

Session 1: Problems of Comparative Qualitative Research

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Comparing conflict on European issues:
A possible way to assess the salience of Europe for French, British
and French speaking Belgians.

Draft – Comments welcome

Introduction – What this project is about and how it fits in the literature.

This project is in line with a longer term research program on politicization (Duchesne & Haegel 2006). Our aim was to use focus groups – designed, moderated and analysed in a specific way – in order to observe how citizens produce or avoid the politicization of discussion, and thus, as a way to observe a specific kind of political involvement that democratic theory considers fundamental.

Doing so, we had to choose a topic for these discussions and we chose Europe. The presentation of our results so far will be limited to the second dimension of the project, citizens' attitudes towards Europe. The choice of the topic was in part related to funding availability but is also in line with former work of two members of the research team (Duchesne & Frogner, 1994; 2002; 2008). Moreover, European citizenship seems particularly interesting for comparative analysis, as we know from the literature that attitudes towards European integration remained particularly sensitive to national differences.

Indeed, since it burgeoned as an academic discipline after the difficulties surrounding the ratification of the Maastricht's treaty in the early nineties, citizens' attitudes towards European Union have been one of the hallmarks of European studies and a well-established subject in public opinion research. Thus, there has been a huge influence of survey analysis (Eurobarometer) which assumes that being in favour of integration can be measured by simple indicators. More specifically, a great deal of the literature on attitudes towards European integration has tended to focus on support for integration, from an Eastonian view which distinguishes between specific or instrumental support and diffuse or affective support in order to explain why people support or not the EU (Easton, 1965 & 1975)¹. To examine these alternative models of support towards the EU that have been proposed so far, and to see what is problematic or limiting about them, is undeniably a useful way of entering into the question.

¹ The instrumental and the affective theories of European integration are by far the most influential and mainstream theories but of course various other theories exist which are also significant, and sometimes conflicting, contributions to the discourse on the issue of support for European integration. For an overview see : GABEL, M. (1998), "Public support of European Integration : An Empirical Test of Five theories", *The Journal of politics*, 60 (2).

As the terms suggest, the different existing perspectives differ in the definition of the basis on which support for European integration emerges and about the factors that shape it. Among these factors, one can find political, economic, historical and/or cultural factors, both at macro and individual levels. On the one hand, rational choice theory argues that citizens are expected to be in favour of integration if they believe that they (their country and themselves) benefit from it (Gabel, 1998 ; Gabel and Palmer, 1995). This utilitarian or instrumental view stresses the importance of the performance criteria of the new political system for the development of support. This neofunctionalist perspective has of course been challenged by other European integration theories. Thus, from the mid-90's, the so-called "EU democratic deficit" issue became of primary interest and, correspondingly, the notion of "European identity" was introduced in the literature, firstly by social psychologists. The primacy of an affective kind of support has from that moment been put forward. But rather than a conceptual debate, the notion of identity applied to Europe gave rise to a proliferation of methodological attempts to get access to in-depth citizens' attitudes. As a result, there has been a growing gap between sceptical accounts of the inconsistency, or even absence, of attitudes towards the EU (Meinhof/Favell) and positive construction of complex attitudes (see for example : Bruter, 2004).

The concern with support has undoubtedly produced many valuable insights and the debates surrounding the attitudes towards Europe have pointed to various factors that prevent the development of legitimisation's attitudes towards the EU : the remoteness of the European level of government from citizens' everyday lives, the democratic deficit of the European political system, the lack of a single political arena and/or of a self-conscious European public and so on. Moreover, national and social differences have been proved to be very strong and, more important, not to decrease over the years (Anderson, 1998 ; Belot, 2002 ; Cautrès & Grunberg, 2007 ; Gabel, 1998 ; Hooghe & Marks, 2005 ; Niedermayer and Sinnott, 1995). Indeed, a repeated finding, from both instrumental and affective support views, is that nationality remains the strongest factor in explaining the level of support. In view of this concern, duration of membership and the degree of elite dispute on the European issue are two factors often referred to. Socio-demographic variables constitute also an important factor for the level of support and the existence of a "elitist bias" have been demonstrated by many European scholars.

But these survey analyses are of little help for anyone who wants to understand the deep meanings and the significance which the EU has and to assess the salience of Europe in people's everyday lives. Until recently, comparative qualitative research has justified little attention in European studies. By contrast, and following the qualitative turn taking by some researchers engaged in the empirical study of European citizenship, we assume that different publics may have different structures of perception and understanding and that these are "framed" not only nationally but also socially (Belot 2000; Bruter 2005 ; Diez Medrano, 2003 ; Scheuer 2005). Assessing country differences in level of EU support and attributing these to contextual factors assumes in practice that the structures of perception and understanding of the EU are the same. Thus, people's attitudes and behaviour towards political objects depend on how they represent or frame them, about how much they know about them. Far from wanting to reify social groupings but accounting on previous European studies' results, we make the hypotheses that these 'frames' vary across sociodemographic and national groups.

