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Political allegiance after European integration

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Political Allegiance After European Integration

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Contents

Introduction p. xx

Map of Interview Locations p. xx

1. Political Community and the Bonds of Collectivity p. xx

2. Studying the Allegiances of Europeans p. xx

3. Articulations of the Political Common p. xx

4. On Subjects, Opponents and Counterparts p. xx

5. The Credibility of Political Projects p. xx

6. The Place of Europe and the EU p. xx

7. European Integration off the Meter p. xx

Methodological Appendix p. xx

Bibliography p. xx

Introduction

The years around the turn of the millennium witnessed growing interest amongst scholars of the EU in the democratic basis of this political arrangement. Questions such as 'Does Europe need a constitution?' and 'Is there, or can there be, a European society?' were being asked, and proposals put forward on 'How to democratise the European Union and why bother'. In some ways this was remarkable, since for most of the period of post-War integration, issues of democracy had been rather marginal. Integration was widely conceived to be an elite-driven process in which broader societal concerns played a limited role, and the degree to which institutions were insulated from direct popular pressure seemed justifiable due to the control enjoyed by the representatives of national government. Yet from the early 1990s, it seemed, neither the empirical nor the normative argument could so readily be accepted. 'Non-elites' were clearly liable to have a strong influence on the course of the integration process, as the referenda results on the Maastricht Treaty in France and Denmark seemed to demonstrate, while the terms of this treaty suggested the emergence of something more than an intergovernmental forum for solving problems of a technical kind. Hence the scholarship on the EU developed a new concern for questions of democracy and political community: the responsiveness of institutions on the one hand, and the significance of culture, ideas and notions of peoplehood as preconditions for the acceptance of these institutions on the other. A debate emerged concerning the existence or possibility of a European 'demos', with this latter often understood in terms of socio-cultural regularities.

At the same time as scholars of the EU were discovering democracy, scholars of democracy were going through a period of revaluation themselves. In Anglo-Saxon political

science and theory, it had become common to conceptualise the legitimacy of political association according to two, perhaps competing, principles: the principle of democracy (or collective self-rule) and the principle of constitutionalism (or the rule of law). While such a distinction is traceable in much of modern political thought, where the need to balance the expression of popular will with safeguards against a tyranny of the majority has been a familiar theme, what was perhaps new was the tendency to emphasise the latter at the expense of the former. The rule of law, it seemed, was being treated as more fundamental to democracy than the principle of democracy itself. A redefinition seemed to be taking place, such that certain changes in the world of practice could be more easily accommodated. Processes of juridification, of the weakening of political authority, and the decline of democratic deliberation in the representative institutions of the nation-state and amongst the broader public, were coming to be seen not as deviations from democracy but as patterns which could be accepted and even celebrated (Tully 2002); (Mair 2006). The study and theorising of democracy was evolving rapidly.

Today, while Europe's political and economic climate has profoundly changed, both these trends continue. On the one hand, in EU studies, the 2005 referenda defeats for the proposed EU constitution slowed somewhat the flow of scholarship on 'constitutional moments' and the active founding of a polity, but questions to do with the viability of the EU and with its democratic credentials have if anything become more salient. On the other hand, in political science and thought, a small literature has begun to emerge on the dangers of depoliticisation, but in general the subordination of questions to do with 'the people' and the democratic principle has continued. Indeed, some of this has fed back into the debate concerning the democratic status of the EU: these redefinitions of democracy have been used to argue that the EU already satisfies the criteria of democratic legitimacy, not because it is no more than an interstate organisation (though this argument is sometimes heard), but

because the kinds of policy-making it engages in are those which in modern democracies are properly put beyond majority control.

