

# Europe in the Political Imagination

---

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

*Ralf, taxi-driver, Würzburg (Germany)*

In normative debates on the EU, the argument is sometimes made that the loyalty of citizens to a transnational polity should be based on its capacity to promote shared political objectives. Rather than locating community in some form of popular identity, centred on facts or perceptions of cultural commonality, or a supposed identity of constitutional values, this view holds that the collective bond should be that of a ‘community of projects’ (Nicolaidis 2004, p.103); also (Cohen and Sabel 2003) (Morgan 2005). Such a view does not imply a purely administrative understanding of the polity – plenty of scope may be afforded for deliberation and dispute concerning the political goals to be pursued – but it proposes that citizens should regard the polity as something that responds to their substantive concerns rather than something expressive of the unity of their attributes or beliefs.

This paper presupposes there are good reasons for adopting this perspective on EU citizenship, but it does not seek to engage directly in this normative debate. Rather it explores how far there exists the ideational background necessary for such a perspective to resonate with EU citizens. At the most general level, it argues that only if such a perspective sits well with existing schemes of meaning, or if these are adapted to accord with it, is it likely to achieve plausibility amongst the wider population. How the EU comes to be entwined with established repertoires of political interpretation is crucial for the views expressed of it. In line with recent research, the paper holds that examining the political significance citizens ascribe to the EU is more revealing than searching for those elusive ‘feelings of Europeanness’ (Diez Medrano 2008).

A project-oriented conception of the EU would seem to demand that citizens regard ‘Europe’ as relevant to tackling at least some of the political problems they consider themselves, and people like

them, to be facing. For such problems, Europe-wide measures would have to ‘make sense’ in principle, even if the EU in its current form were assumed to be somehow deficient. One can rephrase this as a two-step requirement: first, people would need to assume that the problems of significance to them are susceptible to *some kind* of organised collective action, and that they are not simply ‘facts of life’ or issues that can be effectively dealt with by individual adaptation. Second, for at least some such problems there would need to be the conviction that it is both feasible and necessary for them to be tackled at a European level, rather than in a context more local or more global. In this way a project-oriented conception of the EU would become consistent with commonsense expectations about what may be achieved politically.<sup>1</sup>

By studying the views and tacit ideas expressed by taxi-drivers in a series of group discussions in Britain, Germany and the Czech Republic, this paper explores how far a project-oriented perspective on the EU is supported by existing understandings of politics. It looks at how European citizens talk about the political problems of significance to them, notably their origins and their susceptibility to remedy, and the ways they evoke, or choose not to, the relevance of the EU. It thus seeks to examine how far, and in what ways, ‘Europe’ and the EU are spontaneously invoked as reference-points when speakers make sense of their everyday experiences (Meinhof 2004). Such an approach offers a perspective distinct from quantitative studies in this area. When polls are used to probe views on the EU, the goal is to identify positive or negative attitudes towards a clearly defined object, whether European integration as a whole, its constituent policies, or the citizens of other member-states (Kohli 2000) (Duchesne 2009). Political community is conceived in terms of citizens’ willingness to express explicit support or affective engagement. Conversely, studying interventions in a conversational setting, one can refocus attention on the reference-points people take for granted and the underlying repertoires of interpretation that structure (or inhibit) the formation of attitudes and opinions. One can examine, for example, not just whether speakers consider EU enlargement a good or bad thing, but the sense in which they consider it, like Ralf in the extract cited, almost inevitable, something with ‘its own dynamic’ scarcely responsive to political deliberation. Drawing on political-

---

<sup>1</sup> Other dispositions may be relevant too: it may be, for instance, that people must regard citizens elsewhere in the EU as sufficiently like-minded to be partners in the pursuit of these goals. Such factors are not the subject of this paper.

sociological approaches rarely applied in the EU context (e.g. (Gamson 1992; Perrin 2006; Wedeen 2002)), the paper investigates how the EU is conjured in the political imagination.

### Why Talk to Taxi-Drivers?

If taxi-drivers are worth talking to, perhaps the reader will assume this is because their views are taken to be representative of a social group of particular political significance. Such an argument can certainly be made: the majority of taxi-drivers occupy that socio-economic space extending, on a conventional stratification scale, from the working- to the lower-middle classes, and while theories of mobilisation disagree on which are the crucial actors (Eder 1995), the political dispositions of such classes is from many perspectives important. But there is no need thus to suppose either that taxi-drivers across the EU form a coherent social group, or that they themselves are actors of special significance. A better argument centres on the kinds of experience taxi-driving exposes its practitioners to: on the one hand they are in a position of heightened sensitivity to political developments, whether it be changes in prices or spending behaviour, the arrival of immigrant labour, or changing patterns and rates of criminal behaviour, while on the other they are exposed to a wide range of opinion stimuli – newspapers, the radio, conversations with clients – mitigating against the possibility that theirs is an isolated speech community.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the *self-understanding* (Brubaker and Cooper 2000) of many taxi-drivers is arguably as people of commonsense; whereas academics or artists, for instance, may set store by their personal originality, taxi-drivers are less inclined to emphasise the distinctiveness of their views. Furthermore, their daily experiences do not invite unusually strong sympathy or antipathy towards the EU. There is therefore reason to suppose that – alongside some idiosyncratic concerns peculiar to taxi-drivers<sup>3</sup> – one may find in their

---

<sup>2</sup> Using a similar experience-centred justification for interviewing taxi-drivers, see (Gambetta & Hamill 2005).

