EUROPE FROM A POLITICAL SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction: Europe from a political sociological perspective

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Many programs in European studies focus on the institutions that comprise the EU; however, the EU is influenced both by the political developments within each of the member states and by the social developments, such as social movements and civil society organizations or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Meanwhile, the EU itself influences the policies of the member states as well as the strategies and development of social movements and civil society in the individual countries. Europe is more than the EU and its institutions, it is also a collection of states, which all have their own political and social dynamics. What happens at the state level also influences the EU. Countries can decide they want to join and therefore, expand the EU (such as the post-communist countries) or they can decide to leave (such as Great Britain did with its “Brexit”). With rightwing populist Eurosceptic parties on the rise, the entire EU project could be in danger. The EU could survive Brexit, but what if Marine Le Pen and her Rassemblement National would win the French elections and force a “Frenxit”? As a core country of the EU, its exit would greatly endanger the entire EU project. Since Le Pen came in second place in the latest French presidential elections, such an outcome is not impossible. Thus, it is imperative to study the European countries as well as the EU.

However, how can we understand the dynamics of these EU countries unless we look at the interplay of politics and society in these countries? Brexit and the rise of Eurosceptic, rightwing populist parties is a phenomenon that is occurring throughout Europe now. In 2022, such a party – with roots in the Nazi movement no less!!! – came in second place in the Swedish elections, although until recently this country had seemed to be immune to rightwing populism. It would not be possible to understand these populist movements by only looking at the political developments (which would be a purely political scientific approach) and leaving out the voters who support these parties. In order to understand why people vote for

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such parties, we have to bring society into the picture. It is not just an issue of voting: the way
the mass media is organized, the manner in which various civil society organizations mobilize
people and pressure governments also contribute to the rise or prevention of populist
movements. Similarly, it would not make sense to only analyze societal developments (a
purely sociological approach) and leave out the manner in which political actors frame their
arguments to mobilize voters. Thus, we feel that in order to understand the EU we need to
also understand the European countries that comprise the EU and we need to apply a
political-sociological approach that combines the state and society.

This textbook emerged out of a Jean Monnet project on studying the EU and Europe from a
political sociological viewpoint. This introductory chapter continues as follows: first we will
explain what we mean by “political sociology.” Then we will discuss some of the classic
political sociologists and show how the field has developed. Finally, we will describe some of
the main focal points of political sociology as they are presented in individual chapters of this
online textbook.

What is Political Sociology?
Political sociology studies the interaction between politics and sociology. Thus, it is neither
the study of pure politics or pure society. See figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Political Sociology
Political-sociological analyses see the interaction between politics and society as something dynamic, in which both influence each other. See figure 2:

![Figure 2: The interaction between politics and society](image)

In other words, society influences the state, but the state also influences society. This relationship is continuous as both are constantly influencing each other. The diagram below on social movements shows how these dynamics can work: first a social movement develops (for example, one for racial equality), then the movement influences that state so that it changes its policies (for example, by enacting civil rights legislation and passing laws against discrimination that open up schools and universities to people of all ethnic backgrounds). This in turn leads to changes in society (such as an Afro-American getting elected president, a sharp increase in non-white members of Congress, a sharp increase in the enrollment and hiring of people with different ethnic backgrounds at the most prestigious universities., etc.) See figure 3 below:
Table 1 below illustrates the differences between political, sociological and political-sociology approaches by giving the same of how one can study families. A purely political scientific approach would concentrate on the political parties and the state. It would include such topics as what strategies do the political parties have concerning family policy and how the negotiate on these issues within the government. For example, if there is a coalition government, then different parties might have different views and they would have to negotiate a compromise (e.g., Lammi-Taskula & Takala 2009). Or they might focus on the political discourse on family polices and differences in party programs (e.g., Littmarck, Lind & Sandin 2018; Riva 2016).

