Towards a micro socio-political concept of legitimacy reconsidered in the context of European integration

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Abstract:

Theoretical and empirical research on the political legitimacy of the European Union has been one of the hallmarks of European studies since it burgeoned as an academic discipline after the difficulties surrounding the ratification of the Maastricht treaty in the early nineties. If legitimacy has benefited from sustained attention from both normative political philosophy and empirical research, few sociological studies that seek to bring a “bottom-up” perspective on this matter have been published. Using a brief overview of the literature on European legitimacy as point of departure and pointing to some of its shortcomings, this paper aims to reconsider this issue at a micro-level and from a socio-political perspective, by studying how the European integration process has impacted on the acceptance and the appropriation of the political order by citizens. Indeed, legitimacy refers here to the, more or less conscious, appropriation and acceptance by citizens of the structures of political authority (broadly understood to be both organisational and symbolic) an issue that has not yet been addressed directly by the European literature. Focus groups conducted in Great-Britain, France and Belgium will serve as a microscope to address this issue empirically, but the research design relies both on qualitative and quantitative data and methods. Thus this paper aims to contribute to the question addressed by this workshop, “does European integration theory need sociology?”, by focusing on one research object in particular : European legitimacy.

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Introduction

One of the last major political changes in the History of Europe is without any doubt the construction of what is called now the European Union. Since this entity has the quality of an emerging political system *sui generis*, the issue of its legitimacy has been placed on political and academic agendas. Thus, theoretical and empirical research on ‘European legitimacy’ has been one of the hallmarks of European studies since it burgeoned as an academic discipline after the difficulties of ratification of the Maastricht’s treaty in the early nineties. But if macro theories underlying system’s properties and citizens’ attitudes towards European integration are a well-established subject in European studies (Section I), few socio-political studies have been published that seek to examine the social consequences of the integration process in terms of acceptance and/or appropriation of a new political order by European citizens. Nevertheless, this question has been of central concern in classical historical and political sociology for a long while now. As these theories were conceived of in the specific context of the nation-state, they need to be reconsidered in the perspective of the European integration process (Section II). Empirically, I choose to answer this question by using focus groups organized in Great-Britain, France and Belgium as my ‘microscope’. I will describe the methodological decisions that I made when deciding to analyse legitimacy at the micro-level (Section III). To conclude, the paper underlines the need for more complementary research across classical socio-political sciences and European studies, to which this workshop offers a further contribution. Thus this paper aims to contribute to the question addressed by this workshop, “does European integration theory need sociology ?”, by focusing on one research object in particular : European legitimacy.

I. European Legitimacy in the Literature

A brief overview of the major literature on European legitimacy will provide a useful point of departure for an outline of the requirements of a socio-political approach to it. I will address some significant and sometimes conflicting contributions to the discourse on the issue of legitimacy in the specific context of the European enterprise. To examine the

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2 To different degrees, the following works deal also in part with the issue of European legitimacy from a socio-political perspective : BELOT, 2000 & 2002 ; MEDRANO, 2003 ; SCHEUER, 2005 and are therefore of primary interest to my study. But they do not address directly the question of legitimacy defined as the acception and/or the appropriation of a changing political order. Note that other innovating sociological studies have been conducted on other “European objects”. See among others the following authors : FAVELL, 2007 ; IMIG & TARROW, 2001; KAUPPI, 2005; LE GALES, 2002 ; MERAND, 2006; SMITH, 2004.
alternative models of European legitimacy that have been proposed so far, and to see what is problematic or limiting about them, is undeniably a useful way of entering into this complex question. In the interest of simplicity, I will present them in a ideal-typical form. It seems, moreover, a sensible simplification to divide the literature on European legitimacy into two main traditions: on the one hand the macro perspective that emphasizes formal system properties, on the other hand the micro view that analyses citizens’ attitudes and actions (Weatherford, 1992: 149).

I. 1. Macro Approaches

The first point to be mentioned is that the current uncertainty in the meaning of ‘legitimacy’ is reflected in the theories of integration because there are as many normative conceptions of legitimacy as theories of integration’s process. Moreover, each author tends to analyse principles of legitimation according to his own analytical and normative perspectives, not making these explicit most of the time (Lord & Magnette 2001: 3). As far as I know, five major perspectives exist about the basis on which the legitimacy of the European Union has developed (and is developing) and about the factors that shape it.

