Commentary

Brexit and the Problem of European Disintegration

Ben Rosamond, *University of Copenhagen*

14 October 2016

Abstract

The Brexit referendum provokes speculation about the likelihood of European disintegration. This article discusses how scholarship might deal with the issue of disintegration and argues that it should be thought of as an indeterminate process rather than an identifiable outcome. Within the EU system, Brexit is likely to unleash disintegrative dynamics, which could see the EU stagnate into a suboptimal institutional equilibrium. At the same time, EU studies needs to lift its gaze beyond the internal dynamics of the EU system to consider the disintegration of the democratic capitalist compact within which European integration has been embedded historically.

This article uses Brexit as a platform for thinking through some key issues associated with what might be called 'European disintegration'. The result of the referendum in the UK held on 23 June 2016 certainly poses many more questions than it answers, but at the very least it raises the very real prospect of a member state leaving the European Union. This has never happened before. What Brexit might mean for both the UK and the EU has very quickly become *the* defining question of contemporary European politics. At the same time, scholars working on the EU have been accused of being very poorly prepared to grasp analytically the mechanics of disintegration that Brexit has unleashed (or of which it is a symptom). As Jan Zielonka puts it: '[t]he problem is that EU experts have written a lot about the rise of the EU, but virtually nothing about its possible downfall' (Zielonka 2014: 22).

The argument here is that we should not be too harsh on EU studies for failing to develop a theory of disintegration. Indeed, within the field there is plenty of work capable of positing with relative ease the conditions under which integration could be put into reverse, while simultaneously theorising institutional brakes to full-scale disintegration. In terms of the political science of the EU, this is probably a reasonable place to be: that is (a) cognisance that Brexit might be, along with other internal crises playing out more or less simultaneously (the Euro crisis, the refugee crisis), the harbinger of deep existential troubles for the project of European unification; balanced with (b) recognition that there are strong sources of institutional resistance to the full-scale collapse of the EU. At the same time, there is a risk that interpretations of Brexit and its consequences become too fixated on intra-EU dynamics (both in terms of causes and effects). Shifting attention to the broader political economy context gives us a powerful frame for reading Brexit in terms of a set of key conjunctural dynamics associated with a broader crisis of democratic capitalism.

DISINTEGRATION AND EU STUDIES

So why is there no theory of disintegration? And should there be? The answer to the first question lies in part in the motivations that brought scholars to the European case of regional institution-building in the 1950s and 1960s: they were drawn into the field by the puzzle of how 'political unification' takes place. As Ernst Haas explained: '[t]he units and actions studied provide a living laboratory for observing the peaceful creation of possible new types of human communities at a very high level of organization and of the processes which may lead to such conditions' (Haas 1971: 4). Haas's point was that there were sound analytical (as well as strong normative) reasons for exploring processes of post-national community *formation*. These reasons were deeply anchored in antecedent and contemporary literatures (see, for example, Deutsch et al. 1957; Jacob and Toscano

1964; Etzioni 1965; de Vree 1972) and were not purely associated with a narrow interest in the spillover dynamics that may (or may not) have been shaping the nascent European Communities of the time. The associations between European integration and the historical sociology of nation/state/community formation has re-emerged more recently as a topic in EU studies (see especially Bartolini 2005), even if the field continues to narrate (somewhat misleadingly) its past story almost exclusively in terms of a great debate about the dynamics of integration between neofunctionalists and intergovernmentalists (Rosamond 2016).

Another reason for the absence of a literature on disintegration is what might be called the institutionalist bias of mainstream integration theory. In their separate ways, both neofunctionalism and (liberal) intergovernmentalism imagine the EU as institutionally resilient. For the former, integration is made possible by a series of prior background conditions and is driven by a mixture of functional integrative pressures and the reorientation of producer group activities to the new supranational institutional centre. Equally, supranational institutions are depicted in neofunctionalist thought as purposefully committed to the inherently expansive logic of integration – a process they actively sponsor. The much discussed concept of 'spillover' was developed in a way that – not inaccurately – foresaw deeper integration as a solution to apparently intractable difficulties in securing existing integrative aims (Lindberg 1963). By the early 1970s, neofunctionalists had begun to think seriously about how spillover logics might be reversed (see especially Schmitter 1971).

