Nationalism and the European Union

When Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Italy signed the Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in April 1951 it was nothing more than a contract for cooperation between sovereign states in this particular economic sector\(^1\). None of the founding fathers of the ECSC could have anticipated that their creation was able to transform the political, economic and even cultural settings within the continent. Sixty years on, the successor of the ECSC now has 27 members, all of which are sovereign states, a publically elected parliament, a common market, and, since December 2009, a constitution\(^2\). The character of the European Union has evolved from an inter-national organisation to what is best described as a supra-national organisation. As a consequence of this, all member states had to surrender parts of their sovereignty to the institutions of the Union as national legislation has to be in line with European legislation and directives.

The emergence of this new and still developing form of political, economic and cultural organisation that has powers, which reach beyond those of sovereign states, and even actively influence their domestic policy options, challenges the concept of nationalism. This paper seeks to identify the consequences of the rise of the EU has for the two core strands of nationalism theory, namely primordialism and modernism. Is the European Union in any way compatible with either of the strands or is it directly opposing the concept of nationalism? In the second part, we will briefly look at the limitations of such a supra-national “state” and also seek to identify similarities between the national and supra-national model of statehood.

The complexity of this topic becomes all too clear if one looks at the motto of the European Union which is a contradiction in itself: “United in diversity”\(^3\).

For primordialists, a nation consists of a people that have a shared history, common heritage, descent and share a common territory.\(^4\) Due to the factors those people have in common, they identify themselves with each other and as a whole form a nation with a distinct identity. This identity is what separates them from “other” nations. The nation is being held together by mutual

\(^1\) European Union. *1945-1959 A peaceful Europe – the beginnings of cooperation*

\(^2\) European Union. *Treaty of Lisbon – Taking Europe into the 21\(^{st}\) century*

\(^3\) European Union. *United in diversity*

\(^4\) J. Hearn, *Rethinking Nationalism*. p.20
“emotional bonds and feelings of attachment\textsuperscript{5} of its members and the constant reinforcement of a distinct identity.

Primordialists strongly emphasise the importance of kinship in determining the boundaries of a nation.\textsuperscript{6} In the narrowest sense of interpretation, this would mean that all people that share biological ties belong to an ethnic group and could be classed as one nation. Geertz offers a wider approach to this with the notion of “assumed blood ties.”\textsuperscript{7} He shifts the focus away from actual, proven biological ties towards imagined kinship, which could be defined as a feeling of common descent, rather than the knowledge of this relation. When looking at the European Union, it becomes clear that this primordial claim cannot be upheld. People in for example Finland will not feel that they are of common descent as the Spanish, yet both states are part of EU. It is however evident, that there are national reservations towards the EU. The UK public perceives the states of the Union as “others” and is thereby reinforcing its own national identity and imagined kinship ties.\textsuperscript{8} Yet, the United Kingdom has been a member of the EU for over 30 years. A number of Eurobarometer polls conducted in 13 EU states between 1970 and 1990 also indicated that within most of the countries, a mutual confidence has emerged, making the distinction between “us” and “them” less hostile, as even the former archenemies Germany and France showed mutual confidence in each other.\textsuperscript{9} It seems that after all, the notion of real or imagined kinship ties is existent, but it is not as important a factor as primordialists want to have us believe. This argument is further underlined by another reality of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century: With virtually all states today being pluralistic in their make, incorporating many “ethnies” all at once, the primordialist version of a nation-state is outdated.\textsuperscript{10} Primordialism does not provide for the emergence of a European identity, shared by over 400 million people.

Another point stressed as important by primordialists is the existence of a shared history and common national symbols, including language and cultural habits. For Herder, language is the essence of a nation: “In its speech resides [...] all its heart and soul.”\textsuperscript{11} Language is seen as crucial in the building of a shared, distinct history and a national culture. For the European Union, it is difficult to pin down stations of a common history, it is however not completely impossible to at least identify one or two common historical memories. Most states were involved in some way in World War Two, offering the option for a shared common history and memory. Another historical linkage for many EU

\textsuperscript{5} J. Hearn, Rethinking Nationalism. p.20
\textsuperscript{6} J. Hearn, Rethinking Nationalism. p.20
\textsuperscript{7} C. Geertz, Primordial and civic ties. p.32
\textsuperscript{8} C. Gifford. The UK and the European Union: Dimensions of Sovereignty and the Problem of Eurosceptic Britishness. p.331
\textsuperscript{9} M. Dogan. Decline of Nationalisms within Western Europe. p.291
\textsuperscript{11} Herder, quoted in J. Hearn, Rethinking Nationalism. p.33
states is the experience of the Holy Roman Empire during the first centuries of our modern time. Those events are unlikely to be remembered or celebrated in a European context however, as Renan points out with his notion of “collective forgetting”. Unsuitable memories will simply be removed from the historic accords, which for the EU sets the starting date of a shared history at least post-1945 or after the fall of the iron curtain in the early 1990s. As such, Europe so far does not too much of a shared history, as this until very recently had been shaped mainly by the diverse national histories of its member states.

