

# Europe and the Common

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White, Jonathan (2010), 'Europe and the common', *Political Studies*, 58 (1). 104-122.  
ISSN 0032-3217

*Significant attention has been given to the necessary conditions for a viable and legitimate European polity. Drawing on traditions in political philosophy, a central strand of this debate has concerned what must be common to a set of people such that they may be ruled through the same institutions, with various types of collective bond proposed as possible bases for political community. The argument of this paper is that many such approaches, which conceive a bond in terms of shared interests, cultural attributes, or shared values and principles, are liable either to underplay or to overplay how much the citizens of a polity must have in common, tending either to empty public life of the pursuit of shared ends or conversely to downgrade the importance of adversarialism. Both may be seen as depoliticising moves. The paper goes on to explore how a more explicitly political bond, based on the appraisal of political problems, might be conceived for a European polity.*

‘To constitute and give life to a body politic is to put some things in common. [...] The problem of the Europeans is that they do not know what they want to put in common.’ This is how Pierre Manent characterises some of the uncertainty surrounding the EU (Manent 2006, p.67). As with all polities, so in the European case it seems that a sense of the common is required to animate the institutional forms that are emerging. The EU is widely taken to be a self-standing polity *of some kind* (Walker 2002), and despite the openness of the future trajectory of its institutional forms, some basis on which to conceive of it as a political community seems necessary. Yet the ‘common’ is an ambiguous thing. How one *could* conceptualise it, as a matter of description, and how one *should* conceptualise it, as a normative matter, are both issues of some dispute. Ongoing scholarly debate in recent years about the possibility of a European demos has involved a variety of attempts to pin down the common, to give shape to something indeterminate. The current touch of crisis about the EU, while it has quietened the sense of a transformative constitutional moment, keeps the question of the common returning to the fore.

It is useful to distinguish between two ways in which this question can be formulated. One is to treat it as a membership or boundary question concerning who is to be included in the political community and who may be properly excluded. In the contemporary European case this might be a matter both of the territorial extension of the Union and of the citizenship rights granted to temporary and long-term residents. A second is to treat it as a question of the cohesiveness of a unit one takes as given. In this perspective the precise extension of the EU’s boundaries remains an unsettled matter, but it is assumed that – wherever they be located – they require the support of some kind of integrative force to ensure the stability of the polity and the endorsement of its citizens. A *collective bond* is

required in order to conjure the unity of ‘the people’ such that they are suited to rule through the same institutions.

While both formulations of the question raise issues of political importance, one should avoid assuming that any answer to the second question is valid to the extent that it provides a clear answer to the first. A fruitful conceptualisation of the collective bond need not specify where the boundaries of that collective are to lie, since this will be a matter of ongoing interpretation. Membership clearly cannot be resolved by a straightforward appeal to democratic decision-making, to an aggregation of individual votes, since as Robert Goodin puts it, ‘that is like saying the winning lottery ticket will be pulled out of the hat by the winner of that selfsame lottery.’ (Goodin 2007, p.43) Nor do appeals to the principle of ‘all affected interests’, or ‘all probably affected interests’, suggest a solution, since then there are problems of who can authoritatively judge such questions. Appeals to cultural markers or geographical features simply beg the question of which should properly be invoked (Dahl 1990; Whelan 1983). Given that ‘the people’ can never be captured in a single representation that fits neatly to the material world (Laclau 2005), the membership question is never fully resolved, and for that reason one may find value in conceptualisations of the collective bond which remain open on the question of boundaries.

Reflections on how to conceptualise a European common can sometimes seem like academic debate at its most detached. The debate may seem like an artifice of words: one agonises about the ‘demos’ because one has spent too long thinking about the etymology of ‘democracy’. There are several senses in which the debate is of importance though. Firstly, insofar as any democratic regime is based on the principle of rule by ‘the people’, it is an issue of basic constitutional significance how one makes sense of this term. In the absence of a monarch embodying the unity of the whole in his or her person, what defines ‘the people’ and holds them together as the authors of political authority becomes a necessary subject of ongoing ideological debate. As Claude Lefort puts it, in a democracy ‘the locus of power becomes *an empty place*,’ and the representation of ‘the people’ as a single entity is dependent upon political and sociological elaboration (Lefort 1988, pp.17-8). Secondly, how this idea of ‘the people’ comes to be represented has implications for the day-to-day practice of politics. Life in a polity inevitably requires certain constraints on negative liberty, and how one conceptualises the common goes some way to determining how citizens are to ‘make sense’ of this fact, even if largely at a tacit level. In many perspectives, some kind of meta-identity is required if citizens are to accept the rule of law when they would rather not, or to accept decision-making when it runs counter to their perceptions of self-interest. Institutions need justifications if they are not to be exited or ignored, something perhaps especially true for an emerging polity such as the EU, where the habit of accepting decision-making is less entrenched and where a few expressions of dissatisfaction can have

destabilising consequences. How the common is conceptualised can also shape what citizens understand by the common good, or whether they doubt the existence of such a thing, and the extent to which they seek participation in the political process. Also, while no conceptualisation of the common can provide a settled answer to the question of boundaries, nonetheless different conceptualisations can serve to naturalise certain boundaries while problematising others. Why it is logical for ‘us’ to share a certain political arrangement depends crucially on how that ‘we’ is defined.

Rather than simply a classificatory matter, how one conceptualises the common says much about the models of democracy to which one wants to lend credence. One’s perspective is laden with consequences for how one understands the purpose of the polity and the nature of citizenship, and how one understands the challenges which a particular polity or polities in general may face. It may point towards certain kinds of institutional configuration or ‘regime’ rather than others. To suggest what Europeans might put in common is at the same time to suggest a vision of politics for the EU. Likewise any vision of how a polity should look is going to involve, explicitly or implicitly, a position being taken on what it is that holds the political community together. A debate on the nature of the common is embedded in all discussion of the political, and the implications of different positions are therefore an appropriate target of inquiry.