<sup>3</sup> As one example, private individuals parking on the taxi-rank is a grievance recurrently voiced in these interviews.

discussion, in a particularly concentrated form, many of the tacit assumptions and interpretative motifs dispersed more widely amongst citizens.<sup>4</sup>

For this research, conducted between October 2004 and August 2005, groups of three to four taxi-drivers were assembled for two-hour discussions in ten mid-sized European cities – Reading, Swansea and Norwich in Britain; Plzeň, Liberec and Ostrava in the Czech Republic; and Erfurt, Lübeck, Kassel and Würzburg in Germany.<sup>5</sup> While these cities exhibit geographic spread and diversity of historical experience, there is continuity in the character of taxi-driving: in these cities it tends to be a full-time, permanent occupation, involving long-term residents – even if first- or second-generation immigrants – rather than recent arrivals. The study’s aim was to identify those patterns of discursive practice widely present across the different sites and to examine their political significance. By using group discussions, the researcher minimises his/her interventions and can study the kinds of knowledge and understanding participants expect of each other (Duchesne & Haegel 2007) (Gamson 1992).

The discussions were loosely structured. Approximately the first twenty minutes were devoted to a card exercise,<sup>6</sup> which then fed into an open discussion led principally by the participants themselves and centred on what they considered pressing problems in public life. The researcher intervened occasionally to ask questions about causality and agency, but no attempt was made to draw the conversation towards the EU or ‘things European’ until near the end, raising these issues then only if previously unmentioned.

The resulting material may be analysed under several thematic headings, highlighting the topics discussed in greatest detail across the interviews, and the ways they tended to be clustered. Three headings are used in what follows: *Economics* (understood to include, amongst others, problems of (un)employment, wages, prices, taxation, inequality, and social security), *Relations between*

---

<sup>4</sup> How these may be found in differing proportions across differing social groupings is not the focus here, but is explored in an ongoing large-scale project on ‘Citizens Talking about Europe’ (CITES) in Britain, France and Belgium – cf.

‘Conference on European Citizenship Revisited’, Oxford, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2008.

<sup>5</sup> There were 37 participants in total. For further details on participants and the recruitment process, see (Author 2009a).

<sup>6</sup> Seventeen thematic index-cards designed by the author were used, each consisting of two images and a verbal caption and centred on the following topics: Peace & War, Treatment of Outsiders, Overseas Aid, Medical Care, Education & Training, The Legal System, Policing, Health & Safety Standards, The Environment, Science & Research, Transport, Money & Prices, Purchase of Property, Markets & Production, Taxation, Corruption, and Work. Participants were invited to cluster these cards, and to summarise each group with a heading, as a prelude to open discussion. For details, see (Author 2009a).

*Peoples* (encompassing problems of intergroup conflict within and between states, and problems linked to the unwanted encounter with those deemed culturally different), and *Society and the Law* (including matters of crime, corruption, policing, justice, social misdemeanour, and the education system). This paper does not seek to demonstrate the validity of these categories (for a closer examination see (Author 2009)), but supposes they have sufficient plausibility to be accepted in the following analysis.<sup>7</sup> The focus is on the kinds of explanation speakers invoke when discussing these problems (and how these vary across domains), the expectations they express concerning political agency, and the ways these motifs are deployed when conversation touches on European integration.

Certain patterned ways of seeing the political world, it is suggested, serve to ‘make political sense of’ a European polity while others diminish its credibility. How problems are explained opens up certain possibilities for their remedy while simultaneously closing down others. Where there is a *lack* of explanatory resources, this may have the consequence – even if the problems are taken seriously and a desire for change stated – that they are treated with a fatalism that puts agency in doubt (Gamson 1992, p.6). By looking directly at the patterns of assumption concerning the possibilities for action, one can identify more specifically what tends to be expected in terms of address. This enables, in the section thereafter, the study of what these commonsense ways of seeing the political world imply for a European polity, and consideration of how far such a polity can be accommodated by existing patterns of discursive practice. As the paper will argue, the way problems tend to be explained, combined with expectations concerning their susceptibility to address, generally forecloses common action at the European level as a convincing proposition.

### Explanatory Motifs and Expectations of Political Agency

---

<sup>7</sup> The concerns raised in these interviews broadly correspond to those found prevalent amongst the populations of the EU-25 in a large-scale coterminous study (OPTeM 2006, pp.7-8). The three categories discussed here are not exhaustive – other problems, e.g. environmental, were occasionally mentioned – but they represent the core of those articulated and developed throughout the discussions.

‘Explanation’ can be conceptualised in several ways.<sup>8</sup> From the logician’s perspective, it is likely to mean reported causality: explanations involve the explicit giving of reasons for the emergence of a problematic situation. Yet as a feature of everyday talk, explanation as reason-giving may be too narrow: in conversations, points are often made jointly by multiple speakers, with a contrapuntalism that precludes too strict a definition. Moreover, even in the purest cases, a good portion of an explanation lies not in explicit reason-giving but in semantic meaning and assumptions of relevance. This significantly expands the idea, and arguably one may hear almost *any* utterance as an explanation depending on the context and the questions one asks of it (Draper 1988, p.16) (Antaki 1994 p.4). We shall focus on patterns in *what is deemed relevant to understanding a given set of problems*. These explanatory motifs may be thought of as culturally-available interpretative resources, drawn upon by speakers to make sense of situations and experiences (Lamont and Thévenot 2000; Swider 1986, 2001; Author 2009b) Many appeared naturally in conversation, as participants articulated and talked through the problems under discussion, but they were also elicited by the researcher’s interventions. Direct questions, such as ‘how do you explain that problem?’ or ‘why does it arise?’, were mixed with indirect ones exploring the attribution of responsibility and blame. Such questions are ambiguous on the criteria of what is relevant, and so – given no response can include *all* the possibly significant factors – force participants to exercise discrimination.

