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Jens-Uwe Wunderlich, David J. Bailey

Obsolete if obstinate? Transforming European Union studies in the transnational era

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Alex Warleigh-Lack
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Obsolete if obstinate? Transforming European Union studies in the transnational era

Alex Warleigh-Lack

Introduction—on obstinacy and obsolescence

The role of this chapter is slightly different from those of many others in this volume, since it does not address a particular institution, policy area or external relationship of the European Union (EU), but rather the relationship of EU studies with those of the emerging global governance processes. The argument made here is that although EU studies has more to offer those seeking to remodel international relations (IR) as a field of enquiry in the context of the emerging global polity than is often acknowledged, in order to exploit these opportunities fully EU scholars will have to adapt their own studies and exchange ideas across intellectual borders more frequently than has often been the case so far. Behind this argument is a concern that EU studies may lose relevance if it fails to engage in such an enterprise; whatever the profile of the EU itself, EU studies may otherwise find itself ignored by IR scholars who still think of the field as marginal, and by single discipline scholars who stay narrowly in national or disciplinary silos or rush to the global without passing through the European. To put it polemically, now is a dangerous time for EU studies to rest on its laurels; obstinacy in this regard could soon lead to obsolescence, as other scholars reinvent wheels we have made and then claim the credit, with student and popular interest in EU studies waning as a result.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. First, I reflect on what global and transnational governance studies could gain from an engagement with the body of scholarship in EU studies. Subsequently I indicate what EU studies could gain from such an exchange, and identify some of the opportunity costs for EU studies scholars of such a foray. Finally, I discuss how these opportunities might be taken so that EU studies, which has done so much to probe and explore the evolution of transnational governance, is not left behind by IR scholars as well as those of such disciplines as law, politics, economics and history who must now all struggle with the end of what Scholte (2008) has so pithily called ‘methodological territorialism’.

Studying global governance—what does EU studies have to offer?

Before asking what EU studies can offer scholars investigating global governance/the transnational, it is necessary to define what I mean by ‘EU studies’. Several definitions are possible—and
indeed within particular disciplines EU enquiries are often considered as a sub-field—but I define it here in a rather broader, inter- or multi-disciplinary sense, as the scholarly investigation of what is now the EU in terms of its history, identity, politics, law, economics, sociology and anthropology, although I am mindful that not all of these disciplines have been equally active in their engagement with EU studies (Cini 2006b). EU studies is therefore a kind of area studies, but one which is certainly capable of producing theoretically informed, and even theory-forming, work (Bourne and Cini 2006); and as the meeting point of scholars from a range of disciplines interested in the transnational and supra-national, EU studies is also a very fertile intellectual territory.

This is clear in the wealth of material that has been produced in EU studies as we explore the transformation of the nation-state through the processes understood as ‘integration’, and, later, ‘Europeanization’. By exploring the mechanics, implications and limits of these phenomena, EU studies scholars have generated a wealth of data and a useful conceptual toolkit to illuminate similar investigations by scholars of both other regions in the global polity and the emerging global governance system itself—even if these tools will, of course, require adaptation to be applied in their new contexts (Warleigh 2006). Table 1.1 sets out some of the ways in which EU studies could be useful for the study of global governance.

EU studies has also demonstrated the ability to revise and rearticulate itself. Empirically driven as well as theoretically informed, EU studies has responded to developments in the EU itself by rethinking its core approaches and principal research questions in response to macro-level developments in EU politics—witness the evolution of integration theory (Rosamond 2000; Wiener and Diez 2004). Of course, advocates of perspectives with clear links to a modified ‘neorealist’ IR tradition have played a significant role in EU studies (e.g. Moravcsik 1999), and such scholars tend to be sceptical that the EU has any fundamental impact on national sovereignty. None the less, EU scholars have matched their often quixotic subject of study with a willingness to innovate academically, as is shown for instance by the adaptation of concepts and methods from comparative politics for use in EU studies (e.g. Hix 1994, 1998).

