

2

THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL COMPLEX: EUROPE AS NETWORK AND EMPIRE?

Introduction

A new complex and dynamic social formation appears to be emerging in Europe in the early 21st century significantly stimulated by the EU and processes of Europeanisation associated with it. However, even after a generation this development remains in its early stages. Its current outlines are complex and changeable, and its future outlines are difficult to discern and speculate about. Nevertheless this development needs to be given more attention and be better understood than it often is by a range of relevant social science and humanities disciplines, and not least by the discipline of sociology which has, on the whole, given it only marginal attention for far too long. Later we discuss some of the core areas where processes of reconstruction have been occurring. So we consider the changing balance of power and authority between nation-states and the EU in fields such as competition, employment and social policy, and the general emergence of a multi-form European welfare capitalism in Chapters 6–8. However, in this chapter (and also see Chapter 9) we aim to reflect more generally and theoretically on the nature of social change and reconstruction in contemporary Europe and the challenges it poses for the development of a sociology of Europe.

The development of the EU is an historically unprecedented process. Ex-European Commission President Jacques Delors is credited with referring to it as an ‘unidentified political object’ (or more colloquially here, a UFO, an ‘unidentified flying object’).¹ However, the UFO’s progress is uncertain and its future is unclear. The challenges to be faced in developing a sociological perspective on and interpretation of this social formation are particular to its new and emergent complexity, dynamism and fragility. There is a need for a developed sociological specialisation in relation to Europe for a number of reasons: for its own sake, as a matter of intrinsic interest to a discipline concerned to renew itself in new times, to provide an integrative perspective

and discourse to complement and help connect up the growing multiplicity of social science disciplinary angles in European studies, and also normatively and politically to inform growing national and cross-European political debates and policy-making in relation to the EU. Attempting to address these challenges is ambitious, even if (as in this book) we approach the field selectively, and even if we make the effort (which we must) to set our expectations about what can be achieved at a realistically low and provisional level.

The discipline of sociology, together with related social theory and social policy analysis, emerged from late 19th-century European intellectual culture in response to the theoretical and practical challenges posed by the development, institutionalisation and maturation of nation-state-based societies, particularly in Western Europe. As some have commented, it developed on the basis of a 'methodological nationalism'.² In considering the project of and possibilities for a sociology of Europe, it is perhaps some consolation to note that sociological progress can be made outside the traditional intellectual constraints of this mindset, for instance in the current sociology of 'global society' and 'globalisation'. This attempt to understand social formations and processes of even greater complexity than Europe has been engaged with much energy and some success over the last decade or more.³ In addition, the academic caravan of the social scientific and sociological analysis of globalisation has also (albeit as an outrider) generated some useful contributions to the study of Europe, concerning the profound implications and accelerating impacts of globalisation on the EU and its member states.⁴

With this background and these provisos in mind this chapter can be ambitious. Indeed, it needs to be to do justice to the potential of the field of the sociology and social theory of Europe. Its primary aim is to identify and explore in outline some key aspects of the sociological imagination that are needed in, and underpin, the emergence of this field and that, in my view, need to be further developed in order for the field to make progress. As part of this aim it considers two useful models both for Europe as a social complex and for helping to 'identify' the EU UFO sociologically, namely those of Europe and the EU as a network society and as an empire (albeit a new and aspirationally benign type of empire).

Europe and the Sociological Imagination: Historical, Spatial and Ethico-political Aspects

As is well known, the seminal notion of 'the sociological imagination' was first introduced into sociological and general intellectual discourse by the post-war American sociologist C. Wright Mills in 1959 in his book under this title.⁵ Mills' aim was to offer an alternative to the two views which dominated the mainstream sociology of his day. One view, which was associated with the social theorist Talcott Parsons, emphasised a view of society as a self-reproducing and

self-equilibrating ‘structural functional’ system, populated by individuals understood as socialised role players. Its view of this kind of sociological perspective and discourse, which was necessary to address these realities, was that it needed to involve abstract and complex conceptualisation, a view Mills criticised as ‘grand theory’. Another view was associated with empirical social research traditions and emphasised the importance of methodological rigour in the commitment to data-gathering. This view was disinterested in theorising about large-scale social systems and Mills criticised it as ‘abstracted empiricism’.

Mills’ alternative view of sociology and sociological inquiry was theoretically pragmatic and methodologically ‘realist’. It was concerned with the study of ‘real world’ social organisations, such as corporations, bureaucracies and elites, operating in particular national societies (in his case mainly the USA), by means of an array of research designs and methods to be determined by the intellectual craft and professionalism of the sociological researcher and analyst according to the situation. This view was also normatively relevant and engaged, and potentially politically critical, as much of the prejudices (literally pre-judgements) that were often built into traditional, mainstream and ‘commonsense’ attitudes to the social world, as of more explicit and ideological and politically powerful perspectives on society. In addition, and to support this version of sociology as realist and engaged, he emphasised the importance for the discipline of an historical perspective. Mills’ views were highly relevant to the situation of post-war Western sociology. Sociology has undoubtedly changed over the decades but his advocacy of the ‘sociological imagination’ continues to retain some relevance for the discipline in the 21st century. This is particularly so, in my view, in relation to the development of a sociology of Europe.

