

THE ROLE OF ACADEMICS IN THE DEBATE OVER EUROPE

Professor John McCormick

Indiana University

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My thanks to President Barroso and to the organizers of this conference for their kind invitation. It is a pleasure to be here before such an august gathering, and I hope that my comments will provide some food for thought as we discuss European Union affairs over the next two days.

The theme of this conference is "The political implications of European economic integration: Towards a political union". I am a political scientist rather than an economist, so I want to address this topic in a rather specific way: by talking about the difficulties of understanding and perception that the EU faces, about the harm that this is doing to the debate over Europe, and about the role that academics should be playing in addressing these difficulties.

For those of us active in the affairs of the EU, the last few years have not been happy ones. Not only have we seen the trials and tribulations of the euro zone, but we have also heard serious talk for the first time of the possible demise of the EU itself. Meanwhile, the euroscepticism that began to emerge as a serious force at the time of Maastricht has grown in both depth and breadth: its arguments and reach differ by time and place, but it is now a political factor in nearly every EU member state.

Clearly this is a time of crisis, but it is worth pointing out that this is hardly the first time that the process of European integration has charted stormy waters.

Even before the creation of the EEC in 1958, we saw the collapse of the European Defence Community. Then there was de Gaulle's veto of British membership of the Community, the

1965-66 empty-chair crisis, the failure of early plans to launch a single currency, Margaret Thatcher's budget skirmishes, the 1992 Danish rejection of Maastricht, and the end of the constitutional treaty in 2005.

I remember how even the Irish rejection of Nice in 1999 was briefly greeted in some quarters as a disaster, with questions asked about how the EU could function effectively without the institutional changes that Nice envisioned. The same questions were asked again after the French vote on the constitutional treaty.

I subscribe to *The Economist*, which can sometimes be a gloomy experience, providing weekly proof of the notion of economics as the dismal science. Not long ago I was reading one of its editorials under the heading "Alas, poor Europe". I quote:

"[It] has survived other crises ... but is in no state for another prolonged one – or for a period of total stagnation. Its institutions are flaking ... The parliament has disappointed ... The decisive council of ministers rarely decides ... Public opinion in the member states is increasingly apathetic".

It went on to talk about the prospect of a British exit, demands by Greece to renegotiate the terms of membership, lukewarm views about Europe in Germany, an economic slump in western Europe, a row over the budget driven by the efforts of the member states to cut public spending, the failure of Europe to better express itself on the global stage, and the need for Europe's leaders to find the vision to address its disagreements.

The date on the front cover? Not 2012 or 2013 as you might think, but 20 March 1982. More than 30 years later, *The Economist* is still making very similar arguments.

The point is that the EU has survived. It is true that the euro zone crisis is the worst in the history of European integration, but it is also worth remembering what Jean Monnet wrote in his memoirs in 1978: that 'Europe would be built through crises' and would be 'the sum of their solutions'.

A few years later, Monnet argued that ‘the building of Europe is a great transformation which will take a very long time ... Nothing would be more dangerous than to regard difficulties as failures’.¹

Why has the EU faced so many problems? There are five major reasons:

1. The EU is a project without precedent – it has demanded new thinking and a new way of doing political and economic business, to which many people are not yet attuned.
2. The EU has been made up on the fly, with only a general idea about the end goal. There has been no broad agreement on what it is or how it might best evolve.
3. In this vacuum of uncertainty, it has been easy for the critics to encourage myths and misconceptions and to promote a climate of pessimism.
4. We have seen an ongoing struggle between the national interests of the member states and European interests. But the latter have been hard to define.
5. Because people feel less sense of attachment to the EU than to the member states of which they are citizens, it is easy and tempting to blame the EU when things go wrong at home.

There is no question that the EU has had difficulties, but we need to remember that it has not been alone.

Consider the findings of Eurobarometer polls: they have revealed that faith in the EU has been declining over the last few years, but they have also found declining faith in government more generally. The number of people who trust the EU has almost halved in the last six years – falling from 57% in 2007 to 31% today – but the number who trust their national governments has fallen over the same period from 41% to 25%.² The decline for the EU may have been more precipitous, but Europeans have long trusted the EU more than they trusted their own governments.

¹ Quoted in *The Economist*, 20 March 1982.

² *Eurobarometer 80*, Spring 2013, First Results, p. 9.

So this is not so much a crisis for the EU alone as it is for government broadly defined.

And if we think things are bad over here, spare a thought for the poor citizens of the United States where I live. These are just a few of the problems they face:

1. a dysfunctional political system.
2. decaying infrastructure.
3. incivility in public discourse.
4. institutionalized racism.
5. an expanding gap between rich and poor.
6. a prodigious trade deficit.
7. an addiction to fossil fuels.
8. a permissive gun culture.
9. a byzantine tax code.
10. a snowballing national debt.

Little surprise, then, that while 55% of Europeans believe that the EU is headed in the wrong direction, and 58% believe that their country is headed in the wrong direction, the equivalent figure for the United States is 78%.

