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From nationalism to European patriotism? Trade unions and the European works council at General Motors

Thomas Fetzner

ABSTRACT Research on economic patriotism has so far focused on public policy and only marginally addressed the role of non-state actors. This contribution seeks to fill this gap. It examines the emergence of a European economic patriotism discourse among trade union representatives at General Motors since the late 1990s, which underpinned the operation of the company's 'European works council', a statutory body of employee representation mandated by a 1994 European Union directive. It argues that the new trade union emphasis on 'European interests' *vis-à-vis* subsidiaries in other world regions, and *vis-à-vis* GM's global headquarter in Detroit, reflected a (partial) 'upward shift' of patriotism from the national to the European level in response to corporate globalization. It also highlights the limited and fragile nature of European patriotism, which was severely challenged during the recent global economic crisis

KEY WORDS Economic patriotism; European works councils; General Motors; nationalism; trade unions.

'Economic patriotism' (EP), a term first popularized by then French prime minister de Villepin in 2005, has attracted growing academic interest not least in response to the massive state interventions associated with the recent global economic crisis. As defined by Clift and Woll in the introduction to this collection, EP arises from the incongruity between a highly integrated international economy and the narrower territorial boundaries of communities, a 'mismatch' that provides a constant incentive for economic actors to discriminate in favour of territorial 'insiders'. Importantly, going beyond the economic nationalism framework (see Crane 1998; Helleiner and Pickel 2005), EP points to the multi-level character of this phenomenon, which is equally discernible at the level of sub-national (local) or supranational communities. In fact, the EP literature connects here to a long-standing discussion among political and economic geographers, which has highlighted that the spatial setup of politics can shift between various territorial 'scales' (see Cox 1998)

Most of the emerging EP literature focuses on public policy, while the role of non-state actors has so far received only limited attention. The contribution helps fill this gap, focusing on the case of trade union policy in the multinational automobile company General Motors (GM). Given the importance of job creation and/or retention for territorial politics, a study of trade unions is particularly well suited to take a closer look at what Callaghan and Lagneau-Ymonet (2012) call the ‘demand side’ of EP. More specifically, the contribution examines the emergence and subsequent development of a European economic patriotism discourse among GM trade union representatives since the late 1990s, which underpinned the operation of the company’s ‘European works council’ (EWC), a statutory body of employee representation in multinational firms mandated by a 1994 European Union directive (see Gold 2007).

This focus on the supranational European level may seem surprising at first sight. If trade unions are thought of as potential carriers of economic patriotism, conventional wisdom would suggest looking at the national level. Since their post-war integration into nation-states through welfare regimes and industrial relations institutions (Sassoon 1996; Streeck 1998), trade unions are often described as having succumbed to the ‘appeal of national identity’ (Pasture and Verberckmoes 1998). However, labour sociologists and geographers remind us that the politics of job retention plays out at various spatial levels (see Harrod and O’Brien 2002; Herod 2001). In Western Europe, for example, the stronger post-war national rooting never displaced localist traditions, which continued to find expression in everyday union politics – witness the debates about ‘factory consciousness’ and ‘Betriebsegoismus’ (plant egoism) among British and German industrial relations scholars during the 1970s and 1980s (Batstone 1984; Kotthoff 1981). Since the early 1990s, on the other hand, trade union discourses reveal a growing European attachment, expressed in the widespread if vague union advocacy of the ‘European social model’ (Hyman 2005).

But why do trade unions embrace a specific spatial scale of patriotism? What are the conditions under which they have recently espoused, to some extent, a supranational European patriotism? These are the crucial questions I seek to explore through the case study of GM’s European works council. While not denying the importance of the external environment – in particular the statutory support provided by EU legislation as a crucial precondition (see Gold 2007) – the analytical focus will be on developments inside the firm. As a matter of fact, EWC practices vary a great deal across countries and sectors, and the key question is why some councils (such as GM) have moved far beyond the EU-prescribed minimum of regular consultation exercises.

