

Notes and Comments

On the Way to a Post-Functionalist Theory of European Integration

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No one inspired by the ‘neo-functionalist’ approach to regional integration (such as myself) should feel threatened by a ‘post-functionalist’ replacement for it. Unlike its long-term rival, ‘inter-governmentalism’, this way of conceptualizing what has been happening in Europe since the 1950s has always presumed that the process of regional integration would be transformative in the sense that, if and when it progressed, it would change the nature of the actors involved in it. Their identity, motives and mechanisms would shift and, correspondingly, so should the concepts and assumptions of those attempting to explain its trajectory and probable outcome.

Lisbet Hooghe and Gary Marks¹ offer precisely that: a new approach to studying the European Union as it has shifted from what they call a context of ‘permissive consensus’ to one of ‘constraining dissensus’. As a card-carrying neo-functionalist, I can only welcome the effort – with, however, some reservations.

The mechanism that they postulate as responsible for the shift and, consequently, for the future course of European integration is ‘politicization’ or, more accurately, the mobilization of mass public opinion with regard to EU policies and institutions. Interestingly, this was predicted by neo-functionalism as an eventual emergent property – even if the approach did not specify the event that would trigger it or the timeframe within which it was expected to occur. What was *not* predicted was that this mobilization would threaten rather than promote the integration process. In the neo-functionalist scenario, mass publics would be aroused to protect the *acquis communautaire* against the resistance of entrenched national political elites determined to perpetuate their status as guarantors of sovereignty. In the post-functionalist version, the inverse has occurred – opening up a gap between elites, by and large favourable to the expansion of EU tasks and decisional autonomy, and masses resistant to both.

Hooghe and Marks marshal an impressive command of the secondary literature on public opinion (unfortunately constrained in large part by *Eurobarometer* data sometimes of dubious validity) and are convincing in their descriptive observations. Moreover, their task has been greatly facilitated by the increased frequency with which member states have held national referendums on EU-related issues. No serious student of European integration can deny that something like

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¹ See Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, ‘A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus’, *British Journal of Political Science*, published online by Cambridge University Press, 2008, doi: 10.1017/S0007123408000409, hereafter referred to as H & M – with apologies for having usurped the trademark of a famous Swedish clothing chain. See also Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse, ‘Revisiting the Nature of the Beast – Politicization, European Identity, and Postfunctionalism: A Comment on Hooghe and Marks’, *British Journal of Political Science*, published online by Cambridge University Press, 2008, doi: 10.1017/S000712340800046X; and Hanspeter Kriesi, ‘Rejoinder to Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, “A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus”’, *British Journal of Political Science*, published online by Cambridge University Press, 2008, doi: 10.1017/S0007123408000471; also all in *British Journal of Political Science*, 39 (2009).

politicization has occurred since the mid-1980s. The authors are more circumspect about attributing causality with regard to this phenomenon. Was it *endogenous* to the integration process as it penetrated into more-and-more functional arenas of ever greater controversy and allocated greater decisional autonomy to supra-national actors – as neo-functionalism would have predicted? Or, was it *exogenous* to that process as member states found their national interests transformed by events like the collapse of communism or the rising tide of trans-continental migration – as inter-governmentalism would have presumed?

Identifying a mechanism – the mobilization of public opinion by opportunistic national politicians – is not the same as specifying its impact, especially whether that impact will be persistent and pervasive enough to determine the future course of the integration process, as H & M claim. Given that the member states are all liberal democracies and, hence, presumably sensitive to shifts in citizen preferences over time, this may seem to be an impertinent question. But it is not – once the reader is reminded that public opinion in such regimes is always filtered through representative institutions and that these political parties, interest associations and social movements have a logic of their own. Moreover, their most direct connections with mass publics occur during elections and these are sporadic occurrences often overshadowed by citizen concern with other, usually more parochial, issues.

What gives this mechanism its allegedly fundamental status is something they call ‘identity’. Presumably, this has always been present in the politics surrounding European integration, although it received scant (if any) attention by either neo-functionalists or inter-governmentalists. According to H & M, only relatively recently have political entrepreneurs been successful in exploiting it with regard to the European Union. They are less clear about why this has happened. Their data show that ‘(mass) preferences have not changed much’, which means that the context within which these stable preferences have been experienced must have done so. Or, as they put it, ‘the game has (changed)’ and their explanation is (uncharacteristically for them) vague – something about new issues with ‘opaque economic implications and ... transparent communal implications’.² Reading between the lines, one is tempted to conclude that the European Union has temporarily had a tough time dealing with Eastern Enlargement and its own institutional re-definition, but that once these are resolved the integration process should be able to go back to ‘business as usual’, satisfying the functional interests and welfare expectations of its heterogeneous public while leaving their multiple identities intact and unchallenged. If one adds to this the prospect (only hinted at in the conclusion) that collective identities are not fixed and that successive generations are increasingly likely to identify more favourably with the European project, then, the need for a new theory becomes much less compelling. What they have discovered fits rather well with the (admittedly capacious) embrace of neo- or, especially, neo-neo-functionalism.³