The following section examines some of the ways in which the common tends to be conceived in the European debate, drawing as these do on older traditions in political philosophy. There are numerous criteria by which one could distinguish them – a logical one would be historical lineage, charting their links to liberalism, communitarianism and republicanism; another would be the distinction between those seeking the common in the material world and those treating it as a symbolic construction or a feature of social practices. Here they are analysed according to how ‘thick’ they suppose the common must be. By this is meant the level of regularity across the citizen body which is demanded: a thick, maximalist approach supposes a high degree of regularity such that, following whatever principle is invoked, citizens resemble one another rather strongly, whether in the attributes they display or the ends they pursue. A thin, minimalist approach allows for greater diversity, albeit potentially at some expense to the cohesiveness of the political community.

Both maximalist and minimalist conceptions of the common may have unwelcome implications for the democratic character of the political community. From a broadly pluralist perspective, one may argue that an important element in any healthy democracy is political contestation. Where no single viewpoint can claim absolute validity, handling matters of common concern involves the identification and the making of choices, many of which will be contestable. The democratic process is what allows the range of competing political perspectives to be voiced and discussed, and its success depends upon there being active and inclusive public debate, combined with

widespread recognition that, due to the contestability of viewpoints, the outcome may be reasonable disagreement. The system should invite citizens to be oriented to this debate, and to the opportunities provided by democratic institutions to shape decision-making on matters of common concern, so that widely held viewpoints are not systematically excluded. Yet it may be argued that many of the existing approaches to a European common, more or less minimalist or maximalist in their demands, are adverse in their implications for political contestation and involvement, and rather of a 'depoliticising' tendency. Having laid out arguments to this effect, the need for an alternative conception is advocated. It is suggested that this should have two features in particular: one is an emphasis on adversarialism, which implies subgroups of citizens tied to one another by specific common purposes without this presupposing a high degree of regularity and consensus across the whole citizen body; the second is an emphasis on substantive problems, which may foster an engaged citizenry by allowing a close link to be maintained to the everyday concerns of ordinary citizens. These guiding principles point to the elaboration of what one may call a 'political bond'.

#### Minimalist, Maximalist, and Mixed Conceptions of the Common

A staple idea of political philosophy is that material *interests* may serve as the collective bond. This perspective can be thought of as the default position in the older literature on the EU. In the 1940s/50s, the populations of European nation-states were seen as overtly hostile to one another, and it was widely assumed that any moves towards integration would have to quieten their passions by appealing to their interests. In the early post-War years these interests were understood by many as security interests, implying a *security bond* based on the need to establish peace between European states. More commonly, once the early federalist visions had faded, an economic perspective was advanced. With arguments redolent of the older notion of 'doux commerce' (Hirschman 1996), it was suggested that integration and polity formation could be advanced by enabling the pursuit of interests through commercial exchange. The deepening of market interaction and functional integration was viewed as establishing a *commercial bond* between elites, leading to wider economic benefits for the member-state populations as a whole, who in turn would come to see their prosperity as entwined with that of their neighbours (Monnet 1963). While this perspective was most common in the pre-Maastricht era, it survives amongst those who treat the common market and the establishment of economic and monetary union as the principal features of the European polity.

In descriptive-empirical terms, there are valid reasons to doubt whether a bond based on interests, security or commercial, is sufficient to constitute a political community. To conceive the

collective bond for a European polity in these terms is to suggest that interests favour the integration process unambiguously. Yet interests are rarely unambiguous: they can generally be appraised in multiple ways, and are susceptible to redescription. An appeal to long-term interests such as security and economic growth is always vulnerable to counter-claims that conjure short-term or non-material interests, since what may be said to be in someone's interests depends crucially on how alternatives are defined (Connolly 1974a). Interests are *comparative*, and therefore depend on ideational elaboration, which means any interest-based account of social order centred on pre-interpretational factors alone will be incomplete. If the empirical argument is inconclusive, for this reason one can take a critical approach to the normative implications of accepting such a position. As critics of aggregationist models of politics have emphasised, a perspective which takes interests as self-evident is likely to accord a minimal role to political debate and contestation as a means by which to elaborate those interests and seek an interpretation of the common good (Sunstein 1991). If political ends are given, citizens have little need to engage one another in an effort to define them: they need only delegate a small number of representatives to act on their behalf and execute the policies necessary to realising them. While such a perspective may continue to acknowledge 'the people' as the ultimate source of authority, there is little room for 'the people' as active agents engaged in collective decision-making and self-rule (Elster 1986). Indeed, attempts to exercise democratic control over the management of these interests are liable to be portrayed as constraints on efficiency. It follows as little surprise that a commercial perspective tends to be suspicious of activity which cannot be understood in terms of the pursuit of individual advantage, and tends to admire citizens most when they act in private competition.

Naturally, such observations are not to imply that political theory should do away with the concept of interest: there may be ways to formulate it in less determinist terms such that it can be a starting-point for sustained political debate (Connolly 1974a). If one acknowledges the fundamental ambiguity of interests, one makes space for citizens to be active in the articulation of different perspectives, and to seek common cause in the attempt to advance these. But it is exactly this type of reading that one excludes by supposing one can separate out a set of concerns prior to political debate and regard these as the basis of the collective bond. To treat interests in this way as constitutive of the demos is a depoliticising move, likely to weaken public debate and to exacerbate wider trends in contemporary democracy towards the marginalisation of the principle of democratic control.

