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# *Contentious Europeans:*

## *Domestic and Transnational*

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***Protest and Politics in an Emerging Polity***
***(Rowman and Littlefield, 2001)***

***Protesting with Gas***

The year 2000 was a good one for the world's oil companies but not for European drivers – especially for farmers, fishermen, taxi drivers, and truckers. Fuel prices had been going up and up since winter. By mid-summer, it cost as much to drive a few hundred kilometers in Europe as most citizens of Brussels spend on an ordinary three-star dinner.

***Figure One***

***Bar graph of gas prices here***

Figure One tells you how far $30 would take the average European driver in different EU countries by mid-summer.

Normally long-suffering when it comes to their cars, Europeans began to boil over as the price of gasoline crept steadily upward. The first signs of unease came in the country in which gas prices had been allowed to go highest – Britain – when a group calling itself "Dump the Pump" launched a publicity campaign against fuel taxes. Then in Spain groups of farmers organized tractor cavalcades to protest the high price of fuel. But as often happens in Europe, the most dramatic actions were mounted across the channel, where French fishermen blocked entry to channel ports and turned away cross-

channel ferries,  The protesters' actions had the desired effect, gaining subsidies from the government to offset soaring diesel costs.

The French government's capitulation failed to stem the tide from the English channel; emboldened by the fishermen's success, truckers seized the initiative first, blockading some eighty gasoline depots and oil refineries in early September, shutting down the airport in Nice, and closing the Eurotunnel. As the government offered one concession after another, the European Commission threatened to launch an investigation into whether the French were evading their obligation under EU rules to facilitate the free flow of goods and services.

A wider wave of protests soon rippled outward across the continent:

- In the Netherlands, truckers brought traffic around Amsterdam and Rotterdam to a standstill.
- In Belgium a week of blockades shut down Charleroi and Nivelles, and closed the government quarter in Brussels, with angry truckers vowing to barricade Belgian and EU government offices
- In Germany, truckers, farmers and taxi drivers skirted Germany's strict laws against unauthorized protests, staging a series of "go-slow" convoys that paralyzed traffic from the French border to Berlin.

- In Ireland, truck drivers vowed to shut down the country if their scheduled meetings with the government failed to yield sufficient concessions.
- In Spain, truckers, fishermen and farmers mounted blockades of Madrid, Barcelona and Merida.
- But the biggest protests were in Britain, where Dump the Pump activists used the internet to tell motorists where the cheapest petrol could be found.

***Figure Two***

***Dump the Pump***

The protests had a disruptive *political* effect, especially on the center-left governments in Britain, France and Germany, nearly splintering a number of governing coalitions:

- The German Greens were outraged by the suggestion of their Social Democratic coalition partners that the environmental tax on fuel should be cut.
- French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin found himself caught between his Communist partners – who demanded further swift cuts in petrol prices – and his Green colleagues – who derided any such concessions as handouts to polluters.

- And in Britain Prime Minister Tony Blair found himself caught between a noisy anti-fuel tax lobby and Friends of the Earth who wanted fuel taxes kept high to fight pollution,

Where was the European Union in all of this? Voicing the position of government leaders across the continent, French Transport Minister Jean-Claude Gayssot called for EU action. In mid-September, the Commission was investigating whether member-statef, in trying to put out the fires of domestic discontent, were breaking community rules on state aids. By late October, Commission officials were exploring longterm agreements with Russia to guarantee delivery of petroleum at guaranteed prices.

***What is Happening Here?***

Like lots of other European protest waves that have attracted scholars' attention, this one was full of sound and fury, redolent with folklore and bombast and contrasted the colorful actions of ordinary people (even when these were financed by lobbies and unions) with the stubbornness of the authorities.

But there is more than folklore going on here.

- Observe first that the source of the protests was *global* – OPEC's increase in the price of fuel

- Then note that the protests themselves were domestic in scope and aimed at national politicians
- And note that as the protests spread, the national politicians hit by them turned to the EU for a solution.

Whatever we are seeing here, it involves a much more complicated relationship among the global, the national and the regional; *Local Protests triggered by global forces were turning national governments into brokers between the local and the supranational levels.* That is why this story is relevant to an international institution like this one.

