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***Should there be a transnational theory of European integration?***

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*Draft – Comments welcome!*

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In the early 1970s, Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane reminded students of international relations of the importance of transnational interactions and organizations in global politics (Nye & Keohane 1971). For Nye and Keohane, leading theorists in the liberal tradition of international relations theory, the concept of transnationalism referred to all those ‘movement[s] of tangible and intangible goods across state boundaries’ in which ‘at least one actor is not an agent of a government or an international organization’ (ibid, 332). Such interactions were certainly not insignificant in the cold-war world, but it is no coincidence that the real breakthrough of Nye and Keohane’s concept occurred in the 1990s, after the demise of the bipolar world order, when discussions of globalization and the possible retreat of the state were the talk of town (Risse-Kappen 1995; Risse 2002). Since then, transnationalism has emerged as a leading theme in various fields of the social sciences. The concept has been used to analyze a wide variety of issues – ranging from mobility and migration, labour markets and business corporations, culture and religion, to citizenship and social protest – and there have even been attempts to define a distinct social science discipline of ‘transnational studies’ (Khagram & Levitt 2008).

Yet in spite of being such a buzz-word, transnationalism has not achieved an established place in research and theorizing about the European Union (EU). Empirical studies on EU politics have certainly not failed to notice transnational phenomena; there is a large literature on topics such as cross-national policy networks and patterns of interest representation, European public spheres, or European identities. But this research has remained fragmented; it has not resulted in a comprehensive description of Europe as a transnational society. Even more remarkably, empirical attention to transnational phenomena is not reflected in the theory of European integration, which remains dominated by the models of intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism, and the controversy over the relative importance of member-state governments vis-à-vis supranational institutions in the integration process (Wiener & Diez 2004). There is, by contrast, no such thing as a transnational theory of European integration that would highlight the role of non-governmental and non-EU actors in the integration process.

Should there be such a theory? How would it look like? And what could it contribute to EU studies? This paper approaches these questions in five steps: First, it surveys the recent literature in EU studies to find out which transnational phenomena have been identified as empirically relevant for the EU and its politics. Secondly, it analyzes references to transnationalism in prominent integration theories, asking how the empirical findings have been addressed here. On this basis, the third section considers options for incorporating transnational relations more systematically into European integration theories. It argues that the main benefit of ‘bringing transnational relations back in’ (Risse-Kappen 1995) to integration theory should not be seen in adding another independent variable to accounts that explain the emergence of EU institutions. Rather, the main value of a transnational approach lies in encouraging a broader

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conceptualization of European integration that overcomes the institutionalist bias of recent integration theories by highlighting how processes of political institution building interact with – and depend upon – dynamics in other societal spheres. In a fourth step, the paper discusses potential limitations and biases of transnationalism. It shows that due to its actor-centeredness, the concept tends to neglect structural and non-intentional aspects of European integration; its description of Europe's societal integration thus remains incomplete. The paper closes with a discussion of complementary or alternative concepts that offer a more comprehensive characterization of the integration process.

### **Transnational relations and EU politics**

What evidence is there that cross-border interactions involving non-governmental and non-EU actors are empirically relevant for the EU and its political processes? Two strands of the literature in EU studies make this case most forcefully: (a) studies of EU policy making and (b) studies of democracy in the EU. A brief overview of both research fields allows us to identify which aspects of transnationalism integration theories should be expected to address.

While the literature on *EU policy making* does not regularly use the term 'transnational', the fact that EU policy processes involve actors who are neither agents of national governments nor representatives of supranational EU institutions is firmly established, and constitutes an insight around which widely accepted notions such as network or multilevel governance have been formed (Kohler-Koch & Eising 1999; Hooghe & Marks 2001; Tömmel & Verdun 2009). The most consequential – and best analyzed – form of transnational influence on EU policy making is the institutionalized incorporation of 'transgovernmental' actors as well as lobbyists and interest representatives in EU-level decision making. Transgovernmental actors are members of national administrations who are not directly controlled by national governments; they include sub-state regional authorities (Hooghe & Marks 2001) and lower-level units or independent agencies in national administrative systems, such as police forces or central banks (Cameron 1995; Den Boer 2005; Eberlein & Newman 2009; Lavenex 2009). Lobbyists and other interest representatives might speak for individual companies or broad economic sectors, but also for civil society organizations, some of which have received help from the European Commission in establishing EU-level structures (Greenwood 2007). The Commission systematically incorporates such actors into EU decision processes by consulting extensively with relevant stakeholders before making a legislative proposal.

