

THE SEARCH FOR EUROPE

Contrasting Approaches



BBVA



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What is a member state exactly and what does it look like? What are the factors that have driven this shift from nation-state to member state? Does the current crisis of the EU signal an end to member statehood and a return to a Europe of nation-states or is it a confirmation of it? This chapter will argue that member states are characterized by a growing distance between governments and their own societies. This growing gap between political elites and their own societies lies behind the growth of both populism and technocracy as powerful political phenomena in contemporary European politics.

FROM NATION-STATES TO MEMBER STATES: EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AS STATE TRANSFORMATION

Introduction

The European Union remains a mystery to many observers. It is neither a fully-fledged European state nor is it simply a loose federation of cooperating national states. The EU is often described as coercive in its dealings with member states, and yet it has no coercive power of its own. Some think of it as a German-dominated body, and yet Germany seeks to devolve ever greater amounts of its own sovereignty to the EU. Citizens and scholars alike are often confused when they try to describe this political institution. It is often negatively defined in terms of what it is not. Historical analogies, from the antebellum United States to the Hapsburg Empire, are used to define it with limited success.

THE EU REMAINS THE WORK OF STATES AND IS NOT ITSELF A SUPRANATIONAL EUROPEAN STATE

This chapter argues that the best way to think of the EU is as a union of member states. By this, I mean that the EU is an organization dominated by its members; it remains the work of states and is not itself a supranational European state. However, its members are not typical nation-states of the late 19th century: egotistical, war-mongering, territorially greedy, jingoistic and imperialist. Rather, these are member states, whose power and authority are constituted in their relations with one another at the EU level (Bickerton 2012: 51-73). By thinking of the EU as a union of member states, we are able to explain its centrality to national political life but also its institutional weakness.

This chapter takes the Eurozone crisis as a case study of the idea that the EU is a union of member states. I argue that the failure of Syriza in its negotiations with its creditors, along with the behaviour of the Eurogroup in this matter, shed light on the nature of the EU. This

episode also raises questions about the relationship between the EU and democracy. This chapter argues that the EU does not suppress national democracy, but rather, as the European states have evolved from nation-states to member states, democratic representation at the national level has been squeezed out, leaving only populist protest and technocratic responses by national executives acting in concert at the European level.

A European Union of member states

The EU is a difficult entity to pin down for scholars and citizens alike, and so it is often defined in terms of what it is not. Many supporters of the EU lament that it is not yet a federal state, even though it has managed to accumulate considerable powers over the recent decades. Former president of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, referred to the EU as “the first non-imperial empire”: one that asserted power peacefully, through its rules and regulations, and not militarily, through invasion and war. The trick here was the qualifying adjective of “non-imperial”, suggesting that although the EU is not an empire, calling it so helps us understand something about it (see also, Zielonka 2006).

CONTEMPORARY EUROPE IS CHARACTERIZED BY, IF ANYTHING, THE DISINTEGRATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITIES AND NATIONAL SENTIMENT

The EU is often defined by analogy and described as being “like” something else. It is often compared to the antebellum United States, in which individual states retained most of their sovereignty but were linked to one another through articles of confederation and then more firmly through a federal constitution (Glencross 2009). The EU has no such constitution, but many suggested the 2005 Treaty—voted down by French and Dutch voters and then resurrected four years later as the Lisbon Treaty through an impressive feat of legal tinkering—was like a constitution. It was thus called the Constitutional Treaty. When asked whether it was a constitution or just a treaty, French President Jacques Chirac cannily replied: “it is legally a treaty, but politically a constitution”.

There are great difficulties in comparing the EU to the antebellum United States. The historical movement of the 1790s, which continued

into the early decades of the 19th century, was centred on nation-building. Indeed, this was the very beginning of the nationalist age that was to culminate in the First World War of 1914 to 1918. The American and French Revolutions confirmed politics as the secular basis for the state's authority, in contrast to the dynastic and religious understandings of legitimacy that had prevailed up until then (Bayly 2004). Central to the work of the Federalist authors in the United States—Madison, Hamilton and Jay—was the idea of the “American people” as the basis and the authorizing logic for the federal constitution. In his travels, a few decades later, de Tocqueville noticed how prevalent the concept of the “American people” was to political life in the United States (Tocqueville 2004).