***From Gas to Research***

For the past 5 years, in a just-published study with Doug Imig of the University of Memphis, *Contentious Europeans,* I have been trying to figure out whether a transnational level of contention – what some hardy souls have called a "transnational civil society" – is developing in Western Europe. When Imig and I first began to examine contentious politics in the European Union in the mid-1990s, most scholars would ask us; "European contention? What do you mean by that -- `Euro-skepticism'?" We would explain that although opposition *to* European integration was an important phenomenon, we were

more interested in something else: in protest *as a routine part of an emerging supranational polity.*

Imig and I had two main hypotheses:

- First, we reasoned that the progressive shift of policy making to Brussels would ultimately lead citizen groups to focus their claims on the European Union;
- Second, just as business groups were crossing borders to make transnational alliances, we reasoned that if Europe was becoming an integrated polity we would eventually find increasingly *transnational* forms of protest in Western Europe.

We thought that if we found a progressive shift of protest to Brussels from national targets to the EU and the formation of cross-national social movements between member-states, that would signal a trend towards a unified European polity.

Like the conventional social scientists we were, we turned first to the literature on European integration. But we found hardly anything there about political protest. In 1995, scholars were divided between intergovernmental and supranational models of what was happening on that continent.

- *Intergovernmentalism:* a Harvard-centered group around Stanley Hoffman insisted on the idea that the European Union is and will remain state-centered and that major decisions will continue to reflect national interests.
- *Supranationalism:* In contrast, a west coast group of political scientists and sociologists from Settle to Irvine was convinced that the shift of policy prerogatives to Brussels is creating policy networks of officials and interest group leaders around the European Union, sidestepping the formal power of the national states who write the treaties.

If protest was both migrating to Brussels and producing transnational social movements, that would support the supranationalists' thesis; if it was staying at home, that would give aid and comfort to the intergovernmental-ists. The trouble was that both schools focused only on *elite* politics – the intergovernmentalists on national states and the supranationalists on EU officials and interest groups. We wanted to bring ordinary people into the equation. Our work is intended to begin to understand how the growth of supranational governance is affecting ordinary people and their relations to their governments.

Because of time limitations let me skip over a formal presentation of the data Imig and I collected. You can find it in Chatper Two of *Contentious Europeans*. You may be interested, however, in the methodology, which is something new in the study of European politics. Studies of social protest have usually been restricted to one country and for a limited period of time. Until recently, all but the most intrepid researchers to shied away from cross-national, time series analyses. But if we were going to study whether protest is beginning to shift from the national to the supranational level, we would need a source of data that both covered a reasonably long period of time and wasn't limited to spectacular, put possibly unrepresentative events.

Imig had been working at Harvard with a group that was using computer-generated coding of on-line news releases to study big international conflicts. They had developed a dictionary of forms of international conflict that they trained on on-line data sources to track the intensity and the location of coups, civil wars, ethnic conflicts and the like. We reasoned that if we could devise a dictionary for the kind of direct actions we typically find in Europe, we could use their search engine, PANDA, to analyze the changes in the targets and the issues that Europeans aimed at.

As it happened, Reuters' European Bureau had gone on line in 1983, which made it possible for us to study European Union protests for the twelve countries that had been members of the EU for all or most of the period through 1997. After many false starts and dead ends, we produced a quantitative dataset of some 20,000 protest events – most of them purely domestic – out of which we culled some 500-odd that were clearly linked to EU policies.

These quantitative data provided us with a broad map of European protest but they couldn't tell us much about the actors involved in mobilization or their interactions with particular targets. So we also assembled a team of scholars – French, German, American -- who were working on various sectors of European Union organizing – farmers, workers, women, immigrants, ecological and consumer groups. The table of contents of *Contentious Europeans* gives you a picture of the range of sectors covered in the book.

Here is our most important finding: while most people still protest about local or national issues against local or national targets, the number and percentage of Europe-directed protests increased dramatically in the mid 1990s.

***Figure Three***

***Frequency and % of Europrotests***

That a lot of these protests resulted from the strains of meeting the EMU stabilization criteria is hinted at by the kind of actors who mounted them: not the "post-material" new social movements publicized by Inglehart and others, but occupational groups protesting against policies that affected their welfare or incomes. A much larger share (12 percent) of occupational group protests were aimed at the European level than the tiny proportion of non-occupational groups who protested against European policies or institutions.

***Table One***

***Social Actors***

Two regularities are worth noting:

- First, farmers alone accounted for roughly half the protests launched by occupational groups that targeted the EU;
- but second, we found a wide range of contentious actions also launched by fishermen, construction workers, truck drivers, miners and other occupational groups.

This finding is particularly striking when we compare it with the groups who protest most frequently around non-European issues – non-occupational groups.