Our project takes part in this debate, outwardly methodological but with important theoretical consequences regarding the very nature of (so-called) attitudes towards European integration. To summarize, we base our research on the results of prior quantitative research, which show the importance of the national and social differences in regard to the attitudes related to Europe. So to say, we accept the principles of a cumulative oriented science; but cumulative does not necessarily mean repetitive; so we chose to innovate, using focus groups.

Concretely, what did we do? We moderated 24 focus groups in three countries (or better say: three towns), thus 8 groups in Paris, Brussels and Oxford respectively. Participants (about 5 or 6 persons per groups) were selected according to four different categories: working class, white collar, professional-manager and party-political activist. The recruitment was as follows: the project was advertised widely in free-papers, ads in shops (see annex), in the neighbourhood of job centres, factories, community centres, and on websites. Volunteers would contact our research assistant and answer a few questions (demographics, political orientation and availability). When a person was selected (we'll come back to the criteria below), he/she would then have to answer another and more complete series of questions before the session. A consent form was to be signed before the beginning of the discussion, in particular concerning the use of video recordings. The discussion lasted about three hours, in two sessions, separated by a break with food and drinks. Participants were seated in a semicircular way and facing boards, on which the moderator would write down the main elements of the discussion (see plan of the room setting in annex)². A schedule was carefully designed and checked in order to cover a wide range of possible topics related to Europe³. The discussions have been fully transcribed and are currently analysed thanks to a diversity of methods (a first qualitative interpretation, followed by an ALCESTE analysis and coding using a Caqdas software package, Atlas.ti).

Our research design, which we have put into practise with special care, was meant to meet two main objectives: 1/ Find a way to record or “measure” the saliency of opinions expressed on Europe and 2/ Achieve qualitative comparison which are developed in the two following sections.

Section One: Conflict as an indicator of salient opinions

As underlined by other scholars, surveys don't always measure real opinions, they record answers to questions without indications of their saliency. Concerning Europe and European integration, we know that these answers do not necessarily refer to strong opinions; moreover, we have no ideas of what Europe or the EU means for respondents.

But alternative techniques raise other problems. Thus, on the one hand, one can argue that using observation (ethnography) presents a high risk of not hearing anything about Europe, or only clichés. Moreover, the challenges of recording for anyone who wants to avoid interference in the natural setting of discussions are well known (Cramer Walsh, 2004). On the other hand, face-to-face interviews are very difficult to conduct on topics that are remote from interviewee's expertise or daily experience. Indeed, there exist high risks that they either want to please the interviewer or don't dare tell him/her that the questions do not mean anything for them (see traditional Bourdieusian critique of interviews in *The Weight of the World*, “Understanding”, 1999). To this regard, the use of focus groups, generally speaking, present an precious advantage: the dynamics of discussion makes it easier for participants to think and say something about a remote topic and Europe is without any doubt a remote topic to ordinary citizens. Moreover, the EU is not fixed but is constantly evolving making it a “floating referent” (Inglehart 1970). As it is still

² The animation of the groups and the role of the moderator in it offers his range of challenges regarding the relationship between the researcher and the field of study and the issues of qualitative comparative research. Indeed, we soon realized that it was essential that the moderator was native speaker, both to be able to moderate fully the debates and to diminish the “stranger effect” during the production of data.

³ The writing of the scenario itself confront us with the difficulties that could emerge from a qualitative comparative research as several writings and three pilots were necessary. It covers a range of questions regarding Europe: the experience of ‘being European’; the power structure of Europe ; the question of the benefit of Europe and the issue of Turkey's possible entry into the EU and the attitudes of the country's major political parties to Turkish entry (for the details of the scenario refer to the annex).

an emerging and therefore a changing political order; ordinary citizens could be perceived as complex, distant and uncertain.

But our specific way of using focus group technique offers other advantages. First, the five questions (re)introduce the question of Europe in the discussion several times. Apart from that, the dynamic was free – we did not try to refocus the discussion on Europe in the event that participants changed the subject, but let them talk about what they felt comfortable with and interested in.

Second, we actually had no concern for “naturalness” (White, 2008: 6). To the contrary and in this sense, the design may be considered some kind of experimentation. Indeed, choosing to put together people who don't know each other was also intended to make conflict possible: people could have been more reluctant to publicly expose disagreement with their relatives or friends and have it recorded. Moreover, we chose to confront people with opposing views on Europe (according to the questionnaires) and opposing political opinions. But we knew people would resist taking the risk of conflict in public discussion. That would require special conditions and explicit incitation.