Likewise expectations of political agency were embedded in the flow of discussion, but were further elicited using probes such as ‘can that problem be avoided?’ or ‘can anything be done about it?’ Where the possibility of action was affirmed, of interest then would be the agent deemed appropriate to leading it. As a sensitising framework, one may note Perrin’s threefold distinction between expectations of agency centred on ‘governmental’, ‘public’ and ‘private’ approaches (Perrin 2006, pp.63-4; pp.116ff). Where a *governmental* approach is called for, this involves the expectation that government officials can adopt policies that tackle the problems in question, that political parties can be judged according to their willingness to pursue these, and that those who do not can be rejected electorally. A *public* approach, by contrast, involves society-led collective action such as the

---

<sup>8</sup> A useful overview is (Antaki 1988). This paper is informed mainly by discursive and ethnomethodological approaches, but cf. psychological approaches such as ‘attribution theory’ (Hewstone 1996).

formation of social movements, the organising of boycotts, or the use of the media to communicate to a wider public. Unlike the other two, a *private* approach is not based on organised collective action: it involves moves to *avoid* problems rather than make a concerted effort to resolve them. This last perspective offers few resources for making sense of a polity in terms of the pursuit of political projects.

Let us then move to the empirical material, looking at the patterns identifiable for each of the three domains of *Economics*, *Relations between Peoples*, and *Society and the Law*.

## **Economics**

One of the first things to note about problems to do with *Economics* is that many of them tend to elude explanation. They form a large proportion of the discussions, and are discussed with urgency, but also with a sense of mystery concerning their origins. Particularly for those with a numerical dimension, such as rising prices, a widespread lack of explanatory resources seems evident. David in Swansea is not untypical when expressing amazement at how ‘the purchase of a house can go from ... £50,000 to £200,000 in two years. It’s ludicrous ... more debt, more stress, more everything ... [Author: Why are the prices going up so much do you think?] Why has it gone up? ... I don’t know, I can’t answer that. [...] Whether it’ll start coming down I don’t know. [...] But you know, everything’s got to come to a head hasn’t it.’ With similar uncertainty, when the Norwich group reports long-overdue improvements in the economy, these are accounted for on the grounds that luck inevitably changes. ‘With life,’ says Leyton, ‘I mean, you know as well as I do, with life itself, where one door shuts ...’ Barry anticipates: ‘Another one will open.’ Who does the opening and closing is unclear: the doors seem to swing on their hinges.

While explanatory motifs are often thin on the ground for *Economics*, they are by no means absent. Importantly – the second point to emphasise – where present they tend to be broad and transnational, indeed global, in scope. They invoke a range of factors extending far beyond the local environment in which the problems are encountered, and often considerably beyond Europe.

Problems such as unemployment in the city, price rises or the decline of local industry tend to be attributed to global factors such as inequalities in wages. A passage from the Reading discussion, where the talk has been of local unemployment, brings this out, with participants building on each others' points:

Murda: ... England for example is not a manufacturing country any more. Hi-tech, yes, but like the old stuff, it's moved away from that into these lovely nice business parks and things and everybody's in a nice suit and everything ... Everything's changing, and you have to like sort-of [change with it]... If you say 'I'm a rag-n-bone man, I want to stay a rag-n-bone man', you can't be because rag-n-bone man's out the window. Same like with the guy that used to have the horse and cart and drives the coal ... You know, it's all changing, so you have to change with the time.

Habstunder: There used to be a Huntley-Palmer factory [in Reading] ... They made biscuits ...

Murda: Huntley-Palmers, yeah [...] Also for example now, right, like with the new one, Prudential, right, they've taken their call centres over to India. Why? Because it's cheaper. Same with manufacturing. I mean, if I had a factory and I was paying ...

Shafeek: So, like, hang on, they pay the work to the Indians ... so it's less work in England then, isn't it?

David: 'Course, yeah ... but the economy for that company Prudential ... they're having a laugh ...

As Murda summarises a few moments later, 'they pay pittance over there and we want minimum £10 an hour.' The cheaper world further east, comprising Eastern Europe and Asia, is a common motif across the groups.

The fact that explanatory factors, where given, are distant is probably an important reason why the possibilities for governmental agency in this domain are assumed limited. Inevitability is a common motif, and cost imbalances are held decisive: 'it's supply and demand,' says Murda, 'it's where you can get your goods cheaper. ... Unless you start paying everybody 10p an hour for their jobs, you can't compete with other countries now.' A consensus amongst the Würzburg group is that politicians are 'puppets' when it comes to the economy, and powerless to prevent firms leaving the country: 'what exactly is the government going to do?' asks Ulrich. 'It's a democracy, you'd have to introduce some kind of dictatorship ... "You stay here, full stop. Otherwise you go to prison." ... You can't do it any other way, but what do you want to do in a democracy?' Ralf agrees – this kind of interference would constitute 'authoritarian measures.' In the Czech groups, further reasons for assuming limited agency are supplied: their state has weak finances, and is dependent on the health of neighbouring economies. Onřej in Liberec points to how economic conditions in Germany determine



those in the Czech Republic: ‘we’re starting at last to export more than we import from abroad, which is something positive for us, but if Germany ever gets into recession, that means business stagnates, then the problem is they don’t want to buy our products, so we sell less. And Germany is next-door and it’s our main neighbour, that’s the problem. We’re very dependent on the states around us.’