Two things can be noted about these forms of transnational influence on EU policy making. First, they primarily involve political elites and should not be equated with grassroots participation. In fact, direct interactions between EU institutions and European citizens are rare in the policy-making process. Broader political mobilization, if it occurs at all, often takes place in 'domesticated' form – in the member states rather than in Brussels (Imig & Tarrow 2001). This is due in part to the fact that most EU policies are implemented by the member states, but it also indicates that non-elite groups still perceive greater political resources and opportunities at the national level. Secondly,

transnationalism in EU policy making consists mainly of vertical – rather than horizontal – relations, meaning that non-governmental actors do not primarily interact with each other, but with EU institutions. To be sure, transgovernmental actors in some policy fields have established relatively enduring networks, and interest groups have formed pan-European confederations. But by and large, such horizontal structures remain weak; in many cases they only exist because they are ‘initiated, supported, and sometimes structured by actors from the European level’ (Tömmel & Verdun 2009, 295). What is more, their existence does not constitute a prerequisite for effective influence on EU policies. This weakness of horizontal transnationalism is even more pronounced at the non-elite level, where there are only isolated examples of successful mobilization (for instance in protesting against the European Commission’s original plans for a Services Directive in 2005). While other types of cross-border connections – economic or cultural exchange, migration and tourism, bi-national marriages, etc. – have expanded greatly in recent decades (Kaelble 2004; Beck & Grande 2007), political relations seem to lag behind. As Tarrow (2001, 235) concludes, ‘Europeans have not learned to cooperate contentiously across Europe’s internal boundaries’.

Obviously, this finding is relevant for discussions of *democracy in the EU* as well. In addition, the democracy literature highlights some further aspects of transnationalism, particularly when discussing the societal prerequisites for democratizing EU institutions. The argument here is that the full democratization of the EU, which would require more meaningful citizen participation and full electoral accountability of all core decision makers (Hurrelmann & DeBardeleben 2009), requires a certain societal infrastructure: First, a European public sphere that guarantees an accessible and unrestricted exchange of arguments and positions between citizens from all EU member states, in addition to scrutinizing the activities of EU decision makers (Eriksen 2005); and secondly, a European identity that induces Europeans to recognize the perspectives of other EU-citizens as legitimate and to support Europe-wide majority decisions even if they imply the danger of being overruled (Scharpf 1999, 6-28; Offe 2000).

In discussing to what extent these conditions are met, studies on democracy in the EU focus not only on transnational political activities and patterns of participation, but on transnational discourses and beliefs as well. Most studies dealing with the European public sphere analyze political discourses, focusing on the mass media. Acknowledging that EU-level media structures do not exist in any meaningful sense, they examine national media to find out whether an indirect exchange between citizens from various EU states is taking place. The general pattern that most studies identify can, again, be described as one of vertical, but not horizontal transnationalization: National media readily focus on EU issues, often turning them into a topic of intense debate, but there is little cross-border exchange between the media discourses in individual countries (Koopmans & Erbe 2004; Wessler et al. 2008). This finding is disconcerting from the perspective of democratic theory, since it implies a limited potential for deliberation between EU citizens.

The literature on European identities is concerned with the beliefs that Europeans hold about the EU and their own ‘Europeanness’ (for an overview, Herrmann et al. 2004).

Using techniques such as public opinion research (e.g., Hooghe & Marks 2005; Duchesne & Frogner 2008), discourse analysis (e.g., Risse 2001), or group experiments (e.g., Bruter 2005), such studies have shown that while nation-centred beliefs continue to be stronger than Europe-centred ones, many EU citizens – particularly those of higher socio-economic and educational strata – identify themselves as ‘European’ as well. To be sure, a person’s identification as European does not need to imply his or her identification with the EU – the vertical-horizontal distinction is applicable here as well, and we can map in a differentiated way how Europeans feel about the EU and its institutions (Hooghe & Marks 2005), or about citizens of various other EU states (Delhey 2008). All in all, the identity literature allows for the conclusion that European identities do exist in the EU’s population, providing a reservoir of support that EU institutions can draw on. In addition, the EU itself is heavily involved in identity politics; either by highlighting supposedly shared values or symbols in its own activities or by fostering connections between Europeans that promise to have identity-generating effects (Shore 2000; Bogdandy 2005). Still, European identifications are clearly not as strong and universal as national identifications are in the EU’s member states.

