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EU critique beyond Euroscepticism and progressive stories: Introduction to the special issue

Wolf J. Schünemann (wolf.schuenemann@uni-hildesheim.de)
Hildesheim University, Germany
Marlon Barbehön (marlon.barbehoen@ipw.uni-heidelberg.de)
Heidelberg University, Germany

Critical stances towards the EU have long been marginalized. In the political realm, they have been, and still frequently are, depicted as the business of "Eurosceptics" who are fundamentally questioning an established normative consensus. In the academic realm, integration theory somewhat similarly builds on "stories of progress" which construct a simplistic and largely uncritical history of European integration. In this introduction to the special issue, we argue that these tendencies do more harm than good, as they stand in the way of meaningful investigations of the diversity, the ambivalences, the symbolic underpinnings and the socio-political functions of EU critique. We picture how and with what consequences EU critique is typically delineated as a marginal phenomenon, and we sketch alternative perspectives based on an idea of EU critique as a field of knowledge that emerges in discourse and practice. Ultimately, both the introduction and the papers in this special issue make the case for freeing EU critique from its outside position in order to get a more nuanced picture of European integration and the current challenges it faces.

Keywords: EU critique, Euroscepticism, Politicization, Knowledge, Discourse, Practice

1. Introduction: The other side of EU discourse

This special issue is on EU critique. In many senses, the critique of the European Union is not at the centre neither of EU politics nor of EU studies. It at least never has been. This is not to say that European integration has not always experienced fervent criticism throughout European societies. Rather, critical stances towards the EU for long have not been recognized as integral part of democratic politics but have been marginalized as the business of "the others". This has to do with the fact that criticizing the EU has easily been understood and/or depicted by many as a questioning of the overall integration consensus established after Second World War in continental Europe, upheld over the decades and reaching its peak in the 1990s (Hooghe & Marks, 2018, 114). If critical attitudes towards EU integration have been articulated, these voices came from what was observed as "the margins" of the political spectrum, with actors risking to be located at "the extremes" due to their counter-speech. In contrast, so-called "mainstream" parties in the "centre" of the political spectrum mostly took and defended an overall pro-European stance. This constellation holds true for most EU member countries – although with telling exceptions such as the UK where a much more critical discourse on EU issues has always been prevalent (Jachtenfuchs et al., 1998; Teubert, 2008; Risse, 2010).

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As to the academic side, and EU studies in particular, there is a similar picture to be drawn. In line with fundamental assumptions of integration theory (mostly neo-functionalism), research typically relies on an original understanding of EU integration as a principally unpolitical issue, driven by élites, and allowed for by a permissive consensus (Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970) at the public level. Functionalist accounts adhere to progressive stories of EU development, which made them struggle in explaining setbacks and failure (Börzel & Risse, 2018). As Michael Zürn correctly states, other theoretical accounts such as Majone's "regulatory state" or Moravcsik's Liberal Intergovernmentalism not only neglected public contestation in their models of EU integration, they even considered "any democratization of this process […] as counter-productive" (Zürn, 2019, 902). However, in the 1990s, when economic integration was more and more flanked with political integration and when popular concerns thwarted integration dynamics, EU critique and the actors behind it more and more became objects of study. They were classified and somewhat pathologized under the umbrella term of Euroscepticism (Taggart, 1998). More recently, with undeniable crises of the integration process putting long held certainties into question, EU studies have turned to processes of "politicization" of EU politics (Statham & Trenz, 2013). While from a perspective of democratic politics politicization does not sound negative, prominent accounts in EU studies take it as a reason for stagnation or erosion of the European project, even more so as it helped so-called Eurosceptics to spread their messages, to gain seats in representative bodies and to reach the "mainstream" of party politics in many EU countries.