What happens to the non-occupational groups when they confront the European Union? They aren't absent at the European level, but their actions mainly take *contained* form -- the ubiquitous civil society lobbies and platforms that congregate in Brussels. What the representatives of these groups are mostly doing in Brussels is lobbying.

***The Axes of Protest***

Against whom do European protesters protest when they do across what territorial axes? We identified four axes of protest from our Reuters' data and from the studies of our collaborators: diffusion, political exchange, transnational protet and what we call "domestication."

- *First,* we found that a lot of old fashioned *diffusion*: -- the adoption of forms and frames of collective action from one country to another without any connections among the protesters. A good example was the fuel protest wave of the summer of 2000.

***Figure 4***

***Fuel Protest Diffusion***

In this map, we've roughly tracked the progress of the first day of documented protests we found in each EU country, starting from Spain in late August (coded as "zero") to the other countries in the EU for which we have data. The numbers within the country borders represent the number of days that passed from the first Spanish tractor cavalcade to the first days' reported protests in these other EU countries.[1]

There was no doubt that we were seeing diffusion in the gas protests; as one Spanish farmers' representative said in mid-September – after the more dramatic French protests broke out; "We'll Frenchify this conflict if the government doesn't take steps" (WSJ, Sept. 15, 2000, p. a17).

*Second,* the EU also provides incentives for short-term collaboration between protesting groups in different countries. This is what we call *political exchange*: the pursuit of similar or overlapping mutual interests on the part of social actors from different countries. An important example was the collaboration among French, Belgian and Spanish automobile workers when the Renault, announced the closure of the company's plant in Vilvoorde (Le Soir, 28 February 1997).[i] As you know well, Vilvoorde's workers occupied the plant, "kidnapped" a large number of cars due for shipment, and began a

series of public protests that would make Vilvoorde synonymous with a new term in the European political lexicon -- "the Eurostrike".[ii]

The strike actions in Belgium quickly crossed borders, bringing a Belgian "commando" into France and bringing French Renault workers into Belgium to demonstrate alongside their Belgian colleagues.[iii] When the Belgian unions organized a mass demonstration here and dumped a yellow Renault on the steps of the European Commission (it is on the cover of the book), they were joined by leaders of the French left and by delegations of French, Spanish and British auto workers.

***Figure Five***

***Vilvoorde Solidarity***

Twenty years ago, such an event would have been seen as an artifact of the class war – or at least as a breakdown of neo-corporatism. But today, in an age of globalization, downsizing, and European integration, it was widely framed by the press and by the political class as a "Eurostrike". But the joint protests were short-lived; when the new French Socialist government offered measures of reconversion, the workers quickly subsided.

- What of the hypothesis that European regulation will produce sustained transnational social movements? We did find some evidence of

*transnationalization* -- the convergence of claims, identities and forms of action between different national actors at the supranational level – in protests against the import of genetically modified seeds.

Genetic food protests are a sector of activity that lends itself easily to transnational protest. The markets are inherently international; member states have a stake in protecting domestic producers, farmers and consumers; and at least four DGs – External Affairs, Agriculture, the Environment, and Scientific Research – have an obvious interest or competence in this sector. This provided a structural setting that encouraged both transnational and national consumers' and environmental groups to come together in transnational coalitions.

The early phases of that campaign were carefully studied by our collaborator Vera Kettnaker (2001). In November 1996, when the first crop of genetically-modified corn and soybeans was due to arrive in Europe, many Europeans protested in fear of another food safety scandal like the BSE crisis in Britain. As policy initiative shifted back and forth from Brussels to national governments, the campaign alternated between anti-EU and national protests. This situation provided Kettnaker with the unusual opportunity to

compare protest behavior against governments at both the national and the European levels within the same campaign and general time period.

***Table 2***

***Anti-GMF protests***

Table 2, from Kettnaker's study, shows the percentage distribution of anti-GMO protests targeting the subnational, the national, the European, or the international level (e.g. protests at international conferences or UN meetings), as well as 3 categories of indirect targeting. As the table demonstrates, protesters in the anti-genetic foods campaign were equally likely to target national governments or European institutions.

In new and inherently international sectors like genetically modified foods, transnational collaboration is beginning to appear among contentious Europeans. But how widespread is the internationalization of protest in Europe? Turning to our fourth category, "domestication", we can at least hazard a quantitative comparison.

- Most of what we found in our Reuters data was not transnational protest among cooperating groups from different European countries but what we called *domestication*: domestic political conflict aimed at national

political elites, using them as proxies for external actors, policies or institutions.