The ‘grand theory’ problem he criticised, while it no longer takes a particularly Parsonian form, remains a problem in the influence of some philosophical, political and aesthetic discourses on sociological work, particularly in the late 20th-century moment of ‘post-modernism’. Functional conceptualisations of social systems, while appearing to lose influence within sociology, tended to diffuse into other social sciences, and migrate on the one hand into critical and neo-Marxist perspectives, and on the other into governmental organisations’ policy discourses and the operational reflexivity required by their managerial and democratic accountability processes. The ‘abstracted empiricism’ phenomenon he criticised remains a problem, now enhanced within and outside the academy by computerisation, the development of an ‘information society’, and the rise of data-gathering and analysis as key aspects of the operation of governmental organisations. These problems and Mills’ promotion of a realist and engaged sociology remain relevant. So, too, does his advocacy of the historical imagination.

Mills' sociological imagination, in principle, aims to contextualise and guide a version of the practice of sociological research and analysis which is epistemologically realist, theoretically pragmatic, methodologically pragmatic and comparativist, and politico-morally engaged. The main components of this imagination in Mills' version are (explicitly) an historical imagination, and, more implicitly, an ethico-political aspect of the imagination. The former is a way of referring to a capacity to imagine particularly alternative polities to one's own in the present. This is a capacity which is promoted particularly by use of the comparative method, but which is absolutely imperative in relation to past societies. The latter refers to his advocacy of moral engagement and critique as a key dimension of his version of the sociological vocation, whether or not of the discipline *per se*. In my view, each of these elements of the sociological imagination are relevant to the development of a new sociology of Europe. This was indicated earlier in terms of the importance given to an historical sociology perspective in the framework developed for the discussion in this book (Chapter 1). This view also underlies the line of argument pursued in this chapter.

However, to make the theme of the 'sociological imagination' even more relevant to our contemporary concerns, I suggest that we also need to recognise a social spatial imagination and to use this in the context of considering the nature and potential of a sociology of Europe. This is very relevant to, first, the need to complement the historical imagination's address to the ontological category of social time with an equivalent address to the ontological category of social space. Secondly, it is relevant to the need to develop an integrative perspective and discourse in a renewal of the discipline of sociology in order to address what are claimed to be 'post-societal' social realities in a 'post-societal' era.

The relevance and use of the historical imagination will be illustrated throughout this book, particularly in the historical sociological approach to Europe taken in Parts 1 and 2. In addition, we will also touch throughout on aspects relevant to an exercise of spatial and ethico-political imaginations. Spatial aspects are involved in the discussions of Europe's continental 'common ground', Europe as a 'theatre of war', and 'Western' location in historical and global geopolitical and cultural relations in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.⁶ Ethico-political aspects involving assessing Europe's possible commitment to common values and principles of 'social' or welfare rights or to 'cosmopolitan' values are discussed in Chapters 8 and 9 respectively.

To set the scene for this in this chapter we point to the relevance of the spatial imagination in the sociology of Europe by discussing why and how European society and the European complex might be in terms of such notions as spaces and places, networks and flows. Also we point to the relevance of the ethico-political imagination by discussing why and how

the EU might be visualised as, among other things, a potential ‘empire’ and ‘superpower’.

Imagining the European Social Complex I: Networks and European Society

The concept of a network typically refers to a complex system composed of a multiplicity of hubs or nodes which are linked and between which a variety of particular kinds of things move or flow. Networks offer an imaginative visualisation of social space which is different from more familiar concepts and analogies, such as ‘hierarchies’, ‘positions’ and ‘strata’, traditionally associated, for instance, with the analysis of class and power relations. The latter imply ‘vertical’ and unidirectional relationships. The former, while not at all incompatible with ‘verticality’, tend initially at least to emphasise a more ‘horizontal’ and interconnective understanding. Networks can be said to require an understanding of society as socio-spatial to a greater degree than other analogies. First, their horizontality as well as their verticality, and the multidirectionality of the flows within them, imply a view of the society in which they exist as being a kind of (socio-spatial) container. Secondly, within their operation they can be said to create and reproduce space, in that they involve a differentiation and a structuring of space into a system of places, the places of the network’s hubs, links and flows.

Generally, the concept and analogy of ‘network’ has grown in importance and use in contemporary sociology and social science in parallel to, and connected with, two major vectors of structural social change. First, there is the increasing importance of the role of computers and the internet – which is to say, intrinsically complex communicational networks – in contemporary social life.⁷ Secondly, there is the need to model the increasing complexity in contemporary social formations due to the embedding of national societies within the process of globalisation (e.g. Urry 2003). Currently there are numerous different perspectives highlighting networks. These include ‘actor network theory’, which, among other things, pursues epistemological questions and concerns about the ‘social construction of reality’ originally derived from studies in the sociology of science across a great range fields. They also include ‘social network analysis’, which, among other things, is concerned to apply the visualisation and method of network mapping across a great range of fields.⁸ Some of these are at too high a level of theoretical abstraction of methodological formalism to be particularly applicable to Europe *per se* (although of course in principle they can be adapted for use in this agenda as in any other field). However, some versions of network as an analytical tool and perspectives could be said to be of particular relevance to the understanding of Europe. In addition, they illustrate the relevance of analysing social space into

the three social dimension-based forms indicated above. There are at least three main relevant network concepts we can usefully consider here: urban and transport networks, political and economic networks, and communicational networks. Analyses of these networks have usually been developed in distinct disciplinary literatures. However, occasionally, as for instance under the banner of analysis of ‘network society’, they have either been juxtaposed or attempts have been made to link them in more coherent ways.⁹ We should conceptualise and address each type of network as operating in and as producing enviroing, organisational and communicational socio-spaces and as having the full range of socio-spatial characteristics. We return to this integrative socio-spatial theme later. Nevertheless, analytically, different types of network have particular relationships to different forms of social space. They can be seen to illustrate and instantiate these different forms, as we can briefly observe here.

