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Community, Transnationalism, and the Left-Right Metaphor

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The imagery of Left and Right has been a common way to conceive democratic politics in modern Europe, and commentators have suggested it be extended to the European Union. This article examines the normative implications and plausibility of European politics being cast in these terms. It focuses on the challenges of rendering political division recognisable and acceptable at a transnational level, of evoking its continuities of structure, and of symbolizing the ties of political community. The paper probes the Left-Right dichotomy's potential in these regards, together with the conjunctural factors likely to raise or diminish its appeal.

As a feature of the nation-state, Left-Right politics is most familiar. From its first articulation in the late-eighteenth century, and above all following its globalisation in the late-nineteenth, the Left-Right dichotomy has been an established part of the modern world. Political actors have chosen to define themselves in its terms, while commentators have used it to anchor their observations. But what of the dichotomy's significance for public life beyond the modern state, away from a well-ordered world of stable boundaries, hierarchical power and the ties of nationhood? Sites of transnational integration such as the European Union (EU), or more widely of what is sometimes called the 'world polity', have not displaced the modern state but have sharply reorganised it, producing arenas where decision-making is dispersed in space and where populations may be better thought of as multi-national. What normative and practical relevance does Left-Right politics have in settings such as these, as an influence on a community's self-understanding?

There are at least two ways to think about Left-Right politics, only to some degree linked. The first is descriptive in focus, postulating a division of political opinion along a single dimension, as identified e.g. in opinion polls, voting patterns or the programmes of parties. For much of the modern period, a division of this sort has been located in views concerning the proper degree of state intervention in the market, though this is just one of various ways the Left-Right opposition may be substantivised (Fuchs & Klingemann 1990). A recent study discerns a basic political division of this kind developing at the global level (Noel & Therien 2009); others have identified and celebrated its emergence in EU politics (Hix 2008). In these accounts, Left-Right politics transcends the nation-state insofar as political opinion across a wider space is structured by a dominant opposition. 'Left-Right politics' is the convenient summary term for an empirical fact, one that could be captured equally accurately, if not so crisply, by speaking of bipolar division in the public sphere.

A second way of thinking about Left-Right politics focuses rather on the properties of the Left-Right idiom itself. It inquires not so much into the underlying structure of conflict, but into the independent significance of the language and symbolism by which conflict is expressed − the system of its denomination (Gauchet 1994: 242). In this perspective, the distinctiveness of the Left-Right dichotomy lies not so much in its descriptive or analytical capacity as in its ability to valorise and publicise certain democratic ideas. It acts as a kind of constitutional metaphor, capturing important aspects of how the desirable political association should look and framing the expectations of its citizens accordingly. In this sense it is analogous to, though with political implications quite different from, those 'stories of peoplehood' nations are said to tell themselves (Smith 2003), of which the idea of nationhood itself is the paradigmatic example. In this line of thinking, 'Left-Right politics' travels to settings beyond the nation-state insofar as this distinctive interpretative frame offers possibilities for making sense of developments beyond the established arenas of domestic politics.

These two perspectives, one which instrumentalises Left-Right for the purposes of analysis, and one which scrutinises it for the purposes of interpretation, are usefully kept separate, and this article's principal concern is the second. It considers what appeal the Left-Right idiom may hold for democratic politics, within and beyond the modern state, in awareness that its reflections do not necessarily coincide with the actual emergence of bipolar conflict – indeed, with the intuition that the vitality of the idiom is only weakly related to the reality it purports to describe. As we shall show, Left-Right and its associated narratives can be seen as symbolic resources of some value in the transnational context: their potential is to evoke the legitimacy of political division in circumstances where it is liable to be denigrated, and to highlight the priority of political over socio-cultural categories of collectivity in a context where the latter are too often naturalised. Further, they invite the citizen to seek some form of over-arching pattern and coherence to political contestation, a potentially useful check on tendencies towards the fragmentation of political time and space, and they hold possibilities for evoking the ties of political community in contexts where the organic unity associated with the national principle is either unrealisable or undesirable. Examining these points in turn, the article probes the normative appeal of politics denominated in Left-Right terms. It goes on to explore how *plausible* such a contribution is in the contemporary European context. It examines the conditions under which Left-Right symbolism may be expected to flourish, and how far present-day Europe diverges from these, potentially with adverse consequences for the symbolism's appeal.

While the focus is on the Left-Right dichotomy, the arguments made should carry interest beyond those sympathetic to this political vocabulary. The Left-Right idiom has some unique properties – notably the evocation of a counterposed pair – which lend it certain distinctive implications as we shall see, but much of what will be said applies equally to other political categories of denomination, ideological labels in particular. Moreover, for those sceptical about the prospects for this and other such political vocabularies at the transnational level, the discussion should retain relevance as a distinctive reading of the challenges facing

politics and democracy should these symbolic underpinnings be absent, or their democratic potential exhausted. While the discussion bears directly on the social and political theory of the EU, it has a wider significance also, given the possibility that other polities increasingly come to share some of its basic characteristics as the political configuration associated with the nation-state becomes rarer.

The Birth of a Metaphor

There exist many histories of the Left in European politics (e.g. Sassoon 1997, Eley 2002, Schechter 2007), and a number of portraits of the Right (Eatwell 1989, Rogger & Weber 1965, Girvin 1992). Fewer are the histories of the Left-Right idiom itself, as something irreducible to the political traditions it may be said to denote. This is testament no doubt to a deeply entrenched vocabulary, for one may feel less urge to historicise what appears unchanging and omnipresent.

As a generalised spatial metaphor, the Left-Right dichotomy can be found in various domains of human activity (Laponce 1981) (Needham 1973) (de Grazia 1981), but it emerged in political form broadly coterminously with modern democracy. As Marcel Gauchet has described, the terms had their origins in the physical arrangements of the French National Assembly in the years following the Revolution, as representatives allied with the Third Estate began to gather on one side of the chamber, encouraging those loyal to the Ancien Regime to form on the other, and a majority favouring moderate and gradual change to associate in between. Yet their appearance marked a 'false start' (Gauchet 1994: 247), for initially these groupings were generally regarded neither as legitimate – they tended to be seen as factional affronts to the general interest, pathological and preferably short-lived – nor was their existence widely publicised. With pre-revolutionary ideas of the good polity generally holist, drawing on metaphors of the polity as an indivisible body, division was generally viewed a

sign of abnormality, even by defenders of the Revolution (Rosenblum 2008). Only from the 1820s onwards did 'Left' and 'Right' start to gain recognition as acceptable and enduring features of democratic life in parliament and beyond, slowly losing their associations with the Revolution and replacing alternative symbolic schemes – e.g. based on colour – as the primary forms of political identification. Around the turn of the twentieth century, the terms started to acquire prominence beyond France, spreading with parliamentary democracy itself and with socialism and the political divisions it spawned.