Intergovernmentalists argue that divergent preferences can stall integrative momentum, but bargaining takes place in an institutional context that is configured for the delivery of absolute gains across participating member states (Moravcsik 1998). Even Hoffmann's version of intergovernmentalism, first articulated when the EU was going through its first great crisis (Hoffmann 1966, 1982) and well before Moravcsik's later liberal institutionalist elaboration, posited that integration would stall because governments would not concede to the encroachment of integration into areas of 'high politics'. The suggestion was that integration would have limits rather than that it would unravel. Along similar lines, principal-agent accounts of integration (Pollack 2003) frequently focus on how the delegation of authority from principal (member-state) to agent (supranational institutions) can entail, in the longer run, a loss of the principal's ability to repatriate that decision-making competence.

Finally, historical institutionalists tend to argue for the 'stickiness' of institutional equilibria. Put simply, institutional designs tend to outlive the imperatives that gave rise to them. Institutional survival is the norm in the absence of a 'critical juncture' (an intensive period of fluidity and crisis that brings forth a revised institutional equilibrium). The EU is often taken to be a benchmark case of this path-dependence. Its basic institutional template owed much to the security and policy imperatives of the immediate post-World War II context. Yet this institutional template, while embellished through successive rounds of treaty reform, remains intact to all intents and purposes (Pierson 1996).

If the standard literature on the EU has an antonym for 'integration', then it tends to be 'differentiation', 'differentiated integration' or 'flexible integration' (see Stubb 2002; Warleigh 2002; Leuffen, Rittberger and Schimmelfennig 2012; Adler-Nissen 2014). This describes the actually existing patchwork quality of integration, characterised as it is by multiple national derogations and opt-outs from core treaty goals or common policy areas. It captures, for example, the very particular membership status of both Denmark and the UK (prior to Brexit) – the nuances of which have been well documented (Adler-Nissen 2009; Naurin and Lindahl 2010). Of course, 'differentiation' – as both procedural solution and normative principle – is a key technique to prevent disintegration from

happening. Tendencies toward differentiation can be explained, but such explanations are dealing with a very different dependent variable.

If there is a theoretical school with strong credentials to offer an account of disintegration, then it could be realism/neorealism in International Relations (Waltz 1979). In such accounts, cooperation (including intensive examples such as the EU) is always likely to break down because of the inevitable logic of relative gains. It may be rational for two or more states to cooperate at a given point in time, but even if all states in the arrangement gain from collaboration, those gains are likely to be asymmetric. Given that states take their cues from an assessment of their relative position within an anarchic security structure, those on the losing side of the relative gains game will exit the cooperative arrangement. Clusters of states may hang together when the structuring principles of geopolitics (such as the Cold War) make it rational for them to do so (Mearsheimer 1990) or when they have a clear common adversary (Rosato 2011), but structural change and the removal/dissolution of the enemy should bring about the demise of cooperation. Yet the issue for realists, as one of their number admits, is that theory 'gives a poor account of one of the most important processes of contemporary world politics in a historically volatile region' (Collard-Wexler 2006: 399). Moreover, realists rely heavily on the interplay between geopolitical structures and the security calculus of states to account for changes to patterns of cooperation and conflict. The UK's prospective departure from the EU could, of course, be attributed to widespread perceptions of the onset of unacceptable relative gains. There might be some empirical traction in this approach (notwithstanding some rather substantial issues of operationalisation), but realism's insistence that exit decisions would be driven by *raison d'état* in light of external security calculus does rather make it a hard sell as a theory capable of explaining the nuances of Brexit.

DISINTEGRATION AS PROCESS

As Hans Vollard (2014: 1123) points out: 'history is full of currency areas, federations, empires and states that disintegrated'. As such, it should be possible to fashion a set of testable propositions about the dynamics and logics of integration without falling into the trap of EU-centrism. At the same time, like 'integration' before it, 'disintegration' suffers from a 'dependent variable problem' (Haas 1971). Put another way, 'disintegration' can be seen as either a definable *outcome* or as a *process* leading to an unspecified outcome. In the case of the former, this would presumably entail the de jure and/or de facto end of the EU as a meaningful entity, the reversion of European international politics to a pre-integration state and perhaps the replacement of the EU with some alternative ordering principle (that may or may not be institutionalised) for pan-European politics.