Firstly, according to the intergovernmentalist theory, the Union remains an international organisation like any others and, therefore, from the standpoint of citizens, this model of legitimacy could be seen as indirect rather than direct (Wallace, 1993: 95-99). In this view, the legitimacy of the EU derives from the legitimacy of the Member States which are seen as the main actors in Union decision-making process (Milward, 1992; Moravcsik, 2002). These approaches tend to assume that legitimacy exists at the national level but is absent at the European level. However, the absence of EU legitimacy is said to be partly compensated for by the aggregation of the legitimacy of the Member States. Although this account of EU legitimacy fits well with intergovernmental aspects of European institutions, the problem has emerged as integration has proceeded and these assumptions have, therefore, become insufficient to secure EU legitimacy. Indeed, in the post-Maastricht context and with the increasing importance of the majority voting rule, the concept of European legitimacy stemming from the legitimacy of its Member States loses some, but to my view not all, of its significance. As I shall argue in the next section, the legitimacy of the

3 In this part, I will address only the mainstream literature that deals specifically with the issue of European legitimacy as such. Of course, being one of the central questions of political science, the concept of legitimacy has appeared in many others studies that do not focus directly on this issue.
political order in the context of the European Union is an interactive process between the EU and its Member States, which cannot be analysed at one level alone, neither at the European nor the national level. It has to be understood both as direct and indirect in a two-level process. I will pursue this argument further as I argue that national legitimacy ‘frames’ European legitimacy.

The second perspective goes back to the early theorists of integration who see European construction as an elite-driven project and that publics are taught by national elites to perceive it favourably through a spill-over effect (Scheuer 2005 : 7). In keeping with this, Lindberg & Scheingold (1970) used the term of ‘permissive consensus’ to describe a state of European legitimacy in which citizens are passively approving European integration. Since the Maastricht ratification process, this integrationist perspective has been of little use to secure EU legitimacy. The elitist logics of European integration have featured, however, amongst priorities for research ever since (Belot, 2000; 2002). These sociological logics for elite support of the integration process dominated the empirical studies, see for example Inglehart’s work on “cognitive mobilization”.

Thirdly, probably the most prominent attempt to justify the European construction is based on the concept of the ‘rule of law’. This notion was placed on the political agenda by Hallstein and theorised, among others, by Weiler who speaks of ‘formal legitimacy’ that ‘connotes that in the creation of the institution or system all requirements of the law are observed” (Weiler, 1991 : 415). Accordingly, this view is based on the Weberian postulate that the belief in legality, perceived as the readiness to conform with rules that are formally correct and that have been imposed by accepted procedures, is the most common basis of legitimacy in modern societies (Obradovic 1996 : 197). These theorists, generally legal experts or constitutional lawyers, emphasize the principle of the ‘rule of law’ as the main principle guiding European integration. Thus, for them, legitimacy is equivalent to legal validity or legality. This approach covers the traditional Weberian notion of “rational-legal authority” and the tradition of legal positivism which both assume that legality is not merely a necessary but a sufficient condition for legitimacy. But legitimacy derived only from law is widely criticised, despite the frequent reliance on this approach. Indeed, rules cannot justify themselves simply by being rules, but require justifications that go beyond themselves. As underlined by Beetham, “on its own, legal validity is insufficient to secure legitimacy, since the rules through which power is acquired and exercised themselves stand in need of justification … power is
legitimate to the extent that the rules of power can be justified in terms of beliefs shared by both dominant and subordinate” (Beetham 1991 : 17). Along the same line, Lagroye assumes that legitimacy can never be reduced to legality, legitimacy appearing as more complex and more deepened that the so-called ‘formal legitimacy’ (Lagroye 1985 : 397). In sum, although legal validity remains a recognisable element of legitimacy it cannot exhaust it by any means.

The fourth perspective is the utilitarian or instrumental view which stresses the importance of the performance criteria for the legitimacy of the new political system (Rothschild, 1977 ; Schaar, 1969). The utilitarian approach to European legitimacy is based on a neofunctionalist theory of European integration. Neofunctionalists believe that if citizens are satisfied by the performance of the EU, they will transfer their loyalties from national to European level (Haas 1958 ; Scheuer 2005 : 8). Proponents of this instrumental approach emphasize the importance of benefits, in first place economic benefits (Nye, 1971 : 83-84), and of evaluations in shaping people’s view on European legitimacy. In this perspective, Reif and Inglehart (1991 : 7) affirm that “favourable economic payoffs are conductive to – and perhaps even essential to – the process of national and supranational integration”. This approach also has suffered some critics both conceptually and methodologically. Without going too far into the details of these debates, one can argue that this conception of legitimacy is controversial because legitimacy does not equal performance. Speaking in Eastonian words, legitimacy appeals to diffuse support for a political system even, or perhaps even more, in periods of disagreement with its outputs (Obradovic 1996 : 199) and using this time Scharpf’s terms (1998), a system needs both ‘input’ and ‘output’ legitimacy, as alone output legitimacy cannot secure legitimacy’s basis of the political system.

