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Agonistic Democracy and the Hard Eurosceptics: Towards a European Democracy?

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the implications of a substantial and consolidated “hard” Eurosceptic presence at the European level. In this context, “hard” Eurosceptics are understood as those in principled opposition either to the European Union in its current configuration, or to regional integration altogether. I challenge the portrayal of these politicians as primarily a cause of destructive crisis in the EU and ask whether they might be doing more than simply destroying the EU from within. I seek to complicate the general portrayal of the growing Eurosceptic representation at the European level, informed by a hunch that their challenge to the norms of consensus-based deliberation and decision-making in Brussels and Strasbourg might constitute a potential opening for a new type of politics in the European Union. In so doing, this paper speaks to the broader question of whether the EU is capable of fostering a genuine democratic politics, and thus narrowing its enduring legitimacy gap.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a broad consensus, among European integration theorists and empirical scholars, that the EU is on an unsustainable trajectory. A burgeoning body of scholarship on the Euro crisis, the migration crisis, and the rule of law crisis—the EU’s “polycrisis” (Juncker 2018)—has prompted attempts to retool integration theory to consider possible disintegration. These crises are typically linked to the emergence of diverse political movements across the EU, which tend to be categorised as populist movements of the left and right. Alongside their challenge to traditional national governing parties, most of these movements share a critique of the EU as currently configured, while proposing programmes for its reorientation, transformation, or dissolution.

This paper will, first, consider some elements of the changing political practice of hard Eurosceptic Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), and their interactions with their political opponents. While largely informed by events in the period from 2014 to 2019—the Eighth European Parliament—its conclusions and claims remain valid following last year’s elections, which indicate that this bloc of parliamentarians is here to stay.

Second, this paper will seek to merge insights from two theoretical contributions: the neo-neofunctionalist tradition of European integration theory, and particularly the work of Philippe Schmitter on crisis and the potential for democratisation in the EU, and Chantal Mouffe’s conceptualisation of an agonistic democratic politics. Developing an argument based on these theoretical insights, I will challenge the consensus position in the broader literature, which foregrounds the risks and sense of destructive crisis which has attended the growth of the Eurosceptic representation in European politics. I ask whether, to the extent that the growth of hard Eurosceptic representation is indeed a symptom of crisis in the Union, it might be indicative of one of the “good” crises Schmitter described as early as 1970.

CONTEXT: THE CHANGING POLITICAL PRACTICE OF THE HARD EUROSCEPTICS

This paper departs from a hunch that the hard-Eurosceptic representation in European politics might be more than merely a cause of destructive crisis in the EU and might even represent a potential opening for a new type of politics at the supranational level. This section details the observations underlying this hunch and relates these developments to several overlapping debates concerning the contemporary European Union.

These debates, which will be explored in terms of the existing literature in the following section, concern, firstly, the nature of the relationship between the EU and its citizens, usually framed in relation to what is variously described as a democratic deficit, crisis of legitimacy, or elite-public gap; secondly, and relatedly, the question of whether the European Union is capable of fostering and sustaining a genuine democratic politics; and thirdly, the relationship between the hard Eurosceptics and the EU's recent and enduring crises.

i. Transnational Eurosceptic Coalitions

Many hard-Eurosceptic politicians have coalesced into transnational groupings at the European level. This shifting network of alliances, encompassing both formal Euro-parties within the European Parliament, and broader coalitions outside of it, while relatively unstable, has resulted in the articulation of shared policy platforms by nationalist politicians from multiple member states.

While Eurosceptics are to be found at both ends of the broadly left-right spectrum along which the European Parliament is arranged, from 2014-19 the hard Eurosceptics were concentrated on the right wing in two parliamentary groupings: Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD), and Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF). Prior to the 2019 election, these groups comprised serving MEPs from seven and eight member states respectively, with chairs

and co-chairs from the UK, France and the Netherlands representing their blocs in plenary debates with the leaders of centrist groupings.

A similar pattern prevailed in the ninth Parliament. Following the 2019 elections, even excepting the large contingent of Brexit Party MEPs who later departed the session with the UK's prolonged departure from the EU, the ENF's successor grouping, Identity and Democracy (ID) was returned as the fourth-largest Euro-party, ahead of the Greens. Its membership was also more diverse, hailing from a total of ten member states. Meanwhile, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), a grouping which has gradually shifted towards a more radical interpretation of Euroscepticism in recent years, now comprises 16 MEPs from 15 member states.

Following the 2019 elections, right-wing Eurosceptic parties held approximately 26% of seats in the Parliament (Stockemer & Amengay 2020). This represented a modest increase on the 2014 breakthrough but confirmed the apparently permanent presence of the Eurosceptic presence in the Parliament.

This transnational coalition building has increasingly expanded outside of the chamber. Prominent examples including a 2017 conference in Koblenz, addressed jointly by the leaders of the major French, Dutch, Italian and German hard Eurosceptic parties (Chazan 2017), and a gathering of the same parties two years later in Prague, hosted by their Czech colleagues, to present a joint programme for the 2019 elections (Euractiv 2019a). Indeed, throughout the 2019 election campaign, among the most common images were joint photo opportunities for Marine Le Pen of France and Matteo Salvini of Italy, pledging an overhaul of the EU from within (Wheeldon 2019).

ii. The Changing Nature of European Elections

Relatedly, although direct elections to the European Parliament began in 1979, few commentators regarded them as politically significant events until 2014, when research

indicated that a large proportion of voters may have been motivated by European or EU-related issues, rather than treating the European Parliament elections as “second-order national elections” (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016).