Unlike other scholars who have emphasized actor-specific factors such as the role of local union leaders as ‘political entrepreneurs’ (Greer and Hauptmeier 2008), my interpretation connects trade union strategies primarily to shifts in GM’s corporate structures. Translated into the conceptual language of economic patriotism, I argue that there was an upward shift of the clash between economic and community boundaries, which entailed a ‘rescaling’ of union

patriotism: prior to the mid-1990s, competition between subsidiaries *within* Europe fuelled national economic patriotism in the different GM locations, which, was subsequently superimposed by a new European patriotism in response to corporate globalization. As a result, GM trade unionists increasingly embraced ‘European interests’ *vis-à-vis* subsidiaries in other world regions, and *vis-à-vis* GM’s global headquarter in Detroit. Importantly, the emergence of European patriotism was also dependent on a favourable ‘internal’ context, namely the absence of a clear national centre of GM’s European operations.

The contribution draws on contemporary press coverage, published and unpublished trade union documents, as well as on internet sources and interviews with trade union representatives. In the first section, I briefly introduce the pattern of national economic patriotism that dominated among GM trade unionists prior to the mid-1990s, focusing on Germany and the United Kingdom (UK) as the two largest European GM locations. The second and main section analyses the transformation towards a European economic patriotism since the late 1990s and explicates how the absence of a clear national centre of GM’s European operations helped to bring about this transformation. The third and last section argues that it was precisely the (temporary) dissolution of this favourable context owing to GM’s impending bankruptcy and German government intervention which severely challenged European patriotism during the recent crisis in 2009/10. The article concludes with reflections about the implications of the case study for economic patriotism scholarship.

TRADE UNIONS AND NATIONAL ECONOMIC PATRIOTISM PRIOR TO THE MID-1990S

General Motors’ presence in Europe dates back to the 1920s when the firm acquired Vauxhall Motors in Luton (close to London) and Adam Opel AG in Rüsselsheim (close to Frankfurt/Main), next to opening assembly facilities in Belgium (Antwerp) and Denmark. After 1945 GM’s German operations grew dynamically, leading in the 1960s to the establishment of new plants in Bochum and Kaiserslautern. Today Germany still is by far the largest GM location on the old continent, accounting for nearly half of the 48,000 European GM employees. Vauxhall fell behind since the late 1960s despite the launch of an additional facility at Ellesmere Port (Liverpool) – a trend, which was accelerated with the partial closure of the traditional Luton plant in 2000 (Holden 2003). GM diversified its European production geography since the late 1970s, first by opening a large manufacturing complex in Zaragoza (Spain) and component facilities in France and Austria, later, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, by moving East: since the early 1990s new plants have been established in Eisenach (East Germany), Poland (Gliwice), Hungary (Esztergom) and Russia (St Petersburg). GM’s merger with Saab temporarily added a strong Swedish component, too¹ (Bordenave and Lung 2003).

GM also increasingly integrated its European subsidiaries, starting in the mid-1970s with a gradual standardization of Opel and Vauxhall models,

and accelerating after 1986 when the company established a European headquarters in Zurich in response to the Single Market (Dassbach 1989: 442f.). Ever since, car and truck models were developed and produced on pan-European platforms, with two or more locations sharing manufacturing and/or assembly. GM managers frequently threatened to shift production between locations to obtain trade union concessions (Mueller and Purcell 1992).

Against this backdrop, national economic patriotism discourses unfolded among trade union representatives, particularly in the British and German GM subsidiaries Vauxhall and Opel. Competition between locations usually involved plants situated in different countries, rather than those within the same state (Rüsselsheim vs. Antwerp, Ellesmere Port vs. Zaragoza, etc.), which encouraged a national framing of local union interests. In other words, national economic patriotism reflected a 'boundary clash' between the traditional local and national trade union communities and the emergence of GM's corporate Europeanization. Trade union campaigns highlighting alleged dangers to 'German production' or 'British jobs' frequently occurred since the early 1980s, for example with regard to the distribution of production for GM's small Corsa vehicle (1982–6), the reallocation of engine and transmission production (1988–90), or, from the early 1990s, the distribution of headcount reductions in the course of European restructuring (see Fetzter 2005: 266–73).