Finally, the parliamentary legitimacy (Lord & Magnette, 2001), argues that the EU requires legitimation by elected parliaments. This approach is linked to one of the most frequently discussed issues of legitimacy in the EU, the so-called ‘democratic deficit’, usually identified as a lack of popular consent through representation (Weiler, 1992 ; Wallace & Smith, 1995). The recommendation for solving the European legitimacy problem is thus to enhance the role played by European Parliament (EP) which is the only directly elected and therefore accountable EU institution. If the EP can be perceived as a repository of liberal democratic legitimacy, the low turnout in EP elections which have been characterised in Reif’s (1984) terms as “second order elections” has resulted in a failure on the part of EP to make a substantial contribution to the legitimacy of the system (Obradovic, 1996 : 203). Others
criticisms have argued that the EP is not constituted like the representative electorate or that it does not have the powers of a true parliament, but as pertinent as these critics may be, they are beyond the purpose of this text. In addition, referenda have been perceived as a channel for legitimizing the EU and this idea is based on the argument that they enlist the people’s consent in the process of polity transformation (Obradovic, 1996: 206). Although the people’s consent is without any doubt an important dimension of legitimacy, on the European level the problem remains that a referendum has still the function of legitimizing national governments and not the EU. This will be a problem as long as the reasons for calling a referendum on EU issues are located in the domestic area, as was illustrated for example by the last referenda on the European Constitution.

I. 2. Micro Empiricist Approaches

From the empiricist perspective, the issue of the legitimacy of the EU has been approached mostly from the perspective of the Weberian conceptualization of ‘beliefs in legitimacy’ and by citizen’s attitudes towards European integration and the European Union through the Eastonian analysis framework that is nowadays a well-established subject in European public opinion research.

Given that Weber’s conceptualization of legitimate domination provides the basis of more contemporary research and discussions on political legitimacy, I should first briefly touch on what Weber meant by legitimacy. Indeed, Weber has been most influential sociologist on the issue of legitimacy and has become the classic reference on this question. Breaking with the political philosophers who regarded as legitimate a system which was established in agreement with certain rules, Weber instead conceptualised it as a social fact: Legitimacy is the phenomenon that people are willing to accept domination on normative grounds, no matter which specific beliefs this acceptance is based on (Weber, 1968: 215-216). This conception differs from the normative philosopher’s search for ideal criteria of legitimacy as power, suggesting rather that a system is legitimate where those involved in this political system believe it to be legitimate (Beetham, 1991: 8). In sum, Weber defined legitimacy in empirical terms as “beliefs in legitimacy” and he approached legitimacy as an empirical, not a normative, matter. Following Weber’s work, several European scholars (Belot, 2000; Scheuer, 2005) have defined legitimacy in empirical terms as “belief in legitimacy”. Because
it is very close to my own understanding of legitimacy I will come back to this conception in the next section.

In addition to the empiricist perspective inspired by Weberian theory, a great deal of recent literature has tended to focus on support for integration as an attempt to deal empirically with European legitimacy. The Eastonian view (Easton 1965, 1975) formulates “legitimacy as an interplay between specific and diffuse support in order to explain why people stay loyal to a political system despite (temporarily) lacking positive outcomes” (Scheuer, 2005 : 9). The explanation for support of integration is to be found in numerous factors usually depending on the normative background of the author. Among these factors, one can find political, economic, historical and cultural factors that shape support for integration on the national level. Nationality and socio-demographic variables remain the strongest factors explaining support (For example: Anderson, 1998; Belot, 2002; Gabel, 1998; Hooghe & Marks, 2005; Niedermayer & Sinnott, 1995; Percheron, 1991). To some extent this latter approach includes both integrationist and utilitarian views and therefore constitutes an interesting attempt to overcome the interest/idea dichotomy. The concern with support has undoubtedly produced many valuable insights, especially in the area of differentiation between diffuse and specific support and objects of support (polity, regime, institutions/actors). It has however, tended to reduce the salience of the concept of legitimacy to what can be seen at best as the visible expression of it. The concept of support has been over-worked as a useful term to capture the reality of the acceptance of a new political order by citizens; a reality which goes beyond the question of citizen support for the European integration and is no static process.