Table 1.1 What EU studies can offer global governance studies (GGS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue in GGS</th>
<th>Help from EUStudies</th>
<th>Sample literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rethinking the possible evolution of international organizations</td>
<td>Multi-level governance concept</td>
<td>Marks et al. 1996; Hooghe and Marks 2001; Bache and Flinders 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rethinking location and use of meaningful authority</td>
<td>Studies of EU institutions and governance</td>
<td>Peterson and Shackleton 2002; Hix 2005; Christiansen and Piattoni 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of the ‘global’ on the ‘national’</td>
<td>Europeanization studies</td>
<td>Cowles et al. 2001; Wessels et al. 2003; Jacquot and Woll 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of international organizations on non- and sub-state actors</td>
<td>Interest representation and sub-national authority mobilization studies</td>
<td>Greenwood and Aspinwall 1998; Bourne 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rethinking democracy for the transnational era</td>
<td>Normative turn studies</td>
<td>Bellamy and Castiglione 2000; Wiener 1998; Lord and Harris 2006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: author, adapted from Warleigh 2006.
Moreover, most EU studies scholars accept a certain ontological ambiguity, which is useful in areas of enquiry that are in transition. Although there are many labels for, and models of, the Union, the great majority of these understand the Union as a potentially evolving ‘partial polity’ (Wallace 2005)—and thus, of course, a challenge to conventional categories in both IR and comparative politics. This habit of accepting and exploring the ambiguous and potentially novel is a helpful default position that scholars of the emerging global polity might mimic in order to generate fresh empirical evidence and conceptual insights (Kelstrup and Williams 2000). A range of EU studies work in politics on everything from interest representation to the Europeanization of domestic structures, processes and politics via the creation of an innovative legal order and the blurring of boundaries between the supra-national, national and sub-national, is relevant here. This kind of innovative work is to be found in the economics and history communities in EU studies too (see respectively Dyson 2009; Kaiser 2009).

EU studies has also become increasingly self-analytical as a collective enterprise, with several recent works charting the development of the field (Keeler 2005) and providing incisive analyses of its achievements and shortcomings (Cini and Bourne 2006; Jørgensen, Pollack and Rosamond 2007). This signals maturity as a field of enquiry, and serves to deepen our collective sense as a scholarly community of our strengths, weaknesses and potential, which will help us identify exactly where and how we can engage with—and benefit from—scholars in other fields of enquiry.

Engaging with global governance studies—why bother?

Global governance scholars hold that the world has developed beyond orthodox understandings of the international system since the end of the Cold War, with the transformation sparked by, *inter alia*, an increasing ideological convergence on neoliberalism, increased economic interdependence, the rise to influence of non-state actors such as multinational corporations, and the arrival of problems that require global action if they are to be resolved, such as climate change (Woods 2002; Messner 2002). Hence, globalization is producing a ‘global polity’ with four main characteristics (Higgott and Ougaard 2002: 2–4). First, there is increased interconnectedness between state actors, non-state actors of both public and private kinds, and sub-state actors. Second, network systems of decision-making, where sites of real power are hard to pinpoint, but through which authoritative decisions are made, are predominant. Third, the development at both popular and elite levels of a thin awareness of the planetary level as a necessary site for problem-solving can be observed. Fourth, there is a concomitant weakening of the nation-state as a political actor. In turn, this network, contested, interconnected mode of decision-making is what constitutes *global governance* (Hardt and Negri 2000: 14), a process which is partial, with contested and varying levels of authority (Koenig-Archibugi 2002) and an unclear development trajectory that is subject to stops and starts.

All of this sounds like *déjà vu* to EU studies scholars—and yet even as they start to explore this evolving polity, many global governance studies (GGS) scholars seem to pass EU studies work by, aided in their ignorance by discrete academic communities and publication venues. Without a concentrated effort by EU scholars, this may always prove the case, providing what would be a major missed opportunity to raise our collective profile.

Engaging with GGS scholarship could also help EU studies to address its uneasy relationship with IR work. Originally developed by IR scholars, the neofunctionalists, EU studies has often been considered the poor relation of IR by many in that field. This intellectual snobbery has shaped EU studies in two main ways. First, it has allowed the application of comparative politics tools in EU studies to be interpreted as an alternative, rather than a complement. IR approaches, although the most systematic elaboration of the comparative politics approach never made quite
that claim (Hix 1994, 1998). Second, by creating a wagon-circle mentality, it cut many EU studies scholars off from the study of other global regions—a step that contributed to the theoretical ‘n = 1’ problem, and also enabled the study of second-wave regionalism initially to be undertaken generally without reference to, or interest from, EU studies scholars (Warleigh 2004; Söderbaum and Shaw 2003). Neither of these attitudes is helpful if EU studies wants to shift its gaze outwards. Nor are they useful if EU studies is to understand how globalization impacts upon the EU empirically and on EU studies epistemologically (Murray and Rumsford 2003; Rosamond 2005a). By engaging with GGS work, EU scholars can generate a deeper understanding not only of these issues, but also of how IR is itself developing, thereby facilitating a rapprochement with IR by those in the EU studies community with no patience for the nostrums of neorealism, which it is too easy for outsiders to assume remain unchallenged.