Therefore the moderation technique also includes elements in order to facilitate the conflictualisation of the discussion. The moderator displays main elements of the discussion as it goes along, making disagreement and misunderstandings apparent. The “flash” is the most important rule introduced by the moderator: when any participant disagrees, does not fully understand or even wants to comment on something that has been written on the board, the moderator draws a flash next to it, that indicates that this would be discussed again. The flash is clearly valued by the moderator and therefore this is a clear incitation to voice disagreement. Finally, the questions were organised according to a schedule which aimed at producing conflict. The first session was considered some kind of warming-up. But the second session, after the break, includes two questions that were supposed to generate disagreement: Who profits from Europe? and For or against Turkey's entry in the EU? Moreover, thanks to the first session, participants had the opportunity to learn about others' opinions and hence should have been able to identify participants with whom they would agree and participants with whom they would disagree on European questions. As conflictualisation proceeds by the making of alliances (Duchesne & Haegel, 2006), we thus gave participants the time to identify each other's positions in order to make alliances when the questions at stake would become more controversial.

And we did record conflict in these discussions! Our qualitative analysis focuses on agreements and disagreements. We thus consider conflict as an indicator of saliency: participants did express disagreement when the issue at stake really matters to them. And this is not any issue. Our research question thus is: how much is European integration a conflictive issue in these discussions, compared with many other topics spontaneously discussed (such as: economy, politics, education, immigration, globalisation, and so on)?

But to be effective, and moreover allowing for some degree of generalisation of the result in the three countries, this design requires a careful selection of participants. Section 2 aims to present our research comparative design.

Section Two: A (multi) comparative design

In order to have a national comparison, it was necessary to build the national cases; indeed in comparative qualitative research, the cases to be studied and compared need to be defined (White 2008 : 4) . In qualitative methods this means diversifying the investigated population within each of the national cases. We choose to constitute our cases on national and social basis assuming that these criteria were relevant for our study. For us it is also the occasion to reach populations (especially low working class) that scholars usually miss when they work on the basis of polls.

According to qualitative research rules, we had to follow in this respect a logic of sampling, which means diversifying as much as possible the social categories. On the other hand, we could not nevertheless distinguish a lot of categories, because of our limited means. We thus chose to work on a basis of a typification. We separated for each country 3 contrasted social categories: higher social classes (represented by professional managers), middle social classes (represented by white collar workers) and lower social classes (represented by people in manual or equivalent jobs). We also wanted to be able to measure the influence of preliminary politization on attitudes towards european integration. So we added a 4th category - activists from political parties. We then doubled every category to control the effects of group dynamics. That makes 8 groups for each country, and thus 24 groups for the whole study.

The recruitment of the activists was made in a specific way: It was achieved through direct solicitation of political parties. The main criterion of selection was thus political membership, and not sociocultural criteria. Actually, we had many responses from party employees; most of these activists were managers. We anyway had really no choice: few persons having answered our request. So our action consisted then especially in gathering activists from opposite political edges to create the conditions of a political cleavage within the groups.

In the following presentation we will only deal with the recruitment of the 3 social categories (higher social classes, medium social classes, lower social classes). We will outline the issues at stake when one decides to build focus groups. Here this method presents a supplementary difficulty with regard to individual interviews. In the case of individual interviews one can always push aside from the corpus the failed conversations, or the individuals who are in fact atypical. By contrast, in the case of the focus groups the "errors" of recruitment cannot be erased: they can have a decisive impact on the dynamics of discussion, and thus the results of the research.

It is necessary to insist on this point: we selected each time mutually anonymous respondents. So by proceeding we were able to control as much as possible the composition of each group. It would not have been possible if we had worked on the basis of groups of acquaintances - if for example we had delegated the recruitment to one or two focal participants for each group. We indeed know that people tend to invite the most cultivated members of the people they know. (Gamson, 1992).

Thus we particularly looked after the recruitment of the groups. To illustrate this we represented diagrammatically the structure of our corpus using factorial analysis (multiple correspondences analysis). We built this correspondence analysis on the basis of 3 variables: the profession of the participant, his level of diploma and the profession of his (her) parents. They are the 3 criteria we used, in this particular order, to select the participants. For the needs of the correspondence analysis, and to facilitate the comparison, we had to re-code these 3 variables under a more reduced number of modalities, which are more homogeneous between the three countries.

