

How Crucial Was the 'Empty Chair Crisis' in the Course of European Integration?

Written by Joris Jourdain

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JORIS JOURDAIN, AUG 22 2015

To What Extent Can the 'Empty Chair Crisis' Be Considered a Key Event in the Course of European Integration?

In 1965, the European integration was at an early stage; there were only 6 members in the European Economic Community (Benelux, France, West Germany and Italy), which worked alongside the following institutions: the Commission, the Parliament, the Council and the Court of Justice (Ludlow, 2006). Therefore, when De Gaulle decided to dismiss all the noteworthy French representatives from Brussels – because he refused the Commission's proposal on how to finance the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and rejected the qualified-majority voting system in the Council – several scholars feared that European integration had reached its limits (Glencross 2013). This event, known as the 'empty chair crisis', is one of the major crises the EEC has gone through.

Throughout this essay, I shall argue that, although depending on the theoretical viewpoint one chooses, the impact of this crisis is different; the 'empty chair crisis' was a key event as it has considerably lessened the European policy-makers' ambitions on integration. I shall first compare the analysis on the crisis and its impacts given by the two main integration theories at the time. In the neo-functional perspective, the process of integration is characterized by the creation of a supranational entity that shall gradually replace the influences of the national governments; therefore, the 'empty chair crisis' has been a key event in the integration process (Haas 1958). On the other hand, for the intergovernmentalists who believe that integration is limited and that national governments will determine its extent (Hoffman 1966), De Gaulle's retrieval in 1965 was not considered a challenge to European integration. However, although the theoretical standpoint is a determinant issue, I shall then expose which lessons surpassing theories can be learnt from this episode.

Neo-functionalism was created as a grand theory of international relations. It highlights the gradual emergence of political institutions that "demand jurisdiction over national states" (Haas 1968: 114). Although this theory originally aimed at explaining all the processes of regional integration, it has mainly been used to interpret European Integration (Jensen 2013). The European Commission activities have thoroughly been analysed by the neo-functionalists because it is an institution that pushed forward the transformation of European Union into a supranational entity (Haas 1968). Specifically, in 1965, this institution proposed the financing of the CAP through "both agricultural levies and customs duties on industrial products" (Bulletin for the European Community 1965: 2). If it had been accepted, this would have meant the removal of any trade barriers between the member states (ibid: 2). As a result of this, the interdependence of the member states would have been expanded and the Commission and the Parliament would have had more power because their budget would have increased. Therefore, the national sovereignty of each country would have decreased, and in this sense the Commission's proposal was neo-functional (Paylaret 2006).

De Gaulle not only refused the CAP financing but also the qualified majority voting – a system in which decisions are taken when a high majority support them and not by unanimity (Bomberg 2013: 28). De Gaulle's decision is easily explainable: this expansion of the Commission's mandate would have constrained the independence of the French to negotiate trade agreements (Paylaret 2006: 54). This voting system would have sped up the pace of European

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integration but would also have lessened the national governments' power. Consequently, De Gaulle's rejection challenged integration in the neo-functional perspective and the 'empty chair crisis' can be considered as a key event in the process of European integration.

Indeed, an argument of prime importance in the neo-functionalist stream is that if something favours the EEC, it shall always – sometimes indirectly – favour each member state (Haas 1961). The argument goes that the loss of national sovereignty shall always be outweighed by the economic gains of the member states, even when these losses were not expected (Hoffman 1966). However, by rejecting the Commission's proposal, De Gaulle gives reason to intergovernmentalists, such as Hoffman, in the sense that he shows that nations prefer certainty to the possibility of future gains (ibid.). Therefore, after this crisis, the neo-functionalist theory seemed to be condemned. Nevertheless, in the long-term, European integration in the neo-functionalist sense has been re-established with the Single European Act in 1980s (Tranholm-Mikkelsen 1991); suggesting that neo-functionalism is not completely obsolete. Notwithstanding, although neo-functionalism has been at least partially rehabilitated several years after the crisis, it has been severely jeopardized by the 'empty chair crisis'.

On the other hand, for the intergovernmentalists, the crisis was not important in the course of European integration. Indeed, in their view, national sovereignty is of prime importance (Bache and al. 2011) and therefore, the EEC is deemed as an "international regime for policy co-ordination" (Moravcsik 1993: 480). Hence, integration (they prefer the term cooperation) is impossible in areas such as security ("high politics") as they are too important to national sovereignty but economic cooperation ("low politics") is probable (Hoffman 1966: 882). Therefore, the integration in intergovernmentalism is contingent to the idea of compliance to cooperate (Nugent 2006). This allows all participating states to decide the extent and nature of the cooperation (ibid.). Therefore the empty chair crisis was no challenge to intergovernmentalist integration as it only meant that De Gaulle rejected what he felt could threaten the French national sovereignty.