To summarize, since the Maastricht ratification crisis, increasing numbers of normatively and empirically oriented scholars have addressed problems of legitimacy within the EU (Garcia, 1993; Niedermayer & Sinnott, 1995; Schmitt & Thomassen, 1999; Belot, 2000; Scheuer, 2005) and one can assume that most recent work falls into the two broad categories presented above: public opinion (micro) and European political system properties (macro). Without any doubt, debates on European legitimacy have pointed to various factors that prevent the development of legitimation’s attitudes towards the EU: the remoteness of the European level of government from citizens’ every day lives, the
democratic deficit of the European political system, the lack of a single political arena and of a self-conscious European public and so on.

However, our understanding of European legitimacy has suffered three major shortcomings. Firstly, while both approaches discussed above reveal important aspects of the European construction regarding the issue of legitimacy, to my knowledge, neither directly confronts the issue of the acceptance of major change in the political order by citizens; an issue which is of utmost relevance to the question of legitimacy at the individual level. Secondly, despite numerous attempts to study the normative grounds of European legitimacy and to explain variation in levels of support for Europe, there has been little debate between sociologically-inclined scholars and other theorists of European integration. Thus there has been little interaction between normative and empiricist approaches, even if the second are implicitly based on the first. Of course this is not specific to European integration studies as most quantitative empirical analysis tests pre-existing theories, most of which have been developed in the national context. As precious as the theories developed by Easton or Weber, for example, are for understanding European legitimacy, they are nevertheless essentially stato-centric and need to be rethought in this new emerging context. Finally, the empirically developed notion of support is too limiting to be of much use in elucidating the nature and the dynamics of European legitimacy beliefs and is becoming overused and under-theorized. Indeed, the legitimacy of a still emerging polity cannot be assessed by any statist concept and measure. As highlighted by Scheuer (2005: 10), “as a consequence, we have no solid empirical evidence about how European legitimacy emerges, what the current state of European legitimacy is and to which factors it reacts – in short: we are ignorant about the evolution of European legitimacy”. Therefore, in the next section, I propose to reconsider the concept of legitimacy in the specific context of the European Union by addressing some general considerations and hypothesis.

4 If the issue of European identity or identification is linked to the one of European legitimacy, it will not be addressed as such in this paper. See: DUCHESNE, S. et VAN INGELGOM, V., “À propos de la construction d’une communauté politique européenne. Comment les Belges (francophones) et les Français parlent des Européens (de l’Ouest) : sont-ils déjà des « nous » ou encore des « autres » ? ”, « Amours et Désamours entre Européens » : Pour une sociologie politique des sentiments dans l’intégration européenne, Deuxième Congrès SEE, Grenoble, 6 et 7 décembre 2007.
II. Reconsidering European Legitimacy from a micro socio-political perspective

As we have seen, the literature on European legitimacy has focused both on macro approaches emphasizing formal system properties, and also on citizens’ support of the European integration process, attempting to explain why consent has become relevant to it. So far however, the examination of the social consequences of this integration process has been relatively neglected, and this is also the case for the study of legitimacy at the micro-level. As I see it, legitimacy at the micro-level refers to the appropriation and acceptance by citizens, more or less consciously, of the structures of political authority or political order, broadly understood as both organisational and symbolic. Accepting this definition leads me to focus on how the emergence of this new political order has impacted on the social structures of the acceptance of political ‘domination’.

As already underlined, this micro view of European legitimacy has not yet been addressed as such in the literature. Thus, I will first explain what it is meant exactly by legitimacy at the micro-level from a socio-political perspective. Then, I will outline what this all implies in the specific context of a new emerging and changing political order and address the hypotheses underlying my approach. The purpose of this section is thus to reach a few general conclusions and hypotheses regarding legitimacy of the new political order from a micro socio-political perspective.