	<b>Vertical relationship (societal actor ↔ EU)</b>	<b>Horizontal relationship (societal actor ↔ societal actor)</b>
<b>Political activities (participation and mobilization)</b>	Interest representatives (or other transnational actors) participating in EU policy making; citizens protesting against EU policies	Cross-national party or interest group federations; transnational policy networks; citizens engaged in pan-European social movements
<b>Political discourses (communication)</b>	Journalists reporting about the EU; citizens discussing the EU within national public spheres	Journalists and/or citizens exchanging positions on the EU with journalists/citizens from other member states
<b>Political beliefs (values and identities)</b>	Political elites or citizens identifying with the EU (or official EU values, symbols)	Political elites or citizens identifying with other Europeans (or common European values, symbols)

*Table 1: Aspects of transnationalism in EU politics*

While it is not the purpose of this paper to enter into the substantive debates touched upon here, we can conclude from the look at the literature that transnational relations have been identified as relevant to EU politics in various strands of EU studies. Attempts to draw together the insights that these discussions contain on the role of transnationalism in the EU are thus far lacking. Our literature review suggests that as a starting point, transnational relations can be classified in a two-dimensional typology (Table 1): They focus either vertically on EU-society relations or horizontally on society-society linkages; and they can have their grounding either in political activities (i.e., participation and mobilization), political discourses (i.e., communication in the mass media or other settings), or political beliefs (i.e., values and identities held in the citizenry).

All of this indicates that it would be misleading to characterize Europe as one homogeneous transnational entity; rather, different kinds of transnational relations exist within the EU, which overlap but are not congruent (Rumford 2002). Some of them link societal actors to EU institutions, while others are horizontal in kind, linking societal actors from various states. Some such relations encompass activities, communication, and beliefs at the same time, but we can also identify activities that occur when communication and shared beliefs are lacking; communication that is not reflected in activities or identities; or beliefs that develop among actors not engaged in joint activities or discourses. Some transnational relations lead to the formation of organizations, others are less firmly institutionalized. Some engage large parts of the citizenry, others remain elite based. As a result, some parts of the EU citizenry – especially middle-aged professionals with high income and good education – can be said to be more transnationalized than others. Finally, the social and territorial spaces delineated by different transnational activities, discourses and beliefs are not identical, nor do they necessarily correspond to the EU's formal boundaries: Some cover only a subset of the EU's territory and population, others might include non-EU (or even non-European) territories and populations as well.

The literature summarized here also reveals a variety of causal and conceptual relationships between transnational phenomena and EU institutions. There are some forms of transnationalism that precede – and contribute to – EU-level institutional development. But even if institutions remain formally unchanged, transnational activities, discourses and beliefs have the potential to affect the functioning of the EU, both as a system of policy making and as a (proto-) democratic polity. Finally, we can identify transnational relations that develop in response to EU institutions. This is true, for instance, for most forms of vertical transnationalism, which can be understood as societal reaction to the EU's growing importance as a policy maker. What is more, EU institutions are actively involved in attempts to shape transnational relations, most importantly by encouraging the formation of EU-level interest groups and by engaging in identity politics. Even transnational relations that have developed autonomously might be instrumentalized by the EU, for instance in attempts to mobilize support for specific policies. Transnationalism can hence constitute an aspect of Europeanization (Radaelli 2003), defined as the impact of EU rules on policies, institutions, and societies in – and across – the member states.

### **Transnational relations in European integration theory**

How have these empirical findings been reflected in the theory of European integration? What theoretical role is assigned to transnational activities, beliefs and discourses? Is there a need for a more systematic discussion of transnationalism? To answer these questions, it is necessary to analyze how the most prominent integration theories have addressed the issue. On this basis, we can assess whether there is a case for 'bringing transnational relations back in' – and how this could be done.

Given the current popularity of transnationalism as a concept, one might expect that more recent contributions to European integration theory pay more attention to transnational relations than some of the more traditional approaches. However, the opposite is the case: While transnational relations were a crucial category for the integration theories of the 1950s and 60s, they are increasingly marginalized in the theories that dominate the field today (see also Schimmelfennig 2005). For the early integration theories, transnational relations were important because they were seen as a defining component of integration itself. This is most evident in Karl Deutsch's 'transactionalist' framework for conceptualizing regional communities (Deutsch et al. 1957). According to Deutsch, the degree to which various states and their populations could be described as forming a 'security community' depended on the density of cross-border communication and exchange, leading to a 'sense of community' and a shared conviction that problems must be solved peacefully. Crucially, this conception did not require that security communities possess common political institutions – they could be 'pluralistic' (i.e., be formed of separate and independent states) as well as 'amalgamated' (i.e., result from the formal merger of formerly independent states). Using contemporary terminology, we can say that the main criterion for the existence of security communities was the strength of transnational linkages between their individual members.

