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Narrative Ju-jitsu: counter-narratives to European union

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ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognised the crucial role of political narratives in and for European integration. Since its earliest days, supporters have justified integration by telling stories about its beneficial contribution to peace, prosperity, and democracy. In this article and the special issue, we contribute to the burgeoning literature on (counter) narratives to European 'union' (any integration beyond intergovernmental cooperation), and to work on Euroscepticism. The special issue is also at the cutting edge of narratives research in its conceptual innovation and its focus on the narrating actors and concrete instances of narration. We demonstrate that in a narrative ju-jitsu, opponents of European union take up the themes of key pro-integration narratives and return their force against the EU. As well as examining nationalist Euroscepticism in specific countries, we study how cooperation among nationalists across Europe and beyond encourages convergence of their counter-narratives. These counter-narratives do not merely reject European union but increasingly argue for an alternative kind of 'Europe'. They therefore interact with the increasing competition among proliferating pro-integration narratives, which have formed as old stories such as that of Europe as peace-bringer seem to have become less convincing.

Introduction

The Norwegian Nobel Committee's 2012 Peace Prize recognised the European Union's (EU) contribution 'to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe' (Nobel Peace Prize 2012). This peace narrative has been a key justification for European integration since first proposed by Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant (1795).

However just as in the Japanese martial art of ju-jitsu, narratives opposed to (greater) European 'union' (in different institutional forms that go beyond intergovernmental cooperation, not just the EU) return the force of key pro-integration narratives on peace, democracy, welfare gains, and geopolitics against the EU. Nigel Farage in Britain dismissed the Nobel Prize award, countering that the EU, by 'taking away nation state democracy, by attempting to impose a new flag and a new anthem is very likely to cause a series of mini civil wars' (cited in Bet 2019)'. Rassemblement National in France – the former Front National – places the EU in a historical narrative of wars among European countries 'often linked to tendencies to establish empires by subordinating and denying national realities' (RN 2019, 9).

We argue in this special issue that decades of crises of the EU have produced a complex interaction among competing pro-integration narratives and counter-narratives to European union, as interdependent elements within a wider debate. The research to date has not

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sufficiently explored these intricate dynamics. Although most literature still represents Euroscepticism simply as nationalist opposition to European integration (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2018, 1196), some is beginning to recognise competition among pro-integration narratives and their interaction with varieties of Euroscepticism that have their own diverse plans for Europe (Bouza García 2017, 286).

Three articles in this special issue therefore examine how cooperation among populist radical right (PRR) nationalists encourages convergence of counter-narratives across Europe and beyond. Robin de Bruin investigates how individual narrative entrepreneurs have helped marshal loose networks of the alt-Right behind a highly cohesive counternarrative of European union as 'white genocide'. Richard McMahon examines the Eurosceptic counter-narratives in recent electoral manifestoes of four of the EU's most powerful PRR parties. He argues that rather than merely rejecting European integration, they offer their own vision of an 'alt-Europe', based on ethnic understandings of European civilisation. Andriy Tyushka's outside-in perspective explores the motivations and character of Russian government attempts to systematically 'weaponize' counter-narratives. It aims to forge alliances with PRR nationalists in Europe to undermine the EU, both from outside and from within, as a union and as an international actor.

Three further articles focus on nationalist Euroscepticism in specific countries. Daniele Pasquinucci and Agnieszka Cianciara give accounts of how the (Northern) League party in Italy and Law and Justice in Poland have constructed counter-narratives of independence from 'Brussels' by exploiting the vulnerability of locally crafted narratives that welcomed its tutelage. Rafał Riedel's article analyses the Law and Justice government's mobilisation of the counternarrative of Tri-Marium, an East-Central European regional cooperation project designed to elevate Poland to regional power status.