Neither does a common native language exist in Europe. Upon entering, the web portal of the European Union lists the 23 official languages into which the homepage is translated. Legal documents and treaties also are published in those 23 languages to ensure that their content can be understood by all European citizens. One should however note that there is one language which is commonly taught in schools in all member states and has over time emerged to be the means of communication on the European institutional level. What binds the EU together is the English language. Although English is widely understood and spoken across the EU member states, primordialists would dismiss the claim that it is a EU wide medium of communication and forming identities, as for the vast majority of people it is a lingua franca rather than a native language. That English works more as a unifying rather than a separating force becomes clear when we look at people’s movements. Mattei Donan notes that “more Europeans have crossed the frontiers within Europe during the last four decades than during the previous eight centuries”;

We shall now turn towards the bigger picture of “culture”. As Clifford Geertz points out, in most nations, there are differences in “customs” even within the national territory. On an inter- or supra-national level, primordialists would assume to find even greater differences and hardly any common ground between different nations. This assumption can be contested by developments within Europe. For example the annual Eurovision Song Contest regularly attracts a large European audience since it first started in 1954. The presentation of songs by national artists from a great number of

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13 L. Cram. *Identity and European Integration: diversity as a source of integration*. p.113
14 European Union. *The official website of the European Union*
15 J. Borneman & N. Fowler. *Europeanization* p.499
16 M. Dogan. *Decline of Nationalisms within Western Europe*. p.296
17 C. Geertz, *Primordial and civic ties*. p.33
18 Eurovision. *History| European Song Contest*
European states surely facilitates cultural exchange and at the same time offers a platform for the development of a European culture. Another unifying example is football. The sport is popular among all EU member states and with the UEFA even has a non-political supra-national institution that works closely together with national football associations. Europeans can now regularly watch their clubs compete against other European teams in the Champions League on television or even travel to other countries to watch their team play. This also supports the development of a common European culture and contradicts the primordial assumption.

Another primordial claim also does not hold up to scrutiny. The supporters of this strand of nationalism theory argue that states are created by unique national communities which possess a history reaching back into pre-modern times. As a nation, this community has the right to political self-determination and practices this through the creation of a sovereign state. In other words, the nation exists before the state. If, for a moment, we accept this claim, one question immediately comes to the fore: Why would a “national” community give away parts of their sovereignty and right to self-determination to a community which is inter-national in its makeup and full of the so feared “others”? Primordialism has no answer to this question. The continuing and past stages of expansion of the European Community can also not be explained through the lens of primordialism. If there was one “European community” confined to a specific territory before the founding of the EU, then how can it be explained that the future boundaries of the EU are still unclear and contested? As it seems, the formation of the EU is much more complex than the rather straightforward argumentation of nation-building by primordialists and also contradicts it at times.

So, what does the EU say about primordialism? As we have established, biological or even imagined kinship has not been a factor in the development of the European Union. The primordialist claim to national self-determination and sovereignty is dismissed by two developments: The pooling of sovereignty on a supra-national level and the existence of mainly multi-national/ethnic states across the EU. The importance of a distinct national language and culture can be neglected, although it seems that some form of European culture has started to develop but is still in its early stages. The ongoing enlargement of the Union is a clear sign that it was not created by a “European nation”, but instead is a continuous political endeavour. I will address this point in more detail in the next section.

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19 J. Borneman & N. Fowler. *Europeanization* p.508
20 UEFA. *Overview*
21 J. Breuilly. *The Sources of Nationalist Ideology* p.109
Primordialism might be useful to help explain nationalist or even sub-nationalist movements of the past, but what renders it rather unsuitable in explaining current or recent developments is its failure to recognise the overarching impact of globalisation and all its political, economic and social implications.

We will now turn our focus to the modernist approach in nationalism theory. In opposition to primoridalism, modernism, as the name suggests, argues that the roots of nationalism can be found in Europe between the 16th and 18th century. The causes of nationalism can be broadly summarised by the Enlightenment and secularisation and, similarly important the impacts of industrialisation on the structure of pre-modern societies. As a consequence of this, modernists argue, a new form of political, economical and social organisation developed; the state. We will now look at different aspects of modernism and will test if they can also be applied on a supra-national level.