But I would agree with H & M that ‘identity politics’ at the European level is not likely to prove so epiphenomenal or episodic. Mass publics will have to be incorporated within the process of regional integration and their preferences cannot be reduced – if they ever could – to the satisfaction of marginally greater material benefits. Historically, at the national level when analogous issues of collective identity and citizen inclusion emerged, it was *political parties* that stepped in to provide intermediate levels of identification and to negotiate the compromises in rules and the distribution of benefits that eventually led to the re-legitimization of political authority. H & M do mention political parties – but exclusively national ones. This is all the more surprising given their claim to be advancing a ‘multi-level governance approach’. If one were looking for a plausible mechanism for responding to the elite–mass gap in expectations and for re-fashioning multiple collective identities according to different levels of political aggregation, the place to go would be the eventual formation of a supra-national European party system. Moreover, that system could not be a simple conglomeration of national systems (as the present one largely is) and might even involve a

² H & M, p. 18.

³ See Philippe C. Schmitter, ‘Neo-Neofunctionalism’, in A. Wiener and T. Diez, eds, *European Integration Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 45–74.

substantial contribution from parties or fractions representing sub-national constituencies. In other words, multi-level-ness might not just be a descriptive term, but a political solution.

So, the dog that is not barking in H & M's 'post-functional' scenario is the European political party.⁴ Why is this the case? The simple answer is that, contrary to earlier expectations, political parties as such – regardless of level – have declined in their capacity to integrate citizens into a stable and 'legitimate' relation with the political order. The evidence at the national level of decline in membership, voting consistency and respect for parties and their leaders is overwhelming. In short, for reasons that are debated (but none-the-less conclusive), this is not the time to found a political party or to expect that any party – whatever the level of aggregation – will be able to perform the functions attributed to it in the past.⁵

The more complex answer is that there are unique problems with the formation of European political parties in a contemporary system of 'multi-level governance'. H & M allude to this, without making it an integral part of their alternative theory. The issues generated by cleavages at the European level do not correspond to those at the national level. In the statistical jargon, they are orthogonal rather than oblique. It would have been vastly easier if the Left–Right pattern that so dominated the formation of national party systems had simply transposed itself to the supra-national one. Then, conglomeration along these lines might have worked. Instead, the cleavages around the issue of more or less Europe cut across those at the national level.⁶ And this gave to national political elites a powerful motive not to introduce issues with regard to European integration in their manifestos and campaigns since these would inevitably have divided their militants and followers. A 'conspiracy of silence' ensued for a long period until they were forced to address these issues by the increasing success that fringe competitors on both the extreme Left and Right had in doing so.

The solution is obvious – which does not mean that it will even be recognized, much less chosen. There are simply too many and too powerful interests entrenched at the national level. The emergence of a European party system that was orthogonal to most, if not all, of the national ones would be perceived as a serious threat to the legitimacy and viability of national political parties – already weakened in their membership and status by trends that have little or nothing to do with European integration. There are 'modest reforms' that could be introduced from above by European institutions, especially the European Parliament (EP), to provide incentives to shift the procedure for the nomination of candidates from the national to the supra-national level,⁷ and there are some signs that candidates for national office are relying increasingly on trans-national European connections when running for office, but it would take a large-scale crisis of EU institutions to overcome the entrenched resistance – and, even then, would probably be too little and too late to

⁴ Actually, according to old-fashioned neo-functionalism, there is a second 'non-barking dog' that I do not have the space to explicate. Here, the assumption was that the integration process would trigger a much more substantial flow of migration across national borders within Europe. Except for selected professionals (and many purchasers of second homes), there has been much less of this than expected. West Europeans have proved to be quite immobile. In the case of Southern Enlargement, membership in the European Union even led to a decline rather than an increase in transnational mobility. Eastern Enlargement, at least in the short run, has triggered much more substantial migratory flows – and this is a good thing in theory (if not in practice). These intra-European migrants were supposed to become important defenders of regional institutions (and, perhaps, identity).

⁵ I have explored this theme in 'Parties are not what they once were', in L. Diamond and R. Gunther, eds, *Political Parties and Democracy* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 67–89.

⁶ H & M make no reference at all to the subnational level. Since the phenomenon of relatively autonomous patterns of partisan cleavage at this level is relatively recent, it might be presumed that they would correspond more closely with what is happening at the European level. Certainly, the slogan of 'The Europe of Regions' seemed to promise such a re-alignment. Whatever the emergent reality, one might have expected a 'multi-level governance' perspective to at least speculate about its importance.

⁷ For a few suggestions of modest reforms that might do this, see Philippe C. Schmitter, *How to Democratize the European Union – and Why Bother?* (Boulder, Colo.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

make a difference. What did it historically at the national level – namely, international or civil war – is (fortunately) not available at the supra-national level.