The category of ‘urban and transport networks’ refers to the territorial and material as well as social aspects of the localisation of populations, including residence, the pattern of interrelationships between population centres, and the systems of mobility operating within and between population centres. So they include the structures of cities and their zones and the pattern of interrelationships between sets of cities, together with the various transport systems operating to move people and things within and between cities. This category of networks, in both their personally used materiality and also their collectively objective materiality, illustrates the notion of the ‘enviroing’ form of social space discussed earlier. Along with communicational space (below), they are particularly relevant to understanding societies’ cultural dimension. In a European context they are the subject of various kinds of public interests and politics in planning and policy-making relating to a wide range of fields, such as housing, urban and regional development, transport and tourism, from local to EU levels. European Union ‘spatial’ policy relates to some of these fields and arguably this has both Europeanising (standardising and linking) aspects and also what can be called ‘Euro-localising’ aspects (differentiating and identifying places as locations within a specifically ‘European’ space). The EU’s spatial policy has a Europeanising influence, for instance, in relation to such things as cross-border and trans-European air, road and rail transport systems, particularly major linking bridges and high speed rail systems.¹⁰ The EU has a more ‘Euro-localising’ influence in relation to such tourism-related processes as the annual cross-Europe inter-city competition for ‘European City of Culture’ status.¹¹

The category of ‘political and economic networks’ refers to systems of action within and between the spheres of governance and power on the one hand, and those of management and the market on the other. This category of networks illustrates the notion of the ‘organisational’ form of social space discussed earlier, which is particularly relevant to understanding societies’ political and economic dimensions. In the European context, analysts have

proposed that the EU should be understood as a 'network state' and 'networked polity'.¹² Castells' analysis of the EU as a 'network state' is based on his conception of the dominating influence of globalisation in the contemporary period, which, because of the importance of information technology in it, he refers to as 'the information age'. Globalisation occurs through 'globally enacted networks of exchange of capital, commodities and information', this shapes Europe and European integration, which is both 'a reaction to the process of globalisation and its most advanced expression'.¹³ In European societies, the EU and its associated Europeanisation tends to be perceived as a vehicle of economic globalisation and this provokes defensive reactions prioritising national and regional interests and identities as against a common European interest and identity. The EU's institutions and policy-making processes reflect these tensions in their 'growing complexity and flexibility'.¹⁴

Keohane and Hoffman (1991) proposed that the EU 'is essentially organised as a network that involves the pooling and sharing of sovereignty rather than the transfer of sovereignty to a higher level'.¹⁵ Castells comments: 'This analysis ... brings European unification closer to the characterization of institutional neo-medievalism; that is a plurality of overlapping powers.' He argues that the EU institutions comprise a 'new form of state', 'the network state'. This is 'a state characterised by the sharing of authority ... along a network' (which) 'by definition, has nodes, not a centre'. The nodes include at least three leading EU member states – Germany, France and the UK – together with the various EU institutions. Although there are asymmetries between them, 'the various nodes of the European network state are dependent on each other'. 'The network state, with its ... variable sovereignty, is the response of political systems to the challenges of globalisation'.¹⁶

An alternative but closely related network-type concept is that of 'multi-level governance' (Bache and Flinders 2005). This concept attempts to register and understand new and more complex forms of governance emerging in contemporary political and economic systems. On the one hand, these developments involve, within nation-states, an increasing division of labour between state and non-state (civil society and private sector) actors. On the other hand, they involve, beyond nation-states, the increasing influence and penetration of international and supra-national systems of law and policy-making, including (and most particularly) the EU¹⁷ in nation-state affairs. Marks' early understanding of multi-level governance in a European context explicitly visualised it in network terms as a situation in which 'supranational, national, regional, and local governments are enmeshed in territorially overarching policy networks'.¹⁸ Commenting on this, Bache and Flinders implicitly acknowledge the relevance of socio-spatial as well as network conceptualisation when they observe that this concept of multi-level governance evidently 'contained both vertical and horizontal dimensions. "Multi-level" referred to the increased interdependence of governments operating at different territorial

levels, while “governance” signalled the growing interdependence between governments and non-governmental actors.”¹⁹

