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Towards Pan-European Contentions?

European Integration and its Effects on Political Mobilization

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Abstract:
The paper deals with the effects of European integration on political contentions and protest mobilizations. I argue that these effects are located on two different dimensions. On a social structural level, European integration is leading to a gradual fragmentation of cleavage structures and a multiplication of grievances; on a symbolic and cultural level, European integration is establishing pan-European debates that promote a common symbolic frame of reference for the identification and assessment of societal problems. This two-fold process is augmenting the number of (local) grievances and deprivations with a European scope, and thus increasing the potential contentiousness of the EU. Factual protest mobilizations, however, are determined by structures of inequalities, because not all groups and constituencies are willing and able to engage in pan-European contentions. The latter are still patterned by core-periphery relations and class structures, implying that socially less privileged constituencies from the European periphery have more difficulties in voicing their concerns transnationally.

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1 Introduction

The European Union (EU) is faced with a growing willingness amongst European citizens to protest against European decisions, directives or treaties. The 'permissive consensus' of Europe's citizens, which has laid the ground for considerable progress in European integration and enlargement for more than five decades, seems to have been revoked. This is clearly indicated by EU-critical mobilizations in the Netherlands and France opposing the ratification of the European Constitution in 2005, and the mobilizations in Ireland against the Lisbon Treaty in 2008. A similar observation can also be made in regard to more mundane political business. Euro-sceptic political parties have been regularly elected to the European Parliament (Hix and Marsh 2007). At the same time, more and more groups, organizations and advocacy coalitions oppose European initiatives or regulations by means of active public protest and campaigns, for instance, union criticism of the EU's Service Directive in 2005, environmentalist opposition to EU regulations on Chemical Substances in 2007, and farmer protests against EU inactivity towards falling milk prices in 2009 (Balme and Chabanet 2008).

These developments are well documented and have been studied closely by scholars of social movements, often employing the type of institutional analysis developed in the field of political science. Indeed, researchers attribute these developments to the institutional competencies and structures of the EU, partly because more political issues are discussed, coordinated and decided at this level, and partly because the EU has established a proper 'political opportunity structure' for political protest, including new targets and incentives, (Marks and McAdam 1999). More EU-related political mobilizations and protests are the consequence. However, these developments do not suggest an unconditional 'Europeanization' of political contentions, in the sense of transferring political mobilization to the supranational level. Two qualifications need to be made. On the one hand, while there are a growing number of supranational NGOs, welfare associations and social movement organizations operating in Brussels, EU-related mobilizations and protests remain dominated by domestic and local concerns (see Imig and Tarrow 2001; della Porta and Caiani 2011). This has to do, on the other hand, with the strong institutional filters of the EU. The much acclaimed involvement of civil society organizations in EU decision-making is more rhetorical than real. Additionally, the EU privileges an 'elitist' civil dialogue and conventional forms of lobbying, which

are quite distant from the activities of grass-roots movements (Kohler-Koch 2010). This reflects the unequal claims-making opportunities for different civil society movements at the European level.. Whilst European-wide protests from weaker interest groups – for example, the jobless, irregular workers, (illegal) migrants, ethnic minorities – do happen, as the Euro-Marches against unemployment, job insecurity and social exclusion have shown since 1997 (Chabanet 2008), they are in fact the exception rather than the rule (Balme and Chabanet 2008).

These observations raise questions, for which a sociological approach can help to provide answers. While the reference to political institutions is important to understand how the political 'filters' of the EU enable and constrain collective protest action, we still need to identify societal factors impinging on the potential Europeanization or domestication of political contentions. In this regard I propose to look at two interrelated factors. On the one hand, I will argue that the analysis of social structures is important in understanding whether European integration is generating more homogeneous or heterogeneous cleavage structures and related contentions. On the other hand, the study of public spheres and debates is crucial too, because we need to clarify what effect the establishment of the EU as an arena for public debate has had on the pan-European agendas and collective identities that protest actors might be able to mobilize.