A further lesson that EU studies can learn from the global governance/globalization literature is how to raise public interest. Perhaps as a result of the ‘systematic social science’ that Haas and his contemporaries set out, EU studies usually fails to be engaged in the manner of David Mitrany or, in the present period, David Held. In addition to standard academic work, EU studies needs to include equivalents of Held’s 2004 book on global social democracy, which includes an actual plan of how to create such a system and a discussion of how it would work that is intelligible to the lay-person and practitioner, if we are to reach those in the media and general public who shape popular opinion.

Engaging with global governance—issues for EU studies

Before this can optimally be achieved, however, EU studies scholars must, as a collective, address several problematic issues. This is because the kind of self-reflection identified above is likely to be most fruitful if it proceeds from critique to change. Furthermore, it is possible to seek to engage with GGS scholars in a way that excludes some of the benefits of EU studies as identified above. In EU political studies, for instance, it has been argued that EU studies can only mature and punch its full weight if it engages with the dominant form of political science on its own terms—i.e. a fairly positivist, quantitatively driven form of enquiry—because this is the way both to distance EU studies from an inadequately theoretical or rigorous past and to ensure it is taken seriously in the US academy (for a critical summary, see Rosamond 2005a, 2007). There is no need for such intellectual imperialism; instead, such approaches should be offered as part of a range of methodologies, and epistemological pluralism considered to be of value in its own right.

In fact, it is possible that EU studies has not been interdisciplinary or pluralist enough, as suggested by Cini’s survey of the work in EU political studies (Cini 2006b). Ian Manners has demonstrated that critical perspectives need to play a greater role in mainstream EU studies than has yet been the norm (Manners 2007), hence the welcome recent work from, inter alia, a neo-Gramscian perspective (Cafruny and Ryner 2003) and critical social theory (Delanty and Rumsford 2005). It may also be that political scientists have overlooked the role of time—the longue durée of European integration in shaping EU politics—and may thus fall victim to presentism (Kaiser 2009). This may signal a need for more collaboration between political scientists and historians (Warleigh-Lack 2008).

From a linguistic perspective, the EU studies community may not be open enough. As is common in global academia, the English-language literature tends to dominate, even when its authors are not native speakers. This risks cutting off interesting sources of ideas and critiques; in EU studies, are views of acceptable forms of knowledge-generation and approaches to the subject too exclusively the preserve of a select group of scholars in the Western half of Europe and the USA? Could there be—are there?—intriguing and distinctive Chinese- or Arabic-language perspectives on
the EU? How would we in the ‘mainstream’ know? As a result, active outreach to other languages and territories is essential if EU studies is to develop optimally.

Finally, and in some contradiction to an earlier discussion, it must be admitted that EU studies has not always challenged its own received wisdom with sufficient speed. The routine lack of interest shown by EU studies scholars in other global regions is one example, as is the judgement that such regions are only worth studying if they follow the EU ‘model’ (Haas 1961). EU lawyers can often view the EU as an obviously federal entity without due regard to the politics of integration, and the law itself may be seen as either an inherently neutral tool or as an heroic device to be used to deepen the integration process in the face of political dithering (see the critique by Hunt and Shaw 2009). To a certain extent, these and similar problems are normal in any developing field of enquiry and can be seen as part of its evolution, which is in turn not necessarily on a Hegelian model (Rosamond 2007). In part, however, such issues are problematic, as they indicate that EU studies may have more introspection to undertake than has so far been managed.

Engaging with ‘the global’—towards an agenda for EU studies

So far in this chapter I have argued that EU studies has the potential to develop still more richly than to date, but that to achieve this it must engage actively with GGS, and seek to learn from, as well as ‘teach’, scholars in that community. It remains to set out some suggestions regarding a programme of research that could usefully be undertaken in order to realize this potential, as well as to bring more illumination to some of the problems with which EU studies is already grappling. This research programme perhaps reflects a particular awareness of the political science literature, but it is intended as a means to comprehend the Union more holistically, i.e. as an entity ‘co-constituted both by its actions and (by) the reactions of the global milieu’ (Manners 2003: 77).

