Book Review

# Framing TTIP in the European Public Spheres: Towards an Empowering Dissensus for EU Integration

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# Abstract

Oleart offers a theoretically innovative contribution to the Europeanization and politicization literatures by introducing the 'empowering dissensus': an agonistic type of public conflict that legitimizes the EU as a playing field, connects politics with policy, and charts a path towards increasing the accountability and legitimacy of the EU. By applying this concept to the public debate on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), Oleart shows that concerted civil society action can radically transform the nature of public conflict on European issues.

# Key Words

Europeanization; Public spheres; Politicization; EU Trade Policy; TTIP; Framing analysis; Agonism; Social movements.

Since the Maastricht Treaty and the associated growing concerns about the democratic deficit of the European Union, there has been an ongoing debate about the desirability of the politicization of European integration. Some authors have argued that the EU would not benefit from visible political conflict (Moravcsik, 2002), while others advocated sweeping institutional reforms so that traditional government-opposition dynamics take place as soon as possible (Follesdal and Hix, 2006) Yet in the past 10 years, growing evidence on the concrete manifestations of politicization has caused many academics to reevaluate and seriously doubt the positive effects of politicization for integration. This is not because they think politicization unnecessary, but because of the dominant form political conflict over the EU ostensibly takes. In line with Hooghe & Marks' seminal piece on a post-functional theory for European integration (2009), empirical analyses of highly controversial public debates confirm their initial hypothesis that political conflict over European integration is structured primarily along an integration–demarcation cleavage that pits cosmopolitan Europeans against nationalist anti-Europeans (Hutter, Grande and Kriesi, 2016). Bundled together with issues such as immigration and driven by populist radical right parties, Hooghe and Marks claim that executive elites now have incentives to slow integration. Meaning, in other words, politicization acts as a 'constraining dissensus'.

In *'Framing TTIP in the European Public Spheres: Towards an Empowering Dissensus for EU Integration'*, Alvaro Oleart builds a powerful counterweight to this argument by claiming that politicization can be considered 'empowering' rather than 'constraining' for European integration. To show how this is possible, Oleart skillfully bridges the literature on EU politicization, the Europeanization of public spheres, and democratic theory. In Chapter 2 Oleart offers an impressive theoretical review that begins by outlining the traditional argument that beyond-national authorities need an accompanying public sphere to act as a communicative counterweight to administrative power. However, building on the democratic theory of Chantal Mouffe, Oleart criticizes this mainstream view for being too focused on rational deliberation geared towards consensus à la Jürgen Habermas. In line with Mouffe, Oleart stresses that politics is emotional and conflictual, a fight between irreconcilable world views. Our democratic institutions should hence be constructed to let 'agonistic conflict' flourish. From here on, Oleart uses a complementary view, fusing the Habermasian deliberative democratic view and Mouffe's agonistic politics to argue that the public sphere is a place in which conflict takes place and where different counter-hegemonic projects confront each other.

Oleart reviews literature on the Europeanization of public spheres and concludes that two types of Europeanization have been identified. One 'depoliticized' form, which implies some attention for the EU, but which is biased towards executive actors who are free to communicate their own (often technocratic) frames. The other is an 'antagonistically' politicized Europeanization, in line with the 'constraining dissensus' thesis, where the conflict revolves around pro and anti-EU views, it disputes the existence of the EU itself. In reaction to these, Oleart normatively advocates an 'agonistically politicized Europeanization', meaning, a public debate where EU policies (rather than the EU polity) are discussed between groups that recognize each other as equal parts of the same political community, and where the dominant hegemony is being confronted by counter-hegemonic projects focused on alternative values and ideas.

Oleart methodologically innovates by linking this highly theoretical debate to a very concrete framing analysis in Chapter 3. This link rests on a chain of equivalence he puts forward between (i) the type of conflict (ii) polity or policy contestation, and (iii) the type of frame introduced. Hence, antagonistic conflict is equalized with polity contestation, whereby the EU is pitted against nation states, and with a 'sovereignty' frame. On the other hand, agonism is identified where policies of the EU are discursively contested through frames that indicate a counter-hegemonic project. The empirical aim then becomes to evaluate the type of conflict that dominates – antagonistic, agonistic, or depoliticized/technocratic – during a particular conflict by studying dominant media frames.

