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Thematisation and Collective Positioning in Everyday Political Talk

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This piece outlines some of the findings of an exploratory research project into popular forms of identification in the contemporary European context and their implications for projects of transnational integration such as the European Union. Drawing on a series of group interviews conducted with taxi-drivers in Britain, Germany and the Czech Republic, it looks at how political problems are articulated in discussion, how speakers position themselves in relation to these problems, and how this differs according to the topics in question. It is suggested that these routinised discursive practices shape the way speakers make sense of the political world, and in turn the kinds of political association that make sense to them as citizens.

There seems to be some consensus that in today's global political configuration one can no longer assume the congruence of social identities, social practices and political boundaries.² This observation is particularly familiar in connection to contemporary Europe, where the transnational integration of socio-economic and administrative processes has advanced to a peculiar degree, and where the viability of the European Union as a democratic polity has been widely held to rest on the emergence of some form of transnational identity. Popular modes of identification have become a topic of notable interest amongst political theorists and sociologists of contemporary Europe.

Commonly, these forms of identification are conceptualised in terms of people's feelings of socio-cultural belonging, their willingness to extend trust and solidarity, their sense of shared values, or simply their attitudes towards 'Europe' and the EU.³ Much empirical research treats such phenomena as a feature of individual consciousness, and accordingly polls individuals on their feelings of belonging and 'identity', their values, their inclination to trust, and so on. The evident danger here is that one forces opinions to be expressed on highly abstract matters which respondents have rarely engaged with, and infers attitudes and beliefs which have barely formed. Perhaps a more productive way to study forms of popular identification is simply to get people talking about the issues of importance to them and examine the reference-points they evoke spontaneously.⁴ The common-sense assumptions embedded in casual discussion on matters of political relevance may tell us far more about people's interpretations of the world under conditions of globalisation, and the implications of these for integration projects such as the EU, than answers to direct questioning intended to tap their conscious thoughts.

This piece outlines some findings from an exploratory research project into patterns of everyday speech as found in group discussions with taxi-drivers in Britain, Germany and the Czech Republic. It first sets out the research method, describing the means by which a rich body of empirical material can be elicited. It then looks at how the political world is ordered in discussion, identifying a number of thematic domains in which speakers tend to cluster the problems they articulate. It goes on to examine how speakers take up positions in relation to the problems they discuss, and notes in particular how patterns of collective positioning vary according to the matter at hand. Different sets of problems inspire different formulations for 'us' and 'them', and some

encourage the evocation of a transnational context – though not distinctly *European* – while others are treated as more local.

This close analysis of everyday discursive practices indicates how one can study popular identification without reliance on the usual cognitive models. Taking political discussion as the focus means abandoning the quest to find ‘identity’ in the supposed mental attributes of individuals and looking instead at that which is collectively and observably taken for granted. There is no definitive description to be given of the mental phenomena which give rise to the articulation of opinions, since these are underdetermined by the opinions themselves; but putting mental phenomena to one side, one can still investigate the patterns of assumption and collective positioning which can be identified in discursive interaction.⁵ These routinised discursive practices are deep features of the text: even where there is disagreement in opinion, it tends to be enabled by tacit agreement in assumptions. While individuals retain a certain degree of creativity, allowing such practices to evolve over time, nonetheless they must draw heavily on the patterned ways of speaking which are available to them.

Group Discussions with Taxi-Drivers.