Such union campaigns had their 'ebbs and flows', and their core concerns changed over time, from competition for investment and production volumes to rivalries over productivity levels and the cross-border distribution of profits. The climax was reached in the late 1990s: national trade unions at various GM locations engaged in concession bargaining deliberately designed to obtain future investment guarantees at the expense of other plants (*ibid.*: 330–8).

National economic patriotism among trade union representatives was not only expressed in competitive rivalries but also in attachment to country-specific notions of national autonomy. In Germany, labour representatives launched protests against the new GM Europe headquarters' interference in Opel affairs since the late 1980s, demanding more subsidiary and brand autonomy in product development, manpower and budgetary matters (*Rüsselsheimer Echo* 1990). On the one hand, European management centralization threatened to erode the effectiveness of co-determination – lobbying for a greater range of powers for Opel managers was thus a 'surrogate' campaign to preserve traditional German trade union rights (*Rüsselsheimer Echo* 1989). On the other hand, national corporate autonomy was seen as necessary against Zurich's 'excessive' focus on cost reduction at the expense of investment into new products and technologies. A high point of this dynamic was reached in 1997 when the works council, supported by Opel management, entered into open conflict with Zurich over the introduction of a new template for intra-company performance benchmarking (Rehder 2003: 179–81).

In the UK, by contrast, national autonomy was not so much addressed in corporate terms, as British trade unions lacked their German counterparts' role as company stakeholders through co-determination. Instead, national autonomy became associated with broader initiatives for state control and national market protection. Until the late 1970s most of this concentrated on lobbies for government intervention, for example in the form of so-called 'planning agreements' (Wilks 1981), and on trade union support for the campaign against British membership in the European Community (EC). However, the defeat of the EC opposition movement and the neo-liberal shift of government policy since 1979 led to the reorientation of national autonomy strategies towards more market-based initiatives. GM was now directly pressured to accept that British plants should supply the British market – backed up with the mobilization of employees, consumers and public opinion. Exploiting the still influential 'buy British' approach among UK car buyers, the unions accused GM of deliberately depriving UK plants of the supply of the 'home market' (Fetzer 2005: 266–72).

FROM NATIONALISM TO EUROPEAN PATRIOTISM?

By the late 1990s, little seemed to indicate a shift towards European patriotism among trade unionists at General Motors. The creation of the company's European works council² in 1996 had little impact initially; occasional EWC meetings did not appear to mitigate the investment competition between different locations, and the associated strength of national economic patriotism (Hancké 2000). Already by the early 2000s, however, the situation had changed dramatically, as the EWC acquired the status of European management's negotiation partner. A first agreement was concluded in 2000, which gave long-term employment and wage guarantees for employees in GM's European power train operations that were to be transferred to a joint venture with Fiat. In 2001 two further agreements followed in relation to European restructuring measures (Herber and Schäfer-Klug 2002; Klebe and Roth 2000). In October 2004, the EWC again negotiated a European framework agreement for the reduction of headcount levels without forced redundancies or plant closures. In parallel, the body also became involved in the process of investment allocation for the new Vectra/Saab 9-3, 9-5 ranges (Bartmann 2005). In 2006/7 the EWC played a crucial co-ordinating role in the 'site selection process' for the next generation of GM's new Astra vehicles involving the plants in Bochum, Antwerp, Ellesmere Port, Trollhättan and Gliwice (Banyuls *et al.* 2008).

It is not the purpose of this contribution to provide an exhaustive description of this complex transformation. Rather, its main objective is to highlight that the shift towards European trade union co-operation at GM since the late 1990s was nurtured by the emergence of a supranational European economic patriotism, which responded to corporate globalization processes that were perceived as endangering employment security across the European continent.