It is certainly interesting to speculate on what a fully disintegrated Europe might look like and there is obvious analytical value in working with ideal typical future scenarios, not only as a means of prediction but also as a way of shedding light on dynamics in the present. Such work has been done with great effect on future integrative scenarios (see Morgan 2007) and there is no reason why similar reasoning could not be applied to scenarios for European disintegration. This is where thinking about the EU in terms of the rise and decline of pluri-territorial imperial orders might have some traction (Gravier 2009, 2011; Marks 2012; Zielonka 2007). The downside is that the fall of specific 'empires' is best undertaken with the benefit of historical hindsight. Plus, any attempt to insert the EU experience as another data point in a theory of imperial decline runs the risk of assuming that sampling from the past *must* help us to understand present and future trends (Blyth 2006). There is also the risk that EU scholars will come to be cast as latter day versions of the generation of Sovietologists who were taken by surprise when the USSR collapsed rapidly in the early 1990s (Cox 1998). This would be unfair.

If there is a key insight of relevance from the *acquis* of EU studies, then it would be this: even if Brexit has contributed to the release of disintegrative dynamics within the EU system, there are strong reasons to expect that these will be intercepted, shaped and modified within the complex multi-level institutional architecture of the EU. In short, the best guess must be that Brexit-induced disintegration will be messy, drawn out and unpredictable. In the wake of the referendum, commentators have rightly pointed to the unknowability of how Brexit will play out in the UK context. Aside from deep questions about the economy and the sustainability of post-Brexit growth models (Wren-Lewis 2016), the legal (Armstrong 2016) and territorial (Barnett 2016) implications of the referendum result are taking British politics into uncharted territory, where deep uncertainty is the norm and where 'wicked problems' define the political context for years to come. The UK is obviously the most important site for the politics of Brexit. But, of course, the implications of Brexit for the EU will be subject to the complex interplay between what happens in the UK and the multi-level, multi-institutional game across the EU. The upshot may be that the UK does not leave the EU at all (Moravcsik 2016) or that ingenious solutions to particular aspects of the UK's dilemmas will be engineered (Gad 2016). Alternatively, we might speculate, following a remark made by Philippe Schmitter 45 years ago, that integration could stall and settle into a prolonged period of 'low risk entropy' (Schmitter 1971: 257).

In other words, it is more politically urgent and analytically plausible to think about disintegration as an indeterminate process and thus how disintegrative forces and dynamics might transform significantly the EU institutional equilibrium, whilst simultaneously being constrained and shaped by it. One of the most likely outcomes of the Brexit vote is a further contagion of 'Eurosceptic dissatisfaction' (Vollaard 2014) as actors elsewhere in the EU draw inspiration from the Brexit experience and seek to replicate it in their national contexts. EU studies as a field is already well-equipped to make sense of these internal process of politicisation, contestation and cleavage formation around the emergence of anti-EU sentiment (Hooghe and Marks 2008), especially within the work of scholars who claim an affinity to 'classical' integration theory (Niemann 2006).

EUROPEAN DISINTEGRATION IN CONTEXT

The argument posed so far is that any attempt to think about the disintegrative effects of Brexit should be couched in terms of disintegration as an open-ended process rather than as a pre-defined outcome. If Brexit does inspire similar challenges to EU membership in other member states and has the effect of planting intractable problems into the EU system, then the worst case for European integration is most likely an institutional equilibrium of diminishing returns.

It is tempting to think of Brexit as the kind of critical juncture that historical institutionalists regard as likely to induce radical institutional change. Perhaps, but the suggestion here, by way of conclusion, is to suggest that the EU's crises (of which Brexit may be the most acute) should be understood within a much broader set of transformations, themselves disintegrative in character, that challenge the democratic capitalist compact which gave rise to the EU and within which it has been embedded (see Rosamond 2017 for a more detailed argument).

