

## Beelines, Bypasses and Blind Alleys

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**Beelines, Bypasses and Blind Alleys: Theory and the Study of the European Union**

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# **Beelines, Bypasses and Blind Alleys: Theory and the Study of the European Union<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

Whilst the European Union has been beset by economic, political and existential crises in recent years, if our yardstick is the number of articles and books produced, the same cannot be said for the academic study of the EU. Indeed, the scholarly industry of analysing and seeking to explain what Jacques Delors once dubbed the 'Unidentified Political Object' is in rude health.<sup>2</sup> If crisis is good copy for journalists, crisis and complexity are often helpful ingredients for scholarly enquiry and provoke interest from publishers and journals.

A sizeable slice of recent literature on the EU has sought to offer new theories, new theoretical contributions or contributions to theory building. But to what extent have they improved our knowledge and understanding? After reflecting on the broader challenges associated with attempts to theorize and theory's role in the study of the EU, this contribution seeks to make four main arguments. Firstly, four new theoretical routes are identified: alternative, adaptation, synthesis and explaining disintegration. Each of these adds something to our understanding of the European Union and, as the great scholar of European politics Stanley Hoffmann (1959) argued, help fulfil the purpose of theory: to pose better questions.

Secondly, building on some of the insights of the new theories it argues that given the complexities of the current crises (Copsey, 2015; Phinnemore, 2015) and the broader processes of European integration, differentiated integration and disintegration, the study of the EU would benefit from the adoption of more combinatorial approaches and greater use of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches.

Thirdly, I argue there is a tendency to presentism, to focus on the current crises, but the real merit of close analysis of developments is usually in placing developments in the broader historical context of integration. Painting on a wider historical canvas offers an opportunity to observe the short and long-term dynamics of integration.

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<sup>1</sup> Countless colleagues have offered constructive criticism. I am particularly grateful to Anthony Arnall, Lorenzo Cladi, Nathaniel Copsey, Josefin Graef, Dermot Hodson, George Kyris, Julian Pänke, Willie Paterson, Nicole Scicluna and Mark Webber for comments on various iterations of this contribution.

<sup>2</sup> Speech by Jacques Delors, Luxembourg, 9 September 1985. Available at [http://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2001/10/19/423d6913-b4e2-4395-9157-fe70b3ca8521/publishable\\_en.pdf](http://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2001/10/19/423d6913-b4e2-4395-9157-fe70b3ca8521/publishable_en.pdf). Last accessed 23 April 2016.

Fourthly, it calls for a historical and empirical turn. Whilst recognizing that there is to some extent an implicit theoretical choice in any empirical study (Rosamond, 2006), it suggests that there is a danger of what Hoffmann (1977, p. 57) dubbed 'the rage for premature theorizing'. Before we can explain *why* something happened (or not) we need to know *what* happened. We need a firm foundation of facts and more empirical studies to help avoid the risk of a 'tendency towards *compulsive and mindless theorizing*' [emphasis in the original] (Hirschman, 1970, p. 229). As scholars of the EU our interests do not lie in calculating how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, but rather how the EU works (or does not) and when, why, how and in what form integration (or disintegration) occurs. At the heart of these questions are empirical puzzles requiring empirical study.

The purpose of this contribution is not to "critique" any one theoretical framework, question its ontological and epistemological assumptions and suggest that a particular framework is inherently "right" or superior than the rest. Rather, my purpose is to assess the contribution these new approaches can make to bringing us closer to understanding what Puchala (1971) famously depicted as the 'elephant', highlight what needs to be done and to ask what role theory plays and what role it should play in the study of the European Union.

### **I. Theory and Scholarship**

There are two major challenges made against theory. Firstly, the search for, and refinement of, theory drives scholars away from policy-relevant "useful" work. Secondly, theory hinders rather than helps scholarship, or at least it encourages scholarship to drive down what turn out to be blind alleys rather than short cuts. The worst aspect of this second tendency is akin to the driver who slavishly follows his/her GPS convinced it *must* be right rather than looking around to see if the directions make sense. Although I have much sympathy with those who bemoan ivory tower 'scholasticism' (Mead, 2010), the primary purpose of this contribution is not to engage in a debate about the dreaded "impact" agenda particularly well-known to those who work in British academia. Rather in light of recent scholarship my purpose is more to consider the second question.

Casting her eye over the state of academic life Jane Austen might remark today that it is a truth universally acknowledged that a scholar in search of academic fame, fortune or just a job is a need of his or her own theory. Thanks to the incentive structures of academia, scholars are often quick to theorize or claim their work contributes in some (significant) way to theory. Indeed, two of the great weaknesses of modern academia are the stronger incentives for individual achievement rather than collective knowledge and the vaulted position of theory vis-à-vis empirical work.