Reacting against this minimalist conceptualisation of the common, in which citizens tend weakly to mutual engagement, a quite different perspective instead plays up the importance of cultural attachments extending widely across the citizen body. In this maximalist conception of the common,

it is held that political units require the support of a *cultural bond*. Historically, there have been two major ways to conceive such a bond: as involving ethical ties that constitute ‘the people’ as an organic unity extended through time, or as involving contingent ties which serve only the instrumental purpose of evoking a sense of commonality, solidarity and trust within the population. Both versions invoke markers such as territory, language, symbolic practices, blood ties, historical events and feelings of belonging, though granting them a rather different status (Parekh 1995). The first perspective, promoted notably by the Romantic nationalist movements of the nineteenth century, has been rare in the literature on the EU, though it finds expression in discussion of Christianity’s significance for the Union and in the more enthusiastic references to Europe’s ‘common civilisation’ and ‘common heritage’ (Delanty 2002). The latter perspective, which deserves closer attention, presents itself as open and pragmatic, making no strong normative assumptions about the proper nature of common ties. Rather than essentialising a certain set of inherited attributes, it sees the community as bound by whatever combination of attributes its citizens may share and, importantly, believe or can be convinced that they share (Miller 2000). The community is in this sense ‘imagined’ rather than real, and since no outward markers are given *a priori* significance this approach generally marks a turn towards people’s goals, beliefs and feelings.

Without prizing any one conception of cultural commonality, such a perspective seems to posit a level of homogeneity either rather unrealistic for today’s Europe or, were one to take it seriously, repressive of those who do not easily conform to it. There is a danger that those who do not feel a particular cultural affinity with their fellow citizens come to be treated as suspect, and their legitimate presence in the community questioned. The potential for persecution and exclusion seems clear (Parekh, 1995). Even in the ideal case where perceptions of cultural commonality accord perfectly with the extension of citizenship, cultural differences with those outside the community or those temporarily resident may come to be exaggerated in the attempt to make citizens aware of their distinctive ‘identity’. The result may be a potentially dangerous hardening of physical boundaries and, as these acquire a sense of permanence and naturalness, of moral boundaries also.

Moreover, such a perspective can have negative implications for political contestation. Identity of culture risks being taken to entail identity of political ends, with the assumption that where there is cultural consensus there will be widespread agreement on the substantive policies the political community should adopt. One sees this tendency when for instance it is suggested that the divergence of opinion amongst Europeans on how best to respond to global crises, and the failure to agree a common foreign policy, result from the absence of a cultural bond between the populations of Europe (cf. Smith 1992, p.56/71, on the 1990s Balkans crisis). Political adversarialism, rather than the mark of the healthy democracy, becomes that which should fade away once cultural disharmony is removed,

and the conception of citizenship is a demanding but quite passive one, whereby good citizens display the regularity of opinion to which their cultural regularities should dispose them.

A standard counter-argument holds that the presence of a cultural bond is actually what allows political contestation to be pursued to the full, since underlying commonality ensures conflict never quite reaches the point of being destructive. Plausible as this may seem in theory, one wonders whether such contestation is not likely to rely for its animation exactly on those other forms of collective identification (e.g. based on categories of class, or ethnic categories other than those that supposedly define the political community) which are always prone to be suppressed when the talk is of cultural ties. Adversarial debate depends on citizens seeing other groups as people quite different to them: this is, speaking in stereotypes, how the poor may see the rich, or the country-folk may see the town-folk, and arguably it is exactly the sense of otherness which inspires people to mobilise in order to capture the political agenda.

Recognising the problems that result from a monolithic conception of identity, advocates of a cultural bond often emphasise the possibility of multiple identifications and the importance of situation (Miller 2000). There is much talk in the literature of ‘multi-level’, ‘nested’ and ‘cross-cutting’ identities, and even a ‘marble cake’ model has been proposed (Risse 2003). While these moves may seem to relieve the culturalist perspective of its determinism, the result is a perspective so flexible, agential, and instrumental that one wonders what is meant then by ‘identity’ (normally understood as coherence and sameness) and in what sense shared beliefs and memories are shared (Brubaker & Cooper 2000). Are they shared always, or only when agents choose to share them? If the emphasis is on choice, must it be these things that they choose to share? The more cultural identification is pluralised and relativised, the less it can be seen as determining the viability of democratic institutions. Furthermore, the emphasis on perceptions and beliefs, born of the need to avoid reifying particular markers, raises epistemological difficulties concerning how to identify these cognitive phenomena. The danger is then that, faced with uncertainty about the beliefs that bind, one lapses back into essentialism and the predetermination of ends by listing certain cultural features as constitutive of the community (Smith 1992, p.70), thus pre-empting debate over the nature of the common.

The ideal of a *cultural* bond is the clearest example of a maximalist conception of the common, just as the ideal of a *commercial* or *security* bond offers the prime case of a minimalist conception. Both ideals treat the viability of the polity as determined by a pre-political ‘substrate’ (Wagner & Friese 2002), with the emphasis resting on what citizens may be thought to *have* in common rather than on that which they might commit themselves to *placing* in common. A third set of perspectives departs from these by imagining bonds of shared *values and principles*, where these are adopted on the

basis of reasoned deliberation. This opens the space for a more dynamic and reflexive conception of the common, yet the tendency towards a too weakly or too strongly binding set of commitments persists. Such perspectives may be said to oscillate between minimalist and maximalist conceptions of the common.