A first useful project would be to consider how to address the challenges of moving beyond ‘methodological territorialism’. EU studies has made many advances here through the introduction and adaptation of comparative politics methods and tools, but sociology of knowledge variables such as the troubled relationship with IR must mean that there is potential to exchange ideas usefully in both directions. A team project based on different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives on this question would be an important first step, to establish exactly how the multi-disciplinary study of transnational politics and polities might best be pursued, or perhaps to establish a range of suitable approaches.

A second project is to compare the EU with other global regions in order to help ascertain what is particularistic, and what is generalizable in second-wave regionalism. Some such work has been undertaken, but there is certainly room for more, particularly where such work is open to conceptual as well as empirical cross-fertilization (Cooper, Hughes and de Lombaerde 2008a). Such research could very usefully focus on the development trajectories, governance styles and mechanisms, and impact (both material and ideational) of the various organizations. This would facilitate dialogue between EU studies scholars and those of the ‘new regionalism’. It would also add a further range of comparators to those generally used in EU studies (federal states), and has the potential to expand the scope of those interested in policy learning: might the EU pick up policy and policy style lessons from successes in, for instance, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)?

A third useful project would be exploring the links and feedback loops between three intertwined levels of governance: the global, the regional (by which is meant macro-regions such as the EU, not sub-state regions), and the national. Exploring these links economically, historically and legally as well as politically would generate a more holistic understanding of the context in
which the EU operates, and bring attention to the global back into mainstream EU studies from its near separation in EU ‘foreign policy’ studies.

A fourth useful project would be comparative in a different way: a sustained comparison of different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives on the EU, particularly those that have not yet received much attention in the political science community. To what extent do disciplines such as anthropology, geography, sociology or history generate unique perspectives on the EU that are useful across the disciplinary barrier? Looking at the EU through the lenses of critical, post-modern, or feminist theories—as Manners (2007) points out has successfully been done, albeit not as often as it could be—could we ask helpful questions of the EU which differ from those we tend to ask in the mainstream, such as the role of capital in European integration, or the structuring function of patriarchy? If so, what could this contribute to the debate on important, long-standing issues such as the legitimacy deficit?

Such research may not, of course, interest many EU scholars. Instrumental factors such as the chance to increase citation rates may not be seen as sufficient reward for the investment in interdisciplinary work, particularly if this means abandoning the ‘lone scholar’ model. There may also be gate-keepers in the disciplines most habitually associated with EU studies, frustrating such research either deliberately or inadvertently: the grant proposal reviewer has a position of power unusual for an academic, and in research evaluations such as the United Kingdom’s Research Assessment Exercise, there is a de facto prejudice in favour of disciplinary work/publication. There are, of course, many other worthwhile research projects that could be undertaken in EU studies. However, in order to ensure that the study of the EU maintains its innovative and challenging character, such research as suggested here would certainly provide useful food for thought.

Notes

1 This is of course a play on words regarding Stanley Hoffmann’s famous article (Hoffmann 1966).
2 My purpose here is not to critique the global governance studies literature or to debate the difficulties of comparative work between the European/regional and the global; for some initial thoughts in this regard, see Warleigh-Lack 2007.
3 There are several strands of scholarship investigating the emergence of ‘global governance’, and I cannot do justice to them all here; for an excellent overview, see the essays in Ba and Hoffmann 2005. I would identify five main lines of enquiry, however. Several scholars take a critical, Marxian or neo-Gramscian approach, focusing on the impact of neoliberal ideology in the global financial institutions on the emerging global political system (e.g. Wilkinson and Hughes 2002). Other scholars focus on particular policy areas, and explore how they have been affected by global-level decision-making (e.g. Poku and Whiteside 2004). Still others seek to drill into the proverbial ‘black box’ of the state to ascertain how various branches of ostensibly national governments are developing significant new relationships with homologues across borders, as well as with global-level institutions (e.g. Slaughter 2004). Normative theorists have developed blueprints for a democratic global governance system, often with a distinct whiff of social democracy (e.g. Held 2004). Scholars of regional co-operation have charted the links between these processes and the process of global transformation, often using perspectives inherited from Karl Polanyi (e.g. Hettne and Söderbaum 2000).
4 For honourable exceptions see Held 2004, Kelstrup and Williams 2000.
5 In the following paragraphs I address principally EU political studies, since as a political scientist this is the literature with which I am most familiar.
6 Luke Ashworth (2009) demonstrates that IR has been far more interdisciplinary than this for much of its history, with, for example, greater links to gender studies and geography than has been the case in mainstream EU political studies.
7 This section draws on Warleigh-Lack and Phinnemore 2009.