Theory offers scholars frameworks for understanding, opportunities to find meaning in a morass of data and a beeline to an explanation for a set of phenomena. In a trenchant defence of the importance of theory Mearsheimer and Walt (2013, pp. 431-2) argue theories 'identify how independent, intervening, and dependent variables fit together' and '[m]ost importantly, a theory *explains* why a particular hypothesis should be true, by identifying the

causal mechanisms that produce the expected outcome(s)' [emphasis in the original]. 'Well developed theories', they assert, are 'falsifiable and offer non-trivial explanations [which] 'yield unambiguous predictions'. They maintain that '[a] single article that advances a new theory or makes sense of a body of disparate findings will be more valuable than dozens of empirical studies with short shelf-lives' (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2013, p. 448).

Their defence of theory raises numerous questions. I shall return to the value of theoretical vis-à-vis empirical studies below, but for now focus on three themes. Firstly, all theories are implicitly or explicitly built on ontological and epistemological positions. For some, any enquiry a scholar undertakes is imbued with these stances which cannot be removed like a sweater, but rather are more akin to a scholar's skin (Furlong and Marsh, 2002). These positions frame scholars' thinking and identify appropriate questions to pose. To buy into a particular theory in this thinking, therefore, requires not just an acceptance, but an adoption of the same epistemological and ontological positions. Whilst respecting the position of the purists, I would suggest the logical extension of that argument is a scholarly cacophony in which everyone talks past everyone else or else silence in which no-one interacts because there is no agreement on the fundamentals. Blending and the type of combinatorial approaches I discuss below have distinct dangers, but the payoffs of explanation outweigh the costs of a lack of purity.

Secondly, although Wittgenstein bemoaned that 'we are bewitched into thinking that if we lack a scientific theory of something, we lack any understanding of it' (Monk, 1999) almost all scholars (in the social sciences) agree that theory is foundational to study. At that point views diverge markedly. For many who would classify themselves as constructivists, for instance, 'theory is a guide to empirical exploration, a means of reflecting more or less abstractly upon complex processes' (Hay, 2002, p. 47); a view which sits less comfortably with a description of theory as a 'causal argument of universal, transhistorical validity and nomothetic quality, which can be tested through the falsification of a series of hypotheses' (Diez and Wiener, 2009, p. 3). The broader, abstract understanding of theory has its merits, but ultimately in both the natural and social sciences and in significant slices of the humanities, the key questions are causal. Why is it like that? What caused that? Why did it not turn out differently? If theory has *any* role in scholarship it is to advance our understanding of causality. Even the more abstract constructivist theorizing is ultimately seeking to contribute answers to why questions.

Thirdly, although in the minds of some the discovery of causal mechanisms leads onto prediction, the very notion of predictability sits uncomfortably with 'those whose philosophical worldview tells them that the political world is so complex and indeterminate that it is not amenable to prediction' (Hay, 2002, p. 37). Even those like Waltz (1990, p. 29), whose *Weltanschauung* is similar to Mearsheimer and Walt, argue that prediction does not have to be part of theory, noting that 'theories of evolution predict nothing in particular'. Predictability can be helpful and is integral to the attempts to explain European *disintegration*, but it is not a necessary component of any theory.

## II. The Uses and Limitations of Theory in the Study of the EU

There has been hitherto no shortage of theorizing on the European Union. Each of the major theories has offered a substantial contribution to our understanding of the motors and locus of power in the process of European integration. Nonetheless, a number of challenges face anyone seeking to theorize the EU.

The first challenge, what can be dubbed the number 1 problem, is the uniqueness of European integration. Neofunctionalists sought to develop theories of regional integration based on the post-war pooling of sovereignty (e.g. Haas, 1958), but most theoretical activity focused on European integration has tended to respond to the challenge 'of what is this an instance?' (Rosenau and Durfee, 1995), by focusing on the case in hand and just making the occasional reference to wider lessons and the possibility of theoretical travel. Can – or indeed should we – focus just on the theoretical analysis of a single case? There is a real danger that a theory applied to one case becomes 'little more than a sophisticated description of that one case' (Rosamond, 2000, p. 69). Nonetheless, variations over time and in different policy fields offer traction from any theory of European integration, albeit one with more limited traction than the grand theories of politics or International Relations.

This criticism segways into a second challenge laid down by Hix (1994, 1996) who not only argued that just as we have no theory of American or German politics there could not be a theory of the EU, but also that neofunctionalist and intergovernmentalist accounts largely conducted by International Relations scholars were asking the wrong questions. For Hix, the study of the EU required an embrace of the toolkit of comparative politics. I would wholeheartedly agree that comparative politics can bring – and indeed has brought (e.g. Jachtenfuchs, 2001) – considerable insights into the workings of the EU system, but does that mean we should abandon EU integration theory altogether?