Present day Europe is not characterized by this movement towards national consolidation or towards a pan-European nation. Those vocal nationalisms that do exist tend to assert themselves against the idea of the nation-state, as in Scotland and Catalonia. Contemporary Europe is characterized by, if anything, the disintegration of national identities and national sentiment. The steady dismantling of the United Kingdom is a case point. Thus, it is very difficult to imagine that the EU is characterized by the reappearance of this sentiment at the European level. We are simply not living in an age where loose federal unions are being forged into stronger federal states, as occurred in the US, in the course of the 19th century, or in Germany, at the end of the 19th century.

When we try to define the European Union, it is useful to look at exactly what it is. The EU is an aggregate of its institutions. These include the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of Ministers and the European Council. The Commission has the role of initiating proposals. The European Parliament and the Council of Ministers share the authority to decide whether or not they accept those proposals and their amendments. They often work together in secret to respond to Commission initiatives (Reh et al. 2013). The European Council has a more complicated role. It sets the general direction of the EU but is also the source of its own proposals and has become more and more involved in the day-to-day affairs of the EU (Puetter 2015). It sits atop the other institutions as it is made up of the heads of government of the member states of the EU.

The European Parliament claims to represent the European people as a whole, but this claim competes with the individual national parliaments, for whom Europe is made up of its national populations which they represent. The European Commission's power is as a bureaucracy

and as a body charged with tasks given to it by member states. The Council of Ministers is what its name describes: meetings of national government ministers that are organized along policy lines—agriculture, fisheries and others. A final institution is the European Court of Justice. This body is tasked with making judgements about whether individual cases brought before it represent breaches of European law. Both governments and citizens can bring cases to the European Court of Justice.

There is little from this institutional arrangement to suggest the formation of a single European state. Power still lies with national governments and national bureaucracies, although that power is exercised in concert with the EU's institutions. The EU is a coming together of European states more than it is a transcendence of them (Bickerton et al. 2015). The reason why it appears to us as more than that is because of the nature of the European states themselves. Rather than being nation-states that jealously guard their national interests and clash with one another along national lines, European states are member states, and their membership in the EU plays a critical role in their existence. In particular, national governments and national bureaucracies see their authority as derived from their belonging to the EU policy-making process. Their power is therefore constituted in a horizontal way through the relations they enjoy with other governments in the EU, as well as in the vertical relationship of representation between a government and its own people.

Presented in this way, we can understand an important integration paradox that has come to characterize European integration over the last thirty years. Since the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, European integration has moved forward in leaps and bounds. In addition to monetary union, the EU has also expanded into many new policy areas: foreign policy, police and border issues, justice, social policy and employment policy. However, this expansion has not come with the transfer of powers from national governments to European institutions. Over the same period, key EU institutions, like the Commission, have seen their powers reduced. We have therefore seen a form of integration without supranationalism, which can be explained by the fact that the EU is a union of member states rather than a supranational state of its own (Bickerton et al. 2015: 51-72). Member state governments are the leading agents of integration, not the traditional supranational institutions like the Commission and the Court.

The concept of the member state

The term member state is one of the most popular in European studies. Whether one looks at the legal field, sociology or the political science of European integration, member statehood is thought of as a juridical title, which is given to a nation-state when it joins the EU. Were a state to leave the EU, it would have this title revoked. What this chapter suggests is that in addition to treating it as a legal title, it makes sense also to think of member statehood as a distinctive and standalone form of state.

IT IS POSSIBLE TO IDENTIFY MEMBER STATES FOR ITS ORGANIZATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS, ITS POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND ITS FORMS OF POLITICAL CONFLICT

What exactly do member states “look” like? How can one differentiate a member state from other forms of statehood? It is possible to identify member states along three lines. One is the internal organizational arrangements of member states. A second is the political discourse used by member state governments to legitimize their authority. The third is the forms of political conflict that structure member state national life. This section will look at these three in turn.

Internal organizational arrangements

The internal organizational arrangements of member states have a number of characteristics. One is the dominance of the executive. Another is the proliferation of non-majoritarian institutions to which powers are delegated by central government. A third is the lack of mediating institutions that “stand in” between the state and domestic society.

