

Supranationalism and The European Union:
A Template Built to Last, or Crash and Burn?

Supranationalism and The European Union:
A Template Built to Last or Crash and Burn?

Introduction

The concept of the European Union (EU) has been in existence for longer than the institution has been formally organized, and the founding principles have played into the world of international relations since the beginnings of the first modern economy. The collection of states known as the EU are bound together by a common desire to increase trade, create generally open borders, prevent war, and maintain an intertwined and harmonized Western Europe. The EU's shift of power from individual state sovereignty to a higher, overarching power is known as supranationalism. Supranationalism is an incredibly liberal idea that is the primary founding principle of the EU. Current events, however, may contain a glimpse into the future of the EU, as major world powers like the United Kingdom threaten to retract their membership. Evaluating the system through the five theories of international relations including realism, liberalism, constructivism, Marxism, and feminism, leads to a more developed understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of supranationalism and specifically of the EU. By understanding the EU through these theories, it can be predicted that the success of the organization outweighs the current struggles, and for the advance and future of Europe, the EU should stand the test of time.

Relevance

The European Union has only officially been in existence since 1992 after the formation of the Maastricht Treaty (Fabbrini 1004). Leading up to World War Two, Europe had constantly been battling to remain as one united force, and when tensions were embodied in the form of a continental war, devastation had already become exceedingly widespread. Just as quickly as the devastation of the war was realized, it became apparent that preventing any conflict like this from occurring again needed to be of utmost priority to the continent. This realization began the conceptual formation of the EU, which essentially aimed to prevent all-encompassing wars through weaving individual nations into an interdependent supranational institution politically and economically. This concept, however, was significantly younger than that of national sovereignty, which has held nation-states as the primary and most important unit of international relations since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 (Guay 50). When the EU began the process of continental cooperation, they challenged the concept of national sovereignty, suggesting that citizens' welfare could be improved through integration of nations (Guay 51).

As an entity that is particularly unique and is not replicated outside of Europe, the EU is an incredible example of the world-wide trends towards globalization that are beginning to deteriorate the significance of national borders. Jupille et al explain that, "Empirically, trends now falling under the rubric of 'globalization'...deprived state boundaries of at least part of their meaning, to some extent effacing the distinction between politics within states and politics among them" (10). While it can be agreed upon that a single economically and politically united world, or even Europe, is nowhere to be seen on the horizon, these trends toward globalization bring to light the seeming possibility of increased international integration.

With this tendency toward globalization in mind, studying the success and failures of the EU becomes a means to analyze the possibility of groups of states cooperating in supranational manners in order to benefit the world at large for the future. The age of the EU, however, calls into question its potential to sustain a political and economic model of this stature for an indefinite period of time, as the trends and events of a modern world are ever-changing. Ongoing Greece-Germany tensions, the Syrian refugee crisis, a dramatic spike in terrorism and ISIL, and the British referendum to exit the EU (Brexit), are all manifestations of the pressure placed on individual states and the global community when troubles begin to arise. These instances challenge the structure of the EU, and the future of the organization can be understood better through an examination of the advantages and disadvantages of an interconnected Europe, and potentially an interconnected world.

Literature Review

The integration of nation-states is the foundation on which liberalism stands, and thus supranationalism is an obvious manifestation of this theory and an analysis of the EU on the systematic level. The conceptual groundwork for the EU is outlined entirely in liberalist policies, using open markets, free-trade, and intertwined national economies to encourage peace, or peace in the democratic form at the least (Mingst and Arreguin-Toft 116). "The single market policies (of the EU) have continued to be managed through the decision making interaction of supranational institutions and intergovernmental institutions," demonstrating these institutions vital role in free-market policies (Fabbrini 1004). Little regulation, except when necessary to protect property rights and provide a functioning system, creates a healthy, competitive market

which results in not only more peaceful economic interactions, but has the potential to generate peace outside of an economic basis.

Liberals additionally point to the successes of the EU's free market to explain its necessity. All 28 EU member states have experienced growth in terms of economic transactions across borders, and an average member states' exports represent more than a third of their GDP, nearly 70% of that total trade being with other EU members (Mingst and Arreguin-Toft 333). Further, the EU's common currency, the Euro, has facilitated transactions and eliminated some of the uncertainty involved in international trade by creating a standardized currency, reducing the risk of trade related to fluctuations in exchange rates (Mingst and Arreguin-Toft 333).