While Deutsch's approach was seldom explicitly adopted as a theory of European integration – and has today fallen almost completely out of use – its conceptualization of regional integration left an imprint on early variants of the two approaches that dominate European integration theory today, neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism. When laying out his neofunctionalist theory, Ernst Haas – like Deutsch – did not explicitly use the term transnationalism, but clearly appreciated what this term describes today. This is most evident in his definition of political integration as 'the process whereby political actors [...] are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities toward a new centre, whose institutions demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing national states' (Haas 1958, 16). To be sure, transnational relations did not have the same unqualified importance for Haas that they had for Deutsch: Haas explicitly distanced himself from Deutsch by insisting that regional political communities were inconceivable without common institutions. In his theory, it was always institutional development at the supranational level that came first, then potentially triggering spill-over processes and changes in the beliefs and practices of core political actors. Still, if no such 'shift of loyalties' took place, Haas would not speak of integration, since no political community would be formed.

It is perhaps even more interesting to note that the theory of intergovernmentalism, in its original formulation, was acutely aware of the (potential) significance of transnational relations as well. When developing the concept in the 1960s, Stanley Hoffmann explicitly referred to the categories of Deutsch and Haas in analyzing the progress European institutions had made in moving towards community-building – and found this progress to be lacking. Instead, he diagnosed a 'survival of the nations' and of a corresponding 'national consciousness' that prevented integration from progressing beyond the economic cooperation of sovereign states, and towards a fully-fledged European federation (Hoffmann 1966). Hoffmann developed an explicit conception of how a

‘transnational society’ would look like, and deduced his theory’s central tenet – the dominance of national governments in the European construction – from this society’s empirical absence: The fact that transnational integration of member-state societies could not be observed meant that national governments remained in charge.

While transnationalism was hence an important category for the original versions of neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism, it plays much less of a role in contemporary versions of both theories. This marginalization is mainly the result of a narrower conceptualization of European integration, which now tends to be defined exclusively in terms of institutional development. The shift is very evident in Alec Stone Sweet and Wayne Sandholtz’s version of neofunctional theory, also called supranationalism (Stone Sweet & Sandholtz 1998; Stone Sweet 2004). Stone Sweet and Sandholtz explicitly discard the ‘shift of loyalties’, the core transnational element in Haas’ theory, as a defining element of integration and stress instead that ‘[t]here is substantial room for supranational governance without an ultimate shift in identification’ (Stone Sweet & Sandholtz 1998, 6). Transnationalism, for them, is no longer a characteristic of regional integration, rather it re-emerges in a new role: as its trigger. According to Stone Sweet and Sandholtz, the demand for European institution building, through treaty revisions, policy making, or judicial decisions, is ultimately generated by transnational activities, such as economic exchange, tourism and migration, or litigation before European courts. This turns Haas on his head: The substantive content of integration is re-defined as institutional development, spill-overs are understood as path dependencies leading to further institutionalization, and transnational activities are no longer a component of European integration, but its causally antecedent condition of possibility.

A similar shift, though possibly not quite as evident, has occurred in intergovernmental theory, whose most important contemporary variant is Andrew Moravcsik’s liberal intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik 1998). This approach is likewise based on a narrow institutionalist conception of European integration, which is defined by Moravcsik as a case of ‘international cooperation’. His premise is that such international cooperation must be analyzed in a three-stage sequence – national preference formation, interstate bargaining, and institutional choice. In this analytical framework, transnationalism can by definition be no more than a variable of second-class status. Transnational relations are not explicitly mentioned by Moravcsik, but they do enter his model at the stage of national preference formation, where he describes the interests of domestic actors engaged in cross-border economic exchange as important influence on national preferences. We can say that transnational relations, at least economic ones, act as triggers for the integration process in Moravcsik’s theory as well, even though they have little influence on the outcome of the ensuing treaty negotiations.

It hence turns out that the two most influential theories of European integration, neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism, have undergone a similar development: While the emergence of transnational relations was originally seen as a crucial feature (and important measurement criterion) of European integration, integration is now defined in institutional terms only, while transnationalism assumes the role of a trigger for institution building. Compared to the variety of relationships between transnational

phenomena and EU institutions that have been identified in the empirical literature, this conception is quite limited: Transnational relations are interpreted in instrumental terms, and not as important in their own right. Cross-border linkages that fail to produce an institutional outcome (perhaps because they were never intended to do so), or ones that emerge in response to EU-level institutionalization, are accorded no significance. Furthermore, transnational relations are considered only indirectly relevant for institution building – they help initiate institutionalization, but this process is ultimately controlled by other actors, EU institutions (in neofunctionalism) or national governments (in intergovernmentalism).