In contrast to these accounts, we start out from the conception of critique and conflict as constitutive elements of political order in general and democracy in particular (Mouffe, 1999; Rancière, 2002; see also Jörke, 2011). The possibility to articulate discontent and to challenge established convictions – within a certain spectrum (see section 5 below) – is at the heart of democratic rule. Moreover, as a normative reference point, democracy is both inherently ambiguous and never entirely realizable. The question how to realize democratic principles in institutions and procedures is thus necessarily controversial and could never be ultimately settled. Thus, instead of regarding EU critique as somewhat abnormal and risky, we assume that critical attitudes, and especially counter-narratives and practices in respect to EU politics, are a constitutive part of the game and have always existed (Schünemann, 2020, forthcoming). If they have not been expressed in certain discourses in the past, and maybe still are not in the present, this has to do with power/knowledge constellations. This is not only true for political discourse but also for the academic realm which is likewise structured by stocks of knowledge that enable certain critical perspectives while pushing back potential others. Exactly such constellations are to be examined by the papers in this special issue. The works included deal with the political and the scholarly discourse alike as they both seem intertwined when it comes to critique as the other – the less illuminated – side of EU discourse.

This introduction proceeds as follows: First, we sketch dominant discourses on the EU in politics and academia with a focus on critique as their common blind spot or irritating event. Then, second, we critically discuss the term Euroscepticism as the dominant conceptual lens through which EU critique is being observed and assessed. Third, we reflect on the conception of knowledge in EU studies and confront it with a social-constructivist conception in order to derive the relevance of discourse and practice for the study of EU critique. Fourth, we explicate how EU critique could be approached in a meaningful way, both with regard to the political and the academic sphere. Finally, we give a short overview of the papers included in the special issue.

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2. From permissive consensus to politicization

The story of European integration has predominantly been told as a progressive story. This is certainly true for pro-European, mainstream political rhetoric in most of EU member states. It is also true for the academic discourse across disciplines which also depicted the integration project as a peace project, a guarantor of political stability and economic prosperity for all its peoples. This is what Mark Gilbert described as the progressive story of EU integration (Gilbert, 2008). It can be conceived as the master narrative of a dominant discourse that both resulted from, and exerted power on, political actors and scholars in EU studies across the continent. The firm belief that the EU "has the future on its side" (ibid., 659) and the neo-functionalist idea of self-reinforcing dynamics towards an ever closer union exerted large influence, both in political and academic discussions. In the political realm, critique of EU politics has easily been interpreted as critique of the integration project as such. Actors expressing critique risked to be excluded from the mainstream and to be flagged as Eurosceptics (Sinnott et al., 2009; Taggart, 1998), which semantically more or less (hard vs. soft Euroscepticism) coincided with being backward-looking, old-fashioned, nationalist, affective and irrational. In the academic debate, there has been, and still is, the tendency to associate EU critique and resistance towards EU reform with irrational attitudes or a lack of knowledge, instead of seeing it as a legitimate and "natural" articulation of political contestation (Sinnott et al., 2009).

During the last decade, however, this dominant discourse has considerably lost ground. From one crisis of the European project to the next, "from the euro to the Schengen crises" (Börzel & Risse, 2018), voices and stories that openly question EU integration have become much louder. With the so-called permissive consensus vanished, more recently the EU has to face abounding critique particularly in the context of the multiple crises in the last decade. In this vein, so-called Euroscepticism finally entered the manifestos and practices of some mainstream actors across Europe (Brack & Startin, 2015).

Scholars of EU politics have consequently turned to politicization (Beichelt, 2010; Grande & Hutter, 2016; Statham & Trenz, 2013; Trenz & Wilde, 2009; Zürn, 2006). It is commonly defined "as the process through which European integration has become the subject of public discussion, debate, and contestation" (Schmidt, 2019, 1018). Politicization is normally described to happen on three dimensions: 1) the public salience of EU issues increases, 2) more actors get included in political debates on EU issues, and 3) conflict becomes increasingly polarized (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019, 999). Regarding its theoretical foundation, studies of politicization are mostly linked to the perspective of post-functionalism in integration theory. In extending the repertoire of integration theories, Hooghe and Marks had introduced so-called post-functionalism in reaction to the increased public resistance against the European project as expressed in a row of failed treaty referendums in the early 2000s (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Refraining from the neo-functionalists' permissive consensus, the authors argue that one could observe an increasing "constraining dissensus" that hampers the integration process (see also Down & Wilson, 2008). While post-functionalism certainly makes a new and necessary offer for the theoretical explanation of stagnation or even spill-backs of EU integration, it perpetuates conventional views on EU critique.