Industrialisation had a great impact on societies. The emergence of capitalism meant the establishment of a new social hierarchy of capitalists and the working class. The increase in trade demanded some form of political and legal framework to be formed. A state with a common internal market was seen as the best solution to this demand. Economic thinking can be said to have strongly influenced the creation of states. This is also very true for the creation of the European Union. The “Single European Act” of 1987 laid the foundation for a common and free European market after import and export duties were already abolished in 1968. Today, the European free market can hardly be distinguished from a domestic national market, as trade within the EU can occur unrestricted, while at the same time the market is protected from outside markets through customs and duties. The EU market is therefore a reproduction of a national market, but on a supra-national scale. This development can be seen as the result of great economic dependencies between the EU countries. For most member states, about 50% of their GNP depends on trade with other nations. It can be argued that the common European market of today is the continuation of modernist theory in a post-national era characterised by globalisation.

Unlike primordialists, modernists emphasise that it is states that create nations and not the other way round. Hobwbawm for example argues that nations are created through “social engineering”.

In this view, once a state was formed out of economic and political necessity, this very state has to

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23 J. Hearn, Rethinking Nationalism. p.67
24 European Union. The Single European Act
25 European Union. 1980-1989 The changing face of Europe – the fall of the Berlin Wall
27 M. Dogan. Decline of Nationalisms within Western Europe. p.295
28 E. Hobsbawm. The Nation as Invented Tradition. p.76
build up loyalty and a national culture among its citizens. It is not a pre-existing “national” culture that leads to the creation of a state. How does this the EU fit into this argument? Rokkan notes that the development of “institutional solutions” is of great relevance for nation-building.\(^29\) This does include the establishment of political state institutions such as parliaments and citizen’s rights for active participation.\(^30\) The European Union does have several political institutions, such as the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the European Court of Justice to name just a few. It also has a European parliament, with its members being elected by citizens from all member states. According to two Eurobarometer polls, the EU has managed to create loyalty among its citizens. People from 10 member states were asked if they were in favour of European Unification and from 1970 to 1990, agreement went up by 13% to a total of 80%.\(^31\) With four out of five people agreeing on the EU it would be difficult to deny that loyalty towards the Union is existent. The argument of states forming nations seems to also apply on a supra-national level.

Modernists have also paid attention to the question of who the agents behind the formation of nation-states are. This role is attributed to both social and political leaders.\(^32\) One can argue that those two groups can influence citizens of their respective countries simply through their popularity and social status within the society, while at the same time using the tools at their disposal to manipulate public opinion. For Gellner, the strongest of these tools is a nation’s education system.\(^33\) Teaching young citizens about the values, language and history of the nation undoubtedly helps the development of a national identity and the acquisition of loyalty towards fellow citizens. In recent years, there has been a change in education policy in EU member states. The different national curricula do now include the teaching of what can be described a European history and culture. The focus has to some extent moved from national citizenship education to a post-national form, highlighting the similarities of EU member states.\(^34\) Another example of a rising European identity, facilitated by political leaders, can be seen in Italy. The use of the word “patria” to address the nation, which means fatherland and in itself is laden with primordial meaning, has in recent years been replaced by more inclusive words such as “people” or the “country”\(^35\). The importance of elites in building the European Union becomes clear if one looks at the different treaties. The great majority of them, including the Lisbon Treaty are signed by the political leading figures of the EU’s member states. Ultimately, the ECSC is the brainchild of the French Foreign Minister Robert

\(^{29}\) P.Flora et al. State Formation, Nation-Building, and Mass Politics in Europe – The Theory of Stein Rokkan. p.82
\(^{31}\) M. Dogan. Decline of Nationalisms within Western Europe. p.294
\(^{32}\) J. Hearn, Rethinking Nationalism. p. 127
\(^{33}\) E. Gellner. Nationalism and Modernization. p.56
\(^{34}\) A. Keating. Educating Europe’s citizens: moving from national to post-national models of educating for European citizenship. p.3
\(^{35}\) M. Dogan. Decline of Nationalisms within Western Europe. p.286
Schuman, who beyond doubt was part of the political elite of his country at the time. The role of national elites in building the EU can be seen as a projection of modernism’s role of elites in nation-building onto a larger scale.

Benedict Anderson has pointed to the importance of language in the formation of what he called “imagined communities”. A common language, facilitated by the emergence of print-capitalism, would bind together the people within one of these communities. On the national level, a common print language would unite people that use different vernaculars of that language. If we take this argument and apply it to the European Union, we will see a rather similar picture. We will find that the national vernaculars in Anderson’s argument represent the 23 official national languages of the EU member states. As already mentioned earlier, on the European level, English is the language most commonly used for communication as almost every European citizen has at least some knowledge of it. A good example of this can be found on the web pages of the German weekly news magazine “Der Spiegel”. Not only does it publish its content in German, but also parts of it in English. This clearly shows the development of some kind of post-national “imagined community”, along the lines of the development of its national counterpart.