Group discussions have the principal advantage that they involve participants interacting with each other as well as the researcher.⁶ This reduces the danger that the researcher unwittingly predetermines the outcome of the study through his/her own interventions. For these discussions, taxi-drivers were chosen on the supposition that their conversation may exhibit in concentrated form the kinds of discursive practice common amongst lay people, i.e. those without a professional interest in politics. Taxi-driving puts one in a position of heightened sensitivity to a wide range of political developments, including changes in prices or spending behaviour, the arrival of immigrant labour, increases in criminal behaviour, or new policing tactics. At the same time drivers are exposed to diverse opinion stimuli (in particular the media, and the experiences of others as narrated to them on the job), mitigating the possibility that theirs is a speech community isolated from the rest of society. The *self-understanding* of many taxi-drivers is arguably as people of common sense and practical wisdom; unlike, for example, students, academics or artists, they show little tendency to emphasise their personal originality by formulating opinions deliberately in contrast to those they hear around them.⁷ Also, more practically, they are not un-used to being offered money for their time.

A total of ten interviews were conducted at locations across Europe between October 2004 and August 2005, with the goal of gathering from widespread locations a body of comparable material which can be explored for commonalities and variations. The choice of countries corresponded to the so-called logic of diversity: a large country on the periphery of Europe and traditionally a ‘reluctant’ participant in European integration, a large continental country at the heart of the integration process from the beginning, and a smaller, post-communist country which has undergone rapid political change and only recent accession to the Union. Cities were chosen for continuity of size (150,000 to 300,000 inhabitants) but geographical spread and diversity of historical experience: three in Britain (Reading, Swansea and Norwich); three in the Czech Republic (Plzeň, Liberec and Ostrava), and four in Germany (including one city in the former East – Erfurt – and three in the former West – Lübeck, Kassel and Würzburg). With a number of these locations near national borders, one may also examine the (non-)prevalence of nation-based categories in the discourse of those plausibly most prone to adopting them. Taxi-driving in these cities tends to be a full-time and permanent occupation, and to be populated by long-term residents – even if first- or second-generation immigrants – rather than recent arrivals. As a heuristic classification, these drivers can be taken to occupy the socio-economic space which extends from the working- to the lower-middle class.⁸

Groups of three to four were assembled in cafés and pubs for discussions of up to two hours.⁹ Participants were recruited directly at the largest taxi-rank in each city, at times of low customer demand and with the aid of financial incentives.¹⁰ An effort was made to recruit those who were already engaged in conversation, on the grounds that ‘political talk’ may be a more natural phenomenon amongst acquaintances, and while not all participants knew each other in advance, at least some were familiar with everyone.¹¹ Many of the discussions featured cross-references to conversations held on prior occasions, implying the interviews were enmeshed in a broader history of discussion. A concern for some degree of ‘naturalness’ to the discussion meant that the criteria used to guide sampling were quite simple. A balance of ages was sought for each group, with the youngest driver being in his 20s or 30s and the oldest in his 50s or 60s. Where ethnic minorities were strongly represented on the taxi-rank (as at Reading), it was made certain that the sample reflected this.¹² Female drivers were very rare in the ten cities studied, and while no specific attempt was made to exclude them from the sample, in practice they did not feature.

The interviews were quite loosely structured. Approximately the first twenty minutes were devoted to a card exercise, designed to provoke a discussion in which one could study the salience of different problems, how they were assumed to ‘go together’, and the concepts used to link them. Seventeen thematic index-cards were used, each consisting of two images and a verbal heading, and each referring to a topic with some connection to public life: 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.¹³

These headings were the author’s own creations, intended to combine breadth of coverage with openness to interpretation. It was expected that the cards would be of unequal interest to the participants: the intention was to provide a starting-point from which they could proceed as they chose. Participants were invited to arrange the cards in piles according to ‘what goes naturally with what’, justifying their choices as they did so, and to add to the seventeen cards any which they felt were missing. With this type of research it is the accompanying discussion (i.e. the discursive practice) which becomes the focus of analysis, not the arrangement of cards as such. As a second step, the participants were asked, for each of the piles of cards they had created, to decide on a summary title. The third step, which then constituted the bulk of the discussion, consisted in participants selecting problem-areas to talk about in detail according to those they considered the most urgent and important. For much of this open section of the interview, the role of the researcher was restricted to occasional interventions to ask patterned questions such as ‘who is to blame for such problems?’, and ‘who is affected by them?’