For the professions we kept 6 levels :

- we separate higher professional-managers and lower professional-managers
- we also separate higher white collars and lower white collars
- we kept “working class” category
- we gathered farmers and craftsmen in a single category we called “small independents”

We then reduced these 6 levels in order to re-code the profession of the parents; so we only kept 4 categories:

- professional managers
- white collar workers
- working class
- small independants

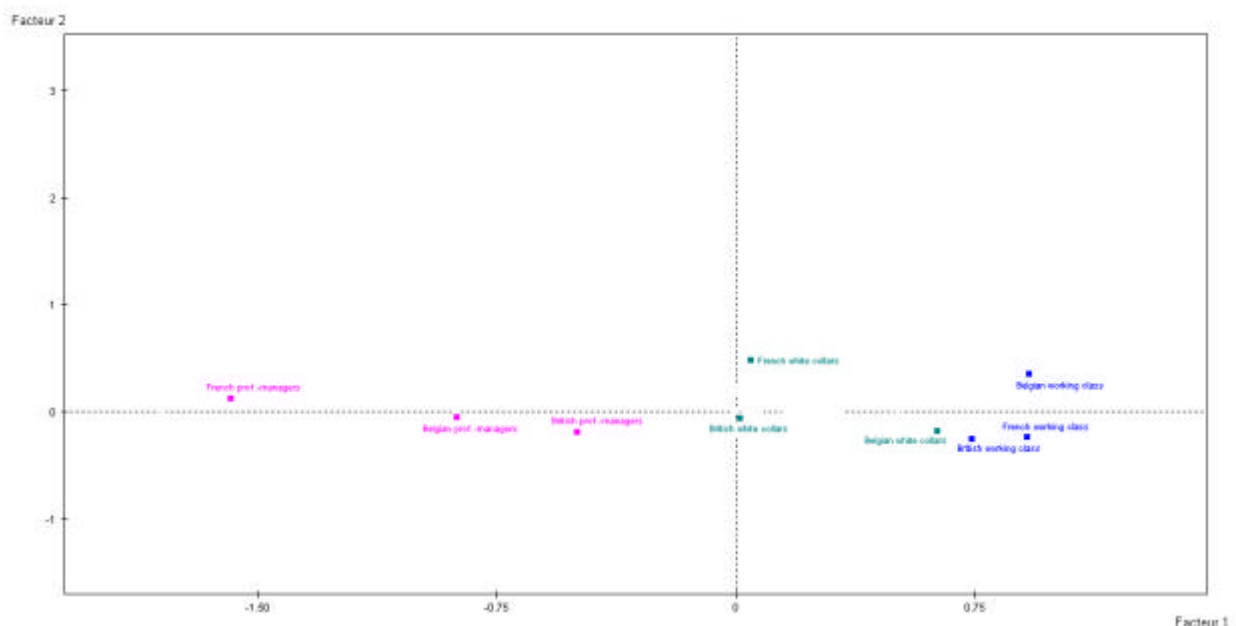
For education we kept only 3 categories:

- higher education or equivalent
- A-levels or equivalent
- GSCE's or equivalent

The graphic presentation here is based on the first and the second factors of the correspondence analysis, that we gathered to from the factorial plan. On the first horizontal axis we see an opposition between, on the left of the graph, the modalities which characterize the higher social classes and, on the right, those which characterize the lower social classes. The modalities which characterize the universe of the middle social classes are close to the centre of the graph (graph 1). On the second vertical axis, we note a secondary opposition (less clear) between the world of the small independents (at the top), and the “popular” world (below).

We can already note that the middle class and the lower class universes are rather close to each other. This shows the difficulty that we had to recruit “true” working class. Actually these last ones are rare in the sample. We thus had to gather within the “lower class” groups at the same moment working class, precarious people, and lower white collars.

Graph 1:

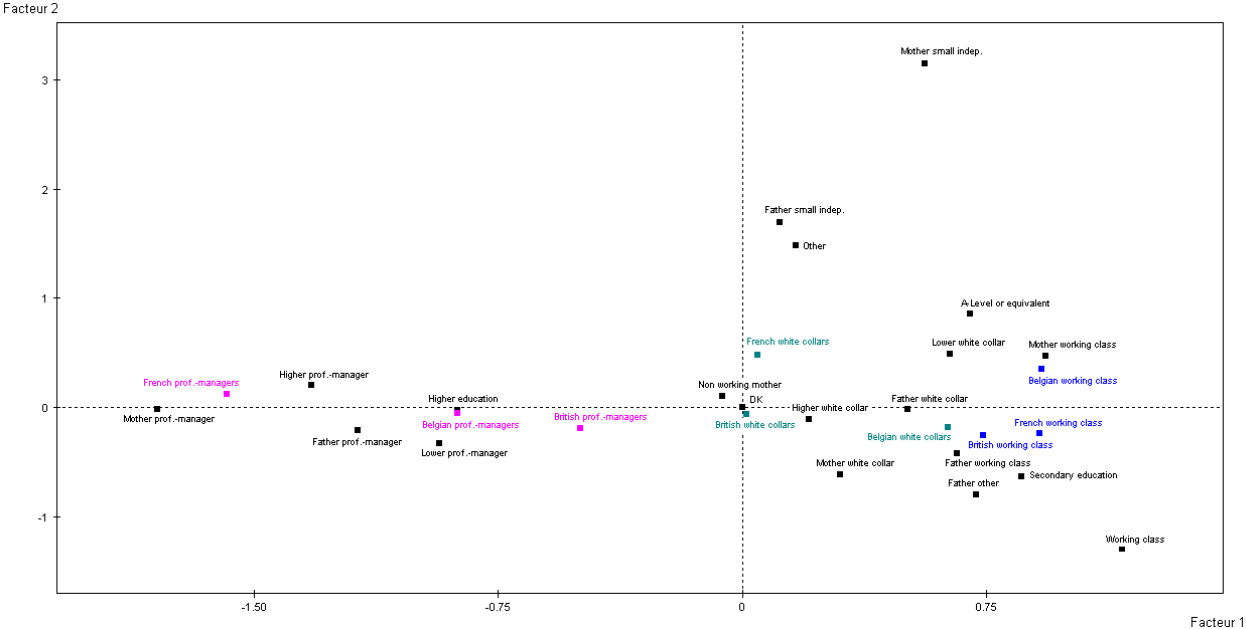


To pursue the analysis, we put supplementary modalities on the graph, namely the categories of group, as well as the individuals. If we look at the categories of groups (graph 2): we can see that in the 3 countries the “higher social class” groups are all situated on the left of the graph. The French groups seem, however, higher (at the very left of the graph) while the British groups seem a bit lower (closer to the centre of the graph).

The “lower social classes” groups are rather close to each other, on the right of the graph. The English groups are however a little more close to middle class universe (closer to the centre of the graph). The Belgian groups are situated a little higher on the vertical axis: this is explained by the fact that certain participants had small independent parents and/or had an equivalent of A-level diploma.

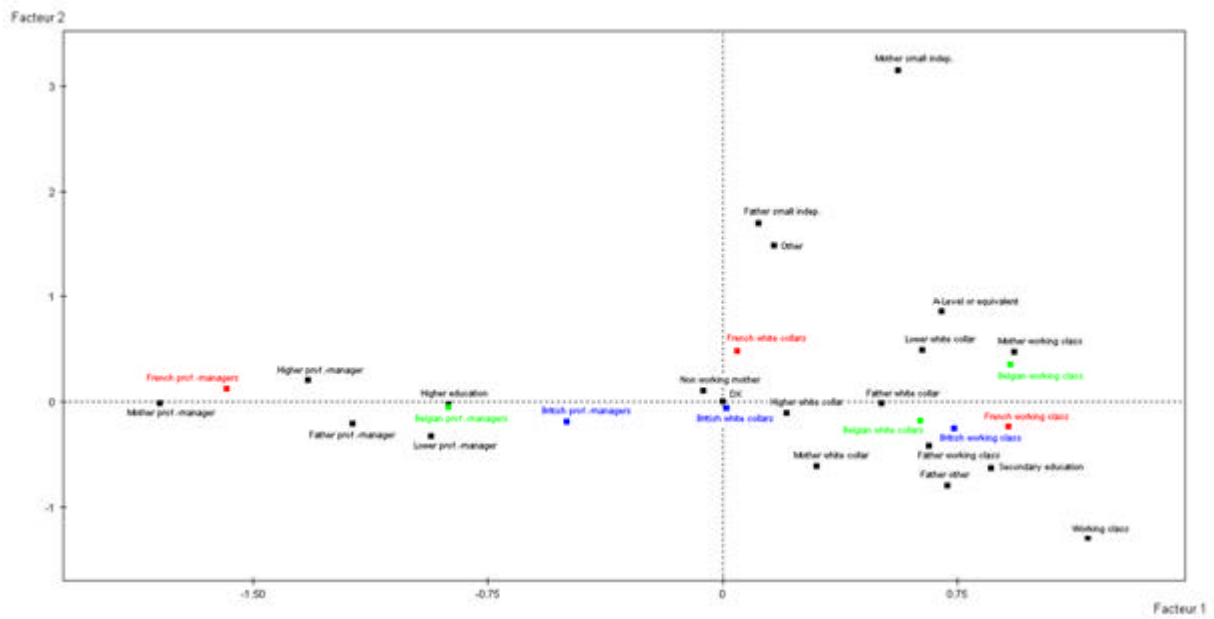
The “middle class” groups are a little less homogeneous. The French and the British are situated near the center of the graph; the French are a little higher on the vertical axis (explained again by the fact there that several participants had small independent parents). Belgians are situated a little more on the right, on the verge of the “popular” world.