### **Transnationalizing the theory of European integration**

Given this mismatch between the multifaceted empirical accounts of transnationalism in EU politics and its limited theoretical role in neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism, it appears worthwhile to ask whether important insights can be gained by paying more theoretical attention to transnational relations. But how could this be done? Does it make sense to devise a distinct ‘transnational’ integration theory to rival the two established approaches? Or is it better to incorporate the lessons from the empirical literature on transnationalism in other ways? This section will introduce and discuss both approaches.

If a transnational theory of European integration were devised with the explicit goal of competing with neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism, it would have to resonate with these approaches’ way of conceptualizing integration theory: Most importantly, it would need to be formulated as a causal theory that seeks to explain the emergence of EU institutions (such as treaty rules, policy outputs, or judicial decisions). In this conception, a transnational theory would highlight the importance of the citizens’ border-transgressing activities, discourses and beliefs as independent variables that account for institution-building. Compared to the causally remote role that transnational relations play in neofunctionalist and intergovernmentalist accounts, this theory would have to show that such relations have the potential to directly shape institutional outcomes. This is the approach taken by Wolfram Kaiser and Peter Starie (2005, 11), who argue that the ‘main challenge’ for a transnational approach in EU studies is ‘to establish causal links between the activities of transnational actors and national, transgovernmental and EU level policy outcomes and to make them plausible beyond reasonable doubt’. Kaiser and Starie are optimistic that this challenge can be met: They criticize both neofunctionalist and intergovernmentalist theories for being too state-focussed (in the case of neofunctionalism, ‘state-focussed [...] at the EU level’), and claim rather apodictically: ‘States do not develop societies. Societies develop states’ (ibid, 12).

But is this approach convincing? To be sure, as our survey of the empirical literature has shown, there are examples of transnational activities, discourses and beliefs that directly impact on EU policy making. This does not mean, however, that national governments and EU institutions play no important role in these processes. Besides, the approach advocated by Kaiser and Starie continues to define the relationship between transnational relations and EU institutions in a one-sided way: Transnational actors are seen as

instrumental for EU-level institutional development, while cross-border relations that develop independently of EU institutions, or in response to them, or ones that are actively shaped by EU actors, are neglected. As we have seen, European realities are more diverse than Kaiser and Starie's state-society formula admits. EU institutions interact in multiple ways with their societal environment: They emerge from society; they operate in society; they are affected by society; they shape society. This relationship is too multifaceted to allow for an unproblematic incorporation of transnationalism as a variable into any unidirectional causal account.

These considerations suggest that it might be more promising to incorporate the lessons of transnational approaches in a different fashion: not by defining transnational relations as an independent variable that accounts for EU-level institutional development, but by viewing them as a phenomenon that encourages a broader conceptualization of European integration – one that overcomes the institutionalist bias of recent neofunctionalist and intergovernmentalist theories by highlighting how deeply EU institutions are intertwined in their emergence, their functioning, and their political impact with dynamics in other societal spheres. This approach challenges the established integration theories in a way that is both less immediate and more fundamental: less immediate because it does not readily translate into a rival causal account of European institution building; more fundamental because, if taken seriously, it undermines the institution-centred understanding of European integration on which these theories are based.

This second approach to transnationalizing European integration theory emphasizes that European political institutions must be analyzed as embedded in, and interacting with, a societal environment from which they emerge, which affects their functioning (in terms of policy outputs, democratic qualities, etc.), but which is also shaped by them. This was appreciated by the more traditional integration theories, but has not received the attention that it deserves in contemporary EU studies, in part because a sociology of European integration has been slow to develop (Rumford 2002; Beck & Grande 2007). The broader understanding of European integration that this approach advocates implies that macro-level causal theorizing about the integration process becomes greatly more difficult, as European institutions cannot easily be isolated from their societal environment. On the other hand, the approach might well inform middle-range theorizing about more limited aspects of EU politics. For instance, it should help in theorizing issues such as citizen support for EU treaty reforms, the Union's ability to absorb further enlargements, or the chances for more developed welfare state policies at the EU level. Many crucial issues facing the EU today are precisely about the ways in which political institutions at the EU level interact with broader societal processes.