As well as focusing on counter-narratives by avowed Eurosceptics, this special issue is the first to recognise that Euroscepticism interacts with the increasing competition among different narratives that argue for a different kind of 'Europe' (Bouza García 2017, 286). Wolfram Kaiser explores these dynamics in the 'ping-pong' of pro-integration narratives and counter-narratives in the debates that dominated the European Parliament (EP) during the 1980s. At the time, radical left and right parties competed to respond to the federalist narrative of the 1984 Draft Treaty on European Union (DTEU). Frank Wendler examines how government and political party actors in another parliament, the German Bundestag, have recently connected narratives about climate change with (counter)narratives about European union.

These complex clashes and interactions of narratives in an increasingly politicised European integration have stimulated a dramatic recent flourishing of political and academic interest in European narratives and discourse more generally. Our special issue builds on three previous ones on narratives of European integration and the EU (Oleart and Van Weyenberg 2019; Kaiser and McMahon 2017a; Bouza García 2017a), an edited book on political stories of European integration (Lacroix and Nicolaïdis 2010) and a special issue on the EU's myths (Della Sala 2010a). Publications on the EU and European identity with narrative in the title increased from about four a year in 2002–7 to about 16 a year in most years since 2015.

Political actors have always told stories as part of the art of persuasion. However, this recent proliferation of European and EU Studies (EUS) literature on the crucial role of narratives in shaping European discourses and identity reflects the emerging public prominence of the concept of political narratives (Kaiser and McMahon 2017, 150–51). Some psychologists rate social narratives, or stories that are widely told, re-told and accepted within particular societies, as our 'primary' way of understanding politics and society and investing emotionally in them (Hammack and Pilecki 2012, 76–78). Because humans have a 'natural tendency to think in narratives' (Shenhav 2005, 76), storytelling has unrivalled power to make cultural, socio-economic and political ideas seem significant, plausible and legitimate (della Sala 2010, 4; Kaiser 2015, 2; De Wilde and Trenz 2012, 544). Crucially, narratives do not just describe what happens, but construct and shape our perceptions and memories (Maza 1996, 1495; Roberts 2006: 710).

Political practitioners and the public have nonetheless only recently begun consciously and openly to discuss narratives as crucial tools for political understanding, communication and debate. Some journalists still expressed surprise in 2015 to see political debates publicly framed as a competition between narratives (Leibovich 2015). The European Commission's first important foray into consciously exploiting the concept of narrative, the 'New Narrative for Europe' project of 2013–14, particularly stimulated scholarly interest in narratives of European integration (Kaiser 2017; Bouza García 2017; Manners and Murray 2016, 190–91).

This introduction outlines the innovative nature of this special issue in four areas. First, the articles explore the intricate connections between counter-narratives and pro-integration narratives. Second, they engage systematically and deliberately with theoretical concepts of narrative. Third, they focus on the narrating actors rather than merely the texts. Fourth, they root vague 'discourses' in concrete narrations.

Connecting counter-narratives and pro-integration narratives in one framework

Back in 2012, Pieter de Wilde and Hans–Jörg Trenz represented Eurosceptic discourse as 'uncrystallised' and lacking its own consistent and 'explicit project', because its 'criticising character' is 'responsive' to what they framed as an allegedly more coherent pro-integration discourse (De Wilde and Trenz 2012, 541 & 544–45). In contrast, the contributions in this special issue identify a more complex intertwining of pro-integration and counter-narratives in three ways, as they compete on the same terrains of democracy, economy, peace and geopolitics and interact with narratives of nation, liberalism and globalisation.

First, we challenge the central objective of much Euroscepticism research to quantify degrees of rejection of 'Europe' (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2018, 1196). While this implies that narratives are pro- or anti-European, we identify PRR narratives that support an alternative 'alt-Europe', to use McMahon's term. His article in this special issue identifies important commonalities in PRR party narratives across Europe, and especially a common narrative of European civilisation that supports intergovernmental cooperation, Christian conservatism and Islamophobia. Tyushka identifies this same narrative of a 'better Europe', defending traditional conservative values of family and nation, in Russia's strategy to undermine pro-integration narratives of a liberal and democratic EU.

