

Difficulties of the EU as a Common Object for Identification

Behrouz Alikhani

Volume 6, Issue 2: *Comparative-Historical Sociology as Antidote to the 'Crackpot Realism' of the Twenty-First Century*, September 2017

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0006.204> [<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0006.204>]

 [<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>]

Abstract: *In order to understand and explain the current problems of 'European identity' and 'European integration', one needs to look at the long-term development of the institutions of today's European Union. The main thesis of this paper is that the transition of the social habitus of a great number of Europeans has been lagging behind the transition of national institutions towards European supranational institutions. In this sense, the European Union could serve as a paradigmatic example of 'non-simultaneity of developments' of social differentiation without accompanying processes of social integration. Owing to this problem, the EU could not serve as a common object of identification for many of its citizens. In this paper, different aspects of processes of social integration and disintegration will be called into consideration. Also to be discussed are some of the difficulties associated with the emergence of a new 'survival unit' in more democratic societies in comparison to authoritarian societies, with regard to the question of democratic legitimacy as well as social equalities.*

Keywords: *European identity, European integration, social inequalities, drag effect of the social habitus, non-simultaneity of developments, process or figurational sociology, survival unit.*

From a process-sociological point of view, there are some *structural similarities* between the transition from a tribal to a national 'survival unit' and the transition from national to a trans-national survival unit. Therefore, the study of processes of state formation at earlier stages could help to understand tensions and conflicts that have arisen throughout the processes of the 'European integration'. These units of integration are not just units of survival, because the people within them usually enjoy a relatively high level of physical security, but also because the membership of these we-groups grants the individual a chance of survival beyond actual physical existence; survival in the 'collective memory' of a group of individuals. The we-identity of an individual is therefore not separable from his or her I-identity. Only the balance of the 'We-I-identity' could change depending on the degree of the individualisation of a society (Elias 2010: 199–200). In both kinds of transitions, the dissolving of the former units of integration could be perceived by people involved as a sort of 'collective dying'. The resistance against the disappearance of the highly valued collective memories, produced and transmitted for generations within these survival units, is primarily an emotional resistance (Elias 2010: 199–200). The reasons for such conflicts are due to the fact that development at the state level is very closely connected with the development of patterns of conduct and feelings of individuals (social habitus) within the survival unit. Nation states are just a stage in long-term processes of state formation.

With regard to 'European identity', national and in some cases local social habitus seems still to represent the most dominant and thicker layers of the we-identity for a great number of Europeans in different nations compared with the thinner layer of their European identity. According to a diagnosis made by Norbert Elias in the mid-1980s, although in the course of the twentieth century nation states in Europe have lost much of their survival function, the national habitus of Europeans did not transform at the same pace. The we-image of many Europeans is still closely tied by a strong affective charge to their national and local group-identities which are *emotionally* more deeply anchored:

This difference of national habitus and the emotionally charged national we-identity cannot be set aside by compromise, by an act of will or by what is usually understood as rational means (Elias 2010: 220).

The transition of the social habitus of a great number of Europeans has lagged behind the transition of national institutions towards European supranational institutions. The European Union could serve here as an example of social differentiation without accompanying processes of social integration (Alikhani 2014). Therefore, for a great number of Europeans the degree of identification with this newly created institution, as well as with other Europeans outside their own national and local borders, is very low. The emotional ties of the affected people to the older and more familiar units of integration, which represent the emotionally more deeply anchored layers of their social habitus, set the boundaries of the frame of reference of their I- and we-images as well as their I- and we-ideals (Elias 2013: 171–2). They more or less consciously defend these safety- and security-giving boundaries with all their strength. Any attempt to reorganise the previously familiar patterns of perception and to dissolve the old emotional ties could lead to insecurity and disorientation. Disintegration of the old functional and emotional connections often means a loss of the sense of meaning in their life and a threat to their psychic and social existence because the painful experience of disorientation has far-reaching consequences for the stability of the human psyche. This lack of orientation in the course of European unification is described by Jeffrey T. Checkel and Peter J. Katzenstein in metaphorical language:

The ship of European identity has entered uncharted waters. Its sails are flapping in a stiff breeze. Beyond the harbour, whitecaps are signalling stormy weather ahead. The crew is fully assembled, but some members are grumbling – loudly. While food and drink are plentiful, maps and binoculars are missing. Officers are vying for rank and positions as no captain is in sight. Sensing a lack of direction and brooding bad weather, some passengers are resting in the fading sun on easy chairs thinking of past accomplishments; others are huddling in an openly defiant mood to the lifeboats, anticipating bad times ahead. With the journey's destination unknown, the trip ahead seems excruciatingly difficult to some, positively dangerous to others. Anxiety and uncertainty, not hope and self-confidence, define the moment (Checkel and Katzenstein 2009: 1).

All this does not mean that the scope of identification of human beings within the EU would necessarily remain ethnic or national forever without any potential for transformation. This scope is by no means 'culturally' or 'biologically' fixed and determined, as some advocators of primordialist theories claim (Grosby 1994: 168). The scope of the we-identity of human beings could change in different directions – whether extending or reducing – depending on how their web of interdependence changes. The term 'change-continuum' coined by Elias as a concept at a higher level of synthesis demonstrates the possibility of shifts in the balance between change and continuity through all kinds of social processes such as processes of identification (Gleichmann 2006: 281; Gholamasad 2001: 617).