Such a sociological analysis is indebted to researchers that have studied political mobilization and social movements from a societal perspective (for instance, Touraine 1971; Melucci 1989; Rucht 1994; Buechler 1999). In this context, the work of Klaus Eder merits special attention, because he has developed the most advanced and comprehensive research agenda. On the one hand, he has been an outspoken proponent of a sociological perspective on political contentions, collective protest actions and social movements. The latter are the product of their societies because they mirror the specific cleavages and problems of their societal environment, and because they help to process these cleavages and problems by engaging – and forcing their societies to engage – in collective learning (Eder 1994). Social movements are a collective cultural phenomenon, as they strive to affect shared visions and divisions of the world, individual self-perceptions and collective identities (Eder 1988:261-82). This applied to the new environmentalist, women's and peace movements of the 1970s and 1980s (Eder 2000a), as they addressed important issues of their time and have had lasting

effects on their society's subsequent development. This argument has an evolutionary impetus: if societies change in their social and cultural structures, then social movements will change as well. Finally, Eder stresses the need to focus on the class structure of social movement constituencies in order to better understand collective protest action. He argues that these constituencies are stamped by specific class conditions, habitus and identities, which define the form, logic and mission of the social movements they carry (Eder 2000a:85-115; Eder 1989).

On the other hand, Eder has insisted that the European integration process is changing the shape and structure of public spheres and political debates, with far reaching effects on the definition of (national) agendas, identities and collective memories. Here again, he focuses on the cultural and symbolic dimension of this development, emphasising especially the communicative and symbolic construction of Europe and the EU within the public sphere (Eder 2007 and 2010). While most scholars argue that European identities and debates are weakly developed due to the strength of the nation-state, he contends that this vertical divide between the European and national level is less consequential. Public spheres and collective identities might still be structured and organized institutionally along national lines, but this does not exclude interrelated, cross-national or pan-European discourses and learning processes that arise when local actors react to common events, address similar issues, and reflect on similar facts or arguments (Eder 2000b; Eder and Trenz 2002). Furthermore, within the European Union a common communicative and symbolic frame of reference is emerging, within which local and national actors are placed and start to re-frame the meaning of the 'local' and the 'national' (for example, the meaning of national policy debates, collective identities or historic memories). If 'Europe' is the object of a process of symbolic construction, then we need to see that the latter is governed by symbolic struggles between (national) actors with varying degrees of symbolic or political power (Eder 2005). A contraposition of 'core', 'not-yet' and 'non'-Europeans is emerging, which certainly has implications for more mundane conflicts of interest.

The empirical and theoretical wisdom of Klaus Eder's sociology will help us to understand the effects of European integration on political contentiousness within the EU. Following his observations, I will argue that these effects are located on two different dimensions. First, political constituencies and mobilization potentials are determined by the social structure of

a society, and thus by their cleavages and grievances. Second, there is a symbolic dimension to the political contentions as well, because cleavages and grievances must be interpreted as shared problems that violate a constituency's interests, convictions and identities, which means that political mobilizations and protests require collective learning and identity formation processes. These observations raise two questions: (1) How much does European (economic) integration change the social structural dimension of political contentions by altering societal cleavages and grievances? (2) To what extent does European (political) integration change the cultural and symbolic dimension of political contentions by establishing an institutional arena of transnational discourses and learning processes as well as a shared symbolic frame of reference?

In the following, I will try to answer these questions. My argument will proceed as follows. First, I will show that European integration is unleashing two opposing developments: on the social structural level, European integration is leading to a gradual fragmentation of cleavage structures and a multiplication of grievances; on the symbolic and cultural level, European integration is establishing pan-European debates that promote a common symbolic frame of reference for the identification and assessment of societal problems. This two-fold process is augmenting the number of (local) grievances and deprivations with a European scope, and thus increasing the potential contentiousness of the EU. Second, I will argue that actual protest mobilizations are determined by structures of inequalities, as not all groups and constituencies are willing and able to engage in pan-European contentions. Consequently, I note that pan-European protest mobilizations are strongly influenced both spatially by core-periphery structures and socially by existing class structures.. In the concluding section I will reflect on the consequences of this situation for the political contentiousness of the EU.