In the one perspective, which gravitates to the first of these two poles, such values and principles are understood as *universal* in scope – despite their adoption for a particular polity – because they derive from a morality justifiable to all. Historically, the French Declaration on the Rights of Man and the US Constitution can be understood as attempts to define principles of universal appeal sufficient to bind citizens together in an attitude of patriotism towards their political institutions; attempts to constitutionalise human rights and the rule of law might be candidate examples in the context of contemporary Europe. Such a collective bond may be considered minimalist in at least two ways. First, given the conditions of heterogeneity they are intended to overcome, the temptation is to frame these would-be universal values and principles very abstractly indeed, perhaps as little more than a commitment to proceduralism, to ensure their universal appeal. The concern then is that they become of marginal significance in day-to-day affairs, lacking immediacy to citizens and offering little spur to political involvement. Because intended to be compatible with a wide array of political programmes, such values can offer little guidance to specific forms of action, and are therefore likely to be a weak resource with which to mobilise citizens to collective ends. Only in the severest crises, when those values are fundamentally at risk, might citizens be reminded of their common bond.

Second, as sympathetic critics have noted, even if one accepts such values and principles could be formulated sufficiently abstractly such that reasonable objection would be unthinkable, yet not so abstractly as to deprive them of meaning and affective appeal, the political implications might not necessarily be attractive. Taking the argument on its own terms, there is the risk that an appetite amongst citizens for the universal could result in a cosmopolitan distaste for *all* political institutions – except perhaps the global – rather than a strong commitment to one set (Ypi 2008). Ethical universalism seems an insufficient source of motivation for political engagement in a bounded polity, since it seems to preclude a claim to the importance of any one specific site of political action (Markell 2000; Choudhry 2001). Judged as to how far they embody the universal, the political institutions and practices of a neighbouring polity might be deemed more adequate and therefore more enticing as a focus of engagement, as might the activities of deterritorialised actors such as human rights NGOs. Conversely, the need to address the ethical failings of the polity in which citizenship is held by contesting its political agenda would presumably be held no stronger than to address the like failings of *all* the world's polities. Insofar then as universal values and principles were successful in inspiring



allegiance, a weakening of engagement with the political life of the particular polity, either by emigration or a refocusing of attentions, would seem the attendant danger.

This is what leads some to conclude that a bond of shared values and principles would need to be conceived in more *particularist* terms. While arguably one can read the early Habermas as advocating the strong-universalist perspective just described (Markell 2000), it is clear that in his more recent work the principles binding the community are understood to be mediated by particularist interpretation (Habermas 1992; Habermas 2001). Such a move will be especially welcome to anyone who doubts whether even the most abstractly framed values are really as universal as claimed. In this alternative perspective, moral reflection on the experiences of European history may play a special role, as a shared set of post-nationalist values emerges through engagement with the past and acknowledgement of the destructive tendencies of the Westphalian nation-state system. Lest reflection seem too abstract a process, often there is the suggestion that shared values be given tangible form with the creation of a European constitution. Both the legal text itself, but also the experience of drafting, debating and reinterpreting that text in the public sphere, serve to amplify the values held in common, ideally exerting a ‘catalytic effect’ on the consolidation of the polity.

By focusing on the discursive renegotiation of the common, this approach avoids the temptation to settle the debate prematurely in favour of a certain understanding of the universal and points to ongoing public debate. Yet in certain important ways it results in a maximalist conception of the common once more conducive to contestatory politics and active citizenship. While it is through a process of open debate that these values emerge, the parameters within which they should lie are strictly defined in advance: deliberation in the unfolding public sphere is marked by its rationality and should lead ultimately to a rational consensus. The model is therefore vulnerable to one of the criticisms made of deliberative democracy more generally: that it is depoliticising because it has an elitist bias, since it limits the involvement of citizens who are only weakly able to frame their interventions according to prevailing conceptions of what characterises rational debate (Sanders 1997). A disjuncture may then emerge such that certain values achieve consensus at the elite level – aversion to the death penalty, for instance – without these reflecting the achievement of a broader consensus across the citizen body, leaving many citizens (perhaps the majority) only with the options either to adapt or withdraw their consent. Insofar as these values are enshrined in a constitution and protected by judicial means, their interpretation becomes a matter for judges rather than the democratic process, potentially deepening the disjuncture. Even were one to accept the conceptual possibility of a genuine consensus that extended to all Europeans without being a ‘top-down imposition’, one would be strained to imagine the public sphere adequately free of power-political influences and the functional

problems of language diversity such that this ideal consensus could take shape in an inclusive public debate (Grimm 1995).

Moreover, while it is an open question whether shared values sufficiently uncontroversial to be widely accepted would generate an affective response amongst citizens (certainly several advocates of such a bond at the European level seem unwilling to abandon a more mythical understanding of the collective at the national level (Weiler 1999)), those that might achieve such a response could well be politically unattractive. Appealing to emotions of shame and anger, one proposal for a more affective constitutional patriotism (Cronin 2003, p.14), would involve couching much of contemporary politics in the language of morality. This holds problems: if political actors conclude that moralistic arguments appealing to values embodied in a constitution are 'trumps', it encourages them to frame political debates as clashes between right and wrong. This invites the adoption of an unquestioning disposition and a conviction of moral superiority, whereby opposing views are portrayed as 'mad' or 'bad', in turn leading to a hardening of intolerance and the demonisation of opponents. Such features have been noted in the Europe-wide reaction in 2000 to the involvement of Jörg Haider's FPÖ party in Austria's coalition government (Müller 2007; Mouffe 2005). The withdrawal of normal courtesies at the diplomatic level, and a series of demonstrations by ordinary citizens around Europe intended to 'shame' those who voted for Haider, engendered an unattractive mix of expressions of moral superiority on the one side and defensiveness and indignation on the other, both with nationalist undertones. The boundaries of legitimate public debate became narrowed as those in sympathy with his views were positioned as outside the normal political process. Much as one may sympathise with the moral judgement behind it, such a move arguably weakens the political process by increasing the danger of anti-democratic responses.