Over the past few years I have witnessed the perfect storm: studying and writing about an entity buffeted by problems while living in a country buffeted by even bigger ones. At times like this I have been tempted to retool as an art historian, or something else less stressful.

What role should we be playing as academics? I am dismayed by how little our work addresses the real and practical problems of Europe, or has entered the public debate about Europe. We academics work hard, and much of our research is fascinating and insightful and even occasionally revolutionary. But our professional rewards are defined by writing for each other, and by talking to each other and to our students; our work rarely enters the mainstream of political and public debate. This is a problem far from unique to

the field of European studies, to be sure, and it is not the sole reason why the EU is misunderstood, but it is unfortunate that so little of the potentially illuminating research we produce should be working its way into the public domain.

The mismatch between academics and practitioners was a dilemma spotted as long ago as 1975 by the American political scientist Donald J Puchala, who wrote as follows:

“One comment constantly repeated by officials involved in the affairs of the European Communities is that political scientists, in their zeal to model "integrating systems," are working at levels of theoretical abstraction too far removed from day-to-day political behaviour ... as one Chef de Cabinet in Brussels phrased it, "when I read your American work you tell me that I am working to cause spillover, or that I am making a new nationality from old ones, or that I am challenging national sovereignty. This is nonsense. I and my colleagues are working to harmonize economic, social, and legal practices in several countries so that a Common Market can function effectively for the benefit of all. If you really want to study European integration, try to learn more about the conditions under which such harmonization succeeds or fails."³

I was left with similar impressions while visiting Brussels last year for field research, and was struck - as I have been before - by the contrast between the academic world, with its own vernacular and a dynamic that stops just short of secret handshakes, and the world of the European institutions and think-tanks and interest groups who deal with the real and the practical rather than the theoretical and the abstract.

As the head of one think-tank said to me, academics are usually focused on narrow aspects of policy, which often have nothing to do with the short-term EU agenda. But the problems, she noted, are also partly self-inflicted because academics do not weigh in to contemporary debates through new research, making it difficult for them to have much of a voice in current debates.

³ Donald J. Puchala (1975), "Domestic Politics and Regional Harmonization in the European Communities", in *World Politics* 27:4, July, pp. 496-520.

Scholars need to be active in the debate over Europe, because at the moment it suffers from two critical handicaps.

First, it has become negative and one-sided, with far too much emphasis placed on what is wrong with the EU than what is right with it. President Barroso eloquently pointed this out in a February 2010 speech to the European Parliament in which he appealed for Europeans to deny the 'intellectual glamour of pessimism and constant denigration of the European Union that is doing so much damage to Europe's image'.⁴

At the heart of this problem is the prominence of eurosceptic thinking, which has both compounded and been compounded by all the bad news coming out of the EU over the last few years. The media love bad news and so does the reading, viewing, and listening public. There is a famous journalistic dictum: If it bleeds, it leads.

The bad news from the EU has had all the terrible fascination of a train wreck, but somewhere along the way we have forgotten the remarkable achievements of integration. Even the news of the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the EU in 2012 was met with cynicism, critics suggesting that NATO was more deserving, and pointing to the squabbling then going on within the euro zone. My response was yes, they may be squabbling, but at least they are doing it peacefully.

The second critical handicap suffered by the debate over Europe is what I call the knowledge deficit. Simply put, most Europeans by their own admission do not understand the European Union. Eurobarometer polls dating back to the 1990s have consistently found that about 60-70% of those surveyed admitted to having little or no understanding of how the EU works. Recent polls have also found that only about 30% of Europeans consider themselves very or fairly well informed about European political affairs, while 20% consider themselves not at all informed.

⁴ José Manuel Durão Barroso, 'Speaking with one voice: Defining and defending the European interest'. EP Plenary: Vote on new College. Strasbourg, 9 February 2010.

How can we have a meaningful public debate when so many people know so little about what they are discussing, and when so much of the debate is dominated by a single camp?

The implications of the knowledge deficit are illustrated by the story of the French referendum on the constitutional treaty.

As we know, the treaty was stopped in its tracks when it was rejected by French voters in May 2005. But consider the data: a Eurobarometer poll carried out at the time of the referendum found that three out of four French citizens had either (1) heard of the treaty but knew 'very little' about its contents, or (2) had not heard of it at all. And yet 69 per cent of voters turned out, of whom just under 55 per cent rejected the treaty, resulting not just in its failure in France but throughout the European Union. When asked what had most influenced their vote, only 18 per cent of voters said it was their opinion of the treaty itself; about half voted No because they were unhappy with the domestic political, economic and social situation in France.

In short: the constitutional treaty died because it was rejected by 26 million French voters, who made up less than six per cent of the population of the EU at the time, living in a country where nearly 75 per cent of people admitted to knowing little or nothing about the content of the treaty, and half of whom voted No because they didn't like Jacques Chirac.