To demonstrate, Oleart turns an analytical lens to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), a derailed trade agreement between the EU and the US that was being negotiated between 2013-16 and which would have been the largest trade deal at the time. From the start of the process, the TTIP negotiations were met with unprecedented (and unexpected) attention, triggered by a wide range of civil society organizations working transnationally and in several Member States. Given the wide array of political and societal actors present during these TTIP debates, applying Oleart's framework, the question becomes whether the dominant framing was antagonistically anti-EU or, counter-hegemonically, addressed TTIP as a policy issue.

In this context, the empirical Chapters 4-6 set out to evaluate the dominant type of conflict and framing in domestic (mediatized) public spheres. The scope of empirical data is impressive, it incorporates media framing analysis of three newspapers in three countries with very different relationships to European integration: Spain, France, and the UK. Collecting over 1000 media articles and using a qualitative content analysis to code the types of frames in titles, images and the body of text, these chapters diligently describe the politicized TTIP debate in detail.

Notwithstanding differences between the three sampled countries, the main finding of Oleart's analysis is that the politicization of TTIP led to similar media landscapes. Not only in relation to the ebb and flow of issue salience, but also in terms of the interpretive frames of reference. The same dynamic was evident in all three public spheres: a depoliticized Europeanization in the first 1.5 years of negotiations, followed by a complete shift towards agonistic politicization. In framing terms, the debate shifted from predominantly executive actors framing TTIP as an economic opportunity (in hegemonic neoliberal terms), towards a pluralistic debate where 'corporations vs democracy' was the master frame and point of reference. Interestingly, the debate was always 'nationalized' so that overarching concerns were translated to domestic contexts (e.g., in the UK the master frame was translated to an attack on the NHS), but the broad agonistic frames of reference were similar across borders. In contrast, and equally remarkably, the EU itself was hardly ever questioned, so it was mostly the TTIP project as a policy issue that was under debate.

Chapter 7 reflects on the research findings. Oleart explains the occurrence of the transnational Europeanized TTIP debate mostly in terms of agency and entrepreneurship. A network of 'alter-globalization' activists and organizations worked as a transnational advocacy network which was crucial for the coordination of campaigns that went beyond the 'Brussels bubble' and translated 'EU-speak' into domestic concerns. Oleart also underlines the importance of the relationship between media-savvy activists and journalists by drawing on interviews with journalists responsible for covering TTIP in their newspapers. Politicization, Oleart thus argues, relies to a large degree on the (discursive) actions of political and societal entrepreneurs.

One side note to Oleart's findings relates to his focus on quality newspapers. Public debate in quality newspapers from different countries are arguably much more similar than the difference we can find between quality and tabloid newspapers *within* the same country (Trenz, 2008). Given the existence of an increasingly fractured and layered public sphere, this raises a question as to whether the finding of similarity in these debates is indeed so surprising. It could be the case that the British tabloid press used TTIP as another example of Brussels stripping away British sovereignty, leading to a much more antagonistic conflict in the UK, thereby qualifying our attachment of normatively beneficial consequences to the TTIP debate. That said, this choice to focus on quality newspapers by no means downgrades the added value of Oleart's contribution; on the contrary, it sparks interest in and opens further avenues of possible inquiry about how the EU debate is mediated and presented to mass audiences.

Oleart's book is not only theoretically rich and empirically thorough, it also presents a genuinely hopeful message. Much in line with his object of study – the Alter-Globalization

movement – his argument shows that, indeed, 'Another Europe is possible'. The dominant ways in which European conflict is made and re-made in the public sphere and is contingent on political and societal entrepreneurs stepping up and making claims. The current dominance of pro-EU vs anti-EU conflicts may be strong, but it is not set in stone. An expansion of EU competence has enlarged the possibilities for contestation of EU policies and politicization of debates on what type of Europe we want. It is these types of agonistic debates, Oleart argues, that legitimize the EU as a playing field, connects politics with policy, empowers actors previously excluded from debates, and charts a path towards increasing the accountability and legitimacy of the EU. The idea of politicization serving as an 'empowering dissensus' is therefore a powerful one; for this reason alone, it is worth exploring in further study.

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