Additionally, throughout the twenty-first century the European Union has continued to instate policies that aim to foster the success and prosperity of EU states. Following the repeated crises of sovereign debt among EU members, first with Ireland, then Portugal, and most recently Greece, the European Council found it necessary to negotiate a European Financial Stability Mechanism (EFSM) with goals aimed toward promoting crisis prevention (Fabbrini 1014). The EU has consistently aimed to prevent and correct the economic imbalances of Europe on a macro level, through pacts like the EFSM, the Euro Plus Pact, and the ESM (Fabbrini 1015). Throughout negotiation of these pacts, the EU has pushed for member states to follow "...the golden rule of a mandatory balanced budget domestically at the constitutional or equivalent level" (Fabbrini 1016). All of these proposed, and some instated, economic policies would conceptually lead to the success of individual European nations, and thus to the EU's success as an entity.

In contrast, Realists find many policies involved with European cooperation to be incredibly troublesome, and thus find the current state of the young organization predictable and unsurprising. Realists have long argued that the most important actors in international relations are the states, and thus critique the EU on the state level. Additionally, realists believe that the anarchic tendencies of the international system mean that no international authority has the ability to govern successfully (Mingst and Arreguin-Toft). States are defined by their sovereignty, and all state actors are equal because of it. This idea of complete and unchallenged sovereignty within states fundamentally contradicts the foundation on which the EU was built. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 negotiated a compromise that removes some of the areas that historically define a sovereign state—those being monetary, economic, foreign, and security policies—from the control of the states and shifts them to the control of the supranational organization (Fabbrini 1008).

While liberals claim that the leading factor behind the success of the European Union lies in the reduction of state-held control of monetary, economic, foreign, and security policies, realists have grounds to claim just the opposite. The reduced state control of economic policies through open markets and free-trade agreements encourage EU members to negotiate with one another, sometimes discouraging states from acting in their best self-interest, removing some of the autonomy that defined a state previously.

Just as joining the European Union as a member state removes a portion of sovereignty from the state, adopting the Euro as a currency further removes the state from its' own autonomy. Sovereign states have two ways of manipulating their economies, those being fiscal and monetary policy (Guay 329). EU members maintain their fiscal policy, that is, they maintain

the ability to decide what items and to what extent those items will be taxed, and how disburse their funds publically (Guay 329). Monetary policy, however, is a countries' control of their money supply, which allows sovereign nations to control central banks in order to manipulate economic activity, slowing it or creating growth by raising and lowering interest rates (Guay 329). When a nation joins the EU and adopts their currency, they surrender their monetary policy to the European Central Bank, which is responsible for setting interest rates throughout the entirety of the Eurozone (Guay 329). A simple example of the consequences of this loss of power came in 2000, when Ireland's booming economy ran the risk of over-heating because of the swift growth (Guay 330). During this same time period, Germany was experiencing a slowing economy, but both countries were under the control of the same monetary policy and thus the same interest rate, as a result of their Eurozone membership (Guay 330). Ireland, had they controlled their own monetary policy, could have benefitted from a higher interest rate, and Germany on the other hand, could have benefitted from a lower one.

Pointing to the EFSM policies of crisis prevention that appealed so greatly to liberals, realists would highlight the concept of the nations sovereign debt, claiming that if anyone besides the nation itself takes responsibility for this debt, it no longer can be considered a sovereign nation. Perhaps the largest EU member operating under the realist perspective continues to be the United Kingdom, repeatedly choosing to refrain from many of the activities that are often defining factors in other countries EU membership. Refusing the Euro as a national currency, and vetoing the fiscal integration presented by the Lisbon Treaty's legal framework, the UK protected London's financial district from potentially restrictive regulations. Respectively, the UK has repeatedly chosen to maintain its' sovereignty as much as possible by

refusing European integration while still maintaining EU membership (Fabbrini 1008). That, however, may even be about to change with the recent United Kingdom referendum to leave the EU.