Finally, the category of ‘communication networks’ refers to the socio-spatial imagination and visualisations produced and propagated in and between societies through the processes of discourse. In particular, the organisational network of politics provides the basis for the constructions of socio-spatial meanings in such fields as policy discourses, and more generally in the contextual phenomenon of ‘the public sphere’. In addition, this category of networks also refers to information and communication technology, which we can refer to as the ‘media-sphere’. As seen earlier, this figures strongly in Castells’ analysis of the ‘information age’, ‘network society’ and Europe as a ‘network state’. For the purposes of this discussion, the media sphere can be taken to refer to the material reality and personal usage of media technology. Thus it points us both to the complexity of this field in contemporary society and also to the profound transformations currently ongoing within it in relation to the diffusion and social penetration of digital technology and the internet in domestic, production and mobile social settings. This category of networks illustrates the notion of the ‘communicational’ form of social space discussed earlier, and (along with environing space, above) is particularly relevant to understanding societies’ cultural dimension. This aspect of European social space and network processes is the subject of various Europe-wide developments and EU-level policies. The Europe-wide development of the EU’s single market project enables and incentivises both the mass diffusion of marketing images and consumption aspirations and also cross-border organisation of media and marketing industries. EU-level policies relating to such fields as ‘television without frontiers’, ‘the information society’ and ‘the knowledge-based society’ promote such communication-based versions of European social space as a common ‘media space’, a ‘research area’, and so on.²⁰

Understanding the social realities of Europe, the EU and Europeanisation, as argued throughout this book, requires that main societal dimensions and their dynamics should not be addressed in isolation, but should rather be considered in their interrelationships, including in terms of their implications for and connections with deep structures such social space. The main types of network developing in Europe imply distinct social spatialisation structures and processes (see above). However, the same goes for them as for social dimensions. We need to attempt to visualise Europe in socio-spatial terms. That is, on the one hand, it is an intrinsically complex and dynamic social space, an overarching arena for the main networks, both for their intra-network elements of places, links and flows and their inter-network links. On the other hand, it is in not only a common space but in some respects a particular and singular social place. This socio-spatial way of experiencing and conceptualising European society is relevant to understanding, among other things, the nature, potential and limitations of European identity in the contemporary

period. This theme recurs in recent studies in the sociology of such varied socio-spatial phenomena as the public sphere and also migration in Europe.²¹

Imagining the European Social Complex 2: Empire, Space and Power

The second major new paradigm or perspective for understanding Europe and the EU, which has been emerging in contemporary socio-political analysis, is that of 'empire'.²² As with the network paradigm, the empire paradigm contains socio-spatial implications and, as a contribution to the development of a sociology of Europe and the EU, it also can be said to illustrate the spatial imagination.²³ The idea of seeing contemporary Europe as some kind of empire is a strange-seeming and potentially provocative idea. In the 21st century we are supposed to live in an era of modernity which, among other things, is decisively post-colonial and post-imperial. Contemporary nation-states typically define themselves constitutionally in ways which appear to make imperialism illegal, morally illegitimate and politically inconceivable. Of course it was not always so, as we will see in the historical sections of this book. And indeed, it is impossible to understand European society without reference to the role of empires in its history both in pre-modern and modern periods. This is not least in terms of the living legacies of empire represented by the presence in most European nations of a diversity of ethnic communities often originally deriving from intra-imperial and ex-colonial patterns of migration. Nevertheless, having gone through numerous often bloody and conflict-ridden processes of decolonisation and 'national liberation', many within living memory, the notion that the imperial still cannot be expunged from the characterisation of contemporary European societies and the social formation of Europe as a whole is, as Munkler, observes, a 'surprising return of empire in the post-imperial age'.²⁴

In what follows the focus is on the sense in which the empire concept is particularly relevant to the socio-spatial imagination of Europe. Some types of and perspectives on empire are outlined and the ideas of some of the main contemporary proponents of the empire analogy are considered. The discussion concludes by considering the overlap rather than the distinction between empire and network. Is a convergent view possible and useful here in terms of contributing to and helping to guide the future sociology of Europe research agenda?

Empires: types and perspectives

For our purposes we can assume that there are three types of empire. Two of them we have noted earlier, namely pre-modern and modern empires. These

can be differentiated in terms of the world regional location, periodisation and general societal characteristics of the modernisation process. Modern empires emerged on the basis of a platform of developed nation-states in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries in particular. They used their colonies systematically to fuel the development of industrial capitalist economies in their imperial heartlands. They controlled their colonies politically by means of literate and rationalistic bureaucracies, and militarily by technologically enhanced oceanic and military power. They dominated them culturally and ideologically by complex combinations of religious, scientific and individualist worldviews. Pre-modern empires, by contrast, whether in Europe or elsewhere around the world, tended to be based on agricultural and trading economies, animal-based production and military power, and charismatic, dynastic or religious cultures and worldviews. The third type of empire, which it is claimed has developed in late modernity's otherwise post-imperial period, can be referred to as 'neo-imperialism'.

Views about the relevance of neo-empire models for understanding contemporary Europe no doubt draw on some aspects of each of the two main historical types. But, by contrast with these types, they tend to portray the neo-empire as a complex but benign and 'civilian' entity, which both integrates itself internally and also exerts influence externally through modern forms of politics and culture rather than through military force and domination. These views differ in terms of whether they emphasise the internal or external aspect, and we will consider each of them in turn.