Meanwhile, a purely sociological approach would look at such aspects as how the family has developed over time (Cheal 2002; Farrell, B., VandeVusse, A., & Ocobock, A. 2012), demographic developments (e.g., Esping-Andersen & Billari 2015; McDonald 2000) and the changing institution of marriage (e.g., Lee & Payne2010). A political-sociological analysis, by contrast, looks at such issues as how social movements and civil society has influenced family policies and how family policies have influenced gender relations (e.g., Saxonberg 2014).
The Differences in Approaches: 
The example of Families

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Table 1: Different approaches to studying the family

Political science approaches are limited in the sense that they study government policies in a vacuum, without analyzing how social forces have influenced these policies. In addition, they are not equipped to analyze how society influences government or how policies influence society. In the case of family policy, the political-sociological approach focuses on these issues and analyzes how social movements influence family policies and how family policies influence society (such as gender relations, labor market participation rates, child poverty, gender and welfare attitudes, etc.). Meanwhile, the purely sociological approach has limited practical use if cannot help us formulate better policies. Why study society if we do not want to improve it? Thus, when studying the family, it is advantageous to also study how policies influence the family and how better policies could improve conditions for families. Consequently, political-sociological approaches have the advantage that they offer a deeper, more holistic approach, that enables social scientists to influence policies. It allows us better advocate what types of policies we should advocate and how we can better organize to pass legislation that will improve conditions for families.

A Short Overview of the History of Political Sociology
In today’s world we often have strict divisions between academic disciplines, but it was not always like that. The father of modern economics, Adam Smith, was actually a professor of ethics! The father of modern political sociology, Karl Marx, received his PhD in law. One of the most influential theorists today on the civil society is Alexis de Tocqueville, who was actually known as a historian. In the 19th century it was common to have a more holistic approach rather than examine one small part of the whole and the trend toward political sociology, political economy, social psychology, etc. is a move back in this more unified direction. Now we will proceed by very briefly discussing some of the most important classic political sociologists: Marx, Weber, Lipset, Linz, Scopol

**Karl Marx**

In his texts, Marx analyzed the relationship between the economy, society and politics. For him, the economy represents the base of society, while politics and ideology belong to the superstructure, which are built upon the economy (see for example, his *Forward to the Critique of the Political Economy*; note for classic texts we do not use references since there are so many editions and translations available). In this sense, Marx was also one of the fathers of political economy since he analyzed the economy in detail. However, the economic base consists of societal elements, such as the contradictory interests of different classes. Under capitalism the main contradiction is between the workers (who have an interest in getting as high wages as possible, and the best possible working conditions) and the capitalists (who have an interest in paying the lowest possible wages and providing the worst possible working conditions in order to maximize their profits). Thus, the ability for workers to organize around their interests (by joining unions, supporting socialistic political parties, etc.) influences both the economic and political outcomes. For example, if we compare Sweden to the USA, the Swedish welfare state is much more generous and more developed than the American one. Marxists would argue that this is because the Swedish workers were much more successful in mobilizing behind unions and a social democratic party.

The base-superstructure dynamics can be seen in Figure 4 below. Thus, at a certain “mode of production” the economic base differs as does the political and ideological superstructure. The mode of production depends on the technological developments, which Marx terms the “forces of production.” Thus, before technologies were developed that could make
agricultural production efficient, most labor was done by humans in the form of slavery. In a society in which the mode of production was based on slavery, large nations or nation-states did not yet exist, as politics took place on a more local level in the form of city-states. In these city states democratic political systems were possible at the superstructure, but democratic participation was only limited to the small portion of the society who enjoyed citizenship, that is a privileged group of educated men. Slaves, immigrants and women had no voting rights. Since politics took place at a small scale, direct democracy was possible in city-states such as Athens. As technology developed with new types of agricultural devices and trade increased as a shipping industry developed, feudalism replaced slavery and aristocratic landowners replaced slave owners as the dominating economic class. Under this system, the aristocrats had both control over the economic base and the political superstructure, as monarchies rules most of the world. At this point, at least in European society, the Church (often Catholic but even Lutheran or Orthodox) promoted ideological justification for the monarchy claiming the kings/queens/emperors ruled because it was “God’s will.” The main conflict at the economic base was now between landowning aristocrats and serfs rather than between slave-owners and slaves. As the forces of production developed further with the invention of machines, a new capitalist class emerged, which eventually succeeded in overthrowing the monarchy in most countries.