The conclusion one may take from examining proposals to conceive the European common in terms of shared *values and principles* complements those arrived at previously. No conceptualisation of the collective bond is of such descriptive plausibility that it must be accepted at face value: the political implications of each are an appropriate element in their assessment. By demanding a high degree of regularity and consensus across the citizen body, rather like a *cultural* bond, a thick *values* bond is likely to downgrade the importance of political adversarialism in the life of the political community. Alternatively a formulation in minimalist terms, where that which is shared is universal, is depoliticising in a different way, since it may weaken attachments to the polity and since – like a *security* or a *commercial* bond, though by dissimilar reasoning – it may empty public life of the pursuit of all but the most general shared ends.

## A Political Bond

The question then is how a more *political* bond might be conceived, one which avoids the difficulties associated with the perspectives on the common just examined. A conception of politics which allows for reasonable but fundamental disagreement requires a collective bond inviting some notion of common endeavour whilst being clear on the possibility of a plurality of political goods and some degree of conflict in their pursuit. Some sense of common purpose with other citizens is indispensable, but one need not assume this should be extended to all citizens at all times. Perhaps there is inspiration to be drawn here from agonistic models of democracy, where the potential for persistent disagreement and political struggle tends to be foregrounded (Mouffe 1993). In this perspective, it is precisely because there may be disagreement on how to interpret the most basic values of democracy itself, liberty and equality, that people may be inspired to participate in the political process so as to secure certain objectives and visions. Those defeated in the political contest at a given moment may be motivated to continue their engagement without conceding the superiority (rational or moral) of the position to which they have lost out. To be sure, it may be that the *possibility* of consensus, based not so much on the supposed demands of rationality but on a respectful disposition to ‘hear the other side’ and reach compromise where it can be reached, is something to hold on to for the sake of progressive politics and the avoidance of a tyranny of the majority (Wagner & Karagiannis 2005). But a conceptualisation of the collective bond should treat consensus as a possible achievement rather than a presupposition.

A second and related challenge for formulating a more political conception of the common is to maintain a close link to the substantive problems which political decision-making addresses, enabling ordinary citizens to ‘make sense of’ the political community in terms closely related to their everyday concerns. One wants issues of direct significance to act as shared reference-points for the citizens of the polity, at once attracting their sustained attention and acting as a focal-point for adversarial exchanges. While it may be possible to recast constitutional patriotism in more conflictual terms so as to accommodate deeper political disagreement (cf. the ‘constitutional culture’ described in (Müller 2007, pp.54ff)), ultimately any conceptualisation of the common centred on constitutional values may lack the immediacy required to give citizens a sense of the daily significance of the political community and of the potential importance of developing relationships of solidarity with groups outside the local environment. To focus on substantive problems is not of course to remove values from the equation: they remain embedded in the way problems are articulated and remedies

advocated, and they will often be appealed to explicitly. But when describing the nature of commitment to the life in common, there may be advantages to a vocabulary which is more prosaic.

Some authors, attuned to the possibilities for a problem-oriented approach, have spoken of the EU as a ‘community of shared projects’ in which citizens are bound to one another by their shared or overlapping political objectives (Nicolaidis 2001, 2004; Nicolaidis & Lacroix, 2003). The suggestion is that goals such as protection of the environment, the eradication of world poverty and the pursuit of market integration can act as a basis for collective endeavour (Nicolaidis 2001, p.473). This intuition seems correct, though a number of points should be remembered. First, there may be very few (if any) tasks to which all in the political community are willing to subscribe, and even where consensus seems apparent this may mask the need to confront those within the community who obstruct their fulfilment. One needs to be particularly sensitive therefore to how the concern with a given set of substantive problems may be shared by some but not all, perhaps due to divergent interpretations of basic ideas of freedom, justice and equality, and to how one might conceptualise the fact that the pursuit of their remedy may proceed in adversarial opposition to others within the political community. Second, and relatedly, these political objectives need to be open to ongoing reassessment: just as one should not suppose, for instance, that ‘security interests’ are sufficiently unambiguous to be made the basis for a collective bond, so one should avoid the suggestion that the pursuit of military security could be singled out as the predominant justification for a European polity (Morgan 2005). Such goals need to be open to dissent and reappraisal.

Drawing on these cues allows us to imagine, in several stages, how a political bond might look. At its core would be the myriad substantive problems which provoke a sense of injustice and the perceived need for remedy amongst sections of the citizen body. This *political common*, as one might term it, could be defined (postponing for a moment its specifically European elements) as *the assumed existence by members of the collective of important common problems in need of address*. One thinks here of all the sorts of problem which ordinary citizens may be inclined to articulate as matters of concern – economic problems, problems to do with anti-social and criminal behaviour, problems to do with inter-cultural relations, environmental problems, and so on. In contrast to interest-based approaches, one need not take a position on the ontological status of these (whether or not such problems are ‘real’), for it is their appraisal and interpretation which is important. They would be ‘common’ insofar as they are treated by those who articulate them as shared with others, as liable to affect ‘people like us’ rather than just ‘me’, where the ‘we’ may differ according to the problem in question. They would not be common in the sense of there being a consensus that every such problem affects everyone alike in the political community: on the contrary, a we-they dynamic would be

involved, such that it is assumed that there are opponents to ‘people like us’ living within the political community whose position on these problems is quite different, or who may indeed be generative of them. Rather than binding all citizens to one another in an image of unity, the problems of the political common would pit some against others in a web of allegiances and conflicts.

