



Pro-refugee protest in Munich, Germany. Photo: Ilias Bartolini

People Matter: Recent Sociological Contributions to Understanding European Integration from Below

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After more than two decades of apolitical ennui, history has returned from the dead and sweeps over Europe at full force. The cold war is back with a new look, enchanted philosophers proclaim the overdue end of the post-modern era, *new realism* is the man of the hour, and old enemies serve as fresh targets. A short, saturated moment of cosmopolitan sentiment ends as global powers return to puberty with Russia and the West stalemating over Syria, forcing whole generations into exodus. Thousands of people flee from

European-brand weapons to European havens. Meanwhile, north of the Mediterranean, societies polarize over such sudden change of affairs. The conservatives, the fascists, and the fearful align to build fences. Some practice verbal arson, others torch literally. The left unites and reacts with selfless help. In Germany, people donate, volunteer, and applaud as refugees arrive at Munich central station. Immediately, others jump in to argue that you don't clap to welcome exhausted survivors of terrible trajectories. Uncertainty is in the air; *Willkommenskultur* meets *German Angst*. A discourse arises about dignity, about "us" and "them," about

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Europe and its borders. The number of new arrivals may drop as winter tightens its grip, but the question arises: What can we learn from this long, historic “summer of refugees,” as the *New York Times* called it? Two lessons stand out.

First, *people matter for Europe*, and today, in times of multiple crises, much more so than in earlier decades. Electorates throughout the continent are suddenly wooed by politicians regarding European issues. On the right, Eurosceptic parties, catering to the anxieties of the men and women in the street, have appeared, while the major central parties hastily move to one of the sides of the newly cleaved public as they realize that the median voter, whom they had been chasing for years, has suddenly disappeared from the scene. The new arrivals are also addressed, whether in the Danish government’s recent daunting ads in several Lebanese newspapers, aimed at *scaring away* potential asylum-seekers, or in promotions for the Blue Card, targeted at *attracting* high-skilled immigrants. But no matter whether they are seen as a threat, as the only way to restock Europe’s aging workforce, or simply as potential new friends, colleagues, and neighbors, one thing is clear: the thoughts and actions of the newcomers, just as those of the “old” citizens, are decisive for Europe’s integration.

The second lesson is that *Europe matters to people*, and again more so today than in the past. For many inbound asylum-seekers, Europe represents the promise of a better future; right-wing citizens picture a “fortress Europe” that needs to be defended against external threats, and left-wingers portray yet another Europe, one of open borders, warmth, solidarity, and diversity. But no matter what the political stance, Europe is felt to be important. Even beyond the “refugee question,” many equally telling cases can be found. Earlier this

year, Europe’s expectant looks were on the citizens of Greece, on whose decision to vote for or against the troika’s bailout conditions seemed to depend the future of the whole region. Already in December 2013, more than half a million people gathered in Kiev’s Euromaidan protests to call for deeper European integration, bringing a whole nation to the verge of breaking apart over their belonging to Europe.

But what does that mean for the social sciences? One thing is clear: If we want to understand Europe today, we cannot just focus on the institutions of the European Union (EU). An appropriate *sociological* perspective on European integration must center on individuals, their actions, and attitudes. In our project, “The New Europeans: Cross-border Interactions and Transnational Identities,” which is part of the research unit “Horizontal

Europeanization” (Heidenreich et al. 2012) and funded by the German Science Foundation (DFG), we have pursued this idea over the past three years. On the following pages, we report some of our impressions and findings from this venture.

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How can sociology contribute to understanding Europe from below?

Our task is tremendously difficult. According to the United Nations (2015), 738 million people are living in Europe today. Any attempt to get a representative picture of how such a huge number of people interacts across borders and thinks about Europe must unavoidably admit to a long list of limitations. Yet, if we want to advance, we have to try; and, indeed, ever more researchers are taking up the challenge of studying European integration from below (e.g., Immerfall 2000; Delhey 2005; Favell and Guiraudon 2011; Kuhn 2011; Mau and Mewes 2012; Recchi 2015). But what options exist to capture Europeans’ transnational practices and attitudes?

One option is to simply *ask* people in Europe about their behavior and feelings. This is, for instance, done in the Eurobarometer, a large-scale survey funded by the European Commission that covers all EU member states and has been carried out regularly since the early 1970s. In our project, we used this survey, which, despite several challenges, has crucial advantages over alternative polls, including its solid coverage across time and space (cf. Deutschmann 2015a). Another path is to analyze process-generated data; for example, the information people provide in their visitor visa forms at airports or when checking in at hotels in other countries. While these kinds of data tell us little about people's *attitudes*, they have many assets compared with survey data when it comes to capturing *activities* (e.g., much broader availability and absence of response biases). These features allow researchers to study cross-national mobility and communication not only across *all* European countries (including those outside the EU), but basically throughout the whole world. The last section of this report is based on analyses of such process-generated traces of cross-border activity.