Under capitalism relationships are more complex as the dominating economic class (the “bourgeoisie”) no longer has political power. However, the bourgeoisie has a big advantage over other groups even in democratic political systems in that it is able to convert some of its economic power into political power. For example, wealthy people can contribute much more than poor people to political campaigns and then expect favors in turn. Or when a leftist government comes to power and wants to raise taxes or introduce measures that increase the costs for businesses (such as raising minimum wages, introducing environmental protection, etc.), the capitalists can always withdraw their investments and invest in businesses in countries with more favorable conditions for them. Meanwhile, according to neo-Marxists, the Church no longer has as much influence over ideology as under feudalism as now there are a plurality of religious groups in most countries and capitalism has enabled the rise of a very influential mass media, which has great influence over ideology.
An example of how one can apply Marx’s model to today’s society comes from the writings of Ronald Inglehart, although he would not have considered himself to be a Marxist. In several texts, such as Modernization and Postmodernization (1997), he argued that there has been a shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy (in Marxian terms a changed in the development of the forces of production). This has brought about a change in values (in Marxian terms, a change in ideology) from modern values based on consumption to post-modern values based on the urge to have greater autonomy, a better environment, more gender equality, etc. This in turn has led to the growth of Green parties in many countries as well as a shift in the political discourse and the stances of political parties. In Marxian terms, a change in the forces of production at the economic base, has led to changes in the ideological and political superstructure.

The part of Marx’s writings that seems the least modern probably concern his view of the state. By today’s standards, his view was very naive. He agreed with the anarchists that the state is repressive: it is a tool that the ruling class uses to dominate the exploited classes. Therefore, he agreed with the anarchists that the state should be eliminated in the long-term.
However, in writing about the Paris Commune in *The Civil War in France*, Marx contemplated why the democratic government had failed after the workers revolted to overthrow the monarchy. He praised the workers for granting voting rights to everyone regardless of class or economic means, but since they workers still had a government – although a democratic one – it was still a “dictatorship” in his usage of the term. For Marx an important event was the overthrow of the commune, when the monarchists got the support of Austrian troops to crush the government. He concluded that if there is a revolution, the class which loses power will likely instigate a counter-revolution; therefore, the revolutionary workers need to arm themselves to defend themselves. In this sense, he might have been more realistic than the anarchists, as leftist governments have often been violently overthrown even when they are democratically elected (such as the CIA-inspired coup against Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973).

However, history also indicates that the anarchists were the realists in their critique of Marx: if you take over the state, you become the state. Marx’ co-author, Fredrick Engels wrote in the *Anti-Dühring* that after a successful revolution, once the workers defeat the counter-revolution the state will “wither away” and then what would be left would only be “the administration of things.” This implies a technocratic view of society, in which the “correct” policies are so obvious that there is no need to discuss them and reach a democratic decision or consensus. The thinking at the time was along the lines of if you are sick then you go to the doctor and do what the doctor says. There is no need for any democratic discussions or decisionmaking because the doctor knows which medicine you need for your symptoms. Today such a view comes off as extremely naive, as doctors are often wrong in their judgements and often we want to get a second opinion before taking a big step like getting an operation.

