

Where scholars disagree: realists, liberal intergovernmentalists, functionalists and federalists

The basic debate about European integration focuses on a simple question: how to explain the emergence of the EEC and EU? There are two broad ways of answering the question: by emphasizing the role of member (nation-) states or by stressing the impact of supra-national institutions. The answers reflect the cleavage between those who think that the creation of the common market has been the central outcome of the integration process and those who believe that it is the shared institutions, customs and laws that truly define the 'new Europe'.

Those who maintain that nation-states have and will remain the main movers of the process of integration are, in general, referred to as realists or neo-realists. Their key argument is that the decades of integration have not fundamentally changed the role of the nation-state as the prime actor in European international relations. States are simply pursuing their national interests in a changed context, as maintained by such authors as Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer. Relatively close to the 'realists' are those scholars labelled as 'liberal inter-governmentalists'. Like the realists, they stress the role of individual states, but they also tend to emphasize the domestic political setting in EEC and EU member states as the key determinants of how these nations act within the inter-governmental playing field. A key practitioner of this school of thought is Andrew Moravcsik.

A third broad approach to explaining European integration is usually called functionalism or neo-functionalism. Building upon the theories of Ernst Haas and Leon Lindberg, such scholars explain the integration from the early 1950s to the present as a gradual spill-over process. While the original ECSC was limited to two industrial sectors, the functionalists argue, various interest groups and political parties responded to problems in related sectors by pushing to enhance the competence and scope of the Community and the Union. The 'deepening' of integration, such as the move from a common market to a common currency, is often cited as a more recent case that 'proves' the neo-functionalists' argument. Among its most prominent representatives is Stanley Hoffman.

Lastly, there are the federalists. Authors like John Pinder generally maintain that the deepening of integration was not due to some spill-over effect but was rather a reflection of the inability of individual governments to deal with a growing number of transnational issues – security, trade, and the environment – without close co-operation. The federalists also stress the idealistic aspects of the process of European integration, namely the fact that democratic governance is at the heart of the integration experience. Perhaps more than the analysts in other groups, the federalists are concerned about the so-called democratic deficit within the European Union. This seems like a legitimate concern, for if European integration is simply a modern expression of nationalism it is based upon shaky ground.