The growth of this imagined community can be explained if we take Anthony Smith’s argument about “ethnic cores” to a supra-national level. Smith argues that the development of a civic nation always starts with and depends on what he calls an “ethnic core”. Once the nation was established, the new culture will over time spread from the centre to the periphery, incorporating it into the nation. When we look at the European Union, we see a similar pattern of growth. The only difference is that instead of an ethnic core, one can rather speak of two core nations. Rokkan identifies the “Lotharingian zone” as the centre of the EU. By this, he means the region of coal and steel production along the German-French borderland. Over time the purpose of the Union has changed, but the main EU institutions, such as the European Parliament in Strasbourg, are still situated in close proximity to that region. Through a number of enlargements, the European Union does now include a number of countries that can be described as being situated in the geographical periphery of the European sub-continent. Smith’s argument seems to apply not only for nation-building, but also at an international level.

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36 European Union. Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community, ECSC Treaty
37 B. Anderson. Imagined Communities. p.94
38 B. Anderson. Imagined Communities. p.94
39 Compare: Spiegel Online International. Front page
40 A. Smith. The Origins of Nations. p.147
41 P.Flora et al. State Formation, Nation-Building, and Mass Politics in Europe – The Theory of Stein Rokkan. p.91
42 J. Borneman & N. Fowler. Europeanization p.496
As we have seen, the development of the European Union has a lot in common with the modernist theory of nationalism. From economic necessities to the development among a core-periphery axis, the establishment and evolution of the Union does follow largely the arguments that apply to nation-building. One can convincingly argue that the development of this supra-national community is not dissimilar to the development of states and that the only difference is the application on a higher level. The European Union does support the claims of modernists, but in a way, through its supra-national character also dismisses the very idea of the state in the form emphasised by modernist writers. This contradiction does however lose much of its force, when the development of supra-national forms of political, social and economic institutions is seen as the latest stage of societal progress. Over millennia, communities have developed from small-sized families and clans into ever larger entities, such as the city-states of ancient Greece and later our modern states. A post-national form of community seems to be the next step in this historical process.

We will now look at some aspects which the EU seems to have in common with a nation-state and will then outline aspects of the EU that will hinder the emergence of a European “super-state”.

What distinguishes a nation-state from the international arena is the freedom of movement for its citizens within a country’s borders. Since 1995, a great number of EU member states have signed the Schengen Agreement. Effectively, Schengen guarantees the unlimited freedom of movement for citizens of participating states not only in their own countries, but also in all other countries that have signed the agreement. The abolishment of internal borders within the EU clearly marks its aspiration of becoming a “super-state”.

The EU has also undertaken several attempts to establish a form of European identity within the community. This is done not only through directing national educational policies, but also in other, more obvious ways. The flag of the European Union is not only displayed on all citizens’ European Health Insurance Card, but also increasingly on national driving licenses.

It should be noted, that people can have more than one identity. The creation of a European identity does therefore not mean the loss of a national identity. Rather, those two identities can co-exist. Dogan has however observed that an increasing supra-national consciousness leads to a decline in nationalism. This decline seems to be very logical, as the attachment of people to their nation is in part replaced by the attachment to something greater than the state.

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43 BBC News. Q&A: Schengen Agreement
45 M. Dogan. Decline of Nationalisms within Western Europe, p.294
There are however many signs that the EU has its limitations and is unlikely to become a “super-state” anytime soon, if ever.

One of the bigger obstacles is the great variety of languages spoken within the EU. Although English is used as the main means of communication between member states, national languages still prevail. The “European Tower of Babel” as Dogan calls it, will most likely restrict and prevent individual movement and further or even complete integration for the foreseeable future.46

The biggest obstacle however, does seem to be the continuing predominance of the state, even within the EU. Although a supra-national is undoubtedly present, states still matter a great deal. The EU electorate for example is split into national constituencies and no cross- or trans-national constituencies exist. EU legislation and directives are carried out to a great extent by national governments.47 States are therefore the guarantor of EU legislation within their national territory.48

The Irish rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in 2008 which temporarily led to the stalling of EU integration also shows that even within the Union, individual states are still of great importance and have a large amount of influence.49

In conclusion, we can argue that the development of the EU has proven primordialism to be outdated and incapable of explaining this new form of organisation in any way. The modernist approach seems not only to apply to the formation of states, but with only a few modifications can also be applied to a post-national form of organisation. Although there are prospects of a true supra-national European Union as the successor of the nation-states of today, there is still a long way to go. Nationalism and the current state system are highly unlikely to disappear any time soon, but the development of a Europe which is “united in diversity” might just be the starting point of a process that will develop and ripe over time to, one day, replace the state.
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