The Left-Right metaphor's appeal seems to have been strongest in circumstances of political complexity, where party configurations were fluid and composite. Where the political system was dominated by just two parties, as in the US, it could be grasped using party names alone (Gauchet 1994: 274). In much of continental Europe, where the political scene was more complex, it came to be heavily used for purposes of electoral mobilisation, symbolising idealised protagonists in conflict. The Left-Right dichotomy became a conventional metaphor of politics – a figure of speech whose metaphorical properties would go largely unnoticed (Drulák 2006). Of course, even at its height, the terminology continued to be resisted, by the empiricist who considered it a misleading guide to opinion, just as by the ideologue for whom it could seem an irritation or threat. Broadly, those perspectives most opposed to the Left-Right idiom were those taking a dim view of democratic adversarialism in general. For fascist movements, the metaphor normalised divisions which were considered unnatural and an offence to popular unity: dissent was the manifestation of private interest in collision with the collective. Similar disdain can be found within the Marxist-Leninist tradition, for whom political conflict was of course a key phenomenon but one valid mainly insofar as it took class form and created the conditions to go *beyond* parliamentary democracy.

Left-Right thus rose as a central but contested idiom of national politics, first in France and later in democracies around the world (Mair 2007). It formed an established political vocabulary long before being appropriated by political scientists as a system of spatial analysis (e.g. Downs 1957). Consistent with the scope of most political practices of the twentieth

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century, its usage was directed mainly to developments *internal* to the Westphalian state. To speak of a Left-Right opposition was usually to speak of the political constellation of a single legal order. Of course, the Left-Right vocabulary was never entirely absent from international politics. When Trotsky, in 1930, sought to expand to the wider Comintern his resistance to Stalinism within the Russian Communist Party, it was the *International Left Opposition* which he founded. The very fact of the terminology's globalisation furthermore meant that any local deployment could not but hint at a wider reality. But the main understanding of Left-Right politics in the twentieth century was as a series of domestic oppositions, analogous to one another but ultimately discrete. Today this no doubt remains the primary perspective on Left-Right discourse. But as processes of regional integration have advanced, notably in Europe, the prospect arises of the idiom's application to wider political developments, be it as a vocabulary of comparison – comparing for instance the fortunes of a 'French' and 'Italian Left', and nesting them within a larger framework – or as a vocabulary by which to evoke transnational subjects unbounded by nation-states. Some such applications are evident already: the European Parliament contains a 'Party of the European Left', and – probably more significant for the terminology's public resonance – various national media apply Left-Right vocabulary to the European political scene. Reporting of the 2009 European Parliamentary elections produced, as we shall see later, numerous headlines in which the terms featured prominently.

Such invocations remain sporadic, and in some lines of reasoning are likely to remain so – debates we shall return to. One family of sceptical positions holds that the Left-Right idiom is on the wane in all contexts, including the nation-state, due to a combination of factors involving the increasing amorphousness of contemporary party politics, the purported discrediting of ideological thinking and of comprehensive narratives of the political, and increasing popular distrust of non-individualist modes of citizen engagement (Giddens 1994). Others hold that the Left-Right idiom faces peculiar challenges in the transnational context, given the difficulties in harmonising the usage of words that acquired varied primary meanings

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elsewhere (Bartolini 2005). A third perspective sees the metaphor flourishing, but in a form quite different to its older meanings. Whatever the validity of these objections, the idiom has been a sufficiently stable feature of politics in the modern age to warrant consideration of its significance in a period of transnationalisation.

What of the idiom's normative standing? As we have suggested, its origins were prosaic, and its invocation by individual actors probably inspired by a series of pragmatic considerations to do with partisan differentiation and mobilisation (White forthcoming 2011). Its adoption meanwhile by scientists of politics has been mainly descriptive, guided by the impassive aim of mapping political space so as to test theories. Yet the meanings of the Left-Right vocabulary have never been reducible to the tactical goals of those invoking it in particular moments, nor to the political traditions it has been used to describe. Taken together, Left and Right form a dualism rich in metaphorical meaning, one which arguably performs a 'democratic function' (Dyrberg 2005) larger than the parts into which it might be disaggregated, and extending beyond the intentions of individual actors. As with other spatial metaphors, it is analytically useful – though from a linguistic perspective still bold – to see 'Left-Right' as a macro-structural phenomenon existing independently of specific utterances featuring 'Left' and 'Right': as a *conceptual metaphor* greater than, though constructed through, its related set of *metaphorical expressions* (Lakoff & Johnson 1980).[2]

The next section examines more closely some of the meanings which may be linked to it, with their possible political implications for the transnational context in mind. As a versatile metaphor, used differently by different voices, Left-Right is prone to more than one interpretation, and there can be no thought of giving the definitive one. Moreover, meanings are ultimately inseparable from specific situations of interaction, and one must treat carefully when approaching them in the abstract. The following is speculative in character: anchored in existing social and political thought, it explores some of the strengths of the metaphor as these

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[2] The relationship between these being dialectical, no strong terminological distinction is made in this piece between 'metaphor', 'vocabulary', 'terminology', 'idiom', etc., which are used interchangeably with for Left-Right dichotomy.

resonate with the challenges of transnational politics. One cannot disguise an intellectualising tendency in the account, for it draws inspiration mainly from the interpretations of democratic theorists and reasoned personal reflection rather than sites of political cognition in everyday life. The Left-Right dichotomy is no doubt only sometimes consciously experienced in the senses here described. But even accepting this, the account should usefully flag up some of the desirable political ideas for which symbolic expression of one form or another may be necessary in a political community, and for which the Left-Right idiom is a familiar but not necessarily the only candidate.

Reading the Metaphor's Democratic Worth

1. The Reality and Legitimacy of Political Division

Modern democracy is typically understood as both pluralist in an empirical sense, in that its citizens are apt to embrace diverse and potentially conflicting political views, and pluralist in a normative sense, in that recognition of this fact, perhaps even its valorisation, forms part of the political community's self-understanding. One way to read the significance of the Left-Right dichotomy is as a symbolic rendition of both these ideas. With its intonations of division, yet division which is normal and non-fatal, it can be viewed as an emblem of *conflict tamed*, of conflict which is unavoidable yet which can be accommodated within the daily life of the community (Mouffe 2005). This image of the acceptably divided community can be seen as contributing favourably to the self-conception of citizens. As Gauchet puts it, the Left-Right metaphor creates 'a frame of reference whose purpose is to make the underlying order of society more legible, more intelligible, and more acceptable to its members. … [It] symbolises membership in a society whose law is division. It provides the symbolic vector that makes possible what would otherwise be highly improbable: identification with a fragmented collectivity' (Gauchet 1994: 290). However discomforting the image of enduring division may

be, it is likely to be an important one for those who take political disagreement seriously, one with the potential to consolidate the idea of democracy in the public imagination. Rather than a mere disciplining exercise, manufacturing a passive form of consent towards the democratic regime, it contains the seeds of a critical disposition: to the extent that division is normalised, one can expect a healthy suspicion in those moments when political contestation is absent.

It is worth noting early in our discussion that the Left-Right dichotomy permits more and less conflictual interpretations. As hinted earlier, it is both a language of action and of analysis, addressing in Gauchet's terms the 'realm of involvement' and the 'realm of observation'. As a device for popular mobilisation, some may play up its adversarial dimension, presenting it as denoting actors in sharp opposition, on whose disagreements the individual must take a stand.[3] In its guise as a language of political commentary, the adversarial dimension may be softer, with Left and Right evoking a continuum of opinions which shade into one another. In both cases it is an idiom expressive of pluralism, although it is the first reading which foregrounds the centrality of contestation to political life.