It may be possible to set these two bodies of concerns, to do with democracy and the EU, side by side without concluding that the EU must subordinate collective self-rule to the rule of law. One way to read debates about the possibility of a European demos is to see them as expressing a renewed concern about the conditions under which ideas of collective self-rule can be meaningfully realised. Yet to focus on socio-cultural regularities and treat these as the prerequisites of a viable democratic polity, as much of this literature has done, is to claim strong limits to the options available for political co-existence. While it may well be that individuals must hold something 'in common' if they are to regulate their lives through the same institutions, it may be appropriate to conceptualise this in ways less prone to determinism and to the devaluing of political adversarialism. The challenge would be to develop a less restrictive understanding of the possibilities for political association, *without* falling into the kind of voluntarism which blinds one to the existence of very real obstacles to democracy in the European context and prevents one acknowledging the weakness with which it is currently pursued.

Conversely, regarding the significance of the EU for democracy more generally, it may be that the EU experience encourages us to rethink the nature of political community, not so as to reduce it to a bare constitutionalism but so as to find ways of uncoupling it from the nationality principle which has been its underpinning in the context of the nation-state. If one understands the period of 'organised modernity' as being characterised by a fairly high degree of congruence between socio-economic practices, practices of social-cultural identification and the boundaries of the polity, and if one understands by contrast the contemporary world as one in which such closure can no longer be taken for granted (and on this there seems to be some consensus), then it may be that new concepts are needed that can better render conditions of boundary irregularity (Wagner 1996) (Benhabib et al. 2007).

Indeed, it may be that there are normative reasons to welcome these changed conditions. But even if there were not, the political constellation of contemporary Europe, characterised by a high degree of plurality, would seem to be a good place in which to explore the kinds of perspective with which one might try to substitute older, problematic notions of 'identity'.

Two things seem to follow, if this reasoning is secure. It seems one may want ways of continuing the discussion about democracy in the EU, and the allegiances needed to support it, with a particular sensitivity to the idea that the principle of democratic control is being subordinated to the principle of constitutionalism. Likewise, it seems one may want ways of continuing the discussion about the nature of democracy more generally in ways that alert one to the possibility of a multiplication in points of reference and sources of identification, and of a diminishing coherence between these. These are the points of departure for the following project, which elaborates a perspective addressed to both concerns. It advances a conception of citizen allegiances which can be defended on normative grounds, as conducive to a meaningful and robust form of democracy, yet which is of sufficient empirical relevance that it can draw out some of the salient features of citizen self-understanding and political appraisal as they can be found in contemporary Europe.

The book's focus is in some ways prosaic: on the shared political problems which people describe themselves as facing, and the interpretative resources they use when talking about them. It is suggested that the sense of shared predicament before common problems may be a promising way to conceptualise the collective bond necessary for political community. The study opens out how such problems are routinely perceived amongst a chosen set of citizens, the patterns of alliance and opposition which they inspire, and the assumptions one finds concerning whether and how they might be susceptible to organised address.

By taking this problem-oriented approach, the intention is to stick closely to some of the basic issues to do with political association and the exercise of democratic voice. It is an

approach different from much of what one finds in EU studies, where a common technique for studying the foundations of the EU amongst 'the people' is to ask a sample of people what they think of it. This is an expression of what one might call the 'EU-centrism' of EU studies: those who wish to study the EU have a natural tendency to put it centre-stage in their research design, leading to the collection of data which, while undeniably tied closely to the research topic, may rather inflate the EU's significance for respondents. The approach taken here, as will become clear, consists not in polling 'opinions' about the institutional architecture of contemporary Europe, nor in discerning abstract loyalties to one cultural world over another, but in examining the reference-points which are invoked spontaneously when people talk about the problems they see themselves, and people like themselves, as facing. The contours of political allegiance should be sought, it is suggested, not so much at the level of conscious beliefs and opinions about 'Europe', but in the taken-for-granted, common-sense understandings people express when talking about substantive issues. These understandings, though always revisable, structure the meanings that EU politics acquires. Rather than as a distinct object of affect, the EU is approached as a context of action, one evoked more readily or less so by its citizens. Such an approach allows one both to avoid an embedded EU-centrism and to comment more generally on questions to do with the health of democracy.

