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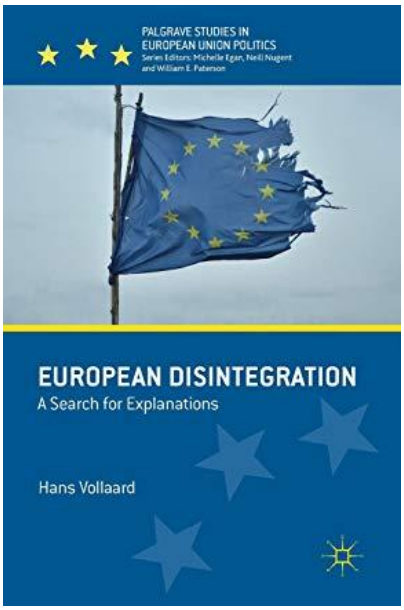
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EUROPEAN DISINTEGRATION: A SEARCH FOR EXPLANATIONS

Author: Hans Vollaard
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How likely is the EU going to disintegrate? This is a question which has gained in the last years the attention of a wide range of actors, from policy-makers, media, and citizens to the academic scholarship. Still, limited scholarly works have tried to explain and conceptualize the process of disintegration, which has spawned greater interest in the context of the more recent empirical developments which have affected the legitimacy and effectiveness of the EU: the 2008 eurozone crisis, the 2015 refugee crisis or the Brexit saga. These crises have stimulated the set up of a research agenda on the issue of the unravelling of the EU which has translated in a growing body of research and academic events focused on stimulating theoretical debates around the issue of disintegration.[1]

[1]Representative for this line of inquiry are the Journal of Democracy which published in 2012 a collection of essays on the unmaking of the EU; see also the special issue of the Journal of European Public Policies 'Re-engaging Grand Theory: European Integration in the Twenty-first Century' published in 2019.

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Hans Vollaard is not new to the study of the EU disintegration; preoccupied to conceptualize and explain the European Union disintegration process, the author has methodically worked throughout the years to develop his theoretical approach (Vollaard 2008; Vollaard 2014) of disintegration which was refined and culminated with the publication of his book in 2018 with Palgrave McMillan. His work represents one of the few books dedicated to analysing the issue of disintegration by embracing a theoretical perspective, although in the last decade, new research scholarship emerged which brought up the possibility that the EU might undergo transfigurations which would alter its nature and compromise the happy ending of the European integration process as promised by the architects of the grand theories of EU integration.

Belonging to the line of research which aims at theory building, the author argues that the lack of theoretical tools are one of the first-hand challenges scholars encounter while trying to offer an explanatory account of disintegration. With these shortcomings in mind, the author aims to make a theoretical contribution to the study and research of disintegration by advancing a mechanism which would equip researchers with the proper conceptual lenses to the study and research of disintegration, in the context of a growing body of disintegration scholarship as argued above. In his research endeavour, he raises several relevant questions: in the absence of a common definition of disintegration, how can we frame disintegration?, can disintegration happen at the same time with integration? What are the factors that can explain the unmaking of the EU? In his quest for relevant answers, he suggests an investigative research process outside the explanatory power provided by the influential theories of EU integration and opts for the work of Stefano Bartollini and the polity formation theory.[2]

But, in order to build a compelling case and convince his audience of the accuracy of his theoretical proposal, his methodological approach involves a two step process: *the first part of the book* is reserved to a thorough review of the grand theories of EU integration Studies. His standpoint is located within one of the established approaches employed by the disintegration literature which looks for answers in the classical theories of EU studies (see: Schmitter 2016; Webber 2014; Schmitter and Lefkofridi 2016).

With this objective in mind, he uses Douglas Webber's technique which proposed to turn the EU integration theories upside down for evaluation purposes of the disintegration prediction capacity of the classical theories of EU integration studies (neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism).

