

The Fusion Thesis and Europeanization

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ALI ABDI OMAR, MAR 8 2013

The 'Fusion Thesis' is a much more helpful lens through which to understand EU Member States' dynamics than 'Europeanization'

The idea formed in the above statement is actually not a completely novel insight. It constitutes the centrepiece of Donald Puchala's (1972) groundbreaking and still much-cited article in which he objects to the theoretical approaches to European integration because, characterising the European Union (EU) in particular terms *à la Puchala* (*sui generis*), they produce narrow research programmes with limited explanatory power. Highlighting the relative immaturity as well as the partiality of the insights of these approaches, he suggests that conformist frameworks have confused "more than they have illuminated our understanding of international integration" (Puchala, 1972:276). However, since then, research in EU integration has entered an innovative phase. One can notice a theoretical renewal that coincided particularly with the relaunch of the integration process in the 1980s due to significant activism at the supranational level (Rosamond, 2000), which in turn triggered the resumption of the long-standing *tête-à-tête* between Neofunctionalism and Intergovernmentalism. Tranholm-Mikkelsen (1991) attempted to breathe new life into the former in order to explicate the Single European Act, while Moravcsik (1993) updated and gave a face-lift to the latter. Nonetheless, this continual theoretical joust between the above theorists fails to capture the intricacy and vigour of the contemporary European integration process or the potential European futures that may perhaps lie between, as Rosamond (2000:106) puts it, " 'Europe des Patries' and 'United States of Europe' ". Thus, the last decade of research on EU integration has seen, to some extent, a disposal of "grand theory" (Rosamond, 2000:126) because we could not fill "the 'grand theory-shaped hole'" (Warleigh, 2000:173 cited in Warleigh, 2006:77) in the EU literature. Put differently, we observed at least a partial withdrawal from 'grand theorising' and towards answering more focused questions about how the EU system works, such as the effects of Europeanization on member states. These questions have motivated academics to treat the EU as an empirical site and to undertake refined testing of an assortment of hypotheses (Wallace et al, 2010). As noted in the introductory line of this essay, the survival of Puchala's metaphor in the collective memory of EU scholars is due to its vividness. Recently, as observed by Cini and Bourne (2006:9-10), many scholars are learning lessons and drawing from that metaphor to create a conceptual framework that allows them to take empirical evidence of different parts of the animal (EU) and work them in order to capture the intricacy of the EU. A good example is the literature on the effects of Europeanization on national and sub-national institutions of EU countries (Borzal and Risse, 2000). Another interesting concept, which grew out of a concern to find a less grand theory or approach, is the 'fusion thesis' developed by Wessels in his 1997 article 'An ever closer fusion? A Dynamic Macropolitical View on Integration Processes'. The argument put forward in this essay is that the 'fusion thesis' is a much more helpful lens through which to understand EU member states dynamics than Europeanization. The essay will first set out the uses of these two concepts for improving our theoretical insight of the EU. It then proceeds to demonstrate the conceptual advantage of the fusion thesis. The last section will provide the concluding comments.

For a long time, studies in the field of European integration focused on the construction of a supranational system of European collaboration, not often enquiring as to the effects this might have on the domestic political and social systems of the member states (Wiener and Diez, 2004). As noted in the introduction, with the renewal of the integration process in the 1980s (due to increased regulation at the supranational level) and the subsequent surge of interest in policy research, the study of Europeanization has grown, covering an extensive research agenda in the studies of the EU (Bulmer, 2007). Thus, driven by the dynamism from the Single European Act in terms of the EU