In the following paper, attention will be drawn to some of the aspects of processes of identification from a process or figurational sociological perspective. The emotional aspects of social integration and disintegration will be especially taken into consideration. It will be also demonstrated that changes in such emotional aspects do not take place in vacuum nor without any connection to the real power relationships between the human beings involved. On the contrary, from this perspective these changes are very closely bound up with the increasing or decreasing of power resources of the human beings involved, whether or not these human

beings experience and perceive these changes consciously. In other words, the two 'sensitive' and 'interest-driven' components of identification are intertwined with each other in a very complex way. Especially in democratic societies, a survival unit as a unit of safety and protection can only be a well-functioning survival unit if at least the majority of its members have the feeling of being protected and taken care of. In the following, it will be demonstrated why the EU has not been successful in establishing itself as such a unit of protection and safety.

The historical development of the European Union

In order to understand and explain problems of 'European identity' and 'European integration' we need to look at the long-term development of today's 'European Union' (EU). Without taking this long-term historical perspective, one would not be able to understand the EU's present problems. The EU traces its institutional origins from the 'European Coal and Steel Community' and the 'European Economic Community' formed by six western European countries in the 1950s. 'Ensuring peace and security' in Europe was the original motive for the process of European unification. After the harrowing experiences of the Second World War, many European intellectuals and politicians came to the conclusion that peace could be backed up only by cooperation between different countries in Europe. The main aim was to boost regional integration, which 'makes war not only unthinkable but materially impossible', as France's foreign minister at that time, Robert Schuman, formulated it (Winters 1991: 185).

Until the Maastricht Treaty came into force in 1993, the EU was primarily an economic community. Finally, through the Treaty of Lisbon which came into force in 2009, the European Union, and its relationship with its 28 members, received a constitution, replacing the previous system of treaties. The creation of this new supranational survival unit was, however, more a *project* of a number of economic, political and intellectual elites than a long-term *process* of state formation at a continental level with accompanying transformations of the social and personality structures of its members. In other words, European unification was more an elite enterprise, than a response to any long-lasting popular pressure by the majority of all Europeans within the EU. The creators of the EU hoped that economic success would bring the approval of the wider populations of its member states, which could serve as the source of legitimacy for this new entity. There was talk of a 'permissive consensus', through which the citizens would accept the integration policy pursued by their governments:

It was assumed that once undertaken integration steps are not only irreversible, but also always would affect neighbouring institutional and policy domains in a way that further integration steps would necessarily follow (Tiemann 2011: 12).

According to these elites, within this set of attitudes, normal European citizens would accept the European Union as fundamentally 'good' and trust their representatives to do the best for them in the course of that complex process. However, the results of referenda in France and the Netherlands against the proposed European Constitution in 2005, and the financial crisis of 2008 in particular, showed how weak the foundations of this relatively new survival unit have been. A great number of Europeans do not identify with this newly established survival unit in comparison with their older and emotionally more deeply-anchored survival units at national and local levels. This reality is not just due to the fast pace of implementation of this project 'from the top' by elites perceived as alien and illegitimate by a great number of EU citizens, but also due to some undemocratic features of the European Union, implemented in supposedly democratic societies. The establishing of a new survival unit through authoritarian and non-transparent methods might be possible

in the earlier stages of processes of state formation in more authoritarian societies, as can be seen in the course of processes of nation building in many less developed societies. This authoritarian approach, however, might not work in existing democratic societies with a new political self-consciousness of their members as *citizens* and not passive *subjects*. In democratic societies, a newly created survival unit could only receive legitimacy through democratic and transparent procedures.

The EU project did not develop through such democratic and transparent procedures. The 'trickle-down economic theory' of EU technocrats has not turned out to be realistic. The EU gave rise to a small number of 'winners' and a bigger number of 'losers', to put it very simply. According to Neil Fligstein, much of the current political conflict around Europe can be attributed to who is and who is not involved in European society. Business owners, managers, professionals, white-collar workers, the young educated have all benefited from European economic integration, specifically by interacting more and more with their counterparts in other European societies. They tend to think of themselves as Europeans. Older, poorer, less educated, and blue-collar citizens have benefited less or have even lost. They view the EU as intrusive on national sovereignty, or they fear its pro-business orientation will overwhelm their national welfare states. Out of this strong fear and uncertainty they have preserved their national and local identities. There is a third group of mainly middle-class citizens who see the EU in mostly positive terms and sometimes – but not always – think of themselves as Europeans (Fligstein 2009: 156).

Democracy and legitimacy deficit of EU

Discussions of the 'democratic deficit' of the European Union have been going on for many years, concerned, in particular, with the critique that the European Union is a union of governments rather than citizens, with no effective, Euro-wide democratic control of the 'Eurocrats' in Brussels. Although this statement by Marcus Höreth is a bit polemical, it highlights a problem: 'If the EU were to apply for EU membership, its application would be rejected due to its lack of democratic quality' (Höreth 2002: 15).

Many Europeans have the feeling that they are excluded from important decision-making processes at the level of European Union, processes which many feel are not democratic and transparent enough (Condruz-Băcescu 2014: 54–5). For instance, the long-term EU President Jacques Delors very clearly summarised the EU's 'democratic deficit' in 1993:

The construction of Europe has been carried out for a long time in almost secret diplomacy, sealed off from the public opinion in the Member States. This was the method of the Community's founding fathers, to establish a sort of enlightened despotism. Competence and spiritual independence were considered as sufficient legitimacy for action and the consent of the population in the aftermath was regarded as enough. The secret of success for them was to produce an inward momentum to overcome integration resistances by bundling various economic interests and bring about decisions concerning various aspects of negotiation. This 'Jean Monnet method' was probably in the foundation phase of the community justified by the audacity of the project. But it has now reached its limits, and we are paying the price for the lack of explanation and a profound debate about the meaning and the purpose of the Community (Fischer 2003: 54).

In 1992, Delors had already called for 'a soul of Europe' in the project of European integration. He argued that, if the carriers of the Europe's project were not able to inject 'a spiritual dimension' into the EU, it would

fail to command the allegiance of its citizens (Krastev 2006: 143). So far, the European Parliament is the only EU institution that enjoys democratic legitimation. It has been directly elected every five years since 1979. However, even turnout at European Parliament elections has fallen consecutively at each election since that date, and has been under 50 per cent since 1999. Turnout in 2014 stood at 42.54 percent of all European voters (Johansson 2014: 10). The low turnout in many countries has put the democratic legitimacy of EU parliamentarians into question. Several studies have also demonstrated that many citizens use the European elections as a protest tool to vote generally against their pro-European governments by electing Eurosceptic parties from left or right (Tiemann et al. 2011: 12). By and large, this legislative body of the European Union is weaker than the bodies that are not directly elected, such as the European Commission and the Council of the European Union (Azman 2011: 245; Chrysochoou 2009: 380–381):

The Commission holds the exclusive right to initiate legislation in the EU. This very control of the legislative agenda allows the Commission to set priorities for the EU and control their implementation independent from the member states (Yalçın 2014: 28).

In the last few years, this low-level dissatisfaction has been brought to a critical point by the the currency crisis, which has severely tested the collective resolve, and the power, of different governments of the Union to manage the crisis. The financial crisis has at times tested the ability of democratic systems to maintain their financial survival, and it has brought into question the relationship between the power of the citizens (democracy) and the power of the economic sector and financial markets (plutocracy) in ways few would have thought possible in Europe decades ago. According to Colin Crouch, the EU institutions suffer from a serious lack of democratic legitimation because they have mainly been developed since 1980, a time when ‘post-democratic’ approaches to governance were dominant among political elites in Western societies (Crouch 2004: 107–8). At this stage of democracy, politicians in democratic societies increasingly do not represent the interests of the apathetic, passive and disillusioned ordinary citizens of their societies, but rather the interests of a numerically small business elite that is mainly globally orientated. An overlapping network of advisers, consultants and lobbyists increasingly play a very crucial role in defining the interests of these corporations as being in the public interest (Crouch 2004: 10). In terms of European integration, there is a discrepancy to be noticed between the elites and ordinary citizens of Europe: while political elites are willing to surrender more of their national sovereignty to EU institutions, to ensure the proper functioning of the internal market between the member states, citizens are more favourable to EU social policies intended to steer and regulate free market forces. The second approach has had, however, less impact on the course of the political decision-making of elites at this level (Hooghe 2003: 281). This new approach of political elites could not be demonstrated better than by a term coined by Angela Merkel: ‘market-compliant democracy’ (Streeck 2015: 50). This concept of Merkel’s has provoked some of her rivals to react. For example, Martin Schulz, the President of the European Parliaments at that time, expressed his dissatisfaction with this approach in an interview on 13 August 2012:

I consider that fundamentally wrong. Markets must instead become democracy-compliant. That is why we need regulation of the financial markets and taxation of the speculative excesses that are triggering major turbulences in many countries worldwide (Schulz 2012).

Over the course of the process of Europeanisation, which has been accompanied by strong processes of economic liberalisation, big global firms in a less-regulated global economy have been able to monopolise more power resources, so that the political elite are functionally more dependent on them than on ordinary

citizens in their countries. Since the concept ‘functional democratisation’ (Elias 2013: 162–3) refers to the more or less equal distribution of power chances between all individuals and groups in a society, the concentration of power resources in the hands of fewer individuals, corporations and financial centres could be grasped as ‘functional de-democratisation’ (Mennell, 2007: 311–14; Wilterdink 2016). [1],[#N1]

These are some reasons why, in a less regulated neoliberal social and political global order, every ‘sector’ becomes more or less dependent on the economic ‘sector’. If in a less regulated power structure in a society the scope of action and decision making of global firms and corporations increases, simultaneously the scope of action and decision making of the ordinary citizens will decrease. In this case, the power balance will shift in favour of only a handful of citizens – the so called ‘one percent’ – who can monopolise decisive political and economic power resources and exclude a greater number of people from these resources (Piketty and Saez 2003: 24). Structurally this new social, economic and political order has *structural similarities* to the ‘pre-democratic era’ (Crouch 2004: 5). The economist Thomas Piketty in his latest book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* draws clear parallels between the degree of social inequality in some current European societies and the time of patrimonial absolutism in Europe. He concludes that twenty-first-century capitalism is in the process of reverting to the patrimonial model of the eighteenth or early nineteenth century, when ownership of capital rested principally in the hands of a relatively few rich families (cf. Mennell 2014):

The general evolution is clear: bubbles aside, what we are witnessing is a strong comeback of private capital in the rich countries since 1970, or, to put it another way, the emergence of a new patrimonial capitalism (Piketty 2014: 125).

If there was a ‘democratic deficit’ in Europe before the euro crisis, now there are many citizens in Europe who doubt there is any democracy at all when it comes to European affairs. They perceive it a Union driven to a great degree by corporations and banks and led by appointed commissioners and powerful nations. In southern Europe, the EU is considered by many citizens as equivalent to a big bureaucratic machine that has been creating austerity measures, privatisation and unemployment (Busch et al. 2013: 3). They see a Europe led by technocrats in Berlin and Brussels as a real threat to pre-existing democratic standards in their countries (Beller 2012: 8). Therefore, the identification with such an institution is especially very weak in these countries (Kaina 2013: 6–7). The recent so-called refugee crisis and the inability of the European leaders to find a common ground and a relatively long-term and sustainable ‘European solution’ does not make this integration easier. Such crises demonstrate what could occur if some technocrats plan to develop a new ‘survival unit’ as a project without taking into account democratic standards in the course of the development of a new survival unit in already existing democratic societies. The EU’s ‘democratic deficit’ goes hand in hand with its legitimacy deficit (Chrysochoou 2009: 379). In the discussions on European integration, the question of the legitimacy of the EU – at least in the core countries of the community – played hardly any role for a long time. Only with the adoption of the Single European Act in 1986 and the associated integration thrust were increasingly critical voices, especially in academia, to be heard. To a wider public, this problem became evident only with the Treaty of Maastricht (1992–3).

The current protests in different European societies against the institutionalisation of the power shift in the form of global trade treaties could be interpreted as an indicator of the resistance of some groups of citizens in different democratised societies against such processes of ‘functional’ as well as ‘institutional de-democratisation’ (Gholamasad 1997: 370). The delegitimising of the governments perceived as the representatives of the economic and financial elite in various European countries could contribute to another dangerous dynamic, which could in turn lead to even stronger processes of de-democratisation at all functional, habitual and institutional levels. The current rise of right-wing populist parties and movements in

these countries is, among other things, one answer to the injustice and economic insecurity perceived by a great number of European citizens involved in such processes experienced as fast-paced. [2],[#N2]. Meanwhile, many citizens in Europe find themselves being forced to choose between two alternatives: an aggressive right-wing outsider alternative and a neoliberal, economically driven orientated established one. The democrats between them feel themselves being forced to decide in favour of a lesser evil if they do not want to become passive and would still like to participate in political decision-making processes. However, in the long run, neither of these two alternatives seems to help in the establishment of a stable and democratically structured survival unit at a continental level.

The lack of identification and solidarity

Another of the EU's 'multidimensional crises', besides its economic and political crises, is what has been termed a 'cultural crisis' (Fitzi 2014: 16–18). The European Union appears to many of its citizens a Europe of elites, without any mass support. Common values and a sufficient degree of identification of the people of member states with this new survival unit are not properly available. The European level of integration seems to be far away from a great number of citizens. 'Europe' has been perceived as just a 'special-purpose association' of its member countries to improve their own separate economic or material situation. However, since the economic crisis of 2008 this expectation has diminished extremely (Fischer 2015: 81).

Without a shared understanding of what the EU is and should be, and how it could contribute positively to the life of the ordinary citizens, without a shared sense of solidarity among them, and the consciousness of being part of this political Europe, the EU's perceived levels of legitimacy and democracy will for a great number of its citizens remain in deficit (Schildberg 2007: 51–2). If this supranational survival unit is supposed to be perceived as legitimate by the majority of Europeans, then one cannot separate three important pillars from each other: democracy, the rule of law, and the welfare state. However, the creation of a 'European social welfare state' seems to be very difficult, firstly because of the heterogeneous social policy amongst the EU member states, and secondly because social policy is seen as the main field of legitimisation for national governments (Schildberg 2007: 62). Nor could the European Union create a polity with a sustainable solidarity-based economy (Negt 2012: 14). The secret negotiations about the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) to reduce the regulatory barriers to trade for big business seem to be against a solidary-based and regulated economy. The logic of economic liberalisation has weakened the sense of solidarity that is one of the most important features of a democratic and well-functioning polity. To cope with the crisis of Europe, the conceptual means of 'business management rationality' seems to be less helpful, as it is currently the dominant way of economic calculation by ruling European elites. The unification of Europe, as a new survival unit, without a solidarity-based economy that includes financial burden-sharing and social investment will hardly come about. And without awareness-building measures, it would not be possible to establish a solidarity-based economy that makes compensatory payments between weak and strong members possible. In order to establish this kind of economy, processes of collective learning are required, which include the daily experiences of ordinary citizens of Europe, as the German sociologist Oskar Negt (2015: 38) puts it. This lack of solidarity could easily be seen in the fact that in the European Union there is a monetary union without a fiscal union. Most member states of the EU participate in the economic and monetary union (EMU), based on the euro currency, but most decisions about taxes and spending remain at the national level.

Currently, *counter-processes* to a solidarity-based economy can be observed at both the European and global level. As mentioned, with processes of deregulation in the course of economic liberalisation, the power balance has shifted between global firms and 'ordinary citizens' in favour of the former. Welfare systems came under pressure, perceived as cost factors that hamper economic progress and restructuring. The welfare state

has gradually become residualised as something for the deserving poor rather than associated with a range of universal rights of citizenship (Crouch 2004: 23). Provision of social services has become more and more a domain of the private market in most European societies. Through their globally orientated market radicalism, neoliberal policies more and more dissolve the national welfare state variations, impair domestic demand, consolidate and increase unemployment and increase the number of precarious jobs, organise a redistribution of the social wealth from the bottom to the top, and reinforce the tendencies eroding solidarity in society. In most capitalist market economies, in the 1960s and 1970s there prevailed a social atmosphere that supported solidarity to help to cope with the deficiencies of developed market economies. Growing individualism and the growing importance of liberal economic doctrines from the 1970s brought to the forefront the questions of whether we can any longer afford the costly welfare systems (Crouch 2004: 53). It seems that the normative base for existing welfare systems has come under pressure, that norms of an 'elbow society' have gained ground, and that norms of solidarity have been declining. Such processes have made the creation of a new democratic polity based on common identification very difficult.

Matters of 'identity'

What is called 'identity', in a process-reduced and reifying way, is a very imprecise concept. Process-sociologically, it is more reality-congruent to replace this stationary concept with the more dynamic and processual concept of 'identification'. Processes of identification are not static and separate from the real relationships of people involved, but very dynamic, depending on the experiences people gain within and beyond a specific survival unit. Identification with different survival units is possible at the same time, although one layer of the identification could become more dominant (Elias 2010: 183). Therefore, under specific circumstances, the integration of local, national, supranational and even global layers of identifications could be possible. In relation to the EU, questions arise related to how the people who do not feel themselves the 'winners' of the European Union project could develop such emotional bonds towards this newly and relatively quickly established survival unit. The answer might be that these people could hardly identify with an institution in which they see no benefit, but rather danger and costs. As mentioned, the two sensitive and interest-driven components of identification are intertwined with each other. Thus, the EU project suffers not only from economic and political, but also emotional shortcomings. All these 'deficits' are, from a process-sociological point of view, very closely interrelated with each other. European integration cannot properly happen without a relatively high degree of identification of a great number of its members within this entity with each other and with this entity at the same time. Especially in crisis situations, a newly created survival unit needs this high degree of identification in order to continue to exist. However, the EU is unable to serve as such an object of collective identification for a great number of its members. Processes of disintegration could in such circumstances sooner or later gain the upper-hand. The Brexit and the 34 per cent of the vote in the French presidential election in April 2017 for the candidate of the far-right National Front, among other things, are the latest manifestations of such counter-processes in the direction of disintegration.

Conclusion

The EU is a good example of the 'non-simultaneity of developments' (Bloch 1991: 106) between levels of differentiation and integration of social development. Transformations of the patterns of conduct and feeling (social habitus) of a great number of Europeans have been lagging behind institutional transformations. The lack of identification with the EU by many of its citizens goes back to the ways in which this new survival

united has been implemented. By and large, this project – perceived by many as fast-paced – also led to increasing social inequality and de-democratisation within and between its member states. Owing to such shortcomings, the relatively newly created institutions of this survival unit are unable to serve as common objects of identification for many Europeans, because, for a great number of its members, these institutions are not providing enough ‘security and the material foundations for life’, requirements which represent the main feature of a well-functioning survival unit (Kaspersen and Gabriel 2008: 370).

One major problem with which this survival unit has been confronted lies in the fact that the peak of its institutional development occurred during the time of a new wave of economic liberalisation at a global level. The adaptation to the neoliberal world order through reforms was one of the main objectives of the developers of this project, in order to be able, especially economically, to compete with other global power centres. Therefore, the project of the EU is for many Europeans equated with deregulation, austerity measures and unemployment. Many see an EU led by technocrats in Brussels as a real threat to the already existing democratic standards in their countries. Some others perceive the establishment of this survival unit as a real threat to their national sovereignty.

Meanwhile, many citizens in Europe find themselves often being forced to choose between two alternatives: a rhetorically aggressive right wing and a reform-resistant neoliberally orientated established option. For many, voting for a lesser evil seems to be the only available possibility of occasionally participating in political decision-making processes. However, in the long run, neither of these two alternatives seems to contribute to the establishment of a relatively stable, democratically structured and peaceful survival unit on a European level. Both tendencies possess high potentials for tension and conflict. The neoliberal *status quo* may lead, as we see, to the increasing alienation of European citizens, as well as to the strengthening of right-wing tendencies that could in turn lead to processes of disintegration of this weak survival unit. Given the current power structures within the EU, the future of this project will remain uncertain. In order to survive, this new survival unit needs structural reforms towards democratisation and social equality within and between its member states. This paper demonstrates the very close connection between processes of identification and processes of democratisation. Without the wider participation of EU citizens in the decisive power resources within the EU, the maintenance of this relatively new created survival unit will be very difficult. A neoliberally orientated EU cannot serve as a common object of identification, especially in already democratic societies in which the citizens are relatively aware of democratic mechanisms and their rights as citizens and not passive subjects. The problem of the legitimacy of the EU could be addressed through the changing of power balances in favour of ordinary citizens between and within all its member states.

Notes

1. Stephen Menell describes Norbert Elias as an ‘optimist’, because he equaled the ‘extension of the chains of global interdependencies’ in the course of globalization with ‘functional democratization’ and did not consider the possibility of the concentration of power and status resources by a few influential individuals and institutions (Menell 2011, 30). In a paper published in *Human Figurations*, Cas Wouters criticizes this kind of understanding of the concept ‘functional de-democratization’ (Wouters 2016). According to him, processes of functional democratization and de-democratization are rather two ‘unintended side-effects’ of long-term social differentiation and integration processes. Therefore, what is grasped as ‘functional de-democratization’ is ‘integration conflicts and disintegration processes’ or some kind of ‘side-effects’ of the more dominant global functional differentiation in the direction of functional democratization, because ‘integration processes’ always trigger ‘integration conflicts’ (Wouters 2016). Wouters by and large assesses a clear dominance of social equality in contrast to counter-processes of

social inequality. The most important indicator for measuring functional democratization seems to be for him the functional differentiation and the long-term global expanding and lengthening of the chains of interdependencies.

In making this argument, Wouters does not take into account current processes of monopolisation and the concentration of decisive power resources in the hands of a small group of individuals and institutions in the absence of regulatory mechanisms at national and global levels. For him everything seems to be tending in favour of processes of functional democratisation, as processes of functional de-democratisation are only 'side-effects' of a greater and stronger processes of integration behind which, however, functional interdependencies are lagging temporarily. This seems, however, to be quite a linear and teleological understanding of Elias, who always considered the possibility of the *reversibility* of social and political processes, depending on the shifting of power balances between different involved groups with different interests and power potentials (Elias 2009: 4–8).

Processes of functional democratization contain, according to my own understanding of Elias, the equalization of power balances on all, by Elias described, 'five main axes of tension', between governed and governors, men and women, parents and children, different ethnic and religious groups and entrepreneurs and workers. (Elias 1996, 149). Elias speaks in this context about the *degree* of functional democratization. The change of this degree depends on the power relations between the involved groups on all above mentioned, at least five main axes of tension. In this sense, Wouters seems to neglect the close interconnectedness of the concept of power and function by Elias in his possess-sociological reception of the concept of function. However, both terms 'power' and 'function' are for Elias concepts of relationships and thus very closely interrelated:

To put it at its simplest, one could say: when one person (or a group of persons) lacks something which another person or group has the power to withhold, the latter has a function for the former (...) People or groups which have functions for each other exercise constraint over each other. ... [P]ower is an attribute of relationships, and that the word is best used in conjunction with a reminder about more or less fluctuating changes in power. That is an example of a concept traditionally based on static components being turned into a concept of relationship. (Elias 2012: 73, 111).

To sum up, the extension of functional interdependencies in the course of economic globalisation *could*, but does not *necessarily*, lead to the increasing functional democratisation. The most important question about the *degree* of functional democratisation is how decisive power and status resources are distributed between different groups involved on the above mentioned five main axes of tension in a society. The study of the long-term direction as well as *constancy of direction* of such processes is one of the main tasks of process sociological investigations. ♠.[#N1-ptri]

2. Such anti-establishment tendencies have recently strongly contributed to, for instance, the Brexit. One could not explain these tendencies only, as some social scientists interpret it (cf. Inglehart and Norris 2016: 29), as reactions of advocates of the Brexit against a wide range of rapid 'cultural' changes which seem to be eroding the basic values and customs of UK society. One should rather place this 'cultural backlash thesis' in the wider context of the shifts of power balances between different groups and individuals at the local, national and global levels affected by strong processes of economic liberalisation in the past few decades, particularly since Margaret Thatcher's radical neoliberal reforms (Peck 2010: 1–8). It is more reality-congruent to address the question about the exact connection of the so called 'psychological factors' and changes in the 'material life' of British people. Inglehart and Norris separate these two interconnected levels from each other and highlight 'cultural' developments as more responsible for the Brexit and the rise of right-wing populists like Donald Trump than the felt and real 'economic insecurity' and the incising of social inequalities in the UK and USA. (Inglehart and Norris 2016: 29–31) ♠.[#N2-ptri]

References

- Alikhani, Behrouz (2014) 'Towards a process-oriented model of democratisation or de-democratisation.', *Human Figurations* 3: 2. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0003.202/-towards-a-process-oriented-model-of-democratisation-or-de?rgn=main;view=fulltext;q1=alikhani> [<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0003.202/-towards-a-process-oriented-model-of-democratisation-or-de?rgn=main;view=fulltext;q1=alikhani>]. Accessed 30 June 2017.
- Azman, Kübra Dilek (2011) 'The Problem of 'Democratic Deficit' in the European Union, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 1: 5, pp. 242–50.
- Beller, Steven (2012) *Democracy: All That Matters*. London: Teach Yourself.
- Bloch, Ernst (1991) *Heritage of our Times [Erbschaft dieser Zeit]*, trans. Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Busch, Klaus, Christoph Hermann, Karl Hinrichs and Thorsten Schulten (2013) 'Euro Crisis, Austerity Policy and the European Social Model; How Crisis Policies in Southern Europe Threaten the EU's Social Dimension', *International Policy Analysis*, Eriedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- Checkel, Jeffrey T. and Peter J. Katzenstein (2009) *European Identity (Contemporary European Politics)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chrysochoou, Dimitris N. (2009) 'Europe's Contested Democracy', in Cini, Michelle (ed.) *European Union Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 377–89.
- Crouch, Colin (2004) *Post-Democracy*. Hoboken: John Wiley.
- Condruz-Băcescu, Monica (2014) 'Euroscpticism Across Europe: Drivers and Challenges', *European Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 6: 2, pp. 52–9.
- Elias, Norbert (2006) 'Wissenssoziologie: Neue Perspektiven II', *Aufsätze und andere Schriften I*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 257–86. ['Sociology of knowledge: new perspectives', *Essays I: On the Sociology of Knowledge and the Sciences*. Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, 2010, vol. 14], pp. 1–41.]
- Elias, Norbert (2009) 'Social Processes', *Essays III: On Sociology and the Humanities*. Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, vol. 16], pp. 4–8.
- Elias, Norbert (2010) *The Society of Individuals*. Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, vol. 10].
- Elias, Norbert (2012) *What is Sociology?* Enlarged edition, Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, vol. 5].
- Elias, Norbert (2013) *Studies on the Germans Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, vol. 11].
- Fischer, Ann-Kathrin (2003) *Legitimation der Europäischen Union durch eine Verfassung?* Münster: LIT Verlag.
- Fischer, Michael (2015) 'Demokratisierungsprobleme: Europas Krise, Neoliberalismus und die Rolle der Menschenwissenschaften', in Waldhoff, Hans-Peter, Christine Morgenroth, Angela Moré, Michael Kopel (eds.), *Wo denken wir hin? Lebensthemen, Zivilisationsprozesse, demokratische Verantwortung*. Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag, pp. 79–97.
- Fitzi, Gregor (2014) 'Ein Desiderat der Forschung: Europas multidimensionale Krise', *Neue Gesellschaft/Frankfurter Hefte*, 7/8, pp. 16–18.

- Fligstein, Neil (2009) *Euroclash: The EU, European Identity, and the Future of Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johansson, Å Jan (2014) *The Lowest of the Low*. Brussels: Organization for European Interstate Cooperation.
- Gholamasad, Dawud (1997) ‚Zu Demokratisierungsproblemen der islamisch geprägten Gesellschaften‘, in Eva Barlösius, Elcin Kürsat-Ahlers, Peter Waldhoff, Peter Gleichmann (eds.), *Distanzierte Verstrickungen*. Berlin: Sigma, pp. 357–74.
- Gholamasad, Dawud (2001) ‚Zum Umbruch im nachrevolutionären Iran‘. *Orient*, 42: 4, pp. 617–38.
- Gleichmann, Peter (2006) *Soziologie als Synthese*, Waldhoff, Hans-Peter (ed.). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag.
- Grosby Steven (1994) ‚The verdict of history: the inexpungeable tie of primordiality – a response to Eller and Coughlan‘, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 17: 1, pp. 164–71.
- Hooghe, Liesbet (2003) ‚Europe Divided? Elites vs. Public Opinion on European Integration‘, *European Union Politics*, 4: 3.
- Höreth, Marcus (2002) ‚Das Demokratiedefizit lässt sich nicht weg reformieren: Über Sinn und Unsinn der europäischen Verfassungsdebatte‘, *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft* 4, pp. 11–38.
- Inglehart, Ronald F., and Pippa Norris (2016) ‚Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash‘, Faculty Research Working Paper Series, Harvard Kennedy School Series *RWP16-026*, pp. 1–52.
- Kaina, Viktoria (2013) ‚EU governance and European identity‘, *Living Reviews in European Governance*, 8: 1, pp. 6–7.
- Streeck Wolfgang (2015) ‚Comment on Wolfgang Merkel, ‚Is capitalism compatible with democracy?‘ *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft (ZfVP)* 9:49-60, pp. 50.
- Kaspersen, Lars Bo and Norman Gabriel (2008) ‚The importance of survival units for Norbert Elias’s figurational perspective‘, *Sociological Review*, 56: 3, pp. 370–87.
- Krastev, Ivan (2006) ‚Europe’s solidarity deficit‘, in Michalski, Krzysztof (ed.), *Conditions of European Solidarity: What holds Europe together*. Budapest: Central European University Press, pp. XXX.
- Mennell, Stephen (2007) *The American Civilizing Process*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Mennell, Stephen (2011) ‚The American civilizing process: a skeptical sketch‘, in Christa Buschendorf, Astrid Franke and Johannes Voelz (eds.), *Civilizing and Decivilizing Processes: Figurational Approaches to American Culture*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 17–34.
- Mennell, Stephen (2014) ‚Globalisation and the ‘American Dream‘. *Human Figurations*, 3: 2.
<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0003.206/–globalisation-and-the-american-dream?rgn=main;view=fulltext;q1=Globalisation+and+the+%E2%80%98American+Dream%E2%80%99>
[\[http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0003.206/–globalisation-and-the-american-dream?rgn=main;view=fulltext;q1=Globalisation+and+the+%E2%80%98American+Dream%E2%80%99\]](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0003.206/–globalisation-and-the-american-dream?rgn=main;view=fulltext;q1=Globalisation+and+the+%E2%80%98American+Dream%E2%80%99).. Accessed 30 June 2017.
- Negt, Oskar (2012) *Gesellschaftsentwurf Europa: Plädoyer für ein gerechtes Gemeinwesen*. Göttingen: Steidl.

- Negt, Oskar (2015) ‚Gesellschaftsentwurf Europa: Plädoyer für ein gerechtes Gemeinwesen‘, in Waldhoff, Hans-Peter, Christine Morgenroth, Angela Moré, Michael Kopel (eds.), *Wo denken wir hin? Lebensthemen, Zivilisationsprozesse, demokratische Verantwortung*. Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag, pp. 37–43.
- Peck, Jamie (2010) *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Piketty, Thomas and Emmanuel Saez (2003) ‚Income inequality in the United States, 1913–1998‘, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 118: 1, pp. 1–38.
- Piketty, Thomas (2014) *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Schildberg, Cécilie (2007) ‚Exploring European Union identity as a ‘social’ one. Theoretical-conceptual considerations for an analysis of European political identity through social policies‘, in Holland, Martin (ed.), *The European Union’s New Identity*. Christchurch: NESCA, pp. 51–67.
- Schulz, Martin (2012) We need more Europe. Deutschland.de:
<https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/politics/germany-europe/we-need-more-europe>
[\[https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/politics/germany-europe/we-need-more-europe\]](https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/politics/germany-europe/we-need-more-europe). Accessed June 12, 2017.
- Tiemann, Guido, Oliver Treib and Andreas Wimmel (2011) *Die EU und ihre Bürger UTB*. Stuttgart: Winters.
- Wilterdink, Nico (2016) ‚American exceptionalism? The growth of income and wealth inequality in the United States and other Western societies‘, *Human Figurations*, special issue: Social Character, Historical Processes, 5: 2. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0005.204/–american-exceptionalism-the-growth-of-income-and-wealth?rgn=main;view=fulltext;q1=American+exceptionalism++The+growth+of+income+and+wealth+inequality>
[\[http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0005.204/–american-exceptionalism-the-growth-of-income-and-wealth?rgn=main;view=fulltext;q1=American+exceptionalism++The+growth+of+income+and+wealth+inequality\]](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0005.204/–american-exceptionalism-the-growth-of-income-and-wealth?rgn=main;view=fulltext;q1=American+exceptionalism++The+growth+of+income+and+wealth+inequality). Accessed 30 June 2017.
- Winters, Leonard Alan (1991) *International Economics*, Fourth edition, London: Routledge.
- Wouters, Cas (2016) ‚Functional democratisation and disintegration as side-effects of differentiation and integration processes‘, in *Human Figurations*, special issue: Social Character, Historical Processes, 5: 2. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0005.208/–functional-democratisation-and-disintegration-as-side?rgn=main;view=fulltext> [\[http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0005.208/–functional-democratisation-and-disintegration-as-side?rgn=main;view=fulltext\]](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0005.208/–functional-democratisation-and-disintegration-as-side?rgn=main;view=fulltext). Accessed 30 June 2017.
- Yalçın, Cem (2014) Challenging the Future: The Democratic Deficit of the EU from a Federalist Perspective, *Poznan University of Economics Review*, 14: 3, pp. 23–38.

Biography

Dr Behrouz Alikhani studied for a master’s degree in political sciences at Teheran University and a PhD at the Leibniz University of Hanover in sociology and social psychology. Currently, he is a lecturer and researcher at the Institute of Sociology at the Westphalian Wilhelms-University Münster in Germany. His main research focus is on processes of democratisation and de-democratisation in different societies.

Hosted by [Michigan Publishing](#), a division of the [University of Michigan Library](#).

For more information please contact mpub-help@umich.edu.

Online ISSN: 2166-6644