A common motif is that while yesterday’s politicians might have had the opportunity to prevent economic problems, e.g. by choosing not to privatise, today’s politicians are powerless and it is *too late* to alter the situation. The Kassel group emphasises the government is unable to control the movement of companies: ‘That doesn’t work any more,’ says Peter; ‘it’s simply too late ...’, says Hans; ‘in the past ... in the past ...’, chips in Dieter, ‘we’ve got no chance now. The train has left the station.’ ‘It was always going to be this way,’ argues Hans, ‘with all the multinational corporations we have. That means firms have no limits any more, there aren’t any boundaries.’

Positive proposals are not entirely absent. It is occasionally suggested individuals should adapt to new economic circumstances by learning new skills (cf. Murda above) – a *private* response, in other words. Individual consumer action against departing firms is also occasionally advocated, but with economic processes extending far afield, the possibilities for action are viewed as constrained. Peter in Kassel suggests there is a limit to what consumers can do, however enlightened: ‘if I had an account with Deutsche Bank, I’d cancel it. I’d boycott such firms. The thing is, everything’s so interwoven these days, you don’t really know ... [Dieter: yeah] ... where they all work, where they produce ... Whatever you do, the glasses will come from somewhere, you can’t say “I’m not drinking that any more because the glass doesn’t come from Germany.” That’s the problem, because ultimately you simply can’t separate it out.’

Not only this but organised action of a *public* kind, such as a collective boycott, is cast further in doubt with scepticism regarding the willingness of others to show firmness. Leyton in Norwich predicts that one day ‘you’ll have one company who own all the food chains. One big massive block will own the lot.’ Barry agrees, and Mickey says it is already happening in the form of price-fixing. ‘We should go in there,’ says Mickey, ‘we should go into Asda or Morrisons or whatever and we should turn round and say “Get that foreign crap out of our house.”’ ‘But until everybody decides to do it,’ responds Leyton, ‘it’ll never happen. They’ve got the upper hand all the time and they’ll do

what they want to do.’ Even if ‘people like us’ were to take the lead, the rest would probably not follow.

In sum, the consensus across the groups is that there are few possibilities for action in the *Economics* domain. With such problems treated either as a matter of puzzlement, or seen as heavily dependent on distant processes, the prospect of organised collective action, whether centred on political institutions or other members of society, is treated as heavily circumscribed. Speakers generally invoke ‘the government’ and ‘politicians’ as the most relevant reference-points, but usually to write off their capacities.

### **Relations between Peoples**

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

Two motifs recur. Neither implicates ‘us’, since ‘we’ are generally described with connotations of peacefulness and good sense. The focus is on other peoples: one set of explanations focuses on how these seek to compensate for what they lack – in particular, power and resources; another set is based on their expressing what are perceived as essential characteristics, such as an unwillingness to compromise. Such motifs can be seen in an extract from the Kassel interview concerning the origins of international conflicts:

Hans: I think the crunch with this whole thing is that the distribution of resources here on Earth is very varied, that most wars take place due to this distribution. Whether it’s basic economic goods like oil or other raw materials, or as is going to happen also with water, which some day is certainly going to have to be divided. Doesn’t affect us so much yet, but it may certainly hit us later. Perhaps very soon.

Dieter: That’ll come too. ... With oil we’re probably already there ... With water it’s coming. [...]

Peter: It's always a matter of distribution ... [H: yeah]. Wars happen because things are wrongly [*falsch*] distributed. But that's completely normal. If I have something, why should I give it up to you? Tell me. That's just how it is, isn't it. And you say 'why don't you give me some, you have a lot, you don't need it all.' Yes, but I say, 'sure, but why? Bad times might come, then I'd need it.'

Sebastian: I think with war and peace it's more that certain countries want to keep their position of power ...

David: Yeah, that's exactly what he's saying. Simply to hang onto their personal or country-specific advantage and secure their position ...

Peter: Or, then there's these wars which in Africa ... a lot ... that some general launches a putsch and is brought to power ... [D: ... Power, power! ...] And then we're back at the same stage like when we had Hitler who killed the Jews and ... in the one case the Tutsus [*sic*] get killed, in the other case the others get killed ...

Sebastian: Sure, but these African wars, for example, the Americans aren't very interested in those. [P: Right, because there they can't ...] Yeah, because they can't extract anything there.

Peter: And probably soon the cost of the raw materials, even if they could get something out there, it'd be too expensive to ship it over to America ... [S: ... No raw materials in Africa ...] Yeah, exactly. [S: ... That's how it is ...]

One seems to see two explanatory motifs here, one explicit and one implicit, and relevant to different kinds of conflict. The first is the more structural one to do with power relations: if resources are distributed unequally, there will be wars as those who have them try to fend off the challenges of those who do not. Such conflicts are presented as rational or 'normal'. The second is a more essentialising explanation: wars in Africa (or in the past) are not necessarily about resources; rather they may involve meaningless violence. Note the phrase 'some general', as though the occurrence were so common that the details were unimportant.

Aside from the odd exception like Northern Ireland (occasionally mentioned as such), Europe and 'the West' more generally are considered places of peace. Wars are projected onto places like Africa or the Middle East, where – as participants in the Lübeck group put it – 'there are fanatics on both sides', people are 'stubborn' and 'unwilling to sit down with each other and work out a compromise', so 'they get each other more and more worked up until it becomes really extreme.' Insofar as the West is generally assumed to be peaceful, these conflicts would take place just in far-away places of contrast; yet what happens *there* is seen to intrude on life closer to home, integrating the sense of space. Immigration is the most obvious way speakers make this link, with the suggestion that peoples arriving from afar tend to bring their natural characteristics with them. Briefly put, these tend to include intransigence and an undue attachment to religion or 'ideology'. The problem tends to be cast as the unwillingness or inability of such peoples to compromise on their differences, seeking

instead to impose their customs and ways of life. As Zdeněk in Ostrava put it, in a formulation echoed widely, ‘Muslims don’t know how to compromise. It’s a completely different mentality.’ Such observations are frequently linked to a discussion of terrorism.