Graph 2:



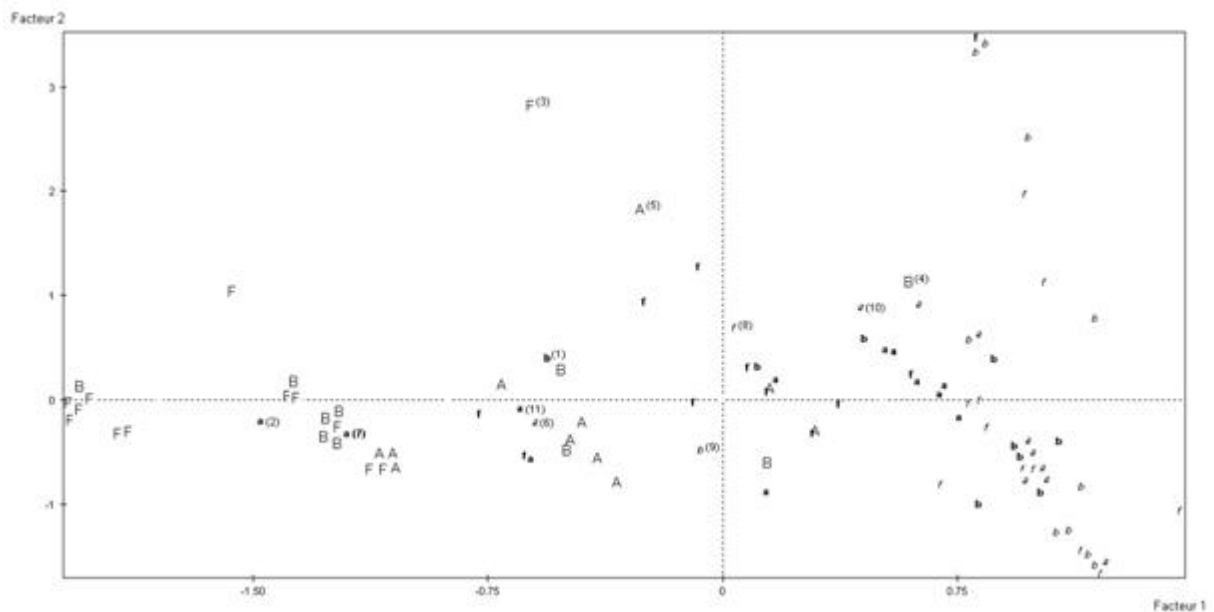
Further, if we look at the distance between the three categories of groups, country by country (Graph 3) we see several things. The French groups are dispersed on the factorial plan, meaning that there is difference between them - thus the classification and group constitution worked well. The interval is less clear for the Belgians and the British groups, although in each case there is a separation between the three social categories. In the Belgian case, it is especially the “middle class / lower class” caesura that is less marked; but the “higher class” groups are clearly different. It is a little bit different in the case of the English groups. The distance between “higher class”, “middle class” and “lower class” groups is quite equivalent, but the total amplitude is shorter: the groups are more homogeneous, or clustered with one another.

Graph 3:



Now if we put the individuals on the graph (Graph 4), we can estimate the proportion of typical and more or less dissonant participants.

Graph 4:



The great majority of the “higher class” participants are situated on the left of the graph; we have few atypical individuals (EX: B4). The “lower class” participants are situated on the right of the graph, with the exception of some individuals (EX: a6; b9). The “middle class” participants are situated in a less ordered way. This is especially the case of the British participants. Even if the modality “British white collars” is situated in the very centre of the graph, the relevant individuals are scattered enough. This weak coherence is not surprising. Middle social classes form a very heterogeneous universe, characterized by a strong social mobility. It was thus more difficult to find participants who were really ‘typical’ in that respect.

On the whole our typification “holds the road”, even if we had a lot of difficulties. At first we had to face the classic problems of qualitative comparative research. The social structure is quite different in France, UK and Belgium. For example in Belgium most of the young people leave the educational system at the age of 18 with an equivalent of A level diploma. Even young working class have this kind of diploma (which is by comparison less frequent in France or in UK). It explains for example the higher position (on the vertical axis) of the Belgian “lower class” groups.

Moreover the indicators which take into account this social structure vary from one country to another, and it is impossible to build an equivalence between these various statistical categories. Furthermore the multiplicity and the variety of the criteria of social location makes this exercise more difficult. We focussed at first on the profession of the individual; but it was sometimes difficult to say for example if one was a ‘lower manager’ or a ‘higher white collar’, or if one was a ‘lower white collar’ or a ‘higher working class’. Then we combined the profession with the level of diploma to select coherent individuals on this basis. Then, when it was possible, we took into account the profession of the parents; we especially worked on the basis of the profession of the father (when the participants remembered it or had really precise memories), since we had a lot of non working mothers. It was often difficult to articulate these 3 criteria: we had in the end few really typical individuals.