The Eurosceptic parties played a key role in this shift. In their analysis, Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti (2014) proposed not only that the rise in turnout in some member states (after falling turnout in previous successive elections) was because of large support for anti-EU parties, but also that these parties focused the election on European issues, as they are dependent on Europe “for their political identity.” While the mainstream parties of government fought this election on domestic issues, the Eurosceptics framed the debates in terms of the Union and integration; in short, they made Europe the issue at stake in the European elections. It is arguable that the marked increase in turnout in the 2019 elections also was partly motivated by the framing of the elections by prominent Eurosceptic parties, including the Rassemblement National in France, where turnout increased by an impressive 7.69% on the 2014 figure, reversing a trend of consistent decline since 1979, with one exception in 1994.

iii. Engagement of Eurosceptics in EU Institutions

Hard Eurosceptic MEPs are not forced to attend and contribute to the debates and work of an institution whose legitimacy they challenge or reject. They could follow the example of Sinn Féin MPs from Northern Ireland, who have left their seats at Westminster vacant for over a century, despite the fact that, as in the period from 2017-19, sometimes having sufficient numbers to swing a balanced House of Commons. Their justification, in the words of a current Sinn Féin politician, is clear: “Westminster has always turned its back on the people of Ireland, so the people have turned their backs resolutely on the British parliament” (Maskey 2018). Given the relatively higher proportion of hard Eurosceptics in the European Parliament, and the chamber’s layout, a large, empty wedge of seats at high-publicity plenary sessions, right next to the place of the Commission President, would arguably constitute a more impactful abstention than Sinn Féin’s absence from a crowded House of Commons.

The paradox of hard Eurosceptic engagement in a European Parliament is not entirely explained away by media stories of their parties' financial dependence on fiddling Brussels expenses (e.g., Guyot 2018 on the reclamation of nearly half a million euros from Rassemblement National), nor by (partially true) claims that they are, in any case, the worst offenders in terms of truancy (e.g., Stone 2015 on UKIP's 62.3% participation rate in votes). The reality is more mixed. Taking the French representation as an example, in the Eighth Parliament hard Eurosceptics were to be found in the 12th and 16th places in the country's 74-strong cohort on an index aggregating activity in terms of attendance, voting and statements, while in the Austrian cohort, a hard Eurosceptic held second place (mepranking.eu, 2019).

A recent study comparing Eurosceptic MEPs' behaviour across the sixth, seventh and eighth European Parliaments (2004–2019) with that of non-Eurosceptic MEPs likewise found that over time, there had been a marked “normalisation” in the activities of the former group (Behm & Brack 2019). Especially in the eighth term, they noted a shift in which Eurosceptic MEPs were more involved in legislative activities, including those which did not garner them obvious publicity or a platform to advance their more radical critiques.

Perhaps the most notorious hard Eurosceptic of the last Parliament—the Brexit Party's Nigel Farage—articulated the utility of European elections for his purpose: he explained that his Brexit Party “could do phenomenally well” under the EU's proportional system, in contrast to a British election, where it “could get a huge number of votes and not many seats and that's the great difficulty” (Farage 2019). A recent study of Rassemblement National's strategy, and its ability to use Europe — “a relatively new and contentious political issue”—as a “powerful ideological resource” in its fight for political legitimacy (Lorimer 2020, p. 1388), has reinforced the significance and usefulness of the EU question to such actors. However, once the hard Eurosceptics arrive in Brussels and Strasbourg, they do not merely block the exits and prevent the functioning of the Parliament.

Indeed, Farage, the most obviously obstructionist among the Eurosceptic cohort, was a good example. Whether orchestrating his Euro-party in turning their backs to the European flag (Henley 2014) or sparring with arch-federalist Guy Verhofstadt, and in the course of several memorable exchanges, actually proposing that the European Union use its veto powers to override the expressed will of the British government (European Parliament 2019), it is not clear that he was merely damaging the EU. I do not doubt the sincerity of his opposition to supranationalism, but we might ask whether such actions and argumentation actually served to strengthen the elected body of the EU, as the arena chosen by both sides to debate the European project.

iv. Proposal of Alternative Visions of Europe's Future

What is often passed over in the mainstream narrative is that many hard Eurosceptics have articulated relatively coherent alternative visions of pan-European cooperation, beyond withdrawal into nation-state fortresses. While outright withdrawal from the EU was once a common demand of hard Eurosceptics, non-British hard Eurosceptic parties in particular have tended towards more nuanced positions, especially since 2016 (Chellotti 2018).

The ENF grouping has done so in a coordinated way over a considerable period of time. At the aforementioned Prague Conference, Marine Le Pen restated her vision of a looser Europe of the Nations from her 2017 Koblenz speech, heralding not the end of European cooperation, but “the birth of a new European harmony with European national parties joining forces to offer 500 million Europeans a new framework for cooperation, a new project and a new potential for the future” (Euractiv 2019b). These policy programmes may lack detail but established political parties have been known to run election campaigns with even less detailed proposals. Indeed, the world's oldest political party ran its 2019 European election campaign without issuing a manifesto of any kind (Mason & Syal 2019).

Rather than analysing the discourses on what Europe is and could be, as evidenced in such speeches, and the opposing discourses of the pro-integration centrists with whom Le

Pen's party debate the issue in the European Parliament, the predominant reaction has been to group the Eurosceptics in with the euro, refugee and rule of law crises, as another symptom of disintegration.