The European Union has not only impacted the economies of these countries, however, and has played a large role in the promotion of feminism and women's rights within Western Europe. Generally and conceptually speaking, an intergovernmental organization comprised of 28 member-states should have a positive impact on each states human rights policies, as these states can now hold each other accountable for their actions, and enhance the EU on the individual level. This concept proved to be true within the EU, as the supranational organization became a protector of not only economic policies, but also involuntarily of women's rights. The EU was able to transform Europe into a collection of countries with a complicated system of policy and procedures focused on promoting a variety of rights for women through a treaty namely focused on protecting businesses (Cichowski 490). Understanding the way in which organizations like the EU can act as protectors of not only economic interests, but can also protect women through integration of supranational constitutions and legal systems can bring to light some of the more personal and individual benefits of operating as integrated, supranational institutions.

When the European Economic Community (EEC) began 1958, women's rights were not on the minds of many EEC members, but protection of businesses from unfair competition was (Cichowski 493). For the same reason that we import goods from countries who do not protect the rights of their workers, EEC members were concerned with wage disparities allowed by some countries to manufacture goods at a much lower price than they could. By paying women

lower wages, regions were making it difficult for more developed nations to compete with manufacturing prices because of the higher pay required to employ women in countries who were protecting women's rights. Out of this purely economic interest came groundbreaking equal rights legislation protecting equal pay (Cichowski 493).

In addition to equal pay for women, the ECJ has ruled in favor of women on a number of cases regarding dismissal from employment on the grounds of pregnancy, setting precedents in that nature (Cichowski 493). The cases, including two 1990's cases that were not covered under their original states' laws, Dutch and Danish, created new rules for the European workplace by explicitly protecting the rights of pregnant workers under EU laws (Cichowski 498).

Furthermore, these EU laws were some of the first to introduce the idea of gender equality for women focusing on the fact that women were being put at a disadvantage, not just attempting to create comparable conditions for men and women (Cichowski 503). The feminist concepts of gender equality can also be seen in the Western European family planning system, such as the promotion of maternal and paternal leave, child care subsidies, and family allowances (Kalwij 507). These policies are targeted toward promoting the equality of genders in terms of family responsibilities, and aims to decrease the opportunity cost of women to have children in order to promote childbearing (Kalwij (517).

The EU continually supported women's rights where other institutions fell short, providing a protection for women when their own states would not, and an outlet for women to peruse justice when their own justice systems would not allow for it (Cichowski 497).

Cichowski evaluates in her research the court cases discussed previously, and her analysis

explains the ways in which constitutions at the supranational level can lead to the expansion of rights (501).

Constructivism, while currently underdeveloped in terms of research in the area of the EU, may have a lot to say about the future of the EU if further consulted. The concept that the international system, and thus the EU, exists as a social construct for order explains the rationale of the organization profoundly (Mingst and Arreguin-Toft 129). The emphasis on individuals and identity in the actions of the international system could explain some of the current discord within the EU, as social norms shift and begin to emphasize national pride, undermining the larger supranational system of the EU (Mingst and Arreguin-Toft 129).

Additionally, while the research on Marxism's role in the EU is also underdeveloped, it's theories of stratification among the international system could also speak to the advantages of the EU. On one hand, Marxists could claim that the EU works to reinforce the relatively fixed stratification of nations within the international system on the systemic level (Mingst and Arreguin-Toft 118). Conversely, however, it could be said that the EU has worked to break down the borders of stratification, allowing for developed countries with strong economies to assist the emerging and developing nations to build their economies, while also benefiting citizens on an individual level (Mingst and Arreguin-Toft 119).

Overall, feminism, constructivism, and Marxism as theories of international relations all have a great deal to say about the structure of the EU. By developing more research on these theories application to the supranational institution known as the EU, the future of the EU could be greatly benefitted.

Lessons Learned

Throughout the course of its history, Europe has quickly evolved from a group of nations joined by proximity, completely sovereign of each other, and constantly feuding, into the interdependent supranational institution that is known as the European Union today. It is undoubtable that the leading cause behind this shift is the formation of the EU, and the political and economic integration of Europe that came as a result of the regulations outlined by the EU. Liberals lay a large claim to the success in this sense, as the research previously discussed demonstrates the extent to which the EU was founded on liberal ideals. Undoubtedly, the progress that has swept over the continent can be attributed to the success of the EU in integrating the continent.