De Bruin's article explores the complex career of these conservative narratives of European (or Western) civilisation. Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi used them to advocate European integration from the 1920s on, but since the 2010s, the Eurosceptic alt-Right has reinterpreted and misappropriated Coudenhove-Kalergi to discredit him. De Bruin demonstrates that although the supremacy and unity of the white race were central to Coudenhove-Kalergi's proposals, the alt-right counternarrative misrepresents him as an architect of a 'white genocide' conspiracy by the EU and 'cosmopolitan elites' to 'blend' migrants and refugees with the 'white' indigenous population.

Second, diverse national debates make interactions between pro-integration and counter-narratives more complex. Pasquinucci and Cianciara demonstrate this in national case studies. Pasquinucci shows that Italian technocratic and political elites narrated 'Europe' as an indispensable 'external constraint', which guaranteed fiscal prudence and economic reforms in Italy. Europopulists turned this pro-integration narrative on its head, transforming 'Brussels' into an unwelcome outsider, allegedly dictating to a supine Italy. Cianciara describes a similarly context-specific inversion of narratives in Poland. The Law and Justice party government switched the country's narrative strategy from 'aspiring saint', aiming to achieve established EU definitions of the 'normal', to a 'disillusioned rebel' counternarrative. This redefined illiberal values as a Polish national 'normal', under attack from the EU's alien Western progressive values.

McMahon argues that these distinctive and often incompatible nationalist narratives present a challenge to cooperation among the very nationalistic PRR parties. The League in Italy and Alternative for Germany (AfD) for example construct diametrically opposed narratives of the financial crisis. While French and Italian PRR parties want European integration rebalanced to favour

longstanding Western and Southern members, the emancipatory, counter-hegemonic Polish Tri-Marium narrative in Riedel's article opposes an EU allegedly dominated by 'old Europe'.

Third and finally, the simple dichotomy of pro and anti-European narratives is also becoming untenable because three decades of politicisation and crises have made pro-integration narratives more diverse and contradictory (Manners and Murray 2016, 186 & 188). They divide both on how much sovereignty to pool 'to pursue common goals' and on ideological issues such as balancing economic with environmental priorities (Lacroix and Nicolaïdis 2010, 13–14).

Although Amandine Crespy and Nicolas Verschueren characterise Euroscepticism as 'resistance' to Europeanism, they undermine this dichotomy by identifying multiple sub-debates (2009, 384–85). Their clashing Eurosceptic and pro-European 'models' include 'social' versus '(neo)liberal Europe' and 'fortress Europe' versus 'cosmopolitan Europe'. This dissolves the pro/anti-European dichotomy into a more complex matrix of cross-cutting debates on globalisation, economic liberalisation, liberal values, the welfare state, diversity and representation. Ian Manners and Philomena Murray (2016, 191–94) even represent the 'social' and '(neo)liberal' models, which for Crespy and Verschueren are Eurosceptic and pro-integrationist respectively, as two new legitimising narratives of the EU.

In this special issue, Kaiser and Wendler both identify and analyse broadly pro-integration Green Party alternatives to established mainstream EU narratives as well as far-right counter-narratives. Kaiser demonstrates how Green narratives of an alternative Europe of eco-regions in the 1980s sought to counter the federalist pro-integration narrative of the larger centrist EP parties. In Wendler's account of German parliamentary debates, the Greens offer alternatives to federal government climate change narratives, framing their narratives less in terms of economics and more in terms of support for European integration and greater climate change action at EU level.