It is true that the hegemony projects of hard Eurosceptics do not hold much attraction for liberals. However, their organised opposition to the current European trajectory at the European level has, for the first time, introduced an element of genuine contestation, and the proposal of genuine alternatives, into the EU's body politic. Before the financial crisis, it was commonplace for scholars of the EU to argue for reforms to overcome the perceived sterility of its political system; that "More politics in the EU should not be feared. Rather, it should be embraced" (Hix 2008, p. 3).

While the European Parliament has succeeded in taking an ever-greater role in the EU's decision-making, top-down attempts at institutional fixes to the democratic deficit have not always succeeded. Attempts to arrange the direct election of the Commission President instead produced the confusing Spitzenkandidat process (Reiding & Meijer 2019), while the Laeken Objectives for working towards a European Constitution and final allocation of competences were effectively abandoned after a series of negative referenda results (Usherwood & Startin 2013).

In light of these observations, it seems reasonable to ask whether, rather than primarily a cause of destructive crisis, the growing representation of hard Eurosceptics should instead be conceived of as narrowing the legitimacy gap, by representing positions of dissent towards an integration process that had long been driven by a consensus among governing elites. Perhaps, after the failure of top-down efforts to reform, it is paradoxically the emergence of ostensibly anti-EU political forces which are encouraging the development of a more democratic politics at the heart of Europe.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In rethinking the interaction of the hard Eurosceptics and the EU as an enduring, dynamic and potentially transformative encounter, rather than as a clash indicative of an insoluble crisis, this paper draws on European integration theory—particularly the neofunctionalist tradition—and builds on existing empirical studies of Euroscepticism. Having identified the pro-integration sentiments built into integration theory, I will argue that Chantal Mouffe’s agonistic model of democratic politics can provide key insights, enabling a fresh look at hard Eurosceptic engagement in European politics.

i. European Integration Theory

There is a widespread consensus among European integration theorists, whether neofunctionalist, postfunctionalist, liberal intergovernmentalist or new intergovernmentalist, that the period since the late 1980s has seen the widespread politicisation, for the first time, of the issue of European integration. Politicisation was not unforeseen by integration theorists, but the entry of European publics who appear to side in ever greater numbers with anti-EU political actors is far from the politicisation of early neofunctionalists’ imaginings.

While the original “grand theory of integration,” neofunctionalism, will be treated in greater detail below—liberal intergovernmentalism, most closely associated with Moravcsik, and frequently juxtaposed as neofunctionalism’s first significant competitor—is the only major school of integration theory to downplay the significance of this public intrusion into European integration. By 2005, and continuing to regard integration as a sequence of intergovernmental bargains, Moravcsik argued that the EU had already reached a “European Constitutional Compromise”—a stable equilibrium that was effective and democratically legitimate (p. 349). Given the subsequent eruption of hard Eurosceptic parties, and the conversion of several national parties of government to forms of Euroscepticism, it seems hard to justify the continued exclusion of European publics from the issue of integration, nor to explain away the continued pace of integration in response to the euro crisis. Moravcsik later dismissed

Eurosceptic gains in European elections: 'Anbody can win European elections ... because they are protest votes' (Szalai 2017), but the reality of recent elections, as suggested earlier, is more complex.

The new intergovernmentalists (Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter 2015), in contrast, built a relationship between hard Eurosceptics and destructive crisis into the foundations of their framework. They described the "post-Maastricht period" as a new phase in the European integration process, marked by continued integration driven by a consensus among traditional governing elites, but without popular consent, leading to an EU in "disequilibrium" (p. 36). Hodson and Puetter's (2019) characterisation of the hard Eurosceptics as "challenger parties," which emerge partly in response to this unsustainable process of integration, led them to engage with the postfunctionalist account, and to argue that rather than a "constraining consensus" (Hooghe & Marks 2009), the emergence of hard Eurosceptic challenger parties actually constitutes a "destructive dissensus," with the potential for the unravelling of the entire European project (p. 1).

Hooghe and Marks' (2009) influential account of the role of public opinion in the EU's politicisation, from "permissive consensus" to "constraining dissensus" (p. 5), and the salience of identity in political mobilisation, has since been revised by its authors (2018) to account for what they see as a major new cleavage, framed by a political reaction against regional integration and transnationalism in general. There is much in this revision that supports the possibility of an agonistic politics at the European level. Drawing on Lipset and Rokkan's cleavage theory, Hooghe and Marks argue that change in party systems dominated by programmatic mainstream parties is driven by rising parties, and that the debate on European integration has, in recent years, been framed by its opponents. Their sketch of the new "transnational cleavage" as a division between Eurosceptics and the mainstream is in keeping with my own understanding of the developing clash in European politics. However, they share with the new intergovernmentalists, and European scholars more broadly, a pessimistic view of the implications of this new transnational cleavage for the EU, even imagining its collapse: "If

the EU were to fail, immigration stop and trade decline, the forces that have led to transnationalism are likely to persist” (2018, p. 127).

The insights from postfunctionalism are more compatible with neofunctionalism than its authors concede. While Hooghe and Marks grouped neofunctionalism with intergovernmentalism as primarily concerned with economic bargaining among interest groups (2009, p. 4), Schmitter was clear that no one inspired by the neofunctionalist approach “should feel threatened” by Hooghe and Marks’ work, and that neofunctionalists, unlike intergovernmentalists, “always presumed that the process of regional integration would be transformative in the sense that, if and when it progressed, it would change the nature of the actors involved in it” (2008, p. 211). Indeed, he had earlier pointed to the likely emergence of “new cleavages that were not envisaged by Rokkan” in “the emerging Euro-polity” (2000, p. 70).

