Building up 'Europe' as a global power in military and defence so as to manage threats emerging from outside – another form of action, desirable or not – is a proposal heard rarely in these discussions. That 'the West' evokes something broader than Europe probably weakens the extent to which acting at a European level is given credence; likewise the assumption that opponents are living *within* the local environment, not just beyond. They can be encountered on the city streets, not just in far-away locations. When the problem is thus constructed as one of daily exposure, the relevance of foreign and defence policy at any level is much diminished.

Compared to *Economics*, it is rare for the EU to be treated as a contributing factor to the problems articulated. Prospective Turkish membership is the notable exception. In Lübeck, during a discussion of awkward relations with '*Ausländer*', Jochen comments with collective approval that 'these differences in mentality, they're particularly serious with regard to Turkey's entry [into the EU] … It'll get even more extreme. Because that's where the Orient meets the Occident, isn't it. Practically two different cultures. I think that's really, really difficult.'

TABLE 2

	Economics	*Relations between Peoples*	*Society & the Law*
Evocations of 'Europe' / EU	Mentioned regularly. But rarely as possible augmentation or substitute for nat. governmental agency. *Variation:* speakers in CZ acknowledge possibility EU *might* herald economic improvements. Often mentioned as expression of problems themselves, picking up familiar motifs of exposure to global forces, irresistibility of changes, irreversibility of decisions. *Variation:* above true esp. amongst D and CZ groups; speakers in UK make similar points, but more rarely.	Mentioned sometimes. Occasional references to possibility of a European security policy. But generally dismissed – peace between 'European' peoples already secure, while the serious problems not considered European in origin or effect - both more global and local. Occasionally mentioned as a *source* of problems, mainly re. enlargement to Turkey. *Variation:* no such mentions amongst UK groups.	Not mentioned

Let us draw the threads of the argument together. As 'Europe' and the EU are invoked in these discussions, speakers readily link them with the problems of everyday life. In doing so, they draw on the repertoires of understanding available to them for making sense of these problems, thus entwining the EU in these wider patterns. In three major ways, such patterns do little to 'make sense of' the EU in positive political terms. First, there are problems from which it is ostensibly deemed too remote to be relevant (mainly those to do with law and order and antisocial behaviour), with these problems understood as local in origin and effect. Second, with regard to those problems for which it *is* ascribed relevance, the EU takes on the sense of powerlessness before mysterious or inevitable forces attributed to governmental agency more generally, thus undermining the possibility it might be regarded as a suitable response to these. And third, more than this, its policies come to be linked to many of the problems raised, casting it as an expression, perhaps even an exacerbation, of them. In each of these three ways, the dominant tone evoked is perhaps not so much that of active hostility towards the EU as a combination of indifference and knowing resignation – notwithstanding the seriousness accorded to the problems themselves.

Note it is not argued the *only* factor conditioning citizen perspectives on the EU is its degree of accordance with these patterns of political understanding. The discussions were focused from the outset on substantive problems, not for instance feelings of cultural or values-based commonality: they consequently do not provide a comprehensive catalogue of reasons why the EU may be seen negatively or with apathy. To reiterate, it is the plausibility of a *project-oriented* rationale for the EU which is at stake. Moreover, as noted, the interview structure was deliberately kept quite open, with the researcher generally refraining from challenging participants to articulate views on the EU so as to focus on wider assumptions. While this avoids embedding Euro-centrism in the research design, still one must acknowledge that why 'Europe' and the EU are evoked in certain ways at certain moments, and left unspoken at others, can only be the subject of interpretative claims. What gives these claims their plausibility is the consistency they highlight between patterns of sense-making on Europe as a political phenomenon and patterns of political interpretation more generally.

Discussion

Accepting this reading of the material, how should one judge the implications? To continue the preceding thought, individual cognitive processes at a particular moment, such as at the polling booth when deciding whether to endorse further integration, can only be a matter of conjecture. Some such individuals may draw directly on the motifs identified; others, following the expectations of psychological approaches, may act according to ostensibly unrelated emotions to do with how 'European' they feel and how they respond to Europe-related symbols (Bruter 2005). Others – surely a minority – may be persuaded more by procedural concerns to do with (perceptions of) how the Brussels institutions are run. Others may not even get to the polling booth. If the patterned ways in which citizens interpret the political world are important, it is not necessarily in the sense one can attribute them a causal status for individual actions at a given moment.

