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Globalization and the limitations of European integration studies: interdisciplinary Considerations by Chris Rumford and Philomena Murray

Abstract

The paper takes issue with the tendency within European Union (EU) studies to focus disproportionately on integration. It is argued that the ever-increasing complexity of the EU's institutional architecture and policy portfolio, wholesale enlargement to the east, and the Europeanization of social, political and cultural realms cannot be captured adequately by the term integration. We advance the case that to understand the dynamics of the EU it is necessary to transcend disciplinary boundaries and embed the study of the EU within wider avenues of social science enquiry. The relationship between the EU and globalization is a case in point. Rather than seeing it in economic and deterministic terms it is argued that acknowledging the multidimensionality of globalization and its uneven or contradictory impact on the EU provides the opportunity to invest EU studies with a greater interdisciplinary. The paper invites a fresh debate on the nature of European integration and on the parameters and priorities of a social science with which we attempt to understand EU processes.

Introduction

The attempt to comprehend the European Union (EU) has always been challenging, largely because of the immense expansion and transformation of its membership, scope, goals, institutional architecture and policy concerns. The interaction between European nation-states has been transformed, which has in turn led to altered dynamics of international diplomacy, trade relations and the nature and role of global actors. The EU has brought about a radical, deep-seated alteration of established boundaries between domestic and international politics. These metamorphoses have been wrought by increasingly complex political and institutional arrangements that were set up as distinctive governance norms for the successive Communities. The Europeanization of social, political and cultural spheres, many of which developed after the original impulse to construct a single market, has not led to an EU transnational polity, although the institutional reach of the EU extends far beyond the national boundaries of member states. Perhaps a little surprisingly, a single term – integration - has come to represent this deep-seated metamorphosis of Europe. Most analytical frameworks adopted to understand the EU have been informed by the precepts characteristic of integration theories.

In this paper we call for a move away from the centrality of integration in EU studies. We urge that a broader interdisciplinary approach be adopted, which seeks to problematize integration, rather than take it as a given. The failure of any one theory (or combination of theories) to capture the nature and dynamics of the EU to the satisfaction of the majority of social scientists, coupled with its ever-increasing complexity, and the ways it challenges accepted notions of bordered polity suggest a need to transcend disciplinary boundaries. We argue for an approach that seeks to embed the study of the EU within

wider avenues of social science enquiry. We propose that the European Union should not be separated from the rest of the world and that, further, EU studies should be informed by an interdisciplinary social science. To this end, the paper invites a new debate on the nature of European integration and on the restrictions and concerns of a social science with which we attempt to understand EU dynamics. It calls for a distinct change of direction from approaches which confirm the developmental, gradualist and deterministic nature of the EU.

The centrality of integration to European Union studies

EU studies have long been European Integration (EI) studies. A thumbnail sketch of EI studies would go along the following lines. The issue of the changing role of the nation state and the extent to which it might/might not have been transformed are key elements, often in the context of analysis of the EU as a polity, federal system or supranational state. EU studies, we suggest, has tended to focus excessively on integration - and the role of the state in that process - while at the same time failing to satisfactorily question the concept or to analyse multiple contributory factors to the process. The assumption that integration is central to EU studies has been institutionalised in the oft-repeated conflicts between neo-functionalists and the intergovernmentalists, and played out by those who advocate a choice between comparative politics and international relations approaches. For those who adhere to federalism or neofunctionalism, integration and supranationalism are often seen as two sides of the same, often teleological, coin. On the opposing side lies the intergovernmentalist thesis, which, at its starkest, regards the EU as a forum for advancing national interests.

In addition, the meaning of integration is often unclear or confusing, referring variously to political objective, theoretical model, or policy process, depending upon the context (Murray 2000). The centrality of the all-encompassing concept of integration to EU studies has not been useful in understanding opposition to the EU in many member states, regions and organisations, while it has been of limited use in comprehending disruption and fragmentation – ranging from enlargement to the east, to mass unemployment and the introduction of the single currency in only 12 of 15 member states. This has contributed to a lack of critical awareness of the outcomes and characteristics of the integration process, and has divested integration of any real meaning. Nevertheless, conceptual lethargy or expediency ensures that integration remains the hegemonic discourse on the EU – convenient shorthand for those who assume (erroneously) that we all understand the same thing by “integration.”

This is doing EU studies a grave disservice. We are particularly concerned that the dynamism, complexity and multi-dimensionality of the European Union are increasingly subsumed to a debate on the extent to which the EU can be regarded as a putative supranational polity. In doing so EI studies risks isolating itself from wider fields of social scientific enquiry which could provide a valuable intellectual resource. There is a real danger of navel-gazing in treating the EU as a hermetically sealed entity, with few comparisons with other processes, countries, regions, and thereby impoverishing broader social science studies of the EU.

