European Studies as an Intellectual Field: A Perspective from Sociology

Michèle Lamont, Harvard University*

The position of European Studies in the landscape of North American social sciences has faced serious challenges since the seventies. The general decline of area studies after the transition away from a colonial, and then Cold War-inspired, geographical organization of knowledge production has meant a redefinition of the position of European Studies within the social sciences field throughout the past several decades. This trend has materialized in a highly regrettable decline in funding from some of the main American supporters of independent social science research on Europe, most notably the Ford Foundation and the German Marshall Fund (both following earlier signals from the Mellon Foundation).

Concomitantly, the Global South has come to exer-

1 I thank my colleagues Jason Beckfield, Bart Bonikowski, Peter A. Hall, and Hilary Silver for their feedback on this essay.

*The author may be reached at: mlamont@wjh.harvard.edu
cise a growing and powerful attraction on our undergraduates of late, due to shifts in what it means for today’s young to be progressive, the intensification of globalization, and the booming economic and political importance of the BRICS. This trend is affecting academic hiring patterns, including the turn of history departments toward global history and the accelerated hiring of experts in areas other than Europe. Although a positive change in itself, such a disciplinary shift is not without consequence for European Studies. Similar transformations operate in other disciplines. To simplify greatly, within political science, an often US politics-based methodological push that went hand in hand with the discipline adopting economics as a reference point has transformed and, some think, challenged European comparative politics, a field with a long lineage of Weberian-inspired qualitative analysis. For its part, US-based Anthropology of Europe prospered for a while, albeit just when the discipline itself went into a state of decline (Lamont 2009, chapter 2). At the same time, macroeconomics veered away from country-based analyses, to focus more exclusively on theoretical innovation and modeling (although some macroeconomists, such as Alesina and Glaeser and Robert Baro, do use country data). As for sociology, research endeavors in my field were never firmly grounded in geographic divisions, and very few of my contemporaries have developed intellectual identities as proper ‘Europeans.’ Instead, more often than not, sociologists aimed to make theoretical or substantive contributions by drawing on evidence that ‘happened’ to be gathered in Europe.\(^2\) The result of these converging changes can easily be interpreted as a general weakening of European Studies in North American social sciences.

Yet, the situation may be far more nuanced and complex than one would be led to believe at first glance. This is certainly the case if one considers the current state of the study of Europe and of European countries in sociology. With the appeal of globalization, the programs of professional meetings, such as those of the Council of European Studies (CES) and the American Sociological Association, suggest that a sizable number of sociologists have been attracted by the study of Europe considered in a comparative, transnational, or global perspective. The extension and consolidation of the European Union (EU) has opened up a whole new field of inquiry that was simply not in the horizon 40 years ago.\(^3\) We have also recently seen the publication of an important collection of articles/textbooks that explicitly aims at consolidating our sociological knowledge about Europe, bringing together excellent contributions dealing with a broad range of topics including identity, inequality, and mobility (Favell and Guiraudon 2011). Moreover, while sociologists working on European countries had typically specialized almost exclusively on fields such as comparative historical sociology, labor, political sociology, and the sociology of social movements (building on the work of comparativists such as Bendix, Esping-Anderson, Lipset, Skocpol, Tilly and the likes), in recent years we have seen a diversification of foci, manifested in what appears to be a rapid growth in the number of publications on a wide range of topics that include income inequality, exclusion, immigration, racism, race and ethnicity, identity, knowledge, gender, and institutions and organizations.\(^4\) Much of this work is comparative, as researchers aim to illuminate the American, or colonial or post-national experiences by looking at Europe through contrasting lenses. This has also meant the emergence and diffusion of a profusion of competing new research agendas.

\(^2\) While some identify as ‘sociologists of Europe’, others identify as doing sociology ‘in Europe’, i.e., using European data for the purpose of studying social processes (I thank my colleague Bart Bonikowski for sharing this observation). Also, while some want to know what can be generalized across national contexts, others are more concerned with studying social processes as fundamental, thus significant, features of social dynamics (with no particular concern for generalizability).

\(^3\) Despite its extraordinarily rapid growth, Mudge and Vauchez (2012) have argued that EU Studies represents a ‘weak field’ of scholarly expertise.

\(^4\) Some of these changes are brought about by transformations in Europe, such as the case of immigration from the Global South, which are encouraging a focus on transnational networks and global comparisons (not only transatlantic ones).
Of course, the research landscape in Europe has expanded and changed as well, and the overall quality of social science research has improved (as it has in North America). This means that North American sociologists are now in a better position to draw on the work of their European counterparts (and vice versa) when researching a topic than was the case 40 years ago. There remain important cross-national differences in the degree of familiarity that social scientists have with US-based social sciences, from the most English-speaking countries (Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Germany, and the United Kingdom) to the less bilingual ones. But in many countries, France standing as a prime example, the younger generations of sociologists are much more aware of, and engaged with, US and international literature than it was the case when I was a graduate student in Paris in the late 1970s. While sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu have gained enormous influence in North America, the transmission of his work has helped the diffusion of a shared sociological language and sets of questions that have been generative from the perspective of theory building (Lamont 2012). The success of historical institutionalism has played a parallel role for political science, with considerable intercontinental interchange among researchers who are pursuing overlapping sets of questions (e.g., Hall and Soskice 2001). Completing the picture, the effect of the EU, and of other EU-based research funds in transforming European social science cannot be underestimated, especially when it comes to the creation of an abundant (some would say over-abundant) number of collaborative European research networks. These in turn have greatly benefited US sociologists working on Europe, both because of the improved quality and sheer quantity of data and knowledge on Europe being produced, and because of its overall greater visibility to North American researchers. Today’s North American-based experts on Europe have many more playmates and playdates than they had a few decades ago, and the increased popularity of comparative research encourages more theory building, away from descriptive case studies with little theoretical reach or scaling up potential. In this sense, the sociology of Europe is now more in sync with disciplinary developments than was the case 30 years ago.