First, it upholds a holistic and dichotomic conception of EU critique in the sense that attitudes towards the EU are said to generally speak either for or against European integration. This is underscored by an extended cleavage approach that identifies "a new divide" within European societies. Accordingly, in the respective literature party competition is mapped along the so-called GAL/TAN cleavage (Börzel & Risse, 2018; Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). This is conceived as a transnational cleavage describing poles on a cultural dimension between GAL, which stands for green/alternative/libertarian, and TAN, which means tradition/authority/nation. The cleavage approach does not leave much

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room for differentiated understandings of how criticism of particular EU politics might be integrated into other political stances and positions. Conversely, it also stands in the way of investigating instances of critique within political positions that are typically classified as Europhile, for instance the transnational movement *Pulse of Europe* which does not only make the case for Europe, but which also carries a critique of a European polity observed as remote and bureaucratic.

Second, there is a clear tendency towards a rationalistic submission of what could be observed as politicization under the strategic choices of political actors in a bipolar constellation. While from this perspective it always has been, and still is, a perfectly rational behaviour of pro-European mainstream parties to de-politicize EU issues in public debates, Eurosceptic parties are seen as the main drivers of politicization as they are about to profit from it (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019, 1000). In consequence, post-functionalism sticks to a bipolar structuration of how EU politics are discussed, with so-called Eurosceptics as the known suspects adhering to TAN values and engaging in a politicization that stands against integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2008; Scharpf, 2009). This gives little room for more nuanced notions of EU critique and for positive assessments of politicization in the context of EU politics (Beichelt, 2010). As Michael Zürn correctly describes, such an understanding of politicization as a threat to integration stands in contrast to normative conceptions of politicization at the national and also the global level:

> *"Whereas European Union (EU) studies in general terms mainly ask about the disintegrative effects of politicization […] the study of de-politicization in the national context and of politicization of international institutions more often emphasizes the normatively positive aspects of increased mobilization" (Zürn, 2019, 978).*

Instead of considering politicization as "a resource utilized as part of regular politics", it is, as Zürn further argues, mostly regarded as "anti-systemic force" (ibid., 984). This preoccupation has also been criticized from a public sphere perspective (Statham & Trenz, 2015).

3. Naming a pathology: Euroscepticism

Speaking of EU critique, instead of Euroscepticism as the much more prevalent term in EU studies, is a deliberate choice of this special issue. We think that the notion of Euroscepticism is associated with many of the central presuppositions (dichotomisation of attitudes towards the EU, rationalistic submission under the strategic choice of actors) that we try to avoid for this collection. In our view, the success of the neologism (sui generis term) can at least partly be explained by its compatibility with the master discourse of EU integration identified above. As it is a fundamental goal of this special issue to deconstruct the master discourse, the very term would stand in our way. To be sure, this move is not meant to actively justify any kind of (EU) critique as a valuable contribution to public discourse. Rather, it allows us to draw a more nuanced picture of the different facets and functions of critical stances, instead of classifying them right from the start on the basis of concepts which are deeply entangled with evaluative connotations.

True, the concept of Euroscepticism might give more room for differentiation as it seems from our critical discussion so far. Following Taggart (1998), researchers of political attitudes active in this field have distinguished between "hard" (exit from the EU) and "soft" Eurosceptics (yes to Europe, but not in its actual form). Nevertheless, this differentiation still leads to a depiction of EU critique as a sort of pathology, which corresponds to the master discourse. As both positions towards the EU are captured under the umbrella term of Euroscepticism, they appear as two variants of a single overarching phenomenon. It is important to recognize that such "scientific" classifications are performative in that they not only denote a phenomenon "out there" but make it specifically available in the first place. Moreover, the notion of Euroscepticism and its variants still facilitate a polarized

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calibration of the political debate, either for or against. This holds particular true for the soft version of Euroscepticism. While the expression of hard Euroscepticism might make sense in that such critics actually turn against the integration project and seek to leave or dissolve the EU, the soft version allows for general support for the system as such with deviant approaches to institutional development, certain EU policies or governing rationales ("EU as a market project", "austerity" etc.).