Even accepting that there is merit in a theory focused on EU integration poses the dependent variable problem: what exactly *is* European integration (Haas, 1971; Rosamond, 2000)? If there have been disagreements between scholars over this fundamental question (Diez and Wiener, 2009) one might ask what hope is there for meaningful dialogue between different theoretical traditions let alone developing a more cogent theory? Nonetheless, at the heart of most understandings of integration is the pooling of sovereignty i.e. the responsibility for certain decisions are taken at a supranational level. Through political, economic and legal analysis of the degree of delegation and the extent of pooling it is possible to produce measures of the variety and depth of integration across a large number of policy areas (e.g. Börzel, 2005).

I would suggest there is still merit in integration theory, which explains the pace, degree and variable nature of integration, stagnation and disintegration. In their different ways each of the four routes discussed below highlight the merits of integration theory. Adaptation and combinatorial approaches provide an explanation for the amount and form of the pooling of sovereignty, alternative theories encourage us to look in different ways and places, and disintegration

theorists indicate reasons why the integration project may unravel. The four routes outlined below offer new directions for research which enhance our understanding although none *per se* is fully satisfactory and they all provoke deeper questions and concerns.

### **III. Four Routes Towards a Better Understanding of the EU and European Integration**

Recent developments in the study of the European Union have provoked scholars to travel down four theoretical routes: alternative, adaptation, synthesis and explaining disintegration. In order to unlock the puzzles of European integration alternative approaches use different disciplines and non-mainstream paths, adaptation accounts amend and refine existing frameworks and synthesis scholarship seeks to blend and combine different approaches. I begin though with attempts to explain not integration, but rather disintegration.

#### *Explaining Disintegration: Why the only way isn't necessarily up*

Now appears a particularly 'appropriate' time to consider both integration and disintegration (Schimmelfennig, 2015, p. 723). Indeed, by the time this contribution is published, one of the major Member States may – or may not – have voted to leave the European Union. But it was not so much the threat of Brexit or even the existential challenge to the EU posed by the migration/refugee crisis, but rather the eurozone crisis, which fuelled an explosion of literature seeking to examine European *disintegration*, (e.g. Webber, 2014; Vollard, 2014).

The great merit of the burgeoning disintegration scholarship – which encompasses scholars of very different backgrounds and persuasions with both positive and normative agendas – is to remind us integration can go in both directions. Any theory of integration worth its salt should be able to explain the speed, extent, variations *and* direction of integration. Whilst the emphasis on alternative directions of travel in disintegration accounts is to be welcomed, we would be wise, however, not to overemphasize their novelty. Neofunctionalists, for instance, did consider the conditions for disintegration: not just spillover, but spillback (Haas, 1967; Schmitter, 1969).

#### *Alternative: Discipline and Deviance*

Alternative, or non-mainstream, theories have been present in scholarship for many years (e.g. Cocks, 1980; Calfruny and Ryner, 2003; Strange and Worth, 2012), but much like the disintegration scholarship it has been the economic woes afflicting the eurozone and the general malaise surrounding European integration in recent times which has fuelled a new wave of interest in alternative theories, especially – but not exclusively – from scholars from critical theory/Marxist traditions (Whitman and Manners, 2016).

Mainstream and critical theorists, however, have often talked about each other with barely concealed disdain or more frequently just talked past each other. Much of this stems from perceived irreconcilable ontologies and *Weltanschauungen*, but also from muddying or insuperable mixing (take your pick) of normative and positive positions. Radical left approaches offer at times

astute analysis of the role of capital and capitalism. The crisis in the banking sector, for instance, played a significant role in precipitating the eurozone crisis. Moreover, examining where a large slice of the bailout funds went and the general thrust of policies designed to tackle the eurozone's predicament underline that the response to the post-2008 economic crisis 'fundamentally subordinated social concerns to market imperatives' (Macartney, 2013, p. 8). Indeed, it is difficult to understand the current crisis without appreciating it is inextricably linked to the structures of power, the replication of those structures in capitalist systems and the power of international capital. For non-Marxists it is worth remembering that whilst his predictions and broader historicism may be highly questionable, Trier's most famous son's analysis of the workings of 19<sup>th</sup> century capitalism was insightful. But that does not mean we have to swallow hook, line and sinker a Marxist approach. At the very least we need to recognize the leaders and finance ministers sitting around the European Council and eurogroup tables were not just the pawns of international capital.

The need to embrace alternative insights also extends beyond disciplinary boundaries. Hitherto political scientists have been at the forefront of theorizing European integration. This dominance has offered disciplinary rigour, but also disciplinary constraints (Rosamond, 2007, p. 233). Given the increasing specialization of modern academia where it is hard enough to keep up with the literature in whatever specific sub-sub-sub-discipline most of us work in, it is perhaps no surprise that scholars grappling to explain European integration have not embraced the perspectives of other disciplines as much as they should. As Jones and Torres (2015, p. 714) noted, 'it is a harsh reality that in a world indexed by Google and narrated by Twitter, the barriers to entry in any disciplinary conversation are large'.