### **Limits of transnationalism: Blind spots and biases**

The concept of transnationalism, in this understanding, points to an important and often neglected research field: the interactions between the EU and its societal environment. The question remains, however, whether transnationalism is necessarily the best concept to explore this field. This section will discuss two problems inherent in the concept: As

even some proponents of the concept admit (Kaiser & Starie 2005, 12; Mau 2007, 37), it describes the societal environment of the EU with a bias towards agency and an implicit presumption of intentionality. In other words, it focuses on transactions and socialization processes into which the participants, by and large, enter knowingly and intentionally, while it neglects more structural and non-intentional aspects of integration.

The bias towards agency makes it difficult to use the concept to analyze more structural aspects of European society, such as patterns of socio-economic inequality. This is not to say that there have not been attempts to employ the language of transnationalism for these kinds of analyses as well. Most importantly, Ulrich Beck and Martin Heidenreich have used the concept to critique the ‘methodological nationalism’ in research on social inequalities in Europe, and have instead sketched a ‘transnational approach’ to the analysis of social structures (Heidenreich 2006a; 2006b; Beck & Grande 2007). According to Heidenreich, the prevailing tendency of analyzing inequalities exclusively at the national level is undermined by both ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ processes that he labels ‘transnational’: Objectively, decisions about the distribution of resources that affect the life chances of individuals and groups are increasingly made by actors and organizations at the EU level, rather than in the nation state; subjectively, citizens evaluate their social positions increasingly by reference to other Europeans, not just their compatriots (Heidenreich 2006a, 24-29; 2006b, 4-7).

But even if these observations are accurate, the term transnationalism frames them in a very skewed way: As Heidenreich’s own analysis shows, his ‘objective’ processes have their roots mainly in legislative decisions by intergovernmental and supranational bodies (Heidenreich 2006a, 35-44); they do not derive primarily from transnational activities. Labelling them ‘transnational’ is misleading; it neglects not only the influence of states and EU institutions on patterns of social inequality, but also the broader structural constraints in which all activities with an impact on the allocation of societal resources – be they governmental, intergovernmental, supranational, or transnational – are embedded. While the label transnationalism should hence be rejected for Heidenreich’s ‘objective’ processes, it seems more appropriate for his ‘subjective’ processes, since these relate to the emergence of new ‘norms of equality’ shared by Europeans (Heidenreich 2006b, 4-7; see also Beck & Grande 2007, 174-78). But is this change in perceptions, if it does occur at all (more sceptical: Heidenreich & Wunder 2008), enough to form the basis of a ‘transnational approach’ to analyzing social inequalities? We should note that this approach would consist primarily of an analysis of beliefs, while the material basis of these beliefs is hard to make sense of using the language of transnationalism.

The actor-centeredness of the concept of transnationalism also results in a tendency to interpret cross-border relationships primarily as connections that the participants enter into intentionally, or at least knowingly. This is evident, for instance, if we look to the literature on transnationalism in Europe’s economic sphere: While there are extensive discussions of the activities of transnational corporations and business communities (Mann 1998, 192-98; Jessop 2004, 204-11; Kentor & Jang 2004), it is striking that Europeanized patterns of consumption are analyzed much less frequently. The most plausible explanation is that such patterns of consumption – the purchase of goods

produced in another European state – are often not experienced as transnational, as they tend to occur without much thinking. Similarly, as Michael Mann (1998, 198) has noted, ‘[r]outine employment in a multinational corporation seems to give little sense of international or transnational identity or interest’ – and is seldom discussed as an aspect of economic transnationalization in the academic literature. The same tendency can be observed outside of the economic sphere as well. For instance, studies looking at migration from a transnational perspective are much more likely to focus on migrants and their connections to their country of origin (Portes et al. 1999; Faist 2004) than on the interactions of a country’s original population with immigrants. Such ‘within-country transnationalism’ (Mau 2007, 159-74) often falls between the cracks because it lacks the element of intentional border-crossing. In all of these cases, the problem is not that the language of transnationalism is conceptually incapable of describing less intentional interactions, but that it seems to carry within it an implicit presumption of intentionality.

Transnationalism, therefore, is a concept that – like all social science concepts – has its specific blind spots and biases. As a result, it highlights certain aspects of the EU’s societal environment while others receive short shrift. This raises the question whether there is another concept available that allows for a more comprehensive characterization of European society, and could hence complement – or even replace – the concept of transnationalism.