The pluralism evoked by the Left-Right metaphor is moreover one in which the competing positions seem to enjoy equality of political status. They are as peers. Whereas *up-down* spatial metaphors are said by linguists to evoke notions of superiority and inferiority, dominance and subordination (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), the left-right metaphor evokes a lateral arrangement whose points appear on the same plane. In Steven Lukes' terms, there is a 'principle of parity' to be inferred (Lukes 2003). The contending positions certainly need not be considered *morally* equivalent, but the implication is that each should be heard, that they should have equal access to political channels. It may be read as one of the decisive symbolic shifts accompanying the advent of democracy that the dominant axis of societal representation was hereby 'rotated' (Laponce 1981), such that what was celebrated was no longer the vertical, class-based divisions associated with feudal hierarchy but the lateral clash of contending forces

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[3] This is not to overlook that the Left-Right metaphor can also be a resource for those championing a politics of *moderation*, for it can be used to mark out the place of the conciliatory Centre. Endorsing the metaphor means accepting the persistence of division, but need entail celebrating conflict and defining oneself by it.

formally equal in legitimacy. This procedural equality may be deceptive of course, for despite

their formal symmetry the positions Left and Right in many symbolic systems enjoy unequal

prestige. The term 'Right' is loaded in many languages with positive associations to do with

correctness, rectitude, entitlement and dexterity, while 'Left' has had connotations of

awkwardness and threat (cf. 'gauche' and 'sinister') (Sartori 1976) (Lukes 2003) (de Grazia

1981). Whether this marking carries over to the political field is debatable – it is arguably the

'Left' which enjoys pre-eminence here, since the 'Right' is often defined by what the 'Left' is

not (Laponce 1981). Certainly the Left-Right metaphor has found many of its strongest

advocates amongst those self-identifying with the Left, a point we shall return to. But even if

one judges there is an imbalance embedded in the terminology, it is one which the metaphor's

visual properties dispute and assuage.

Continuing this line of thought, it can be argued that not only does the Left-Right

metaphor evoke a pluralism of equals, but it casts that pluralism in explicitly political

categories, i.e. ones which point to allegiances based on shared chosen beliefs rather than

inherited ties of circumstance. The protagonists to this encounter – Left, Right, and variations

thereof – cannot be reduced to social categories, e.g. of ethnos, class, religion or territorial

affiliation. While such categories may provide underpinning to them – workers, blacks,

women or oppressed colonial groups are sometimes named as causes on whose behalf the Left

is active; the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie and, in some contexts, whites have been associated

with the Right – the terms themselves transcend these categories and cannot be essentialised by

association with specific groups. They can only be fully understood in terms of political goals

susceptible to choice and revision (Dyrberg 2005: 162). One way to understand the

significance of this is that it makes division comprehendible not as mere *factionalism*, as an

array of self-seeking efforts by social groups bound by shared interest to better their situation,

but as *partisanship*, i.e. the clash of competing efforts to enact a vision of the *public* good. It

stands for a pluralism of political ideas, in other words, rather than a pluralism of interest-

groups. Of course, the metaphor is for the same reason always vulnerable to a negative

counter-reading: precisely because 'Left' and 'Right' can never be tightly linked to the interests of a certain group, they can be portrayed as lacking in content, as symbols of arbitrary difference. Their symmetry of form can be read as indicating an instinctive negativity, suggesting disagreements rooted in a structural need to oppose the Other rather than in considered evaluation.[4] At its best, however, the Left-Right metaphor may be said to dignify political conflict by presenting it as irreducible to private interest – something surely crucial to any normative model of politics.

If the Left-Right metaphor has symbolised the legitimacy of political discord within the nation-state, it may have special appeal in the context of a compound (Fabbrini 2007), multi-national polity such as the European Union. For in contexts such as this, where constitutional structures are weak and the polity's dissolution into its component parts an ever-present possibility, this is a message easily forgotten. Political disagreement is liable to seem threatening to the polity's integrity, a possible source of fragmentation, and for this reason denigrated or suppressed. In effect one may see a reversion to the pre-modern preference for a holist image of political community, and the justification of decision-making with recourse to putatively incontestable standards. This is to some extent what one finds in the present EU, where the style of politics – its discourse as much as its institutional structures – is primarily technocratic rather than adversarial. Only in the European Parliament, traditionally the weakest of the EU institutions, is division in its political guise made manifest. If there is a hegemonic spatial metaphor to be identified in EU politics more generally, it is not that of Left-Right but that of the moving object (forwards-backwards, as in the sense of advances in integration and periodic retrenchments) or that of the container (inside-outside, as in the sense of a state's membership in or exclusion from a policy regime, be it the euro, the Schengen zone, or the EU as a whole) (Drulák 2006). These are metaphors which have little to say

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[4] This effect may be encouraged further by another geometrical artifact of the metaphor: insofar as Left and Right are appreciable it is because they are at some distance to the self, something which evokes the self as a detached spectator to distant rivalries, able to see the full scene more clearly than those directly involved. This too may encourage political actors to be viewed as partial in the negative sense – as sectarian and sub-rational. Cf. Urbinati 2010, fnt. 20.

regarding the legitimacy of political disagreement. Insofar as successful EU politics is often considered to lie at the leading edge of 'forwards' or 'inside' – that is, when the Union is 'deepening' its *acquis* rather than becoming 'sclerotic', or enlarging to include new members rather than acting the 'fortress' – it is cast in terms which are uncompromising towards alternatives. Being 'behind' and 'outside' risks becoming equated with being recalcitrant and irrelevant. And insofar as passages of successful integration are accounted for by agreement amongst the actors involved (and their failure equated with insuperable differences), the reality of persistent disagreement within the political arrangements thereby created becomes harder to acknowledge and give significance to.

The potential worth of the Left-Right metaphor here need not lie in discrediting the EU polity, exposing it as irredeemably non-democratic. Nor need it be to highlight the necessity of democratisation, though clearly this is one possible application. More modestly, it would lie in reminding that, even in a political association consensual in style and of which membership is voluntary, political agreements have value choices and compromise at their origin, and that alternative political paths are conceivable. Even if the exact meaning of 'Left' and 'Right' remains weakly defined, the Left-Right metaphor functions as a mnemonic to the contestability of political decision-making and the ineradicability of division, discouraging the passive conception of citizenship which says decision-making is appropriately understood as an expert-led search for optimal solutions. Ideological labels can be used to achieve the same, but immediately direct attention to the *content* of division. In the transnational context, it is reminding of the very fact of its existence which is the primary challenge.

Beyond the danger that disagreement is overlooked in a compound polity, there is the danger that where acknowledged it is cast solely in territorial terms. The EU's institutional structure embeds the member-state as the pre-eminent actor (in the Council of Ministers and the increasingly powerful European Council), and when conflicts emerge they tend to be cast using nation-state categories: consider the articulation of the EU's recent economic problems as a confrontation between Germany and Greece, and ongoing media discussion of budgetary

issues in terms of national contributors and beneficiaries. In the multinational polity, these territorial units are moreover often seen as expressive of distinct cultural identities. Disagreement is thus liable to be denominated either in state-territorial or socio-cultural categories, and seen as a function of the clash of brute interests or identities rather than the clash of (more or less) chosen, criticisable and revisable political beliefs. Thus Germany and Greece are presented as locked in a conflict born of irreconcilable state interests, inflamed by differing ways of life (cf. national stereotypes pitting profligate and workshy Greeks against hard-working, thrifty Germans). The 'unity in diversity' of which the EU motto speaks is generally interpreted as unity in the face of differences of culture and state interest, not differences of political commitment. Here again, for those seeking a more contestable legal order, the Left-Right idiom may seem desirable, offering possibilities for redenominating conflicts in political categories, thereby re-endowing actors with responsibility for their positions and rendering these susceptible to debate. While it is possible that in a compound polity, with its nested legal and cultural orders, territorial denominations will enjoy a certain pre-eminence, there may be value in symbols which counter this tendency.