Scholars of the EU have been better than most political scientists in recognizing the need to integrate the insights of other disciplines. Not only has the study of law and legal institutions enriched the scholarship of integration (e.g. Alter, 2009; Sandholtz and Stone Sweet, 1998; Scicluna, 2014), for example, but it is clearly integral to cogent explanation. The European Court of Justice may not be the behemoth portrayed by Eurosceptic politicians and journalists, but thanks to both landmark cases such as *Cassis de Dijon* and day-to-day rulings it has played - and continues to play - an important role in European integration. More engagement with different disciplinary perspectives, especially history as I argue below, is needed in order for us to better understand Puchala's elephant.

### *Adaptation*

Recognizing the limitations of the standard theories of neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism (both the original and the liberal variants), Christopher Bickerton, Dermot Hodson and Uwe Puetter (2015a, 2015b) have adapted the long-standing tenants of the intergovernmental school and developed 'new intergovernmentalism'. At the heart of their study is what they label the 'integration paradox': since the passing of the Treaty on European Union, whilst the basic constitutional features of the EU have remained stable, EU activity has expanded to an unprecedented degree. Member States, they argue, 'pursue more



integration but stubbornly resist further supranationalism' (Bickerton et al., 2015a, p. 705).

Much *has* changed since the early 1990s. Bickerton and colleagues (2015a, p. 705) maintain there has been a proliferation of *de novo* bodies such as the European External Action Service, the European Food Safety Agency, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights and the European Banking Authority 'that often enjoy considerable autonomy by way of executive or legislative power and have a degree of control over their own resources'. For the new intergovernmental thesis the key here is that these new bodies fulfil functions that were not delegated to the Commission and tend to contain mechanisms for Member State representation. More broadly, and indicative of the centrality of Member States to the process of European integration, the European Council, as Puetter (2014, p. 68) argues, has become the 'new centre of political gravity'.

Frank Schimmelfennig (2015, p. 724), however, challenged the empirical basis of the new intergovernmentalism thesis, maintaining that the *de novo* bodies 'display a wide variation of intergovernmental and supranational features, the Commission and European Parliament have gained powers since the early 1990s and in the post-Maastricht era the "Ordinary Legislative Procedure" (i.e. the most advanced form of the Community method) is indeed, the "ordinary" decision-making logic and procedure' (p. 725). Moreover, other studies have questioned whether the Commission has been so peripheral in recent times (Nugent and Rhinard, 2016).<sup>3</sup>

Highlighting the argument I make about presentism below, the most telling criticism of new intergovernmentalism, however, lies in the temporal division. Although we can make a distinction between a pre-Maastricht era which was mostly about markets and a post-Maastricht era where non-market policies became more prominent in European integration, to see Maastricht as a watershed 'overlooks the extent to which it codified and built on existing integration dynamics within and around the then European Communities' (Phinnemore, 2015, p. 72). Indeed, Schimmelfennig (2015, p. 726) points out that European Political Cooperation (1970), the Monetary Committee (1958), the snake (1972), the European Monetary System (1979), the TREVI anti-terrorist intergovernmental network (1975), the beginnings of regional policy (1975) and the Schengen Agreement (1985) were 'all dominated by intensifying intergovernmental policy co-ordination both within and outside the Treaty framework'.

Whilst we may challenge the 'new' and question new intergovernmentalism's 'blanket characterization of EU integration' (Bulmer, 2015, p. 294) Bickerton et al make a strong and persuasive case for an intergovernmentalist framework. They enrich intergovernmental accounts in two ways. Firstly, although Andrew Moravcsik's (1998) *Liberal Intergovernmentalism* offered a detailed discussion of national preference formation largely in terms of the economic preferences Member States brought to the treaty negotiation tables, the crisis period in

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<sup>3</sup> See also Dinan's contribution to this volume.

particular has highlighted the ‘unstable set of relationships between domestic constituencies, member state governments, and EU policies and institutions’ (Bickerton, et al, 2015b p. 22). These relationships need to be understood much better, in particular the vulnerabilities, which shape states’ decisions to pool sovereignty (Keohane, 1982; Haughton 2010). With some notable exceptions (e.g. Paterson, 2011; Lucarelli, 2015), studies of individual Member States have remained largely the preserve of textbooks (e.g. Bulmer and Lequesne, 2013). Yet without detailed, empirically grounded studies of Member States theorizing on the European Union has weak foundations.