2 The social structural dimension: fragmentation and domestication of grievances

During the 1980s and 1990s scholarly and public debates in Europe have become accustomed to discussing the 'new' risks and conflict lines of modern societies (for example, Beck 1992; Giddens 1999), which have reflected the claims and protest actions of new social movements (Touraine 1971; Melucci 1989). Indeed, we witnessed the emergence of 'new' grievances and contentions surrounding environmental degradation, gender equality, sex and civil liberties, technological hazards, genetic engineering and animal rights. In many of

these areas the EU has received policy-making competencies. However, I would argue that European integration and enlargement processes are putting 'old' grievances on the public agenda again, such as economic disparities, social inequalities, poverty and social marginalization, interethnic conflicts and xenophobic anxieties.

Empirical evidence corroborates this assumption about the renaissance of 'old' cleavages and grievances. Today, the European Union comprises 27 member states with different levels of economic development, social inequalities and living standards. The consecutive rounds of EU enlargement have considerably increased the disparities within the EU by integrating some of the least developed European economies as well as some of the most advanced. Economic growth rates amongst the new accession countries nurtured optimism during the early 2000s. However, since 2007 the global financial and economic crisis has detrimentally affected the southern and eastern European economies, such as the Baltic countries whose GDP decreased more than the European average. Former role-models of European integration such as Ireland, but also other countries like Portugal and Greece, now require EU assistance in preventing national bankruptcy. This development places fiscal austerity high on the agenda of most European governments and increases the pressure to adopt welfare state retrenchment policies.

Economic developments have also had an effect on the lives of European citizens by increasing the number of jobless and poor people. While these problems are still mediated by the structure of national labour markets and welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990; Gallie and Paugam 2000), it is nonetheless true that European integration is contributing to institutional change as well. In fact, Beckfield (2006) has demonstrated that European integration increased income inequalities within western European nations between the early 1970s and the late 1990s, particularly because of the policy pressures that accompanied the economic and political integration process, namely, the external and internal pressures on national labour markets and labour organizations, and demands for the relaxation of national social security benefits. At the same time, labour market policies have been under review since the European Lisbon Strategy of 2000, which favoured increased liberalization and flexibility in labour markets in an attempt to increase employment (Countouris 2007:87-105), thus generating more precarious jobs and working poor.

These developments point to a renaissance of 'old' grievance structures. But this is not the only conclusion to be drawn from recent scholarly writing. At the same time, we have to highlight an increase of spatial disparities throughout Europe. Within the old member states, the poorest regions are still located on the periphery (for example, southern Spain, Italy and Greece, East-Germany, industrial areas of Belgium), while eastward enlargement has increased these regional disparities considerably. In the twelve new accession countries, 97 per cent of the population lived in poor regions in 1995, and 88 per cent still did in 2004 (Brasche 2008:208-10). Socio-economic development is strongly concentrated in the big cities, mostly in the metropolitan areas of the new member states. These urban centres benefited most strongly from EU membership, as they shelter the biggest share of the population, attract most foreign investment, and generate high growth rates through their promotion of the service, information and high-tech sectors, as well as knowledge-based goods and labour markets.. Cities such as Prague, Bratislava, Budapest and Warsaw are therefore far above the EU-average per capita GDP (Brasche 2008: 212-18), and sharply contrast to their countries' rural areas. It comes as no surprise that recent research has pointed to a substantial increase in interregional disparities that reproduces and/or aggravates existing core-periphery-relations (Heidenreich and Wunder 2007).

This situation is generating quite different life opportunities and standards for its citizens. It is to be assumed that prosperous metropolitan regions, such as Madrid, London, Stockholm, Prague or Bratislava have many more societal features in common with each other than with the surrounding metropolitan areas of these cities neighbouring areas and rural peripheries. This core-periphery structure implies contrasting grievances and problems. Peripheral regions have to struggle with aging and declining populations, poorly developed transportation and communication infrastructures, as well as limited access to social, cultural or health services, higher education and knowledge-based labour markets, while more developed metropolitan regions are confronted with urbanization, migration and spatial segregation, insufficient (affordable) housing and public services, traffic congestion and environmental degradation, amongst many other problems (ESPON 2007).