Europe as a neo-empire: internalist perspectives

Some of the main writers relevant to an internalist perspective on Europe as a neo-empire are Beck and Grande (2007), Zielonka (2006) and Munkler (2007), and since Zielonka's analysis is more elaborate, more attention will be given to it here. Munkler takes an historical perspective on empires in Europe from the classical period to the present, whereas Beck and Grande's and Zielonka's main concern are with the arguably neo-imperial character of the EU in the present and into the future. However, they have some common analytic interests. Each writer emphasises the profound difference between nation-states (and nation-state models for the EU such as that of a 'super-state') and empires, and argue that the EU is more like the latter than the former. Each is concerned about understanding the unfamiliar and non-nation-state character of the EU, in particular in relation to its borders, and thus implicitly as a new kind of territorial entity. Nation-state borders are clear and fixed, but the EU's borders are fuzzy (involving a number of different but overlapping jurisdictions) and flexible (i.e. changing, and mainly expanding).

Each feels that the notion of an empire, albeit in a new benign form, is a more useful model for understanding these aspects of the EU, particularly the border flexibility involved in EU enlargement processes, than any nation-state-based

model. However, they take different views about further EU enlargement. Munkler is concerned to highlight the ‘lessons from history’ for the EU, regarding about the problems of ‘imperial overstretch’ attendant on pursuing an expansionary strategy.²⁵ He argues that ‘If Europe is not to overstretch itself and eventually end in failure, it will have to take over (an) imperial model of boundary demarcation’. ‘Europe’s external frontiers (need to be made) at once stable and elastic’ like stable imperial orders which have “soft” boundaries, where the centre’s regulatory claims gradually lose their force and where borderlands take the place of borders’.²⁶ By comparison, Zielonka takes the view that ‘the EU may be compelled to carry out further enlargements on strategic grounds’ and ‘is unlikely to try to close its doors’ to additional accession countries. However, like Munkler, he recognises that this carries risks and costs. Therefore it is likely that the EU ‘will make the accession process longer and fill it with an ever longer list of membership conditions’ and thus that it ‘is likely to more fuzzy and ambivalent’.²⁷

Beck and Grande offer an analysis of the contemporary EU in terms of such dimensions as its political order, spatial structure, and societal structure, and in terms of the nature of its integration, sovereignty, political process and power in order to argue for the relevance of viewing it as an ‘empire’.²⁸ Its political order is ‘asymmetric’. That is, EU members have a range of kinds of status depending on which of a number of concentric zones of power they occupy. This runs from a central zone of complete integration out to more limited and loose forms of association, as in the case of accession candidate countries. Its socio-spatial structure is ‘open and variable’, involving processes of interweaving, transformation, border shifting, cultural pluralisation. Its societal structure is multinational and its integration as a multi-level governance system is simultaneously horizontal (between the nations) and vertical (between the nations and the EU). Its sovereignty is of a ‘complex cosmopolitan’ rather than nation-statist kind, and its political process is one which favours consensus-building and cooperation in law and rule-making, policy decision-making and conflict resolution. Following Ansell (2000), they argue that the power of this empire is exercised in and through its embodiment as a network.²⁹

Zielonka’s concept of the EU as a neo-empire emphasises the relevance of this notion to understanding its internal nature and structure both in analytic and normative terms. His main analytical tool in this context is that of the ‘neo-medieval’ character of the EU. This is an apparently historical (but actually effectively ungrounded and unspecified historically) concept.³⁰ It is intended to disconnect Zielonka’s version of ‘empire’ (and EU-as-empire) from what we have referred to above as the ‘modern’ type of empire, which he sees as national states-turned-empires, and thereby as regimes committed to military conquest, territorial expansion and economic exploitation. In reality, most historical medieval empires both in Europe and beyond, whether or not

based on nation-states, were just as committed to military conquest and the rest, albeit by different (non-modern) means, as were modern empires. However, Zielonka chooses to ignore this and to focus on aspects of medieval empires such as 'limited and decentralised government ... internal conflicts between a king or emperor and the lower aristocracy ... the persistent divergence of local cultures, religions and traditions ... [which] implied a highly divided political loyalty'.³¹ This interpretation provides a set of benign elements for his concept of a 'neo-medieval empire'. Applying this kind of concept to the EU suggests that the EU be seen as a regime characterised, among other things, by 'fuzzy borders and polycentric governance',³² and the coexistence of 'multiple cultural identities' and 'diversified types of citizenship'.³³ Zielonka's line of analysis, as with Beck and Grande's, suggests that there are significant linkages to be made between neo-empire-based and network-based visions of the EU.