A new way of measuring how Europe matters to people

Intuitively, we may feel that Europe is highly relevant for people's everyday lives today – but is there a way to actually measure that? First of all, we need some sort of benchmark against which to compare Europe-related practices and attitudes. Traditionally, the nation-state was used as the sole yardstick (Vobruba 2008). However, it can be argued that this is insufficient and that the world *outside* Europe needs to be considered as an additional benchmark to guarantee that the observed activity is not merely transnational or cosmopolitan, but actually *Europe*-related. A more precise picture can thus be obtained by looking at European activity relative to the amount of activity at both the national and the global levels.

Implementing this approach empirically for various practices (travel, consumption, relocation, etc.) and attitudes (identity, solidarity, interest in culture, etc.) shows that Europeans' practic-

es take place mostly within their own nation, less in Europe, and least in the world outside Europe. For attitudes, in contrast, Europe is as present as the nation and the world at large. In other words, free-floating thought is more Europeanized than physical activity, which is still cost-sensitive and spatially bound (Delhey et al. 2014). Cross-country comparisons reveal another bifurcation between practices and attitudes: Whereas the former are most Europe-centered in small and prosperous countries, particularly Luxemburg, which is traditionally considered as belonging to the “core” of Europe, attitudes are most centered on Europe in Eastern Europe, which is conventionally treated as “periphery.” The will to “return to Europe” after 1989 could be an explanation for this strong orientation toward Europe in many post-Soviet societies. Our findings also show that Europe's geographic midpoint doesn't necessarily have to coincide with its center in terms of social integration (Delhey and Deutschmann 2015).

Differences *within* European societies

Of course, sociology is never merely interested in comparing countries on the whole, but particularly in understanding inequalities between social groups *within* societies. In our case, we wanted to know *who* is most transnationally active in Europe, and *who* identifies most with Europe. The traditional view in this regard is that “doing Europe” and “feeling European” is a “class project” in that the upper social strata are more transnationally active and Europhile than the lower ones (Fligstein 2008). We argue that although such a gradient exists, this metaphor is overly simplistic since characteristics other than class, in particular “horizontal” factors such as age, gender, and migration background play at least as big a role in structuring transnational activity in Europe (Delhey et al. 2015). This can be seen even more clearly in the case of identification with Europe, for which factors like migration background, political orientation, residence location, and gender are all significant predictors, whereas occupational class is largely irrelevant. Incidentally, respondents with migration backgrounds feature weaker national

and stronger European identities than those without – even when their parents’ country of birth is non-European (Cirlanaru 2016). That way, migration seems to boost rather than bust the mental cohesion of Europe.

We also compared class-specific levels of transnational activity across the EU-27 member states. Here, three findings stand out: First, in all these countries, the upper social classes are more transnationally active than the lower ones. Second, in economically well-off countries, all social strata are more transnationally active than their counterparts in less affluent societies. Finally, the increase in transnational activity with economic prosperity is greater in the higher social strata, resulting in a wider class gap in the richer countries (Delhey et al.

2015). In theoretical terms, this finding contradicts the popular idea of a “death of class” (Clark and Lipset 1991). In political terms, it can be seen as a warning sign: The lower social strata are not only more Eurosceptic in their attitudes (Kuhn 2011), but are also left behind when it comes to “doing Europe.” If politics is to take bottom-up European integration seriously, it has to consider this widening class gap in cross-border interaction.

Learning about Europe by looking beyond Europe

Let us return to the question of how we can ensure that the phenomena we have observed so far are genuinely *European*. Is it not possible that continent-scale societal integration from below occurs in all parts of the world, which we just can’t