3 The symbolic and cultural dimension: pan-European frames of reference

The second development associated with the process of European integration concerns the establishment of pan-European debates and learning processes. While living conditions remain very different within Europe, depending on location, it is also true that the EU is re-defining and re-framing national problems and local grievances within a pan-European frame of reference with common debates, policy agendas and objectives. This argument can be empirically validated through a number of observations.

Social cohesion has become a prominent issue of political debates addressing the processes and consequences of European integration. The institutions of the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe (CoE) have encouraged these debates for over two decades, due to their concerns surrounding rising economic disparities, social inequalities and cultural differences within the enlarging European Union (Commission 2009; Council of Europe 2008). Both the EU and the CoE have proposed remedial actions that focus on two levels. On the one hand, attention was paid to territorial cohesion (Commission 2008). Here we can refer to the EU's own regional policy that aims to combat the persisting disparities in the economic development of European member states and their regions. Throughout its history the EC/EU has developed several funding schemes and invests today more than 30 billion euros of its total 140 billion euro budget in regional development and convergence policies.

On the other hand, the EU is also concerned about social cohesion within nations or regions, and thus about social inequalities, cleavages and segregations between different population groups. The objective is to combat the social exclusion of individuals, particularly vulnerable groups in society (for example, the elderly, youth, migrants, single mothers). The main strategy consists of furthering social inclusion by granting basic civic, political and social rights to the European citizenry, efforts that have been supported through the enforcement of the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter, and through more than 10 billion euros invested through the European Social Fund and targeted at labour market inclusion. Moreover, emphasis is placed on the coordination and harmonization of national regulations in the realm of labour markets, employment, education, anti-discrimination and social security systems (an example since 2000 being the Lisbon-Strategy). Finally, European institutions encourage the incorporation of civil society and non-

governmental organizations into policy-making and service delivery, for example, by promoting the so-called European civil dialogue (Prodi and Kinnock 2001).

The EU's own strategy thus resides in two instruments of social integration, the law and money, which establish shared rights and selective incentives in order to promote the idea of Europe as a shared social space open to all of its citizens. Additionally, the EU is defining economic and social indicators for all of its member states and is gathering comparable data and encouraging a continuous process of monitoring in many policy areas (for example, economic integration, employment, education, and poverty). This is true in particular for soft governance tools, such as the Open Method of Coordination, which has been used in several of these policy fields, and involves member states in a constant process of review, benchmarking and evaluation (Hodson and Maher 2001; Heidenreich and Zeitlin 2009). The EU is thus contributing to constructing Europe as a social space with a shared social structure, within which citizens, regions and nations can and must be compared. And while the OMC is not altering the institutional and legal situation in member states, it is influencing policy debates throughout Europe on a cognitive level by setting agendas, diffusing policy ideas and altering policy strategies.

In sum, even if the process of European integration and enlargement is leading to a more plural and fragmented field of societal grievances, it is probable that the EU is effectively influencing the definition of societal problems and conflicts by erecting a pan-European frame of reference and a vision of a common European space. There is evidence supporting this conclusion. On the level of elites, we see that academic communities are advocating the idea of an emerging common 'European Society' (Outhwaite 2008; Beck and Grande 2007; Delanty and Rumford 2005), and attempts are being made to reconstruct its culture, identity and collective memory (Giesen 2003; see Eder 2005). On the level of European citizenry, there are studies showing that citizens are starting to assess their situation in pan-European categories, for example, by comparing their position with those of other European citizens. Delhey and Kohler (2006), for instance, have demonstrated through a survey of three European countries (Germany, Hungary and Turkey) that the great majority of respondents (75-90 per cent) compare themselves not only in relation to closer reference groups (neighbours, family, fellow citizens), but also with the situation in other countries. Moreover, peo-

ple tend to compare themselves with more affluent countries. This comparison affects their subjective well-being, thus generating feelings of relative deprivation.

4 Political contentions and societal filters: Core-periphery and class structures

Political contentions are shaped by the social, institutional and cultural environment, which determines underlying cleavages and grievances, and influences the definition of collective deprivations and problems. However, political contentions do not spring out of grievances directly, but require the agency of specific constituencies. The emergence of EU-related mobilizations and contentions thus depends on the readiness and capability of societal groups to engage in (transnational) collective action. This capability, however, is strongly determined by structures of inequality.