2. Structured Contestation rather than Isolated Disputes

A second implication of the Left-Right metaphor in its nation-state career has been the notion of divisions which are consistent across time. It has been an emblem of *continuity*. As Gauchet puts it, 'in their abstraction *left* and *right* functioned as memory notions through which historical continuity could be maintained. They allowed people to believe that political conflict is political conflict, that from the Girondins versus the Montagnards to the nationalists versus the socialists by way of the liberals versus the monarchists the story was always the same' (Gauchet 1994: 259, 241). The metaphor evokes an enduring we-they configuration rather than an aggregate of isolated disputes – conflict with a past and a future. The cast of

actors and their style of performance may change, but the continuity in their roles lends a sense of equivalence.

In the nation-state setting, several goods may be said to follow, together with some problems we shall come to. First, the sense of continuity offers *intelligibility*, conjuring a larger frame for the minutiae of day-to-day politics. When confrontations are sliced into a series of momentary encounters between ephemeral actors, they are liable to seem opaque and technical. A dispute for instance over working conditions may seem trivial if it cannot be understood in terms of a larger political context involving arguments and value orientations with a historical pedigree. Second, awareness of a cross-temporal dimension can be a source of *motivation*. Where there is continuity in the protagonists to conflict there is reason to take each encounter seriously, for 'we' have a continued stake in it. The Left-Right metaphor implies the struggle is larger than any single defeat – that there is a 'long war' beyond the daily battles. (To be sure, notions of continuity can be dispiriting, suggesting a politics without directionality, one which permits no horizon of progress to aim for. Continuity in adversarialism is motivating only insofar as some evolution in the substance of dispute is acknowledged.) The third point is that the cross-temporal dimension provides reason to respect the political opponent, suggesting to victors that if they take excessive advantage of the defeated then it will be a variant of *those same* opponents who may later be in a position to dominate them. To an extent, these notions of continuity are afforded also by ideological categories such socialism, liberalism, libertarianism or conservatism. Yet where there are three or more such terms in play, they do not offer the same clear lines of opposition, nor do they necessarily conjure a unified adversary – points liable to qualify their symbolic power.

It will be objected that the reality of political conflict is considerably more complex than the Left-Right model implies. The metaphor suggests, after all, two or more sides who agree on what divides them, something quite possibly misleading given the disagreements as

old as the metaphor itself concerning the differences it symbolises.[5] A single, over-arching

conflict may be ever more elusive in post-industrial society. Even should one interpretation

become hegemonic, such that the main contending parties do approximately agree on the terms

of their opposition, all dualistic schemes are likely to obscure certain perspectives: note the

objections of Green activists to political spectrums configured according to how best to achieve

economic growth, a goal they may not share. Also, is there not something dubious about the

notion of continuity in political orientations? A 'Right' which moves 'rightwards' may be

shifting not just its own position but the very terms of debate, bringing its opponents in tow

(Anderson 1998). For all these reasons there is clearly major simplification involved in the

Left-Right model. Such concerns are alleviated in part by empirical studies highlighting some

level of convergence in what the Left-Right spectrum means, and showing how the dichotomy

can absorb new ideas without major disruption (Fuchs & Klingemann 1990). Ultimately

however the Left-Right metaphor does badly if judged as a guide to the structure and content

of conflict. Its appeal would lie rather in the more general manner in which its component

terms, as categories of abstraction, invite the citizen to lift her eyes from the particular and to

seek out a larger structure. Its implication is that political contestation is *patterned*, a

contention which is the necessary point of departure for more empirical efforts to best capture

the contours of that pattern.

Notions of a larger cross-temporal structure to political life have their relevance to a

polity such as the EU just as to the modern state. Where politics presents itself as of a

fundamentally new kind, played out in novel types of political institution, there may indeed be

an acute need to suggest that not all has changed, that today's political encounters have their

antecedents. But in this larger political environment it may be that one looks not just to cross-

temporal but to cross-*spatial* structures of conflict, to the continuity of political conflict across

geographical settings. In a polycentric polity, power is dispersed and decision-making takes

place across multiple locations: whatever contestation occurs is therefore liable to seem highly

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[5] A subtle discussion is Bobbio 1996.

fragmented. Further, given the noted tendency for disputes to be cast in territorial denominations, there is the danger they inevitably come to seem parochial in import, played out in one location only and featuring just a small cast of protagonists. As illustration, consider the strikes in February 2009 at the Lindsey Oil Refinery in Lincolnshire (UK), and subsequently other refineries and power stations in northern England, against the application of EU job rules to exclude local workers from employment. When the engineering company Jacobs sub-contracted work on expanding the refinery to an Italian firm (IREM) which chose to use its own Italian workforce, British workers and their unions objected on the grounds that they were thereby being unfairly excluded from the local job market (a grievance amplified by the suspicion that the Italian workforce was being employed on lower wages and different terms). Arguably one of the major challenges facing protesters in such situations is to show that theirs is not merely a local dispute but goes beyond those directly involved. They need to avoid casting themselves, or being cast, as Business Secretary Lord Mandelson was happy to cast them, as local reactionaries engaged in 'the politics of xenophobia'.[6] Should outside actors including the media present their grievances as merely local, or as the concerns of a national group ('British workers') against outsiders ('foreign workers'),[7] first they are liable to seem motivated by self-interest rather than principle, and second the possibilities for a wider, coordinated political response at the transnational level will be limited. A vocabulary of dissent is needed by which to render the dispute intelligible as part of a larger pattern, so that structural causes can be sought and cross-national cooperation pursued where desirable.

Many such vocabularies are possible, and it is of course a matter for protesters themselves how they choose to articulate their protest. The language of worker solidarity is evidently one viable option: a *Unite* union shop steward was reported as denouncing employers' use of 'unjust laws' to 'pitch one European worker against fellow European

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[6] 'Foreign labour row "deal reached"' 4 February 2009, *BBC Online*,
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7868777.stm.
[7] The willingness of some protesters to deploy the British flag and the slogan 'British jobs for British workers' makes such portrayals quite feasible.

workers', a formulation which permits generalisation to other sites of contention.[8] Ideological categories such as 'socialism' or a 'social Europe' offer the same possibility – arguably in superior form, given what we have said about the merits of categories irreducible to the interests of a particular social group. As a symbolic system of the most abstract kind, and one established widely across national frontiers, the Left-Right metaphor offers this possibility in a peculiarly interesting way: its broad, umbrella categories offer a kind of 'constructive ambiguity', enabling forms of cooperation which a more specific vocabulary might obstruct. Precisely for the reason the terms cannot be associated with any single intellectual tradition – i.e. for the reason there exists no definitive text, individual or movement with which 'Left' and 'Right' may be equated – these terms can be a point of consensus for actors varied in their orientations. The metaphor thereby offers a way of evoking decision-making across many sites as part of a chain. To be sure, its promise that political meaning can be translated across space and time may be flawed and destined sometimes to disappoint. There will be difficulties in store for those who invoke it too hastily: cross-site comparisons will first be needed to establish how far experiences are really shared, how far different disputes genuinely have common origins and permit common address. But ultimately a language of this sort may be a facilitator of wider political coordination and engagement, fostering the expectation that political contestation is continuous from one instance to another.