We also have to mention other types of constraints. The first ones are connected to the logistics of focus group method. One knows that the risk of desertions has a very important impact in the case of focus groups - we suffered several desertions from the beginning of the study. Later, to anticipate this risk we sometimes had to resign ourselves to inviting somewhat atypical individuals. This is the case in the example of b(1) - a (young) lower manager who participated in a (young) upper white collar group.

Another type of constraint is the logic of diversification of the groups. The method of focus groups requires anticipating the dynamics of group: it is necessary to create the conditions for a “good” group dynamic, that is, favourable to discussion and to the exchange of points of view. This requires creating potential cleavage between participants; but in the same time, in order to avoid the phenomena of social domination, it is also necessary to ensure the social homogeneity of the groups. These two logics are potentially contradictory. In order to create cleavages among the groups, we tried to diversify them politically and ethnically.

More precisely we tried hard to split each group on the political level. But it was sometimes difficult to find rare political profiles, for example higher managers supporting Labour, or very conservative working class. Regarding to the ethnicity criterion, we especially tried to diversify as often as possible the groups. This is indeed a population that quantitative survey research usually misses. But it was always difficult to find ethnic minorities who agreed to participate, especially in Oxford and broadly among the managers.

Thus when volunteers appeared with the profiles we were looking for, we took them even if they were a little bit dissonant on the social level. B4 is a good example : a self-taught (he only had an equivalent of A levels) small company manager, stemming from a working class background, but who was close to the Belgian FN (national front). As we would not have been able to find another individual close to this political party (even among the activists), we integrated him into a group of lower managers.

It is also the case of a6: a 48 years old woman, precarious lower white collar, who only had a O’level diploma, but who was stemming from upper middle class; she was thus in situation of

intergenerational downward mobility. She had the peculiarity to be very close to the conservative party, which allowed us to split the group in which she participated.

Besides we also wanted to take into account the gender criteria in the dynamics of group. So we tried to balance the groups on this variable. We noticed indeed quickly the tendency of women to keep silent when they are in minority. It was thus necessary either to put more women than men, or to select women who were higher, socially speaking, than men, so that they had the resources to participate in the discussion. It was not always possible to do that, especially in the case of the “higher class” groups: it was thus difficult to recruit women who were managers

The case of *b9* allows us to illustrate simultaneously these logics. We had scheduled a “lower class” group only composed of ethnic minorities, 4 men and 2 women. The day before, one of the participants, a woman, cancelled. We had the possibility of replacing her by another participant, who was a little bit higher socially: unemployed white collar (accountant), with an equivalent of A level diploma, stemming from an upper middle class ground (her father was engineer). We took her anyway because:

- as she was Congolese, she allowed completing a group of ethnic minorities participants;
- we had a woman in the group and did not want to leave her in her own with only male participants;
- she had a quite rather rare profile on a political level, which allowed to split the group: she was close to the CDH (Christian democrat party) while the other participants were either apolitical or close to the left.

On the whole, we as much as possible avoided participants who were in a situation of strong intergenerational downward mobility. We know that these people might develop more aggressive or imperious attitudes when they are confronted with “true” white collars or working class. In that case the discussion is often impossible, because they tend to set their face against the other participants. This situation occurred during the first experimental group in Paris. We thus decided to try hard not to have again this situation. On the other hand we were less strict with the participants characterized by an ascending social mobility, as far as these last ones do not raise (or much less) this type of problem.

If we except the activists, of a total of 99 participants (36 in Paris, 30 in Brussels and 33 in Oxford) we count approximately only a dozen more or less dissonant individuals on the social level. In the end only two participants (*B4* and *a6*) are really dissonant, with a single true social deviant (*a6*). Anyway we limited the impact of these atypical individuals on the analysis.

We split the groups into two ‘families’. We isolated the most homogeneous and comparable groups for each of the four categories (lower social class, middle social class, higher social class, activists) from a country to the other one, which makes 12 groups we called “family 1”. We then gathered the 12 remaining groups into what we called “family 2”, which includes most of the atypical individuals who appear on the graph.

Conclusion

To finish we would like to conclude on the question of the generalization of the results. In our case, we rely on a multi comparative design. It is not the individuals who interest us as such, but the product of their interactions. In other words, we analysed the dynamics of their relations, which allows to mark the difference between subjects that are important for them, and the others subjects that are not so important. In the same way, it is not what one participant in particular said that interests us, but the universe of meaning that the discussions draw around a subject.

