

Commentary: Complex EU cohesion and integration mark 2

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9. Commentary: complex EU cohesion and ‘integration mark 2’

Andreas Faludi

Writing a commentary for the benefit of readers on the chapters in this part of the book is like playing simultaneous chess. There are the authors likely to be in the know, more or less, about my take on European Union (EU) territorial governance, and there are the readers who may not, or at least not to the same extent. For their benefit I had better explain myself.

Before doing that, I need to apologise: it might of course be only fair to give the author or authors of each chapter the same attention. But no, I discuss Estelle Evrard and Tobias Chilla first, only to turn to the other chapters later. Lack of space is one reason. The other is that the remaining four chapters fit remarkably well into the overall theme set by these two authors: ‘(dis)integration’. Note that I prefer to call (dis)integration ‘integration mark 2’. So, expect two rounds: one in which I explain myself to readers and also the concept of integration mark 2, the other in which I refer to the chapters in the order as explained.

To set the tone, I relate an observation about the Dutch–Belgian border. It sometimes cuts through private premises and businesses. So, a business lady came on TV pointing to a line on the floor and explaining that COVID-19 regulations required wearing face masks on one side but not the other! See here the state cutting through the life tissue of society. Now, the trinity of state–people–territory manifesting itself in this way is a historic construct. My contention is that it no longer fits.

Not that I am against drawing boundaries. Planners could hardly do without. What I am against is treating state borders as if they were our skin and states like our bodies. Which is only slightly exaggerated: recall the saying, perhaps wrongly ascribed to the Sun King Louis XVI: ‘I am the state’ (*‘L’état, c’est moi’*), which symbolises a (spurious) unity that is obviously unattainable. Which is really no different from Hugo Chavez saying to his voters: ‘I am you, I am the people’ (Rosanvallon, 2020). Now, viewing the modern state as an organic whole courts the danger of populism. And what is populism other than having a leader who, once elected, doubles up for the Sun King ruling over his – I seem to know of no female examples – sovereign realm?

What does this have to say about European integration? Its object is sovereign states, some of which have been taken over by populists. Elsewhere, populists are waiting in the wings. This is a battlefield making EU cohesion, amongst other issues, a complex affair. The point is: state borders mark the edges of sovereign realms. Conflicts often rage over territoriality, meaning control over territories (Faludi, 2016). But is it self-evident that there should be sovereign realms? John Moodie, Franziska Sielker and David Goldsborough (Chapter 6) discuss maritime spatial planning where – outside territorial waters, that is – boundaries are functional. There is news galore about such boundaries marking Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the South China Sea. But these disputes are not territorial. They concern the exploitation of resources, leaving the freedom of the sea unaffected. And major parts of the world oceans – the Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction – lie beyond the outer limits of any EEZ. There, boundary lines are being drawn for different purposes (for example, nature protection) – this entirely without claiming sovereignty. The same is true for the last remaining terra incognita of any significance, Antarctica (Keane, 2018).

But planners are landlubbers. They are used most of the time to engaging in planning for, or at least within, the bounds of jurisdictions. This was my experience, albeit as an academic teacher and researcher. At this point, I had better relate my rubbing shoulders with European planning, an experience pushing me into exploring rarified issues like ‘territorialism’, to be discussed below.

The first thing I have heard of European planning has been from a Dutch speaker at one of the Royal Town Planning Institute’s Annual Conferences. The UK was about to join – those were the days – the European Economic Community, so UK planners were interested. They must have been thinking – and, being based there at the time, so was I – about this novel entity uniting the six original member states engaging in joint planning of their common territory, as if it were one large jurisdiction. But no, the speaker was saying: the Community was not into spatial planning.

Arriving soon thereafter at Delft University of Technology, it transpired that the two UK staff I was allowed to bring required no permits, but I as the national of a non-member (Austria) needed one. It drove home that European integration had meaning, if not yet for spatial planning. In fact, when Dutch colleagues and I later became once more curious about what ‘Brussels’ was doing in the terms of planning, the answer was once again: nothing much. Turning Regional Policy, being the cradle of Cohesion Policy, into serious business, the Single European Act – according to then Commission President Jacques Delors a step towards some form of European federation – seemed to change this.