This leads to the first of three reasons why I consider that the neofunctionalist tradition, and particularly the neo-neofunctionalist version associated with Schmitter, enables a fresh reading of the developing encounter of hard Eurosceptics and the EU.

First, as noted in a recent analysis of the broader neofunctionalist contribution, neofunctionalism “incorporates two dimensions of human behaviour that are not usually considered or even mentioned in classical theories of international relations: learning and socialization” (Niemann et. al. 2019, p. 60). Haas, neofunctionalism’s founding father, was sufficiently convinced by the potential of a constructivist approach to neofunctionalism—now its dominant manifestation—that in his final contribution to the European integration debate, he revised his previous declaration of neofunctionalist obsolescence, opining that it had been given a “new lease of life” (Niemann & Schmitter 2009. p. 56).

Second, and in contrast with the current consensus, neofunctionalism understands crisis as potentially both positive and negative in terms of progressing European integration.

Schmitter has previously argued that crises “have been an integral part of [integration] and, moreover, that they have had a net-positive effect” (2012, p. 39).

Third, neofunctionalism gives a place of privilege to unintended consequences. These were at the core of the original concept of spillover, and Schmitter (2012) noted, in its midst, that in theory, the euro and sovereign debt crisis could prove to be the “‘transcending’ crisis” (p. 40) that would compel member states to move closer politically in order to coordinate their response, with the unintended consequence of eventually compelling the foundation of a pan-European political party system.

This characterisation of the crises offers an important corrective and justifies questioning the widespread portrayal of the hard Eurosceptics as tied up with destructive crisis. Prior to 2007/8, European integration theorists and public policy scholars frequently discussed the democratic deficit as a major challenge to the EU. By 2017, Kelemen reflected that “we can look back with nostalgia on the days when scholars believed the greatest threats to democracy in Europe stemmed from the EU’s own democratic shortcomings” (p. 212); a time when it was uncontroversial to prescribe reforms to introduce “a genuine debate about and competition over the exercise of political authority at the European level” as the means of fixing the EU (Hix 2008, p. 3).

With the exception of liberal intergovernmentalism which, as Hix explored in a later piece, is challenged by the “growing salience of EU politics amongst the mass public” (2018, p. 13), the major schools of integration theory have a shared concern with the democratic deficit, or a broader crisis of legitimacy, that is held to have characterised EU politics in the post-Maastricht period. This raises the question of why the hard Eurosceptics, elected in increasing numbers by European publics to represent alternative visions at the European level, are rarely considered a potential part of the solution. This question becomes more pressing if we share Schmitter’s reflection on postfunctionalism: “If one were looking for a plausible mechanism for responding to the elite-mass gap in expectations ... the place to go would be the eventual formation of a supranational European party system” (2008, p. 212). It is possible that the hard Eurosceptics offer a stepping-stone to it.

ii. Studies of Euroscepticism and Eurosceptics

The term “Euroscepticism,” perhaps unsurprisingly, has its origins in the politics of the British Conservative Party, and made its first recorded appearance in *The Times* newspaper, as early as 1985 (Poli 2014, p. 9), denoting the position later set out in Margaret Thatcher’s “Bruges Speech” of September 1988, in opposition to the “new dominance from Brussels” (Thatcher 1988).

The first significant scholarly contribution, a 1998 article attempting to construct a typology of the emergent Eurosceptic parties (Taggart 1998), marked the beginning of a decade of debate over how Euroscepticism should be conceptualised and studied. This interest was driven both by a broad consensus that the Eurosceptics were a manifestation of the “constraining dissensus” described by Hooghe and Marks, in an environment where traditional parties of government “must look over their shoulders when negotiating European integration. What they see does not reassure them” (2009, p. 5); and by events which appeared to demonstrate the impact of Euroscepticism on the integration process, notably the rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in a Dutch referendum, and its approval by the narrowest of margins in France.

Taggart’s (1998) article was the starting point of a project which analysed Euroscepticism as a party-based phenomenon, with an initial article setting out the distinction between “hard” and “soft” Euroscepticism (Taggart & Szczerbiak 2002) culminating in two edited volumes of case and country studies, all following the hard/soft categorisation. The literature on Euroscepticism often sets up Taggart & Szczerbiak as representatives of a “Sussex School,” stressing nation-specific characteristics of Eurosceptics, in opposition to a “North Carolina School” represented primarily by Cas Mudde, and emphasising party-system factors as drivers of Euroscepticism. While these scholars may disagree on the drivers of Euroscepticism, their categorisations of Euroscepticism are more compatible than is sometimes acknowledged.

Alternatives to the hard/soft distinction have included Flood's (2009) categorisation, conceiving of Eurosceptics as a shade of opinion on a broader political spectrum, or Kopecký and Mudde's (2002) four-part typology, where Eurosceptics in the Taggart & Szczerbiak conception can be situated in the "Euroreject" and "Eurosceptic" categories (the "Euro-pessimists"), and are joined by "Europragmatists" and "Euroenthusiasts" (the "Euro-optimists") on the other side of an argument driven both by perspectives on the EU as current configured, and on any form of European integration (p. 303).