Ordering the Political World in Discussion

The forms of collective identification evoked in discussion depend much upon the problems in question, and for this reason it is sensible to look first at the patterned ways in which problems are divided up and ordered in discussion. In keeping with the decision to use group interviews, the focus is not so much on the interventions of individuals but on the repertoires of interpretation which they share and which guide their interaction. It may be useful here to recall how, in the Wittgensteinian tradition, rule-based behaviour is understood as the enactment of knowledge about ‘how to carry on’.¹⁴ This knowledge or ‘competence’ is understood as a social phenomenon, as a basic convergence in practices and the capacity for successful coordination and adjustment among peers. Competence in conversation, by extension, can be seen as the ability of individuals mutually to coordinate their talk based on a certain convergence in discursive practices: to make interventions which others can respond to, and to carry on from what others say, so as to achieve some level of ordered and sustained interaction.

By convening participants in an interview environment, supplying them with prompt cards, and asking them to justify the choices they make with these cards, I was creating a situation in which participants must 'carry on'. The cards, rather than pre-determining the discussion, act as a set of tools that can be employed in different ways: some are likely to be neglected, while others are likely to be followed up and become the basis for a detailed conversation. Only if the participants are sufficiently competent to handle at least some such resources, and to 'carry on' by reaching beyond the situation to knowledge which is already available to them, can an ordered discussion emerge. Importantly, the fact that participants are in a *group* environment means that all interventions are subject to the judgement of peers. This acts to filter out interventions which are trivial or highly idiosyncratic, since participants are likely to say things which they assume others in the group will be able to react to and develop. As H.P. Grice famously noted, there is a *cooperational* basis to conversation.¹⁵ Even autobiographical narratives must, in the group context, be presented in such a way that they hold common significance, and interventions which diverge from this rule are likely either to be rejected explicitly as odd, or to result in a breakdown in conversation and a shift in topic. When certain problems are repeatedly linked together in discussion, and when participants accept and develop the linkages which are made by others, one can treat this as indicative therefore of a more basic convergence in discursive practice concerning what topics go with what. The analyst's ability to identify these patterns of ordering, within and across groups, depends significantly upon their *own* practical competence as an interpreting actor, something which cannot be distilled to a set of theoretical rules. Nonetheless, useful indicators include the justifications that are made for the card arrangements, and cross-referrals in the discussion to that which was said earlier. The transpersonal dimension becomes evident when problems are talked about and developed by more than one participant, arguments are constructed jointly, and when the same problems are pursued in depth in more than one interview. Levels of salience may be indicated by emotive language, such as more than one participant expressing a sense of injustice or frustration, or by the early expression of opinion.

A brief look at how the interview at Lübeck developed should serve to clarify this approach. Having explained the protocol for the discussion, the participants were invited to consider how best to order the prompt-cards laid out on the table:

JW: Perhaps you could spend a couple of minutes thinking about how these cards might go together. If you had to make little groups out of them, how would you do so? There's no right or wrong way, whatever seems natural.

Jochen: How many groups should it be?

JW: Up to you, up to you. [90 second pause]

Jochen: So, what would I say ... start with the economy, with Taxes ... they belong together, right? ... Markets and Production are directly linked with Taxes because taxes can strengthen or weaken the economy.

[Werner: yeah] And ... Science and Research ... also has something to do with the economy, because innovation strengthens the power of the economy.

Werner: Yeah, I'd also put those together. And Work too ... [J: Work too] ... Work too ... [J: Work too.]