So why, then, have the past few years been riddled with backlash directed toward the institution that seemingly resulted in so much stability? Realists offer the strongest argument against the formation of the EU, claiming that the cooperation undermines member nations sovereignty. The backlash against the EU in recent years makes perfect sense to realists, as the constant back-and-forth struggle between nation-states and their multinational EU government is a simple demonstration of nations fighting to hold their complete sovereignty over their nation. Many major EU member nations have resisted these attempts at a seemingly complete EU take-over by forgoing participation in the Eurozone, resisting and negotiating trade agreements, and increasing immigration restrictions. These tensions have come to light in recent years through events like the Greece-Germany strain, immigration issues regarding the Syrian refugee crisis, the rise of terrorism, and was cumulated in the British referendum to exit the EU.

While the other three theories of international relations—Feminism, Marxism, and Constructivism—all provide interesting insight to the past, present, and future of the EU, these theories seem underdeveloped in research. If researchers develop these theories into more robust analyses of the EU, it is quite foreseeable that the theories, when combined with the already understood theories of liberalism and realism, could shed a great deal of light on the unknowns of the EU.

Future Direction

After reviewing literature and developing an understanding of what theories of international relations best explain the conduct and repercussions of the European Union, it becomes incredibly apparent that the success of a peaceful, interconnected Europe relies on the success of the EU to unite the continent. The struggles associated with the youth of the institution, and the difficulties of cooperation explained by realism are not to be dismissed—the future of the EU does not exist without troubles. The future undoubtedly brings continual backlash against the system. It is key, however, that when progressing as an interdependent supranational institution, these struggles and concerns are realized and considered. By proactively addressing the possibility that some nations may feel threatened by overarching EU regulations, more negotiable policies can occur on reasonable and effective bases.

In conclusion, while the concepts of realism explain the struggles that continue to face the EU, the success of the liberal organization whose concepts helped to form the multinational organization prove its' importance to the international system. Through the EU, advances have been made in the economies of member nations through single market policies, increased

trade across borders, and simplified trade and travel through the creation of a single-currency in the Eurozone. In addition to the economic advancements made through the EU, social advances have been made as explained partially through feminism. The overarching policies protecting women's, and other human rights, have enabled the EU to make social advancements in the wider European community when some singular states have not yet granted these rights to their individual citizens.

While the EU has had and will continue to struggle in integrating individual sovereign states into a larger, multi-and-supranational institution, the multidimensional benefits of the organization cannot be discounted. It is undeniable that Europe has shifted from an assemblage of individual, sovereign nation states that were constantly riddled with conflict, disagreement, and feuding into a peaceful supranational structure. While the struggle to balance tensions associated with individual governments' and EU headquarters conflicting desires, finding compromise and negotiating a middle-ground that maintains the structure and integrity of the European Union will benefit the economic, social, and general wellbeing of all nations involved.

Works Cited

- Cichowski, Rachel A. "Women's Rights, The European Court, And Supranational Constitutionalism." *Law & Society Review* 38.3 (2004): 489-512. *Social Sciences Full Text (H.W. Wilson)*. Web. 1 Dec. 2016.
- Fabbrini, Sergio. "Intergovernmentalism and Its Limits: Assessing The European Union's Answer to The Euro Crisis." *Comparative Political Studies* 46.9 (2013): 1003-1029. *Social Sciences Full Text (H.W. Wilson)*. Web. 10 Oct. 2016.
- Guay, Terrence R. *The Business Environment of Europe: Firms, Governments, and Institutions*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2014. Print.
- Jupille, Joseph, James A. Caporaso, and Jeffrey T. Checkel. "Integrating Institutions: Rationalism, Constructivism, And The Study of The European Union." *Comparative Political Studies* 36.1/2 (2003): 7-40. *Social Sciences Full Text (H.W. Wilson)*. Web. 21 Sept. 2016.
- Kalwij, Adriaan. "The Impact of Family Policy Expenditure On Fertility In Western Europe." *Demography* 47.2 (2010): 503-519. *Social Sciences Full Text (H.W. Wilson)*. Web. 8 Dec. 2016.
- Mingst, Karen A., and Ivan M. Arreguin-Toft. *Essentials of International Relations*. Seventh ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2008. Print.