Europe as a neo-empire in a 'multi-polar world': externalist perspectives

In addition to perspectives which attempt to provide new models of the EU's internal nature and workings in neo-imperial terms, it is likely that studies of the EU as an actor in international relations and in the global order generally might also generate visions of the EU relevant to the neo-imperial perspective. The idea that the EU may be becoming a neo-empire in the context of its external actions and foreign policy has not yet been much articulated in explicit terms. For instance, for Khanna, the EU is a major world regional power, and its 'capital' is Brussels, 'the new Rome' (Khanna 2008). This might be because of the potentially negative normative associations of the concept of empire, even though contemporary usages of the concept 'neo-empire', such as those of Zielonka, as has been noted, are at pains to emphasise its benign or even normatively positive nature. Is the EU becoming a neo-empire in terms of its operations in the external context of international relations and global politics relations? The view that it is can be said to find some support in studies that focus on the EU's potential status as a new 'superpower', particularly in relation to the hitherto dominant, even singular, global superpower, the USA.³⁴ It can also be said to find support in analyses of the EU's character as a pole in an arguably emerging 'multi-polar world order', and, relatedly, as a region in a 'multi-regional world order'.³⁵

In these analyses, characteristics of the EU that might have hitherto been assumed to be weaknesses are seen in a very different light, namely as strengths in the changing international and global contexts of the 21st century. For instance, the fact that the EU (at least currently) has not developed substantial or coherently organised military power, particularly when compared with

the USA, might be taken to be a weakness. America's 'superpower' status since the Second World War derived significantly from its willingness and capacity to devote considerable economic and technological resources to its military 'hard power', to continuously enhance it, and to project it around the world. This strategy, and the 'arms race' involved in it, over the course of the Cold War, succeeded in draining the resources of the USSR, its only competitor. With the collapse of the USSR in 1990, the USA was left, for a decade or more, as the world's sole hegemonic power, a *de facto* modern empire exercising global influence through its economic as well as its military dominance.

America's period 'in the sun' has been a relatively brief one and arguably is beginning to pass as we enter the second decade of the 21st century as a result of the rapid onset of a number of types of challenge from other regions of the world – cultural ('civilisational') and military ('terroristic') challenges from the Islamic world, global economic and potential regional military challenges from a resurgent Russia and China, and economic competition from the European Union. This new and evolving geopolitical situation is a significantly unanticipated consequence of the economic globalisation processes promoted by the USA since the 1990s. No doubt it has much further to go in terms of developments and surprises as the 21st century unfolds, given such dynamics as the likelihood of continued economic and population growth in India, and the economic and military reassertion of the Russian Federation and its central Asian client states. It should be noted that at the heart of these developments are polities (China, India and Russia) which had imperial structures in the early modern period, which subsequently as modern (large-scale) 'nation-states' continued (and continue) to contain and organise empire-style multi-ethnic populations and multi-'national'/provincial structures, and which continue to exert an imperial-style influence on neighbouring nations and 'spheres of influence' in their world region.

The emerging global geopolitical situation involves changes which appear to be moving irrevocably away from a scenario of uni-polar American global hegemony and *de facto* imperialism and towards various possible scenarios. None of these alternative scenarios is yet clear or stabilised, but they all involve some version of a more polycentric, multi-polar world order. In the course of this transformation no doubt the possession of economic power will remain vital. However, as compared with the Cold War period, when this was significantly concentrated in the hands of the USA, it has for some time been becoming more dispersed around the world. This was initially, as we will see in Chapter 7 above, in relation to the EU, particularly from the 1970s, and Japan also emerged as a powerful global economic force in a more or less parallel development in the same period. Much more recently there has been the awesome phenomenon of China's rapid economic growth, and this could well be echoed in due course by India. The global economy is certainly more developed and interdependent than it ever has been, but it is also no longer

a system run largely by and for the USA. By the early 21st century it has already become significantly polycentric, and it is likely to become much more so as the century unfolds.

Contemporary polities' military power and their capacity and willingness to use it to promote and project their interests is, and will remain, important in their relationships, as it ever has been in human affairs. All poles in the new world order, led by the USA and China, the old and new 'superpowers', but also even including the EU, are seeking to enhance their military power. However, the balance between 'hard' military power and the 'soft' power of cultural and political influence appears to be shifting in favour of the latter. The USA revealed a surprising degree of military ineffectiveness and associated political incompetence in getting its way in the second Iraq war, and also in Afghanistan in the early years of the 21st century. On the one hand, this provides some evidence to suggest that, in spite of its continuing superiority in military technologies (and the capacity to 'shock and awe' etc.), the USA is beginning to encounter the phenomenon of 'imperial overstretch' which has afflicted many previous modern and pre-modern empires (Munkler 2007). On the other hand, these displays of the limitations of military power were undertaken by a state with diminished moral and political legitimacy in the eyes of the international community, and also with a fading image as a social and cultural model. As such they could be argued to provide some evidence of the importance, even for exercises of 'hard' power, of the ability to influence other nations and the international community through cultural and political means, that is by means of 'soft' power. This shift in the balance between hard and soft power, whatever else it might also mean elsewhere in the emerging multi-polar world order, also increases the EU's potential status and influence, and shifts the balance within the two main 'Western' poles, the USA and Europe, more in favour of the latter.