This dual definition, based on attitudes to regional integration and/or attitudes to the EU as current configured, is also encompassed by the refined version of Taggart and Szczerbiak's definition of hard Euroscepticism: "where there is a principled opposition to the EU and European integration and therefore can be seen in parties who think that their countries should withdraw from membership, or whose policies towards the EU are tantamount to being opposed to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived" (2008, p. 7). Several Euro-party groupings have, moreover, found it possible to encompass a membership representing both of these positions, while the current configuration of Euro-parties indicates a relatively strong division along the hard/soft distinction.

Complementing the conceptual literature has been a growing body of empirical studies, focused on questions including the link between the EU's crises and the rise of Eurosceptic parties (e.g. Taggart & Szczerbiak 2018, Hobolt & de Vries 2016, Nicoli 2017, Treib 2014), and on the potential impact of Eurosceptic parties in stimulating policy shifts by more centrist parties (e.g., Meijers 2017).

What has received less attention, despite its significance for the EU's future, is the political practice of the Eurosceptics themselves, the substantive nature of their engagement with mainstream European politicians, and the implications of their engagement in European politics for the developing European polity. This neglect can be partly explained in terms of their "normatively biased" portrayal as a "marginal phenomenon"—a destabilising or

destructive force seeking to obstruct a consensus-based way of working (Brack & Startin 2015, p. 245).

Where more nuanced study of Eurosceptic practice has been undertaken, this has usually focused on either the discursive or role repertoire of Eurosceptic MEPs. In tracing the changing political practice of hard Eurosceptics, the argument developed here is indebted both sub-fields of study, as I attempt to build a composite model of agonistic politics at the European level.

A handful of studies of Euroscepticism as discourse have emerged, including party case studies, such as MacMillan's (2018) exploration of dystopian narratives in Front National and UKIP discourse, Lorimer's (2020) understanding of Europe as an "ideological resource" for radical right-wing parties, and a body of scholarship rooted in broader debates over the development of a European public sphere. De Wilde and Trenz (2012) attempted to shift the discussion away from individual or party attitudes, and towards "Euroscepticism as an element of discourse" (p. 537), stemming from "the unsettled and principally contested character of the [EU] as a political entity," characterised by debates over the EU's purpose, rationale, design, and future trajectory, and engaged in contestation with its pro-European counterparts (p. 538). This resulted in "six forms of polity evaluation of the EU," from "Affirmative European" through to "anti-European," as a means of analysing "forms of EU opposition and defences through which the legitimacy of the EU polity is debated" (p. 547).

Complementary to this work on Eurosceptic discourses is Brack's detailed study of the behaviour of Eurosceptics serving in the European Parliament. In an initial study (2012), Brack drew on Hirschmann to propose a typology of roles, on a continuum between "exit" and "voice." While some MEPs were identified as "absentees," the majority were described either as "pragmatists," which involved themselves in the work of the Parliament and respected institutional rules, or "public orators," who sought to delegitimise the EU institutions through their speeches, but nonetheless participated in parliamentary activities (Brack, 2012, p. 51). A recent book (Brack 2018) extended this study and sought to explain the diversity of these roles.

Brack's individual-level focus on MEPs' behaviour in the chamber found that these individuals "remain too poorly organized and heterogenous to have a significant influence ... [on] the European decision-making process" (2018, p. 182). However, Brack also pointed the way to a broader study of Eurosceptic practice, hinting in her conclusion that politicisation, driven largely by Eurosceptics, could contribute "to the articulation of conflicts, and conflict is also a key ingredient of democratic politics" (p. 187). This understanding of conflict as the essence of democratic politics, in opposition to the "non-partisan approach" of pro-integration MEPs (p. 188), makes the case for exploring the discourses and behaviours that have structured the clash of Eurosceptic and pro-integration MEPs, and extending the study beyond the rule-bound institutional environment of the parliamentary chamber, to include, for example, the nature of electoral campaigns and the formation of alliances across member states, as pointed to above.

iii. An "Agonistic" Democratic Politics

In 2000, as Schmitter was contemplating the transformation of representation that would be necessary for the development of a European party system, and the potential for the emergence of political competition in Brussels, Chantal Mouffe was arguing for the centrality of conflict, and the articulation of genuine alternatives, to the existence of "the political" (2000a, p. 126). Twelve years later, both scholars were considering the same question: whether Europe in a time of crisis. As Schmitter questioned whether the emergence of Eurosceptic movements indicated that the potentially "good" crisis that could have compelled the EU's democratisation was instead driving the Union towards destruction, Mouffe was diagnosing the Eurosceptic surge in terms of rejection of a neoliberal consensus, and declaring an urgent requirement to "create the conditions for democratic contestation within the EU" (2012, p. 638).

I earlier identified three fields of debate to which this paper speaks: the much-discussed crisis of legitimacy or democratic deficit in contemporary European politics; the related question of the potential for a genuine democratic politics at the European level; and

the relationship between the emergent Eurosceptics and Europe's crises. Both Schmitter and Mouffe, from different perspectives, have been contemporaneously engaging with these questions over several decades.

This section will explore Mouffe's contributions, in terms of her engagement with two of her principal, related interests: agnostic democratic politics, and populist politics in Europe. In laying out my argument in the subsequent section, I will contend that reading Mouffe's prescription for the fundamental elements of a democratic politics, in light of the neo-neofunctionalist approach to crisis and democratisation in the EU, points us towards a radical reconsideration of the mainstream narrative of destructive Euroscepticism in European politics, while also suggesting two possible revisions to Mouffe's own framework.