II.1. Towards a micro socio-political approach to Legitimacy

Most political theories join the common sense when distinguishing between two kinds of citizens’ relation to power: submissive obedience and voluntary obedience. Where the former is characterised by a general attitude of submission resulting from the fear that inspires the regime or from the habit of submitting to it, the latter supposes the consent of the citizens, an acceptation of the power and of its expressions, and thus a legitimate domination. However, if Weber’s conceptualization of legitimate domination provides the background for most contemporary discussions of political legitimacy, in reality the distinction between the two is not easy to establish. Indeed, the term “consent” can

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5 With the exception of Weber, the authors mobilized in this section were not introduced in the review of the literature on European legitimacy because they do not work specifically on the European level or they are not yet part of the so-called “mainstream literature”.
indicate multiples relations between the citizen and power, all marked by different significations. Indeed, the individual can “consent” in the sense that he is resigned to the existence of the political apparatus, he agrees to it by habitus or because he believes in the social necessity of it. He can either perceive the utility of power or its beneficial character as he expects to receive advantages from it⁶, as outlined in the utilitarian approach. He can also support it because he subscribes personally to the beliefs and values delivered by the regime and the leaders, as emphasizes by the Eastonian concept of diffuse support.

As far as the national political community is concerned, the obedience of citizens has come to be taken for granted to a certain extent. Political power is part of the structures of the social organisation that are learnt through the socialisation process and considered by citizens as unavoidable – as its disappearance is simply unthinkable to them. The national political order is there, part of their everyday reality. The acceptance of power and the position of subordinates is facilitated by the interiorization of beliefs in the legitimacy of this relation, whether citizens are conscious of it or not. In other words, citizens accept or even appropriate the existing political order on various grounds. But in the context of European integration, a new political order is emerging which simultaneously changes the current national political orders.

Following Lagroye, François & Sawicki’s classification (2006: 438) which is inspired by the work of Wright (1976), it seems sensible to distinguish between three ideal-types of citizens. Firstly, the consenters: they intentionally adopt the rules of social and political life, they consent in an active way as they are interested in political life, they have some knowledge of it and even feel competent to participate regardless of their political preferences. Secondly, the assenters: they manifest an approval without any commitment, participation and/or interest towards political activities, to some extent they can be seen as indifferent to “politics”. Finally, the dissenters: they are conscious of the rules of social and political life but refuse them and have in common with the consenters their interest for political life.

Thus, the approval of a political order, the acceptance of the leaders and the regime and obedience towards political power, correspond to dispositions that are different in essence.

⁶ S.M. Lipset (1962) distinguishes strongly between supports resulting from the “efficiency” of the regime and legitimacy. Without making a so rigid distinction, it is however important not to confuse efficacy and legitimacy.
and in intensity (Lagroye, François & Sawicki, 2006 : 439) but which all contribute to the
legitimacy of the political order. As a result, both passive and active forms of acceptance
are relevant to the legitimacy of a political order. Indifference, defined as the lack of
interest for “political life”, is not a phenomenon necessarily nor profoundly negative
towards the legitimacy of a political order, as long as it states passive acceptance of political
domination. Regarding passive acceptation of the political order, it is important not to
underestimate the importance of beliefs, however diffuse or unconscious they may be.

Regarding the issue of indifference, Braud (1991) refers to an “optimum of indifference
towards politics” and argues that dangers to the serenity of pluralist democracies come
from the excessive influence of dissidents or from the presence of too many apathetic
citizens, i.e. assenters⁷. The consolidation of the democratic political order relies on a
relative equilibrium between the consenters and dissenters on one hand, groups that play
an active role in the dynamic of the political system, and the assenters on the other hand, a
group that favours the forces of inertia (Braud, 1991). Of course in pluralist democracies,
citizens are not politicised all the time with the same intensity, as there is a rotation
between highly politicised times, for example elections or referendum, and dead times. This
means that the three citizen profiles presented above must not be taken as static categories.
They will be a function of the degree of politicization, which varies according to the
context and to the issue addressed - bearing in mind that an individual’s direct experience
of an issue is also a factor of politicization.

Thus, the legitimacy of political power can be defined as “the product of attitudes and beliefs of
unequal intensities, having diverse significations depending on the social group ; it ensures the political regime
and its leaders different kinds of support, ranging from the habit of consensual obedience to the mobilisation
of particular groups for the defence of a threatened power. It ensures an acceptance of the political
domination by the social agents upon which this domination is exercised ”(Lagroye, François and
Sawicki, 2006 : 440-441)⁸.