Engaging with concepts of narrative

This special issue reflects our conceptual and methodological pluralism in connecting narratives with other established concepts of discursive representation. We also operationalise the narrative concept to analyse actor intentions, the propagation of narratives and storytelling in politics or policy-making. Earlier EUS work on narratives was not always very precise in specifying its concept of narrative and engaging with its specific structure (e.g. Nicolaïdis and Howse 2002; Kuus 2002; Armbruster, Rollo, and Meinhof 2003; Kaldor, Martin, and Selchow 2007). It tended to use terms such as narrative, discourse, model, myth, symbol, role, image, norm and ideology fairly interchangeably. This special issue is part of a move towards carefully distinguishing them as structurally distinct 'elements of discourse' (De Wilde and Trenz 2012, 544), allowing their interactions to be used as an analytical tool. De Wilde and Trenz thus represent Eurosceptic narratives as unfolding through 'loosely rearranged signifiers, symbols and stories' (2012, 544). Manners and Murray (2016, 186–87) develop a six-part analytical framework which considers the structure (chronology, plot and characters) of narratives, the degree to which Europeans engage with them, and their relationship with identity, change, security threats and norms.

In this special issue, Riedel's article draws on framing analysis to understand the structure and role of narratives and their use for foreign policy and domestic politics. Kaiser's article meanwhile emphasises the relationship between wholesale narratives and narrative 'topoi'. Because MEPs' speaking time in EP debates is too limited to always detail coherent narratives, speeches often instead invoke topoi, or words or brief phrases that allude to larger coherent narratives. Communist MEPs could for example use the phrase 'monopolistic integration' to clearly signal the traditional communist counternarrative in which this topos had been consistently embedded.

Wendler and Cianciara deploy Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), the most systematic scheme for analysing elements of narratives designed to sustain policy agendas. This was also the first narrative approach to emerge in EUS in the late 1990s (Radaelli 1998). From the perspective of NPF, narratives require a plot that unfolds over time, within a context, containing dramatic moments, symbols, the three archetypal characters of victim, villain and hero, and, essentially for policy narratives, a moral

(Jones and McBeth 2010, 329; Jones and Radaelli 2015, 351). In the German Green Party plot, for example, only transnational EU cooperation can effectively tackle climate change.

Wendler's article offers an important bridge in this special issue to NPF work on how narratives matter for policy choice and implementation. Cianciara's application of NPF to the interplay of policy and identity narratives is particularly innovative. Before now, positivist methods have largely kept NPF literature separate from the predominantly qualitative EUS work that focuses on narratives of identity. Wendler and Tuyshka's articles in this special issue link these literatures by combining quantitative and qualitive methods.

Cianciara and Tuyshka's articles both use innovative frameworks to address issues of power, which are central to research on discourse. Cianciara connects narratives with Bourdieu's field theory, representing the EU as a field in which competing narratives vie for power and influence. Tuyshka links narratives and power through a rational choice International Relations lens. Here, narratives are not about domestic legitimacy and 'conventional-narrative contestation', but rather are weapons in an international, counter-hegemonic 'military-political offensive strategy'. The article's focus is the 'weaponization' of narratives by the Russian authorities as a foreign policy tool to undermine the internal identity and cohesion of the EU as a competing 'power'.

In his article, Pasquinucci instead focuses on the power of narratives in competition with one another. He characterises pro-integration narratives based on lack of faith in domestic politics and society rather than on the merits of 'Europe', as 'weak'. He claims the 'toxic result' of this weakness was the rise of Europopulist narrating actors who exploit resentment against imagined foreign domination and control.

Focussing on the narrating actors

Having originated in literary studies, discourse analysis traditionally focuses almost exclusively on discourses or texts. This special issue, however, contributes to recent work on narratives, drawing on Foucault and NPF's recognition of the narrator as a key character, which aims to bring the narrating 'actors back into focus' (Bouza García 2017, 286; Schünemann 2017, 200; Jones and Radaelli 2015, 342–43). Our main narrating actors are parliamentarians, parties, governments, officials and other political elites.

A central theoretical tension in narrative studies concerns the degree to which individual narrating actors have autonomous agency or, as the key concept of grand or master narratives implies, are mere vectors of a common cultural discourse (Hammack and Toolis 2015). It is widely accepted in EUS that broader cultural narratives circulate within a community or 'communicative space', told and retold (Kaiser 2015, 2; Eder 2006, 257, 2012, 44; Vincent 2010, 4; Maza 1996, 1495). Klaus Eder says this 'flow of narratives' constructs the boundaries of communities 'within which a normative projection of a shared world is embedded' (Eder 2006, 258, 2012, 44). For della Sala, this aspect is crucial for providing political legitimacy (2010, 5), and for Ian Manners, collective memories (2010, 82).