The cross-*spatial* application of the Left-Right metaphor, as in a compound polity, is different from its cross-temporal application in at least one important way. In the latter case, differences of interpretation are more easily disguised, for those who see things differently may never meet, separated as they are across generations. In the cross-spatial context, the possibility of encounter exists, such that quite different, perhaps even contradictory, understandings of Left-Right, as they have developed in different contexts, may run up against one another (Bartolini 2005). These different understandings will be persistent insofar as the

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[8] 'Foreign labour row "deal reached"', *BBC Online*.

terms may signify ideas by their nature not easily transnationalised.[9] One must be careful however not to overstate the unity with which the Left-Right dichotomy has been understood in the national context. The meaning of the terms is itself a matter of political contestation, and while this usually takes place within recognisable parameters – the number of generally accepted interpretations is limited – there have been periods of considerable instability in their meaning without this leading to their long-term demise (Gauchet 1994: 259). There is no reason, in other words, to seek perfect symmetry of understanding across actors in the political field: in each political locale one may expect a second-order conflict over what constitutes the principal dimension of conflict (Schattschneider 1975: 63ff), involving appeals to wider shared meanings in a clash with alternative interpretations. Furthermore, as we shall note again, the Left-Right vocabulary permits *pluralisation*, such that one may speak of 'Lefts' and 'Rights', a characteristic allowing notions of context and difference to be preserved within a broader family resemblance. Equivalence, rather than identity, is its logic. Moreover, even if there are issues which cannot be signified in Left-Right terms, due to fundamental disagreement (e.g. across countries) about how these terms might apply, this does not exclude convergence in certain areas. As Noel and Therien have indicated (2009), there are disputes played out at the transnational level which surely *are* susceptible to interpretation using the Left-Right idiom, even if others are not.[10] Indeed, the most recent research on political differentiation at the European level suggests divisions across Europe's party systems are more consonant than is generally thought (Mair & Thomassen 2010: 29).

Ultimately, whether political disputes can be denominated in Left-Right terms is not primarily an empirical matter but one of political judgement and inclination. Not all political forces will *want* to evoke a wider structure, to suggest that there is an equivalence of

[9] This may be particularly acute for certain perspectives conventionally associated with the far Right, insofar as they are particularist and hostile to transnational cooperation. Far-right parties in Hungary and Romania, for instance, have directly conflicting views on 'their' respective minorities. See also the experiences in 2007 of the 'Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty' group in the European Parliament, which lasted less than a year due to MEPs of the Greater Romania Party taking offence at the anti-Romanian sentiments of their Italian colleague Alessandra Mussolini who, following a murder in Italy, suggested that breaking the law had become 'a way of life for Romanians'.

[10] Also on this point, see the final section below.

experiences across political space: there is likely to be a general asymmetry of wills here, to which we shall return, as well as differences of view concerning how to frame particular issues. For certain critical perspectives, this evocation of continuity is likely to be indispensable however, and the Left-Right idiom is one means to achieve it.

3. Evoking the Ties of Political Community

In the nation state, one source of the Left-Right metaphor's appeal has lain, so it has been argued, in its ability to signify a political community which, despite its divisions, retains sufficiently clear contours for its citizens to identify with it (Gauchet 1994: 288ff.). Recall the familiar metaphor of the *body*. As noted, the divisions of representative democracy are anathema to the unity honoured in pre-modern images of the community as an organic whole. Denunciations of 'faction' were a theme in the work of thinkers such as Hobbes and Rousseau. One way to read the attraction of the Left-Right imagery is as a symbolic register which conjures the reconciliation of unity with division. The imagery allows a sense of corporeal oneness to be coupled with bifurcation, in a manner intuitively accessible to the individual due to her experience of the same tension within her person. In this sense the Left-Right metaphor can be seen as allowing the connotations of an earlier metaphor, that of the body politic, to be preserved.[11] There would seem to be no necessary paradox then in the way strong notions of unity, as expressed e.g. in the idea of nationhood, have since the late-nineteenth century existed in parallel with the notions of division symbolised by the Left-Right metaphor.

In the transnational context, these images of unity are generally absent. As scholars writing on the EU have consistently noted, there is little sense of 'European identity' amongst EU citizens analogous to the national identity widely supposed to exist in nation-states. The

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[11] This argument may be problematic however, since what pre-modern holists feared was not so much the multiplication of parts – the coexistence of a left and right hand – but their competition for supremacy. It was the vision of two *heads* which inspired revulsion – i.e. two parts both seeking to be sovereign, thereby duplicating each other – and it is not clear that the Left-Right metaphor, understood corporeally, addresses this fear.

political 'body' seems lacking – for good reason, some would say, since it is exactly the promise of transnational politics to loosen our attachment to such images (Habermas 2001). One conclusion is to see this as evidence for why the Left-Right metaphor does not translate to contexts beyond the nation-state: insofar as the metaphor implies (and renders intelligible) a division of something, of an entity ultimately unitary and bounded, there is no such thing outside the nation-state sphere. Left and Right signifies the proverbial 'battle for the soul' of a given collective. This perspective posits the dependence of the Left-Right imagery on that of the political community. Yet a second perspective would invert this first, seeing the Left-Right metaphor as a resource for evoking exactly those ties of political community absent at the transnational level, and in a way that avoids some of the pitfalls of the national principle. In this reading, the metaphor stands as an emblem of *reciprocal engagement*, of social integration achieved through the common reference-points and concerns political conflict entails. Rather than replicating the holism of the national idea, it would symbolise the emergent but always incomplete unity of a community formed through adversarial encounter. Its ties would mix the solidaristic with the oppositional, evoking allegiances of principle which cut across socio-cultural denominations (including those of the existing nation-states of Europe) and which implicate the citizen as both observer and protagonist.

That adversarialism can be integrative is a familiar idea in political and social theory, defended amongst others by agonist theorists of democracy and conflict theorists of social integration (Mouffe 2005) (Simmel 1904) (Coser 1956). It is an idea which can be developed at a theoretical level in various ways. Conflict can be seen as truth-disclosing, insofar as an exchange of competing arguments tests the credibility of each and enriches the understanding of those party to the conflict (Mill 1991/1861). Each voice would be poorer if deprived of its interlocutor, the awareness of which creates impulses to engage. The symbolism of Left and Right, particularly insofar as it evokes identifiable protagonists rather than mere points in political space, seems to capture something of this idea. Unlike self-standing ideological categories, it conjures not so much the *parts* as how they interrelate to form a whole. The Left-

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Right pairing is not easily dissolved: in the logic of the metaphor, each of the two finds its meaning and identity in the encounter with the other. No single perspective in isolation can claim a monopoly of truth, the dyad seems to suggest, and advancing one's political understanding requires being attentive to one's foes.[12] To yearn for absolute triumph, for the annihilation or banishment of the opponent, would be to strive for a form of self-destruction or self-cretinisation. Alternatively, in a more consequentialist reading, it may be the fear of what happens should the adversary triumph which prompts an ongoing commitment to political conflict. By positing the absolute and uncompromising opponent – 'Left' or 'Right', according to perspective – the metaphor again gives colour to this idea.