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⁷ A similar « debate » took place in the United States following the work of R. Dahl in the sixties.
⁸ My own translation of : « Le légitimité du pouvoir politique apparaît alors comme le produit d’attitudes et de
croyances d’intensité inégale, dotées de significations variées selon les groupes sociaux ; elle assure à un
régime politique et aux dirigeants des soutiens variés, allant d’une docilité consentie habituelle à la mobilisation
de groupes particuliers pour la défense d’un pouvoir menacé. Elle garantit une acceptation de la domination
politique par les agents sociaux sur lesquels cette domination s’exerce ». 
II. 2. Reconsidering European Legitimacy: General Considerations and Preliminary Research Hypotheses

The issue is now to assess the significance of the changes in the political orders that are emerging with the European integration process in terms of this micro socio-political perspective of legitimacy. In order to respond to this problem, some general considerations must be outlined and some preliminary research hypotheses advanced.

Firstly, as already suggested to a certain extent by the intergovernmental approach, the nation-state remains the prime reference point for the formation of political attitudes (Anderson 1998) and the locus of political socialisation. Thus, it seems that what is usually called the “legitimacy of the EU” cannot be assessed alone. It should be understood both as direct and indirect in a two-level process and moreover has to be perceived as the extension and/or transformation of the acceptance of the national political order. An illustration of this can be found in the French ratification procedure of the so-called ‘European Constitution’; a situation in which this two-level process was clearly visible. National and European political elites now recognize the necessity of a direct legitimation process, as revealed by the use of the referendum. However once this direct legitimacy runs into trouble, as was the case after the French ‘no’, the emerging political order can still rely on indirect legitimacy. Indeed, the process has continued on through the legislative procedure, relying on national acceptance of political domination without much contention from French citizens.

Therefore, it seems that the European integration process has not created a distinct European political order in the eyes of citizens, but rather it has modified their current political orders. Following Delmotte’s work on Norbert Elias’ theory (Delmotte, 2002; 2007), when regarding European integration I believe we need to distinguish two key hypotheses: on one hand, the hypothesis of the rupture with other forms or levels of political integration, and on the other hand, the hypothesis of a simple transposition, on a larger scale, of the processes that took place along the statonational integration. Thus, what is now called the European Union is considered as having an impact on the lives of
European citizens and therefore to have transformed their common political order. This latter now stands more than ever in need of legitimacy⁹.

Secondly, regarding the interest citizens have for European affairs and their feelings of political competence, one can argue that a European “cens caché” exists, to use Gaxie’s term (1993). To some extent, the Eurobarometer data offer a first insight into this problem as of 2005. This data suggests, for example, that more than a third of the citizens didn’t know that the EU counts twelve countries and the same proportion affirms not “being interested at all” in Europe, generally speaking (Fondation Robert Schuman, 2005). These figures clearly stress the persistent indifference and the detachment of large fractions of the European population of Member States regarding the EU. This detachment has been discussed by both the sociological logic of elitist support and by the “cognitive mobilization” thesis of Inglehart.

Therefore, following others, I postulate that the proportion of indifferent citizens, which I have called the assenters, is even more greater regarding European politics than national politics. Indeed, Braud distinguishes between three faces of indifferences : the indifference by distance, the indifference by insufficient comprehension and the indifference by defection (1991 : 30-37). One can easily understand that the two former kinds of indifference are reinforced when considering the European sphere as it can be perceived as more distant and complex in the eyes of ordinary citizens than the national sphere. Indifference by defection is reflected in the weakening of the belief that the system offers any opportunity for the improvement of the citizen’s condition. This feeling covers two realities : the conviction that it is impossible to have an impact on rulers’ decisions and/or on the conviction that even the rulers are powerless to resolve citizens’ problems. Referring to Braud’s “optimum of indifference towards politics”, it seems reasonable to argue that the “optimum of indifference” of the changing political order has been perturbed by the Europeanization process; assenters or Euro-apathetics and dissenters or Euro-sceptics, being particularly present. The high levels of Euro-apathy and Euro-scepticism are currently the major forms of opposition to further European integration, the former being passive and the latter active (Delmotte, 2007).

⁹ Once again legitimacy is defined here as the appropriation and acceptance by citizens, more or less consciously, of the structures of political authority or political order, which are broadly understood as both organisational and symbolic.
Thirdly, assessing country differences in levels of EU support and attributing these to contextual factors such as economic power or duration of membership, for example, assumes in practice that the structure of national legitimacy is the same. However, I believe that different national publics may have different structures of perception and understanding of the EU, and that these are framed by national legitimacies which are not necessarily similar (Belot, 2000; Scheuer 2005; Medrano, 2003).