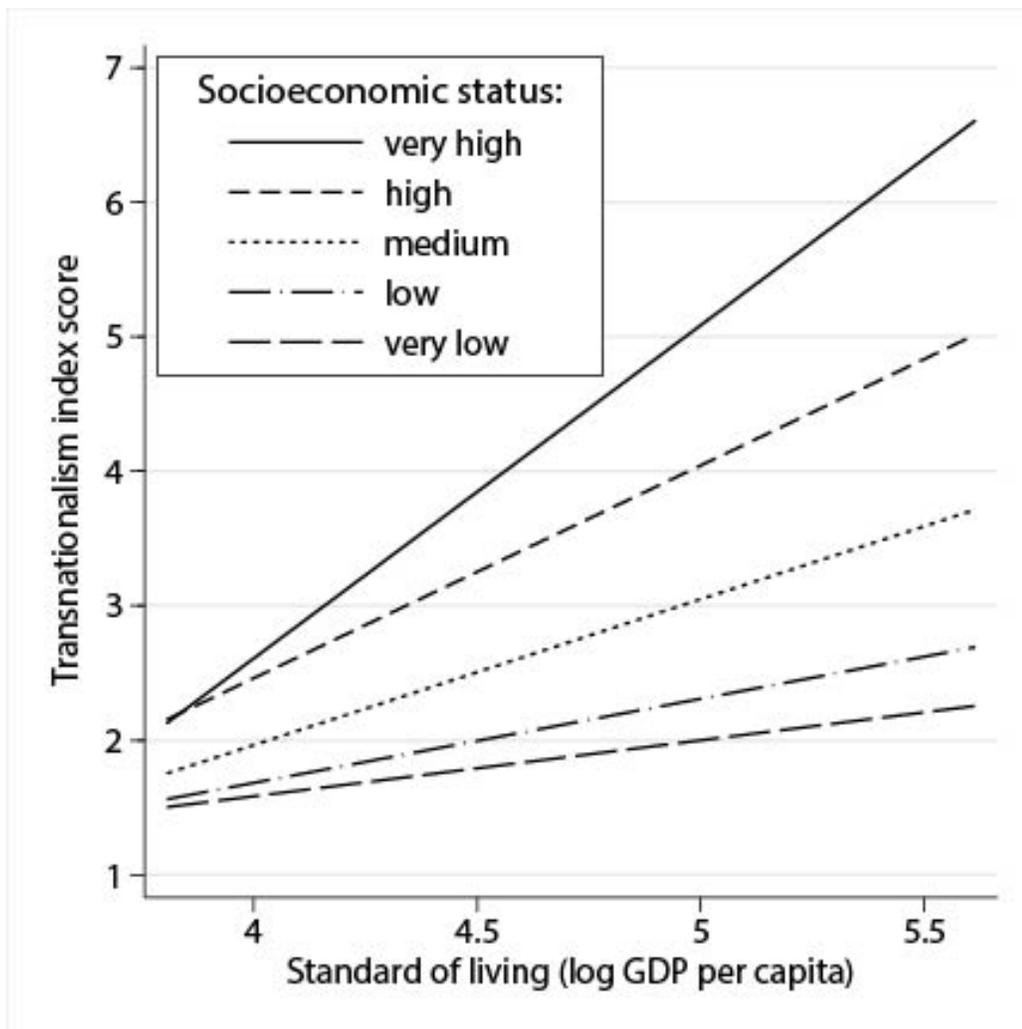


Figure 1. The widening class gap in transnational activity in the EU-27. For technical details cf. Delhey et al. 2015.

see because our horizon reaches but from Lisbon to Luhansk? The only way to solve this problem is to abandon the exclusively European outlook in favor of a global-comparative perspective. So far, however, with the notable exception of Roose (2013), comparative glances beyond Europe have been extremely rare in sociology, despite a long tradition of comparative, universalistic integration research in international relations (Delhey 2005) and a recent trend toward “comparative regionalism” in political science (Larusen 2010).

Yet, such comparisons across world regions are feasible, even with currently existing data. An examination of various networks of transnational mobility (asylum- and refuge-seeking, migration, tourism, and student exchange) reveals that regionalism (understood as concentration of transnational activity within world regions) exists in *all* world regions and becomes stronger over time in all but one of them. The two continents where bottom-up regionalism is most developed overall are Europe and Latin America. However, this picture does not hold for all mobility types: In terms of refuge- and asylum-seeking, for instance, Africa is most integrated as a region, while Europe ranges at the bottom. Europe’s regionalism is truly exceptional only when it comes to student exchange (Deutschmann 2015b). But is that because the *Erasmus* program offers unique opportunities, or because Europeans are simply richer on average than people in other parts of the world, and thus can afford to study abroad? An analysis of potential explanations for the existence of bottom-up regionalism shows that while cultural (common language, religion, colonial past, etc.) economic (gross domestic product, regional trade agreements, etc.) and political (shared membership in international organizations, visa waiver agreements, etc.) factors are all relevant to some extent, their role is minor compared with the powerful force of geography (Deutschmann 2015c). A

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closer look reveals that the relation between physical distance and almost all types of transnational mobility and communication follows a precise mathematical function, the power law, which is also found in the natural sciences for the motion tracks of animal species. Moreover, despite much talk about a globalization-induced “death of distance” or “end of geography,” this spatial structure remains remarkably stable over time (Deutschmann 2015d).