The new discourse of European economic patriotism

General Motors started to shift towards the globalization of corporate structures and strategies since the early 1990s. This process was not linear; it suffered setbacks owing to corporate and market constraints, and its degree was contested within the company. Still, there was a significant shift towards the integration of European operations into global company structures. New car models were developed on global platforms, which were designed to rationalize the various model ranges sold by GM brands throughout the world (Bordenave and Lung 2003). Between 2004 and the 2009 crisis, this process accelerated as Detroit increased its corporate control over the regional company groupings in Europe, Asia and Latin America (Banyuls *et al.* 2008). In parallel to global reorganization GM's production geography also changed owing to the company's massive investments in Eastern Europe and Asia. Joint ventures were launched in Russia and China, and GM took over the Korean manufacturer Daewoo. As a consequence, the relative position of GM's traditional European operations declined (Bordenave and Lung 2003).

It was against this backdrop that trade unionists started to invoke 'European interests' *vis-à-vis* GM subsidiaries in other world regions and *vis-à-vis* GM's global headquarter in Detroit. This discourse was already discernible during the first cross-border union encounters prior to the EWC creation in the mid-1990s. German Opel works councillors spoke about the necessity for a new 'European thinking' when GM was investing large sums in other parts of the world. British union representatives warned that GM's new plants in Asia would constitute a threat for long-term employment prospects in Europe (Betriebsrat Adam Opel AG 1994). After the EWC establishment in 1996, its first chairman praised the 'production location Europe', warning that accelerated investments in Asia, partly financed from European profits, would come at the expense of necessary improvements of products and facilities on the old continent (Betriebsrat Adam Opel AG 1997).

After the millennium this rhetoric intensified. There was a great deal of trade union anxiety about the expansion of GM operations in other parts of the world, expressed, for example, in frequent complaints about newspaper interviews of leading GM managers alluding to Detroit plans for a longer-term shift of GM activities to Eastern Europe, China, Korea and India. The changing GM production geography and the global platform approach were portrayed as a dangerous combination because they appeared to force West European locations into ever new rounds of cost competition with the new GM plants in Eastern Europe and Asia. Global car architectures, a EWC leaflet warned in March 2007, meant that 'a single plant can manufacture very different GM brands and models and that production can be transferred between plants even beyond Europe within six weeks' (GM Workers Blog 2007a).

'Economic patriotism' is a useful concept to interpret this new trade union discourse. Essentially, this was an upward shift of the dilemma that underpins the rationale for economic patriotism, namely the clash between a highly

integrated international economy and the narrower territorial boundaries of communities. Prior to the mid-1990s *national* economic patriotism in the different GM locations had been fuelled by competition between subsidiaries *within* Europe; now, corporate globalization schemes favoured the emergence of a regional, European patriotism discourse. This did not mean the end of national trade union patriotism. Indeed, national and European patriotism often co-existed, best illustrated in comments of a Belgian EWC representative in the wake of the Astra allocation decision in 2007: while expressing satisfaction about the fact that European co-operation allowed the Antwerp plant to (temporarily) stay open despite having lost out on Astra production, he nevertheless criticized the selection decision as driven by brand considerations rather than productivity, which would have favoured the Belgian over German and British sites (GM Workers Blog 2007b).

Still, the new rhetoric of 'European interests' was a significant novelty. On the one hand, it must be seen against the backdrop of the broader notion of 'Europe' as a global economic competitor that had gained ground among European policy-makers and interest groups since the early 1990s (see Rosamond 2002, 2012). On the other hand, the earlier defensive nationalisms were transposed to the European level. Still, in 1996, for example, German labour representatives had argued that it had been thanks to 'German profits' alone that GM had been able to invest in other *European* operations in Belgium, Spain and Sweden (Betriebsrat Adam Opel AG 1996). Now the same argument was shifted to the European level: profits made in Europe should be reinvested there rather than used for helping GM's global expansion plans.