In the real world, even if we all can agree on the problem and the outcomes of policies (which is actually quite rare) we still might not agree on the best solutions for problems. For example, both those who support and oppose nuclear energy might agree that it emits less carbon dioxide than gas, coal and oil so further investments would help fight global warming in the short turn. They might also agree that if the state subsidizes nuclear energy by covering the insurance costs for an accident then it is cheaper in the short-run to produce energy this way
than though the main alternatives. However, they might also agree that without these state supports no companies would ever build nuclear power stations as it would be impossible to find a private insurance company that would be willing to insure them. Should the state subsidize this or not? That is a normative and not a neutral, objective issue that we can solve by scientific means; it depends partially on whether one prefers a free market or state intervention in the economy. Then the problems arise as to what to do with the waist from the power plants. Both sides can agree that the waist will be radio active for up to 100,000 years and that at the moment we have no solution to the problem; nor can we know what the solution would cost if it were found. So how can we make an “objective,” scientifically neutral decision on the matter? Those who support nuclear energy are more optimistic about the long-term possibilities of finding a solution and the long-term costs of it, while those who oppose nuclear energy are more pessimistic. Meanwhile, there is also the moral issue: are we willing to risk the health and well-being of future generations in order to live better today? Again, this is a moral question, which cannot be solved by having bureaucrats simply “administering things.” These dilemmas show why it is naive to think that the state can “wither away” and also show the importance of having a democratic society where one can have an open debate about such issues.

This critique of Marx & Engels shows the need for analyzing the state and its institutions. The first big step in this direction came from Max Weber, who although highly critical of Marx was also highly influenced by Marx; he developed many of his most important ideas in opposition to Marx. Consequently, one could conclude that one of the biggest problems of Marx was that he wrote before Weber, but without Marx perhaps we would not have Weber.

Max Weber

One of Weber’s most important works was *Economics and Society*. In this book he gave one of the first important analyzes of state institutions, which laid the groundwork for institutional theories within political sociology. He pointed out the importance of leaders getting legitimacy for their rule. He also developed an alternative class scheme to Marx. For him, status rather than purely economic classes was central. Status comes from property, prestige, and power. This laid the foundation for much of the later political-sociological research about cleavages in society and the role of status. For example, much of the later research on welfare
attitudes, uses a status-based definition of class, which Erikson-Goldthorpe developed (e.g., Svallfors 1997).

In addition, in this book, Weber distinguishes between goal rationality and instrumental rationality. Goals rationality concerns the judgement as to how rational one’s goals are, while goal rationality accepts people’s goals, but assumes given these goals, people will act as rational as possible in trying to achieve them. This idea laid the groundwork for modern rational choice theories that analyze behavior based on the notion that given certain preferences, people will act in certain ways.

In contrast to Marx, Weber considered culture to be the base of society. His book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he argued that the reason why the northern European countries were much wealthier than the southern European countries was that they were protestant. Protestantism encourages people to work hard to improve their economic situation as it claims God rewards people for doing so. This encourages capitalism and makes it easier for countries to prosper. Meanwhile, Catholicism had encouraged adhering to the status quo. One was born into a certain position in society and one should simply accept one’s lot, which discouraged people from being entrepreneurial and working hard. His ideas on religion were influential for the development of the sociology of religion and cultural sociology. For political sociologists his ideas are also important in expanding values as being something beyond ideology, as Marxism tended to downplay culture as simply a synonym for ideology.

**The late 1950s-early 1960s: Sociologists Become Political Scientists**

Until the 1950s political science was not especially scientific. The main trends were either philosophical where one studied normative philosophical idea, or legalistic, where one analyzed formal institutions, such as constitutions. In the 1950s, however, sociologists, such as Seymour Lipset, Juan Linz and C. Wright Mills began writing about political issues, thus invigorating political science and giving it more of a methodological and socio-scientific base.

Lipset was trained as a sociologist, but moved over to the field of political sociology by writing about political topics from a socio or sociological view. His first famous text in this direction was his article about the social requisites for democracy, where he linked democracy to
modernization: more “modern” societies were more likely to become democratic (Lipset 1959). Then in *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*, he investigated the connection between social strata and voting. Together with the Norwegian sociologist, Stein Rokkan, he developed his ideas further in discussing the role of cleavage in society (Lipset & Rokkan 1967).

Somebody who worked closely with Lipset, was Juan Linz, who received a doctorate in sociology at Columbia university at the time that Lipset was there. Linz became famous for analyzing different regime types and the dynamics behind different types of regimes. He was especially known for his works on the differences between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes (Linz 1964, 1975), the breakdown of democratic regimes (Linz & Stepan 1978) and on transitions to democracy (Linz & Stepan 1996).