The executive dominance comes from the fact that policymaking is being undertaken less by parliaments as legislators and more by executives as negotiators. International agreements tend to empower executives in so far as they conduct the negotiations, set the terms for them, and are able to select which domestic interests they want to represent and which to leave aside (Putnam 1988). EU policymaking empowers national executives in the same way, particularly with the rise of the European Council as the dominant EU institution and its direct involvement in the ever-increasing numbers of policy areas. The flow of information is

top-down, with the executive informing parliaments of the outcomes of negotiations and presenting legislative packages not to be debated but to be voted on as finished products.

**IN MANY WAYS, THE EU ITSELF
HAS BECOME THE NEW FORM OF
MEDIATION BETWEEN THE
STATE AND SOCIETY**

An extreme case of executive dominance existed during the expansion of the EU to Eastern Europe. In order to manage the negotiations with the European Commission, applicant states created powerful European offices that were often directly linked to prime ministerial cabinets. This became the core negotiating team, with the best people and resources channelled into it. Other parts of the state, both political and bureaucratic, suffered, especially national parliaments which ended up rubber stamping decisions made by their executive in union with officials from the European Commission (Bickerton 2009).

The proliferation of non-majoritarian institutions reflects the fact that member states prefer to rule through external frameworks, that is, frameworks that are external to political contestation and especially external to the political party systems. In the same way that EU institutions sit outside of political party conflict, many other key institutions of member state governance do so as well. Central banks, and thus monetary policy, are independent of political competition. This is not only true of Eurozone member states, which have delegated monetary policy to the European Central Bank, but also non-Eurozone member states. The Bank of England, for instance, is independent of the UK government, as is the Swedish Riksbank, whose independence from the Swedish Rikstag (parliament) has a clear, statutory basis. Rather than thinking of EU institutions as distinctive or unique, we can thus see them as part of a spectrum of external authorities, which national governments use as a way to exercise their own powers at a distance from national political contestation. Indeed, compared to the scope and range of non-majoritarian institutions at the domestic level, the EU is only the tip of this particular iceberg.

A third institutional feature of member statehood is the weakness of bodies that mediate between the state and civil society. The state-society relationship is traditionally conceived of as a relationship that mediated



Mario Monti in a press conference in Brussels.

through workers' and business organizations, political parties and particular frameworks, such as corporatism or pluralism (Berger 1982). The relationship is therefore normally a thick one, marked above all by the role played by political parties in "standing in" between the state and civil society. European states of recent decades have been marked by a distinct lack of mediation. In part, this comes from the disrepute of the party system, but it also has to do with a more general historical trend towards the unravelling of more complex forms of state-society relations. An extreme instance of unmediated state-society relations arose recently in Italy, where the technocratic Monti government enjoyed neither the support of the political parties nor the support of social groups in Italy (Culpepper 2014).

Of course, one can also speak of a transformation in mediation rather than an absolute decline. Indeed, in many ways, the EU itself has become the new form of mediation. State-society relations are thus mediated through institutions and bodies external to the state and society; this is the change which has taken place. A stark example of this is Greece, where the Troika of creditors have played a direct role in the everyday running of the Greek government. Relations between Greek citizens and their governments run through Frankfurt, Brussels and Washington.

Legitimizing discourses

The typical legitimizing language for the exercise of power by national governments is that of popular sovereignty and representation. This has been true at least since the emergence of the modern secular state in the late 18th century and its consolidation as a national actor in the 19th century. State power is exercised in the name of the people. This holds true across variations in political regime; the differences lie not in invoking the people's right to rule but how the identity and will of the people is determined.

The legitimizing discourses of member statehood are different. Popular sovereignty is treated more as a problem or danger to be contained than it is a source of final authority. The preferred legitimizing discourse is that of wider regional and international obligations and the more abstract language of collectively agreed rules whose validity holds regardless of political life and its multiple competing interests. Specifically, what constitutes legitimacy here is the sense of moral superiority associated with an ability to limit the national will in the absence of external coercion. Joseph Weiler (2003) has written on this particular legitimizing discourse and calls it "constitutional tolerance". In his words,

Constitutional actors in the Member States [national executives, legislators and officials] accept the European constitutional discipline not because, as a matter of legal doctrine, as is the case in the federal state, they are subordinate to a higher sovereignty and authority attaching to norms validated by the federal people, the constitutional demos. They accept it as an *autonomous voluntary act*, an act endlessly renewed on each occasion, of subordination, in the discrete areas governed by Europe, to a norm which is the aggregate expression of other wills, other political identities, other political communities (Weiler 2003:21, italics added).