In fact, intriguingly, the new European patriotism discourse among GM trade unionists represented a curious mix of the different national approaches described earlier. Given the large size of GM facilities in the Federal Republic, there was a strong German 'imprint' here, in particular with regard to demands for management and brand autonomy. Until the mid-1990s, as we have seen, such demands had been deployed to request more independence for national management and the Opel brand. Now they were 'europeanized' – EWC spokesmen frequently argued that GM's European workers were paying the price for a misconceived strategy of global product standardization that was out of tune with 'European' market demand. They claimed that GM's 'European brands' Opel, Saab and Vauxhall, needed more autonomy and a more European product profile to achieve a turnaround in sales, and hence a stabilization of employment prospects (GM Workers Blog 2007c).

However, there was also a component that followed earlier British union approaches focusing on national market control. Time and again EWC statements argued that GMs' European sales, including those of non-European GM brands (e.g., Chevrolet) should be sourced from plants in Europe. The joint EWC bargaining position with regard to the Astra allocation in 2007, for example, rested on the assumption that the plant without Astra production would be compensated by the allocation of non-European GM models destined for sale on European markets. A EWC press release prior to the decision pointed

out that ‘an important principle for the employee representatives would be that cars which should be sold in the European market should be produced in the European plants’ (GM Workers Blog 2007d). It should be added that such demands co-existed uneasily with parallel lobbies for a stronger role of European operations *within* the globalization process, e.g., the promotion of European leadership for global product development and greater export opportunities for European brands in other world regions.³ Trade union aspirations, in the terms suggested by Clift and Woll (2012) in the introduction to this collection, oscillated between ‘strategic (inter)-regional integration’ (liberal patriotism) and ‘defensive regionalism’ (conservative patriotism).

As these remarks indicate, the new European patriotism discourse was not merely empty rhetoric but shaped practical trade union strategies at GM during the 2000s. On the one hand, European patriotism informed union approaches in the negotiations with GM management. Here, the EWC often pointed to the company’s mediocre market performance since the mid-1990s, which it saw caused by GM’s failure to develop innovative ‘European’ car models, e.g., with regard to engine technology, or safety standards, and the lacking cultivation of European brand images (GM Workers Blog 2007c). In light of the fact that European market demand indeed differs from America and Asia in some crucial respects (Jürgens 2004), the EWC argued that GM’s business success depended on the retention of a distinctly European style, which in turn would guarantee European production and employment.

At the same time, the EWC used the European patriotism discourse to build up a united front of workforces across the continent. The EWC created its own internet forum, the ‘gmworkersblog’, on which ‘European solidarity’ became a buzzword – defined not only as an intra-European affair but, more importantly, as the necessity to stand united in the defence of European interests within the global GM network. Special efforts were made to propagate ‘European interests’ as a means to overcome intra-European competition. During the 2007 Astra allocation process, for example, EWC leaders discouraged plant representatives from concluding local agreements not only by pointing to the dangers of an intra-European race to the bottom but also by highlighting the risks inherent in GM’s globalization even for the ‘winners’:

the allocation of a future global product like the next Astra doesn’t make a plant and the jobs ‘safe’ anymore. After getting the new product the workers, unions and works councils can easily be blackmailed by management to make further concessions, otherwise the plant can lose its production to a ‘cheaper’ plant worldwide. (GM Workers Blog 2007a)

Clearly, not all these attempts to ‘produce’ unity on the basis of presumed joint ‘European interests’ were successful in downplaying the importance of intra-European conflicts and the massive cost-cutting schemes to which the EWC signed up in the process (see below). It is also striking how much EWC positions reflected an essentially *West* European notion of patriotism that was to defend German, British, Belgian and Spanish plants against competition not only

from Asia, but also from *Eastern Europe*. However, these ambiguities notwithstanding, the new globalization-driven European trade union patriotism undoubtedly played an important role for the dynamic development of GM's European works council since the late 1990s.