The wider vision we advocate would critically distance itself from the propensity within EI studies to utilise Europe as the frame of reference for studying EU integration, thereby alienating processes occurring in Europe from pertinent developments occurring in the

rest of the world. The cross-fertilization of research into transnational processes, cosmopolitanism, “world polity,” and “global governance” with research on the EU has been piecemeal to date. There are many advantages to be culled from incorporating a global framework – placing the EU within a broader understanding of state, society, economy and culture, not necessarily territorially bounded - into EU studies. This would encourage greater interdisciplinarity and would allow due consideration of the non-EU origins of developments deemed to be central to EU affairs - citizenship, governance, and the “democratic deficit,” for example. We are not alone in recognising these needs. Rosamond (2000: 186) has suggested that the theorization of EI is only fully understood with reference to wider currents in political science, and Bellier and Wilson (2000: 1) call for more dialogue between cognate social science disciplines.

The need for a broad-based interdisciplinary approach will be demonstrated by examining the way in which the relationship between globalization and the EU is approached in EI studies. The dominant interpretation sees globalization as impelling greater integration, thereby contributing to the trend to view the dynamics of the EU in terms of an integrative logic. It is argued that EI studies suffers from the following weaknesses in respect of its treatment of globalization. First, EI studies is determinist or inevitabilist in the sense that globalization is deemed to lead automatically to deeper integration. Second, the EU proffers an economistic interpretation of globalization, EU studies confirming rather than confronting this one-dimensional interpretation. Thirdly, EI studies see transnational and global spaces as being an aggregate of nation-state space. On this reading, what is global about globalization is greater national interconnectivity (Held et al 1999). In a challenge to EI studies, it is argued that the need to understand the relationship between globalization and the EU provides an opportunity to inject greater interdisciplinarity into EU studies, develop an interpretative framework which views globalization as a multi-dimensional rather than an economic process, and develop new concepts with which to apprehend the governance of transnational spaces.

European integration studies and globalization

In relation to European integration, globalization is commonly understood to constitute an external (economic) threat creating the environment in which a much greater degree of integration is necessary and impelling Europe towards “ever closer union.”¹ The nationstate needs the security offered by membership in an economic bloc such as the EU because it is no longer possible for relatively small national economies to “go it alone” in the global market-place. On this reading, European integration is the logical response to a world dominated by global financial flows and trans-national corporations. Globalization has acted upon the EU by encouraging the replacement of an economic space of independent trading regions and nations by a single Europe-wide corporate economy (Amin and Tomaney 1995: 33). In Wallace’s (1996: 17) account Europe embraced the necessity of integration in order to domesticate the effects of globalization.

European integration can also be seen as a distinct west European effort to contain the consequences of globalization. Rather than be forced to choose between the national polity for developing policies and the relative anarchy of the globe, west Europeans invented a form of regional governance with polity-like features to extend the state and harden the boundary between themselves and the rest of the world.

For EI studies, the existence of globalization legitimizes European integration in the name of the need for greater EU competitiveness, and global trade trends can justify the need for regional blocs (Mattli 1999). Globalization is presented as a challenge – and justification - to be met and an incentive to pursue ever-greater steps towards economic integration, trade liberalization and competitiveness. In other words, globalization presents the EU and its member states with both the motive and the opportunity to enhance competitiveness. According to Delanty (1998), in EU studies “globalization is the condition which has replaced the need for peace in the justification of European integration today” (see also Castells 2000).

The integrative dynamics of globalization are also deemed to have another dimension: presenting a range of new opportunities for the EU to assume a leading role in global governance. A European Union with a high degree of economic integration and a commitment to neo-liberal trade policies stands to benefit from the expansion of global markets and the empowerment of institutions of global governance dedicated to defend neo-liberal principles. But the EU sees itself as much more than a market.² It also embodies a “social model.” The EU can further its interests by deploying its new-found power as a global player to press for the regulation of global actors. This is what the EU terms a moral framework for globalization, anchored in solidarity and sustainable development.³ For Lamy and Laidi (2001) “Europe’s main collective preference is arguably the pursuit of global governance” in order to defend non-market social policies and social solidarity. Under proper management globalization becomes the most appropriate means of safeguarding and promoting the European social model: “the problem of poverty cannot be resolved by less globalization, if anything we need more” (Prodi 2001).