One can suppose that a rich political common composed of diverse kinds of problem would be conducive to preserving the integrity of the community. If opponents are constructed in relation to problems, and there is a plurality of problem ‘domains’, then there will be a plurality of we-they formulations rather than a single axis of confrontation. Different kinds of problem will provoke different ways of formulating opponents, and any one formulation will relate only to a subset of the problems of the common, thus constraining the likelihood that the community fragments into discrete adversarial groups who choose to separate from each other. Those positioned as opponents on economic problems, for instance, might nonetheless be ‘people like us’ as regards matters of law and order, or those positioned as opponents concerning certain cultural practices (e.g. the deployment of religious symbols) might be treated as sharing nevertheless the same economic and environmental problems as ‘us’. The feasibility of pointing to a particular section of the citizen body and saying ‘we have nothing in common with them’ would be reduced by the multiplicity of resources for collective positioning. Thus in substitution for the idea of an all-embracing ‘we’ such as ‘the nation’ or ‘the community’, one would envisage numerous lines of intersection between multiple, interdependent constituencies (Connolly 1995, pp.xix-xx). It would be one of the roles of organised political actors to give shape to these constituencies and articulate new ones by problematising new aspects of the social world and thereby expanding the political common.

In order to foster a collective bond appropriate to a polity like the EU, the acts of collective positioning thus inspired would probably need to fulfil two conditions. Firstly, as the basis for a transnational demos, one would want those ‘people like us’ who are affected by the problems in question – call them the *political subjects* – to be conceived not just as limited to people in ‘our country’. Treating the problems as purely domestic to individual member-states would provide little basis for a wider collective bond, and while it might be valid for a subset of problems to be treated this way, this could not be the case for all. Instead one would want to see the assumption that there are *counterparts* to ‘us’ in other EU countries, i.e. people confronted with the same problems. Their designation would depend on the problems in question – class-based categories might be invoked with regard to economic problems, other social categories for other domains. The emphasis would not be on problems affecting ‘Europeans’ as such, in broad undifferentiated terms, since this would imply a strong level of consensus and would downplay the agonistic dimension, but there would need to be some sense that there are groups in other member-states who constitute ‘people like us’. The bond

between *subjects* and *counterparts* would be based on the sense of shared predicament, the recognition that their situation is alike. It would – at least initially – amount to something less than active solidarity across borders, although it contributes a perspective on how such solidarity might emerge (Offe 2003). Yet likewise it would entail rather more than a general sense of common humanity: to the extent that others share in ‘our’ problems, ‘we’ take interest in their experiences because through the practice of comparison there may be something to be learned, and because occasionally it may be desirable to seek joint political action in remedy of these problems.

This positioning of the *subjects* and their *counterparts* would have to be coupled with a basic level of tolerance towards those assumed to be *opponents*. While, if one holds that conflict is constitutive of the political, a ‘we-they’ dynamic of some kind is always present or liable to emerge, still this would have to be agonistic rather than antagonistic: opponents would have to be treated as adversaries to be convinced or defeated, rather than enemies to be destroyed or banished from the community (Mouffe 2005, p.20). They would need to be regarded as legitimate sharers of ‘our space’, even if much disliked. In the European context, for example, those population groups reliant on EU subsidies to support rural, agrarian economies would have to be acknowledged by their opponents as legitimate partners in dispute, even if their conversion to financially less reliant industrial or service-based economies were sought. While the subjects/counterparts and their opponents would have little in common other than their conflicts and their membership in the community – there is no overarching ‘identity’ that links them, nor a common set of values beyond the basic ones of liberty and equality – their adversarialism would have to stop short of the break-up of the community. The struggle would have to be treated as ongoing. One can imagine that the avoidance of nation-based categories to demarcate opponents would be advantageous, since it would encourage other EU countries to be treated not so much as undifferentiated wholes or unitary actors, each with discrete interests and ways of life, but as *environments* in which events unfold, and where counterparts may therefore be sought. Ultimately however the required attitude is not something for which one could give conclusive grounds – opponents would be accepted not because they bear a particular attribute linking ‘them’ to ‘us’, but simply because, to speak with Wittgenstein, ‘this is what we do’ (Wittgenstein 1976, §217). Nurturing this attitude would be a role for civic education. Again, that acts of collective positioning would be made according to *problems*, with multiple sets of problems at stake, would perhaps make easier the task of fostering tolerance and reciprocal engagement, since the plurality of domains would mean that those seen as opponents with regard to one set of problems might be seen as ‘people like us’ in connection to another.

A political bond would be completed by the assumption that seeking to address these problems through common institutions constitutes a worthwhile endeavour. The sense of shared predicament

before common problems would have to be linked in other words to belief in the merit of a collective *political project* to address them. This would involve, first, that they be treated as problems which can be tackled, rather than just ‘facts of life’, and tackled in organised collective terms rather than just an *ad hoc* personal basis. Were there no sense of their possible remedy, such problems would as likely inspire a retreat into the private realm as a concern for collective action, and were they assumed to be resolvable on a personal basis by individual adaptation there would be no reason to make political claims which attempted to influence decision-making. Only if they were seen as requiring *collective* address would these problems have an integrative force. Second, to constitute a collective bond supportive of a European polity there would have to be the assumption that the nation-state cannot alone provide the means to address all these problems adequately, but that some (though by no means all) require Europe-wide approaches to be successfully tackled. Such a perception would probably be rooted in taken-for-granted understandings of the nature of such problems, including assumptions about their transnational origins and effects, combined perhaps with the sense that they are not so global in scope as to resist address at a European level. Europe-wide measures would have to ‘make sense’ in principle, even if the Brussels institutions in their current form, and the policy-making they have given rise to, were assumed to be deficient in some way. In this way European-level political institutions would become natural reference-points in the agonistic encounter between subjects and adversaries, with each ‘we’ seeking to gain influence over these institutions’ agenda so as to advance their political objectives.