Our data show that most people who protest against EU policies or institutions do so against domestic targets, rather than directly against the EU institutions or through transnational coalitions.

***Table 3***

***Domestic and Transnational Protest***

Table Three shows that almost 83 percent of the EU-directed protests in our Reuters data were examples of "domestication;" while only 17 percent were transnational.

The Table also suggests that the proportion of transnational and domesticated protests were more or less constant between the 1980s and the late 1990s. You can see this better if you look at a scatterplot of the number of "domesticated" vs "transnational" protests in each six-month period since 1983; the late 1990's saw an increase in "transnational" protests, but it saw a larger increase in "domesticated" protest.

***Figure Six***

***Scatterplot of Transnational and***

***Domesticated Protests***

People who protest against European institutions and policies still do so predominantly on home ground without collaboration with others like themselves from other European countries.

Why do they do this? A number of hypotheses can be suggested:

- First, Brussels may be too far away form where they live, and the EU's institutions too confusing, and provide no obvious target for protest
- Second, the kind of transnational coalition that is likely to make the Commission sit up and take notice is hard to organize, and may not fit with the goals of the protesters, who are often protesting against other EU actors – eg., farmers.
- But third (and we think this is the most important reason) people protest against their own governments – even when they know that the EU is the responsible authority – *because that's where they can have the most clout* against politicians who they have elected and whose action they can demand on their behalf.

Despite the evidence of diffusion, temporary exchange and transnational coalitions we have sketched, the EU is still largely state-centered when it

comes to protest because it is state officials who can most effectively be pressed by protesters to represent their interests in Brussels.

***Summary:***

What can we conclude from our research?

- The continuing predominance of domestic over internationalized protest on European issues suggests that if globalization, liberalization, and the Europeanization of policy-making are bringing about a shift in protest behavior, they are doing so indirectly, using national states as their intermediaries.
- As the fuel protest story showed, even when protests never move beyond national boundaries, when they co-occur and have general or global causes, they offer an opportunity to national politicians to project their problems onto the European Union
- If you are hoping transnational social movements will develop in Europe in short order, keep your eye on inherently international sectors of activity like genetic modification, the prospective European defense force, and the furor over food safety issues.

## *A Concluding Conundrum*

We don't know yet whether the relatively traditional or short-term forms of European protest, like diffusion and political exchange, multilevel forms like domestication, or transnational forms like genetic food campaigns will become more frequent in the years to come. British observers like Tony Judt think disasters like the mad cow infestation are exposing the limits of the European Union and moving Europe away from support for European Union.

### *Figure Seven*

### *Mad Cow*

But as ordinary people and the organizations that represent them increasingly target Europe with their claims, old institutions are changing and new ones are developing.

How these trends will intersect in the future is the most important question in the so-called "democratic deficit": will Europe's institutions begin to fill the representative gap that some believe have given rise to a more contentious European politics? Or will they reinforce and adapt the old

institutional channels that Europeans have available to provide incentives to act collectively?

- A second question: Europe's are the most extensive set of supranational institutions in the world today, but they are not the only ones. If Europe's emerging patterns of contention are the archetype at the regional level of protests against supranational institutions at the global level, will there be more Seattles and Genoas in the world's future, or will there be more and more widespread examples of the domestication of anti-globalization protest?

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[1] We have no data on Scandinavia because our informants tell us that Scandinavians "don't do things that way". But there are reports that the big oil companies slapped signs on their gas pumps in October listing the percent of gas prices that go to taxes.

[i]. For a more detailed analysis of the strike, see Imig and Tarrow, "From Strike to Eurostrike: The Europeanization of Social Movements and the Development of a Euro-Polity."

[ii]. Just who coined the term "eurostrike" remains to be investigated. In our present state of knowledge, it first appeared in the French newspaper, Le Monde, on March 10th ("L'Eurogrève a mobilisé les salariés de Renault contre la fermature du site de Vilvorde" (p. 24). The term does not appear in Reuters' dispatches, but

on March 11, Reuter's quoted a French union spokesman who called the demonstration that day a "pan-European demonstration."

[iii]. When Schweitzer announced that he would meet with the Renault Works Council at the firm's Paris headquarters, a convoy of 80 buses transported 3,000 workers in their red and green union jackets to Paris, where they called for solidarity strikes (Reuters, 11 March 11, 1997; Le Monde, 13 March, 1997). The Belgian workers followed with a surprise "commando action" on the 13th across the border to the Renault plant in Douai.