Globalization is often associated with a diminution in the role of the nation-state and the concomitant empowerment of the sub-national region. This has coincided with the recent shift of emphasis in EU scholarship towards a study of governance (Rosamond 2000; Jonsson, Tagil and Tornquist 2000: 126-7). Governance has become the preferred term for the way the EU organizes the complex array of mechanisms of regulation at its disposal, working at regional, national, and supra-national levels with the EU, and involving a variety of state and non-state agencies. Governance denotes the organization of rule most attuned to the needs of a European space structured by the twin dynamics of neo-liberalism and (economic) globalization. Within European studies questions of governance have been dominated by the increasingly influential multi-level governance approach (Marks, Scharpf, Schmitter, and Streek 1996; Benz and Eberlein 1999; Hooghe and Marks 2001).

The multi-level governance approach offers an account of the EU as a series of interlocking and mutually reinforcing levels: regional, national and supranational (Hooghe and Marks 2001). Its appeal is that it both strives to capture the capacity of the EU as a complex polity and gives expression to its aspirations for greater democracy, social inclusion, and citizen participation. The multi-level governance thesis represents a positive step in integration studies as it embraces the plurality of levels, centres and agencies operational in the exercise of power and is not exclusively nation state-centred. Nor does it reinforce the cleavage of nation-state versus supranationalism. More importantly perhaps, it encourages a wider perspective on European issues. Not state building or centralized supranational power as such, but the exercise of rule and authority throughout the Europolity. The multi-level governance thesis is a sophisticated attempt to understand the complexity of European integration, although arguably its

limitation is a failure to incorporate a true global dimension to an understanding of the EU. For example, it discounts the possibility that sub-national regions could be animated from beyond the EU (Marks, Nielsen, Ray and Salk 1996),⁴ or that postnational European citizenship could have a marked global dimension (Streek 1996).

In addition to the emergence of the multi-level governance approach within EU studies, deriving from, but no longer limited to, a study of EU regional policy, studies of the relationship between globalization and the EU have attempted to utilize a multi-level model (see Mann 1998; Castells 2000). Perhaps the fullest development of the multi-level governance thesis as applied to the relationship between the EU and globalization can be found in Held et al. (1999), for whom transnational European space has been impelled by globalization and takes the form of amalgamated levels of governance, deriving from, displacing but not eliminating the nation-state. The need for greater competitiveness in the global marketplace has forced EU member states to bind more closely together in order to regain at the European level some of the autonomy lost at the nation-state level. At the same time, the nation-state has been subject to pressures from new, mainly supranational levels of authority and globalization is responsible for creating "multiple power centres and overlapping spheres of authority" (Held et al. 1999: 441): thus it appears that a European level of polity is emerging. The transnational level reorders the nation-state within the overarching integrative framework provided by the EU.

In sum, EI studies not only assumes that there is a causal relationship between globalization (conceived predominantly as an economic process) and integration but also that there is something inevitable about it: the EU as a necessary response to the inexorable global integration of capital (Calhoun 2002), and globalization as the midwife of multi-level governance (Rosamond 1999). The idea of the EU as a bounded, cohesive, transnational polity-in-the-making driven by a teleological logic is thereby reinforced. However, this is not the only way that globalization can be understood in relation to the EU. It can provide the launching pad for a broader based social scientific approach to the EU. Rather than an economic juggernaut, globalization can be seen more plausibly as a multi-dimensional series of processes that are reducing the separation of Europe from the rest of the world, broadening the horizon of possibility for European actors, and transforming Europe into a global space. Many social scientific interpretations of globalization emphasize that the nation-state is simultaneously strengthened and weakened by globalization (Albrow 1996; Fulcher 2000; Robertson 2001; Scholte 2000). Similarly, attention is drawn to cultural, social and political, as well as economic, dimensions of globalization (Appadurai 2001; Axford 2001; Featherstone 1990; Rumford 2002). Diverse cultural phenomena, technological innovation, mass communications, and supra-state regulation have all 'caused' globalization to happen (Scholte 2000: 89-108).

An incorporation of these themes into a study of the EU would shift the balance from the inevitability of integration to an attempt to understand how globalization increases the disjunctures between society, economy and state and in doing so de-totalizes existing polities. Rather than engaged in the process of state - or polity-building the EU works to mitigate the tensions generated by the cleavages – within and between nation-states - produced by globalization (Lamy and Laidi 2001). What follows is that the EU has to be viewed not simply as an aggregation of nation-states with an internal motor of integration, but as an entity patterned by – and, indeed, contributing to - the accelerating institutionalisation of international and global instruments of governance - the UN, World

Bank, GATT, NATO, OECC - within the orbit of the US, and framed by a developmental logic sustained by the Cold War (Giddens 1985; Keane 2002; Meyer 2000; Shaw 2000; Waeber 1995).

