Still Not Yet Obsolete? A Neofunctionalist Account of Brexit

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Arne Niemann, Geoffrey Edwards and Pia Jakobi

Abstract

The UK decision to leave the EU poses a challenge to European integration theory at the supranational end of the spectrum. This process of horizontal disintegration by popular vote constitutes a particularly hard case for neofunctionalism, which has assumed a forward-moving integration project based on a "permissive consensus" among European citizens. Unsurprisingly, neofunctionalism has been dubbed "outdated" in view of the British membership referendum. In this paper – which examines the degree to which neofunctionalism may explain the Brexit process and referendum outcome – we argue that the theory still significantly adds to our understanding because (1) neofunctionalism may be able to theorise disintegration, to some extent, by tackling the issue of politicisation; (b) neofunctional dynamics, although overridden by other factors, were, and continue to be, present here; (c) neofunctionalism is a dynamic/transformative theory: a specification of the conditions of spillover can usefully delimit its scope of application – an exercise to which this paper seeks to contribute.

1.   Introduction

On 24 June 2016, shock and incredulity were palpable across Europe. By a narrow majority, British citizens had voted for their country's exit from the European Union (EU). While the referendum represents the climax of a relationship that has long been described as "awkward" (George, 1998), it left the United Kingdom (UK) as well as the EU in varying degrees of turmoil and uncertainty. The same may be said – at least on the face of it – for certain theories of regional integration.

Brexit has so far largely escaped analysis from the grander integration theories, especially those at the supranational end of the spectrum. This is a surprising gap in the literature, as crises lend themselves particularly well to a reassessment of theory and such critical junctures have had considerable impact on theory development in EU Studies (Rosamond 2000: 9). One contender that cannot easily escape such challenge is neofunctionalism, one of the most intensely discussed and widely referenced approaches to European integration and one, we would argue, that retains considerable explanatory scope.

The Brexit vote marked an important decision against further integration on the part of one member state. It remains to be seen whether it was an aberration as few Eurosceptic parties seem particularly eager to follow the British example, especially given the tortuous negotiations on exiting the EU (van Kessel et al 2020) and the corona virus has focused attention on meeting yet another crisis for the EU-27. Brexit nonetheless constitutes a significant challenge to neofunctionalism. After all, the theory focuses on the dynamics of integration and concentrates on vertical and sectoral integration. Horizontal disintegration (i.e., a member states leaving the EU) has so far been outside its focus. Moreover, one of its core assumptions is that of a permissive consensus, the tacit public support for the European project. How, then, can these elements be squared with a popular vote against EU membership? The result of the British referendum has led some to claim that "Brexit is final proof that […] EU scholars must abandon the long-outdated assumptions of neofunctionalist spillover …" (Foster 2016: 105).

This paper examines the extent to which neofunctionalism helps to make sense of Brexit, and argues somewhat counterintuitively that the theory provides valuable insights into the referendum process and outcome. It may not be able to account fully for all the particularities of the UK's crisis but insofar as later neofunctionalism took politicisation more seriously than generally assumed (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970; Lefkofridi & Schmitter 2014), it continues to provide a useful starting point. Crises have been viewed as a relatively normal feature of the integration process that might not always result in further integration, and that the emphasis has been on the theory being 'pluralist' and 'transformative' (Schmitter 1970). Crises may have intensified 'identity politics' (Hooghe & Marks 2009) but the eurozone crisis or even the refugee crisis did lead to differing forms of closer integration (Niemann & Ioannou 2015; Schimmelfennig 2014; Niemann & Speyer 2018). What early neofunctionalists had not predicted was that politicisation might seriously threaten the integration process (Schmitter 2009) or the exit of a member state. The assumption was that politicisation might question further integration possibly leading to stagnation or even spill-back in particular policy areas, not challenge the process as a whole. What Brexit raises therefore is the extent to which neofunctionalism can take such a shift on board to better identify the factors delineating the boundaries of spillover as an ongoing process, especially given the changed context of integration in Europe.

Although ultimately unsuccessful, the Remain case relied on a number of (neofunctionalist) arguments including: the functional rationale related to the economic costs of leaving the EU/SEM; the adverse repercussions in other policy areas resulting from leaving the EU; path dependencies that made membership 'sticky' and renationalization costly. Unfortunately for the Remainers, much of this was dismissed under the label 'Project Fear'.

How this came about may challenge some aspects of neofunctionalism but, we argue, the theory has a dynamism and flexibility that allows for a specification of the conditions of spillover that can usefully define/delineate its scope of application and thus be seen as an exercise in revising it. Several factors can be identified which help to explain why the rationales for Remain found little traction: (I)

When issues are substantially politicised and polarised, as during the Brexit referendum, they tend to be framed in emotive terms, beyond the reach of (functional) rationality. (II) While neofunctionalists had emphasised the role of informed elites, during the referendum campaign British citizens were encouraged to distrust not only the EU but 'experts' in general thereby reinforcing the dismissal of complex (functional) arguments. (III) A key factor in bringing about such distrust and politicising 'Europe' in ways not imagined by neofunctionalists was the role of the media, the bulk of which in the UK were involved in a campaign against European integration and its institutions using simplistic, snappy, biased and sometimes simply misleading information, with the result that the costs and benefits of integration became lost and functional logics hardly registered. (IV) When integration measures stretch the perceived adaptive capacity of societies/economies, such as the decision for early liberalisation of the free movement following Eastern enlargement in 2004, they can lead to unintended countervailing dynamics and, in the case Brexit, provide an easy target for hostile nationalistic campaigns.