While the book begins in a theoretical mode, it soon takes an empirical turn by looking at the material generated in ten group discussions held with taxi-drivers in Britain, Germany and the Czech Republic. Theoretical ideas, unless one wishes to shelter them from all criticism except that to do with their internal logic, must be explored and developed outdoors. In this sense there is a political-sociological move to the work. But the purpose, it will be understood, is not that of the natural scientist: the empirical work is guided by the goals of concept-formation and critical diagnosis. By probing a small amount of data in considerable depth, one can refine one's concepts and show what they mean in practice.

Rather than to test them, the primary goal is to unfold them – something for which a small but varied sample is ideal. A hermeneutic rationale of this sort does not exclude the possibility of generalising from the material and making claims of a falsifiable kind. A secondary aim of the study, beyond elaborating a theoretical approach, is to give an empirical reading of some of the ideational factors conditioning political attachments in the contemporary EU, supported where this is possible with cross-reference to existing data and research. With a detailed description of the research method in the Appendix, the study is in principle reproducible and extendable. Even a strongly interpretative study would undermine its purpose if it were not rigorous in its methods and methodology. But ultimately the guiding concerns here are those of the applied theorist, not those of the collector of facts.

A project such as this has a clearly cross-disciplinary character. It draws on political theory, social theory and political sociology, as well as on the relevant debates in EU studies and political science. It also involves the use of a relatively new qualitative research method – the 'focus group', or group discussion. While this breadth of resources is a positive feature, multidisciplinarity should never be the cause of easy celebration, for there are genuine tensions involved. Perhaps the most notable and most general is that between political and social theorising – a tension which too frequently leads them to be pursued in isolation. In this work, we shall be drawn towards political theory which is especially sensitive to the importance of historical context, and which does not pursue abstract and universal truths. At the same time, inspiration is taken not from classical sociology but from more recent approaches which combine attention to patterns with an emphasis on interpretation, choices, and the possibility of change.

There are six main chapters to the work that follows. Chapter 1 sets out the basic problem, which concerns how best to conceptualise the collective bond that may be necessary for a viable democratic polity. This matter is explored with a particular focus on how political community may be conceived in the EU context, where contemporary

processes towards the separation of political authority from the underpinning of nationhood are widely considered advanced, and where a rich debate has unfolded on how to conceptualise social and political ties beyond the nation-state. Arguing that many of the existing approaches are adverse in their implications for contestatory politics and the possibility of collective self-rule, and therefore of a depoliticising tendency, this chapter lays out the contours of an alternative conceptualisation referred to as a *political bond*. It is suggested that if the political allegiances associated with such a bond could be discerned amongst Europeans, in place would be not only the sense of belonging needed for citizens to endorse membership of the EU, but also the popular expectations needed to drive efforts to reform and fully democratise it. Conversely, should these allegiances be absent or partially formed, that stimulus would likewise be weak. Seeking the traces of a political bond is therefore about seeking the basis for a *politically desirable* form of social integration. The political bond is presented as an ideal to be developed further in empirical study, and a sensitising concept with which to orient the empirical analysis.

Chapter 2 looks at the methodological basis on which such a bond may be studied. It assesses some of the empirical approaches which have been taken to the study of mass politics in the European context, and discusses the kinds of social theory appropriate to the concerns of this work, gravitating towards that which places an emphasis on routinised discursive practice. It then presents the strategy and specifics of the exploratory study that follows (on which further details are provided in the Appendix).

From this point onwards, the narrative voice is enriched by the voices of taxi-drivers. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 each explore one of the three key ideas associated with a political bond: the existence and nature of shared political problems constituting a 'political common', the collective positioning one finds with regard to these problems, and the perceived credibility of political projects designed to address them. The study's participants were given considerable scope to foreground whichever political problems they wished to, allowing the

analyst to map out and analyse the discursive patterns of political significance which accompany these. Chapter 3 identifies the most salient problems emerging in discussion, and shows how speakers construct these as issues of common concern and dissatisfaction for which remedy of some kind should be sought. Here one encounters many of the 'bread-and-butter' issues of everyday politics, and one sees them richly articulated and discussed with engagement. Political apathy or confusion are little in evidence, and one sees few grounds to suggest a political bond must flounder on political withdrawal. Three bodies of salient problems are identified – *Economics, Society and the Law,* and *Relations between Peoples* – and these become the units of analysis for the remainder of the study.