The possibilities for tackling these problems of *Relations between Peoples* are assumed quite limited, probably in part because the explanatory motifs tend to externalise responsibility away from the people constructed as ‘us’. The problems are thus assumed to be out of ‘our’ hands. Rarely does one find the idea that relations can be improved through dialogue or mutual understanding. ‘You’re never gonna stop war,’ says David in Reading, and ‘I can’t do nothing about it.’ ‘Unless you can zap people for thinking,’ says Mickey in Norwich, ‘you will never ever have peace.’ Instead, the idea of irreconcilable difference tends to be emphasised: for Peter and Dieter at Kassel, ‘people’s opinions are simply too different’; Dieter predicts ‘the direct confrontation between people with completely different cultures.’ Conflict tends to be normalised: tackling these problems therefore tends to be presented as a matter of reducing mutual exposure. Strict immigration rules are often assumed to be the most credible answer, accompanied by doubts about whether the national government will do this. The tendency to assume that problems experienced at a local level also play out on a wider scale is probably a contributing element in the scepticism about political agency, in that it implies such problems transcend polity boundaries. They are neither purely local and therefore susceptible to local address, nor purely distant and therefore susceptible to a policy of disengagement and withdrawal.

## **Society and the Law**

For problems such as crime and social misdemeanour, explanations are found quite reliably – there is little sense of mystery here. Such problems tend to attract explanations limited to the domestic, often to factors within the city itself. The focus is on the behaviour and mentalities of local actors, and explanatory factors tend to include upbringing in the family, discipline levels in schools, and the willingness of the institutions of law enforcement to fulfil their responsibilities for seeing the rules equally applied. Transnational factors are rarely cited, even though one could imagine references to

the decline of religion in modern societies ('no-one fears God any more'), the impact of technological change on local communities and family interaction, or the rise of transnational criminal networks.

The sense that something can be done varies, but is generally stronger than in the other domains. Possibilities for action tend to be seen in connection with national or subnational actors – indeed, it may be there is a stronger sense of agency here precisely because the sense of space is narrower. Improving the national education system is widely regarded as a credible objective, with the assumption that if young people can be caught 'from the word go' there is a chance of raising them as honest citizens. Punitive measures against crime are a second way *government*-led action is affirmed. More police on the streets of the city, together with stronger criminal sentencing, are obvious expressions of this sentiment. 'I watched a programme,' says Mickey in Norwich. 'The average drug-dealer affects and destroys forty lives. ... Simple way to stop that, isn't there.' Barry: 'yeah, take him out.' 'Lock him up,' continues Mickey. 'Nip the supply in the bud.' A principle of enforcing the rules harshly on 'true criminals' and gently on those caught for a minor thing holds widespread appeal. The exception to this pattern of stronger agency is found amongst the Czech groups, where a lack of state finances is deemed an important constraint, as is the prevalence of corruption.

The possibility of society-led *public* approaches is raised in several groups, though with some qualification. Other members of society are assumed important to the extent they can ostracise those who misbehave, and if people will 'stand up for the rules' there is the possibility that society can be improved. But one of the reasons people may fail to do so is that social etiquette stands in the way. 'If you say something,' says Andreas in Erfurt, 'then you're cursed as a trouble-maker.' This compounds people's apathy and fear, says Uwe, so they say to themselves 'oh, there's no point, let's leave it,' and the deviant behaviour continues.

To summarise, the sense of agency in this domain, while still qualified, is stronger than in the others. Especially amongst the British and German groups, education and law enforcement are regarded as convincing *governmental* approaches – though the government involved is the national one, and there is no sense of a transnational context.

The observations of this section are summarised below. To render them in the boxes of a table risks conveying an exaggerated uniformity and overtones of determinism. Discursive practices are patterned, yet any attempt to express that pattern will inevitably be procrustean, since speakers may sometimes diverge from that pattern, and – relatedly – since new patterns are always in generation. Nothing that has been said rules out the possibility that individuals may question or reject some of the motifs they encounter. Nevertheless, as an indication of prominent patterns an overview has heuristic value.

A rich range of problems are articulated in these discussions, and participants demonstrate a keen sense of their urgency: something should ideally be done. It is principally action by *governmental* means which speakers invoke: the role of ‘politicians’, ‘the government’ or ‘the State’ is foregrounded, and while there is some reference to *private* and *public* approaches, there is no mention of NGOs. Contrary to notions that modern politics draws its vitality from ‘civil society’ rather than the traditional institutional channels, here the reference-points for agency are typically state-centred.<sup>9</sup> But often, with some variation according to issue, political actors are assumed to be lacking in power. This is especially true where the origins of the problems are traced out to a global level – something done frequently.

**SUMMARY:**

	<i>Economics</i>	<i>Relations between Peoples</i>	<i>Society &amp; the Law</i>
<i>Explanatory Motifs</i>	Sometimes quite lacking. Alternatively very broad, stretching beyond Europe – global price & wage inequality, the ‘cheaper East’, dependence on economic conditions elsewhere.	Generally broad, stretching beyond Europe – global inequality of power and resources; aggressive / intransigent impulses of non-western peoples.	Generally local – mentalities & conduct of local actors, institutional constraints, declining discipline.