What seems problematic here is related to the term's quality as neologism or sui generis term, leading to the fact that it is only applicable to the EU polity and EU politics. In order to illustrate the problem emerging here, an admittedly imperfect analogy might be in order. Imagine the existence of the term *German-sceptic* (not used so far), and that it would not only be used for so-called "Reichsbürger" and other people who deny the very existence of the polity, but also for people that utter their concern and criticism about institutional reforms, certain policies or overarching orientations of governing in the domestic realm. One would probably not accept such a kind of classification that would potentially serve strategies of de-politicization. This again is in line with Zürn's observation mentioned above that (de-)politicization is differently discussed at the EU and at the national level. While politicization might be viewed critically in the EU context and de-politicization is seen as a success strategy for the sake of integration goals, this is completely reversed on the national level.

From this perspective, instead of further pathologizing EU critique as the strategically motivated arguments of Eurosceptics, it should be perceived and studied as a normal appearance of counter-discourse in democratic politics (see below). A similar observation could be made with regard to the currently spreading research on populism, a phenomenon which is also regularly depicted as something alien to democratic rule (e.g. Urbinati, 2014). In contrast, a more nuanced perspective is able to reveal that populist strategies have always existed as they are inherent to democracy and the institutionalization of the difference between the ruling and the ruled. The question then is why a populist rhetoric peaks in certain historical phases and how we could differentiate between problematic, acceptable and even desirable forms (cf. Möller, 2017). As to European integration and the existential dangers it faces in our days, it seems a valuable endeavour to examine more closely the different threads and forms of EU critique instead of banning them into the isolation of Euroscepticism.

4. Knowledge and EU critique

Even before the explicit turn to politicization, the phenomenon of EU critique had been unavoidable for analysts of EU referendums, as these offered more and more opportunities to national publics for open debate on EU issues (Barbehön & Schünemann, 2018; Schünemann, 2014, 2017, 2018). More specifically, referendums served as prime situations to express critique on the European project or particular policies. When explaining contestation that had led to failure in referendums and thus irritating halts of EU integration, knowledge and reason have regularly and remarkably served as core variables in many models. However, both "variables" are utilized ex negativo because it is the lack of knowledge or reason that is often taken as responsible factor for the rejection of an EU proposal in a national referendum. Or to put the message of this branch of research simple: Whatever people rejecting a treaty reform expressed in a referendum, it was certainly not the expression of a well-informed, well-reasoned choice on the issue. Instead, a no vote in a referendum on Europe is expected to be driven by affection and facilitated by a lack of knowledge and information (Hobolt, 2009, 48–53; Laffan & O'Mahony, 2008, 263–264; LeDuc, 2002, 727). The argument is linked to the inversed cognitive mobilization hypothesis according to which more knowledge on EU issues would produce more support for EU integration (Lubbers, 2008, 64; Marsh, 2010, 188; Sinnott et al., 2009, 19).

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From a social-constructivist perspective, to which the idea for this special issue adheres to, any positivist knowledge hypothesis has to be challenged on fundamental grounds. Firstly, the supposed causal mechanism between knowledge and EU support suffers from an unresolvable endogeneity problem. The assumption that more knowledge about the EU would lead to more support for European integration is highly contestable and has not been supported by unambiguous evidence so far. Indeed, the relation could be exactly the other way around (Mößner, 2009). Secondly, a lack-of-knowledge assumption does not make sense to us as political debates are necessarily embedded in complex power/knowledge relations (Foucault, 1990), meaning that there is always knowledge circulating in a given society and social communication. Its availability is influenced by power effects. For a referendum campaign, it is not really the question, then, *if* but rather *what* knowledge is present and processed in a given society (Schünemann, 2018).