Talcott Parson’s (1951) developed a functionalist model in which the economy, polity, household and religion/culture/church all have functions to play in keeping society in equilibrium.

**Recent Trends in Political Sociology**

While sociologists played a major role in turning political science into a science in the 1950s and 1960s, the term “political sociology” was not much in use. In recent years, however, the term has become more popular as various political sociological fields have developed – some of which are covered in this textbook. This includes studies of social movements and civil society, political participation (such as voting), social policy, the study of power in politics and society, social change including the democratization of society, the rise of populist movements, attitudes toward politics, etc. Some of the phenomenon emerged only recently. With the rise of populism and new modes of political communication via social media it is becoming increasingly clear that also questions around identities and emotions play a crucial role in politics and voting decisions. Closely related to that, we see a new wave of nostalgia and political mobilization based on the feelings of a “lost paradise.” Politicians – especially populist ones – invoke nostalgia to cope with unpredictable crisis situations and create a sense of security and belonging.
Due to all these recent developments we decided to open the textbook with a chapter by Ella
Petrini that gives a comprehensive overview about the role of emotions in understanding
European societies. The author explains why sociologists and also political sociologists are
becoming interested in emotions. Pavol Frič writes about the relations between civil society
organizations, populism and democracy. Two other chapters focus on civil society – Veronika
Valkovičová, Zuzana Očenášová & Katarína Minarovičová concentrate on Slovakia and analyze
feminist and women’s rights activism in the area of gender-based violence against women.
Eva Karlberg and Kerstin Jacobsson use a meta-organizational perspective on the
Europeanization of civil society for the case of the Swedish women’s lobby. Concretely, the
authors examine what it means for CSOs when the EU imposes the umbrella organization
structure on them, and more specifically what has participation in the European Women’s
lobby meant for the Swedish women’s movement.

One of the classical concepts of political sociology is political participation and voting
behavior. Why do people vote like vote? Olga Gyárftášová looks at a specific case of voting –
the European Parliament elections. She writes about general characteristics of European
elections – known as second-order, and more closely looks at Slovakia which became master
of voting abstention – among all the EU member countries and all the elections it reached the
lowest electoral turnout ever.

The influence of the EU on national policy-making is a hotly debated issue. So far, most of the
attention has focused on the direction of the influence of this organization on policymaking.
In his analysis of family policy in Poland and the Czech Republic, Steven Saxonberg argues that
the EU’s main influence has been indirect – by legitimizing a discourse on feminism and
gender – rather than direct, by demanding changes in policies. positioning. Peter Jansson’s
chapter deals with the ideological background of public policies at a more general level in
writing about social democracy, functionalism and New Public Management in Sweden.

Finally, the textbook contains three chapters dealing with emotional narratives, nostalgia,
national sentiments and identity building. Namely, Martina Insero analyzes relations between
populist politics and the logic of emotions. She points at “restorative nostalgia” – recent
framing of right-wing populist parties and movements across Europe. Such kind of populist
appeals are gaining popularity in Italy, France, Germany, and were prevalent in Britain’s experience of Brexit. They are also gaining ground in Central and Eastern Europe – especially in Poland and Hungary. Populist parties are feeding on dissatisfaction with the political system and distrust towards the traditional, mainstream political elites. Mariam Mosiashvili deals with the same phenomenon and looks at a concrete case – national-populist groups in Georgia. One more chapter investigates a post-Soviet country: Alaiksei Kazharski looks back at the rigged 2020 presidential election in Belarus and raises the question if the anti-authoritarian protests after this election identity were building and they did mean that the Belarus ‘new political nation was formed or at least started to be formed.

In spite of broad variety of topics, theoretical backgrounds, methodological approaches and different location they have a common denominator: a political sociological perspective. This textbook does not claim to cover all the main topics in political sociology, but rather by giving concrete examples, it aims to show students how they can study Europe from a political sociological perspective, which takes into account the interplay between state and society.
References