In his recent work, Wolfgang Streeck (2014) uses the experience of recent crises to show that the respective allocative logics of the market and representative democracy are not natural bedfellows. Indeed, historically these logics pull in very different directions, meaning that governments are forced to engineer some kind of compromise between them – usually by subordinating one principle to the other. The three decades after World War II were remarkable for being able to deliver a democratic capitalist compact, particularly in Western Europe where varieties of the Keynesian welfare state allowed degrees of domestic policy autonomy within a managed modest expansion of

economic openness. The latter part was accomplished in part by and through European integration. This democratic capitalist compact was always fragile and was arguably dependent on the unusually high growth rates enjoyed by the rich democracies during the post-war boom.

As the logics of capitalism and democracy de-coupled in light of a variety of factors – low growth rates, globalisation, post-industrial transition, increasing fiscal burdens on the state, the rise of market liberal ideas, the decline of political parties, growing inequality and so on – so supranational integration came to be posited as a viable institutional solution to these emerging collective problems (Jacoby and Meunier 2010). In the context of the global financial crisis and the subsequent sovereign debt crisis in Europe, the EU (particularly through the operating logic of the Eurozone) came to be widely seen less as a solution and much more as part of the problem. Contestation of the EU within the EU was amplified by the prior breakdown of the so-called 'permissive consensus' on integration (Hooghe and Marks 2008), which had been an essential if underappreciated component of the post-war democratic capitalist compact.

The point to make here is that, as has always been the case – but especially now, the EU should not be studied in isolation from the broader dynamics of political economy within which it is situated. The risk of begging for a theory of 'European disintegration' to help us make sense of what Brexit might do to the EU is that we end up treating the EU as a self-contained system. Those internal systemic properties are important to understand, but if we are looking for potent disintegrative forces, then perhaps we are more likely to find them shaping the broader context of the stalled and possibly declining project of European unification.

CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS

Ben Rosamond, Centre for European Politics, Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, Øster Farimagsgade 5, DK-1353 Copenhagen, Denmark [br@ifs.ku.dk]

REFERENCES

Adler-Nissen, R. (2009) 'Behind the scenes of differentiated integration: circumventing national opt-outs in Justice and Home Affairs'. *Journal of European Public Policy* 61(1): 62-80.

Adler-Nissen, R. (2014) *Opting Out of the European Union: Diplomacy, Sovereignty and European Integration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Armstrong, K.A. (2016) '"On your marks, get set LEAVE! The technical challenge of the Great Repeal Bill"', blog post, *LSE Brexit Blog*, 7 October. Available online: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/10/07/on-your-marks-get-set-leave-the-great-repeal-act-is-symbolically-significant-and-legally-not-unimportant/ [accessed 10 October 2016].

Barnett, A. (2016) 'The revolt of the natives: Britain after Brexit', blog post, *Open Democracy*, 30 August. Available online: https://www.opendemocracy.net/uk/anthony-barnett/revolt-of-natives-britain-after-brexit [accessed 10 October 2016].

Bartolini, S. (2005) *Reconstructing Europe: Centre Formation, System Building and Political Structuring between the Nation-State and the European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Blyth, M. (2006) 'Great punctuations: Prediction, Randomness, and the Evolution of Comparative Political Science'. *American Political Science Review* 100(4): 493-498.

Collard-Wexler, S. (2006) 'Integration Under Anarchy: Neorealism and the European Union'. *European Journal of International Relations* 12(3): 397-432.

Cox, M. (ed.) (1998) *Rethinking the Soviet Collapse: Sovietology, the Death of Communism and the New Russia.* New York: Pinter.

De Vree, J.K. (1972) *Political Integration: The Formation of Theory and its Problem.* The Hague: Moulton.

Deutsch, K.W., Burrell, S.A., Kann, R.A., Lee, M., Lichterman, M., Lindgren, R.E., Loewenheim, F.L. and Van Wangeren, R.W. (1957) *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Etzioni, A. (1965) *Political Unification: a Comparative Study of Leaders and Forces*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Gad, U.P. (2016) 'Could a "reverse Greenland" arrangement keep Scotland and Northern Ireland in the EU?', blog post, *EUROPP.* Available online: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/07/07/reverse-greenland-arrangement/ [accessed 30 September 2016].

