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# ‘All u need is space’: Popularizing EU space policy

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ABSTRACT

The development of EU space policy and its two main programmes, Galileo and Copernicus, has necessitated a parallel process of legitimization of this policy. Popularization, defined as the simplification of a policy in order to be made accessible to the masses and accepted by them, has been a core legitimising tool in the hands of the European Commission, with regular help from experts/industrialists, or ‘organic intellectuals’. After establishing popularization conceptually, the analysis illustrates instances of both expert-based and non-expert-based popularization at the Brussels level. It concludes that the process of popularization conceals the most controversial aspects of both Galileo and Copernicus while also producing a ‘general interest’ that glues together a disparate set of social forces, in favour of EU space programmes and their manufacturers - the European space industry.



## 1. Introduction

It has become a commonplace to suggest that the European Union (EU) is a key actor in space, having developed its own space policy, resources and programmes. The emergence of this policy, however, has been a very complex and contradictory process, made possible through the massive mobilisation of resources and a parallel creation of a specific ideational projection of EU space policy as something beneficial for the Union, its security and its economy, but also for the world as a whole. To put it simply, the production of satellites for Galileo and Copernicus has, in the background, been accompanied by the production of ideology - of a particular depiction of space as an indispensable field where the EU ought to activate in order to survive and prosper. Such a depiction is, essentially, a form of popularization of space - or, as we shall argue, popularization of EU space policy via space.

How and why has EU space policy been popularized by its masterminds? What is, in other words, the function of popularization in this specific context? What tools and narratives have been utilized in order to achieve it? And what is the role of expert opinion in promoting the popularization and legitimization of this policy? The paper attempts to tackle these questions, first, by delineating the theoretical background of the analysis, with special emphasis on the notion of organic intellectuals and an understanding of public discourse inspired by Cox’s critical-theoretical perspective. Then, it moves to the concrete analysis of specific discursive moments in the evolution of EU space policy, focusing on expert reports and locating the scope and patterns of popularization involved there. At the same time, there are instances of popularization that are not directly mediated by the invocation of expert authority, such as EU-sponsored comics, competitions for young people, etc. Such ‘moments’ are also illustrated in the present paper, as the ‘menu’ of EU space policy popularization is broad enough to fit both expert- and non-expert - based tools, addressing a variety of audiences and purposes. Thus, the next section discusses three major illustrations of non-expert forms of popularization, before turning to the analysis of the rationale of popularization of EU space policy. Finally, a conclusion sums up the findings of the analysis.

Empirically, the article focuses on the Galileo and Copernicus programmes for a number of reasons. To begin with, they are the two flagship projects of EU space policy; without them, EU involvement in space would be merely a set of declaratory statements without any substance. So, if one wishes to examine whether popularization has been indeed an element of that policy, she has to confront these two programmes unavoidably. Also, these two projects have been ambitious, both technologically and financially, and are characterised by an element of politico-military sensitivity due to the non-civilian applications that both projects involve. Therefore, if indeed popularization is ‘biased’ towards legitimization, then its recurrence should be evident here. If not, then the entire argument can be safely discarded.

Methodologically, the article is a case study of legitimization of

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an EU policy - EU space policy - via popularization, by utilising a number of illustrations and by analyzing their discursive content and purpose. It adopts a two-fold method: on the one hand, it identifies a popularization potentiality (legitimacy) and then seeks relevant empirical confirmation; on the other hand, it utilises the empirical findings in order to add to the theoretical starting point by expanding on the functions and role of popularization. Apart from theory-related secondary bibliography, the analysis draws upon a range of reports and other material intended for public use.

## 2. Theoretical considerations

The theoretical starting point of this essay is Robert Cox's [1] conception of theory:

> Theory is always for someone and for some purpose. All theories have a perspective. Perspectives derive from a position in time and space, specifically social and political time and space. (…) There is, accordingly, no such thing as theory in itself, divorced from a standpoint in time and space. When any theory so represents itself, it is the more important to examine it as ideology, and to lay bare its concealed perspective.

Even though popularization is not theory, it involves the production of simplified, ideational images of social reality. Indeed, in the above excerpt one could replace the word 'theory' with the word 'popularization', and have a delineation of the present analysis' main thesis: that the popularization of EU space policy is something bigger than a set of seemingly neutral information campaigns; it is a tool serving a purpose that is informed by the interests of the 'authors' of popularization.