### **European societal integration**

In my view, the concept most promising in this respect is that of societal integration, a long-standing theme of sociological theorizing. Theories of societal integration have resulted in a number of ideas and distinctions that can fill the gaps left open in discussions of transnationalism. This is true in particular for a number of recent contributions to integration theory that explicitly treat integration as an empirical rather than normative concept, and move beyond a simple integration-disintegration dichotomy by focusing in differentiated ways on various aspects and mechanisms of integration. Like transnationalism, societal integration is a concept that has been largely neglected in academic debates about European integration. Its main advantage over transnationalism is that it is not exclusively actor-oriented, and hence allows for a better characterization of structural and non-intentional aspects of European society.

In the language of societal integration theory, the issue highlighted by discussions of transnationalism – interactions between EU institutions and their societal environment – can be reformulated as follows: We are interested in the relationship of political integration with other aspects of societal integration in Europe. A first distinction suggested by sociological theories at this point is that this question can be looked at both from the perspective of societal subsystems and from the perspective of individual or collective actors. David Lockwood (1964) termed the first approach system integration, the second social integration. The most sophisticated conception of system integration can be found in Niklas Luhmann’s autopoietic systems theory (Luhmann 1997). Put very briefly, this theory describes modern societies as being differentiated into various

functionally defined subsystems – politics, the economy, religion, the law, education, the arts, sports, families, etc. – which are constituted by specific forms of communication and remain closed off against each other in their routine operations. Integration, for Luhmann, refers to the degree to which these functional systems nevertheless influence – or, as he puts it, ‘irritate’ – each other, thus mutually restricting their degrees of freedom (ibid, 601-8). For functionally differentiated societies, both too little integration and too much integration can have negative effects: Too little integration makes it difficult for one system to rely on services provided by another system (e.g., the family system needs the legal system to stabilize marriage contracts, etc.); too much integration might result in de-differentiation by imposing one system’s logic onto another.

Luhmann’s approach to system integration – which has thus far been largely overlooked in discussions of European integration (for exceptions, see Albert 2002; Jessop 2004) – offers new perspectives on structural aspects of the relationship between European politics and other societal system. For instance, it brings up the question whether the European integration process, with its focus on the removal of market barriers, has led to an over-integration of the political and economic systems, resulting in an ‘invasion’ of economic considerations into politics (Bourdieu 1998). Or, to take a slightly less radical position, whether economic processes have been able to shift to the global scale more quickly than political ones, thus reducing the chances of reigning in the economy through political interventions. This last point is made by Heidenreich (2006a, 35-44), and not coincidentally, he builds on Luhmann in this part of his analysis, not on the concept of transnationalism. Beyond the politics-economy nexus, the idea of system integration can also be applied to interactions between EU level politics and a host of other societal spheres, ranging from the law (presented in some theories as the true driving force of European integration) to religion (an issue of crucial importance in the debates about the accession of Turkey) or the family (relevant for instance in legislation on migration policy). While relationships between EU institutions and activities in these spheres are touched upon in the literature on transnationalism as well, the systems integration perspective highlights that these relationships are not only about interactions between different types of actors – (inter-)governmental and supranational actors on the one side, societal actors on the other – but also about balancing, in specific power constellations, the potentially conflicting logics of various functional systems.

This is not to say, of course, that an actor-centered perspective could be discarded. It enters into discussions of societal integration through the concept of social integration, which refers to the inclusion of individuals or groups into society. Even Luhmann points out that it is possible to map whether actors are included into, or excluded from, the various functional subsystems of modern societies (Luhmann 1997, 618-33). The crude inclusion-exclusion dichotomy is of limited utility, however, and it is much more interesting to analyze in a differentiated way through which *mechanisms* various members of the population are included into society and its subsystems.

One crucial distinction in this respect, which can address weaknesses identified in the concept of transnationalism, differentiates between non-intentional and intentional forms of integration. This distinction is developed by Jürgen Habermas in his theory of

communicative action (Habermas 1984/87). Habermas uses Lockwood's terms of system and social integration, but fills them with a different meaning. In his conception, system integration – in later writings also called functional integration – refers to a form of inclusion of individuals into society that operates through 'functional interconnections of action' brought about by mechanisms that work 'in a subjectively inconspicuous fashion' (ibid, II 186-7). This refers precisely to cases such as the ones mentioned above in which individuals are entangled in societal relations (possibly of a transnational kind) without having intentionally constructed them, or even being fully aware that they exist. As Habermas puts it, such forms of integration occur in ways that go 'beyond the actor orientations of those involved' and 'cannot be grasped without further ado' from their perspective (ibid, II 232). The most important mechanisms of functional integration are the market and public administration, relying on money and power, respectively, as media of integration. By contrast, social integration is defined as a kind of integration in which actors take charge of their own social relationships by means of a 'communicative intermeshing of actor orientations' (ibid, II 233), ideally leading to a 'consensus of those involved' (ibid, II 186). Social integration, whose most important medium is language, constitutes an individual's 'lifeworld'; but Habermas sees the danger of this lifeworld being successively 'colonized' by the mechanisms of functional integration.