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integration process, EU scholars were challenged to explain the subsequent impact of the EU on its constituents (the member states). Over the last decade or so, the Europeanization literature has grown exponentially. Because the interests of these studies extend to various aspects and embrace different theoretical perspectives, one cannot be surprised as to why Europeanization is a nebulous concept (Radaelli, 2000). There are a variety of propositions in terms of definitions of the Europeanization concept. Cowles et al (2001:1), in their introductory line, define Europeanization as “the emergence and the development at the European level of distinct structures of governance...on the domestic structures of the member states.” Their whole research is devoted to states adjusting their policies in relation to EU input. Therefore, their definition appears to draw attention to the creation of supranational governance, rather than on the domestic effects of integration. According to Radaelli (2006:59), this definition does not demarcate the particular *terrain d’Européanisation* as a field of inquiry. There is not a shared definition or even a stable meaning, and frequently definitions differ from one article or book to another (Bulmer and Lenesque, 2002:16; Héritier, 2001:3 cited in Wiener and Diez, 2004:109). Olsen (2002:944), admitting to the definitional challenge, argues that we should not turn everything about the EU into a definitional issue, but rather “the challenge is to model the dynamics of change in ways that make the simplifying assumptions behind various definitions accessible to empirical tests.” Hence, illustrating the many faces of Europeanization, he provides an approach that covers almost a limitless spectrum. Nevertheless, the common view describes Europeanization as the *modus operandi* through which supranational institutions and policies impact member states’ institutions and policies (Wallace et al, 2010:37). This view evades any teleological inference and leaves it open to empirical corroboration whether a state has internalized the institutional logic of the EU. European legislation is a departure point and research investigates and explicates, from a comparative point of view, the processing of supranational input in national political structures.

The greater part of the Europeanization literature is limited to studying the impact of the supranational on member states in relation to changing policies. However, even in this relatively limited area and notwithstanding a significant number of empirical explorations, it does not seem to be in agreement on causation. It is not difficult to understand the reasons why one cannot make persuasive generalizations, considering the intricacy of issues giving rise to different groups of interests, and also the differing institutional histories of member states. The rostrums on which Europeanization manifests itself as well as the mechanisms through which it transforms the member states are contested in the EU literature. For instance, in showing the problem that immediately arises from the analysis of the impact of Europeanization upon national policy, Bulmer and Lequesne (2002:18) ask the question of how easy it is to isolate the EU as an independent variable when examining institutional adjustment. To illustrate this problem, these scholars took the case of Air transport liberalization in the European countries, and ask if this liberalization of Air transport occurred as a result of global industry pressures, because of Europeanization process, or as a consequence of separate domestic moves. In the case of the UK, Bulmer and Lequesne (2002:18) argued that policy change happened before, and even informed the supranational-level policy; hence Europeanization was much less of a ‘misfit’ compared to other countries such as Greece, which had not at all liberalized internally. Stating that both UK and European liberalization were persuaded to some extent by global trends in the Air transport industry, they concluded that

“the danger is one of attributing change to Europeanization while under-emphasising the global pressures against which the supranational level might be designed to offer some protection” (p18).

Cowles *et al* (2001) have dedicated meticulous effort to explicate the conditions under which Europeanization can produce change in national arrangements. They present a wide-ranging typology of Europeanization at both the national and supranational level, which includes ‘institutional building’ and ‘institutional adjustment’. Recognizing the importance of institutional compatibility between the national and supranational levels, and also attempting to formulate a thrifty concept, Cowles *et al* (2001) put forward the notion of “goodness of fit.” Although widely utilised by scholars who explore the domestic effects of the Europeanization process, the “goodness of fit” mechanism, according to Radaelli (2006:75), does not account ‘for agency’ as well as for ‘transformative power of discourse.’ Furthermore, this concept “tends to miss the complex dynamics of political processes induced by the European policy inputs at the national level” (Héritier, 2001:9 cited in Wiener and Diez, 2004:109). To conclude this section, for Bulmer (2006:62), Europeanization is a phenomenon that demands explanation (*explanandum*). If we take his words, then we can understand Europeanization as a conceptual tool that is useful as an “attention-directive device” (Olsen,

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2002:943). In other words, it provides an important shift of focus by producing a set of questions for examining the interaction between the national, sub-national, and supranational levels.

In what follows, this essay will unpack the fusion thesis, an approach that provides various conceptual ways to grasp both the course of EU integration and the perceptions and adjustment of the contributing political elites of member states. Also, the fusion thesis, according to its intellectual architect Wolfgang Wessels (1997), offers better theoretical tools to explicate the evolution of the European Union. In fact, this approach transcends the analysis of the process of integration. Wessels states that the term fusion is not a new term for characterizing the integration process, but rather it goes beyond the horizontal “pooling of sovereignties.” The fusion thesis contends that EU integration is “the logical product” of important choices made by EU governments. Member states consent to invest competencies and resources in the EU because of “package deals” (Wessels, 1997:274). As Miles (2005) has identified, one should understand the fusion thesis as being part of, and linked to, Europeanization approaches.