At that very occasion, and not for the first time – Wil Zonneveld (2012) reports on them having been the (perhaps naïve) advocates of post-war

European planning – Dutch national planners were considering Europe as their next challenge. Due to their ‘planning doctrine’ (Faludi and Van der Valk, 1994) guiding the development of the country, their reputation was high. Urging us at the time to learn to ‘think European’, Dick Williams (1996) might just as well have suggested formulating a doctrine similar to the Dutch for the EU territory. But I reckoned this was ‘a bridge too far’ (Faludi, 1996). Instead, Wil Zonneveld and I looked for where in the Netherlands Dick Williams’ ‘pot of gold at the end of the rainbow’ – European money – hit the ground. This way we were closer to the reality of EU policy.

A student on internship with the Dutch National Spatial Planning Agency apprised us of an initiative to make what would become the European Spatial Development Perspective, or ESDP. With his master thesis devoted to it under his belt, another former student, Bas Waterhout, joined me in researching *The Making of the European Spatial Development Perspective: No Masterplan* (Faludi and Waterhout, 2002). But where Dick Williams had argued for thinking European, we were startled by the failure to do so. National politicians were rather single-minded about funds – the ‘pot of gold’ – coming their way, whilst railing at the same time against attendant regulations. So the Commission Services could have done with support from the national planners engaged in making the ESDP – and vice versa! But generally, the planners involved had little traction with the ministries administering EU funds and were unfamiliar with the ways of the Commission to boot.

For reasons of their own, German planners insisted that the EU had no competence for spatial planning and that the Commission should keep out of it. Which did not prevent the makers of the ESDP from expecting the same Commission to continue its support once the ESDP was on the books, which was in 1999. At that time, presumably on the advice of his officials frustrated by having been kept at arm’s length during the ESDP process, the new Commissioner for Regional Policy at the time, Michel Barnier, wiped spatial planning off his agenda. Instead, preparing the 2001 White Paper on European Governance, Commission experts proposed preparing a ‘European scheme of reference for sustainable development and economic, social and territorial cohesion’ (Working Group 4c, 2002). Presumably it would build on the ESDP, amongst others. Also, a shared competence for territorial cohesion came on the statute book, but not before 2009, at which time the competence had become a toothless tiger. Nothing has been heard about the Commission’s scheme of reference since.

On the positive side, a long-standing desire of the makers of the ESDP, the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON), saw the light of day. The acronym referring to spatial planning being forgotten, ESPON produces ‘territorial evidence’, throwing in occasional scenarios of territorial development into the bargain. This volume owes much to ESPON, but the

EU continues to feature a mosaic of territories, with member states continuing to join battle with the Commission, not least over EU Cohesion Policy. Weakened as they have been, national planners show less of an interest, but this volume gives evidence of a dynamic research agenda. The authors of this, as with many other publications, give witness to the reality of various forms of Europeanisation: with the majority not native English speakers, they happily work in their lingua franca, Euro-English. Many seem to be living away from their country of origin, some with partners from other countries.

There is thus Europe beyond politicians being chased by populists questioning the EU. The purely declaratory ‘ever closer union’ in the preamble of all EU treaties draws fire to the point where there is talk about the EU’s demise. I am not into defending it, but we all-too-easily conceive of – and reject – the EU as a (federal) state-in-becoming. Or we understand it as states reluctantly allowing some – but which? – of their powers to be exercised jointly, only for them to subsequently guard jealously the benefits accruing to them. What is underlying is the ‘territorialism’ dividing up the surface of the globe into sovereign territories, which I have made into the object of my criticism in Faludi (2018 [2020]).

What would member states taking back control mean? The question comes to mind. Discussing it, I am entering the conversation with Evrard and Chilla (Chapter 8) on (dis)integration, but remember that I reckon ‘integration mark 2’, in the title of this commentary, to be a better term.