Here, a new prospect may have been introduced by Eastern Enlargement. Parties in post-communist polities are much less well entrenched in citizen identities than in the West and they are even less aligned with the traditional Left–Right cleavage pattern. As H & M point out, the co-ordinates at the national and supra-national levels of partisan competition are more oblique than orthogonal in this part of Europe, which should mean that the issues of conflict can be more easily transposed from one level to another. Whether these twelve new member states will be sufficiently assertive to overcome the inertia of their richer and more experienced predecessors is, however, dubious. How can they be expected to lead the way to a more coherent and appropriate European party system when most of them have made such a mess of their national ones?

Therefore – if and when it emerges – a party system on the European level will have to be sculpted from the quarries of Western Europe. And the raw material embedded in its national party systems there is hardly favourable to the effort.⁸ Not only do the cleavage patterns criss-cross rather than co-align with each other, but national politicians have also grown quite attached to the financial and patronage resources that come from their gate-keeping role in conducting European parliamentary elections. There have been scattered signs of movement: pan-European party congresses and manifestos; ‘cross-campaigning’ by notables in each other’s elections, some shuffling back-and-forth from one level to the other, etc. But no one expects that national party executives are going to step aside graciously and let the supra-national party secretariats in Brussels take over responsibility for candidate nomination and electoral campaigning. The emergence of a standard European electoral law, especially one that encouraged the formation of trans-national constituencies in particular border regions, would help – but not suffice. The only scenario that I can imagine that might bring about such a shift would be the acute embarrassment generated by widening divergence between the outcomes of national and supra-national elections. Presumably, if national parties in power started regularly to lose by ever more significant margins in EP elections, they might seriously consider the virtues of divorce, i.e. of allowing the latter to be conducted by parties under distinctive labels with candidates that they had no responsibility for selecting.

The key to unravelling the brave new world of ‘post-functionalist’ European integration lies in the notion of ‘refraction’, namely, the acute observation made by H & M (alas, without much further elaboration) that, for the foreseeable future, the politics of the European Union will have to pass through and be distorted by the conflicts and aspirations of national party politicians for whom the European level is of secondary importance (and will probably remain so). Until this level has been either finessed or superseded, the lines of cleavage across national and sub-national borders will have great difficulty in articulating themselves and laying the basis for a fundamentally different political order. This is the sort of ‘transcendence’ that neo-functionalists talked about, but failed to explicate.

Is there an alternative to relying on the *deus ex machina* of a European system of political parties? And has H & M’s ‘post-functionalist’ approach identified it? I could not find it. They are fully aware that public opinion alone is impotent – most of all, at the level of Europe as a whole. Established politicians and aspiring political entrepreneurs might be able to shift their expectations and careers to the European level, but, without the sort of infrastructure that only parties can provide at that level of aggregation, they are not likely to succeed. The mass media offer only an inferior alternative. Not only are the media at least as ‘national’ or ‘sub-national’ in ownership and vision as are political parties, but they are also severely limited in their reach in a region of many languages and

⁸ Ignorance prevents me from speculating about the potential contribution that might come from the subnational level – from the *provinces, regioni, Länder, estados autonómicos*, and so forth. My impression is that autonomy in local party organization has been on the increase, precisely because the traditional national level cleavages have declined in significance with regard to the issues involved at that level. Whether the ‘sub-’ could combine with the ‘supra-’ to redefine the lines of strategic partisan competition is anyone’s guess.

cultural traditions. Something like Euro-media have begun to emerge, e.g. the *Financial Times* and *Euro-News*, the ARTE television channel, but they have attracted only a very selective public.

The intrusion of public opinion into the process of European integration is a fact – probably an irreversible one. All future theorizing will have to acknowledge that the citizens of the European Union have become increasingly sensitive to its distribution of costs and benefits and to its connection with their multiple collective identities. H & M seem to believe that this has negative implications. I am less convinced that this poses a threat to the process of integration. It may even offer an opportunity. In the short run, fringe groups and factions of the Left and Right at the national level have been more successful at exploiting the tensions generated by ‘opaque economic and transparent communal issues’, but why should this always be the case? So far, no serious threat to the integrity of EU institutions has emerged and decision-making has proceeded more-or-less unimpeded. If, in the medium run, this were to happen and the *acquis* were to be jeopardized, I suspect that the elite–mass gap would be rather quickly bridged and the overlapping consensus in favour of the integration process would assert itself.

Finally, in the longer run, collective identity is a variable – not a constant – and I foresee no reason to believe that Europeans will not be able to add a more comprehensive regional identity to all of the others they already bear. What remains a mystery that neo-functionalists thought they had resolved by invoking the emergence of a Europe-wide party system and that post-functionalists such as H & M leave in abeyance is what formal institution or informal arrangement will accomplish this task. Is it just remotely possible that the European Union might become the world’s first post-modern polity that refracts the interests and identities of its citizens directly through electronic channels of virtual representation, thereby, doing away with the need for political parties and site-based elections? Not very likely, I admit, but then neither was European integration back in the late 1950s.