We would thus argue that it is not the supposed lack of knowledge that serves as explanation for EU critique, but that it is the ubiquity and diversity of EU critique itself that is central for getting a better and differentiated understanding of the significance of EU contestation. By bringing together the notion of knowledge with EU critique, we do not aim to causally explain manifestations of the latter on the basis of the former. Rather, we assume that EU critique is itself a field of knowledge which is both the precondition for and the result of discourses and practices. For instance, the result of the Brexit referendum could be explained, to a certain extent, by drawing on the prevalence of misinformation in the election campaign and a lack of knowledge on the part of the electorate. However, such an account would tell little about why these practices obviously appealed to large parts of the population. For that, a social-constructivist perspective is needed in order to trace the deeply embedded concerns within British society regarding supranational integration (cf. Jachtenfuchs et al., 1998; Teubert, 2008; Risse, 2010). The same holds true for the field of EU studies which also features specific orders of knowledge that allows for certain criticisms while disqualifying others. In order to explore and reconstruct the knowledge orders behind (the absence of) instances of EU critique, we thus have to turn towards discourses and practices of EU critique at different levels and in different social spheres.

5. Investigating and articulating critique

To further differentiate what it means to approach EU critique in a way that aligns to the above considerations, we can discern two different directions of analysis. First, one can investigate discourses and practices of EU critique and how they constitute a distinct field of knowledge (see the paper by Roch). On the one hand, this corresponds with the literatures on Euroscepticism and on the politicization of EU politics. On the other hand, however, we suggest refraining from these concepts as they carry evaluative connotations which split the political realm into a “normal” and a “pathological” sphere. Instead, we argue to treat critique and contestation as constitutive aspects of politics in general and democratic rule in particular. We think that such a perspective is required since today EU critique could no longer be brushed aside by claiming that it is the exclusive business of “the others”. Rather, criticizing the EU is deeply embedded in how societies talk about Europe and EU integration. At the same time, the ubiquity of anti-EU sentiment might not only be negative, as it may also indicate a greater maturity of the EU political system. EU critique could also be seen as an “appropriation” of European politics (Beichelt, 2010) which also features a positive side, as public debate is exactly where EU critique belongs. Moreover, from the viewpoint of democratic theory (cf. Jörke, 2011), articulating critique is not external to, but a constitutive part of democracy itself. Democratic rule has to incorporate certain possibilities to voice discontent and objection, and there has to be room for meaningful debate about such objections.

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This in turn raises the question of how EU critique can be approached, categorized and qualified. By refraining from evaluative notions like Euroscepticism, we do not intend to argue for the legitimacy and value of *any* kind of critique. Rather, certain minimum standards have to be fulfilled in order for a critique to appear as legitimate. It is of course neither possible nor desirable to define such criteria once and for all, as they vary with conceptions of democratic rule. However, a *certain* definition is necessary. This holds also true for radical democratic perspectives informed by constructivist and anti-foundationalist ontologies which explicitly build on the centrality of critique: on the one hand, they stress the importance of conflict and dissonance due to the radical contingency of the world, while, on the other hand, they argue that conflict, despite the absence of any ultimate grounding, has to be carried out not among enemies but among opponents that acknowledge each other as legitimate and equal voices (Mouffe, 1999, 2005; Rancière, 2002). It is thus important to stress that our more open take on EU critique should not be misunderstood as an attempt to authorize and justify critical voices per se. Rather, the aim is to acknowledge practices of EU critique as a constitutive part of the democratic realm.

Second, research may itself articulate critique. In a way, a critical orientation is inherent to constructivist ontologies as the endeavour of reconstructing the way how the world emerges in social practices necessarily implies that there are also alternatives. The articulation of critique can basically be directed at two (intertwined) addressees: On the one hand, one may critically interrogate certain EU policies, current institutional structures or governing rationales against the background of certain normative standards. Prime examples for this kind of research are analyses of European austerity measures (Mastromatteo & Rossi, 2015), or of the architecture of the EU's external relations (Staeger, 2016; see also the paper by Lenz and Nicolaidis). On the other hand, one may take a critical stance towards the field of EU studies and its (missing) critical perspectives (see the paper by Hoenig). As elaborated above, for a long time the field of EU studies has been, and to a certain extent still is, dominated by a "progressive story" (Gilbert, 2008) which provides an oversimplified historical account of supranational institutionalization. As every story, it features certain blind spots, one-sided interpretations and retrospective idealizations. Developing a critical perspective towards this, or any other, narrative does not imply the attempt to "falsify" it. Rather, the task is to confront it with an alternative story in order to enable different interpretations of what has happened and is happening. These alternative stories are of course also selective, as observations are necessarily made from an observer (Luhmann, 1995), i.e. from a certain point of view which can never be all-encompassing.