If we see a referendum on UK membership in the next few years, a similar dynamic will be at work, and more so: In a 2012 Eurobarometer survey, only one-third of Britons felt there were benefits to EU membership or felt optimistic about the future of the EU, but only 40% felt they knew how the EU worked.

A report by the UK Electoral Commission published two weeks ago looked at the proposed question on the referendum on EU membership, which reads as follows: 'Do you think that the United Kingdom should be a member of the European Union?'. The commission recommended that the wording should be changed because there were enough people in

Britain who did not know that their country was currently a member of the EU as to create confusion.

If there is a referendum in the UK (which is by no means certain, given the current problems of the governing coalition), I guarantee that many people will be voting No not because they understand the EU and have well-thought out objections to its work but because they do not understand the EU, and eurosceptic British media will exploit the knowledge deficit and tell them to vote No based mainly on the kinds of myths they like to perpetuate about the EU. The standing of whichever government is in power at that time will also be critical.

There is a school of thought in political science that we need not worry about the knowledge deficit, because voters can use information shortcuts such as party labels, elite endorsements, or cues from trusted sources to help them decide, even where they lack much knowledge about the issues at stake. This supposedly gives them the capacity for reasoned choice.

I reject this argument. Relying on such sources exacerbates the elitism of which the EU is often accused. And how can we rely on political parties for cues when so many of them are internally divided on the question of Europe? Furthermore, political activists often differ from the general population in socioeconomic terms, tend to be more partisan in their views, and will often have interests and agendas that are different from those of voters.

And there is plenty of evidence to suggest that even the experts are confused or fail to grasp the big picture; for example, how many political scientists or journalists were able to predict the end of the cold war, the rise of the BRICs, the global financial crisis, the euro zone crisis, or the Arab spring?

As long ago as 1995, my colleague Jeff Isaac in the department of political science at Indiana University was reflecting on how political theorists had remained entirely silent about the end of the cold war, the collapse of the USSR, and the revolutions in eastern Europe. In

reflecting on the reasons for this, he drew the following conclusions about his sub-discipline:

“It seems almost beneath us to examine mundane, practical political problems located in space and time, in particular places with particular histories ... How much more edifying, rigorous, hip, virtuous, it is to discuss the constitution of the self, the nature of community, the proper way to read an old book, or the epistemological foundations or lack thereof that are involved in examining mundane political problems”.⁵

Academics may not necessarily be in the business of predicting, but we are in the business of enlightening, and I would argue that those of us active in EU studies are doing a disservice to ourselves and to our fellow citizens by being so inward-looking at a time of such obvious need.

Confused citizens also face the related problem of information overload. In the face of the enormous variety of sources of information available to them, many voters are turning to those outlets that fit most closely with their interests and predispositions, thereby denying themselves access to alternative points of view. Democracy demands not just freedom of information but exposure to competing analyses, and yet many overwhelmed citizens are either turning off or retreating into what the American legal scholar Cass Sunstein calls information ‘gated communities’ or ‘echo chambers’.⁶

We can see this dynamic at work in the debate over Europe: euroscepticism is a legitimate and important part of the debate, but far too much of it is based on myth, and we have not been hearing nearly enough about the objective pros and cons of European integration.

It was my concerns over this problem that encouraged me to write my book *Why Europe Matters*, published earlier this year in order to help make the case for the European Union. I

⁵ Jeffrey C. Isaac (1995), “The Strange Silence of Political Theory” in *Political Theory* 23:4, November, pp. 636-652.

⁶ Cass Sunstein (2001) *Echo Chambers: Bush v. Gore, Impeachment, and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

found that there was much to celebrate in the European project, and far more – certainly – than we are led to believe. To give you just five examples:

1. The EU has helped bring a lasting and sustainable peace to the continent.
2. It has encouraged innovation, opportunity, and choice, helping raise standards and expectations.
3. It has replaced exclusion with inclusion, helping Europeans better understand their shared values, and stimulating a European identity.
4. It has helped strengthen democracy, human rights, and free markets, at home and abroad.
5. It has allowed Europe to speak with a louder voice on the global stage, and offered a benchmark model of civilian influence in a world where power is still commonly defined in military terms.

To summarize.

The debate over Europe is neither as productive, nor as balanced, nor as informed as it needs to be. The EU has problems, to be sure, but why add to those problems with myths, misconceptions, and apathy? We academics have a key responsibility. We need to help improve the quality of the debate over Europe by helping close the knowledge deficit. I am not suggesting that we are responsible for offsetting the influence of eurosceptics, but rather that we are responsible for helping educate not just our students but also the wider public so that their opinions of the EU are balanced and informed as well as being based on fact rather than on myth.

The American biologist E O Wilson summarized the wider knowledge dilemma in 1998 when he wrote that we ‘are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom’. He predicted that the world would ‘be run by synthesizers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely’.

As academics, we are synthesizers. If the wider public is going to better understand the political implications of European economic integration, and if we are going to have a sensible and productive debate about the possibilities and pitfalls of the move towards a political union, then we scholars need to step up and give people the tools and the knowledge to help make sure that happens.