While the special issue articles all identify grand narratives, however, many also emphasise the role of agency in different ways. McMahon stresses that compromises within PRR parties and careful targeting of different constituencies introduce contradictions and ambiguities into manifestoes. These can therefore be used – as the 'garbage can' model in policy studies suggests (Zahariadis 2007) – as a complex grab-bag of resources which actors selectively emphasise as circumstance require. Following NPF, Wendler's article recognises that 'political agents' must respond to counter-narratives but focuses on their agency to 'engineer policy narratives to advocate their interests and preferences'.

Narrating actors also have agency in tailoring narratives to specific audiences. Cianciara and Pasquinucci both describe how politicians in relatively peripheral EU member states portray themselves to the EU institutions and other member states as conforming to 'European' norms, while targeting their domestic audience with nationalist counter-narratives of resistance to oppressive Brussels rule. Riedel identifies different narratives targeting domestic, regional and EU audiences in

Law and Justice's Tri-Marium initiative. Rather than the content of speech acts, Tyushka's article mainly focuses on the 'logic, rationale and scale of their deployment' by Russia.

Four special issue articles particularly engage with a key controversy regarding the agency of narrating actors; the degree to which narratives are entrenched and perennial or can change. The coherent identities of individuals and social groups depend heavily on narratives providing an illusion of continuity (Hammack 2008, 10–11). The widespread coupling of the two terms 'tradition' and 'narrative' (e.g. De Wilde and Trenz 2012, 544) recognises that although narratives are contested and change, they and their elements can endure for long periods or be revived when circumstances make them useful. Thus, Oliver Daddow traces Britain's 'grand narrative tradition' since 1815 as an eternal outsider in Europe (2015, 71–73). He recognises, however, that individual stories from this 'multidimensional package of narratives', such as the outsider as balancer, saboteur or supplicant, came in and out of salience.

In this special issue, Riedel demonstrates that Law and Justice legitimise Tri-Marium within an established nationalist tradition by drawing on interwar proposals for a Polish-centred 'Inter-Marium' in a similar geographical space, though with very different ideological baggage.

Constructivists and post-modernists critique the concept of enduring narratives for their 'misleading', 'reified view of the social world' (Petrović 2017, 180). However, two articles in the special issue demonstrate that actors can even subvert narratives that become deeply embedded in a political system. Pasquinucci shows that until the 1990s, Italian elites and citizens increasingly internalised a continuously repeated narrative in which European governance compensated for Italy's unreliable political class. Eurosceptics capitalised on growing irritation with this humiliating narrative to deploy a counternarrative that turned Italy's weak pro-integration narrative on its head. Kaiser reminds us of another dramatic change in PRR narratives since the 1980s, when they still supported European integration in opposition to communism and immigration, and to facilitate economic reform.

Focusing on the narrating actors is useful to examine the important interplay of national and international level debate too. Several authors study the internationalisation of far-right narratives. McMahon, de Bruin and Riedel all emphasise internationalism within the EU, as of course does Kaiser's study of EP debate. McMahon argues that PRR parties function in certain ways as a pan-European (or even pan-Western) movement with certain common narratives but he also shows their difficulties in coordinating narratives. De Bruin's article emphasises the importance of individual PRR leaders such as Thierry Baudet in the Netherlands. These leaders construct and disseminate highly cohesive counter-narratives within a very loose and mainly online network of alt-Right groups with diverse preoccupations. Riedel's account demonstrates how counter-narratives can easily clash when extended beyond their original national contexts. Poland's smaller neighbours for example have no interest in being dominated by Poland within its Tri-Marium project.