4.1 Core-periphery structures and political contentiousness

There are various indicators demonstrating that Europe is strongly segregated in regard to social cohesion, and that societal resources for EU-related mobilizations are thus unevenly distributed across Europe. First, scholars have demonstrated that civic engagement and social capital are strongly interrelated, as generalized trust and wider networks of social relations increase citizens' readiness and capability to participate in protest events. National differences within the EU are quite strong and follow cleavages along the north-south and west-east divide (Fuchs and Klingemann 2002). These differences are demonstrated in statistical data from Sweden, Portugal and Poland regarding the average number of organizational memberships (1.43 compared to 0.20 and 0.19), the proportion of people who participate in mass protests (89 per cent against 27 per cent and 26 per cent), as well as the number of people who proclaim the importance of friends (75 per cent against 42 per cent and 33 per cent) and who voice interpersonal trust (64 per cent against 10 per cent and 18 per cent) (Voicu 2005).

Europe appears to be spatially segregated in terms of relations of trust, with available data revealing a 'core' group of countries with high levels of mutual trust, as well as a 'periphery' of low trust societies. Delhey (2007) has shown on the basis of Eurobarometer data that people from the six founding EC member states strongly trust each other. Meanwhile, rates of mutual trust between the old member states and the southern neighbours are lower, and lower still in regard to the eastern European countries. People from these countries are

much less trusted by other Europeans, but also tend to trust less people from other countries, eastern European fellow citizens included. . Open distrust is directed at Rumania, Bulgaria and the candidate country Turkey.

The same picture of a segregated continent emerges when considering the EU's diversity in terms of cultural values, attitudes and political agendas (Ingelhart 1997). Gerhards (2007) has demonstrated on the basis of survey data that cultural values within the old member states (here, in particular within the EU 6 and 9 countries) are more in tune in many policy areas with the liberal and secular 'script' of the EU's own modernization project (economic, employment, social, gender, family policies, for example), while the more traditional and materialist cultural values of the new eastern European member states tend to match this EU script much less.

In short, Europe is strongly segregated in regard to social ties, trust and cultural identities along a core-periphery structure. On the one hand, there is a core group of northern and western European member states possessing higher levels of internal social capital, stronger mutual relations of intercultural trust, and representing a better 'fit' between their cultural values and the political mission of the EU. On the other hand, southern and eastern European countries are at the periphery belonging to a group of 'not really' or 'not yet European' countries, because they possess less generalized social capital, are trusted less in transnational relations, and share less 'European' (that is, EU-related) values and policy ideas(Eder 2005). This core-periphery structure is complemented by a similar internal cleavage, as regional disparities in social cohesion also exist within each member state . Indeed, while levels of social capital are quite high in Europe when compared worldwide (van Oorschot,Arts, and Gelissen 2006), there are nonetheless higher levels of generalized trust and civic participation in more urbanized and developed core regions. Social cohesion is less developed meanwhile in peripheral areas, including parts of western Europe such as southern Italy and southern France, western and southern Spain, northern England, and Scotland (Beugelsdijk and van Schaik 2005). Based on these differences, political moblizations are much more likely to take place among 'core' Europeans than their counterparts in the 'peripheral' states and regions.

4.2 Social class and political contentions

The political contentiousness of the EU is also mediated by social class inequalities. Research has recurrently shown that the level of civil and political engagement is determined by income, employment, social status and education, regardless of country or region (Cainzos and Voces 2010; van Oorschot et al. 2006). We can therefore speak about cumulative deprivations, in which those people affected by income poverty and material deprivation also suffer from social poverty and political exclusion in the sense that they possess fewer social contacts and relations of support, and are less active in political life.