The facilitating context: trade unions as 'risk communities'

As has been argued elsewhere (Fetzer 2008), the 'discovery' of 'European interests' in response to GM's corporate globalization can be interpreted as the 'external' expression of a 'risk community', whose cohesiveness stood and fell with the perception of a common threat. Crucially, however, this 'risk community' also had an internal dimension, which provided the necessary facilitating context for the emergence of European patriotism (*ibid.*: 296–300). The key aspect here was that General Motors Europe, in contrast to EU-based automobile firms like Volkswagen, Fiat or Renault, lacked a clear national centre in terms of corporate decision-making and production operations – circumstances that have routinely been emphasized as facilitating EWC operations by industrial relations scholars (Kotthoff 2006; Marginson *et al.* 2004). As mentioned earlier, GM's production facilities were widely spread across the continent; by the late 1990s substantial manufacturing and/or assembly operations existed in nine European countries. As for corporate decision-making, the creation of the European headquarter in Zurich in 1986 strongly enhanced the autonomy of GM's European management even *vis-à-vis* the largest national subsidiary, the German Adam Opel AG. This pattern contrasts with the situation in EU-based automobile producers, which continue to display a strong focus of 'production geography' on the respective home countries (Dicken 2007: 301–3) and lack an independent European management level – European strategies are decided upon in the national headquarters in Wolfsburg, Paris or Turin.

As a consequence, the interests of national trade unions and works councils at GM were *more evenly* affected by processes of corporate restructuring than in the case of EU-based car firms. At the same time, it was more difficult for even the largest national group – German Opel labour representatives – to successfully 'play the national card' in dealing with restructuring. Here, the 'domino' concession bargaining of the late 1990s, while marking the 'high point' of national economic patriotism, also provided a useful lesson about the limits of such negotiation tactics. Designed to secure long-term employment prospects in the Federal Republic, national concession bargaining caused a competitive spiral, which threatened to degenerate into a 'race to the bottom'. Among German representatives, in particular, this episode strengthened the case for at least a minimum degree of cross-border understanding to protect local/national collective labour standards in a longer-term perspective (Herber and Schäfer-Klug 2002). It is also worth noting that German representatives themselves rarely formed a cohesive group owing to tensions within and between works councils in the different locations.

Clearly, as already alluded to earlier, the new European patriotism did not mean that labour representatives abandoned their local and national allegiances. In fact, the EWC continuously faced the task of reconciling diverging interests. Next to providing a broad ‘safety net’ through European framework agreements ruling out plant closures, one of its most important objectives became the elaboration of accepted rules for ‘fair competition’ between locations, e.g., with regard to the transparency of investment tenders and the definition of ‘bottom lines’ for wage concessions (Bartmann 2005). Nonetheless, suspicions about a ‘German bias’ in GM’s European strategy continued to be voiced by unionists from other locations, in the UK, for example, at the time of the Luton cutbacks in 2000/1 (Minutes of a special meeting of the Vauxhall JNC 2000), and in Belgium in relation to the Astra allocation procedure in 2007 when GM managers publicly emphasized the need to retain a good brand image in the Federal Republic.

Still, the GM context was much more favourable to the articulation of ‘European interests’ and European economic patriotism than that of EU-based companies. In the case of Volkswagen, for example, cross-border contacts between trade unionists also became more important since the mid-1990s, and they even reached beyond Europe (Weiler 2006). Yet, these contacts were always conducted under the leadership of German labour representatives (Carley and Hall 2006: 67). VW’s supervisory board remained the crucial arena for decision-making, while the EWC never acquired the prominent role it achieved at General Motors (Weiler 2006).

CHALLENGES TO EUROPEAN PATRIOTISM: TRADE UNIONS AND THE GM CRISIS 2009/10

That the absence of a clear national centre indeed represented a crucial facilitating condition for the emergence of European economic patriotism among GM trade unionists became abundantly clear during the company’s recent major crisis. That crisis, culminating in June 2009 with the insolvency of the American parent company under chapter 11 of the US bankruptcy code, led to protracted negotiations about a possible sale of GM’s European operations. Among the several bidders a consortium led by the Canadian–Austrian company Magna appeared to have won the day by November 2009 when, in a surprise move, GM decided to retain its European subsidiaries and to cancel a preliminary agreement with the consortium.