Of course, the notion that conflict has centripetal dynamics contains much which is counter-intuitive, perhaps especially when posed in the rather Manichean form implied by the Left-Right metaphor. The concern will be that the subjects of conflict, who articulate themselves, their constituencies and their goals in their very alterity to others, come to adopt a disposition of mutual resentment, treating one another as obstacles to be avoided or removed rather than opposed, encouraging the dissolution of the political community. At an empirical level, the integrative potential of conflict may lie not so much in Manichean dualism as in the way allegiances of principle play out along *multiple* dimensions, their subjects never reducible to discrete groups (White, 2010). In other words, the Left-Right metaphor is once again more the suggestive emblem than the descriptor.

How might this rendition of political ties at the transnational level look in practice? In one form it might be sought in public statements which imply the presence of, or declare the necessity of, 'the Left' or 'the Right' as an actor seeking to oppose the dominance or growing powers of its adversary in the EU institutions. Such claims might be addressed to particular areas of public policy – e.g. employment relations, migration, foreign policy – or these in combination, and would carry force where they chimed with existing views about the

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[12] The way the Left-Right imagery positions the citizen also as *spectator* (cf.fnt. 3) invites an additional, dialectical reading, where the citizen acknowledges not so much the betterment of an existing perspective to which they are committed but the emergence of syntheses which transcend existing perspectives.

transnational nature of these policy areas. By evoking political subjects that cut across territorial lines, such appeals could be expected to have integrative force. But an indivisible 'Left' or 'Right' is only one form such subjecthood might take: one could equally envisage plural categories evoking *multiple* Lefts and Rights, replicated e.g. from one member-state to the next, and grasped as elements in a pattern rather than a unified whole. The Left-Right vocabulary can be turned back on itself to produce ever more differentiated entities, a feature which guards against the homogenising tendency to which collective concepts are generally prone.[13] The ties it evokes may thus be complex ones of mutual concern – the impulse e.g. to 'follow the fortunes' of a Left which is elsewhere – as much as simple ones of shared identity, allowing a diversity of political ideas to be acknowledged.

If the Left-Right metaphor has some potential to evoke social bonds, it is unable to prescribe where the boundaries of community should lie. Denominating the world in categories of shared belief rather than given identity, it can draw no stable lines of inclusion and exclusion. It invites no special significance to be given to a particular political arena, for each is but one more site in which contestation may become manifest. 'Left' must combat 'Right' wherever the two are said to meet: the radius of action resists *a priori* determination. This is in contrast to certain ideas of nationhood, which – dubiously perhaps – imply cultural markers can indicate the community's proper extension. The openness of the Left-Right imagery has particular resonance therefore with a transnational order such as the EU, whose frontiers resist sharp definition and which is often celebrated exactly for this reason – as a polity weakly able to naturalise the line between insiders and outsiders. In a world of open political systems, characterised by transborder migration and/or economic and political integration, the territorially unbounded ties evoked under the Left-Right sign may be especially well adapted.

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[13] Note that one of the formal properties of a Left-Right spectrum is they way it displays, like a fractal, 'self-similarity'. Its characteristic form nests within itself and reappears at different levels of analysis, allowing microscopic as well as macroscopic observation.

Contexts and Conditions of the Metaphor's Invocation

The Left-Right metaphor can thus be read as an emblem of *tamed conflict*, *continuity* and *reciprocal engagement*. If in these regards it has a certain normative appeal – and we have focused so far on the positive arguments which can be made – this is not likely to be sufficient to see it deployed in transnational contexts such as contemporary Europe. The tactical motivation of individual actors is likely to be important, as are the wider structural conditions in which they operate. This final section investigates what some of the relevant contextual factors might be, taking as the point of departure the historical conditions in which the metaphor has flourished in the nation-state environment. The focus is on aspects of political culture rather than the structure of institutions. While such factors as the relative power of parliamentary and non-parliamentary bodies clearly have implications for the strategies political actors choose, including their willingness to contest decision-making, in the transnational context these 'rules of the game' are relatively fluid and reactive to the wider political field in which they operate.

One might suspect that the metaphor's deployment depends on the existence of stable political alignments broadly consistent with the bipolar configuration it evokes – in other words, the existence of two major parties identifiable with Left and Right. One might then query whether such a simple and stable configuration exists at the transnational level – and indeed whether it can still be expected at the national level, following processes of de-alignment in late modernity. Yet there is an argument which says the Left-Right imagery tends to prosper exactly under conditions of political *fragmentation*, when party configurations are complex and / or transient and where categories of abstraction such as Left and Right are therefore needed to bring order to the political scene. As Gauchet puts it (1994: 261), 'the more lefts (and rights) there were in actuality, the greater the need for an ideal left (or right),' and 'contrary to what a superficial view might suggest, then, Manichean dualism actually feeds

on fragmentation of the political contest. Manicheanism does not occur in two-party systems, where the centre is generally the main battleground, but in a system in which the camps are irreducibly composite' (p.275). On this point alone, transnational European politics is by no means an implausible site for the deployment of the Left-Right metaphor: indeed, rather than an obstacle, the complexity of this political scene may be a necessary condition. The party groupings of the European Parliament are unavoidably composite in nature, drawing together parties from different member-states; they are often unstable (changing from one cycle to the next); and the Parliament's system of proportional representation implies, following 'Duverger's Law', that it is likely to retain a multipolar rather than bipolar configuration. Furthermore, because EU politics involves multiple institutions beyond the Parliament, as well as the visible involvement of a wide range of non-party organised actors (including social movements and trade unions), the names of parties are never likely to be sufficient as terms with which to map the political constellation. (The same applies to conventional alternatives such as 'government' and 'opposition', which again rely on clearly-defined groupings.) There is scope therefore for the meta-categories of Left and Right to play an ordering role both within party groups, across them and beyond them. Note that those looking for the emergence of 'Left-Right politics' at a European level are sometimes accused by critics of wishing to project the 'Westminster model' onto EU politics, with dualistic conflict between a stable Centre-Left and Centre-Right (Hix 2008). If what we have said is correct, it is actually under the *opposite* conditions – those of complexity, of flux and uncertainty, where bi-polarism is not the rule – that the *language* of Left and Right, and its potentially desirable effects, may prosper.