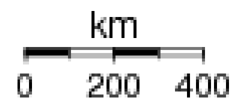
The next two chapters investigate the context within which speakers locate these problems, and how far this includes a transnational dimension. Chapter 4 examines what kinds of social grouping they inspire. It shows how 'political identities', as they are conventionally called, may vary markedly from one domain of problems to another, be it in their conception of the self, of the nature of opponents, and the scope of those with whom comparisons may appropriately be drawn. Patterns of identification are domain-specific, itself a potentially valuable resource for political community, and only sometimes are they based on national or regional categories. With an eye to the possibility of transnational political ties, the chapter investigates how social groupings in other countries are drawn into these discussions: the extent to which speakers evoke counterparts to themselves abroad – people who share in their predicaments, and perhaps have common adversaries – or treat these places as alien, undifferentiated wholes. The chapter shows how this varies markedly according to the nature of the problems in question, some prompting a much wider horizon of awareness than others. Speakers are willing to assert the relevance of the experiences of other Europeans – but only on some kinds of issue.

If interpersonal ties are the focus of Chapter 4, Chapter 5 deals with ties to institutions, in particular as these are grounded not in perceptions of the competence and

trustworthiness of office-holders – a standard focus of survey research – but in perceptions of how far matters of everyday concern are susceptible to organised address. It is suggested that one of the stand-out features of the empirical material is a sense of *fatalism* regarding what political agency of any kind can be expected to achieve. This fatalism is all the stronger for those political issues cast as global in their origins and extension, and of the kind that transnational political structures might be expected to deal with. A political world believed to consist largely of problems without solutions, of difficulties attributed to far-away causes, is one that subverts the plausibility of collective self-rule, and represents a challenge for political authority at all levels. On the basis of these discussions, fatalism rather than political apathy appears the major challenge to political allegiance.

Chapter 6 connects these observations directly to the question of a European polity. It looks at how matters European are drawn into these discussions, and the extent to which the views traced are consistent with a political bond in Europe. It argues that the way problems of everyday concern tend to be understood, combined with expectations concerning their susceptibility to address, generally rules out 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, perhaps liable to exacerbate, others. Under such conditions, the EU appears less as an augmentation than a curtailment of the democratic principle of collective self-rule. Some may conclude this is reason to relax such principles, or to call for their realisation in a world composed exclusively of nation-states. But it can equally be the spur to conceiving new repertoires of political understanding, of the kind that give more meaning to the EU as it is, or – less conservatively – that create the expectations conducive to its evolution in a desirable way. The chapter concludes therefore by critically examining in what respects things might need to change in order for stronger political allegiances to take shape.

The discussions with taxi-drivers at the core of this work were conducted in 2004-5. It was an interesting time to be talking: the price of petrol was sharply on the rise, the war on Iraq was becoming the war *in* Iraq, and new waves of migration within Europe were beginning. Bombs went off on the London Tube, and personal debt was quietly growing. The rich were getting richer, though it was not always clear how. In the background, someone somewhere was trying to tie up a constitutional treaty, one that could systematise, even dramatise, the accomplishments of European integration. Democratic concerns were by no means absent from this exercise – they were surely one source of inspiration. But for many amongst the broader public, such tinkerings seemed a peripheral matter, something whose relevance was at most indirect. This book follows the same ordering of priorities. Squarely, though not uncritically, it is in the everyday concerns of ordinary citizens that it roots its political and sociological concerns.



Locations of interview:

Swansea, Reading, Norwich, Kassel, Würzburg, Lübeck, Erfurt, Plzeň, Liberec and Ostrava