This implies that more privileged social classes are exempt from these cumulative deprivations and instead tend to benefit from cumulative privileges. In fact, upper classes tend to have more social capital in general, and more transnational social capital in particular: they maintain closer contact to friends or relatives abroad, spend more time in other countries, and often support more cosmopolitan attitudes (Mau 2007:106). Moreover, people with higher levels of educational attainment, with better jobs and a higher social status, often feel more European, know more about the EU, and are happier with their country's EU membership (Petithomme 2008). Additionally, they have assembled important transnational resources, such as linguistic competencies, as higher-level professionals, executives and self-employed tend to speak more foreign languages (Gerhards 2008b). These observations do not suggest the advent of an integrated pan-European class or elite (Hartmann 2007), but rather indicate that the more privileged social classes are developing a more 'transnational' life-style, with greater mobility, transnational contacts and related experiences (Favell 2008; Gerhards 2008a).

The process of European integration has thus generated a more cohesive 'European society' for the more privileged strata of the European citizenry, who are better equipped to benefit from the opportunities generated by the EU, and are thus able to develop more transnational economic, social and human capital. In Fligstein's view (2008), this will intensify the contentiousness within the EU due to confrontations between three different constituencies with different social interests and political orientations: 1) a group of well educated, young professionals, managers and white-collar workers who will proactively use and defend European integration; 2) a stratum of older and less educated poor, underemployed and blue-collar workers who will defend the national welfare state against an intrusive EU; and 3) a

middle class constituency who shares a more positive view of the EU, but is not unconditionally in favour of furthering integration, thus being a potential ally of both other factions. This class-biased structure of social cohesion provides better societal opportunities for middle and upper class mobilizations and protests, because these groups have greater (transnational) social relations and organizational memberships, feel more European, are better informed about the EU, and are more in tune with the EU's own ideas and missions.

5 Discussion and conclusions: the political sociology of European contentions

In this chapter, I have argued that the process of European enlargement and integration has affected the political contentiousness of the EU. The main conclusion to these observations is that Europe is not governed by one big core fault line, but rather that societal developments lead to the multiplication and fragmentation of 'new' and 'old' societal grievances along national and regional divisions. At the same time, I have pointed to the institutional structure of the EU, arguing that it is establishing discursive arenas on the basis of shared data, agendas, consultation procedures and policy objectives that tend to place local deprivations and grievances into a pan-European frame of reference that has the power to redefine and 'Europeanize' cleavages, conflicts and contentions.

These developments should increase the political contentiousness of the EU, because the European integration process is reshaping and differentiating existing cleavage structures within and across the member states, and because the EU is facilitating policy actors into identifying the European scope of their (local) grievances. However, the emergence of pan-European contentions depends still on the availability and capability of social groups to engage in cross-national mobilizations and collective actions. These mobilization potentials are still patterned by core-periphery relations and class structures. This decreases the scope of constituencies that can be mobilized effectively and sustainably across Europe. On the one hand, constituencies of the socially underprivileged, excluded or marginalized have less information about the EU and the 'system of European grievances' it monitors and addresses. Their cultural and social capital is more restricted and less transnationalized. This limits mobilization potentials, because we are dealing with spatially dispersed and complex European constituencies with different agendas, belief-systems and forms of sociation. Moreover, these constituencies are much more dependent on the nation-state and its welfare institu-

tions, thus being more inclined to mobilize on their behalf against EU-specific policies, particularly if they are viewed as a threat to the national welfare state (Fligstein 2008).

On the other hand, we need to consider the continuing domestication of contentions (Imig and Tarrow 2001), acknowledging that political protests within the EU are still primarily a local phenomenon with specific constituencies, issues and claims. This is due to the fact that political contentions are still strongly tied to the nation-state, with the latter remaining democratically legitimate and legally accountable to act in all policy fields, even in those 'Europeanized' issue areas where it is responsible for legally adopting and implementing European objectives and directives. Moreover, living conditions and aspirations still diverge between countries and their regions. Hence, even if grievances and political contentions have a pan-European dimension, they will resonate quite differently within the various member states of Europe, depending on each country's specific problems and cleavages, political institutions and traditions, structures of social cohesion, as well as cultural belief-systems and discourses. Moreover, we might expect that transnational mobilizations will be frequently restricted to the European core states, who share similar values, mutual relations of trust, and strong transnational ties. Truly pan-European mobilizations and protests thus reside in the ability of activists to constantly rebuild coalitions and amalgamate discourses that mirror the different grievances and claims of local constituencies throughout Europe.

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