Special issue articles also emphasis the role of actors outside the EU. In Tyushka's case, the narrating actors are Russian state apparatus or state-sponsored actors from President Putin to troll factories, which disseminate narratives of a weak and degenerate EU to broad publics. While, in de Bruin's account, Baudet actively cultivates American alt-right contacts, Riedel stresses the importance of American President Donald Trump's support for Tri-Marium.

Rooting 'discourses' in concrete narrations

An important way of recognising the agency of narrating actors in this special issue is to root grand narratives in specific individual retellings. Cianciara assembles cohesive narratives from qualitative analysis of individual 'speech acts' by politicians and officials over 10 years. Tyushka adds 'big data' analysis to achieve the same outcome.

The special issue contributors trace the individuality of concrete narrations to the very specific circumstances of their production, a factor also emphasised by NPF and some other EUS literature on narratives (Jones and Radaelli 2015, 341; Manners and Murray 2016, 186 & 188). We study narration in

diverse contexts such as election campaigns (McMahon), social media (Tyushka, de Bruin), foreign policy (Tyushka, Riedel) and parliamentary debates on constitutional change (Kaiser) or specific policy issues (Wendler). Although the PRR parties sustain identifiable elements of grand narrative about the EU from manifesto to manifesto, McMahon emphasises that these are also individual documents. In the post-Brexit period therefore, when opinion polls suggested Europeans wanted to stay in the EU but PRR parties remained popular, they avoided nationalist narratives that directly attacked one another's countries in order to campaign as a united European front.

Changing external circumstances permit narratives to develop but are also a structure that constrains agency. Kaiser and Pasquinucci therefore underline the importance of structural scope conditions for change in narratives. The Cold War conditioned the radical left in the EP to resist anti-communist European integration and the radical right to support it. Pasquinucci meanwhile attributes Italian narratives of the EU as a necessary external constraint to clientelism and the elite's lack of willingness or ability to reform the economy or politics.

Kaiser and Pasquinucci both identify moments of transition when individual ways of telling stories contributed to important reformulations of discourse. In Kaiser's account, debates following the 1984 DTEU initiated the narrative repositioning of the new left (Greens) on the future of the EC. Pasquinucci describes how the end of the Cold War, the new policy challenges of preparing for the euro and the decline of left-wing Euroscepticism similarly heralded structural changes in the political context (or scope conditions) for narratives in Italy. The post-communist Left therefore took up the centre-right's external constraint narrative of the EU, which in turn created space for right-wing Europopulism.

Conclusion

Decades of increasing political competences and crises have politicised the EU, led to a fragmentation of its foundation narrative, and generated a powerful Eurosceptic opposition movement. This special issue shows how Eurosceptics of one hue or another do not merely reject European integration. They construct their own counter-narratives while interacting with an emerging complex interplay of competing pro-integration narratives. In this narrative ju-jitsu, they turn pro-integration narrative themes such as peace and democracy against the EU. Further research could ask whether sovereignty, one of the few largely Eurosceptic narrative themes, is also about to become contested territory. After all, the EU institutions are now promoting notions of European sovereignty in the face of an unreliable US and an increasingly aggressive China.

The issue's contributors are conceptually adventurous, linking narratives with topoi, framing or analyses of the internal structural components of narratives. While recognising enduring master narratives, the authors use techniques such as rooting narratives in individual concrete narrations to stress the agency of narrating actors to select or amend the stories they tell.

These conceptual innovations will be particularly important to move analysis beyond the narratives produced by elite political actors such as individual political leaders, governments, and political parties. Future research should include more bottom-up perspectives, studying how political elites and citizens in their daily life interact to construct narratives. Research on popular European identities have often used quantitative large-n opinion surveys and content analyses, but these by their nature tend not to capture complex narratives. Identifying narrative topoi from quantitative studies, coupled with ethnographic and sociological methods like focus groups, may help to analyse these popular narratives (Lai and Zhang 2013, 18–24). This and other extensions of the burgeoning interdisciplinary research about narratives could result in an even more nuanced picture of their contestation in the EU's multi-level politics.

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