From an externalist perspective, then, in terms of the EU in the wider world order (such as it is, and such as it might becoming), the EU can be seen as a relatively benign neo-empire among a variety of kinds of extant and emerging 'great powers'. In externalist terms, the EU faces new challenges and opportunities presented by the process of globalisation *per se*, the emergence of the new multi-polarity and polycentrism in global geopolitics, and greater salience of 'soft' power in this situation. Arguments that the EU now has 'superpower' status (McCormick 2007) or that it is emerging as a new kind of 'civilian' power (Telo 2007) rest on its possession and use of 'soft' power. This includes the working model and experience it offers to other regional groupings of nations and/or to potential regional hegemony, of a long-term and largely successful project of regional international collaboration in the peaceful conduct of relations between culturally and politically different communities and in the pursuit of prosperity. The EU's soft or civilian power also includes the values and broader policies it pursues in support of, on the one

hand, social responsibility and ecological sustainability in global economic growth and, on the other hand, respect for human rights and (UN-based) multilateral decision-making in the field of global governance (Telo), together with the economic resources and influence it can use to promote these values and policies. These kinds of characteristics not only enable the EU to be viewed as new kind of ‘superpower’ or ‘civilian’ power (McCormick, Telo). In effect, they also contribute to the general argument outlined here that the contemporary EU is analysable as a benign type of ‘neo-empire’, both internally in terms of the complexities of its structures, and also externally as an actor in the multi-polar world order emerging in the 21st century.

Earlier we identified three major ‘visions’ present in the contemporary development of the sociology of Europe and the EU, namely those of Europe as a ‘network’, as an ‘empire’ and as ‘cosmopolitan’ social order. Each of them can usefully be understood as envisaging the European social formation in terms of the (socio-spatial) sociological imagination as a special kind of social and territorial space. Having considered the first two as new analytic perspectives, and given that the cosmopolitan perspective is significantly normative rather than analytic, we will postpone discussion of the latter to the final reflective chapter of book. In relation to the network and empire models, we have noted connections and overlaps between their visions of European society and its social spaces as well as differences. The empire model can be interpreted as a particularly politically weighted version of the network model. The ‘neo-imperial network’ concept enables internalist network-based views of the EU, which otherwise tend to stress cross-national forms and other forms of socio-spatial ‘horizontality’ in power relations, to restore socio-spatial ‘verticality’ and a recognition of multi-level hierarchy and inequalities in the analysis of power. It also requires that internalist network-oriented views recognise the relevance internally of EU’s external situation and challenges, and that they pay due attention to the growing importance for the EU project both of the pressures of globalisation and also of its operation as a potentially influential actor in 21st-century international and global geopolitical settings.³⁶

Conclusion

In this chapter contemporary Europe and the EU have been considered in general terms as together comprising a socio-political complex. The image of the EU in particular as a puzzling socio-political UFO has guided the discussion towards models which visualise Europe and the EU in socio-spatial terms as a network society and as a neo-imperial system. One of the core themes has been that of the EU’s distinctive character as both an international and supra-national organisation, an organisation which has multinational and multicultural characteristics, and in which the governance system is multi-level and multi-form. The discussion reviewed a range of perspectives on

the EU and on an EU-orchestrated Europe in this respect, noting in particular the inadequacies of the ‘super-state’ and nation-state analogies to adequately model it. The view of the EU which sees it as a ‘meta-state’ and a ‘post-national state complex’ was generally endorsed. In the course of this, the general sociological perspective involving notions of societal dimensions, deep structures and transformations, which was outlined in Chapter 1, was further developed in terms of the socio-spatial aspect of the sociological imagination, and this was applied in a preliminary way to the EU. These sociological concerns to understand contemporary European society and the EU will be taken further in more detail in later chapters. However, before we move forward and engage with this, it is necessary to pause and take a step back, a step into the historical, socio-temporal aspect of the sociological imagination, in order to take an historical sociological perspective on the development of Europe.

Sociology needs a continuing dialogue with history not only because modern societies are products of long-term and ongoing social change, but also because they, and the people within them, *believe* that they are. As we put it earlier, time is one of the ‘deep structures’ of society and human social organisation. Personal, generational, national and civilisational identities are founded in memories and beliefs about the past – including such things as ‘origins’, ‘roots’, ‘defining moments’, ‘turning points’ and so on – together with related practices of conservation and commemoration at all levels from the personal to the national. While this is true of all modern societies, it is particularly true for Europe as the continent and ‘civilisational constellation’ which led, and indeed often coerced, the rest of the world into the modernisation process.

Contemporary European society is characterised by changing balances, accommodations and conflicts within and between peoples differentiated by city-based, regional, national, religious and continental identities. This complexity provides both the social arena and ground for the EU and also generates the social and policy problems which challenge it and its member states. It cannot be understood in abstraction from an awareness of the real and perceived relevance of history for European society. So, in order to be able to return later to engage with the understanding of contemporary Europe and the EU on a well-grounded basis, it is necessary initially to step back into the history of Europe, not only in the modern period but also in pre-modern periods. This step is taken next in Part 1.

Notes

- 1 Cited in Zielonka 2006, p.4. For discussions relating to the analysis of the EU as a complex organisation or system, see Bache and Flinders 2005; Chrysochoou 2001; EC 2001; Jessop 2005; Hix 1998; Hooghe and Marks 2001; Marks and Hooghe 2005; Milward 2000; Rosamund 2000; Warleigh 2002; Wiener and Diez 2004.