A messy reality often plays havoc with any overall plan. Nonetheless, based on the misconception that the world could be ordered following one overall principle, the term ‘integration’ implies precisely that: having a plan. All other considerations apart, the problem is epistemological, the comprehensive knowledge needed being unavailable. So we should recognise uncertainty, foster criticism and defend pluralism as the guarantors of an experimental, step-by-step approach. And we should be willing to contemplate criticism. These are of course terms in which classic planning debates have been conducted. The opposite is a populism identified as the belief, already referred to briefly, in the one-and-only truth incarnated by a leader, a belief that legitimises suppressing opposition with all the venom that becomes the devil. Which is why, rather than the espoused ideal, hated as it is by its distractors, of an EU as a kind of super-state, the ‘real EU’ is not – and cannot be – integrated in any literal sense of the term. Nor for that matter is any one state or its policy. Such integration as is being achieved always comes at the cost of reducing variety.

Now, Evrard and Chilla say scholarly discourse is too pro-integration, failing to take disintegration seriously. Against the backdrop of integration theories, including the EU as the ‘unidentified political object’ mooted by Jacques Delors, they see Euroscepticism as a durable political alternative. To

which I add populism, according to Rosanvallon (already quoted) also to be taken seriously. Based on all this, the two authors argue – and I strongly agree – that integration is at best a complex matter, and so is EU Cohesion Policy.

The same is true for spatial integration. Rather than chasing the chimera of a well-appointed European space, multilevel governance Type II, referring to functional spaces, is on offer as an alternative to multilevel governance Type I, conditional as the latter is on the existence of a neat hierarchy of levels of government. The political geography literature features discussions galore on the alternative, functional spaces. Europe as a geopolitical block is no longer a realistic alternative either. As is well known, member states are not willing to concede the EU the powers to operate as such.

Unfortunately, theoretical reflection on disintegration is in its infancy, irrespective of more than half of Europeans, according to *The Guardian*, believing in 2019 that ‘the EU is likely to collapse within a generation’.¹ Unusually, Nigel Farage, the former UK Independence Party leader, agrees with this mouthpiece of the ‘Remainers’.² Kirchick (2017) has warned us therefore of ‘The End of Europe’. But this is not what Evrard and Chilla are about. Rather, they tell us that Europe must let go of the illusion – or nightmare – of becoming a state with its usual attributes, like a government and parliament and people. It must accept a more pluriform future instead. As said, I think ‘integration mark 2’ is the better term.

An EU flagship policy, Schengen, may serve as an example. Thirty years ago it came, not from the European Community as of then, but from representatives of a handful of member states meeting at Schengen (hence the name) in Luxembourg. Doing away with passport controls would be good for the Single Market, they concluded. Now fully embraced by the EU – the Republic of Ireland, for historic reasons in a Common Travel Area with the one-time member the UK, enjoys an opt-out – Schengen would hardly cease operating if and when the EU were to be in an existential crisis. The experience of temporary lockdowns due to COVID-19, also discussed by Evrard and Chilla, is proof of how essential open borders are, not only to the exchange of goods and services but, importantly, to integrated labour markets, including cross-border workers being given access. Our authors discuss such complex and contradictory developments, leading to border functions being renegotiated and delineations becoming more and more complex. Indeed, the ‘territorial complexity of border controls and of functionally integrated areas indicates that the processes will not lead to the pre-EU patterns of purely national regimes’. Border regions comprising ‘entangled territories [...] have not yet shown any tendencies to disintegration. Even in the case of fundamental EU disintegration, there is clearly an opportunity in these regions to develop bypassing strategies’ (see Chapter 8). If you care to see, all this has demonstrated how ineffectual con-

trols at state borders can be – but do not read this for a minute as an argument against containment where containment is needed!

Let us figure briefly how an existential EU crisis, if there were one, would work out? Would Amsterdam have to let go of the European Medicine Agency and Paris of the European Banking Authority just acquired? It is salutary to look at the European Patent Office, with its headquarters towering close to where I live. It is not an EU brainchild, nor has – other than with Schengen – the EU incorporated it later. No question, therefore, of it going down with the EU, nor presumably would many of the other functional agencies. The outcome would be a form of (messy) ‘integration mark 2’.

If so, the picture would resemble a ‘neo-medievalism’ which Zielonka (2014) – and I in his wake – sees as the future of the EU. In fact, the EU already features differentiated governance and overlapping territorial regimes reminding one of the Middle Ages. So, I agree with Evrard and Chilla’s viewing of (dis)integration not as integration in reverse, and therefore not a return to the status *ex ante* of a Europe of sovereign states, but a return to an unadulterated Westphalian order.