The second insight concerns public opinion. In their post-functional theory of European integration, Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks (2009, p. 5) observed since the early 1990s a shift in public opinion from ‘permissive consensus’ to ‘constraining dissensus’. Bickerton et al challenge the post-functionalist expectation that a more politicized public would ‘shrink[...] the scope of agreement’ (Bickerton *et al.*, 2015b, p. 26). Indeed, the raft of measures agreed upon by the Member States in recent years to combat the Eurozone crisis (EFSF, ESM, Six-Pack, Two-Pack, Fiscal Compact etc.) suggests any ‘constraint’ exerted by public opinion has been limited.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Bickerton et al argue the gap between governments and peoples has created an unprecedented opportunity for expanding the activities of the EU, but has also been a powerful constraint on the manner in which integration has taken place.

Public opinion, however, does matter. At times decision-making has been characterized by insulation and separation, but popular will has played a role. Indeed, it is difficult to understand the stances taken by Angela Merkel and David Cameron around the European Council table without considering the role played by public opinion. In Germany, the ‘politics of timing and the timing of politics’ has mattered to Merkel (Jacoby, 2015) and in the past few years it has felt that the Farage-fuelled Eurosceptic public opinion in the UK has been the tail wagging the dog in British policy and practice in Brussels. We should not underestimate the political antennae of those sitting round the key decision-making bodies in the EU representing Member States. Critics might point to the disregard of Greek public opinion expressed during two elections and a referendum during the course of 2015<sup>5</sup>, but whilst some individuals may have been driven by plans and ideology, we would be unwise to ignore domestic political opinion in other Member States. Public opinion does matter for politicians as it will ultimately determine how long they stay in their seats. As Jean-Claude Juncker once famously remarked, ‘We all know what to do, we just don’t know how to get re-elected afterwards’.<sup>6</sup>

The eurozone crisis, the possibility of Brexit and perhaps most especially the migration/refugee crisis have ensured a high level of politicization of the EU (Risse, 2015). Any satisfactory theory of European integration needs to integrate public opinion and political linkage into the equation in a robust and systematic

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<sup>4</sup> See Hodson’s contributions to this and previous issues of the *Annual Review*

<sup>5</sup> See Featherstone’s contribution to this volume

<sup>6</sup> *The Economist*, 15 March 2007

manner highlighting when they do and do not matter. As Hanspeter Kriesi argues in this volume politicization is not simply a post-Maastricht phenomenon. Indeed, rather than Maastricht marking a watershed it may be better to refer to 'intermittent politicization'. Moreover, politicization has not only varied over time, but is highly differentiated across countries. This argument underlines the need for more bottom-up empirically grounded studies rather than examinations of top-down Europeanization.

### *Combinatorial*

Whereas Bickerton et al. have sought to identify and elaborate a new general theory of integration, when confronted with the challenge of explaining the post-2008 crisis period of the EU or the development of integration in non socio-economic areas over a longer period of time, other scholars have sought instead to build new theoretical models and insights in a combinatorial, eclectic or synthetic manner (e.g. Jones et al, 2016; Leuffen et al. 2013), drawing explicitly or implicitly on calls for combination and to transcend the theoretical divides over 'isms' (e.g. Jupille et al, 2003; Lake, 2011; Saurugger, 2014; Verdun, 2002).

Jones et al (2016), for instance, combine intergovernmentalism with neofunctionalism in their explanation for the incremental, step-by-step response of the EU to the daunting economic and financial challenges of the eurozone crisis. Intergovernmental bargaining, they argue, leads to incompleteness because it forces states with diverse preferences to settle on lowest common denominator solutions. Incompleteness then unleashes forces that lead to crisis and Member States respond yet again by agreeing to lowest common denominator solutions. In their schema, the EU 'fails forward': 'again and again responding to the failures of incremental reforms by taking new steps to expand the scope and intensity of integration' (Jones et al, 2016, p. 1012). But such an intergovernmental account by itself could indicate two different directions of travel. What pushes the states towards solutions involving more integration are the 'forces of neofunctional spillover and supranational activism' (Jones et al, 2016, p. 1015).

A different way of conceiving European integration using a combinatorial approach has been offered by Dirk Leuffen, Berthold Rittberger and Frank Schimmelfennig (2013). They set out to explain variation in the integration process, both in horizontal (i.e. the 'territorial extension of the EU's policy regimes') and vertical (i.e. capturing the 'depth or centralization of supranational decision-making in different policy areas') terms (Leuffen, 2013, p. 245).

Identifying differentiation *per se* is nothing new (e.g. Stubb, 1996; Kölliker, 2006), but 'differentiation has increased rather than diminished in the course of European integration' (Leuffen, 2013, p. 26) and is worthy of explanation. Although Leuffen et al agree on the importance of intergovernmentalism, in contrast to Jones et al's, (2016, p. 1015) emphasis on neofunctionalism's ability to explain the 'gradual patterns of change over time', they suggest an intergovernmental baseline model which is affected by both institutional path-dependencies at the supranational level stressed by historical institutionalists

(Pierson, 2006) and identity politics at the domestic level (Hooghe and Marks 2009).