Rather than as determinative in the particular instance, this ideational background is better seen as exercising a more general enabling and constraining effect on various political aspects of citizenship. First, as suggested, it may shape the kinds of arguments that can feasibly be made on

behalf of political authority and those unlikely to resonate, thus influencing general levels of consent towards the polity. Project-oriented justifications for the EU, referring e.g. to the possibilities it holds for addressing problems to do with economics or migration, will be received as convincing only to the extent those projects themselves are held credible. Second, it may influence levels of political vigilance and participation, for only if citizens have the tools of imagination to see the EU as a possible deliverer of political goods are they likely to seek assurance its policies approximate the standards this requires. Without this necessary basis on which to judge and criticise, the risk will be that the legal and political rights of EU citizenship are neglected, leaving a passive and manipulated citizenry. Also, while these ideational features may not *determine* electoral outcomes, they may affect which political actors have the best resources at their disposal. Certain routinised ways of seeing can be used to mobilise supporters behind a political programme, and to encourage transnational alliances and supranational claims-making in its pursuit, while others inhibit such action (Gamson 1992). Projects of economic redistribution, or intercultural dialogue, would be pertinent cases in point.

The way the EU is drawn into these discussions with taxi-drivers rather jars with the notion its political viability and legitimacy rest on addressing the substantive concerns of citizens. Even supposing the EU does perform this beneficial role, such a message is not easily 'hearable' for those of its citizens drawing on the patterns of interpretation traced. Certainly the findings suggest these difficulties are not restricted to the EU, since the political capacities of national institutions are questioned analogously (albeit rather more actively, and with a lingering sense of what may be achieved on certain issues). But the consequences of such thinking are especially damaging in the EU case, for a transnational polity is not only permanently vulnerable to a dissolution into its component parts, but is less able to draw on some of the additional sources of allegiance associated with the nation-state. The ties generated by commonality of culture and history, or the commitments born of routine and repeated exposure, may ensure that in the nation-state context the question 'what is the polity for?' either finds an instinctive answer or is not even posed; yet these ties and commitments seem absent in the European context and unlikely to emerge.

Given the observations made, changes in certain common patterns of political understanding seem a necessary accompaniment to any deepening of the EU's political credibility. Such changes are

possible, since rather than expressing a uniquely correct way to appraise the political world, these patterns express contingent interpretations. Reality is sufficiently complex as to resist definitive representation (Sewell 2005, p.191). Indeed, changes are inescapable, since these discursive patterns are reproduced through acts of human interpretation, and must respond to the creativity individuals bring to this. While generally enduring, there may be moments of crisis and conflict when such commonsense ideas are swiftly remade. The task for suitably inclined political actors would be to make available new ways of interpreting the problems of everyday life so as to make better sense of the possibilities for their organised address (Tarrow & Tilly 2007; Tilly 2003). Judging by this study, these would need to offer ways of understanding the origins of problems such that they did not appear the outcome of mysterious forces or the inevitable consequence of human nature, and would need to dispute the tendency to locate causal factors either at a quite local level or far beyond Europe's borders. Only then is political agency at a European level likely to escape the triple hazards of seeming remote from, dwarfed by, or partly responsible for, the challenges it might seek to address. The articulation of new sets of problems little heard in these discussions, for instance to do with the environment, would further expand the stock of resources with which such arguments could be made.

The paper began with a quotation from Ralf, a taxi-driver in Würzburg. His words conjure the EU, specifically its process of enlargement, as an economic phenomenon, both in its goals – the creation of markets – and its consequences – the migration of companies to the East. As the subsequent analysis has indicated, the sense of fatalism he conveys can be read as part of a more general mood speakers evoke when articulating matters of economic concern. The 'door' which has been opened in the EU can no longer be closed, just as it is 'too late' to control the economic forces of globalisation. Such motifs weaken the credibility of counter-arguments seeking to portray the EU as a positive means to address the substantive concerns of its citizens, and, one may suppose, any resolve to ensure it fulfils such a role. If a project-oriented rationale of this kind is to have resonance, it would seem to require wider changes in the interpretative schemes by which the political world is imagined.

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