European idealists, such as still exist, sometimes appear to have the opposite in mind: one large (federal) state, but of the Westphalian type. Witness the concern about the European Parliament not having enough say, as if it were the parliament of a nascent state. Witness also the critique of the EU not playing its due role on the world stage, once again as if it were in a league with other unitary blocks. This sometimes shades into a kind of European populism, as if the EU were a bulwark of (white, liberal, Christian?) civilisation with borders in need of proper protection. Some border fences have already been cast in such terms.

No, instead of such simplifications, Evrard and Chilla anticipate more complexity, not less: integration and disintegration as two sides to the same coin, with (dis)integration standing for a ‘renegotiation of the underpinning mechanisms that shape socio-spatial relations and the form of the EU geopolitical project’ – in my terms, ‘integration mark 2’. Be that as it may, the authors would be the first to agree: as a concept, (dis)integration is work in progress, and so, I hasten to add, is the ‘neo-medievalism’ which I diagnose, not only for the future, but in fact also for the present (Faludi 2018 [2020]).

Rather than elaborating, Evrard and Chilla return, albeit briefly, to the implications for Cohesion Policy. But their notion of ‘(dis)integration’ is of wider significance. Think of Jacques Delors’ ‘unidentified political object’ already mentioned and you realise that it could cast light on how to think about the EU as such. Indeed, Evrard and Chilla attest to the need, not only for rethinking it, but for re-inventing political categories we take for granted. I would say: the ‘state’, its ‘people’ and its ‘territory’ – mysterious notions like the Holy Trinity – should also come under the microscope.

Now, without necessarily articulating issues in quite the same way, other authors in this part snugly fit into the notion of EU Cohesion Policy being complex, like under 'integration mark 2'. Moodie, Sielker and Goldsborough (Chapter 6) writing about maritime spatial planning where conditions are similarly fluid as under neo-medievalism have already received a mention. Their diagnosing trans-boundary maritime spatial planning as fragmented, with competing national and sectoral interests and variations in institutional responsibilities being to blame, applies, if only with even more force, to the EU mainland. So with their identifying the cause: 'the main rationale for decision-making [being] ultimately national considerations and domestic processes'.

In different ways, Eva Purkarthofer and Peter Schmitt (Chapter 4) talking about functional, flexible and soft spaces and about territorial governance also explore aspects of the massive changes taking place under our eyes. Cotella and Dąbrowski (Chapter 5) show EU Cohesion Policy meaning multifarious constellations of actors and institutions at all levels of government, its complexity having been investigated by an ESPON project dubbed COMPASS dealing with territorial governance and spatial planning, with staggering results in term of the variation of outcomes, with no one common denominator. Their advising against any overzealous attempt to standardise planning fits into the same pattern of stimulating – and learning from – diversity and experimentation.

Karsten Zimmermann and Rob Atkinson, writing on urban policy (Chapter 7), diagnose the existence of the same seminal struggle as in mainstream Cohesion Policy between the Commission and member states. In fact, the former is exploring each and every opportunity for gaining influence, with an alliance with urban areas the next in line to be embraced. In so doing, the Commission Services invoke one of their assets, the presence of a highly motivated and, it should be added, brainy staff devising regulations, exploring indirect pathways to achieving what it cannot achieve in direct confrontation with member states, seeking to build an evermore varied constituency in the process. In so doing, the Commission Services are a main driver in making EU cohesion the complex matter it is. Perhaps unwittingly, they arrive at 'integration mark 2' as a viable alternative to the implausible, in fact undesirable, EU super-state replicating, as it would, the issues and dangers that states carry with them. How would you, for instance, fancy a President of the European Union with executive power elected by popular vote on a ticket to restore Europe to its one-time position of world dominance? Absurd? Why?

NOTES

1. www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/15/majority-of-europeans-expect-end-of-eu-within-20-years (last accessed on 15 August 2020).
2. www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/nigel-farage-predicts-eus-collapse-within-ten-years (last accessed on 15 August 2020).

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