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Is liberal intergovernmentalism regressive? A comment on Moravcsik (2018)

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ABSTRACT

This commentary discusses the evidential basis of postfunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism and Moravcsik's (2018) critique of postfunctionalism.

KEYWORDS Postfunctionalism; liberal intergovernmentalism; multilevel governance; European integration

Rarely has a theory been so closely associated with a single volume as the theory of liberal intergovernmentalism is with Andrew Moravcsik's *The Choice for Europe* (CfE). Several contributions in this special issue and the one published in the *Journal of Common Market Studies* (2018) question liberal intergovernmentalism's relevance in a politicized European Union by comparison to postfunctionalism. In his 2018 article, Moravcsik defends liberal intergovernmentalism and critiques postfunctionalism, referring extensively to Hooghe and Marks (2009) and an earlier version of our article now published in the *Journal of European Public Policy*.¹ In this essay, we contrast the evidence underpinning these theories, discuss AM's critique of postfunctionalism, and explain why inflating liberal intergovernmentalism is problematic. For transparency, we detail sources and interpretations in an extensive appendix on our websites.²

Our debate with Moravcsik engages three basic questions: What are the causal underpinnings of international integration; how can one assess the validity of alternative explanations; and what are the most constructive ways to debate them.

On the first question, postfunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism agree and disagree. They share the (neo)functionalist premise that institutionalized cooperation among states is an effort to solve transnational problems. However, postfunctionalism argues that this is countered by the desire for self-rule on the part of those who conceive their national identity in conflict

with the exercise of supranational authority. The corresponding puzzles that postfunctionalism raises have to do with the sources of identity, the conditions under which identity and functional pressures are mobilized politically, and their effects on international governance.

These puzzles are directly relevant to the European Union, the context in which regional integration has gone furthest and where we have not only astute theory but diverse sources of information on politicization. However, it makes little sense to confine a theory to European integration, and postfunctionalism explicitly places the EU in the broader comparative context of multi-level governance among and within states.

Postfunctionalism does not seek to point-predict particular outcomes. This applies even to Brexit, a series of events in which postfunctionalism is reputed to be prescient. However, we anticipated only the political tensions that could lead to such an outcome. To predict Brexit one would need to predict not only the result of the referendum, but also the complex bargaining that ensued, the shifting responses of MPs, and Prime Minister Cameron's decision to hold the referendum in the first place. Point-prediction of such events requires far greater knowledge than we have, and social scientists avoid the claim that they can do so on grounds of pragmatic modesty. Postfunctionalism, like other social science theories, seeks to uncover regularities under *ceteris paribus* conditions.

This has implications for how one approaches the evidence. It is preferable to assess a theory against a range of comparable cases, either in focused structured case studies or in quantitative analysis. The analyst can then frame generalizations and test them against a wide range of evidence under controls. Assessing the power of a theory to predict individual events is less transparent and more difficult to replicate.

Debate about the relative validity of contending theories is always welcome, though to be honest, it is best conducted by those who are removed from the genesis of the theories in question. Feynman (1985: 343) once remarked that the first principle of science is that you 'must not fool yourself, and you are the easiest person to fool'. This is another reason why one's approach to the evidence is so vital.

Core claims and method

Postfunctionalism posits a tension between the functional benefits of multi-level governance and the desire for self-rule. Drawing on the comparative analysis of public opinion, voting, and political parties, postfunctionalism theorizes the incidence of exclusive identity at the individual level, the conditions under which exclusive identity is politicized in competition among political parties, and the resulting structure of political conflict. While postfunctionalism is intended to come to grips with evolving EU politics, it is targeted at a

range of multilevel governance settings. The core expectation is that the re-allocation of authority is constrained by the politicization of exclusive identity in mass politics. This is conditional on the character and salience of an issue, how it is connected to other issues, whether a decision enters mass politics, and the ideologies of the actors who make key decisions.

Postfunctionalism makes claims about individual preferences, party competition, and the structure of political conflict. It engages evidence from case studies alongside cross-sectional and panel surveys of citizens, political parties, social groups, and the media. The effort to test postfunctionalist claims has also generated information that raises new puzzles by placing the EU in a comparative frame. This includes data on decision making and authority in 76 international organizations and on multilevel governance in 81 countries (Hooghe et al. 2016, 2017).³ These are intended to be used by the scholarly community rather than to vindicate a particular theory. The datasets lay out their sources, assumptions, and indicators transparently before the reader.

Both liberal intergovernmentalism and the evidence supporting it have their definitive expression in the *Choice for Europe* (Moravcsik 1998) (CfE), which remains one of the most cited sources for the study of European integration. Liberal intergovernmentalism theorizes European integration as a process of inter-state bargaining in which governments are chiefly motivated by economic preferences rather than by geopolitics or ideology. Bargaining takes place in two arenas: domestic arenas where national preferences are formed; and inter-state negotiation where governments determine jurisdictional reform. Treaties are negotiated by 'national leaders who consistently [pursue] economic interests – primarily the commercial interests of powerful economic producers and secondarily the macroeconomic preferences of ruling governmental coalitions' (CfE: 3).