Admittedly, this extension of political contestation to the European level would take place within the context of existing popular attachments to the political institutions of member-states. Yet there seems no reason in principle why it should entail the abandonment of those attachments. As long as there remain certain domains of problem for which political action at a continental level is deemed unnecessary, more local approaches would retain appeal. Furthermore, engagement with European institutions might be pursued precisely so as to enhance the ability to influence state-level decision-making, rendering the political struggle complementary across multiple venues. Of course, the problem of divided allegiances *might* arise if citizens saw their attachment to national institutions and practices not in political but cultural terms: if, for instance, they regarded them not so much as familiar arenas in which to advance a political project, but as the unique means by which ‘our’ cultural community represents and governs itself. A strong *cultural bond* at the member-state (or sub-state) level would undoubtedly raise challenges for this vision. But the prospect of persistent nationalism is challenging for *any* conceptualisation of the European common, because it is a challenge to the very idea of a European polity. To the extent that its persistence is a realistic prospect (and widespread talk of a ‘crisis of national identity’ does question this), the way to moderate it is not by an appeal to

material interests, wider cultural attributes, or shared values and principles, but through the elaboration of a political language for transnational collective positioning of the kind described.

A political bond provides a perspective on the common distinctive from those considered in the preceding section. It conceives members of the collective as tied to one another by the reciprocal concern that a sense of shared predicament may generate. Such citizens, rather than atomised, have a web of links extending outward towards others. Yet towards those with whom ‘we’ do not share problems there is no particular bond other than a common focus of attention (on those things widely held to be problematic) and mutual acceptance as members of the same political community. There is no generalised ‘sense of belonging together’ (Mason 2000), and no presumption of consensus therefore: indeed, the absence of consensus and the consequent desire to control aspects of the political agenda are what provide the impetus to come together. Nor does this conceptualisation presume coherence across issue-areas: indeed, a certain irregularity may usefully soften the symbolic boundaries which are constructed towards the world outside the polity. By conceptualising the common in this way, one seems to arrive at attractive implications for the nature of citizenship. A political bond calls for politicising citizens such that they are inclined to see a substantial body of matters of common concern, widening the context within which they set these problems such that transnational allegiances may develop, and building up their faith in the worth of a collective political project to address them. It does not assume a high degree of political participation – there is no presumed consensus on the value of active citizenship – yet it may foster the conditions in which participation is deemed attractive.

### Towards a Political Bond

It would be unrealistic to imagine that such a bond already exists amongst European citizens: the idea has a critical edge intended to suggest how citizenship might develop. It may be, to a degree, that some of the basic conditions for a political bond are discernible in contemporary practices. A readiness to identify problems of common concern, and to set some of these in a transnational context, is evident when one looks at everyday patterns of discourse on matters of political relevance (Author, forthcoming). Whether or not one wants to speak of an emerging European public sphere, trends in the national news media seem to point towards further coverage of, and comparison with, political issues in other European countries (Risse 2007). But a wider scepticism about what can be achieved through political agency to address matters of common concern may need to be challenged and



undermined if a political rationale for the EU polity is to find acceptance. To a large extent a political bond remains to be constructed: it is more a diagnostic or sensitising idea than an existing empirical phenomenon.

The EU's institutional regime may have some role to play in facilitating its emergence, albeit a restricted one. Adopting this political perspective on the common does not predetermine the type of institutional configuration towards which the EU should tend, but it does perhaps point towards certain regime types over others. If one imagines a plurality of allegiances inspired by different sets of problems, and if one sees it as normatively attractive to seek to widen these allegiances and multiply the problems appraised, then one will want to avoid a constitutional settlement which allocates on a fixed basis certain (or all) problem-areas to decision-making and political contestation only at national or European level. If such a separation of powers favoured institutions at a European level, thus establishing a new political centre, this would risk undermining political debate and attachments to institutions at the state level (or simply a rejection of the European polity); if it favoured institutions at the state level then it would reduce the plausibility of pursuing a political project at the European level. For the same reason, if one wishes to see emphasised the EU polity's potential relevance to the problems of ordinary citizens, one will want to be sure that its institutions are receptive to public pressure, and that the role of actors outside the democratic process is kept to a minimum.

Of the various visions to be found in the literature on EU regimes, one is likely for these reasons to prefer those which look to a polycentric rather than centred Europe (Fabbrini 2005; Bellamy 1999, 2001), and which prize political over legal constitutionalism (Bellamy 2007; Nicolaïdis 2001). A centred system generally implies a stable division of institutional competences ordered according to a hierarchical principle, and while some degree of flexibility may be achieved by periodic amendment, this is likely to remain a top-down process. In a polycentric regime, by contrast, powers are dispersed horizontally across institutional actors such that they exist in relations of balance, with no single one at either national or European level holding supreme authority. Meaningful political contestation may thus be widely extended, and the system should be responsive to changing power configurations. The advantage of a political-constitutionalist regime meanwhile is that it makes the identification of good substantive outcomes predominantly a matter for democratic processes. The possibilities for contestation are rather stronger if the functioning political system is itself understood as the constitutional basis of the polity than if certain desired outcomes have been enshrined as rights and made a matter for judicial interpretation. Furthermore, a sense of shared predicament with other Europeans can then be developed gradually in the unfolding political process rather than proclaimed (and perhaps rejected) at a decisive constitutional moment.