---

<sup>9</sup> This may be a European specificity: cf. (Perrin 2006), in whose US focus groups public/societal action is more prominent.

<i>Possibilities for Action</i>	Little. Inevitability, global price / wage inequalities conclusive, 'too late' to undo critical decisions, hard to protest because everything entwined. Individuals may be able to adapt.	Limited. Conflict largely inevitable, and 'our' politicians unwilling to take a stand. Can reduce exposure, e.g. with immigration controls.	Reasonable. Education at a young age, stronger enforcement of the rules, through the law or social ostracisation; wait for a new generation (Czechs).
---------------------------------	--	---	--

### Europe and the EU in Discussion

As indicated, no concerted effort was made by the researcher to steer these discussions towards 'Europe' or the EU until the interviews were near to conclusion. It is worth noting then that spontaneous mentions were not common. In each of the discussions, 'Europe' or the EU did appear naturally at some point, but in total such references could be associated with – as an approximate estimate – no more than 10-15% of the material.

For the purposes of analysis a distinction can be made between two such kinds of reference. The first involves the direct expression of opinions concerning the EU – its institutions, decision-making procedures, and questions to do with the transfer of sovereignty – separate from the context of substantive political problems. An emblematic example would be the complaint made by Andy in Swansea about the money which is wasted ('£20 million or something') every time the European Parliament moves between Brussels and Strasbourg. Such references are not the focus here. One reason is that they relate to rather contingent phenomena specific to the EU's present institutional configuration, and about which popular attitudes have already been studied in depth.<sup>10</sup> A second reason is that it was rather rare for participants to express opinions of this decontextual, non-policy-related kind. While questions of the mechanisms and 'finality' of the integration process will inevitably and properly be of salience to scholars, it seems natural that those without a professional interest are more inclined to work outwards from the problems of immediate concern to them, and to

---

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. (OPTEM 2006), which contains substantial sections on knowledge levels about the EU institutions and how they work, as well as attitudes towards them. Also, (Bruter 2005).

invoke ‘Europe’ or the EU only where these are assumed to have a bearing. We shall focus on these problem-related references.

It will have been anticipated from the preceding section that for one set of problems – *Society and the Law* – the significance ascribed to the EU is very minor. These are problems given prominence across the groups, but attention is on the domestic arena, with explanations local in focus. It may be for this very reason that one sees relatively positive assumptions concerning political agency: the problems are ‘close to home’, and can therefore be tackled, with roles ascribed to the national government and fellow citizens. Such a perspective is not *incompatible* with a European polity, since the possibility of decentralising certain policy-areas to local authorities is expressed by the EU’s principle of subsidiarity. But it does little to invite positive political significance to be ascribed to the EU – rather it is simply overlooked.

In discussion of *Economics* (especially) and *Relations between Peoples* (to some degree), ‘Europe’ and the EU are invoked rather more.<sup>11</sup> That a connection is made on both is important: it reminds that the meaning ascribed to the EU cannot be reduced to a single register of evaluation, whether economic, cultural or geopolitical. This double significance is no doubt linked to the fact that both domains are described in transnational terms, with explanatory motifs including factors that extend well beyond the local environment. In this sense there would seem to be some of the ideational ‘raw materials’ in place for citizens to make positive political sense of the EU. Yet when one recalls more closely the kinds of motif identified above, the difficulties will be readily apparent.

As highlighted, where speakers do identify origins and causes for *Economic* problems (and often they do not), these generally evoke factors at a global rather than continental level, notably the irresistible forces of a global market. Problems are held to be beyond the control of political authority, and what one sees is not the conclusion that transnational approaches are necessary but the transferral of the same assumption of powerlessness from the national to the European level. The EU is very rarely mentioned in these discussions as a means of addressing economic problems which cannot be addressed by a national government. Amongst the Czech groups, the EU is occasionally given credit

---

<sup>11</sup> The prominence of economic perspectives on the EU is also evident in the preliminary findings of the ‘Citizens Talking about Europe’ (CITES) project; recent research on national public spheres reiterates it (Diez Medrano 2008).



for helping to improve Czech infrastructure: Román in Plzeň notes judiciously that ‘it can be said that in the time we’ve been in the EU the situation’s improved.’ Míra confirms: ‘the Union’s contributed to the construction of every bridge here, large and small.’ It remains doubtful however whether such EU-led action is seen as an expression of agency, a meaningful response to a demand for action, or some kind of *deus ex machina* whose mysterious arrival on the scene brings a welcome change in fortunes. Generally, with most economic problems linked in discussion to global factors far beyond the borders of Europe, little positive role is accorded to a European polity.

Instead, across the groups, various current policies of the EU come to be heavily entwined in discussion with the key problems in this domain, such that the Union is treated as an expression or an exacerbation of them. This can be seen in many instances. Discussion of the introduction of the euro, for example, often exhibits the familiar motif of inevitability. Participants in Ostrava talk of the euro as a ‘catastrophe’, but unavoidable nonetheless. In Plzeň, participants are agreed the euro is coming, ‘the only question is when’ says Petr – with the caveat the EU may break up before then. In a passage from the Lübeck discussion, a specific grievance with discrepancies created by the EU is linked together with a more general sense of powerlessness before wider economic forces:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Author: Which ones profit, for example?

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

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

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

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

Werner: This process is no longer reversible.