Taken alone though, this condition can hardly be sufficient. Complexity, after all, can just as well inspire the most banal forms of signification which ignore all kinds of differentiation (see e.g. evocations of 'Brussels' *tout court*). A plausible second requirement is that this fragmented political scene must nonetheless be characterised by some degree of polarised opinion – even if it does not clearly correspond to a dualistic model (cf. Gauchet 1994: 274ff.). Only, one might argue, if it is preceded by genuine ideological divisions is the

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Left-Right metaphor likely to be invoked, and to be regarded as symbolising meaningful oppositions rather than a narcissism of small difference. This line of thinking may produce a more pessimistic conclusion, for notwithstanding the formal differentiation political scientists have observed in the Parliament, arguably the political fragmentation of EU party politics is one of parties which remain ideologically close. At the EU level just as in recent decades at the national level, one struggles to discern for instance a major alternative perspective on equality to the dominant one of equality of opportunity. Nor does one see major disagreements concerning how values which are shared are best achieved. Discord exists at the EU level in the form of anti-system parties, but unlike in the nation-state context in the early- to mid-twentieth century, these parties can oppose the EU system without offering a radical, programmatic alternative, since they may call simply for a return to the nation-state. Their system-opposition need not be a strongly polarising one. To be sure, Europe remains in a turbulent condition in which systematic alternatives may yet emerge. Responses to the 2008 financial crisis are, and have been widely noted to be, ideological in character, and the degree to which convergence on an 'austerity' programme has been a distinctively European phenomenon, accompanied by calls for further Europeanisation of policy-making, provides clear reason for counter-perspectives to be framed likewise in transnational terms. Counter-narratives on how the burdens of the crisis should be shared, as well as on the origins of the crisis, exist at an intellectual level (Harvey 2010), but have found limited expression in organised politics. For these reasons, a major condition for the Left-Right metaphor would seem absent. Yet one must be careful not to impose too straightforward a causal relation, and to lose sight of the circular, self-fulfilling character of social representations (Merton 1968). The Left-Right metaphor as we have described it is not just a characterisation but a *facilitating* idea for contestation in its nascent stages – contestation which, in a pluralist setting, is never far from the point of emergence. The metaphor's application cannot be seen as pre-determined by the distribution of political opinion; indeed, that distribution of opinion becomes knowable in part through its application.

It is worth reiterating that political polarisation of this sort need not necessarily take the form of the class-based oppositions characteristic of twentieth-century industrialised societies. If one regards the class dimension to the Left-Right opposition as merely one variation on a larger set of political contestations centred on the interpretation of democratic values such as equality and liberty, it is clear that different historical contexts may afford quite different significations, some of them incorporating previously unfamiliar political demands (just as the class dimension itself was a late-nineteenth-century innovation). Ecological demands, or those highlighting injustices against ethnic- or gender-defined groups, would be cases in point. They too are susceptible to Left-Right denomination. Of course, not *all* political demands may be rendered in Left-Right terms: those which call for the eradication of their opponents – e.g. certain types of fundamentalist-religious demand – would seem to have little affinity with a pluralist political idiom. (Indeed, as we have suggested, the ease with which demands may be translated into the Left-Right framework tells us much about their democratic credentials.) Furthermore, notwithstanding the metaphor's adaptability, it may be that the economic field retains a good claim to be of singular importance. But one should avoid seeing the survival of the socio-political structures associated with industrialised society as a precondition of the metaphor's deployment. Left and Right may be deployed to characterise, and awaken, a variety of political oppositions.[14]

If one takes the position that deployment of the Left-Right metaphor is as much the facilitator as the consequence of polarisation, and that the metaphor is sufficiently flexible to accommodate diverse political demands, attention will naturally fall on matters of political action and will. The idiom needs agents willing to champion it, seeking to impose order on a fragmented political scene and to sharpen the contours of division, perhaps by proclaiming themselves the embodiment of Left or Right. As we touched on earlier, the metaphor can meet

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[14] The number of political demands truly resistant to Left-Right signification is smaller than sometimes suggested: attitudes to European integration, for instance, are fully susceptible to such depiction, provided the demand includes a conception of *what kind* of European Union is being endorsed (or opposed). Where this is absent, and with it the Left-Right metaphor, this should be regarded as a strategic choice on the political actor's part, not as symptomatic of the nature of the issue.

resistance: while some opponents are no doubt principled critics of the adversarialism or simplification it entails, others are likely to resist it as subversive of a preferred status quo. Historically, the idea of a Left-Right divide is something which, rather than consensually adopted as a merely descriptive effort to capture the distribution of political preferences, has generally been advocated most strongly by those at the political margins, an imposition of those announcing themselves as 'the Left' (or part of it) on those they refer to as 'the Right', in an effort to mobilise against the status quo and undermine its claims to sole legitimacy. The powers of the status quo in turn have tended initially to reject the distinction's validity, casting it as meaningless or the source of needless division (Lukes 2003: 10).[15] The metaphor becomes conventional, if at all, only after an initial phase of contestation. Staying at a level of theoretical abstraction, a useful idea here is Schattschneider's notion that the *scope of conflict* is itself a politically contestable matter (Schattschneider 1975). While some actors may choose to frame a given dispute as local or individual in its dimensions, others will seek to broaden it to a wider constituency (be it national or transnational), using inclusive categories of subjecthood and making efforts to evoke a larger structural context to the dispute. Challenging dominant political perspectives is likely to entail expanding the scope of struggle in this way – 'socialising conflict', so as to reconfigure the balance of forces – while the more conservative move of consolidating dominant perspectives may entail avoiding them in political debate or casting their attendant disputes as local or individual. Thus the dissident voice which casts itself as 'the Left' has special reason to proclaim the existence of a Left-Right conflict – a conflict whose scope resists spatial delimitation – while its opponents may have every reason to deny this proposition and denounce such pronouncements as over-blown.

That the main EU decision-making institutions, from the avowedly supra-partisan Commission to the Council formed of national executives, would reject application of the

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[15] From the early twentieth century onwards, relatively few parties have defined themselves with the label 'Right' (Mair 2007) (Laponce 1981), and enthusiasm for the Left-Right idiom has probably been stronger amongst the self-identified 'Left'. Yet this need not be so: the idiom is in principle a resource available to all who wish to express dissent, and one must be cautious in seeing dissent as necessarily a phenomenon of the Left.

categories of Left and Right to their activities may thus be unsurprising. It is perhaps rarely the vocabulary of those closest to power. But what, on the other hand, of those whose ambitions are stifled in the national or sub-national arena, and who may have most to gain from 'expanding the scope of conflict'? Are there actors in contemporary Europe who would seek to promote the Left-Right metaphor as a tool of critique? There are some, particularly on what we may call the 'far Left': Germany's 'Left Party' and Portugal's 'Left Bloc' are examples at the national level, as at the transnational level is the 'Party of the European Left'. Yet more generally one identifies a *disavowal* of the Left-Right vocabulary, not just from 'the Right' and 'Centre' but from 'the Left' too. Over the last two decades, numerous social-democratic parties have been drawn to ideas of a 'Third Way', claiming either to have repositioned themselves closer to the 'Centre' or to have transcended Left-Right thinking altogether (Driver & Martell, 2000) (Dyrberg 2009). These moves are surely linked to an analysis of the Cold War which posits that much of traditional left-wing thinking has been discredited, and perhaps that the west-European Left shares moral responsibility for the experiences of communism. When sub-altern actors – here, the post-Cold War Left – internalise such a perspective, they may have as much incentive to proclaim the Left-Right idiom dead as do dominant powers (Anderson 1998). At the transnational level, this – and general wariness of division – combines to produce a political regime often justified in pragmatic terms redolent of the Third Way: as engaged in efficiency-maximising, positive-sum 'governance'. While Third-Way politics as an electoral force may be in decline (Noel & Therien 2009), at a discursive level its legacy of scepticism towards the Left-Right dichotomy remains.[16] A metaphor which was once conventional at the national level, certainly amongst the democratic Left, has been contested and de-conventionalised.