In the language of Habermas' theory, the implicit presumption of intentionality that we detected in the literature on transnationalism can be described as a tendency to conceive of transnational relations as elements of Europeans' lifeworlds only, thus neglecting the systemic features also inherent in them. By contrast, Habermas in his own analyses quite plausibly describes the 'postnational constellation' in Europe as being structured by *both* functional (systemic) networks and social lifeworlds; in fact, his main concern is whether transnational lifeworlds can develop quickly enough to keep up with the rapid expansion of transnational networks (Habermas 1998, 91-169). In Habermas' interpretation, 'horizontal relations of exchange and interaction that are established via markets, transport links, and communication networks between actors making decentralized decisions' (ibid, 125, translation A.H.)<sup>2</sup> are elements of system integration, operating largely through the media of money and power. The steady expansion of such networks breaks open the existing, nationally defined lifeworlds, necessitating a reconstitution of the lifeworld at the European level. This in turn requires the emergence of Europe-wide beliefs of solidarity and common practices of collective will-formation (ibid, 122-35). Habermas' analysis indicates that cross-border linkages among Europeans are governed by both intentional and non-intentional mechanisms, and that it is precisely the interplay of these mechanisms that determines future directions of the European integration process. This interplay should therefore move to the center of research on societal relations in Europe, and we should not simply assume that such relations are predominately intentional in kind.

As these examples show, the concept of societal integration, and the distinctions that sociological theorists have developed on its basis, promises a more comprehensive

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<sup>2</sup> The official English translation only mentions 'market decisions of independent actors' at this point (Habermas 2001, 82), thus obscuring that system integration, in Habermas' conception, reaches beyond economic exchange in a narrow sense.

characterization of European society, and a more multifaceted view of its interactions with EU institutions, than the concept of transnationalism. In particular, societal integration theories allow for a better characterization of structural and non-intentional aspects of European society that remain underexposed in discussions of transnationalism. This does not mean that the concept of transnationalism must be discarded; it can provide valuable insights into societal relations in Europe from an actor-centred perspective. But we should note that this perspective remains one-sided unless it is systematically embedded in broader discussions of European societal integration.

## **Conclusion**

As originally devised by Nye and Keohane, the concept of transnationalism highlights the role that societal actors – individuals and organizations who are neither agents of national governments nor of international institutions – play in global politics. Our discussion has shown that such actors are of crucial importance for politics in the EU as well. But while the empirical literature in EU studies provides a rich account of the ways in which their cross-border interactions, discourses and beliefs become relevant for the EU, the main theories of European integration have successively marginalized transnational relations as an element of the integration process. As this paper has argued, there is hence a case for ‘bringing transnational relations back in’ to European integration theory – not as an additional causal variable in accounts that explain the emergence of EU institutions, but as a phenomenon that encourages a more sociologically informed view of European integration and a better understanding of the relationships between EU institutions and their societal environment.

On the other hand, our analysis has also indicated the limitations and biases of transnational as a concept, which stem mainly from its actor-centeredness as well as its tendency to describe cross-border relations as intentionally constructed. These limitations result in a problematically one-sided characterization of the EU’s societal environment: While transnationalism is helpful in distinguishing various kinds of actors and classifying the connections that they forge, it does not provide the conceptual instruments to describe structural aspects of European society, as well as non-intentional mechanisms linking its members to each other.

Transnationalism hence points to an important research field – the relationship between EU institutions and their societal environment – but it is not by itself sufficient to explore this research field in a comprehensive way. This paper has suggested that contemporary theories of societal integration are more useful in this respect. They provide a general framework for understanding the relationship between political and societal aspects of European integration, both in terms of inter-system dynamics and in terms of various mechanisms for the inclusion of individual or collective actors into society and its subsystems. To gain much-needed insights into the relationship between EU institutions and their societal environment, such theories should be used more widely. The concept of transnationalism can play a role in this endeavour, but only if it is situated within a more comprehensive analysis of European societal integration.

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