Globalisation, understood as the levelling out of global wealth inequalities, is presented as something inevitable or 'too late to stop'. Attempts to put barriers in its way are likely to be futile, for it is an irreversible process to be played out over generations. Changes associated with the EU, such as the opening of borders and the introduction of the euro, are spoken of merely as symptoms of broader economic globalisation and the loss of boundaries. Note 'you can see that already in the EU' – implying that the EU is the first or the most immediate expression. The euro comes across as neither positive nor negative, neither a remedy nor a mistake, but the extension of a pattern. In this and other groups, participants do raise complaints about the *manner* in which it was introduced – 'no-one asked us, there should have been a referendum,' says Hamid in Lübeck; 'it was simply fixed by politicians' says Andreas in Erfurt – but this is not matched by a sense that the outcome might have been different. The EU follows wider trends.

When discussion touches on problems of *Relations between Peoples*, one finds further reference to 'Europe' and the EU. As noted, questions of (the threat of) conflict are generally not associated with the majority-peoples of 'the West', as these are constructed in discussion. Their relations are assumed to be peaceful: whatever the differences in 'national character', war between them is unlikely. As Ralf in Würzburg put it, 'the only conflicts which are left are far away from us, and here in Central Europe, in Europe, in the EU area we have a very peaceful shared existence. I think that's very important, that's a historical step forward. Germany-Britain, the bombardment in the

Second World War, this hard enmity is gone, gone once and for all.’ Perhaps because this assumption is made so readily, any role for the EU in coordinating harmonious relations between peoples – one of its classic justifications – is hardly mentioned. The organised maintenance of peace is unnecessary, it seems, for the very reason that peacefulness is treated as characteristic.

Nor does a positive role tend to be accorded to the EU as regards those inter-people relations quite clearly problematised. Building up ‘Europe’ as a global power in military and defence so as to manage threats emerging from outside – another possible form of collective action, normatively desirable or not (Morgan 2005) – is a proposal heard rarely in these discussions. The fact that ‘the West’ evokes something broader than Europe probably weakens the extent to which acting at a European level is given credence. Also, the appeal of a collective foreign policy is probably diminished by the assumption that opponents are living *within* the home environment, not just beyond. When the problem is constructed as one of daily exposure, the relevance of foreign and defence policy at a European level is much diminished.

Rather than seen as a means to address perceived problems, the EU is again treated occasionally as a contributing factor. The prospect of Turkish membership is a notable instance. In Lübeck, Jochen comments with collective approval that ‘these differences in mentality, they’re particularly serious with regard to Turkey’s entry [into the EU] ... It’ll get even more extreme. Because that’s where the Orient meets the Occident, isn’t it. Practically two different cultures. I think that’s really, really difficult.’ Hamid agrees: ‘That’s going to be a really difficult topic when Turkey comes in.’ There is no mention of Bosnia and Albania, two potential EU members that in principle might be associated with the experience of war and the presence of Muslims, but one suspects here too the EU might easily be treated as a source of the perceived problem.

Let us draw the threads together. As ‘Europe’ and the EU are invoked in these discussions, speakers readily make a link with the problems of everyday life. In doing so, they draw on the repertoires of understanding available to them for making sense of these problems, thus entwining the EU in the patterns characteristic of these repertoires, or omitting reference to it because these imply its irrelevance. The EU therefore comes to be regarded as a negative political phenomenon in a double

way: on the one hand its policies come to be linked to many of the motifs used to make sense of the problems raised, and thus it is coloured by association with these. On the other hand, it takes on the sense of powerlessness before mysterious or inevitable forces which tends to be attributed to political agency more generally, thus undermining the possibility that it might be regarded as a suitable response to these. Existing patterns of discursive practice do little to ‘make sense of’ the EU in political terms.

## Discussion

If one accepts the reading of the material presented, what might the implications be? In what contexts is this ideational background likely to be significant? The thought-processes of individuals at a particular moment, such as when deciding in the polling booth whether to endorse further integration, can only be a matter of conjecture. Some such individuals may draw directly on the motifs we have identified; others, following the expectations of socio-psychological approaches, may make their decision based on an ostensibly unrelated set of emotions to do with how ‘European’ or ‘[national]’ they feel (Bruter 2005). Others – though surely a minority – may be persuaded more by procedural concerns to do with (perceptions of) how the Brussels institutions are run. Others may not even get to the polling booth. If the patterned ways in which citizens interpret the political world are important, it is not necessarily in the sense that one can attribute them a causal status for individual actions at a given moment.

Rather than as determinative in the particular instance, this ideational background might more appropriately be seen as exercising an enabling and constraining function on political action more generally. How citizens render the political world intelligible matters because it shapes the kinds of arguments that can feasibly be made on behalf of political authority and its demands, and those unlikely to resonate. Thus it may influence levels of political consent and participation, guiding the degree to which the legal and political rights of EU citizenship are exercised or exist only formally. It may influence levels of political vigilance, for only if citizens have the necessary tools of imagination

to see the EU in project-oriented terms are they likely to seek assurance that its policies and processes approximate the standards such a polity requires. Also, while these ideational features do not determine the outcome of referenda, they may affect which political actors have the best resources at their disposal in these moments. Certain routinised ways of interpreting the world can be used to mobilise supporters behind a political programme, and to encourage transnational alliances and supranational claims-making in its pursuit, while others inhibit such action (Gamson 1992).

The way the EU is drawn into these discussions rather jars with the notion that its political viability and democratic legitimacy rest on addressing the substantive concerns of citizens. Even supposing the EU does perform this beneficial role, such a message is not easily 'hearable' for those of its citizens drawing on the patterns of interpretation we have traced. This is by no means to suggest that a political rationale for the EU is the wrong one – the ease with which speakers articulate problems in need of address suggests it is an apposite one – nor that the very idea of a European polity is suspect – there are few grounds for complacency about nation-state democracy, since its political capacities are also questioned, and its achievements mainly relegated to the past. But it seems reasonable to suppose that any shift in the political significance ascribed by citizens to the EU is unlikely to succeed in isolation from changes in the broader discursive patterns it is drawn into.