In his 2018 article (1658), AM claims that 'Few scholars or commentators still contest LI's ability to explain the past'. However, we follow Lieshout et al. (2004) in finding that CfE biases the evidence to sustain an economic explanation. The evidence in CfE takes the form of an extended narrative that encompasses the bulk of the book. Narrative can be a valuable approach in the social sciences but it comes with a particular challenge. Whereas systematic case study and quantitative analysis are designed to allow observation to check theory, a narrative that seeks to predict particular outcomes makes it difficult to disentangle observation and theory. This potential pitfall has led historians to place great weight on the accurate use of sources. To what extent has an author accurately cited material? Does the author interpret the sources plausibly or does he deploy them in line with his theory?

There is reason to believe that CfE is weak in each respect. When one reads the sources marshalled to support the argument in CfE it becomes apparent that they have been heavily interpreted to amplify economic factors,

including above all, agricultural interests. Profiles of key sources on our websites reveal a pattern of bias in interpretation and bias of omission that goes far beyond the subjectivity that could be considered normal in a narrative.⁴

Postfunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism differ sharply in their accounts of the preferences of key political actors. This difference reflects contrasting approaches to evidence as well as contrasting ontologies.

Moravcsik's critique of postfunctionalism

The evidence for AM's interpretation of European integration appears unconvincing for recent decades. Over the past twenty-five years European reform has been politicized in twenty-two referendums, eleven of which have seen governments go down in defeat. Debate over the EU has come to play a major role in national elections, pitting mainstream political parties against anti-EU challengers. If they wish to sustain support, governments need to be intensely aware of public opinion over European issues. Europe and immigration have combined to fuel a nationalist challenge to mainstream political parties which have seen their share of the vote decline from an average of 72.5% in the late 1990s to 54.5% in 2018.⁵ The contest is two-sided. Previously quiescent pro-EU citizens have begun to mobilize in large numbers. Green and social-liberal parties in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, and the Netherlands have seen their vote share increase, while Brexit generated mass pro-EU demonstrations. The debate involves the kind of society in which we wish to live. It is a debate about polity, not just policy. And there is mounting evidence that it is restructuring political conflict across Europe.⁶

AM responds to postfunctionalism along two lines.⁷ First, he downplays phenomena that are not subject to LI. Second, he inflates LI to encompass them.

The main line of defense in JCMS (2018) is to say that popular opposition to Europe has 'little effect' because '*populists have rarely been successful in recent general elections, referendums and European elections, and in exceptional cases of success, they soon moderate general opposition to the EU*' (2018: 1663, author's italics). This ignores both the rise of populist nationalism and the research it has generated. By 2018, populist nationalists received at least 10 percent of the vote in 15 of the 28 EU member states. Over the past ten years they have entered, sustained, or brought down governments in Austria, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Slovakia. Where nationalists are considered non-coalitionable, as in Germany, their rise has had the profound effect of constricting coalitions and government alternation. At the same time, Europe and immigration have intensified divisions within mainstream political parties.

AM claims that nationalism is symbolism without substance. Like de Gaulle's geopolitics, populist nationalism elicits only 'rhetorical lip-service'

from governments. It amounts to 'organized hypocrisy', a 'kabuki theatre' (2018: 1653, 1662–1663). And, in any case, '[t]he potential salience of migration is not a recent development: majorities in nearly all OECD countries have opposed migration for decades ...' (2018: 1662).

We disagree with both statements. The political salience of immigration has increased significantly over the past decade and, as postfunctionalism theorizes, this has reinforced opposition to Europe. Radical TAN parties have been pivotal in mobilizing a transnational cleavage arising from the perforation of national states by immigration, integration, and trade. This is a phenomenon that can be probed systematically. The Chapel Hill Expert Survey tracks the positioning of political parties on Europe and a range of issues over the past two decades. This has allowed scholars, including us, to investigate how political parties connect Europe to immigration across countries and over time. CfE virtually ignores public opinion and party competition, and it has almost nothing to say about immigration.

Postfunctionalism theorizes the conditions under which national identity is mobilized to shape jurisdictional reform. Brexit is an example of this in a high barrier party system where a new cleavage produces severe party divisions and high-voltage conflict. Postfunctionalism provides an explanation of the sources of the conflict, the decision to hold a referendum, the psephology of support and opposition, and the course of the debate in which Remainers appealed to the functional benefits of integration and Leavers opposed foreign rule and immigration. There is no return to the pre-Brexit status quo even if the UK were to revoke Article 50 and remain in the EU. The EU would accommodate a more intransigent, polarized, but diminished state that would unload its ideological baggage in European debate. And the UK itself has been deeply riven by Brexit. The cleavage over Europe has intensified, and territorial tensions have increased.

Liberal intergovernmentalism downplays Brexit. In his recent article, AM admits that 'LI does not claim to offer an entirely satisfactory explanation for Prime Minister David Cameron's risky decision to call a referendum or its surprising outcome', and then blames British exceptionalism about which '[i]t is unclear whether LI, PF, HI or any other theory can say much else' (1663). Having declared the choice of decision arena inexplicable, AM claims that Brexit is merely symbolic politics.