On the face of it, the crisis should have further strengthened European trade union patriotism, given that the issue of European autonomy from Detroit – a staple of EWC demands since the late 1990s – soon became one of the crucial questions in the takeover negotiations between GM and Magna. It turned out, however, that the crisis instead led to serious tensions among GM’s European trade unionists, most visibly expressed in the open clash over Magna’s takeover bid, which was welcomed by German and Belgian representatives, while being opposed for a long time by their counterparts in Spain, the UK and, to a lesser

extent, Poland (EIRO 2009). The EWC was effectively sidelined, and there was little European co-ordination in the subsequent restructuring negotiations with the prospective new owner Magna. And, while all national unions had struck deals with Magna by late October 2009, reactions to GM's U-turn in early November again revealed the deep internal divisions: in the UK, Tony Woodley, general secretary of the UNITE union, described the GM announcement as 'fantastic news', while GM's decision was met with a great deal of criticism and even a one-day strike action in the German GM plants (EIRO 2009).

While we saw that the European works council never managed to fully overcome tensions between local and national GM labour representatives, this clash was of a different quality because of the heavy involvement of the German government in the Magna–GM negotiations, which was itself in part triggered by joint lobbies from several regions in which Opel plants are situated (Hesse, Nordrhein-Westphalia, Rheinland-Pfalz, Thuringia – Tagesschau 2009). There can be no doubt that German labour representatives were actively implicated in the initiatives of this federal 'crisis cartel' from the outset – within months, the central Opel works council chairman Franz became a German media celebrity, featuring as the 'saviour' of Opel plants in the Federal Republic. At the same time, against the backdrop of the upcoming federal elections, the GM saga turned into a crisis management competition between the two coalition parties CDU (Christlich Demokratische Union) and SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands), and both sought close co-operation with Franz and national union leaders. This pattern was particularly discernible in the bidding process in the first half of 2009 – the strong German government preference for the Magna consortium over the rival contenders Fiat and RHJ International was fully in line with trade union positions (*ibid.*).

Conversely, the new conspicuous role of the German government became the main bone of contention for labour representatives in other European GM locations. In Spain and the UK, in particular, it was widely believed that the German government put strong pressure on General Motors to agree to a Magna takeover, because Magna's future business plan privileged German locations over those in other European countries. In the Spanish Zaragoza plant, for example, workers went on strike to protest against Magna's plan for a partial relocation of Corsa production to Germany (Autoevolution 2009). In the UK, UNITE leader Woodley denounced what he saw as a 'disgraceful political stitch up' between Magna and the German government and called on the EU to 'block the deal immediately' (*PoliticsHome.net* 2009). In fact, these protests of non-German GM trade union representatives are likely to have contributed to the late intervention against the deal by the European Commission, which in turn provided General Motors with a legitimate argument to pull out of the takeover negotiations at the last hour.

What this analysis suggests is that the 2009 crisis upset the peculiar combination of national and European patriotism among GM trade union representatives that had emerged during the early 2000s. With the new influence of the German government, GM Europe appeared to move towards the pattern of

EU-based car makers by acquiring a much stronger national centre – providing new opportunities for some (Germany) and threats for others. As a result, notions of ‘European interest’ receded into the background. The ‘boundary clash’ at the heart of economic patriotism shifted downwards again, from the global/European to the European/national dichotomy.

GM’s eventual decision to retain Opel and Vauxhall in November 2009 has had an ambiguous impact on European trade union patriotism. On the one hand, the removal of Magna’s ‘German bias’ has enabled a ‘comeback’ of this patriotism, expressed in (ultimately fruitless) protests against GM plans to close the production plant in Antwerp and renewed calls for the defence of ‘European interests’ within GM’s global structures (*Finanzen.net* 2010). On the other hand, subsequent restructuring has removed GM’s independent European management centre in Zurich, as future European co-ordination is to be carried out under the leadership of the Opel headquarters in Rüsselsheim. Against this backdrop, it remains to be seen whether or not European patriotism will inspire future trade union strategies at GM as much as it has done during the last decade.