Mouffe's call for an agonistic model of democracy had a dual target: the Rawlsian and Habermasian theories of deliberative democracy which, despite their different conceptualisations of the link between liberalism and democracy, both emphasised the centrality of achieving rational consensus; and the (then dominant) consensus of contemporary Western politics. What these targets shared was a "fantasy": "the dream of a rational consensus" that denied the essence of a democratic politics (2000a, p. 124). This essence is "a vibrant clash of democratic political positions" (2000a, p. 127), with the aim of liberal democracy being not arrival at a consensus without exclusion, but building the framework and institutions to transform antagonism into agonism; that is, the construction of one's opponents as adversaries rather than enemies, "whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not call into question" (2000a, p. 126).

For Mouffe (2000b), agonism is the key to negotiating the ineradicable tension inherent in the paradoxical articulation of liberal democracy: a liberal discourse emphasising individual freedom, and a democratic discourse emphasising the collective exercise of popular sovereignty. She saw the social democrats' "capitulation to a neo-liberal hegemony" (p. 5) and success in building "consensus at the centre" (2005, p. 63), exemplified by Blair and Giddens' "Third Way" and Schröder's "Neue Mitte," as a denial of popular sovereignty, which was based

on a fiction “that the adversarial model has been overcome” (Ibid). For Mouffe, this led to a dangerous scenario where “the very idea of a possible alternative to the existing order has been discredited” (2000b, p. 3), and a democratic confrontation may be “replaced by a confrontation between non-negotiable moral values or essentialist forms of identifications” (2009, p. 551).

As early as 2005, Mouffe asserted that this “post-political” vision (p. 48) had “created the terrain for the rise of right-wing populist movements (p. 119). More recently, she addressed this phenomenon through identifying a contemporary ‘populist moment,’ marking a ‘return to the political’ (2018, p. 6), with the potential ‘for the construction of a more democratic order’ according to her own agonistic principles (2018, p. 1). She sees the potential of this moment in terms of the mobilisation of a ‘left populism’ to oppose a rising ‘right populism,’ distinguished by the ways they ‘construct a people’ (Mouffe & Bechler 2018).

Mouffe’s understanding and explanation of this contemporary ‘populist moment’ have much in common with Schmitter’s contention that the rise of right-wing Euroscepticism can be partly understood in terms of a crisis of the European nation-state, and his acceptance of the post-functionalist account of the EU’s politicisation through the eruption of public opinion driving party change. Mouffe’s framework for an agonistic politics is a powerful frame through which to consider the changing nature of politics in Brussels and Strasbourg, and the cure Schmitter prescribed to the EU’s crisis: a European party system with European publics being offered genuine alternatives.

In the following section, I will argue that by returning to the core principles of each of their theoretical frameworks: to Schmitter’s understanding of crisis, of the EU’s democratic potential, and of its potential to transform the behaviours, identities and interests of those involved in it; and to Mouffe’s insistence on agonistic political competition and ‘conflictual consensus’ (2013, p. 39) as essential to negotiating the paradoxical nature of liberal democracy, we can reconsider the mainstream interpretation of emergent Euroscepticism as inextricably bound up with destructive crisis.

ARGUMENT

Neunreither (1998) observed, in an article appropriately titled ‘Governance Without Opposition,’ that the EU institutions, having been developed to produce consensus, struggle to accommodate dissent. In the following decade, spurred by debate about a perceived democratic deficit built into this consensus-based institutional framework, books with titles such as *How to Democratize the European Union ... And Why Bother?* (Schmitter 2000), and *What’s Wrong With the European Union and How to Fix It* (Hix 2008) became a staple of EU scholarship, commonly arguing for top-down reforms to facilitate democratic competition. In the age of polycrisis, the tone has become more desperate. Indeed, Verhofstadt’s (2017) *Europe’s Last Chance*, in keeping with its author’s general disposition, was notably optimistic when compared with *After Europe* (Krastev 2017), and, perhaps most distressingly, *The EU: An Obituary* (Gillingham 2016).

I argue that what is often perceived as a key symptom of an unsustainable project in crisis—the growing hard Eurosceptic engagement in politics at the European level—might, paradoxically, be playing a part in resolving the very democratic deficit which was such a concern for earlier scholars. By introducing an element of organised dissent into European political debate, they challenge the centrist consensus supporting European integration approximately along its existing lines. I earlier made four observations on the developing discourse and political practice of hard Eurosceptics at a transnational level: that they are coalescing into transnational coalitions, within and outside of the European Parliament; that they have played a role in focusing EU elections on European issues; that they made the (not necessarily obvious) decision to engage in the work and debates of the European Parliament; and that they are proposing more or less coherent alternative visions of Europe’s future.

I argue that these developments may, for the first time, have created the conditions for something like the agnostic formulation of democratic politics described by Mouffe. Taking

together Mouffe's work on agonistic democracy (2000a, 2000b, 2013) and her own proposal for applying this model to the EU in crisis (2012, 2013), we can identify two main conditions that would need to be met to claim the existence of a developing agonistic clash:

1. The articulation by opposing parties or coalitions of alternative and incompatible visions of the EU and its future
2. A 'conflictual consensus' among these opposing parties or coalitions, manifested in:
 - i. *a shared symbolic space: common discursive subjects, and shared institutions, practices and conventions through which this conflict is mediated;*
 - ii. *a recognition by both sides, even if implicit, of their opponents; what might be termed an 'agonistic solidarity,' where proponents of opposed hegemony projects acknowledge the legitimacy of their interlocutors.*

In light of these requirements, the initial observations I proposed about the nature of hard Eurosceptic engagement in contemporary politics at the European level would suggest that the hunch with which I introduced this paper—that the Eurosceptics are doing rather more than just destroying the entire project from within—deserves closer study.