LI sees only two viable options: to reverse course and renegotiate Britain's position within the EU, or to engage in 'organized hypocrisy', pulling out formally and rhetorically, while pressing to retain substantive policies as close to the status quo as possible ... [E]ither way, functional policy changes little (1664).

This underpins the idea that politicization is epiphenomenal. Policy outcomes are functionally determined if one believes that a political system will rebalance toward what its interests are.

In the new rendition of liberal intergovernmentalism, the theory is stretched far beyond its former frame. To respond to the criticism that government preferences depend on much more than the producer groups that were the focus of CfE, AM asserts that this was never his intention. However, the treatment of what CfE terms ‘nonproducers’ is simplistic. The political influence of nonproducers is conceived to be a simple function of a country’s per capita income and as limited to regulation of particular policies, such as health and safety on the ground that this ‘explanation remains deliberately simple, abstracting away from . . . collective action, formal institutions, partisan competition, and issue linkage’ (CfE: 36, 40). Postfunctionalism suggests that this leads in precisely the wrong direction if we are to understand the forces bearing on European integration (2009: 23).

The JCMS article retreats from the core claim of CfE that commercial preferences explain the politics of European integration. It conceives LI as encompassing all rational influences on policy making ‘starting from the LI premise that “the primary interest of governments is to maintain themselves in office”’ (2018: 1652). However, to explain how governments maintain themselves in office requires that one analyze issue linkage, partisan competition, public opinion, and elections – precisely the phenomena that CfE excludes on grounds of simplicity.

AM wishes to contrast LI’s analysis of rational self-interest to the purportedly non-rational and irrational politics of postfunctionalism. However, the forces theorized in postfunctionalism, including ideology, identity, and the desire for self-rule, are no less rational or irrational than the pursuit of material self-interest. Rationality refers to the relation between means and ends, not the desirability of the ends. Postfunctionalism argues that political parties are rational in responding to exogenous change but have sunk costs that constrain their flexibility. Postfunctionalism posits that identity as well as economic interest underlies preferences over European integration. ‘Identity is causally important to the extent that an issue has (a) opaque economic implications and (b) transparent communal implications that are (c) debated in public forums by (d) mass organizations rather than specialized interest groups’ (2009: 13). Each of these conditions can be (dis)confirmed using unbiased information. Unlike LI, we seek to explain the sources of public support and opposition to Europe, and we find that economics is less useful than theory drawn from comparative politics and psychology.

Beyond producer groups, LI is now conceived as covering *all* social groups. ‘Social groups often have an incentive to pressure governments to accommodate their interests’ and so ‘the most important determinant of international cooperation is the pattern of potential transnational co-operation and competition among *societal* actors’ (2018: 1651 – our italics). AM concedes that LI ‘does not explain *everything* that goes on in an increasingly politicized and contested Europe’, a concession that is modestly repeated a page later.

However, we are informed that LI ‘encompasses a far broader range of phenomena than is often believed, *including non-economic concerns, public opinion, partisan politics*, the role of smaller states, informal and evolutionary processes and unintended consequences’ (1649, 1650 – our italics). These inflated claims are regressive and weaken rather than strengthen the theory. Artificially stretching LI widens the scope for ad hoc adjustment to cover every contingency.

Notes

1. Our introductory article for this special issue lays out the contributions of post-functionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, and neofunctionalism in explaining Europe’s four big crises: the Eurocrisis, the migration crisis, Brexit, and illiberalism.
2. See <https://garymarks.web.unc.edu/> and <https://hooghe.web.unc.edu/>.
3. These data are available at <https://garymarks.web.unc.edu/data/international-authority/> and <https://garymarks.web.unc.edu/data/regional-authority/>.
4. Profiles of key sources relating to de Gaulle’s European policy are available on our websites.
5. Average vote share across the 14 largest EU member states in Western Europe for national elections in 1999 (or most recent year prior) and 2018 (or most recent year prior). Source: CHES data <https://chesdata.eu>.
6. The causes and effects of politicization are systematically analyzed and debated by Stefano Bartolini, Tanja Börzel, Catherine De Vries, Pieter de Wilde, James Dennison, Geoffrey Evans, Edgar Grande, Christoffer Green-Pedersen, Sara Hobolt, Dominic Höglinger, Swen Hutter, Hanspeter Kriesi, Robert Rohrschneider, Jan Rovny, Frank Schimmelfennig, James Tilley, Stephen Whitefield, Michael Zürn, and in the contributions to this special issue.
7. The critique of postfunctionalism in the JCMS article is misleading at several key points, two of which we note here. Postfunctionalism theorizes the sources and consequences of the tension between exclusive national identity and functional pressures. It does not claim that *Europe is ‘disintegrating across the board’* (Moravcsik 2018: 1661, author’s italics). We reject the view that jurisdictional outcomes are functionally efficient, and emphasize instead an ‘agnostic detachment about whether the jurisdictions that humans create are, or are not, efficient’ (2009: 2). JCMS (2018: 1660) tells us that ‘PF remains, in Hooghe and Marks’ words, “agnostic” about under what conditions and in what direction concrete policy responds to pressure’ (2019).

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