

This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.

Author(s): Palonen, Kari

Title: Editorial: The European Union as an Agency of Politicisation

Year: 2014

Version: Published version

Copyright: © Author 2014

Rights: CC BY 4.0

Rights url: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Please cite the original version:

Palonen, K. (2014). Editorial: The European Union as an Agency of Politicisation. *Redescriptions : Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*, 17(2), 133-139.
<https://doi.org/10.7227/R.17.2.1>

Editorial

The European Union as an Agency of Politicisation

Kari Palonen, University of Jyväskylä

The European Union is an important political innovation of the recent decades. It is a contingent result of conflicting political actions, and its originality is difficult to appreciate even for the politicians who have contributed to the formation of the Union itself. The EU also poses major challenges for sets a major challenge to political theorists, who as we can read from Claudia Wiesner's review in this issue, have to date hardly contributed to the understanding of it.

In this editorial I speculate on aspects of Union politics with a Weberian style of political imagination. For me the EU is a major agency of politicisation today. By politicisation I refer to the activities that open up and make visible aspects of contingency that have not been experienced as such before. Politicisation may be intentional, connected to making the phenomena in question controversial, or it may be an unintended by-product of political struggles. Thus far EU politicisation appears rather as a by-product of European integration. This 'passive' politicisation — *Verpolitisierung* in German — is, nonetheless, sufficient to create new horizons of contingency for professional and occasional politicians which can be used as occasions for conscious politicking by those concerned with this politicisation.

EU membership creates a new sense for contingency in terms of increasing the complexity of politics. The Union blurs the divide between domestic and foreign politics by creating new union-level institutions and practices that make the EU a political phenomenon 'internal' to the member states, yet different from merely domestic politics. This ambiguity opens up new opportunities for politicking — in the formal sense of referring to any political action.

In a Weberian manner we can first ask: in what sense and to what extent do EU politics alter the type of personality expected of first-rank politicians in EU countries? Becoming a professional politician in an EU member state is to an increasing degree different from becoming one in countries outside the Union. The Swiss or Norwegian politicians appear today provincial, because they lack

the opportunities to learn the new range of activities that their counterparts in the EU member states have been slowly learning.

Secondly, Union politics provokes among its citizens an insight into the contingency of their own situation. EU membership dissolves its citizens' old identities, loyalties and community bounds. For the individual EU citizen, all this means the breaking down of traditional forms of dependence on quasi-natural units. Something that has been regarded as given and stable, the ways of living for Union citizens, is turning into something highly contingent and controversial, and awaiting a political response from them. A 'simple life' without the need to worry about politics is no longer a realistic option for the EU citizen. Or rather, this political status should have been evident with the rise of universal suffrage and parliamentary government, were it not for the different quasi-natural bonds that have led to a *de facto* postponement of the chances for politicisation. Only within the EU has Weber's insight from *Politik als Beruf* (1919) that "we all are occasional politicians" become a lived experience.

* * *

The European Parliament is still elected by treating the member states as separate electoral districts, for which a quota of MEPs is assigned according to the size of the population. Nonetheless, the very presence of the EU in the horizon of political careers is a remarkable novelty not only for the MEPs and government ministers (compared with their colleagues outside or before entry into EU membership), but also for member-state parliamentarians, local politicians, party officials etc., who experience how the EU has changed expectations and the quality criteria for professional politicians. Similar to the way playing "European football" in the Champions League or the Europe League transcends both the local leagues and the national teams, neglecting the political games of the European Union relegates a politician to remain a player in the provincial leagues of politics.

What then are the new rules, practices and competences for an EU-level professional politician? To some extent they apply to all politicians with EU level ambitions, and in certain respects they differ according to the current character of the EU institutions.

The European Parliament still has deficits in terms of the chances it affords for individual MEP initiatives and in the role of plenary debates. However, the internal rules of procedure and parliamentary practices are based on the free mandate of the members. The absence of a clear government vs. opposition divide allows the voice of individual MEPs at least occasionally to count more than in the member state parliaments with fixed majorities and stronger whip pressures. The Francophone committee system of *rapporteurs* provides another occasion for manifesting political competencies specific to the EP in that the

politician may both give a personal stamp to EP amendments and rally the support of a majority of the committee. The chances to create an individual profile as a European-level politician do really exist in the EP — but a great number of MEPs fail to learn how to do politics at the European level. Despite the fact that voting according to the party lines is in many cases conspicuous in the EP, this is a surface phenomenon that tends to cover over the fact that central controversies frequently cross party lines.

In the two Councils (the European Council and the Council of Ministers), the member-state ministers must act in a double role: as state ministers and also as EU ‘senators’, that is, as parliamentarians of the second chamber. Promises to the home audience to advance their ‘national interest’ simply cannot work: as an ‘EU senator’, no minister can always say no and threaten to veto. Ministers must also learn the senatorial form of acting politically, in forming majorities and agreeing on compromises about Union policy, which then must be further negotiated with the Parliament. They have to know the political constellations of the entire Union, along party lines or by other criteria, which themselves remain matters of controversy and are in practice alterable through the course of debate and negotiation.