These different variants are linked to one another, as the field of EU studies could not be neatly separated from the EU's political interventions into the academic realm (see the paper from Chamlian), and as analyses of the politics of EU critique necessarily take place within a field of "scientific" knowledge that raises certain expectations as to how to approach and evaluate the object under study, leading for instance to differentiations between "conventional" and "peripheral" or "inconvenient" perspectives. The point is thus not to try to escape from the power/knowledge relations in which EU critique is entangled, but to reflect on how it is structured and with what consequences.

6. Structure of the special issue

For this special issue we have invited and selected papers that do not adhere to the common Euroscepticism discourse and do not just identify the known and the new suspects of anti-EU-sentiment. Instead, the papers gathered here present more nuanced analyses of the meaning and significance of critique both within the political realm and within academia. They relate to the different ways of approaching the notion of EU critique distinguished above in specific ways and combinations.

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Juan Roch is the only contributor in this collection who concentrates on EU politics as he analyses EU political debates in two member countries. In his article *Unpacking EU contestation: Europeanization and critique in Germany and Spain* he presents the findings of a comparative discourse analysis of party manifestos, speeches and parliamentary ratification debates produced over a long time span (1992-2017) in two member states. The underlying argument of the author is that the forms of EU contestation must be studied together with the symbolic orders about Europe and the EU at the national level. Drawing on the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD), the article delineates the diverse representations and problematizations of EU-contesting discourses in the countries under investigation. The findings suggest that Germany has been a more permissive environment for the articulation of EU critique whereas critique of the EU has been rather constrained in Spain over the last decades. The author connects these divergences to the country-specific processes of Europeanization.

Lucie Chamlian and Barbara Hoenig turn to academic discourses and practices instead. Hoenig reconstructs motives of EU critique in German sociological research since the 1990s. In her paper *'Critique as a vocation': Reconstructing critical discourses on Europeanization in German sociology, 1990–2018*, she investigates how the distinct field of the sociology of European integration emerged in processes of theory-building, empirical research and intellectual critique. Based on Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge approach, Hoenig discerns three generations of sociological research, each operating in specific socio-political constellations, in turn leading to different forms of EU critique. Hoenig's analysis thus shows how the emergence of different (im)possibilities of EU critique are bound to generational contexts and structural styles of thinking about Europe.

In her paper *European Union Studies as power/knowledge dispositif: Towards a reflexive turn*, Chamlian critically addresses the production of the field of EU studies on the basis of Foucault's notion of power/knowledge relations. She examines two prominent configurations which have steered academic research in specific ways, namely the numerous interventions by the European Commission and the cultivation of a particular type of "science" within EU studies itself. Chamlian's paper shows how certain (politically steered) academic practices co-evolve with in- and excluding power relations. Against this background, the paper makes the point for a reflexive turn which is sensitive towards the mutual interference of political and academic realms.

Finally, Tobias Lenz's and Kalypso Nicolaidis' article *EU-topia? A critique of the European Union as a model* speaks to both the political and the academic discourses. For, it formulates a critique of the widely shared idea of presenting the EU as a model for the rest of the world. By way of referring to the postcolonial literature, Lenz and Nicolaidis question the underlying assumptions that are inscribed into the discourses and practices of Europe-as-a-model. As a consequence, the paper argues for greater reflexivity on the part of Europeans and for the value of an ethos of mutual recognition which refrains from notions of superiority.

In addition to the papers selected, we are glad that the journal editors asked us to include Georg Vobruba's essay on the "Logic of populism" and an interview with Ágnes Heller on the relationship between democracy and capitalism.

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