This theory provides great insights to explain the empty chair crisis. An explanation of the crisis that fits into the intergovernmentalist's framework is that De Gaulle rejected the Commission's proposal because the CAP was mainly in France's interest and that with no veto power, other member states could have created an alliance to vote for its dismissal (Moravcsik 1993: 481). Indeed, De Gaulle, pressured by authoritative French lobbies, insisted on the integration of the agriculture as "a sine qua non condition" of the French membership (Keeler, 1990: 64). On the contrary, at the moment of the CAP's establishment, West Germany was in favour of the Common Market only for industrial goods (ibid.), which suggests that the Germans may have attempted to challenge the CAP and that France would not have been able to counter this (Glencross 2013).

Notwithstanding, although the argument – according to which De Gaulle's motivation was to preserve French interest – provides great insights to interpret the crisis, I shall also consider that, to a certain extent, De Gaulle's rejection was motivated by ideological beliefs. Indeed, De Gaulle's concept of Europe was mostly intergovernmentalist as he deemed that the EC should be a "Confederation of European States" and not a federation (Chopra 1975: 32). In this sense, boycotting the meetings in Brussels was a technique of refusing not only the proposals but also the wider idea that the EC could become more supranational than it was at the time.

The 'empty chair crisis' was therefore a key event in the process of European integration in the sense that it was a turning point in European history. With the Luxembourg compromise, both the financing proposal for the CAP and the qualified majority voting were rejected. Therefore, by agreeing with this compromise, the Commission gave up on several political ambitions it had and accepted that the EC would not become a supranational entity (Nicoll, 1984). Therefore, intergovernmentalism provides great insights when it comes to interpreting De Gaulle's rejection of the proposal.

As I have argued throughout this essay, the 'empty chair crisis' may be considered as a challenge to the European integration process depending on the theoretical standpoint one embraces. For neo-functionalists, this crisis was challenging to the extent that this theory was deemed obsolete after the crisis. On the contrary, intergovernmentalists believe that integration was not challenged as they consider integration to be cooperation. However, this does not mean that one cannot critically assess and interpret the impact of this crisis on the integration process without the

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help of theories.

An important aspect to take into account when analysing this crisis with regard to the European integration process is the way in which the Luxembourg compromise put an end to it. The conclusion of this informal settlement was the following: in cases when major interests of the member states are at stake, the decisions should be adopted by all the members of the Council and not as a result of qualified majority voting (Europa 2009). The major impact of this compromise is that it initiated a culture of consensus that remained even when the Single European Act put an end to the Luxembourg Compromise (Heisenberg 2005). Indeed, the qualified majority voting constitutes 65% of decision-making in the Council and has been extended to several policy areas (Europa 2009). This culture has positive effects on the European Integration to the extent that, even if the EU is not a state-like entity and has no centralized power to force its members to comply with its decisions, the rules established by consensus are "almost always respected" thanks to the use of "participation, publicly and legal procedures" (Neyer 2004: 35). The fact that the most important decisions are taken through unanimity slows down the pace of decision-making considerably, and therefore the pace of the integration process (Glencross 2013). The agreement on the Luxembourg compromise therefore demonstrates the major impact of the crisis. Indeed, European policy makers want to make sure that even though the integration process is slowed down, all the member states are going to back up all the decisions taken in Brussels (Heisenberg 2005). Indeed, if countries all agree on a proposal, they are much less likely to retrieve and to initiate a crisis.

However, a major issue that has been addressed by De Gaulle in 1965 but has not been resolved since then is the lack of 'finality' of the European Union (Kaniok 2013). At the moment of the 'empty chair crisis', there was no agreement among the member states about what precisely integration should aim to achieve. Out of the six founding member states, only five were in favour of supranational integration. This issue is still of prime importance today: France, Denmark and Ireland asked for their citizens' approval before confirming the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 (Franklin and al., 1996); likewise, in 2005, the Dutch and the French even answered no to the referendum to adopt the Constitutional Treaty (Reh, 2009). These two events demonstrate the unwillingness of European citizens and the drifting paths of several member states during the process of supranational integration, and they reveal the lack of political finality in the EU, which had already been suggested in 1965 (Wallace and Winnand, 2006).

Thus, the 'empty chair crisis' is an event of prime importance in the course of European Integration. It has challenged the view of the neo-functionalist European policy-makers who believed that the EC would eventually become a supranational entity where national sovereignties' power would not be significant. Moreover, it demonstrated that national governments, even when they had formed a significant minority, would not willingly transfer their power. However, in the intergovernmentalist perspective, which assumed that the national governments would always remain the main actors of integration, the 'empty chair crisis' was not a challenge and actually confirmed their opinion that the EC would never become an overarching institution. Nevertheless, to the extent that the crisis highlighted several issues such as the lack of political finality to the EU, and led to integration that was slower-paced in order to attempt to avoid this type of crisis, the empty chair crisis can be considered as an event that shaped European history and policy.

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