The members of the European Commission, EU’s *de facto* government responsible to the Parliament, are still elected from among politicians of the member states, one from each. A sign of the Commission’s key position in the Europeanisation of politics is the fact that Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen recently resigned in order to become the Finnish Commissioner (replacing Olli Rehn, who was elected to the EP). Commissioners act politically in a cabinet-like manner and they are elected after the EP conducts hearings on their political records and assesses their suitability for the actual commission post. They do not represent their member country nor are they just ministerial heads of the bureaucracy (which they used to be, until the empowerment of the EP in recent treaties); instead they have to learn the game of working as parliamentary responsible cabinet ministers. A crucial feature of Westminster parliamentarism, namely that the ministers retain their parliamentary seats, is still missing from the EP, which strengthens the commissioners’ loyalty to their Commission offices and weakens their parliamentary link, although with the full parliamentarisation of the Commission this rule might change.

The three directly or indirectly elected EU institutions are consciously multilingual. The resources for translation are limited and in order to intervene in debate there is frequently no time to follow a translation. EU politics operates by verbal dexterity, playing on between the historical and rhetorical differences between words in the various languages. An increasingly cosmopolitan and polyglot type of politician is required if one wants to become a first-rank player in the EU’s political game. While a long trend has been towards specialist politicians who can act as experts in committees and ministries, the Euro-

peanisation of politicians has good chances to break this trend. We can expect a rise of political generalists, even a renaissance of a more humanistic type of competent politician sensitive to cultural differences and visions broad enough to set EU politics above intergovernmental diplomacy.

At the EU level the old populist idea of politicians' merely being a mouth-piece for their electorates is out of question, although the Eurosceptic parties have a nostalgia for that. The electorates of a candidate or a party have no uniform opinions in national elections either, if they ever had. More importantly, the key political questions on the agenda of the EP and the other EU institutions are put on the agenda increasingly in a manner about which EU citizens have no distinct opinions, especially concerning the specific parliamentary form in which agenda items must be presented. The EU level politicians must regularly face the consequences of making unpopular decisions and they do well to ignore the Eurobarometer surveys. They do the best service to EU citizens by not being Gallup-poll democrats, but by acting as consciously professional politicians and meeting the EU requirements for them.

* * *

At the same time the EU citizens can understand themselves as occasional politicians. All this is, of course, in contrast to the technocratic image of politics of many official EU documents. For them, written by career officials of the Commission or external specialists, politics is a dirty word, referring to an activity that they want to replace by "governance". This image is completely out of touch with the politicising powers of the EU and the chances to understand the Union as a project of increasing the insight into what is contingent and controversial.

The EU has a reputation of being a stronghold of free-market liberalism. The concept of liberty implied in EU politics cannot, however, be reduced to freedom from interference. On the contrary, the EU has done much for the republican or neo-Roman concept of freedom by removing many practices that have maintained dependence for the citizens. The Eurozone and the Schengen Area enable EU citizens a margin of indifference towards many categories on which they have been classified previously to be dependent.

By its very existence the Union politicises the situation of the citizens of the member states. EU citizenship breaks down existing quasi-natural identities, loyalties and 'we'-relationships. Whereas in nation states the old identities were frequently regarded as safety belts, EU citizenship now illustrates how such quasi-natural units has been institutions of dependence. Politicisation as a dissolution or shattering of identities and loyalties means that nobody is doomed to dependence on these quasi-natural entities. The EU opens up to its citizens the chance to distance themselves from them.

The EU dissolves a number of criteria of 'being' or 'identity' and the forms of dependency based on them. For example, the voting clienteles who tended to make of elections a registration of a given pre-existing identity have been replaced by the understanding of elections as a choice of oneself, as Jean-Paul Sartre, that notorious non-voter, put it in an essay written in the mid-1960s.

Sociologists, in particular, tend to worry about the lack of "European identity" among EU citizens, and the Commission documents contain much propaganda in favour of such identity. All that again mistakes the character of the politicisations enabled by the EU. EU citizens have to take stand on their relationship to the EU not only in the EP elections but in numerous situations of their daily life as well. Weber's formula must now be read: "We are all occasional EU politicians". This refers to the fact that EU citizens are now learning, more or less willingly, to situate themselves to the more contingent and complex political agency of the Union.

When citizens once experience their situation as political, this politicisation cannot easily be turned down, except by extremely repressive means (as currently used in Hungary under the Orbán government), and even then the results never can be guaranteed. Polemics against the EU and its politicising powers of disturbing fixed identities have, of course, been used as a tactic for gaining power shares, which itself is already dependent on the EU as politicising agency. The anti-EU parties testify *volens nolens* to the politicising powers of the Union, for it is a necessary condition for their protest.

As a polity the EU is neither a fixed thing nor an impersonal agent, but a distinct complex of chances, to use a Weberian concept once more. What kinds of chances there are or how much the EU differs, for example, from the chance complex called 'the state' are matters of political disputes and academic struggles. Another question is how much, in what manner and in which directions the chances are and shall be used as new chances for politicking.