From the outset, the vocabulary on the cards is being handled non-arbitrarily: Jochen creates a small narrative to explain the relationship between them, one which is validated by Werner's interventions, in turn accepted by Jochen. When asked to summarise the collection of cards with a title, the participants chose 'Occupation and the Economy' (having considered 'Markets and the Economy' and 'Working Life'), giving an indication of the links assumed. Of further interest is what happened a few minutes later: the card 'Money and Prices' had for some reason ended up in a different pile, but questions started to be raised as to why. Jochen said it should have been placed

with ‘Occupation and the Economy’; Niklas, Hamid and Werner agreed, and it was moved over. Arguments appealing to common expectations of what goes with what were able where necessary to overturn whatever momentum was generated in the placing of cards.

When asked to go into further depth, Jochen invoked once more ‘the economy’ and, with the active support of Werner and Niklas, used it to link together a whole series of concepts which had not been written on any of the cards: ‘I think the biggest problem here in Germany at the moment is the economy. [Werner: yeah] The economy, and work of course. Unemployment and ... zero economic growth, or hardly any economic growth, and the unemployment which goes with that. Domestic purchasing power, the lack of domestic purchasing power. Also under this heading with money and prices I’d say the introduction of the euro is very relevant, because the euro – due to the exchange rate – has brought disadvantages in purchasing power, considerable ... [Niklas: price rises] ... Yeah, it’s led to price rises, and so also the purchasing power, the domestic demand, has gone down, because people have less money at their disposal.’ A later cross-reference (this time by Werner) suggests the naturalness with which the participants orientate themselves in discussion using the concept of ‘the economy’. The conversation had been looking at the problem of inadequate contributions to the health-insurance system: ‘The easiest solution for this problem would be full employment. If there weren’t five million unemployed people there, if they were paying into the pension and health insurance, then we wouldn’t have all these problems ... [Niklas: yeah]. We’re back to this first subject again – the economy. It all links together.’ Some notion of ‘the economy’ or ‘economics’ clearly comes across as an organising concept, a way of linking together specific problems which are recognisable to several or all of the participants.

Across the groups in this study, one finds participants constructing a domain of problems to do with economics, tying together issues such as wages, prices, unemployment, taxation, inequality, social security and insurance, the consequences of privatisation, state finances, the decline of industry and exports, and the adequacy of the education system in equipping people for employment. Not all groups, of course, when asked to label the card piles formed at the beginning of the interview used the word ‘economics’ or its functional equivalents in the relevant language. A range of candidate titles was generated, perhaps all with a family resemblance, but with enough variety to suggest a plurality of ways of constructing the domain.

One does not need to locate domains in the individual brain;¹⁶ they can be understood as patterns at the level of the text, produced in coordinated action. Using the same techniques, two further domains were identified. One can be called *Relations between Peoples*, and spans the administrative and analytical distinction – rarely found in these discussions – between foreign policy and domestic intergroup relations. Key problems articulated included intergroup conflict and perceived threat (internationally, and domestically at the street level), and the unwanted encounter with cultural otherness. Wars and terrorism were discussed with some regularity here (somewhat less so amongst the Czech groups). A third domain concerns the breaking of legal and social rules and can be referred to as *Society and the Law*: problem-areas identified include crime, corruption, policing, justice, the behaviour of individuals towards others in society, and the education system (understood here in terms of its capacity to produce law-abiding citizens). While the categories ‘relations between peoples’ and ‘society and the law’ do not recur in the discussions with the frequency of ‘economics’, nonetheless the problems associated with them were linked up repeatedly, both in the discussion surrounding the card-exercise and in the subsequent open phase.¹⁷ That the interviews were not being ‘fixed in advance’ by the prompt-cards seems to be confirmed by the fact that a number of topics indicated on the prompts, even if touched upon during the exercise, were little followed up in the open discussions. Almost nothing, for example, was said in the open discussions that could be linked closely to ‘Science and Research’, and, in contrast to a card such as ‘Money and Prices’, it was never referred to, pointed at, or tapped during discussion.

