Europeanising ideologies: Understanding the EU's complex relationship with 'isms'

For much of its history, the EU has been portrayed as an attempt to move beyond the ideological divisions present at the national level. Yet in recent decades, European integration has increasingly been criticised from the standpoint that it functions as an ideological project itself – whether as an expression of neoliberalism, federalism, or other 'isms'. **Jonathan White** *argues that to politicise the EU is not just to critique it: by inserting the EU into a larger, more intelligible history, we can better understand its relation to wider political struggles.*

One of the striking features of recent talk of the 'frugal four' of European Union politics is that it implies ideological disagreement at the core of the integration project. At July's negotiations on the Union's future financing, French President Macron spoke of 'different conceptions of Europe' in play, as some leaders favoured borrowing to invest and others reductions in spending. Some of this talk has felt grandiose: on the basics of the EU's economic model there is generally agreement, and talk of 'frugalism' can dress up parochial actions as something more principled. The leaders of Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden seem notably keen to reduce their own country's contributions. Yet the suggestion of a clash of ideas is intriguing, for it departs from how EU politics tends to be viewed.

The EU has always had a contradictory relation to ideologies. It is historically the expression of two opposing tendencies – the effort to *promote* certain ideologies transnationally, embedding them in new institutions, and the effort to *transcend* ideological conflicts and build a supranational sphere beyond their reach.

That the EU emerged out of the transnational projects of Christian Democrats, Ordoliberals and their neoliberal successors is the message of much recent historiography. Both in its inspiration and its institutional form, it reflected the ideological formations gaining ground in post-War Europe. But just as ideologies were central to European integration, so was the suspicion of them. The EU was from the beginning an *anti*-ideological project. Initiated in an era of heightened anxiety about political isms, notably fascism and communism, European integration was defined in contradistinction. It was about creating a realm beyond ideological division, whether conceived spiritually as a space of Christian unity, or materially as a market detached from political pressures. Just as the EU has been built on ideologies, it has also been built against them.

'Isms' are what the EU's representatives have preferred to attribute to its critics. In many ways the pattern is familiar – ideology tends first to be ascribed to those at the margins. The first modern 'isms' were coined to describe heresies. Emerging in Reformation Europe, they were descriptions of religious doctrines advanced by their critics in the Catholic Church – 'Lutheranism', 'Calvinism', and so on. They denoted patterns of deviant thought and the ways of life said to attach to them, reaffirming by implication the basics of the Catholic faith. The identification of heresy served the identification and protection of orthodoxy.

Likewise in the EU case, the concept of *nationalism* and the spectre of its return has long been a resource for supranationalists. Robert Schuman, one of the initiators of European integration, used the term 'heresy' to describe nationalism on the continent. More recently, the concept of *euroscepticism* has been used to denote deviations from EU support, conflating things whose unity lies mainly in the eye of defenders of the status quo – opposition to a European polity with opposition to its structure and policies, left-wing with right-wing opposition, political critique with socio-cultural aversion, reasoned dislike with an emotional response. The term *populism* has played a similar role in recent years. 'Isms' are what the dissenters engage in; rarely have they been acknowledged as part of the Union itself.

But while for many years the EU was successfully distanced from isms, by the turn of the millennium it was increasingly being criticised as an ideological project itself. The 2005 French and Dutch referenda on an EU constitution brought such claims to the fore, and they have multiplied since. Socialists, Greens and far-right figures have condemned its institutions and policies not just as deficient but *ideological* – as instantiations of neoliberalism, globalism, federalism, racism and other isms. Whereas the EU has long been cast as somehow problematic – as undemocratic, 'sclerotic' and so on – it is now cast as an expression of wider problems. Such critiques renew an idea of politics as the stuff of ideals, collectives and conflicts, things the EU was conceived to depart from.

Why does this matter? Clearly one answer is that some such depictions have much to recommend them. They pose the right questions about the political leanings of the integration project: without ideological categories one fails to understand it. But the willingness to narrate EU politics in these terms is also significant for what it does to EU authority.

An effect of the historic dissociation of the EU from wider ideological struggles has been to make it seem like a political world unto itself. It has been viewed as an order *sui generis*, hard to read in part because it is hard to connect to political currents elsewhere. To associate it with more abstract ideas, by contrast, is to insert it into a larger, more intelligible history. It is to treat it as a symptom of broader tendencies played out in a global space – as one more front in a wider set of conflicts. Moreover, to regard the EU as the expression of an '-ism' is also to suggest the involvement of '-ists'. To impute ideology to the EU is to cast it as susceptible to influence, a fundamental re-characterisation for a legal order long described as an anonymous process responding to rational and functional imperatives. It is to make it a site of contestation.

For institutions designed to exclude rather than accommodate conflict, these dynamics can be highly destabilising, as the Church discovered in early-modern Europe (soon charged for instance with 'papism'). The EU was not set up to be the site of rival views. When isms are attributed back to the seat of power, the claims of its agents are evidently in question – no longer simple truths but the expressions of a tendency. But such moves are the precondition of charting who wields authority and to what end. To politicise the EU is not just to critique it, but to see its politics as the extension of wider struggles.

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