Conclusion: from EI to an interdisciplinary vision of EU research

We have argued that there has been a tendency to place European Union studies in an invidious position where interaction with theories and approaches on a broader scale has been limited, lacking in interdisciplinarity, and overly focussed on integration. Further we are concerned that this focus on integration, combined with a lack of adequate dialogue with other social scientists, has meant that an element of teleology has not been avoided, but rather succumbed to. It is argued that the EU studies debate can be advanced by exploring the need to broaden agendas, with reference to three issues which we consider to be particularly significant.

The first is the value of greater interdisciplinarity. It is increasingly recognised that legal studies, sociology, and cultural studies offer innovative and reflective understandings of the EU and that these disciplines advance the problematization of the often-rigid assumptions regarding integration. A multiplicity of approaches will broaden EU studies, transcend the tendency to ghettoise, and access the plurality of meanings attached to the many major issues such as globalization, deterritorialization, enlargement and postnational polity, without which the dynamics of the EU cannot be understood. Indeed we would argue further that the transformative nature of the EU's organization of economic and social space, and its relationship with the rest of the world cannot be fully understood unless we reinterpret integration through the lenses of globalization, deterritorialization, enlargement and postnational polity. While we recognise that it is not appropriate for specialists in one discipline to become expert in another, we do consider it essential that social scientists seek to build mutual understanding across disciplinary and subdisciplinary boundaries. Questioning the tendency to focus exclusively on integration is an important first step in moving the study of the EU beyond the current uniformity – even orthodoxy - that is apparent in many contributions to EI studies.

We argue therefore that there is a need to advance beyond the temptation to duplicate the same research agendas, and our second plea is for a more transparent EU studies programme autonomous of any academic or political agenda promoted by any EU institution, for whatever commendable reasons. The openness of the EU institutions and especially of the European Commission to researchers on the EU is praise-worthy. In that openness, however, lurks a potential danger. That is to say, sponsorship of research by the EU can foster a potentially cosy relationship between the Commission and EU studies. The fact that the EU funds a considerable amount of integration studies directly or indirectly carries the latent risk of tending towards inadequate objectivity and a continued commitment to integration studies *per se* to the detriment of an extended inter-disciplinary dialogue.⁵ In short, we are concerned that EI studies do not always successfully avoid the trap of what Mair (1996: 313) calls privileging the official story, at the expense of alternative versions.

Thirdly, consideration of an autonomous research vision must be accompanied by the need to develop appropriate concepts and theories with which to question and research the dynamics of European integration. There have been considerable advances recently, with, for example, the contributions from new institutionalism and constructivism –

although to date integration still constitutes *the* central concern of EU studies. In line with the call for greater interdisciplinarity we urge more bridge building (and conceptual borrowing) across disciplines in order to pursue creative and original social scientific research.

The international aspects of the EU, and those which are not characterised by integration merit further research. We are in favour of an inter- or multidisciplinary approach, which attempts to synthesise analytical methods, thereby resulting in a consortium of diversity, a comparative understanding of models, and an avoidance of both exclusive specialisation and the propensity towards the ghettoization of integration specialists.⁶ This would lead to a profitable meeting place and interaction between disciplines and sub-disciplines. In EU studies, social scientists are learning to be attentive to spaces – both conceptual and transnational - and the various meanings attached to boundaries. We advocate multidisciplinary, an increasingly autonomous vision, and new spaces within which the study of the EU and the nature of its boundaries can flourish.

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Footnotes

1 Objections to this view tend to refute the idea that globalization is an adequate description for the market environment in which the EU operates, not that globalization should be thought of in other than economic terms. For example, Hay (2002); Fligstein and Merand (2002).

2 According to former Commission President Jacques Delors, European “societies were more than markets, citizenship more than consumption, and government more than an economic traffic squad” (Ross 1995: 46).

3 “Europe needs to shoulder its responsibilities in the governance of globalisation. The role it has to play is that of a power ... seeking to set globalisation within a moral framework, in other words to anchor it in solidarity and sustainable development.” Presidency conclusions, European Council meeting in Laeken, 14 and 15 December 2001.

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4 Albrow (1998) and Rumford (2000) outline the ways in which globalization animates the European region from beyond the EU in ways that can compromise integration.

5 An American academic was recently quoted as saying (of EU think-tanks) that “they are afraid to work on something, unless the commission has decided that it should be on the agenda” (“Charlemagne: The Brussels Consensus,” The Economist 7 December 2002, p.36).

6 And hopefully put an end to the view that social scientists who do not devote their careers to integration studies are “non-specialists.”

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