The problems associated with *Economics, Society and the Law* and *Relations between Peoples* undoubtedly do not exhaust the ways in which the political world might be ordered in discussion: there are problems which were articulated only sporadically in these discussions, such as environmental pollution, and aspects of life which were not discussed at all, such as gender relations, which amongst different social groups or in different spatio-temporal contexts might be problematised in depth. But these three domains represent a core of problems which were articulated and developed throughout the interviews. They were discussed as common problems, liable to affect ‘people like us’. This does not mean that all participants necessarily linked themselves to them as individuals: as taxi-drivers, none of the participants was unemployed or in immediate danger of unemployment, and certainly not by the factory closures which were so often mentioned. It was not a problem liable to affect ‘me’, but it was nonetheless a problem that could affect ‘people like us’; a reference-point in relation to which collective, we-oriented subject-positions were generated in discussion.

Patterns of Collective Positioning

So as to define their relationship with the problems discussed, speakers evoke a considerable range of social groupings. These groupings do not constitute ‘the identity’ of the participants, since speakers invoke different subject-positions at different moments in discussion as they move from one set of problems to another, but they are categories and implicit groupings towards which the participants orient themselves. Importantly, ‘we’-definition and description is generally a relational move, an act of *positioning* which requires the evocation of ‘others’ so as to clarify and give meaning to the ‘we’. For each domain of problems, one can explore who is positioned as the ‘people like us’ (or ‘subjects’) affected in like fashion by these problems, who are positioned as their opponents, and how these opponents are described. One can also look at how comparisons are made, and the types of location assumed to be similar. Different patterns of positioning emerge in the three principal domains that have been highlighted; a passage from the Würzburg discussion contributes to our reading of *Relations between Peoples*:

Ulrich: I recently read again how the British are supposed to have trashed the Germans [in newspapers like *The Sun* and *The Daily Mirror*]. I said to myself, well, you know, I’m not going to get caught up in this hysteria. I’ve met enough British people and I’ve always got on really well with British people and I think it’s all rubbish. Racism or whatever, it’s basically stupidity I think ... [Ralf: yeah]. Because ... think about it, what is the difference between a British person and me? Basically there’s none at all. He was born over there and I was born here.

Oskar: They’re partly blood-related, through the Angles and Saxons ... they also had German origins. [...] As far as what he’s saying, with the Germans and British, I don’t see that as a problem at all. The only thing which I see as a problem in Germany is the religion issue, Muslims and Christians ... [U: yeah]. That’s the only, fundamental problem, that Muslims are anchored here in the society, and on the one hand the women behave and dress like German women and on the other hand there’s the danger of attacks. Muslim fundamentalism ... [R: yeah, yeah]. And anyone, if he wants to, can commit a suicide attack here. You can’t even expel them any more, because a lot of them are already German citizens.

Ulrich: [to JW] You have that problem as well, especially in London. The same problem.

Oskar: ... In the whole of Europe ... the Netherlands ...

Ralf: Yeah, exactly ... they’re getting the same in Britain too, that’s right ... [U: ... The same problem ...]

Oskar: ... Britain ... London ... Very difficult. A lot of Muslims there too ...

Ulrich: ... And they're also perverse. And the problem is, OK I'm generalising a bit, if you have a hundred Muslims, one makes an attack, but the other 99, who know about it, they don't speak up. They're harmless, sure, but they wouldn't say anything even if they knew, I think. That is the danger [R: Yeah, I agree ...] For everyone, for the whole western world, whether it's Germany or Britain or the US. I really see that as a problem.

Ralf: It must be very pronounced in France too, I think the problem there is even greater. In France, because of the close connection with Arab countries ... Algeria ... Morocco ...