To be convincing as an overall theoretical framework for explaining integration any combinatorial approach cannot just be a pick and mix theory, which suggests X matters here, but Y matters there. It has to confront the challenge of whether the components can be combined in a meaningful and coherent manner. Ontological and epistemological purists might suggest different positions are 'unalloyable', but combination is 'possible' (Jupille, 2006, p. 213). Indeed, in a prize-winning book Frank Schimmelfennig (2003), for instance, blended constructivist and realist ideas effectively into the most cogent explanation of the eastern enlargement of the EU.

Even if we navigate the ontological and epistemological hurdle, however, there are further challenges. For some, theoretical approaches such as neo-functionalism are a 'package deal' (Alter, 2009, p. 14). But on closer inspection some of the major theoretical traditions are not a million miles apart. If we examine the major (supranational and liberal intergovernmental) accounts of what drove the internal market programme of the late 1980s, putting aside '[d]ifferences in emphasis', 'the ingredients of both explanations are very similar' (Schimmelfennig, 2010, p. 40). Moreover, several conditions of integration (interdependence, convergence of preferences and politicization) 'are stipulated explicitly or accepted implicitly by intergovernmentalism, supranationalism and constructivism' (Leuffen et al., 2013, p260). In other words, the challenge is not so much whether combination is possible, but how to construct a cogent combinatorial framework. Integral to that task are questions related to empirical foundations and the manner in which we undertake research.

#### **IV. Extending and Enhancing the Road To a Better Understanding**

The four routes sketched out above provide promising avenues of understanding, but I suggest theoretical work on EU integration needs to go further in three ways.

##### *The Parts, The Sum and The Whole*

Although it contains only a passing reference, Leuffen et al's *Differentiated Integration*, can be seen as illustrative of what Rudra Sil and Peter Katzenstein (2010) have labelled 'Analytical Eclecticism'. Taking inspiration from Hirschman's (1970) argument that paradigms can be a 'hindrance to understanding' and drawing on a number of examples of scholarships that have combined different approaches, Sil and Katzenstein make a strong and persuasive case for a combinatorial approach. They argue that '[s]implifications based on a single theoretical lens involve trade-offs, and can produce enduring blind spots unless accompanied by complementary, countervailing efforts to "recomplexify" problems' (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010, p. 9). The word 'eclecticism' may be synonymous with 'indiscriminate' and 'ragtag' (Bennett, 2013, p. 461), but Sil and Katzenstein's purpose is to emphasize taking the best from a variety of different approaches, methods or styles. They see analytical eclecticism's

value-added as 'a more open-ended analysis that can incorporate the insights of different paradigm-bound theories' (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010, p. 20).

Sil and Katzenstein are not suggesting that combinatorial approaches are necessarily suitable in all cases. Narrow questions can be – and perhaps are best – addressed within single paradigms, but for what they see as 'open-ended' and real world problems of international politics, Sil and Katzenstein argue there is a need to examine them in all their complexity and breadth. So far, beyond studies in European security and foreign policy (Cladi and Locatelli, 2016; Pohl and van Willigen, 2015) there has been little explicit use of analytical eclectic approaches in studies of the EU, but the evolving EU elephant seems a highly appropriate specimen to examine using analytical eclecticism. Indeed, it is striking not just that Jabko (2006) and Schimmelfennig's (2003) work are referenced as examples of the kind of approach Sil and Katzenstein advocate, but also that *Analytical Eclecticism* is dedicated to three scholars who made major contributions to the study of European integration: Ernest Haas, Karl Deutsch and Stanley Hoffmann.

#### *Changing Realities, Changing Theories: The Problem of Presentism*

For obvious reasons political science tends to have a bias towards the present. New theoretical frameworks have tended to emerge out of a feeling the existing ones do not explain the present (e.g. Hoffmann, 1966; Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Egan *et al*, 2010) and the multiple crises besetting the EU have understandably prompted scholars to search for new explanations. Crisis periods often feel new and distinct. If they really are so new and distinct, requiring new theorizing then we open ourselves up to the accusation that rather than just limiting ourselves to  $n=1$  we restrict ourselves to  $n$ =only a fraction of 1. Any truly convincing theory of European integration would be able to explain, for example, the lack of any integration after World War One, the decision to pool sovereignty after World War Two, the subsequent speed, nature and variety of integration and ultimately any disintegration. The ability of the work of Haas (1958), Hoffmann (1966) and Moravcsik (1998) to address at least most of these questions is part of the reason for their enduring appeal. Of course one strand of theorizing on the EU, historical institutionalism, *has* stressed the role of historical decisions in shaping the course of European integration, particularly in terms of identifying the stickiness of institutions and 'critical junctures' (e.g. Pierson, 1996; Verdun, 2015) and it is no surprise that combinatorial approaches have embraced historical institutionalism (e.g. Leuffen, 2013).