Being only too aware that what makes power legitimate in one society may differ from what makes it legitimate in others, I emphasize that people’s attitudes and behaviour toward political objects depend on how they represent or frame them (Medrano, 2003). Using Medrano’s terms, I assume that ‘frames’ vary across sociodemographic, political and national groups and so do the grounds for compliance and therefore the legitimacy of this changing political order. The rise of ‘contentious politics’ as a field of study has also concluded that European citizens are Europeanized to differing degrees depending upon national contexts (Imig and Tarrow, 2001). To summarize, the structures of perception and understanding of the EU are of primary interest in studying the acceptance of a political order and are framed; these ‘frames’ differ across sociodemographic and national groups.

Finally, the EU is not fixed but is constantly evolving, making the EU a “floating referent” (Inglehart 1970), furthermore it is still an emerging and therefore a changing political order. This “floating referent” also introduces uncertainty and probably insecurity in the acceptance of the former political order, thereby reinforcing the part of indifference by defection among ordinary citizens. The changing political order is perceived as complex, distant and uncertain. Therefore also, the national level remains of primary interest as it offers its citizens a structure of comprehension and acceptance (or not) of the changing political order.

These are some general considerations and research hypotheses that need to be addressed when reconsidering the issue of ‘European legitimacy’. In the next section, I will present my research design using focus groups as a ‘microscope’ to rethink the issue.
III. Research Design: the very first outcomes of the use of focus groups as a microscope to answer macro questions

We begin this section with a citation from Guiraudon, who emphasizes that “the lesson to be drawn … is the need for more systematic data-rich comparative projects that combine qualitative and quantitative methods and do not hesitate to answer macro questions with a microscope” (Guiraudon, 2006:5). Indeed, I choose to answer a macro question, the question of so-called “European legitimacy”, by using focus groups as my microscope. This section describes the methodological decisions I made when deciding to analyse legitimacy at the micro-level. I will then present the research design and the very first results.

With regards to the existing literature on European legitimacy, presented in Section 1, I chose to address this question at the micro-level – emphasizing citizen’s attitudes and actions rather than formal system properties. Indeed, legitimacy is a multilevel concept “as it links global attributes of the political system with the orientations of individual citizens” (Weatherford, 1992: 150). Thus, I envisage addressing macro questions about legitimacy with an individual-level methodology, the use of “focus groups”. In this I hope to gain a better understanding of legitimacy, reconsidered in the specific context of an emerging and therefore changing political order. Both my conceptual framework and my methodology are borrowed from the field of sociology.

The qualitative analysis of focus groups based on CAQDAS and ALCESTE methodologies will serve for the formulation of theory which could then be further tested on quantitative data. Indeed, as the attitudes and the perceptions of citizens are framed (Medrano, 2003), it seems to me that the acceptance and/or appropriation (or not) of this changing political order cannot be fully understood directly and uniquely in reference to traditional comparative methods of quantitative analysis, which all assume that everybody perceives the European integration process and the European Union in the same way. Thus, the analysis of the focus group will be used to develop a *Grounded theory* of legitimacy that aims

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10 The systematic qualitative analysis of the groups is currently under work. So the first outcomes presented here result from a first “impressionist” analysis of the groups. This paper does not engage the other members of the team in any way.

to review the concept at the micro level and from a socio-political perspective which will be then applied to the Eurobarometers data. Indeed, in spite of all the critics that could be levelled at them, I still believe that these quantitative data represent a very useful tool for European studies if correctly understood and enriched by the use of qualitative data.

Turning now to the design of the research, the focus groups\textsuperscript{12} were realised in three countries: Belgium, France and Great-Britain. The participants met for an extended period of three hours including refreshment and socialising, and they discussed a range of questions regarding Europe: the experience of ‘being European’, the power structure of Europe, the question of Turkey’s possible entry into the EU and the attitudes of their country’s major political parties to Turkish entry. The groups were deliberately constructed to include participants who were socially homogeneous but politically heterogeneous\textsuperscript{13}. So in each country we convened: two groups of participants with occupations such as cleaners, drivers, shop assistants and kitchen workers (identified for the purposes of the project as working class), two with occupations such as office workers, salespersons, health support workers (white collar), and two groups with university or higher education and jobs such as consultants, engineers, office managers, or journalists (professional-manager). In addition, in each country, we convened two groups of ‘activists’, the idea being that we expected our activists to be familiar with the facts and understand the controversies surrounding the European Union and European politics. In addition we expected them to have relatively well formed and stable attitudes about these controversies and to be used to engaging in political debate and argument. The research was thus designed to enable three kinds of comparison: between countries, both within and across countries between social groups and between politically involved people and ordinary citizens.