The problem is formulated here as the presence of conflict and otherness in the local environment. As places where people encounter this, Germany is highlighted, and comparisons are made with various parts of Europe and also the US. The people affected are constructed as 'Christians' and more generally those of 'the western world'; a little later in the discussion they are described as 'the white race', and the mention of a blood relation between Germans and British is highlighted here. The differences between them are downplayed; they are not identical (a comparison is necessary), but they are assumed to be counterparts in this context. This is typical of the material as a whole: when *Relations-between-Peoples* problems are articulated, whether in domestic or international terms, those positioned as 'we' correspond to something like 'the West', where this may carry racial connotations (the white majority), and often carries connotations of good sense and peacefulness.

Relations between these peoples of the West are widely assumed to be smooth: as Ralf says elsewhere, 'conditions like those that led to the First World War, to the Second World War, or also even in the century before, where there were hostilities within central Europe that led to the world wars: they've been completely eliminated, gone forever, or at least for a long time.' The need to maintain peaceful relations between European peoples – one of the historical justifications of the EU – goes unmentioned, since these peoples (and those in the wider West) are taken to be peaceful anyway. Instead, as evident in the passage above, the 'we' tends to be demarcated in particular against Arabs or Muslims, who are assumed to be present not just beyond the borders of the West but close to home in the city itself. These opponents are portrayed as uncompromising and aggressive (with the religious dimension often emphasised), and they are cast not so much as adversaries who are to be convinced, defeated or tolerated, but as enemies who may need to be excluded from the community.¹⁸ Where explanations are given for these problems of conflict, they tend to include reference-points global in scope, including the supposed characteristics of peoples from different parts of the world, and global contests between them and the West over power and resources.

In the discussion of *Economics*-related problems, those positioned as 'people like us' are different, and the range of comparisons slightly narrower. National categories are rare: certainly no speakers talked of economic problems which faced 'us Europeans', but nor were there many economic problems described as affecting 'British', 'Germans' or 'Czechs' in broad, undifferentiated terms. As subjects one hears instead much talk of 'working men', 'those who contribute their share', 'the little people', 'ordinary' or 'normal people' or (particularly from the British) 'those in the middle'. As locations where others are liable to be affected by price increases, taxation and lost jobs, one finds comparisons made spontaneously with neighbouring countries in Europe of a similar level of economic development. Amongst the British and German groups this means western Europe, while amongst the Czech groups it means countries of central and eastern Europe such as Poland, Slovakia and Hungary. Bar a few exceptional topics connected to international finance, these places are described not as unitary actors but as *environments* where events unfold, and where counterparts face similar difficulties to 'us'. But unlike for *Relations between Peoples*, hardly any comparisons are made with the US or Australia. The formulation of the opponents is also quite different: instead of against 'Muslims', one sees the subjects demarcated against opponents such as 'the rich', 'shareholders' and 'multi-national concerns', and to some degree (especially amongst the British) those who avoid paying their taxes. Such opponents tend to

be portrayed more as a cost than an existential threat: disliked, but their presence grudgingly accepted. Where explanatory factors are offered, they tend to cite causes which extend considerably beyond Europe and beyond the reach of a European polity: local problems such as unemployment in the city, price rises or the decline of local industry tended to be attributed to factors such as global inequalities in prices and wages.

While a transnational context is evoked very freely in *Economics and Relations between Peoples* (albeit generally not 'European' as such), in discussion of problems to do with *Society and the Law* a transnational context is rarely mentioned. The focus is firmly on 'the city', with occasional comparisons with other cities in the same country, or across time, but very little reference to conditions outside. As subject positions one finds 'those who play by the rules' (and are potential victims) and 'those who speak up for the rules'. The opponents in this domain are the hardened criminals, the egotistical and the corrupt; some minority groups are mentioned as persistent rule-breakers, but there is almost no reference to transnational, organised criminal networks. The focus is on the behaviour and mentalities of *local* actors, and explanations are local in their reach. References to the EU are naturally quite absent.