Popularization of a policy that concerns a field of science and technology, such as space, is conceptually preceded by the popularization of science. The latter has been given two interlinked definitions, as 'the spread of knowledge in science and technology to the masses' and as 'the acquisition of new science and technology for improving one's social and economic life' [2], p. 30. Undoubtedly, the introduction and incorporation of science and technology into the daily lives of the people is a task of tremendous significance, as it can improve the quality of life, intellectual capacity, professional prospects and set of skills of the population. As Albert Einstein said, 'it is of great importance to give the great public the opportunity to experience, consciously and intelligently, the efforts and results of scientific research' quoted in Ref. [3]. However, science and technology do not fall from the sky; they are embedded in social relations of production and their development is planned, organised and funded by industrial actors whose primary motive is the maximisation of profitability, in conjunction with public, national and supranational agencies. So, the popularization of, say, satellite navigation or earth observation cannot be artificially isolated from the producers and the subsidizers of the satellite systems that make these space-based applications happen. It ceases, in other words, to be merely popularization of science or technology; it becomes popularization of scientific or technological *policy*. And this is why the mainstream definition of popularization needs to be expanded in order to take into account the institutionalised policies in charge of supporting the development of science and technology.

Consequently, in the context of EU space policy, popularization is the process through which a policy outcome is simplified and made accessible so that it attracts public visibility and acceptance; in other words, it is a process of transformation of a complex set of social relations and interests into a coherent, easily understandable and approachable message favouring these interests. Legitimization, in parallel is the process through which a policy outcome is considered right and necessary, thereby creating a sense of urgency, and silencing any potential critique. The two terms are interrelated, yet they must be conceptually separated: popularization produces legitimization, while legitimization is not a prerequisite of popularization. Put simply, popularization is a means and legitimization is an end. The two processes are profoundly politicized, not only in the sense that they produce ethical-political outcomes - notions of 'right' and 'wrong' over an EU policy and the EU as such - but also in the sense that they are themselves produced by political actors aimed at securing political outcomes. What is at stake here is ideology and the formation of the collective consciousness of the European citizens, an ideational outcome of mechanisms that are very material in nature. Or as Kostas Gavroglu [4], p. 226 contends, 'scientific popularization and the various forms of knowledge in circulation are involved in the processes of continuous rearticulations of the dominant or hegemonic ideology'.

The popularization and legitimization of EU space policy has been marked by the role of experts, as has indeed been the case with European public policy-making *per se* [5]. This is due, primarily, to the very active engagement of the European Commission with scientific, industrial, military and other communities, in an effort to set and promote the agenda - to pave the way for the introduction and maintenance of its programmes by placing then under a veil of technocratic urgency and scientific approval. Contrary to the idea of experts as socially neutral, scientifically driven actors, it is hereby claimed that the experts active in the specific context of the public-private bodies - term borrowed from European Commission [6], - that are organised by the European Commission, act as organic intellectuals of the European military-industrial capital and its sub-section, the European space industry. According to the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, organic intellectuals give a social class 'homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields' [7], p. 5. In the Brussels policy context, organic intellectuals often appear grouped together, as collective organic intellectuals, in the form of think-tanks, panels of experts, and other institutionalised mechanisms. Their task is the production of a hegemonic set of ideas - in this case, the idea of the development of EU space assets as an urgent task with immense positive potential for the Union and its citizens - that sustains and legitimises the Commission's initiatives.

The industrialist can also potentially be an organic intellectual, and this is indeed a pattern foreseen by Gramsci himself: 'If not all entrepreneurs, at least an *elite* amongst them must have the capacity to be an organizer of society in general, including all its complex organism of services, right up to the state organism, because of the need to create the conditions most favourable to the expansion of their own class' [7], p. 6. Industrialists themselves - senior executives of arms/space companies - are regularly called upon to put on the hat of the expert, presenting and assessing the benefits of their products, with the output of their intellectual work then utilized by the Commission as a proof of the value of its space programmes. Conceptually, the industry does hold *de facto* an expert status, as the producer of technological applications, satellites etc. However, there is an evident conflict of interest when the industry is invited to assess the utility of the very platform it produces or the policy objectives that underpin the production of this platform. To that, one should ass the unbalanced composition of the expert groups in favour of the industry and the relatively secret *modus operandi* of these groups.

## 3. Panels, experts, reports

Expert groups have become a critical component of European decision-making and legislation, at least at the consultative level,