- 2 See, for instance, Beck and Grande 2007; also Roche 1996, Chapter 2 on 'national functionalist' assumptions in social policy.
- 3 See note 17 above.
- 4 See, for instance, Axtmann 1998; Giddens 2007; and Giddens et al. 2006.
- 5 Mills 1959.
- 6 On spatial aspects, analogies and perspectives regarding society and social formations in general, see Benko and Strohmayr 1997; Brenner 2004; Crang and Thrift 2000; Lefebvre 1991; Thrift 1999; Tilley 1994. On the (implicitly socio-spatial) concepts of fluidity and mobility as characterising contemporary society, see Urry 2000, 2003.
- 7 See, for instance, Barney 2004; Benkler 2006; Castells 1996; Rossiter 2006; Sunstein 2007; Urry 2003, Chapter 4; and van Dijk 1999.
- 8 On 'actor network theory' see, for instance, Law 1992; on 'social network analysis' see, for instance, Crossley 2007; and White 2002.
- 9 See references in note 6 above.
- 10 On the EU's spatial policy, see Jensen and Richardson (2004), for relevant cultural geographic and social theoretic discussions see McNeill (2004) and Delanty and Rumford (2005, Chapter 7), respectively.
- 11 On the EU's transport networks policies and ambitions, see the seminal discussion in the Delors White Paper (EC 1993a); also Jensen and Richardson 2004. On the European City of Culture, see Palmer 2004; also Garcia 2005. On European tourist spaces, places and circuits in Europe and contemporary society more generally, see Shaw and Williams 2004.
- 12 See Castells 1998, Chapter 5. On Europe in terms of a network perspective, see Ansell 2000; Axford and Huggins 1999; and Leonard 1999.
- 13 Both quotations, Castells 1998, p.318.
- 14 Castells 1998, p.331.
- 15 Quoted in Castells 1998, p.331.
- 16 All quotations in the preceding paragraph from Castells 1998, pp.331–332.
- 17 See Featherstone and Radaelli 2003; also Marks and Hooghe 2005; George 2005; Bache 2005.
- 18 Quoted in Bache and Flinders 2005, p.3.
- 19 Bache and Flinders 2005, p.3; also see Jessop 2005 on the EU as a case of 'multi-meta-governance'.
- 20 On the European information and knowledge economy see, for example, Axford and Huggins 2007; Mansell and Steinmuller 2000; and Rodrigues 2002. On European media and communications spaces and places see, for example, Bondeberg and Golding 2004; De Vreese 2003; Gripsrud 2007; Harrison and Wessels 2009 forthcoming; Harrison and Woods 2000; Morley 2000; Morley and Robbins 1995; Schlesinger 2003; Silverstone 2005; and Williams 2005. On EU cultural policy see, for example, Shore 2000.
- 21 Contemporary sociological interests in exploring the European dimension of the public sphere lies in Habermas's work (1989, 1992). For some notable contributions see, for instance, De Vreese 2007; Eder and Giesen 2001; Eriksen 2004; Fossum and Schlesinger 2007; Koopmans and Erbe 2003; Peters and Sift 2003; Peters et al. 2005; Risse 2003; van der Steeg 2005. For sociological and related studies of migration in Europe and EU, see Favell 2008; Fligstein 2008; Geddes 2003. On the social theory of social space and identity in Europe, see Beck and Grande 2007, Chapter 4; Delanty and Rumford 2005, Chapter 7; Rumford 2006; also Axford 2006; Axford and Huggins 1999; and Jonsson et al. 2000. On European socio-spatiality in terms of borders, see Balibar 1998;

- Delanty 2006; Eder 2006; Ferrera 2005a; Rovisco 2007; Rumford 2008; and Walters 2002.
- 22 See, for instance, Beck and Grande 2007, Chapters 3; Munkler 2007; Zeilonka 2006. As Beck and Grande and other writers on neo-empire indicate (e.g. Hardt and Negri 2000), neo-empires are importantly embodied as networks and usefully understood in terms of them.
- 23 See, for instance, Munkler 2007, pp.96–101, on ‘the construction of imperial space’.
- 24 Munkler 2007, p.139.
- 25 Munkler 2007, pp.111–119, 166–167).
- 26 The quotations in this part of the paragraph come from Munkler 2007, pp.166–167.
- 27 The quotations in this part of the paragraph come from Zielonka 2006, pp.174–176.
- 28 Beck and Grande 2007, pp.64–67.
- 29 Beck and Grande 2007, pp.69–70.
- 30 See Zeilonka 2006, p.18.
- 31 Zeilonka 2006, p.12.
- 32 Zeilonka 2006, p.18.
- 33 Zeilonka 2006, Introduction and pp.98, 120, etc. Zeilonka is only the most recent of many writers who have viewed Europe and the EU in ‘neo-medieval’ terms. See also Friedrichs 2001; Burgess and Vollaard 2006; also more generally Gamble 2001.
- 34 See McCormick 2007; Telo 2007.
- 35 See Telo 2001; and Grant and Barysch 2008. On versions of the multi-polar world order concept connected with concepts of world regionalism and polycentrism, see also Gamble and Payne 1996; Mouffe 2005; and Scholte 2005. Katzenstein’s study of ‘a world of regions’ retains a concept of America’s relation to the world as being a central and neo-imperial one. But his interpretation of the world order being one of ‘regions embedded in an American imperium’ (2005 p.1) has some relevance and lends some support to the emerging multi-polar world-order views.
- 36 See, for instance, Bretherton and Vogel 1999; Rifkin 2004; McCormick 2007; Telo 2007.