Indeed, in seeking to understand the current crisis we would be wise to think in more historical terms. Braudel highlighted the focus on the present of 'l'histoire evenementielle' flaring up in the night like a 'firework display of phosphorescent fireflies' and briefly illuminating the landscape around it might catch our eyes, but it can detract attention away from understanding 'the slower trajectories of change and the enduring continuities' (Braudel, 1980, pp. 10, 26; Tosh, 2008, p. 43).

Moreover, a deeper understanding of historical developments can help explain the crises and the responses of Member States. The Central and East European

states response to the flow of refugees is intimately linked to historical issues of weaker statehood and comparatively limited experience of migration during communist times (Haughton, 2016), the Brexit referendum of 2016 has striking parallels with the previous referendum of 1975 and Germany's stance and actions in the eurozone crisis cannot be understood without reference to the experience of unification a quarter of a century previously (Newman, 2015).<sup>7</sup>

This is not to suggest the present and the current crises are somehow carbon copies of past developments, but rather to stress the need to be more cognizant of longer-term historical developments. Jones et al's (2016) theorizing which offers a distinction between short-term intergovernmentalist dynamics and a much longer-term neofunctional logic, for instance, offers a helpful way of incorporating historical insights.

*Who, Where, What, When..... and Why?*

Scholars who have taken us down the alternative, adaptation, combination and disintegration routes have shed light on actors and processes and have provoked thinking about the speed, nature, motors, brakes and direction of European integration. Nevertheless, there is a more fundamental question to pose about advancement in knowledge: does theory help or hinder the search for understanding? Theories – as all adherents of them stress – offer fast-tracks and short-cuts, allowing us to speed along bypassing seemingly unimportant detail and getting us quickly to explanations. Yet do we know enough in order to theorize? The precursor of a satisfactory answer to a “why?” question are answers to the questions of who, where, what and when? Even Waltz (1990, p. 23), who offers a trenchant defence of theory, argues that we cannot ask how does X work or does it all hang together unless one has some clear idea of what the “thing” or the “it” might be.

The pace of change in the eurozone and the EU over the past few years has been striking. A plethora of measures, agreements and actions have ensured the single currency has survived and possibly with it the entire EU. The crisis, though, is not over. Until the eurozone crisis is behind us there are difficulties in thinking about causes and consequences, let alone the contribution of those events to the wider theoretical agenda. Indeed, it is striking that not only have many of the best accounts to explain the state of the EU largely eschewed theory (Copsey, 2015; Schmidt, 2009; Tsoukalis, 2011)<sup>8</sup>, but probably the two most insightful accounts of the eurozone crisis published so far have either sidestepped the theories of European integration (Marsh, 2010) or refrained from discussing the grand theories of integration until the penultimate chapter (Matthijs and Blyth, 2015). I am not suggesting that we should avoid all theorizing, but rather be more cautious of theorizing an on-going process.

Moreover, the rush to theory is having a potentially deleterious impact on our scholarship. Inspired in part by developments in US legal scholarship the main

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth remembering that Wolfgang Schäuble was a major player in the negotiations for German unification and the eurozone crisis (Novotná, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> See also Börzel's contribution to this volume.

direction of travel in legal studies of the EU over the past few decades has been away from doctrinal research involving article by article commentary and annotation and a close reading of texts towards more contextual and political analysis (Arnall, 2008, 2010). Whilst the greater interdisciplinarity of that shift was very much to be welcomed, the contextual work is only possible 'because other writers have conducted the necessary doctrinal analysis' (Arnall, 2008, p. 426). If too many scholars abandon analysis based on a close reading of the texts, there is a danger that contextual work will be based on insecure foundations. We can draw a parallel here with trends in the study of comparative politics. Robust and convincing large 'n' studies are frequently built on the insights of country experts. Without those who know the detail about specific cases, there is the danger of number-crunchers confusing what is 'measurable' with what is 'meaningful' (Copsey, 2015, p. 209). Indeed, it is striking that some of the most significant theoretical contributions to political science have grown out of detailed empirical scholarship of a single case (e.g. Putnam, 1993).

These two arguments underline the need for scholars not just to have greater knowledge of the twists and turns of more recent events, but also to have a solid historical grounding of developments. Yet despite the obvious linkages between history and political science, it is striking how little dialogue there is between the two disciplines. History is not just about descriptive detail, but can provide much of the flesh for political scientists helping to turn their arguments from lightweight to heavyweight.