Simply speaking, we can say that whereas legitimizing discourses of the nation-state rested upon the idea of supremacy of the national will, the legitimizing discourses of the member state rest upon the idea of its subordination or submission. The idea of constraining national power through an act of self-limitation thus becomes the most important legitimizing discourse of member statehood and, therefore, of EU integration more generally. As Paul Margette (2000) once put it, Europe, today, is all about "taming the sovereign".

Modes of political conflict

Member states are characterized by modes of political conflict that focus on contesting processes rather than outcomes. Within member states, the process of aggregating preferences has become the subject of political contestation. As a result, political life is devoted as much to challenges to governmental authority as to the enactment of specific policy programmes. If we take as an example the protests which occurred across Europe in 2011 and 2012, from “Occupy London” to the *Indignados* in Spain, we see that the concern of protestors was, in part, with the iniquities of financial capitalism and the way in which European governments had bailed out their banks. But the protestors were also driven by scepticism and disenchantment with national democracy as a process.

The political life of member states is thus based both on traditional cleavages, such as Left versus Right, and newer forms of political conflict, in which political elites are identified as a monolithic group and denounced for their self-interested behaviour and corruption. The language of *la casta* is used by Beppe Grillo, in Italy, and by Pablo Iglesias, in Spain. Indeed, the very definition of populism is to define the political field as a struggle between the virtuous people and the corrupt national elite. The prominence of populism in European politics is thus evidence of the way the political process itself—not just its outcomes—has become politicized.

Member statehood and the Greek crisis

In order to demonstrate the relevance of the member state analysis to the idea of the European Union and European integration today, this chapter takes the Greek crisis as an example. There are a number of ways in which the member state analysis helps us understand the key features of this crisis, its place within the wider European integration process and its present resolution. At the time of writing, Greece had finalized a third bail-out agreement with the EU to the tune of 86 billion Euros, to be disbursed over three years in exchange for significant and far-reaching internal reforms. This section will focus on two aspects of the Greek crisis: why Syriza failed in its negotiations with the Troika and what Yannis Varoufakis’ tenure as finance minister has revealed about the Eurogroup and the nature of European monetary union more generally.

The failure of Syriza

Viewing the EU as a union of member states helps us understand Syriza's failure after winning the Greek elections in January 2015 (see also, Jones 2015). Syriza won just over 36% of the vote, leaving it short of forming a parliamentary majority on its own. It entered into a coalition with Independent Greeks, a right-wing party that was also opposed to the bail-out deal agreed to by previous Greek governments.

The incoming strategy of the Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, and his finance minister, Yannis Varoufakis, was to argue for change from within the single currency union. Their language was strongly pro-European, and they argued for a different policy mix for the Euro, rather than its abolition or for Grexit. Indeed, it was made very clear by both figures that Greece did not want to leave the Euro but only to change the existing terms of its deal with its creditors. This “change from within” strategy relied on the existence of real sympathy for new policies within the Eurozone, most notably some sort of debt mutualisation mechanism and debt relief for Greece—policies which signalled the formation of an embryonic fiscal union. These were policies that would have required more supranationalisation at the European level and more “burden-sharing” across borders.

What Tsipras and Varoufakis ran up against was an EU whose governing logic was not that of ever-increasing supranationalisation of macro-economic policy. Rather, the EU has for some time been moving in a “new intergovernmental” direction, with member states at the realm. In monetary policy, the focus is on rules and the importance of these rules in constraining the behaviour of national governments. This implies greater coordination between national governments but no sharing of the debt burden and no “solidarity” of the kind that Varoufakis was demanding.

Syriza also underestimated the extent to which other member state governments identified with these collectively agreed frameworks rather than with any ideological project of Left or Right (Gourevitch 2015). One might have expected Syriza to be able to rally other social democratic parties in power across Europe, most notably in Germany, France and Italy. Had there been a strong position in favour of a revised and less “austerity-focused” deal for Greece on the part of Germany's Social Democrats, then Merkel and Schäuble would have found their negotiating hand much weakened. Schäuble's strength and determination was

in some part a reflection of the absence of any challenge to his views within Germany. And yet, the SPD is in coalition with the Christian Democrats, and Sigmar Gabriel, the SPD leader, is Vice-Chancellor.