In characterizing the change-producing forces of the EU and its integration, Rometsch and Wessels (1996) explain a three-step process. The first step is Europeanization, as discussed in the first part of this essay, understood as permeation of the supranational into the national and sub-national (Radaelli 2006; Olsen 2002). Europeanization leads to a growing number of national actors participating in the EU political sphere, consequently blurring the boundaries between the EU and national areas. The second step after Europeanization, in the direction of integration, is what is termed “institutional fusion” (Miles, 2008:7). This is essentially about the growing reciprocity of influence between supranational and national institutions, which in turn leads to an increase of exchanges between various levels of governance as well as an increased sharing of responsibilities. The last and third step is convergence, which comes as a result of fusion. This is the most integrative part of the process. Rometsch and Wessels (1996: 236) portray this step as the “gradual process of institutional, procedural, and behavioural innovations and adaptations to the EU decision-making by national institutions.” This will lead to member states or political elites accepting the EU institutional logic. Aware of the importance of supranational participation, these elites will, to paraphrase Miles (2008:11), “sell the EU” nationally. Hence, states will then part with their exclusive competence as well as adopting common adjustment.

As noted above, the fusion thesis must be understood as more than the permeation of the supranational into the national arena. Looking through the fusion lenses, owing to an increasing Europeanization process, exchanges between member states and European Union institutions will multiply, leading to increased interdependence between various actors at different level (Wessels, 1996; Miles, 2008). As a result of these growing exchanges, according to Wessels (1997: 274), one can observe an increase in cooperation. Furthermore, Rometsch and Wessels (1996: 239) argue that national and supranational levels of governance cannot act alone anymore. Wessels (1997: 273) argues that, in the face of growing dependencies, such as something out of their domain of direct control, member states need shared “problem-solving instruments” through supranational institutions at the EU level, while simultaneously they make a great effort to keep “the ultimate say”. According to Wessels (1997), this is not a general quandary as Moravcsik (1993) might argue, but rather it is intrinsically linked to the ongoing transformation “of the western European system towards the welfare and service state” which has *comme raison d’être* the realization of the basic needs of its citizenry. This can be observed in the political elites’ behaviour. In other words, political elites or policy makers accept the ‘pooling of sovereignty’ and the EU institutional logic in an attempt to find solutions that realize the needs of their citizens that can no longer be attained by solely national machinery and policies (Miles, 2008).

As discussed in the second part of this paper, the fusion thesis argues that, because of variables such as interdependence, cooperation, and growing mutual exchanges, one should expect member states to share responsibilities. Indeed, as Rometsch and Wessels (1996) explain, member states’ institutions will, more and more, share the responsibilities horizontally (between states), vertically (with supranational institutions), and with other institutional bodies outside their sphere of control. In addition, the fusion thesis anticipates the occurrence and amplification of further pressures that will encourage the *passation de pouvoirs* to supranational bodies. Wessels (2005:27) describes this process as the “escalator effect”. In addition, the intellectual architect of the fusion thesis expects not only a merger of public resources but also of legitimacy as well as any integrative instruments. Hence, member states will move towards more convergence.

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To conclude, it is clear that the fusion thesis is a much more helpful lens through which to understand EU member state dynamics than Europeanization. Though, to restate Warleigh (2006:77), “we can go some but not all the way towards filling the ‘grand theory-shaped hole’” with the fusion thesis. However, it has great potential to help develop a theory of integration. The fusion thesis is a relevant conceptual lens through which one can observe EU policy coordination. It explicates different trajectories of the EU integration process, by dissecting the interactions of various actors contributing to the policy making process in order to capture how these actors behave as a result. The fusion thesis provides various conceptual ways to grasp both the course of EU integration and the perceptions and adjustment of the contributing political elites of member states. Furthermore, this concept shows the importance of the growing reciprocity of influence between supranational and national institutions, which in turn leads to an increase of exchanges between various level of governance, as well as an increased sharing of responsibilities, and hence allows us to assess the development of European integration.

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