CONCLUSIONS

In this contribution, I have attempted to demonstrate that ‘economic patriotism’ is a useful concept for the analysis of economic actors beyond the realm of public policy. In the case study under review, the concept has helped to illuminate how and why trade unions have espoused notions of European economic patriotism in the context of a transnational company like General Motors. Put simply, the case study shows that corporate globalization produced a clash between global economic structures and strategies, and a new regional (European) expression of territorial interests that was superimposed on traditional forms of local and/or national economic patriotisms. The case study also demonstrates that this transformation was dependent on favourable contextual conditions, in particular the absence of a clear national centre of GM’s European operations.

The case study has a number of broader implications for economic patriotism scholarship. First, it demonstrates that analyses of non-state actors yield valuable insights about economic patriotism. The study of trade unions provides just one among many other possible examples of how non-state actors help to reproduce territorially based economic partiality. Other relevant yet under-researched cases quickly come to mind, in particular consumer movements (Frank 1999) and business élites. Indeed, as Callaghan and Lagneau-Ymonet (2012) in this collection show, the study of a broad range of non-state actors is also useful to fully understand the ‘demand side’ rationale (or lack thereof) for EP in public policy-making. If there is a lesson to draw from the case study in this respect, it can only be that a strengthening of European works councils’ role – beyond the modest revisions of the directive in 2009 (see Waddington 2010: ch. 7), is likely to give a boost to the politics of job retention in the European Union.

Second, the example of trade unions at GM suggests that the development of economic patriotism over time should be taken as seriously as cross-country

variation, which requires us to pay close attention to longer-term continuities as well as to gradual change (see Streeck and Thelen 2005). For example, based on the General Motors evidence, it does not seem compelling to assume, as is often done in contemporary debates, that economic patriotism has had a 'comeback' in the 2000s after two decades of decline. At the same time, the case study's portrayal of the recent partial 'European turn' of economic patriotism reminds us to avoid a static conceptualization that has no place for the possibility of reproduction through renewal.

Third, the case study helps to advance the reflections about the conditions under which EP takes shape at the supranational, European level. The trade union experience at GM highlights the crucial importance of external economic challenges (here: corporate globalization). This is of course nothing new – as Rosamond (2002, 2012) demonstrates, notions of 'European' economic interests and 'European competitiveness' have been primarily defined in response to such external challenges since the early 1980s. However, like the contribution by Callaghan and Lagneau-Ymonet (2012), the contribution also shows that there is a complex relationship between perceptions of non-European challenges and intra-European fears of domination – it is only when the former are not overshadowed by the latter that supranational EP seems likely to emerge.

These remarks also point to a fourth and last aspect of broader significance, related to the multi-level framework of the economic patriotism concept. On the one hand, the case study supports the rationale for such a framework beyond the confines of traditional notions of economic nationalism. On the other hand, however, it points to differences between national and European economic patriotism – thus far the latter seems to have remained much more fragile and context-dependent. Indeed, the 'composite' character of European patriotism in the case of trade unions at General Motors suggests that it might perhaps be more appropriate to talk about 'European patriotisms' – European dimensions of distinct national allegiances, which need to be brought together and reconciled. In other words, European economic patriotism appears to be mediated through a plurality of national (and perhaps local) patriotisms, a finding, which is consistent with the thrust of a large body of scholarship dealing with the relationship between European and national identities (see Risse 2005). In turn, this suggests that we may need a stronger ideational grounding for the economic patriotism concept to fully grasp the phenomenon – including the analysis of imagined 'economic cultures' (Crane 1998). This may perhaps seem a daunting task, but it is one that promises a great deal of innovative scholarship.

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NOTES

- 1 In January 2010 General Motors sold the Saab brand to the Netherlands-based boutique car maker Spyker.
- 2 GM's European works council is officially called 'European Employee Forum'. For the sake of simplicity, the paper refers to the body as European works council (EWC).
- 3 The latter point, for example, was explicitly included in the 2001 restructuring framework agreement (Labournet Germany 2001).

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