What does all that tell us about European integration from below? First, Europe has a huge advantage over other world regions when it comes to bottom-up regional integration because of its small territorial size, which facilitates cross-border interaction. This is rarely recognized in European integration research, while exceeding emphasis is put on the role of EU institutions. Second, the reported power-law relation between distance and mobility shows how distorted and misleading recent right-wing politicians’ claims in Germany concerning the influx of refugees into Europe are, from “We can’t take everybody in” (*Der Spiegel* 2015; *Handelsblatt* 2015) to “We can’t save the whole world” (*Passauer Neue Presse* 2015; BR24 2015). In reality, most refugees stay close to their country of origin and only a small fraction head toward distant destinations such as Western Europe.

Conclusion

The more fervidly Europe’s future is debated in the re-politicized public discourse, the more important becomes dependable, disinterested information. The social sciences must play a critical role in that process. Sociology, in particular, with its focus on horizontal forms of social interaction, can contribute a lot to increasing our understanding of European society, which is not held together or driven apart primarily by the institutions of the EU, but by the actions and thoughts of the people

that live in it. In this short contribution, we reported some experiences in this regard from our research over the past three years. We showed, *inter alia*, that people with (extra-European) migration backgrounds are likely to identify *more* with Europe than autochthonous Europeans, that the lower social classes run the risk of being left behind when it comes to “doing Europe,” and that physical distance structures cross-border mobility in a way that facilitates European bottom-up integration and implies that *de facto* only a small fraction of all refugees start for Europe. Some of these findings clearly conflict with stereotypical opinions ex-

pressed in the current debates, to which we hope to have contributed some useful information. Of course, a lot remains to be done for social science research in this direction. We need improved data, more information about trends over time, and further comparisons with other world regions. Global inequalities, armed conflict, new technology, and better transportation infrastructure will continue to bring people from different places together, in Europe and all other parts of the world. The conflictive or integrative ways these contacts evolve will be of utmost importance.

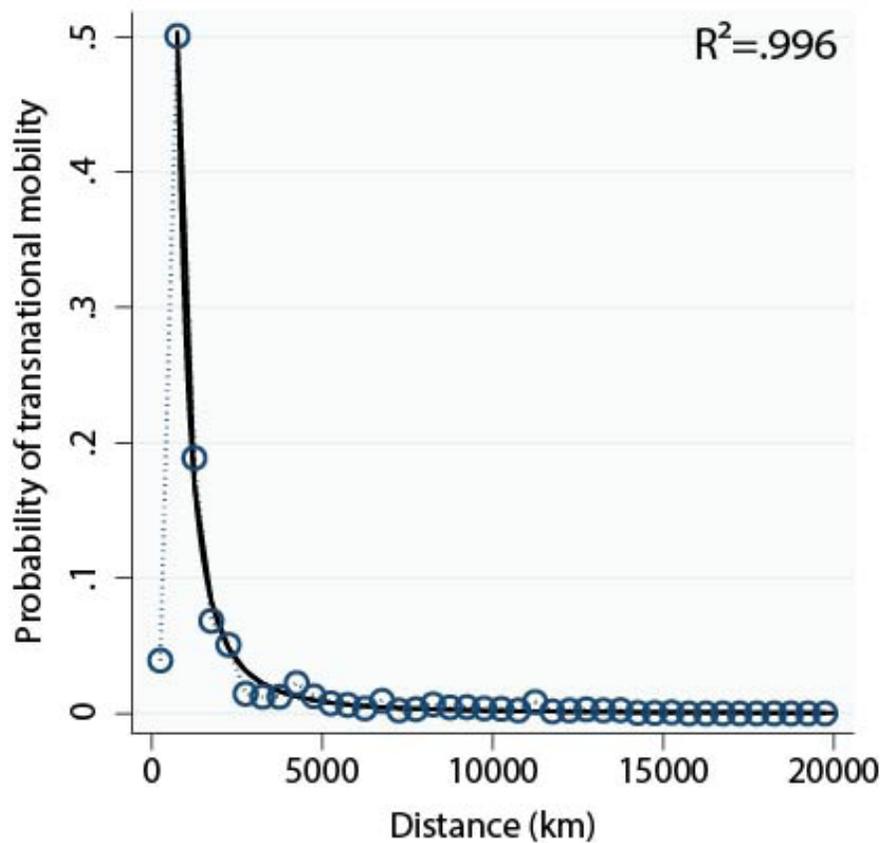


Figure 2. The spatial structure of global refugee flows, 2010. Circles show binned empirical observations, solid line shows fitted power-law curve (for details cf. Deutschmann 2015d).

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