That is not to say that fostering a democratic clash at the European level has been the intention of the hard Eurosceptics. We need not question the sincerity of, for example, Geert Wilders' belief, recently repeated among colleagues he refers to as "patriots like Marine Le Pen, Tomio Okamura and other freedom fighters," that the EU, "an undemocratic superstate" is "attempting to erase our nation states" (Wilders 2019). What I argue is that Wilders' MEPs, sitting together with Le Pen's and Okamura's in the European Parliament, and meeting at conferences across the Union, are working closely together and in direct contestation with a centrist bloc of pro-integration MEPs, broadly supportive of the *status quo*, who are themselves working in increasingly close cooperation as they confront this new adversary.

Just as the roles and behaviours of hard Eurosceptics might contain democratic potential—both in terms of their significant presence in and engagement with the proceedings of the European Parliament, and their transnational coalition-building both inside and outside

of the Parliament—so too might their developing discursive contributions to debates about the EU. As the quotation from Wilders demonstrates, as does the title of the Euro-party to which his party then belonged—Europe of Nations and Freedom—the meta-subject under contestation between the Eurosceptics and their pro-integration interlocutors is nothing less than the fate of the European nation-state. Pro-integration politicians directly engage with the same subject, with Verhofstadt, a key opponent of the hard Eurosceptics, taking the opportunity of the 2019 election campaign to deny any interest in a “superstate,” but reaffirm his commitment to a radically different vision from that of Wilders, Le Pen and Farage: a federal “United States of Europe” (Jamieson & Harris 2019).

One could say that the same question was at the heart of neofunctionalist concerns from the earliest days of the Coal and Steel Community. Indeed, in arguing for the continued relevance of neofunctionalism in the months before Maastricht, Tranholm-Mikkelsen identified it as the “issue at the very heart of integration theory” (1991, p. 1). However, Mouffe has made increasingly clear in recent years her view that “the central axis of the political conflict will be between right-wing populism and left-wing populism” (2018, p. 6). This points to the first of two possible revisions to Mouffe’s framework that this paper might suggest, in the event that the trends in the European Parliament observed above continue to demonstrate the kind of changing behaviours and discursive engagements that might be indicative of the development of an agonistic “conflictual consensus” among pro-integration and hard Eurosceptic politicians: that the adversaries may not be identified with traditional “left” and “right” political positions.

Schmitter’s (2000) neo-neofunctionalist account of how the EU might be democratised proposed this possibility, in the event that the hard Eurosceptics decided to engage in rather than abstain from institutionalised politics at the European level. He suggested that “if the ‘anti-Europeans’ do choose to play according to EU rules in order to oppose it from within and if the left-right cleavage continues to decline in salience, then the longer-run prospect will be for the emergence of a two-party system in which two very heterogeneous coalitions (one pro and the other anti) will dominate—an outcome that superficially resembles the U.S. party system even if the central issue is ‘states’ rights’ rather than social class” (p. 70). The

postfunctionalist contribution (Hooghe & Marks 2009, 2018) subsequently evidenced a new “transnational cleavage,” defined by a reaction against regional integration and globalisation being represented in a changing party system.

Characterising the agonistic conflict in Europe as between a broadly pro-integration coalition and an opposing coalition which contends that either the current trajectory of integration, or regional integration altogether, is an existential threat to a preferred vision of a Europe of nation states, runs counter to Mouffe’s insistence on a left-right clash. However, Mouffe has herself observed that those she calls “right populists” (all hard Eurosceptics) have in many cases successfully drawn a frontier and constructed a people to translate resistance into re-politicisation (2016). This may not be the clash Mouffe wanted, but it appears to be the one actually developing at the European level; perhaps not insignificantly, the largest gains in the 2019 European elections accrued to the former ENF, on the one hand, and Verhofstadt’s pro-integration Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) on the other (Europe Elects 2019).

This is linked to a second revision that we may propose for Mouffe’s application of agonistic politics in the EU context. When considering the potential for agonistic politics in the European Union, Mouffe saw this in terms of “a ‘conflictual consensus’ between its different nations” (2012, p. 634), rather than a transnational agnostic polity complementing the national polities. However, Mouffe’s repeated “insistence on the question of nationalism and patriotism” (Mouffe & Bechler 2018) when it comes to the European Union, appears to stem, in part, from a reductive reading of neofunctionalist theory, which Schmitter’s contributions can help to clarify. She identified the roots of the growing resistance to European integration as “attempts to construct a homogenous postnational ‘we’” (2012, p. 634), identifying those who were attempting this as “some supranationalists,” and in a nearly exact, but unacknowledged quotation of Ernst B. Haas, suggests that they seek “the ‘transfer of people’s allegiance from their own nation states to the EU’” (2012, p. 635). While Haas’s (1958) initial contribution defined integration partly in terms of a shift of loyalties, such a view of European identity has

not been a significant feature of European integration theory since the mid-1960s, let alone at Mouffe's time of writing in 2012.

Indeed, her key argument against a European agonistic democracy—that “it is futile to expect people to relinquish their national identity in favor of a post-national European one” (2012, p. 629)—is not only in conflict with the more contemporary neofunctionalist position that “collective identity is variable,” and there is no particular reason why Europeans “will not be able to add a more comprehensive regional identity to all the others they already bear” (Schmitter 2008, p. 215), but also with her own imagining, in the same article, of “a multiplicity of demos, where democracy could be exercised at different levels and in a variety [of ways]” (2012, p. 636).