Changes, it should be emphasised, are entirely possible, since rather than expressing a uniquely correct way to appraise the political world, these patterns express contingent interpretations: enduring perhaps, but by no means impervious to change. Indeed, it may be that changes are inescapable, since like social structures more generally these discursive patterns are reproduced through acts of human interpretation, and must respond to the creativity individuals bring to this. The question then would be whether the process of change is susceptible, at least in part, to direction by organised actors. The role of suitably inclined political activists, whether they be parties, social movements, media organisations, or others, would be to make available new ways of interpreting the problems of everyday life so as to make better sense of the EU as a political phenomenon (Tarrow and Tilly 2007; Tilly 2003).

Judging by the findings of this study, such redescriptions of the political world would need to be distinctive in a number of ways. They would need to offer clear and constructive ways of understanding the origins of problems such that they did not appear the outcome of mysterious forces

or the inevitable consequence of human nature. They would also need to foster the conviction that such problems are suitably addressed at a European level, something likely to require disputing the tendency to locate causal factors either at a very local level, as one currently sees with problems to do with *Society and the Law*, or far beyond Europe's borders in distant places of contrast, as one sees with problems of *Economics* and *Relations between Peoples*. Only then is political agency at a European level likely to escape the twin dangers of seeming remote from, or dwarfed by, the challenges it seeks to address. The articulation of new sets of problems little heard in these discussions, such as those to do with the environment, would further expand the stock of resources with which such arguments could be made.

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

## References

- Antaki, Charles (1988), 'Explanations, Communication and Social Cognition', in Charles Antaki (ed.), *Analysing Everyday Explanation: A Casebook of Methods* (London: Sage).
- (1994), *Explaining and Arguing: The Social Organization of Accounts* (London: Sage).
- Author (2009a), 'Thematisation and Collective Positioning in Everyday Political Talk', *British Journal of Political Science*, forthcoming.
- (2009b), 'The Social Theory of Mass Politics', *Journal of Politics*, accepted for publication.
- Brubaker, Rogers and Cooper, Frederick (2000), 'Beyond "Identity"', *Theory and Society*, 29 (1).

- Bruter, Michael (2005), *Citizens of Europe? The Emergence of a Mass European Identity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave).
- Cohen, Joshua and Sabel, Charles F. (2003), 'Sovereignty and Solidarity: EU and US', in David Trubek and Jonathan Zeitlin (eds.), *Governing Work and Welfare in a New Economy* (Oxford: OUP).
- Díez Medrano, Juan (2008), 'The Public Sphere and the European Union's Political Identity', in Peter Katzenstein and Jeffrey Checkel (eds.) *The Politics of European Identity Construction* (Cambridge: CUP).
- Draper, Stephen W. (1988), 'What's Going On in Everyday Explanation?' in Charles Antaki (ed.), *Analysing Everyday Explanation: A Casebook of Methods* (London: Sage).
- Duchesne, Sophie (2009), 'Waiting for European identity: Preliminary thoughts about the identification process with Europe', *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, forthcoming.
- & Florence Haegel (2007), 'Avoiding or Accepting Conflict in Public Talk', *British Journal of Political Science*, 37 (1).
- Eder, Klaus (1995), 'Does Social Class Matter in the Study of Social Movements? A Theory of Middle Class Radicalism', in Louis Maheu (ed.), *Social Movements and Social Classes* (London: Sage).
- Gambetta, Diego and Hamill, Heather (2005), *Streetwise: How Taxi Drivers Establish their Customers' Trustworthiness* (New York: Russell Sage).
- Gamson, William (1992), *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: CUP).
- Hewstone, Miles & Frank Fincham (1996), 'Attribution Theory and Research: Basic Issues and Applications', in Hewstone, Wolfgang Stroebe & Geoffrey Stephenson (eds.), *Introduction to Social Psychology* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Kohli, Martin (2000), 'The Battlegrounds of European Identity', *European Societies*, 2 (2).
- Lamont, Michèle and Thévenot, Laurent (eds.) (2000), *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology* (Cambridge: CUP).
- Meinhof, Ulrike (2004), 'Europe Viewed from Below: Agents, Victims, and the Threat of the Other', in Richard K. Herrmann, Thomas Risse, and Marilynn B. Brewer (eds.), *Transnational Identities: Becoming European in the EU* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield).
- Morgan, Glyn (2005), *The Idea of a European Superstate: Public Justification and European Integration* (Princeton: PUP).
- Nicolaidis, Kalypso (2004), "We, the Peoples of Europe ...", *Foreign Affairs*, (November / December).
- OPTEM (2006), 'The European Citizens and the Future of Europe: a Qualitative Study in the 25 Member States', (Eurobarometer).
- Perrin, Andrew J. (2006), *Citizen Speak: The Democratic Imagination in American Life* (Chicago IL: U. of Chicago Press).
- Swidler, Ann (1986), "Culture in Action." *American Sociological Review* 51 (2).
- (2001), *Talk of Love. How Culture Matters*. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press.
- Tarrow, Sidney and Tilly, Charles (2007), *Contentious Politics* (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm Publishers).
- Tilly, Charles (2003), 'Political Identities in Changing Polities', *Social Research*, 70 (2).
- Wedeen, Lisa (2002) 'Conceptualising Culture: Possibilities for Political Science', *American Political Science Review* 96 (4).