Confirming the results of prior studies by Medrano, among others, our first analysis of our initial results of participants’ attitudes to and understandings of European citizenship,

\textsuperscript{12} The data were collected as part of an international project led by Sophie Duchesne: “Citizens talking about Europe. French, British and Belgian Citizens in Political Discussion”, in which Sciences Po Paris (CEVIPOF), the University of Oxford (Department of Politics and International Relations and New College) and the University of Louvain (CPC) took part. The teams member are: S. Duchesne, F. Haegel and G. Garcia (Sciences Po Paris); E. Frazer (University of Oxford); and A.-P. Frognier and V. Van Ingelgom (University of Louvain). For further details on the project please refer to the following website: \url{http://erg.politics.ox.ac.uk/projects/discussion_political/index.asp} or read DUCHESNE, S. & VAN INGELGOM, V. (2008), Recherche en cours: « Comment les discussions deviennent politiques, lorsque des Français, des Anglais ou des Belges francophones parlent de l’Europe », Politique européenne, 24, Automne 2008.

\textsuperscript{13} By the time of the redaction of this text, I’m working with G. Garcia on an article which underlines the specific difficulties and challenges regarding the construction of focus groups and the qualitative comparative analysis. This article deals with both question of social homogeneity and political heterogeneity.
suggest ostensible country differences. The Belgian groups speak from a taken for granted position within the EU and focus on familiar dilemmas of a multi-level institutional system in which political authority is complex and shared. The French groups also take the EU for granted but do not make any clear distinction between it and the national level. The British groups on the other hand speak very clearly from outside the EU, focusing above all on the questions of sovereignty and national identity. These very first outcomes reveal a promising comparison.

Moreover, we expected the magnitude and detail of the differences to vary between social classes. As far as our initial impressionist analysis is concerned, it seems that in some respects the differences between the working class groups are magnified compared to those between the activists and the managers; in other respects they are less. From our observation of the groups, it seems quite obvious that citizens perceive the emerging and changing political order, as an extension of the existing national political order. Thus they mobilise, more or less consciously, “national legitimacies” to appropriate and ‘frame’ the structures, both institutional and symbolic, of this political order. A possible exception to this are the militant and professional/manager categories.

Finally, it was interesting to note that in our groups the referendum was not as mobilized as we expected it to be. This was particularly true for the French groups, even though the groups were organized less than a year after the French referendum took place. The quasi absence of the referendum in the discourse of our participants, with the exception of the militants, combined with the weak conflict around the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty by the French Parliament, reinforce my argument of the underlying unity of a political order and of a moment of stronger politicization and they contradict the thesis of a ‘European politization’ of the citizens that began with the referendum.
Conclusions: the Need for a micro socio-political approach of Legitimacy

This paper aimed to contribute to the question addressed in this workshop “does European integration theory need sociology?” by focusing on one research object in particular: European legitimacy. As underlined in Sections One and Two, the focus of the “sociologist” is quite different from that of the legal expert, the philosopher or even the integration theorist. Thus, the concern is not about solving legal disputes or normative dilemmas about power, but it is rather to understand how citizens accept or not a new political order or, as underlined by Medrano in his paper’s introduction: “what we still need, however is an exploration of the ways in which the emerging institutional order in Europe has impacted on this society” (Medrano, 2008 : 4).

In this text, I fundamentally argued that the question of how citizens accept (or not) major changes in their political order is of most relevance to the issue of legitimacy, and has not yet been addressed as such in European literature. This absence can be understood by the conjunction of two factors: the lack of debate between sociologically-inclined scholars and other theorists of European integration and the stato-centricism that has characterized major socio-political works on legitimacy.

These shortcomings warrants the micro socio-political approach presented above. Indeed, studying legitimacy from a micro socio-political perspective seems a particularly convenient way of opening the debate between sociologically-inclined scholars and other theorists of European integration. Crossing the paths between these two disciplines may be both reciprocally useful and potentially enriching in our move towards a new understanding of the concept of legitimacy itself, as it is reconsidered in the context of the European integration. The so-called ‘European legitimacy’ studies stand in need for systematically collected qualitative data on people’s understanding and acceptance (or not) of their changing political order and therefore, methodologies and concepts borrowed from the field of sociology will be of much use. In short, here also the lesson to be drawn is the need for more systematic comparative projects that combine qualitative and quantitative methods and do not hesitate to answer macro questions with a microscope …
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