Nevertheless, we need to ask a more fundamental question about how we use theory. To claims that theory might distract, or worse distort, scholarship provokes numerous objections. If we simply seek an empirical route might we just end up with a mindless collection of data? The European Union is not the most scintillating object of study at the best of times, but if we all become bean counters then we may end up trading interesting ideas for dull as ditchwater detail. Moreover, Rosamond (2006, p. 450) rightly reminds us, 'the selection of particular events or phenomena in the EU's history is in and of itself a theoretical choice'. Perhaps the greater risk, however, lies in theoretical cherry picking i.e. choosing assumptions that will generate the kinds of results the investigator wants to find (Pfleiderer, 2014). Instead of offering us a beeline to an explanation, theory may send us down a blind alley.

My purpose here is not to suggest that theory has no role (it does), but rather to argue we should be careful not to fetishize theory. Moreover, a specific theory should not be the starting point, guiding light and the end point of research activity. Instead of starting with a theory, generating a research question and undertaking empirical research to test theoretical expectations, we would be better off with deeper empirical studies unencumbered by specific theories as we generate and clarify the puzzles and only at a later stage testing and refining theories. Such studies would move at a slower pace, along empirical side roads rather than theoretical super-highways. They may not yield much ultimate insight - but then neither do unsatisfactory theories - but they will generate raw material which can be used for wider reflections. It is striking that Marks and Hooghe (2009) acknowledged that one of the major stimuli for their post-

functional theory of European integration was the mass of data generated by the Chapel Hill expert surveys which simply aimed at mapping party politics in the Member States. Moreover, Kassim et al's (2013) extensive survey of Commission officials' background and beliefs provides the basis for more robust theorizing. Neither Marks and Hooghe nor Kassim and colleagues embarked on their data collection viewing European integration through a specific theoretical lens, but as Donald Trump might put it, 'to figure out what the hell is going on'.

Stanley Hoffmann (1959, p. 358) warned us nearly six decades ago that '[c]ollecting facts is not enough; it is not helpful to gather answers when no questions have been asked first'. Few would disagree, but how do we generate those questions? Put simply, we can be driven by paradigms or puzzles. Whilst there is merit in paradigm-driven research agendas if we want to test specific theories, grappling with the open-ended questions of European integration are far better suited to puzzle-driven research. Not only can starting from empirical questions be a more engaging way to teach (Edkins and Zehfuss, 2014), but it will ultimately take us to better destinations.

### **Conclusion: The Long and Winding Road**

We should welcome the recent contributions of scholars who have forwarded alternative, adaptation, synthesis and disintegration frameworks for understanding European integration. Disintegration scholars remind us the direct of travel is not always forwards, whereas synthesis scholars underline that combining different approaches is not only possible, but necessary to grasp the 'the multifaceted and hybrid nature of European integration' (Egan et al, 2010, p. 2). As Hoffmann (1959, p. 372) warned many years ago, '[e]xcessive emphasis on one perspective produces optical illusions'. Adaptation scholars question whether the same frameworks can be used in different time periods and the alternative theories highlight that at the heart of an integration process which has markets and states requires an understanding of the functioning of capitalism and more broadly they remind us that a single disciplinary toolkit is not enough.

Genuine interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches are much harder to construct and coordinate, but given the collective acquired wisdom they can contain they have a much better chance of grasping the elephant in its entirety. In particular, any attempt to explain integration needs to be built on a solid historical basis. Arguably the most telling critiques of the theories of integration have come from historians (e.g. Milward, 1992; Lieshout, 2004). Moreover, our response to theories not seeking to explain the present is often to generate new theories, but these should also provoke us to look again more carefully at the empirical bases in previous periods. Present periods may be exceptions rather than the rule.

The *JCMS Annual Review* of 2015 is an appropriate place to reflect on the role of theory in the study of the European Union not just due to the significant scholarly activity of recent times, but also given Stanley Hoffmann's sad death in September 2015 and his lifetime contribution to the study of European politics and society. This is not to suggest Hoffmann was a ground-breaking theorist.



Indeed, his elegantly written articles highlighted the role and motivations of obstinate states, adding a necessary note of caution to our use of theories rather than outline a systematic theory of intergovernmentalism.

Theories are neither panaceas nor silver bullets. At best they can offer us a speedy and direct route to understanding, but we need to be cautious. '[W]e have to proceed methodically and gradually', conscious that 'the weakness of many theories comes from their attempt to skip several stages' (Hoffmann, 1959, p. 370). Robust theorizing needs not only to take adequate cognizance of the existing corpus, avoiding the dumping of existing theories just because they do not explain the present predicament, but also it needs to be grounded in thorough and detailed empirical knowledge. If well constructed they will help us pose better questions, uncover new and potentially promising paths of discovery, and ensure the long and winding road to understanding is at least a little shorter.

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