Discussion

Tracing these everyday discursive practices indicates some important things about popular identification under contemporary conditions. Firstly, it reminds that one need not look to abstract 'feelings of belonging' or 'identity' as the basis for collective positioning, still less seek to research these through questionnaires that challenge the respondent to declare his/her 'feelings of Europeanness' and suchlike. Political issues themselves form the basis of a rich set of resources for we-formation, and while it may be that not all such identification is normatively desirable – tolerance of opponents can be quite thin – there seems little reason to suppose that citizens are too politically apathetic or unaware to engage in it. A greater focus on how people interpret the world of politics and political problems would therefore seem an appropriate way of expanding research in European Studies beyond the usual culture- and values-based approaches. This seems particularly important given that, secondly, forms of identification vary according to the problems in question. Rather than thinking of *hierarchies* or *concentric circles* of identities, as many schemes in the EU-related literature suggest, domain-specificity may be a more useful orienting idea. Moreover, the transnational element seems to vary by domain. One sees little over-arching unity here, either centred on the national or the European level: reference-points range from the broader-than-European to the quite local.

Thirdly, the frequent use of transnational comparisons for certain sets of problems, and the evocation of others abroad who share in the same problems as 'us', suggests political theorists might want to conceptualise further the idea of the 'counterpart', the stranger living outside 'our' environment who nonetheless shares in our problems. This would seem to be an interesting figure to think about when conceptualising an EU demos. Likewise, there seems something theoretically significant about the textual distinction one encounters between references to other countries as unitary and perhaps competitive *actors* ('France' in the sense of 'the French', for example), and references to other countries as *environments* in which events unfold, as locations worthy of comparison because they feature others whose predicament is similar to 'ours'. In these interviews the latter were common, especially as regards locations in Europe – though there is no neat fit to the contours of the EU.

For such patterns to support a political community coextensive with the EU, the tendency towards transnational comparisons would probably need to be extended so as to include countries both in western and eastern Europe, and the subject-position of 'the West', including its racial and antagonistic undertones, undermined. Furthermore, these acts of positioning would arguably need

to be coupled with references to the EU as an arena for tackling the problems in question. One would want to see the assumption that it is feasible to address such problems as part of a collective political project, coupled with the sense that at least some of them can and should be addressed on a coordinated European scale. While these issues are beyond the scope of this essay, they may readily be studied using the same research method, as part of a wider inquiry into patterns of everyday discursive practice on matters of political relevance.

¹ Special thanks to Volker Balli, Harry Bauer, Michèle Lamont, Christine Reh, Michael Voříšek, Peter Wagner, Albert Weale and Lea Ypi, as well as the Journal's referees.

² Peter Wagner, 'Crises of Modernity: Political Sociology in Historical Contexts', in Stephen Turner (ed.), *Social Theory and Sociology: The Classics and Beyond* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

³ For a review of theoretical contributions to the EU debate, see Peter Wagner and Heidrun Friese, 'Survey Article: The Nascent Political Philosophy of the European Polity', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 10/3 (2002). On the empirical literature, see Martin Kohli, 'The Battlegrounds of European Identity', *European Societies*, 2/2 (2000).

⁴ A like-minded approach is Ulrike Hanna Meinhof, 'Europe Viewed from Below: Agents, Victims, and the Threat of the Other', in Richard K. Herrmann, Thomas Risse, and Marilyn B. Brewer (eds.), *Transnational Identities: Becoming European in the EU* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

⁵ This perspective is informed by the social-theoretical debate on 'tacit knowledge': cf. Theodore R. Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina, and Eike Von Savigny, *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (London: Routledge, 2001); Stephen Turner, *The Social Theory of Practices: Tradition, Knowledge and Presuppositions* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994). For an understanding of 'positioning' I draw on the discourse-theoretical work of Rom Harré (Harré and Luk Van Langenhove (eds.), *Positioning Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999)) and Chantal Mouffe's application of the concept 'subject-position' (Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993), p.97).

⁶ On the group-interview method, see William Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); David L. Morgan, *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research* (Qualitative Research Methods Series 16; London: Sage, 1997); and Michael Bloor et al., *Focus Groups in Social Research* (London: SAGE, 2001).