In the context of these broad developments, the Council for European Studies (CES) has played a pivotal role. Thirty years ago, relatively few sociologists attended the biannual meetings of the association, and most of those who did were ‘quasi political scientists’, working on topics that more often than not pertained to political economies, labor, political institutions, and related issues. The contemporary landscape is quite different, given the proliferation of new topics (mentioned above), which adds to the earlier strengths in the field (most of which have been maintained). There have also been rapprochements between CES and sister-learned societies such as the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics (SASE), whose meetings alternate between Europe and the United States, and whose faithful members and leadership overlap in part with those of CES.6

5 Moreover, as pointed out by my colleague Hilary Silver, “the increasing availability, diversity, and expertise for analyzing large quantitative data sets on multiple nations favors a greater focus on Europe because its many small affluent countries are overrepresented in harmonized data bases. Quantitative macrosociology is not focused on Europe per se, but makes possible many new conclusions about Europe, or certain types of countries (‘democracies’ etc.) characteristic of Europe” (personal communication).

6 The creation of the European Sociological Association also provided additional fora and resources for intellec-
How about the horsepower of the field? All in all, I would venture to state that sociologists working on Europe make up a fairly remarkable group, as the subfield has attracted a number of very talented individuals across the generations (while I don’t risk providing names for fear of omitting meritorious figures, I am certain that readers will have their own personal ‘best of the best’ list.)

Nevertheless, despite a clear push in theory building, there is still considerable room for improvement. To mention only one area that I know well, the sociology of racism and anti-racism, researchers on both sides of the Atlantic often proceed in parallel fashion, due in part to (paradoxically) the overabundance of information and problems with the circulation of information about who does what. In fact, the relevant research communities often do not read the same journals or books and do not define the same problems as ‘interesting’. (I am sure that British sociologists are proportionately not more numerous in reading the American Sociological Review than American sociologists are in reading the British Journal of Sociology.) The result is a somewhat chaotic research area that offers more than its fair share of case studies that are developed without a clear vision of accumulated knowledge. A few topics, such as immigration, have been the object of more integration, thanks in part to the vast amounts of funds that have been made available for its study by supranational and national funding organizations in the United States and Europe, as well as through foundation and non-profit funding agencies. I believe this to be an exception, and even there, European researchers on immigration to Europe tend to be somewhat more theoretically motivated that their American, more often descriptive, counterparts (at the very least, what counts as ‘theoretically motivated’ differs across contexts).

Obviously, it should also be mentioned that the conditions of intellectual production vary enormously across European countries and that this influences the type of research that can be conducted across national contexts. The Berlin Wissenschaftszentrum, Sciences Po, the Max Planck-Cologne and the Max Planck-Goettingen have means that are rarely matched in the social science communities of Spain and Portugal. And it is not random that the departments that are most internationalized in their hires (the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research comes to mind) are also institutions that are particularly well funded and where personal networks extend across the Atlantic divide. The investment of the German government in the creation of centers of excellence (for instance, the Research Center in Social and Cultural Studies in Mainz) is paying off handsomely and confirms the value of pursuing such strategies, even if they are sometimes decried as creating (already existing) inequalities within academic fields. The alternative is the stagnation of talents, and eventually, the intellectual and institutional decline of fields of study.

This brings me to the touchy issue of peer review, which European academics often associate with neo-liberalism and which has generated much condemnation in Europe while being entirely taken for granted in the North American context (see <www.sauvonsluniversite.com/spip.php?article6091> and <www.isa-sociology.org/global-dialogue/2013/04/german-sociologists-boycott-academic-ranking> for examples from France and Germany; also Cousin and Lamont 2009). Nowhere are the pressures toward the standardization of national academic practices more visible than where and when this topic is raised. Several European countries have joined forced in the NORFACE network to adopt similar practices (e.g., Lamont and Huutoniemi 2011), and some, like Switzerland, have created organizations charged solely with evaluating evaluative practices, but with mixed results. (The French Agence d’évaluation de la recherche et de l’enseignement scientifique (AERES) was predictably abolished shortly after the Socialists came to power in 2012.) While the verdict is still out on the relative success of these enterprises, I believe there may be an emerging consensus that too often European institutions have recourse to quantitative measures to assess quality (the infamous H index that measures citation rates being the prime example), in a meaningless effort to make evaluation more ‘objective’ (which by defi-
nition evaluation requires judgment!).

In conclusion, despite a marked declined in the resources put at the disposal of sociologists working in Europe, most importantly by the German Marshall Fund and the Ford Foundation, I would venture to offer that the overall health of the study of Europe by sociologists remains stable, and has even increased by some measures, thanks to the creation of more intense transnational ties between North American and European professional circles, and to the accelerated development of scholarship in Europe, due to the input of considerable resources by the European Research Council, the Marie Curie Program, and other European sources. Even if our undergraduates are turning their eyes toward the Global South in growing number and fewer students of comparative politics are interested in Europe, in sociology at least, we still face a relatively healthy situation. (I would not say ‘market’, as North American sociology departments never look specifically to hire an expert on Europe!)

A final provisional prediction is that the future of North American European Studies is likely to depend largely on the capacity of concerned knowledge producers to reinvent their field in unpredictable ways, to the extent that the current state of affairs could not have been foreseen by extrapolating a linear evolutionary model in the production and diffusion of knowledge (Camic et al. 2011). Unexpected turns of events and forks in the road, and unintentional effects of serendipitous developments may very well continue to be our best friends and our salvation for a prosperous future.

References