Such an application of Mouffe's agonistic politics to the European level therefore contends both that the nation-state is not the exclusive arena that can foster an agonistic confrontation in Europe, and moreover, that this confrontation is not of necessity between left—and right-wing positions on the traditional political spectrum, but could well be configured in terms of pro- and anti-positions on regional integration; at its heart, a clash over the role and future of the European nation-state. The early neofunctionalists had predicted that as and when the issue of integration became politicised, the resulting clash would focus on this question. However, they took the optimistic position that mass publics would mobilise to protect the Community against “the resistance of entrenched national political elites determined to perpetrate their status as guarantors of sovereignty” (Schmitter 2008, p. 211).

While something like “the inverse has occurred” (Schmitter 2008, p. 211), to the extent that further developments and research might confirm a developing agonistic confrontation at the European level, there will be grounds for an optimistic revision of Schmitter's fear, in light of the Euro crisis and the rise of Eurosceptic parties, that “the ‘good’ crisis I imagined four decades ago has turned out to be a very ‘bad’ one instead” (2012, p. 41). To the extent that that “good” crisis was theorised to compel the beginnings of a European party system, the eruption into European politics of a hard Eurosceptic coalition, challenging the centrist pro-EU

bloc with a genuine alternative, might paradoxically be playing a part in the democratisation that Schmitter has so long advocated.

Schmitter, like Mouffe, previously assumed that the introduction of a party political contest at the European level would involve a transposition of the traditional left-right divide from the national to the supranational. Instead, the enervation of European politics in this decade of crisis has been driven by parties which are often tainted through xenophobic and authoritarian positions. However, supporters of the European project are not at liberty to choose their adversaries. While this is not the confrontation that Mouffe would have chosen, we should follow her advice to “nurture contestation ... and foster institutions in which political action can be pursued” (2000a, p. 128), and accept the risk that a “return to the political” that “may open the way for authoritarian solutions ... [but] can also lead to a reaffirmation and deepening of democratic values” (2018, p. 6).

PROPOSALS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

I identified two main requirements that would need to be met to make the case for a developing agonistic confrontation at the European level. The theoretical proposals in this paper would therefore suggest further research by pursuing two sets of empirical questions, linked to these requirements and concerned with the discourses and behaviours of Eurosceptic and pro-integration blocs of MEPs, both inside and outside the parliamentary chamber, to explore whether such an agonistic confrontation is developing. This dual empirical focus on political discourse and practice is in keeping with Mouffe’s own understanding of “the logical priority of practices and languages games” as the essence of “the political” (2000a, p. 124).

1. **Discursive constructions of the EU**—have opposing coalitions come to present incompatible visions of the EU and its future, articulated in direct competition?
2. **A “Conflictual Consensus”?**
 - i. The Mainstream MEPs—regarding the role repertoire of MEPs, have the conduct and attitudes of mainstream MEPs changed in response to the increasing presence of more radical politicians—the hard Eurosceptics—in European politics? Have they, for

- example, become more tolerant towards and/or more constructive in their engagement with, the growing bloc of their radical opponents and/or formed more cooperative configurations with pro-integration allies?
- ii. The hard Eurosceptics—in what ways might they have been “socialised” into European politics, and have they in any sense come to learn that they need the EU to build their alternative visions of a European Project? Have they, for example, more fully engaged with the work of the European Parliament and/or developed increased transnational groupings among Eurosceptic fellow travellers, inside and outside of the Parliament?

CONCLUSIONS

Over the course of the last, turbulent decade, the prior preoccupation of many EU scholars and policy-makers with addressing the democratic deficit has taken a back seat, as a succession of crises have challenged, and often found wanting, the EU’s decision-making process and its capacity for action. In this context, it is scarcely surprising that the growing representation of hard Eurosceptic political parties at both national, and especially at the European, level, has become bound up in a sense of existential doubt. It has not helped that in many cases, these hard Eurosceptics are associated with, at best, mildly xenophobic, and at worst, overtly racist policy platforms.

These are not the challengers to the internationalist “neoliberal hegemony” that Mouffe, or indeed most of us, would have hoped for. However, it is they who have played an increasing role in shaping the political debate on Europe, and in defining the EU, and its relationship with its member states, as the key issue for contention. It is not necessary to agree with Marine Le Pen or Matteo Salvini to accept that a large, and growing, proportion of European publics hear in their messages a vision of a European future with which they have more sympathy.

I have argued that this emergent political bloc, and its enduring encounter with pro-EU politicians at the European level, may have created the conditions for an agonistic democratic politics, and in doing so, may paradoxically have contributed to the partial closing of the EU-

public gap. The idea that any of this could contain the kernel of a European party system may seem unlikely to concerned observers of the EU's polycrisis. However, the emergence of a single economic area with powerful administrative, political and judicial institutions, and spanning twenty-seven states on both sides of the former Iron Curtain, would, I imagine, have seemed rather unlikely to an observer at the signing of the Treaty of Rome.

Forty years ago, Schmitter considered the potential "good" and "bad" crises that might confront the Euro-polity and reminded his readers, "that international integration is an innovative and experimental process. It takes place in an ambiance of considerable uncertainty and trepidation" (1970, p. 849). What is now the EU has always been a thing in motion, an "objet politique non-identifié," as Delors (1985) put it. There is no monopoly on defining what the EU is or should be, but this question is now the subject of a vibrant contemporary debate. For European democrats, that is to be welcomed.

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