For the EU citizen it seems particularly difficult to get rid of the old imperial images. EU politics is not done merely by "some bureaucrats and politicians far away in Brussels", but also by ourselves, the EU citizens, here and now, in our manners of thinking, eating, travelling and so on. To act politically as a EU citizen does not need any distinct "European identity": it suffices if one makes use of the specific chances of politicisation created by the EU, especially those involving the breakdown of the existing forms of dependence and naturalising classifications of human beings, as occasions for politicking for everyone. By doing so we already act politically by making use of the distinct power shares that EU citizenship has created for us.

Both professional and occasional politicians are needed in EU and elsewhere, and the two are by no means mutually exclusive. The everyday deliberations and choices of occasional politicians provide the microscopic basis for the EU as a polity; nobody can dictate the specific action, but everyone conducts

them with their own manner of living as a practical subject matter. The specific profile of possibilities to adopt a consciously political attitude towards the everyday contingency of personal life is dependent on the EU as a polity, which provides the procedural and institutional setting for dealing with the form and content of Union politics and which makes the citizen's votes and other political acts count in this polity.

EU citizens encounter the contingent and controversial situation of living analogously to the parliamentarian and as voters, debating *pro et contra* with others and with themselves and finally making their own decisions. The forms of controversy with others and the manners of proceeding in the deliberations are less formal than in the institutions through which the professional politicians act. Still, parliaments and elections provide exemplary procedural references for understanding these more personal modes of acting politically.

* * *

With this issue of *Redescriptions* we start a new practice of publishing not only new research, but also old unpublished texts. Thanks to our editor Hubertus Buchstein, the journal has obtained rights to publish a previously unpublished lecture by the German-American constitutional lawyer and political scientist Otto Kirchheimer from 1964, *Elite - Consent - Control in the Western Political System*.

Frank Schale and Hubertus Buchstein present in their *Introduction* the author, the lecture and its historical context in a detailed manner. The first half of the 1960s is now remembered as the heyday of talking about 'depoliticisation' and 'the end of ideology', which Kirchheimer also takes up in his lecture. He is worried about the increasing concentration of powers in governments and bureaucracies and the weakening of the means of their political control also in Western democratic countries. In the article Kirchheimer proposes new instruments of such control. The discussions on the 'crisis of democracy' or similar *topoi*, dealt with by several contributions in recent volumes of *Redescriptions*, illustrate clear parallels to the problematics that Otto Kirchheimer discussed in the essay a half-century ago.

Teemu Häkkinen discusses in his article *The concept of the Royal Prerogative in parliamentary debates on the deployment of military in the British House of Commons, 1982–2003* how Westminster parliament has, indeed, gained new powers of political control of government. The ancient Athenian *ekklesia* had extensive powers over the entry of the *polis* into war. Modern governments have retained the powers of war and peace as their prerogative, leaving parliaments only the power of the purse to restrict it. According to Walter Bagehot's *The English Constitution* (1867) the British cabinet is nothing more than an executive committee of the parliament by which he meant that parliament has

nothing to fear from the cabinet. This view has, however, been used to justify governmental prerogatives. Häkkinen illustrates how House of Commons backbenchers critical of British war engagements from the Falklands to Iraq have contributed to a revision of the procedure. The parliament has obtained a limitation of the prerogative and now has the right to deliberate on the war powers not only *ex post facto*.

Julian Honkasalo's study *Hannah Arendt as an ally for queer politics?* discusses recent interpretations of Hannah Arendt's relationship to the politics of gender. With the pair the pariah vs. the parvenu as well as the concept of plurality, the scholars discussed in the article focus on an aspect of Arendt's thought that she never considered herself, namely on her 'contribution' to the queer studies. Indeed, the concept of *queer* opposes to a certain style of thinking, for which everything ambiguous, diffuse, nuanced, multifaceted and so on is considered as both a lack and a weakness. The thinker, who most militantly defends both unity and clear-cut divisions, is, of course, Carl Schmitt, with his *Freund-Feind-Unterscheidung* and his *entweder-oder* thinking. Honkasalo's piece illustrates not only Arendt's fierce opposition to Schmitt and Schmitt's notorious fascination with the anti-Semitic aspect of Nazism. We could also see in Schmitt a paradigmatic exponent of what is seen as hetero-normative thinkin.

Benoît Godin's article *Innovation after the French Revolution, or, Innovation Transformed: From Word to Concept* analyses the paradiastolic revaluation of the concept of innovation in the French post-revolutionary debates. He indicates, however, why speaking of technical and 'social' innovations has been ubiquitous, but 'political innovation' is still viewed with strong reservations. The critics tended to link that 'innovation' with the arbitrary power of rulers and governments, and it was only the new philosophy of history with the figure of 'progress' that made innovation look less dangerous. The present "obsession", as he writes, with innovation is part of the 'progress' jargon, continues despite its dismissal by perspectivist thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Weber. My suggestion to rehabilitate 'political innovation' follows in their footsteps, separating innovation from progress and understanding it as a contingent and controversial product of *debates*, for which Westminster-style parliamentary practice forms the paradigm.