One of the most developed visions of a multifocal regime for the EU, and one which makes no special goal to preserve cultural bonds at the national level (contra e.g. (Weiler 2001; MacCormick 1999), sees it as an emerging ‘directly-deliberative polyarchy’. In this form of government, certain powers are granted to sub-units of the polity so as to give greater voice and freedom to local actors, while enlarging their frame of reference and the knowledge resources of the wider polity by fostering practices of comparison between them. Local initiatives inform, but are also disciplined by, objectives set at the European level (Gerstenberg & Sabel 2002; Cohen & Sabel 2003). An institutional regime based on such principles could well be conducive to a political bond, since transnational comparisons, if widely publicised, could provide a point of mediation between the world of daily experience and the broader life of the European polity, encouraging the idea that other EU member-states represent environments featuring those with whom problems are shared and with whom a common framework for the pursuit of remedies is needed. It could provide the basis for various forms of collective action, centred on national parliaments, the European institutions, or in the form of extra-parliamentary protests and campaigns, and intended to produce European-level initiatives or simply to widen the frame of reference for state-level initiatives.

Admittedly, some of these accounts may be too quick to celebrate the governance practices of today’s EU such as ‘comitology’ and the OMC (Sabel & Zeitlin 2007). Such mechanisms are problematic both because they are exceptionally complex, reducing their potential resonance to all but the experts, and because they rely on some rather technocratic ideas (Tsakatika 2007). When notions of ‘best practice’ are taken to imply that policies may be right or wrong, regardless of the context of their application, or when the criteria used for comparisons of ‘performance’ are unproblematised such that they weigh consistently in favour of a narrow range of practices, then the result is a depoliticising tendency. Further, when comparisons are presented such that they set sub-units of the polity (e.g. member-states) in competition with one another, they may be subversive of a sense of the collective. If a polycentric regime of this kind is to enable the emergence of a political bond, it requires that political objectives set at the European level be susceptible to political contestation – with a clear role here for the European Parliament – and that their further elaboration within member-states be susceptible to contestation at the state or sub-state level. It requires furthermore that the basic procedures by which policies are judged, though simplified where possible, remain open to revision.

Ultimately, however, a political bond will not be achieved solely through institutional design. Institutions can promote but they cannot themselves establish the sense of the common which may be the condition of their viability. This is particularly so if one wants to see emphasised the political rationale for the polity, which requires challenging popular expectations about the limitations of political agency, something which institutions themselves are ill-equipped to do. It is citizens

themselves who must lead other citizens in furthering a political bond. This is likely to depend upon political movements ‘from below’ being able to engage people with a stronger sense of the comparable experiences of citizens in other EU countries, and with new ideas about what can be achieved through collective action. It is a question of remaking the common sense, and depends upon political will.

## Conclusion

The emergence of a new polity, its ambiguities of form notwithstanding, provides the opportunity to reconsider some fundamental conceptual questions of political theory, amongst them the nature of the common. The current EU polity bears little resemblance to a nation-state, and the trajectory of its development may lead to a quite novel political arrangement, yet how one responds to these basic questions says much about which contemporary political trends in nation-state politics one approves of and wishes to see replicated at a transnational level. Rather than mainly empirical, how one defines a European demos is an ideological matter, bound up in broader questions of the health of contemporary democracy. It is in the context of wider developments such as the ongoing marginalisation of the principle of democratic control that one should reflect on the common in Europe.

The suggestion has been that the main existing approaches to this question either conceive of a quite minimal degree of commonality amongst citizens or they overplay the degree of regularity which is necessary, moves both depoliticising in their consequences. By minimising the sense of common purpose amongst citizens one is liable to diminish the expectation and possibility of exercising democratic control over matters of common concern; conversely, by overstating the degree of common purpose one may narrow the sphere of reasonable disagreement and circumvent some of the very debates which it is the peculiar virtue of democracy to make possible. Consequently, one may want to formulate a more explicitly political conception of the common, something the paper has tried to do.

Even allowing for the ideological character of the debate, it may seem counterintuitive to propose a political bond in an age many see as characterised by increasing political scepticism and the hollowing of democracy as a political form. A wide range of trends negative to lively and purposeful politics have been observed, including the decline of ideological cleavages, the weakening of parties, the supposed disengagement of non-elites, the trivialisation of the news media, and the withering of practices of collective solidarity and organised bargaining (Mair 2006). From this perspective, meaningful politics at the national level is under assault from all sides, and to propose a politics-based bond for a newly emerging polity is to be severely out of tune with the times. Insofar as minimalist

and maximalist perspectives on the common are depoliticising in their implications, they may seem to resonate rather better with the facts on the ground.

The danger with such arguments is that one takes them too far. Repeated emphasis on political disaffection can itself be depoliticising, for if one declares ordinary citizens too politically ignorant or apathetic to articulate matters of common concern, the retreat of party elites into themselves and the trivialisation of the news media will quickly seem legitimate responses. In the face of such developments, the disengagement of citizens becomes likely. For now, not least following an 85% turnout in the 2007 French presidential election, it seems premature to dismiss the feasibility of popular mobilisation for political ends. Certainly, a political conception of the common gains further plausibility if certain empirical factors are confronted: increasing the responsiveness of EU institutions to multiple sources of public pressure so that policy ideas can be thoroughly contested, and fostering more widely the conviction that substantive political problems can be addressed at a European level, are two developments that would support this perspective. But it is such changes which become more imaginable when one adopts a political conception of the common.

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