Gravier, M. (2009) 'The next European empire?'. *European Societies* 11(5): 627-647.

Gravier, M. (2011) Empire vs federation: which path for Europe?'. *Journal of Political Power* 4(3): 413-431.

Haas, E.B. (1971) 'The Study of Regional Integration: Reflections on the Joys and Anguish of Pretheorizing', in L.N. Lindberg and S.A. Scheingold (eds) *Regional Integration: Theory and Research*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 3-42.

Hoffmann, S. (1966) 'Obstinate or Obsolete? The Fate of the Nation State and the Case of Western Europe. *Daedalus* 95(3): 862-915.

Hoffmann, S. (1982) 'Reflections on the Nation-State in Western Europe Today'. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 21(1): 21–38.

Hooghe, L. and Marks, G. (2008) 'A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus'. *British Journal of Political Science* 39(1): 1-23.

Jacob, P.E. and Toscano, J.V. (eds) *The Integration of Political Communities*. Philadelphia, PA: J.P. Lippencott & Co.

Jacoby, W. and Meunier, S. (2010) 'Europe and the management of globalization'. *Journal of European Public Policy* 17(3): 299-317.

Leuffen, D., Rittberger, B. and Schimmelfennig, F. (2012) *Differentiated Integration; Explaining Variation in the European Union*. Basingstoke, Hants: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lindberg, L.N. (1963) *The Political Dynamics of European Economic Integration*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Marks, G. (2012) 'Europe and its Empires: From Rome to the European Union'. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 50(1): 1-20.

Mearsheimer, J.J. (1990) 'Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War'. *International Security* 15(1): 5-56.

Moravcsik, A. (1998) *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Moravcsik, A. (2016) 'The great Brexit kabuki — a masterclass in political theatre', *Financial Times*, 8 April. Available online: https://www.princeton.edu/~amoravcs/library/Brexit.FT.pdf [accessed 10 October 2016].

Morgan, G. (2007) *The Idea of a European Superstate: Public Justification and European Integration*, second edition. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Naurin, D. and Lindahl, R. (2010) 'Out in the cold? Flexible integration and the political status of Euro opt-outs'. *European Union Politics* 11(4): 485-509.

Niemann, A. (2006) *Explaining Decisions in the European Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pierson, P. (1996) 'The Path to European Integration: A Historical Institutionalist Analysis'. *Comparative Political Studies* 29(2): 123-163.

Pollack, M.A. (2003) *The Engines of European Integration: Delegation, Agency and Agenda Setting in the EU*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rosamond, B. (2017) 'The contexts of EU crises', in D. Dinan, N. Nugent and W. Paterson (eds) *The European Union in Crisis*. London: Palgrave Macmillan – forthcoming.

Rosamond, B. (2016) 'Field of Dreams: the Discursive Construction of EU Studies, Intellectual Dissidence and the Practice of "Normal Science"'. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 54(1): 19-36.

Rosato, S. (2011) 'Europe's Troubles. Power Politics and the State of the European Project'. *International Security* 35(4): 45-86.

Schmitter, P.C. (1971) 'A Revised Theory of Regional Integration', in L.N. Lindberg and S.A. Scheingold (eds) *Regional Integration: Theory and Research*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 232-264.

Streeck, W. (2014) *Buying Time. The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*. London: Verso.

Stubb, A. (2002) *Negotiating Flexibility in the European Union: Amsterdam, Nice and Beyond*. Basingstoke, Hants: Palgrave.

Vollaard, H. (2014) 'Explaining European disintegration', *Journal of Common Market Studies.* 52(5): 1142-1159.

Waltz, K.N. (1979) *Theory of International Politics*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Warleigh, A. (2002) *Flexible Integration: Which Model for the European Union?* London: Sheffield Academic Press.

Wren-Lewis, S. (2016) 'Just how bad will Brexit be, and can it be undone?', blog post, *Mainly Macro*, 25 June. Available online: https://mainlymacro.blogspot.se/2016/06/just-how-bad-will-brexit-be-and-can-it.html [accessed 10 October 2016].

Zielonka, J. (2007) *Europe as Empire. The Nature of the Enlarged European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zielonka, J. (2014) *Is the EU Doomed?* Cambridge: Polity Press.