Both Italy and France, supportive of Greece at the very end when “Grexit” seemed a real possibility, did not support Greece as ideological partners. Their defence of a more socially-friendly deal for Greece was weak in comparison to their support for honouring past agreements and adhering to a rule-bound framework. In an interview, Varoufakis said that French finance minister, Michel Sapin, was personally very supportive of the Greek attempt to transform the substance of the bailout deal. Publicly, however, Sapin refused to back Varoufakis and instead urged Greece to support the conditions being offered by its creditors (Parker 2015).

The real sins of Varoufakis

One feature of the Greek crisis was the short-lived presence of the Greek finance minister, Yannis Varoufakis, within the Eurogroup. Varoufakis was tasked by Tsipras to lead negotiations with creditors, and he defended his government’s position in the Eurogroup. Much ink has been spilt discussing Varoufakis, in particular his flamboyance and lack of respect for typical political and diplomatic protocol. However, if we want to explain why Varoufakis became a *persona non grata* for the Eurogroup, one has to understand how he broke many of its rules and violated its etiquette as an institution (Bickerton 2015).

In terms of the substance, there was some overlap between Varoufakis and the creditors. Many accepted, at least implicitly, that Greece’s debt obligations would never be paid back in full and that some sort of debt relief was inevitable. There was also sympathy for Syriza’s statements about tackling the oligarchic nature of the Greek economy. Many, indeed, saw this—as much as anything else—as the real obstacle to growth in Greece and welcomed the possibility of tackling these major figures, whose influence far outweighed their contribution to the Greek economy.

However, Varoufakis did not negotiate in the manner expected within the Eurogroup. Viewed through a member state analysis, where state-society relations are distended to the point of having closer identification between national elites at the European level than between those elites and their own domestic societies, the Eurogroup is

an institution that powerfully demonstrates this separation. Within the Eurogroup, ministers think of the discussions as being technical in nature, and there is a strong problem-solving and, therefore, consensual nature to its deliberations. Participants think of themselves as sharing a basic outlook with disagreements relegated to matters of detail. The Eurogroup is also a place where those with difficulties achieving domestic results come for support. This shared outlook prevails over the specific national affiliations of each finance minister.

In contrast to all of this, Varoufakis understood his participation in the Eurogroup as that of a Greek finance minister, bringing to the table the demands of his people. He did not leave his national identity at the door but wore it as a badge of honour. Any important issues on which he needed to compromise were brought back to Athens to form the basis of cabinet and party votes. He even began to publicize his positions before Eurogroup meetings and his interpretation of the proceedings afterwards. Varoufakis thus injected into the Eurogroup the vertical principle of direct representation that challenged the horizontal principle of elite identification, which animates the institution. He certainly also annoyed participants by patronising them, using his authority as an academic to make his case for Euro-reform. He was not at all attentive to building political coalitions, and one wonders whether he was playing a “long game” at all or instead preferred to shine brightly for a while and then disappear with a bang. This political naivety, one suspects, was not fatal, however. It was his violation of Eurogroup etiquette that made him a *persona non grata*.

Conclusion: Populism, technocracy and the future of Europe

This chapter has argued that European integration needs to be understood as a process of state transformation. National states have been transformed, and what we see in the EU is the institutional expression of these domestic level changes. It is for this reason that the EU seems so omnipresent but is also institutionally weak. The specific nature of the transformation has been labelled here as a shift from nation-states to member states. This describes a change in state-society relations, where a vertical relationship of representation and authorization, which identifies people as the basis of national power, is increasingly being replaced by a horizontal notion of state power and authority. In this

conception, participation in transnational networks of governance such as the EU are not constraints on national power but constitutive of it.

The result of this shift from nation-state to member state, and the effect on the way state power is constituted, is that political life at the national level is no longer based on a combination of democratic contestation and governmental effectiveness. Political parties have been, since the beginning of the 20th century at least, the main vehicles within European democracies for the reconciliation of the competing demands of representation and responsible government (Mair 2009). Member statehood, based as it is on a thinning of the state-society relationship to the point that mediating bodies, like parties, are increasingly marginalized, generates a kind of political life that is unable to combine representation with responsibility. Instead, the two have become uncoupled and appear as opposites that challenge one another: populism, on the one hand, and technocracy, on the other. It is the people versus the elites, rather than competing representations of the popular good and its realization through concrete sets of policies.

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