In line with other research findings (Scheller and Eppler 2014) he concludes that the limited manner in which these theories discuss disintegration and show a bias towards the actors they analyse-with a preference for the state- are only partially capable to explain

[2]Stefano Bartolini, *Restructuring Europe: Centre formation, system building and political structuring between the nation-state and the European Union*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

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disintegration. In his evaluation exercise, he does not neglect the theories of International relations (realism and comparative regionalism) or of comparative politics (federalism and empire dissolution) to discover their shortcomings in explaining disintegration by being too narrow in scope and focusing on a single factor. *The second part of this book* aims at presenting his own definition of disintegration, drawing on the lessons learnt from the theories and approaches which were thoroughly scrutinized; this section is the most consistent one, focused on advancing his theoretical model by building on the work of Stefano Bartolini, while the final chapters are reserved for testing the set of four propositions / hypotheses which the book formulates.

The central argument of the book is that in order to spot disintegration we need a simple, but encompassing mechanism that frames disintegration at system and actor level. By capitalizing on several academic contributions in designing his analytical tool (the work of Stefano Bartolini who used Rokkan's and Hirschmann's studies), he intellectualizes disintegration as "a system of interactions through which authoritative allocations of values are made and implemented" (Vollaard 2018, 4). In line with his mission, his theoretical tool envisages two dimensions: the polity level where he connects the *locking-in capacity of the EU* and actor level which is linked to Alfred Hirschmann's *exit, voice and loyalty mechanism* developed in the field of organisational sociology. The author highlights that when actors manifest dissatisfaction, they withdraw from the EU system of values and opt for a partial or a full exit, but maintaining them in this system of values depends on the locking-in capacity of the EU. Thus, dissatisfaction is an illustrative variable which expounds the full or partial withdrawal of actors. He also clarifies the circumstances under which partial or full exit can occur. He shows that the higher the exit costs and the lack of more attractive international alternatives, the more the behaviour of actors is directed towards partial exists, which is the one of the key challenges the EU is facing currently. Thus, he rejects the thesis expressed by other authors who argued that Brexit might generate a spillover effect and would encourage other states to question their EU membership.

What are the merits of the book? One of the contributions that this publication makes is the advancement of a comprehensive mechanism to study disintegration. He contributes to the strand of literature which considers alternative approaches to the study of EU disintegration, beyond the role played by theories of EU integration. His argument is that other disciplines are better suited for the understanding of disintegration. In his view, he is in concert with Douglas Webber who has written about the usefulness of hegemonic stability theory in the study and research of disintegration or Scheller and Eppler who favour sociological and economic integration theories and underline that scholars of disintegration should not overlook this direction.

Second, this theoretical mechanism is accompanied by a set of four propositions with few works preoccupied to design a theoretical tool accompanied by testable hypotheses; by doing this, he fills a gap in the literature, which has extensively been dominated in the last

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two years by the implications of Brexit on the likeliness of EU disintegration. And finally, it is worth mentioning that defining disintegration at actor level is a fresh perspective, as a great deal of disintegration studies are defined by their attention to the exclusive part played by the state in causing disintegration. In terms of limits, one of the omissions that can be invoked-in his inventory of theoretical approaches-is that the author fails to take into account the postfunctionalist theory developed by Marks and Hooghe in their 2009article which so far is considered as the only theory of disintegration (Webber 2019) or as one of the most powerful theory of EU integration (Jones 2018). Additionally, he does not explain convincingly enough why other competing approaches to disintegration (Webber's hegemonic stability theory) is not rigorous and interpretative enough.

To sum up, this is a book that should be read by the novice and the more experienced researchers. Scholars of EU Studies are to make use of the theoretical mechanism advanced by this book and test it at empirical level, as the issue of partial exists is one of the current features exhibited by old and new Member States. Second, as this is promising work, disintegration scholars can contribute by further developing this model and advance the knowledge in the area of disintegration literature. For students of political science, where EU taught courses tackle the Theories of EU integration or the History of EU integration, it fosters learning opportunities by capturing new perspectives on the disintegrative forces which have always accompanied the process of integration; further expanding and innovating the curricula beyond the classical focus on the integration process, is another plus brought by this book, which can be used as a teaching resource. And not lastly, this book speaks to EU policy-makers and to the domestic political elite, as it draws attention and facilitates understanding on the concerning issue of partial exists that touches upon several Member States; it offers an insight on the importance of consolidating the locking-in capacity of the EU. 

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