Our research is exploratory in the sense that it is comprehensive and interpretative. This is particularly necessary with this material because meaning is rarely given. More widely, our purpose is to identify the points on which participants involve themselves. On the other hand we followed a more “positivist” way for at least two reasons:

- because we accept the principle of cumulativity of research
- because we consider that the system of comparison we set up between countries and categories of groups allows us to consider that the results have some degree of generality regarding our three countries and considered social categories - until proved otherwise.

It remains that this research is qualitative in the sense that our goal is theoretical: we wish to understand better the process of construction of political attitudes, in a period when political systems have been quickly changing. Our aim was therefore to diversify the methods not for its own sake, but to challenge the classical conceptualisation and understanding of European attitudes field.

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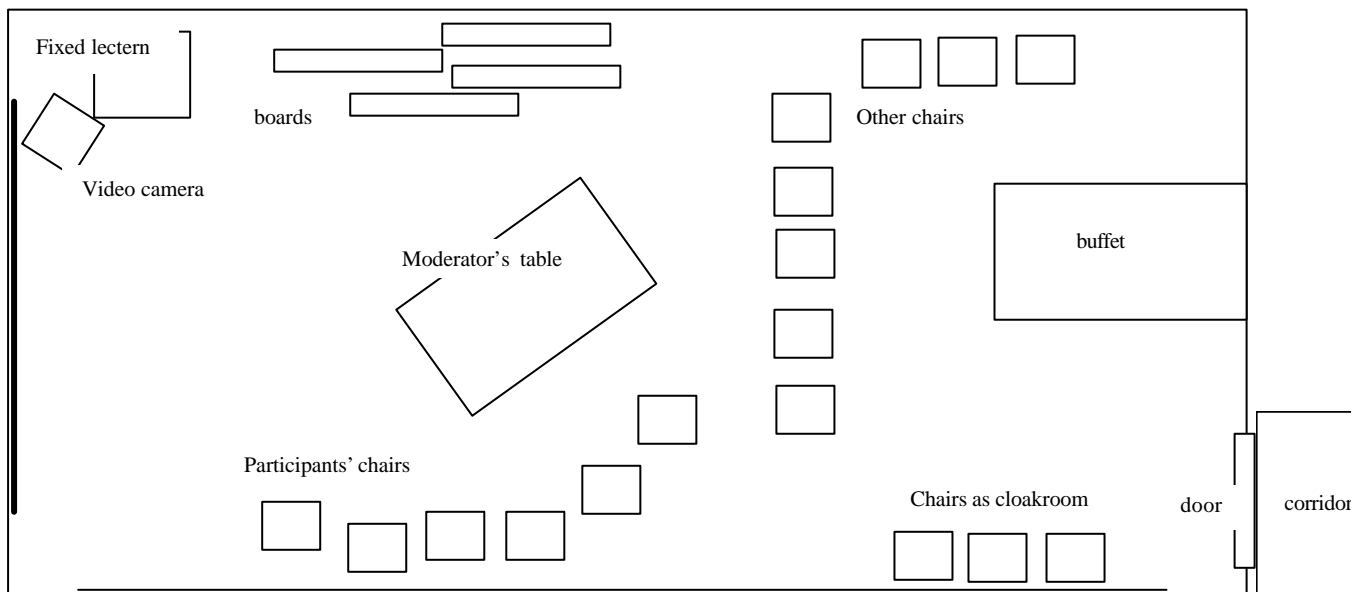
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Annexe:

1/ Oxford advert



2/ room setting (Oxford)



3/ Scenario

Q1 (30 minutes):

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE EUROPEAN?

Participants discuss, moderator writes what is said on cards, puts them on board, in order for the participants to face their own discussion.

Q2 (45 minutes)

HOW SHOULD WE DISTRIBUTE THE POWER IN EUROPE?

Boards are separated in four sections, with a source of power written in each of them: the nations, MPs, experts, the market.

Participants asked to discuss advantages and dangers of giving the power to each of them.

Finally, participants given 6 stickers ('votes') each and asked to distribute them between the four sections.

Break

Q3 (30 minutes)

WHO PROFITS FROM EUROPE?

Participants work in pairs (or in threes). They write answers to the question on cards (one answer per card). Cards are put up on the board and discussed by the whole group.

Q4 (30 minutes)

IN FAVOUR OR NOT OF TURKEY'S ENTRY IN THE EU?

Participants are first asked to vote (with a sticker) in favour or not in favour. Then everyone is asked to find arguments in favour of the minority answer, and then arguments in favour of the majority answer.

Q5 (15 minutes)

IN FAVOUR OR NOT OF TURKEY'S ENTRY IN THE EU? POLITICAL PARTIES

Participants are asked about the position of all the major political parties in their country on Turkey's entry in the EU