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[16] Note however that, insofar as this disavowal of the Left-Right idiom has broadly coincided with the global supremacy of the capitalist model, the terms retain a more radical potential than they would had the Left-Right dichotomy been straightforwardly absorbed into a world in which it could only signify trivial oppositions.

The contemporary European political scene seems to lack some, though not all, of the conditions in which the Left-Right metaphor has historically flourished. While fragmentation at the level of organised political actors (parties, movements, and so on) is characteristic, programmatic divisions, and the willingness of certain partisans to claim and celebrate them, are weakly present. Yet one should not infer that the Left-Right metaphor finds no place in transnational European politics. In the places where one might expect to find it, it is present. Consider the following, the headlines of reports, commentary pieces and blog entries in major European news sources following the European Parliamentary elections in June 2009: 'Right senses victory in European poll as Left fails to gain from global crisis' (*The Times*)'; 'Rout of the soft left: Europe veers right to beat recession' (*The Independent)*; 'Voters Steer Europe to the Right' (*BBC*); 'Konservative gewinnen Europawahl: Die EU rückt nach rechts' (*Der Spiegel*); 'Europe's Race to the Right' (*The Guardian*); 'Europe swings Right as depression deepens … The establishment Left has been crushed across most of Europe, just as it was in the early 1930s' (*The Telegraph*); 'Il vento di destra spazza l'Europa', 'L'europarlamento va a destra' (*La Repubblica*), and 'Journée noire pour la gauche européenne' (*Le Parisien*).[17] To an extent, these deployments of the Left-Right idiom produce effects of the kind highlighted earlier: they evoke the plurality of possible responses to economic recession, a larger context to events in each country, and a connection to previous moments of crisis and contestation. While the intensity of their deployment is unlikely to be evenly spread across the electoral

[17] http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/elections/article6426539.ece;
http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/rout-of-the-soft-left-europe-veers-right-to-beat-recession-1700181.html; http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8088309.stm;
http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,629071,00.html;
http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/libertycentral/2009/jun/24/europe-elections-right-wing';
http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/finance/ambroseevans-pritchard/10000247/europe_swings_right_as_depression_deepens/;
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http://www.repubblica.it/2009/06/sezioni/politica/elezioni-in-europa/bonanni-rep-it/bonanni-rep-it.html;
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cycle, and their appearance at key moments probably insufficient to establish the idiom's public resonance, one sees an indication of the appeal they may hold.[18]

Yet although these phrases testify to the perceived utility of the metaphor beyond the nation-state context, perhaps one can also discern in some of them a rather different reading of it, one which neuters some of its normative appeal. Glance back at the specifics of the wording. Notice how in some cases the terms are used to evoke a division external to the political community – a division not of 'Europe' itself, but of the space through which it moves. The terms 'veer', 'swing', 'steer' and 'lurch' are words which seem to describe a moving body, one that can point in different directions. One pictures it as a pendulum or a vehicle. In these images, 'Left' and 'Right' represent not contending political groups but locations in space or landmarks on an external terrain, rough points of orientation for the detached analyst. The difference is significant for the metaphor's implications. With the division externalised, the community itself is presented in quite holist, consensual terms: it is *either* to the Right *or* to the Left (or perhaps momentarily in the 'Centre'), but cannot be marked by both simultaneously. Its members are posited as sharing the same perspective on the world, for only those side-by-side can use Left and Right as points of orientation. There is little sense of a political scene populated by adversarial protagonists, of the kind described in previous sections. Indeed, a pendulum view of politics is a fatalistic one in which agency is lacking: the pendulum swings as an autonomous process governed by the laws of nature, not in response to human ideas and actions. It is a vision offering limited hope of progress and little reason to engage with the course of events. Its divisions are arbitrary and its symmetry hypnotic. As a division of space rather than of contending political groups, the Left-Right metaphor is unable to conjure political protagonists for citizens to identify with, and so provides a weaker symbolic source for the desirable political community.

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[18] Of interest too is the reporting of political developments in one member-state as having significance for the wider fortunes of a European Left or Right. See e.g. Tony Barber, 'Labour party's likely defeat fills the European left's cup of woe', *Financial Times*, 4th May 2010: http://blogs.ft.com/brusselsblog/2010/05/labour-partys-likely-defeat-fills-the-european-lefts-cup-of-woe/

Under present conditions, when relatively few partisans are willing to associate themselves with the Left and Right, the metaphor thus survives but in modified form. Whether its normative appeal remains intact probably depends on whether the alternative image of counterposed protagonists to conflict persists in parallel with this more anodyne reading, or is supplanted by it. It is an open question whether a metaphor which has been strongly problematised can regain its status as a conventional idiom or whether it has in some sense been permanently 'outgrown'. Were the Left-Right vocabulary to disappear from the lexicon of political action, continuing only as a vocabulary of analysis, one might well decide that other symbolic registers held greater democratic appeal.

Conclusion

The Left-Right dichotomy, understood as a metaphorical language shaping citizen practice and self-understanding, has potentially important things to contribute to politics beyond the context of the modern nation-state. As an emblem of legitimate division, continuity and reciprocal engagement, it may have roles to play in giving sense and visibility to political disagreement, in encouraging a macro-level frame to be sought for micro-level acts of contestation, and in evoking the ties of political community. These are desirable features of political life generally vulnerable in the transnational context, for which symbolic underpinning of some kind seems important. While under existing conditions the Left-Right metaphor finds some application at the transnational level, its prospective democratic contribution is weakly fulfilled. In order to prosper, it would probably need the promotion of political actors themselves, something many have recently been reluctant to do. Insofar as many current political figures are 'fugitives' from the Left-Right dichotomy, the plausibility of evoking it at a transnational level is diminished.

One cannot exclude that, rather than a function of conjunctural conditions, an actorless conception of the Left-Right metaphor is destined to become the dominant one. This, after all, is largely how it is taught in universities, where political scientists generally use it to map 'political space', and where the political world is widely cast as a 'system' to be understood in terms of its structuring forces and resultant regularities rather than the goals of its human subjects. And if, as one hears, scepticism towards encompassing, programmatic ideas is one of the irreversible trends of the contemporary age, there may be limited scope for the Left-Right dichotomy to be understood principally as signifying principled oppositions. Still, a world which is hostile to utopian thinking, assuming the characterisation is appropriate, is not necessarily one that is irretrievably unresponsive to narratives of political struggle and amelioration. Categories of political abstraction of one kind or another are likely to remain politically sought after, and while these may take a variety of forms, it is premature to write off a more spirited version of the Left-Right metaphor.

One is tempted to see enthusiasm for the Left-Right metaphor, and its presentation in more conflictual or more dispassionate, analytical terms, as something likely to proceed in cycles. Where it is the dominant idiom of political life, a countervailing tendency to reject it in the name of a consensual politics that transcends division seems likely to emerge. Where politics is played out in largely technocratic or moralised terms, the emergence of others wishing to denounce this as false objectivism seems predictable and necessary. If the fate of the Left-Right metaphor is bound up in that very modern antinomy of the universal and the particular, its popularity may be fated to wax and wane. It would seem ripe then for rediscovery in coming years, as processes of transnationalisation yield depoliticising tendencies. But if from another perspective this prospect seems doubtful, due to the contextual barriers to its application, the question would be whether there are alternative symbolic registers by which the democratic goods we have discussed might be achieved. If the Left-Right metaphor is dead, how much need die with it, and how much can be nurtured by other means?

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