⁷ On 'self-understanding', see Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, 'Beyond Identity', *Theory and Society*, 29/1 (2000).

⁸ Broadly, for the countries studied, the majority of taxi-drivers earn below the average income, and few have completed a university education. Calculation of earnings is problematic for two reasons however. First, much depends on the times and the number of hours the individual chooses to work. Second, many drivers are wary of anyone who might turn out to be a tax-inspector, and therefore reluctant to declare their income. Data compiled by national statistics offices should therefore be treated with scepticism. A better approximation can be had by browsing the internet chatrooms which taxi-drivers themselves use to compare earnings with one another – see e.g. www.taxi-driver.co.uk or www.taxiforen.de/forum. These indicate earnings after running costs (fuel, licensing, maintenance, car rental etc.), and before tax, of around €25,000 in Britain, €20,000 euros in Germany (though lower in the east), and €6000 in the Czech Republic, each of which falls short of Gross National Income per capita as cited in the World Bank's World Development Indicators 2006 database. Drivers working night hours in capital cities (who do not feature in this study) may nonetheless earn higher figures.

⁹ Each discussion was led by the author in the local language, and recorded using audio microphone. Participants were encouraged to select the venue.

¹⁰ In Britain and Germany the rates were €60-70 per head; in the Czech Republic c. €40. These were above waiting-time, and intended to represent a good return on two hours' work for most drivers: however, they were not so high that a driver might not, in principle, have made the same amount in that time from fare-paying customers.

¹¹ Cf. Pamela Conover, Donald D. Searing, and Ivor Crewe, 'The Deliberative Potential of Discussion', *British Journal of Political Science*, 32/1 (2002). Some studies based on participant observation in the US have emphasised the tendency of non-elites actively to avoid discussion of politics: see in particular Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Others conversely argue that such discussion is by no means uncommon: see Katherine Cramer Walsh, *Talking About Politics: Informal Groups and Social Identity in American Life* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2004). The focus here is on what happens when the opportunity is provided, with the provision of opportunities treated as an important but separate issue.

¹² For further details on participants, see the author's webpage: <http://jonathanpjwhite.googlepages.com/home>.

¹³ The cards are reproduced on the author's webpage: <http://jonathanpjwhite.googlepages.com/home>. The exercise draws on Anthony Coxon, *Sorting Data: Collection and Analysis* (London: SAGE, 1999).

¹⁴ Amongst the interpreters of Wittgenstein this approach draws particularly on Barry Barnes, 'Practice as Collective Action', in Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, and Von Savigny (eds.), *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, and Schatzki,

Social Practices: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Chapter 2, pp.49ff.

¹⁵ On the 'cooperative principle' see H. Paul Grice, 'Logic and Conversation', in Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics*, Vol. 3, *Speech Acts* (New York: Academic Press, 1975), pp.45-7.

¹⁶ Political psychologists have debated whether individuals carry 'schemas' of the political world, and of what 'domains' these might be composed (cf. Susan T. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor, *Social Cognition* (Reading Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1984); Pamela Johnston Conover and Stanley Feldman, 'How People Organize the Political World: A Schematic Model', *American Review of Political Science*, 28/1 (1984)). The suggestion in Johnston Conover and Feldman is that there may be four basic domains of stimuli about which people have political beliefs – economic matters, social concerns, foreign affairs and racial affairs (with a suggested linkage between the last two). This has a clear affinity with findings here, differences in time and location notwithstanding.

¹⁷ Other studies, while not investigating the clustering of problems, identify a similar set of concerns amongst contemporary Europeans: e.g. Optem, 'The European Citizens and the Future of Europe: A Qualitative Study in the 25 Member States', (Eurobarometer, 2006).

¹⁸ Cf. the distinction made by Mouffe, (1993), *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso).