Original Article

Demobilising the nation: The decline of sovereignty in Western Europe

James Heartfield
Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster, 32-38 Wells St., London, W1T 3UW, UK.
E-mail: heartfield@blueyonder.co.uk

Abstract Sovereignty is the subject of considerable debate in both International Relations (IR) theory and European Union (EU) studies. In IR, debate is oriented around the extent to which sovereignty constitutes the building block – or generative grammar – of international order. In EU studies, inter-governmentalists and integrationalists differ over how, why and to what extent European states are pooling or derogating sovereignty to supra-national institutions. This article makes no claim to resolving these debates. Rather, it works within them in order to examine the ways in which the exercise of sovereignty is becoming increasingly problematic, particularly in Western Europe. Specifically, it is argued, because of the failure of *domestic* political processes, European states are frustrated in terms of their *international* actions. This diminution of sovereignty provides the integration process with a veneer of dynamism as European institutions fill the vacuum left by demobilising nation-states.

International Politics (2009) **46,** 712–731. doi:10.1057/ip.2009.21

Keywords: sovereignty; European Union; European politics; legitimacy; depoliticisation

Introduction

Sovereignty is the subject of considerable debate in both International Relations (IR) theory and European Union (EU) studies. In IR, the debate is oriented around the extent to which sovereignty constitutes the building block – or generative grammar – of international order. In EU studies, inter-governmentalists and integrationalists differ over how, why and to what extent European states are pooling or derogating sovereignty to supra-national institutions. This article makes no claim to resolving these debates. Rather, it works within them in order to examine the ways in which the exercise of sovereignty is becoming increasingly problematic, particularly in Western

Europe. Specifically, it is argued, because of the failure of *domestic* political processes, European states are frustrated in terms of their *international* actions. This diminution of sovereignty provides the integration process with a veneer of dynamism as European institutions fill the vacuum left by demobilising nation-states.

To trace the failure of domestic political processes, I look at the declining weight of political parties and civic organisations – in other words, at reduced popular identification with the state. The rise of anti-political movements and protest votes are considered as symptomatic of a sclerosis in the post-war political process. These changes, it is argued, determine shifts in policy away from ideological motivations towards technocratic public administration. And furthermore, it is argued, the declining weight of national polities is driving the reorientation of elites towards European cooperation and integration. The demobilisation of popular movements encourages elites to derive legitimacy less from national constituencies and more from European institutions. Indeed, the EU itself is an institution that has developed via the technocratic character of public administration.

From Popular Sovereignty to Sovereignty-as-Subjectivity

National sovereignty is, more often than not, taken for granted. As such, questions over why authority is invested in a *state*, separate from civil society, is rarely posed (although see Rosenberg, 1994). But the separation of state and civil society is only one of the mysteries of national sovereignty. Why, for example, is the world divided into national polities? Even more pressingly, why does territoriality demand that modern states are conceived as *sovereign*, analogous to Hobbesian individuals? Benno Teschke (2003, p. 225) raises an eyebrow at the extraordinary fact of 'states marrying states' to illustrate the archaic character of dynastic absolutism. But is it so much more extraordinary that states should marry states than that they should divorce each other, recognise each other and even, on occasion, apologise to each other (Wendt, 2004)?

The concept of the sovereign state is bound up with debates on the sovereign individual and the sovereign people. Philosophers ranging from Isaiah Berlin to C.B. Macpherson have emphasised the contradictions between individual rights and collective rights invested in the state, arguing that one or other of these should hold sway. But more remarkable is the *homology* between these rights-bearing subjects – the individual, the people, the Sovereign – which renders them as *Subjects*, that is as self-governing agents (Heartfield, 2002, p. 9). Individuals, peoples and sovereigns are cast with the same qualities of inward deliberation, abstraction from their environment, self-interest and so on. In his *Philosophy of Right*, G.W.F. Hegel elaborates the essential structure of civil rights, law and constitutional government out of the essential element of *Will,* or subjectivity. Following Hegel, subjectivity can be seen as the principle at the heart of modern society, the human-centred world created by the overthrow of tradition and superstition. Sovereignty is the principle of Subjectivity as invested in the Subject of the Nation – the people.

International Relations theorists have an awkward relationship to sovereignty-as-subjectivity. On the one hand, sovereignty is the cornerstone of modern diplomacy. On the other hand, it is only considered from the outside, as it were, as a fact under observation, with little sympathy for its meaning (although see Bartelson, 1995; Biersteker and Weber, 1996; Philpott, 2001) There is, of course, a plausible account of sovereignty as the pursuit of national interest. In this account, Germany surrenders economic advantage to achieve political rehabilitation, 'a European Germany, not a German Europe' (Ash, 1994, p. 386); France seeks to tie Germany into Europe, which it uses as a platform to punch above its weight in world politics; Britain, seeing only demotion in accepting membership of the European club but fearing that it might finally close its doors against her, stalls for time, preferring to enlarge rather than 'deepen' Europe. Here, High Diplomacy operates at a slower tempo than domestic politics. The principle of non-partisanship of matters of vital interest insulates diplomacy from the swifter tempo of domestic political debates. For liberals, in contrast, national sovereignty is an ideological construct that masks structures of oppression. Indeed, Geoffrey Robertson (1999, p. xvii) goes as far as to say that 'the movement for global justice has been a struggle against sovereignty'. In both of these accounts, what is out of fashion is any identification with *popular* sovereignty. Here, theory offers an intellectual reflex of the actual retreat from sovereignty as a mode of political organisation in Europe.

The ability of governing elites to elaborate national interests depends upon their capacity for self-reflection. In the modern era, the process of establishing the national interest takes place through political contestation, typically through party political elections and debates in parliament. Of course, foreign policy matters tend to play a minimal role in domestic politics, but that does not stop domestic debates from taking place around defining and projecting the national interest. Much as it might appear that High Diplomacy is independent of domestic politics, it is argued here that the functioning of the domestic realm is a precondition of the formulation of national priorities and, as a result, foreign policy. That is important because across Europe, at least since the end of the Cold War, domestic political processes have become sclerotic, collapsing from a profound popular disengagement with the political elite.

Political Disengagement

The crisis of political disengagement since the end of the Cold War has led to a rapid decline in popular support for political parties and mass civil society organisations. This was in evidence first on the communist left and was connected, perhaps unsurprisingly, to the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe. Mass communist parties across Europe haemorrhaged supporters more than during the invasion of Hungary in 1956, or even at the height of the Hitler–Stalin pact. In many cases these parties were important, if awkward, elements of the polity. The Italian, French, Greek and Portuguese communist parties were either involved in or supporting ruling coalitions in the 1980s. In the 1990s, they had become relics, either trying to mask their difficulties by name changes (as in Italy, see Ginsborg, 2001, p. 159–162) or doggedly persisting with the old slogans in the face of ridicule (as in France) (Table 1).

The more moderate socialist parties seemed well placed to gain from the eclipse of the communists, and in electoral terms, some of them did. But the membership of the socialist parties also suffered sharp losses (Table 2).

Table 1: Membership of Communist Parties in France, Italy and Spain

	1978	*1980*	*1981*	*1987*	*1989*	*1991*	*1998*
PCF France	632 000	—	—	604 285	—	—	210 000
PCI Italy	—	1 753 323	—	—	1 417 182	—	621 670[a]
PCE Spain	—	—	160 000	—	—	44 775	—

Source: Mair and van Biezen (2001).
[a]As the Democratic Left.

Table 2: Membership of Socialist Parties in Germany, France, the United Kingdom and Austria

	1978	*1980*	*1987*	*1988*	*1989*	*1990*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2003*	*2005*
SPD Germany	—	986 872	—	—	921 430	—	—	755 244	—	660 000[a]	—
SFIO France	632 000	—	604 285	—	—	—	210 000	—	—	—	—
Labour Party UK	675 905[b]	—	—	265 927[b]	—	—	—	—	—	—	200 000[c]
SPÖ Austria	—	719 881	—	—	—	620 141	—	—	400 000	—	—

Source: Mair and van Biezen (2001).
[a]Tom Bentley and Paul Miller (2004).
[b]Seyd and Whiteley (1992, p. 16).
[c]Woodley (2005).

Table 3: Trade union density (% of workforce), 1975–1995

Country	*1975*	*1985*	*1990*	*1995*
Austria	59	61	56	52
France	23	17	15	9
Germany	37	36	35	32
Greece	—	17	15	11
Ireland	60	61	57	53
Italy	49	42	39	38
Netherlands	37	28	26	26
Spain	19	14	17	17
The United Kingdom	52	49	38	32

Source: Bentley *et al*, (2000).

Table 4: Respondents belonging to a trade union (%)

	1981	*1990*	*2000*	*Change*
France	10	5	4	−6
East Germany	—	55	8	−47
West Germany	16	15	7	−9
Ireland	14	9	10	−4
Italy	8	6	6	−2
Portugal	—	5	2	−3
Spain	6	3	4	−2
The United Kingdom	21	14	8	−13

Source: European Values Survey (2008, p. 40).

The damage to socialist party membership showed that the problem was not just a reaction to events in the Soviet Union. Commentators thought that perhaps this reflected a broader collapse of the left. Both Communist and socialist parties had an intimate relationship to trades unions, and pointedly, these too showed signs of decline (Table 3).

The European Values Survey also registered a decline in trade union membership in most west European countries (Table 4).

Some commentators related the decline of organised labour to a shift from manual to clerical labour (Hobsbawm, 1981; Andre Gorz, 1982). And Trade Unions were certainly important supporters of Socialist Parties, both in terms of funding and campaigning. As such, their decline hurt the traditional base of socialist support. However, it is closer to the mark to understand the decline of trade union membership as related to a decline in militancy, as indicated in the fall in days lost through strike action (Table 5 and Figure 1).

Table 5: Days lost in strike action, Germany, peak years

1971	*1978*	*1984*	*1992*	*2000*
4 484 000	4 281 000	5 618 000	1 545 000	200 000

Source: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (2000).

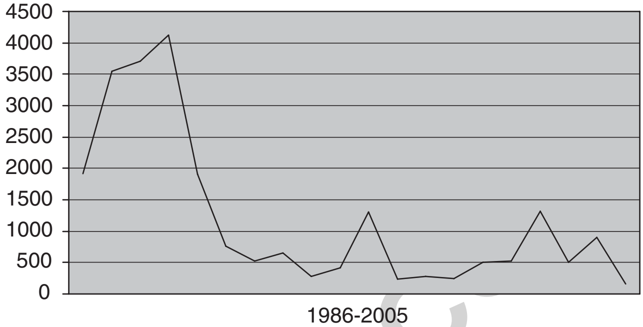

Figure 1: Days lost through strike action, the United Kingdom (000s).
Source: ONS.

On the other hand, the era of liberal-capitalist triumphalism as announced in Francis Fukuyama's (1992) essay, 'The End of History?', was short lived. Not long after the socialist left fell into disarray, many of the parties of the pro-market right found themselves in comparable difficulties. The French UDF shrank from 145 000 members in 1978 to half of that in 1999, while its Gaullist counterpart was reduced from 760 347 to just 80 424; Britain's Conservative Party lost one million members between 1973 and 1994, leaving it at just 500 000 strong (*Times*, 11 October 1994); the German CDUs decline was more modest, losing just a tenth of its 600 000 members between 1980 and 1998. The social constituencies that the right depended upon as a counterweight to the city-based socialist votes, like farmers' lobbies, were demobilised, as organised labour had been before them.

The fact that conservative parties, too, were subject to the downward trend in membership suggested that this was a wider problem of party identification in which political elites had lost contact with the public. Now it was not the decline of the left that people were talking about, but the End of both Left and Right. A prescient PCI leader Achille Ochetto said 'We are at the end of an epoch, the epoch of opposed systems' (1988, p. 8). The parties of the right were in a sense defined by, even dependent upon, the threat of socialism to mobilise their support – once that threat diminished, so too did their appeal.

Mass parties were like a pyramid with their tip in the constituent assembly and a broad base in the population. One should not romanticise the rule of the party machines (Kiely, 2005, p. 283) – they were often rigidly bureaucratic and deeply conservative. Still, their existence allowed questions of economic and social policy to be routinely debated not by experts alone, but by thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of ordinary people in halls and clubs across Europe.

The End of Policy

Membership numbers of political parties and strike statistics reflect only part of a broader decline, indeed the exhaustion, of mass political projects. Perhaps this was most dramatic for the communist project, disproved, as it were, by the failure of the Soviet countries to offer working people either security or prosperity. But Keynesian solutions, too, had been equally ‘disproved’, not least by the inability of French and Greek socialists to offer national strategies of recovery during the 1980s. Their attempts to raise levels of spending failed as consumers took advantage of liberalised European markets to spend their wages on German and Italian goods rather than domestic products. The national economic policy of ‘Keynesianism in one country’ was no match for the international spread of liberal capitalism.

At the same time, the conservative drive to free the economy from socialist controls proved to be a comparable disappointment. The idea here was that entrepreneurs would emerge spontaneously once freed from the shackles of state regulation. Instead, Western Europe’s timid capitalists proved to be peculiarly risk averse (Unice, 2000, p. 16; DTI, 2001, p. 68), unwilling to invest unless governments planned the projects and guaranteed them against losses. The victorious free market floundered in the 1990s as growth petered out, this time without any labour movement to blame for pushing up wage costs. National capitalism proved to be as big a disappointment as state socialism and national Keynesianism.

What was it, then, that was lost in the decline of these radically divergent forms of political ideology? It was the intellectual framework of *collective subjectivity*. According to Karl Korsch (1977, p. 174), left-wing political projects, whether reformist, syndicalist or Leninist, all ‘attempted to make the subjective action of the working class rather than the objective development of capitalism’ primary. ‘Socialism’ in Lukacs’ telling description, ‘is societal self-determination’ (1991, p. 97), or in more familiar terms – social democracy. On the right, capitalism was not seen as a barrier to human freedom, but as its basis. The stress here was on individual liberty. With the depletion of political projects of both left and right, the contest over the soul of the nation was

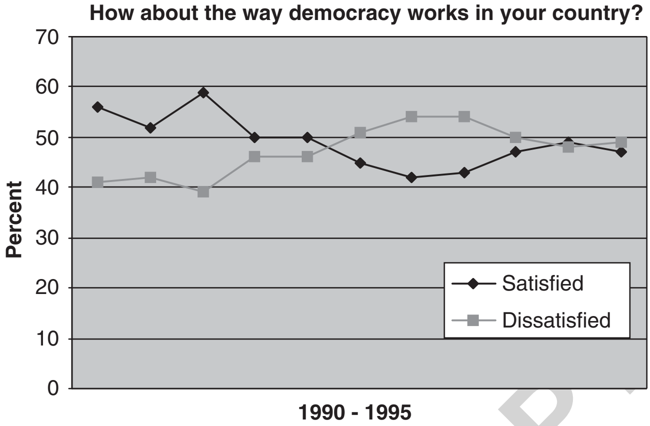

Figure 2: How Europeans felt about their democracies, 1990–1995.
Source: Eurobarometer.

closed. National assemblies still opened their doors, but their ideological connection to mass society was weakened.

As a result, governments across Western Europe suffered from a crisis of popular disaffection (Figure 2). Disaffection manifested itself as a cynicism towards politics and as a deep-seated distrust of political leaders. This was a crisis of legitimacy. More often than not, these attitudes consolidated into a greater public appetite for scandal (Table 6). In part, this was because of a growing intolerance towards the kind of corruption that had been accepted when parties were popular – trade union subscriptions that seemed unremarkable were cast as corrupt, and with party dues sliding, elites became increasingly reliant on donations from big business. In part, the preoccupation with scandal was a willingness to see corruption even when it was not there. In Belgium, distrust of the Dehaene government was so intense that many people were persuaded that ministers must have colluded with the paedophile killer Marc Dutroux in his escape from jail. The EU's polling of citizens' attitudes towards their national democratic institutions demonstrates the crisis of legitimacy that lies behind the proliferation of scandals.

It was in Italy, though, that the crisis of legitimacy was most intense, leading to the disintegration of the political class and the suspension of parliamentary democracy. Corruption scandals saw leading politicians accused of constructing a city of bribes, *tangentopoli*. First the Socialist Party leader Bettino Craxi fled to Tunisia. Then the former Prime Minister Giuliani Andreotti was jailed pending investigation under the Milan Magistrates 'clean hands' campaign

Table 6: A crisis of legitimacy

- *Italy, April 1992*: Magistrates launched 'Tangentopoli' investigations, bringing corruption charges against leaders Craxi and Andreotti.
- *Britain, July 1994 – May 1997*: 'Cash for questions' scandal.
- *France, 1998*: Ministerial flats scandal damaged Jacques Chirac.
- *Belgium, 1998*: Ministerial cover-up in child torture case shook Jean-Luc Dehaene's government.
- *Switzerland, 1998–2000*: Sustained campaign over Jewish bank deposits.
- *Germany, 2000*: CDU funding scandal.
- *Italy, 2005*: Renewed corruption investigations into Premier Berlusconi.
- *Britain, 2006*: 'loans for peerages' allegations.
- *France, 2006*: Prime Minister de Villepin accused of smearing his rival Sarkozy in the Clearstream scandal.
- *Greece, 2008*: Siemens' bribery of government exposed.
- *Britain, 2009*: MPs second-home expenses scandal.

(in and out of prison for years, he was eventually cleared of all charges in 2003). Andreotti's party imploded as more and more politicians were jailed. Special powers granted magistrates in the pursuit of the Red Brigades in the 1970s were turned on the political elite (Negri, 2004, pp. 16–17) and the Carabinieri were sent to arrest representatives as they sat in the Chamber of Deputies. Crucially, the public supported the magistrates until, exhausted by the campaign, they turned to the charismatic figure of Silvio Berlusconi and his Forza Italia party to bring an end to the uncertainty (in 2009 the party changed its name to *Il Popolo della Libertà*). The Christian Democrats had for years succeeded in avoiding criticism of their links with business and in some cases organised crime, by pointing the greater threat of a mass Communist movement. As that danger subsided, the Christian Democrats' ability to mobilise middle class supporters collapsed, and the voters recoiled from the party's seedier connections.

The Italian crisis was particularly intense, but it contained all the elements of the legitimacy crisis that was overtaking European governments in general: an intense distrust of the political class; allegations of corruption; the emergence of extra-parliamentary institutions exercising authority over elected deputies; the emergence of new, populist parties articulating the anti-political mood.

Perhaps as a corollary of this disaffection, votes increasingly came to be cast for 'third parties' or protest candidates. Right-wing parties like the Front National in France, the Pim Fortuyn List in Holland, Jorg Haider's Freedom Party in Austria, and Forza Italia have done well. So too have regional parties like the Lega Nord, the Scottish Nationalist Party and Herri Batasuna. In 1989 the Green Party won 8 per cent of European votes, and in Germany, the Green

Party became part of the ruling coalition in 1998. Protest candidates of the far left also did well, like France's Arlette Laguiller, and Britain's George Galloway. In 2005 even the communists made a comeback playing key roles in a new protest party, Die Linke in Germany, and in the successful campaign for a No vote on the proposed European Constitution in France. In 2009, communists won the general election in Moldova.

Although the traditional mass mobilisations of the labour movement and of rival conservative supporters were in abeyance, the depletion of the party system actually created a need for random demonstrations and collective gatherings. These were fleeting in character and left few institutional structures, although they were often very large in number. The 1990s saw millions march against child abuse in Belgium, and thousands in Portsmouth, England; tens of thousands mourned the unexpected deaths of Princess Diana, Pim Fortuyn and Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh; unofficial and alternative music festivals were popular in Britain and Germany; farmers protested in favour of fox-hunting in Britain in 2001; anti-racists rallied to the cause of immigrants *sans papiers* taking refuge in a Paris church in 1996; between 1999 and 2001 anti-capitalists protested in London, Cologne, Bologna, Prague and Nice. Culminating on 15 February 2003, European capitals were once again site to mass protests, this time against the war in Iraq. In 2005 a coalition of the revived left organisations pulled together in a successful campaign for a vote against the proposed EU constitution. No doubt there is much that is interesting or positive about many of these developments, but they are for the most part less rooted movements than before, and were, considered as a whole, a reflection of the declining authority of the old party system (Heartfield, 2003).

Depoliticisation as a European Process

Depoliticisation is a process that affects national polities, but it is also a pan-European problem. Grasping the ways in which depoliticisation is transmitted *across* national boundaries is no easy task: ideology plays a key role, as does emulation; market transactions across borders are important but do not predetermine political action; elite socialisation is an important factor in determining how governing bodies cope with the new conditions; cross-border meetings among civil society bodies and political parties also act as transmission belts through, for example, the adoption of novel or 'lean' organisations or anti-corruption campaigning. What is most marked, however, is how the various attempts by political actors and governments to negotiate the new conditions of the post-Cold War era have only accentuated the underlying trend towards depoliticisation.

One way to understand the crisis of legitimacy of the 1990s is to contrast it with a previous era in which the problems facing governing elites were quite different. The 1970s were also characterised by a crisis of legitimation (Offe, 1984). The difference was that this crisis did not arise because of popular disaffection or demobilisation, but rather from its opposite – what the *Financial Times* called 'a revolt of rising expectations' (in Brown, 1975, p. 7). Indeed, ruling strategy in the early 1980s was largely an attempt to *contain* expectations. In the first instance, this meant a struggle to contain wage demands and state spending on interest groups. Friedrich Hayek recalled that, having persuaded Labour Chancellor Denis Healey that he could not spend his way out of a crisis, there were still 'onslaughts of popular forms of Keynesianism' to be faced (Hayek, 1978, p. 223). Through a series of set-piece confrontations – the renegotiation of the *scala mobile* in Italy in 1984, the reversal of France's socialist economic plan in 1982, the steel and miners' strikes in Britain in 1980 and 1984 – the advanced of organised labour was halted and, then, reversed. Following Margaret Thatcher's lead, European governments embraced neo-liberal economics and set about dismantling socialism. What they succeeded in doing was disaggregating social collectivities that were not only the basis of the left's appeal, but also of the post-war social consensus. In short, the 1990s were the working out of social processes set in train in the 1970s and 1980s.

The governing styles of European elites have changed to take account of these new conditions. Most problematically, policy-making operates in a near void. Once, for example, competition for the popular vote had been an important disciplinary factor in the formulation of public policy. Alongside debates in constituent assemblies, this was how a modern society came to reflect upon itself. As these two mechanisms declined in significance, elites were flying blind, guessing wildly at what a popular policy might be where once these would have been developed in dialogue with broader social groups. Parliamentary sovereignty was diminished in favour of extra-parliamentary sources of authority, often judicial like the Italian magistrates, or administrative, like the British Parliamentary Standards Commissioner, or even in supra-national bodies like the European Commission and the European Court of Human Rights. Social questions were depoliticised, reduced to matters of administration to be resolved by auditors rather than electorates. The public was consulted through market research, focus groups and questionnaires, that is, as a passive mass, rather than being mobilised in a contest of clearly demarcated political platforms. Political ideology lost its contours of left and right, posing questions as 'modernisation or die'. 'A Social Democracy that spent its time reminiscing about the past would, at best, be a glorious memory', wrote German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (2003), adding presciently that, 'at worst it would become a reactionary force'.

The End of Sovereignty in Europe

The contemporary model of apolitical social administration favours cooperation between European states and their integration in a pan-European entity. Of course it can be argued that however healthy European democracies are, states still interact according to the pursuit of national interest. But that would be to see national interest as the self-evident datum of economic or military competition, irrespective of the process in which that national interest is constituted. And increasingly, elite actors derive authority from their relations with each other, often via the EU, than from national constituencies. In 1980, for example, the modernisation plan for the Belgian Cockerill–Sambre steel works was struck down under the D'Avignon plan to limit output, leading to violent demonstrations: 'One also suspects that the government concerned was delighted to pass the buck to the European Commission, and thus lay the blame for an unpopular decision to the "faceless bureaucrats in the Berlaymont"', write Tsoukalis and Strauss (1987, p. 210). In Italy, Giulio Amato's caretaker government, already paralysed by the emerging corruption scandal, succeeded where previous governments had failed in persuading Bruno Trentin of the CGIL to agree to end the costly inflation indexing of wages, the *Scala Mobile* on 31 July 1992. Amato did not confront labour directly, as Andreotti had when reforming the agreement in 1984, but by reference to the 'external constraint' of the European Monetary System. According to Minister Guido Carli, writing in 1993, 'the European Union represented an alternative path for the solution of problems which we were not managing to handle through the normal channels of government and parliament' (quoted in Ginsborg, 2001, p. 243; also see Moravcsik, 1998, pp. 74–75).

What we find time and again is that policy innovation at the European level is framed in terms of *avoiding* nationally based ambitions. Elites often speak of 'locking-in' reforms as in 'Germany's desire to "lock in" a guarantee of low inflation by creating an autonomous ECB' or the French government 'lock in austerity' by subordinating spending to the European Monetary System. Raymond Barre's government committed France to 'microeconomic austerity and macroeconomic discipline'. The European Monetary System was a means to 'institutionalise disinflation' (Moravcsik, 1998, p. 386). British chancellor Nigel Lawson justified subordinating exchange rates to the European system as an economic policy based on rules rather than discretion (Lawson, 1993, p. 1024). Lawson explained to Geoffrey Howe that an 'externally imposed exchange rate discipline' would help avoid the 'political pressures for relaxation … as the election approaches' (Lawson, 1993, p. 111). It is hard to justify binding future parliaments from the perspective of national sovereignty, but increasingly European leaders found themselves less willing to submit to the judgements of national electorates and correspondingly more comfortable with pan-European agreements and obligations.

The legitimacy crisis that engulfed the European ruling elite in the 1990s had a direct impact upon the framing of foreign policy. In fact, the legitimacy crisis led to an explosion of foreign policy initiatives that were peculiarly at odds with any simple idea of national interest. Indeed, it was the *moralisation* of foreign policy, a disjuncture between national interest and diplomacy, which tended to accelerate the rate of diplomatic activity. Politicians who were struggling to find a purpose at home were reinvigorated by the prospect of doing good elsewhere. Far from being indifferent to domestic considerations, the crisis of legitimacy in Western European societies was driving elite choices both domestically and internationally.

The disintegration of the Yugoslav Republic is a particularly good example of this process. Michael MacLay, a special advisor to Bosnian High Representative Carl Bildt, saw German willingness to pursue its own national agenda as a cause of the conflict, because her unilateral decision to recognise Croatian independence emboldened the separatists (MacLay, 1998, pp. 88–89). Early in the Bosnia crisis, UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali was moved to complain that the Security Council 'is becoming more like the General Assembly: it is making demands that it knows cannot be implemented' (Boutros-Ghali, 1999, p. 42). Gesture was more important than implementation, and the point of the gesture was to demonstrate the selfless moral virtues of West European nations. It was an attitude that was consolidated in British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook's 'Ethical Foreign Policy'. Taking over military command in Kosovo from Mike Jackson, German General Reinhardt (1999) made the point that two times previously German soldiers had come to exploit the Balkans: 'It is the privilege of my generation that I am the first to come here to help, not to fight'.

The remoralisation of foreign policy relates, in part, to the Cold War – the moral compass of foreign policy before 1989. For example, Austrian Foreign Minister Wolfgang Schüssel (1998) saw the Kosovo conflict as re-orienting NATO and forcefully rejected the argument that 'NATO is a product of the Cold War and has therefore outlived its usefulness under the conditions of the new Europe … You just have to switch on your TV set to see Albanian refugees in Kosovo brandishing self-made posters bearing the inscription "Help, NATO, help!"' The sense of moral purpose so sorely lacking in the West is restored by the grateful pleas of Eastern Europeans. At a photo-call at the Stenkovec Refugee Camp, Tony Blair explained that there were no selfish interests behind NATO's action: 'This is not a battle for NATO, this is not a battle for territory, this is a battle for humanity, it is a just cause, it is a rightful cause'. Blair continued by explaining that Milosevic would 'be defeated so these people can once again become symbols of hope, humanity and peace'.

As David Chandler (2006, p. 71) puts it, ‘the language of “interests” has been superseded by that of “Other-regarding” ethics which appear to have taken the politics of power and interests out of foreign policy’.

The new model of selfless diplomacy, though, had its pitfalls. Contests to demonstrate moral rectitude proved prone to spinning out of control. In November 2002, Britain and France suspended a planned summit after Jacques Chirac read Tony Blair’s meaning to be that he, Chirac, was a racist because he would not support third world farmers’ access to European markets. Indeed accusations of ‘racist!’ and ‘fascist!’ are as common between European politicians as they are in a Junior Common Room. In September 2002 German justice minister Herta Däubler-Gmelin had to resign after comparing George Bush’s foreign policy to Hitler’s. In July 2003 Italian premier suggested German MEP Martin Schulz audition for a part as a concentration camp guard. At a lunch for party leaders after the April 2009 G20 summit, French President Nicolas Sarkozy let slip his low opinion of his fellow world leaders: Spain’s Zapatero was ‘dim’, Germany’s Angela Merkel was a ‘follower’, and Commission President Barroso was ‘absent’.

No doubt the exchange of insults is all very childish, but it is a sign that High Diplomacy is also subject to the hollowing out that we can see in mainstream politics. The impression is one of a degree of skittishness among political leaders, tending to play to the gallery rather than reflecting soberly on the national interest. Both Sarkozy and Berlusconi are thought to have deliberately honed their ‘plain-speaking’ style of insulting foreign leaders. In the past, the political process acted as a discipline on leaders, curbing their personal eccentricities, but in today’s era of lean government, emotional responses are much closer to the surface.

The Saviour of Civil Society?

One indicator of the declining efficacy of European nation-states is the extending authority of *non-governmental organisations* (NGOs). The expansion of the role of these international aid and advocacy organisations is much commented upon. When Tony Blair complained of the NGOs ‘malign tyranny over public debate’ (Blair, 2006), he was echoing complaints made by Vladmir Putin, Thabo Mbeki and the Palestine National Authority, all of whom have objected at different times to the ways in which NGOs can undermine national priorities. For the EU, though, being itself a trans-national project, NGOs have proved a useful interlocutor between the Commission and the public. Indeed, a European Commission discussion paper (Prodi and

Kinnock, 2000, p. 4) makes clear just how close relations are between the EU and NGOs:

> At present is it estimated that over €1000 million a year is allocated to NGO projects directly by the Commission, the major part in the field of external relations for development co-operation, human rights, democracy programmes, and, in particular, humanitarian aid (on average €400 million). Other important allocations are in the social (approximately €70 million), educational (approximately €50 million), and environment sectors within the EU. Several hundred NGOs in Europe and world-wide are receiving funds from the EU.

Of course, the EU not only funds NGOs, but also consults widely with them, entrenching the institutional lines of communication between Brussels and NGOs. Twice a year, for example, the biggest pan-European environmental NGOs (‘Group of Eight’) meet with the head of the commission’s environment Directorate-General to discuss its work programme (Prodi and Kinnock, 2000, p. 11). Beyond the commission, the European Parliament also solicits input from environmental lobbies. Indeed, the Directorate General for Information and Public Relations of the European Parliament sponsored the comic book *Troubled Waters*, by Dominique David. The book provides an insight into the Parliament’s ideal of political accountability. In it, a beautiful environmental lobbyist, Irina Vega, exposes water pollution by Fimoil, winning over the European Parliament to act on behalf of Europe’s Citizens (Figure 3).

But just how representative of Europe’s citizens are these NGOs? In comparison to, let us say, chambers of commerce, or trades unions, NGOs are travelling light. Their membership base is mostly passive, with decisions monopolised by a much smaller core of activists (Hopgood, 2006). And their single-issue focus militates against negotiation (Heartfield, 2005, pp. 95–96). The relationship between the EU and the NGOs gives some sense of an emerging European public realm, but its relationship with the European public is much more fleeting and much less organic than the national public realm once was to national publics.

In general, the EU has struggled to generate a positive relationship with its citizens. The best that can be said is that the EU has crossed the Rubicon from being unsatisfactory to satisfactory in the eyes of its public; it is not exactly popular, but it has become legitimate. Seemingly different from the bankrupt realm of national politics, the Union has actually gained from the tendency towards ‘anti-politics’ (Figure 4).

However, this greater European identification does not translate into support for grand projects such as enlargement or constitutionalism. On 29 May 2005, French voters rejected the proposed European Constitution in a

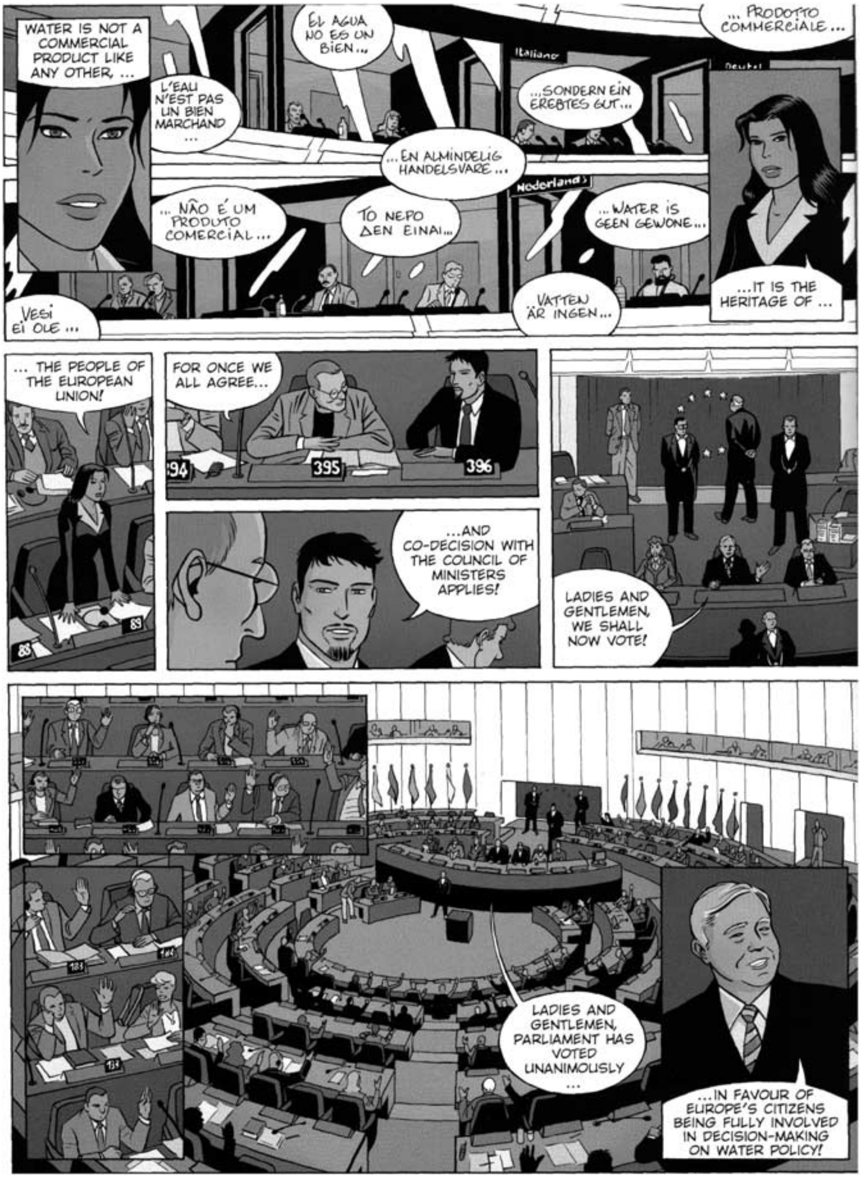
WATER IS NOT A COMMERCIAL PRODUCT LIKE ANY OTHER, ...
EL AGUA NO ES UN BIEN...
... PRODOTTO COMMERCIALE ...
Italiano
Deutsch
L'EAU N'EST PAS UN BIEN MARCHAND ...
...SONDERN EIN EREBTES GUT...
... EN ALMINDELIG HANDELSVARE ...
Nederlands
... NÃO É UM PRODUTO COMERCIAL...
TO NEPO ΔEN EINAI...
...WATER IS GEEN GEWONE...
VESI EI OLE ...
VATTEN ÄR INGEN...
...IT IS THE HERITAGE OF ...
... THE PEOPLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION!
FOR ONCE WE ALL AGREE...
394
395
396
88
89
...AND CO-DECISION WITH THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS APPLIES!
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WE SHALL NOW VOTE!
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, PARLIAMENT HAS VOTED UNANIMOUSLY ...
...IN FAVOUR OF EUROPE'S CITIZENS BEING FULLY INVOLVED IN DECISION-MAKING ON WATER POLICY!

Figure 3: The European Parliament's NGO fantasy.

referendum, followed by Dutch voters on 1 June. Reflecting on her experience of the 'Yes' campaign, Simone Veil (2009, p. 162) thought the defeat showed that national identification was getting stronger. But the anti-political mood of

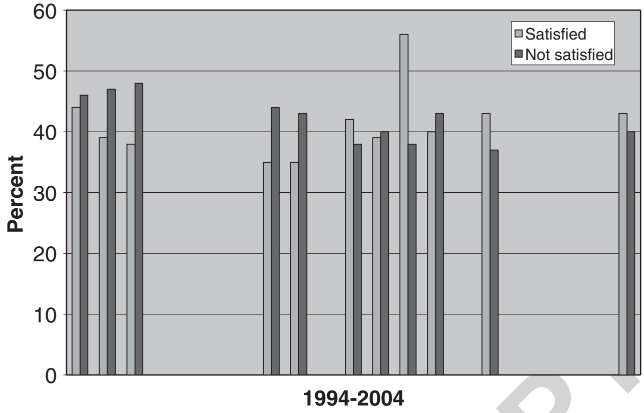

Figure 4: Satisfaction with democratic institutions.

the ‘No’ campaigners is better understood as an outcome of disengagement from mainstream politics, including national politics. The constitution, supported by mainstream political leaders – to its disadvantage – was opposed by a more *ad hoc* coalition of anti-capitalists and extremist parties. The anti-political mood could damage European institutions just as much as it has done with national institutions.

Oftentimes, the case for Europe tends to be presented in negative rather than positive terms. One version of Europe’s special claim on our allegiances raises it as an alternative to US *hyper-puissance*. With younger Europeans marching in millions against the ‘Coalition of the Willing’, it is not hard to understand its appeal to an ageing and out-of-touch political establishment. But both Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schroeder learned that opposing US policy in Iraq could not cement a relationship with the young, all the more so since the anti-war movement was in its very nature, *ad hoc* and fleeting. In their manifesto ‘February 15, or what binds Europeans together’, the late Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas (2005) sought to connect the anti-war movement to European identity (15 February 2003 was the date on which the largest European anti-war demonstrations were coordinated). But it was an interestingly downbeat connection that they drew. What binds Europeans together, it seems, is working through the experience of loss of Empire; and ‘with the growing distance of imperial domination and the history of colonialism, the European powers also got a chance for reflective distance from themselves’ (2005, p. 12). Habermas and Derrida’s Europe is an anti-identification, in which overcoming ‘a bellicose past’ teaches the lesson that ‘the successful history of the European Union may have confirmed Europeans in their belief that the domestication of state power demands a mutual limitation of sovereignty, on the global as well as on the nation-state level' (2005, p. 12). The point of the EU is to formalise the delimitation of national sovereignty.

What we find, therefore, is a pan-European political process of demobilising mass movements, or of depoliticisation. By the 1980s, national consensus was a luxury that elites felt they could no longer afford, and sought instead to free themselves from nationally formulated expectations. They invested supranational institutions, most pointedly the EU, with authority beyond national publics. The development of the EU since the end of the Cold War is a model of what a post-sovereign politics looks like. Sadly, it has served as the institutionalisation of the apolitical style of social administration rather than as an alternative form of popular democracy.

Acknowledgement

Thanks to Andrew Arato, Chris Bickerton, David Chandler, Peter Ramsay, Justin Rosenberg, Marjo Koivosto, George Lawson, Robbie Shilliam and Jan Zielonka, for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

About the Author

James Heartfield works on the interaction between European integration and mass participation. He has written broadly on depoliticisation and new social movements, including *Green Capitalism: Manufacturing Scarcity in an Age of Abundance* (Mute, 2008); and *The Death of the Subject Explained* (Sheffield, 2002).

References

Ash, T.G. (1994) *In Europe's Name*. New York: Vintage.

Bartelson, J. (1995) *A Genealogy of Sovereignty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bentley, T. and Miller, P. (2004) Party poopers. *Financial Times* magazine, 24 September.

Bentley, T., Jupp, B. and Stedman Jones, D. (2000) *Getting to Grips with Depoliticisation*. London: Demos.

Biersteker, T. and Weber, C. (eds.) (1996) *State Sovereignty as Social Construct*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Blair, T. (2006) On the impact of the modern world on leadership. Speech to the News Corps.Pebble Beach, CA, 30 July.

Boutros-Ghali, B. (1999) *Unvanquished, A US-UN Saga*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Brown, G. (1975) *Red Paper on Scotland*. Edinburgh, UK: EUPSB.

Chandler, D. (2006) *Empire in Denial: The Politics of State Building*. London: Pluto.

David, D. (2002) *Troubled Waters*. Brussels, Belgium: European Parliament.

Department of Trade and Industry. (2001) *Competitiveness Indicators*. London: DTI.

Derrida, J. and Habermas, J. (2005) February 15, or, what binds European together. In: D. Levy, M. Pensky and J. Torpey (eds.) *Old Europe, New Europe, Core Europe*. London: Verso.

European Values Survey. (2008) *Changing Attitudes and Beliefs from 85 Countries*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. (2000) Unions staying away from picket lines, 17 May.

Fukuyama, F. (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: The Free Press.

Ginsborg, P. (2001) *Italy and its Discontents: 1980–2001*. London: Allen Lane.

Gorz, A. (1982) *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay in Post-Industrial Socialism*. London: Pluto.

Hayek, F. (1978) *New Studies*. London: Routledge.

Heartfield, J. (2002) *The 'Death of the Subject' Explained*. Sheffield, UK: Hallam.

Heartfield, J. (2003) Capitalism and anti-capitalism. *Interventions* 7(2): 271–289.

Heartfield, J. (2005) Conceptualising the anti-capitalism movement in global civil society. In: G. Baker and D. Chandler (eds.) *Global Civil Society*. London: Routledge.

Hobsbawm, E. (1981) The forward march of labour halted? In: M. Jacques and F. Mulhearn (eds.) *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*. London: Verso.

Holloway, J. and Picciotto, S. (1978) *State and Capital: A Marxist Debate*. London: Edward Arnold.

Hopgood, S. (2006) *Keepers of the Flame*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Kiely, R. (2005) *The Clash of Globalisations*. Leiden, The Netherland: Brill.

Korsch, K. (1977) *Revolutionary Theory*. Austin, TX: University of Texas.

Lawson, N. (1993) *The View from No. 11*. London: Corgi.

Lukacs, G. (1991) *The Process of Democratization*. New York: New York State University Press.

MacLay, M. (1998) *The European Union*. Stroud, UK: Sutton.

Mair, P. and van Biezen, I. (2001) Party membership in twenty European democracies. *Party Politics* 7(1): 5–21.

Moravcsik, A. (1998) *The Choice for Europe*. London: Routledge.

Negri, A. (2004) *Negri on Negri*. London: Routledge.

Occhetto, A. (1988) Report to the central committee. in *The Italian Communists*, Rome: PCI, Foreign Bulletin of the PCI, No. 4, October – December.

Offe, C. (1984) *Contradictions of the Welfare State*. London: Macmillan.

Peeters, M. (2003) The principle of participatory democracy in the new Europe: A critical analysis. Paper given at conference on *Nongovernmental Organizations: The Growing Power of an Unelected Few*, 11 June 2003, American Enterprise Institute.

Philpott, D. (2001) *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How Ideas Shaped Modern International Relations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Prodi, R. and Kinnock, N. (2000) *The Commission and Non-Governmental Organisations: Building a Stronger Partnership*. Brussels, Belgium: European Commission.

Reinhardt, K. (1999) Speech on assuming K-FDR Command, Pristina, 9 October.

Robertson, G. (1999) *Crimes Against Humanity*. London: Allen Lane.

Rosenberg, J. (1994) *The Empire of Civil Society*. London: Verso.

Schröder, G. (2003) Modernise or die. London, *Guardian*, 8 July, http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2003/jul/08/eu_policy.

Schüssel, W. (1998) Europe's Security and the new NATO, Austrian Foreign Ministers Address to 1998 NATO workshop. Vienna, Austria, Centre for Strategic Decision Research, http://www.csdr.org/98Book/schuessel98.htm.

Seyd, P. and Whiteley, P. (1992) *Labour's Grass Roots*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Teschke, B. (2003) *The Myth of 1648*. London: Verso.

Tsoukalis, L. and Strauss, R. (1987) Community politics and steel. In: Y. Meny and V. Wright (eds.) *The Politics of Steel*. New York: De Gruyter.

UNICE. (2000) *Stimulating Creativity and Innovation in Europe: The Benchmarking Report*. Brussels, Belgium: UNICE.

Veil, S. (2009) *A Life*. London: Haus Publishing.

Wendt, A. (2004) The state as a person in international theory. *Review of International Studies* 30(2): 289–316.

Woodley, T. (2005) The trade unions now occupy the centre ground. *Guardian* 20 October.