The paper proceeds as follows: section two elaborates neofunctionalist theory. The third section briefly describes the UK's (difficult) relationship with the EU as well as the process leading to the Brexit vote. Section four specifies the neofunctionalist pressures/rationales for Remain. The fifth section explains why these neofunctionalist dynamics had little effect. Finally, we draw some conclusions from our analysis.

2.   Neofunctionalism

The basic neofunctionalist assumptions can be summarized as follows: (i) integration is a (dynamic) process which evolves over time; (ii) decisions are taken by rational actors, who have the capacity to learn from their experiences in co-operative decision-making (Haas, 1958: 291); (iii) Incremental decision-making is given primacy over grand designs. Adjustments take place gradually and are often driven by the (un)intended consequences of earlier integrative attempts/developments; (iv) interaction in the Community setting is often characterized by positive-sum games and a supranational style of decision-making where participants seek to attain agreement by means of compromises upgrading common interests (Haas, 1964: 66); (v) the integration process is dominated by elites. Early neofunctionalists attached little significance to the role of public opinion. Instead, they assumed a 'permissive consensus' in favour of European integration (Haas 1968: xii).

The neofunctionalist dynamic for change is succinctly encapsulated in the notion of 'spillover'. Three inter-related types of spillover have generally been identified: functional, political and cultivated spillover (Tranholm-Mikkelsen, 1991).

Functional spillover pressures develop due to the interdependence of policy sectors. The tensions and contradictions that may arise from the integration of different but interdependent sectors tend to foster additional integrative steps (Haas, 1958: 297). When EC governance of one policy area has negative implications on another sector, such tensions can often only be resolved through integration in the latter, especially when alternative (e.g., disintegrative) solutions are risky/unavailable or blocked by path dependencies (Lindberg, 1963: 10; Pierson, 1996: 143). However, it has been suggested that while functional logics must be regarded as plausible or even compelling, they do not determine actors' behaviour in a mechanical or predictable manner (Niemann, 2006: 31). Much therefore depends on agency, the (soft) rational action of actors with at least a certain level of knowledge and understanding.

Political spillover encapsulates the process whereby (national) elites come to pursue European solutions to problems of substantial interest that cannot be effectively addressed at the domestic level, thus adding a political stimulus to the process. Haas (1958: chs. 9-10) in particular focused on interest groups that (benefiting from European solutions) would support integration, and increasingly organize at the European level to influence the process. Lindberg (1963: chs. I+IV) concentrated on socialization, deliberation and learning of governmental elites. He suggested that their frequent interaction would lead to a certain esprit de corps, cooperative norms and problem-solving in the Council framework,

which tended to foster consensus formation among governments and facilitate integrative outcomes. Neofunctionalists also emphasised the role of experts/epistemic communities, who tend to identify and legitimise functional rationales, depoliticise issues, and internalise conflicts (Schmitter and Lefkofridi 2016).

Through cultivated spillover, supranational institutions, seeking to increase their own powers, become agents of integration, from whose progression they are likely to benefit. Once established, they tend to take on a life of their own and are difficult to control by their creators. Supranational institutions, such as the Commission may foster the integration process, for example, by acting as policy entrepreneurs, through promotional brokerage, lifting agreements beyond the lowest common denominator (Haas, 1964: 75ff; Lindberg, 1963: ch. 3), or through positions of centrality and authority in the Community's political system (Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970: ch. 3).

Theorising disintegration?

Although neofunctionalism is above all a theory explaining (further) integration, its fundamental nature/characteristics should also allow it to provide considerable insights into processes of disintegration. It was formulated in the 1950s and early 1960s, well before phenomena such as wide-spread popular Euroscepticism emerged. It is reasonable therefore to put some of the early claims, e.g. concerning permissive consensus, into perspective and also to explore the extent to which the theory can be modified in a meaningful way.

The early neofunctionalists ascribed little importance to the role of public opinion or politicisation. For Haas (1958; 1961: 374) the public participated in the Community system through affiliation with mass organisations such as trade unions and other interest groups. From the early to mid-1960s onwards, in response especially to the role of President de Gaulle, neofunctionalists started to treat politicisation somewhat more seriously, conceptualising it as "an intervening variable between economic and political integration" (Haas and Schmitter 1964: 707). By the late 1960s neofunctionalists engaged more systematically with the issue. Schmitter (1969: 166) defining politicization as a "process whereby the controversiality of joint decision-making goes up […leading…] to a widening of the audience or clientele interested and active in integration. Somewhere along the line a manifest redefinition of mutual objectives will probably occur […] along with a shift in actor expectations and loyalty toward the new regional center" (Schmitter 1969: 166). Schmitter's account of the potential impact of politicization became more cautious soon afterwards: he suggested such a prediction only applied to exceptionally dynamic (integration) processes, while the more normal result of politicization would be "encapsulation," a state of rest or stagnation (Schmitter 1970).

Lindberg and Scheingold (1970: 278ff) held that the relatively benign climate in which the EC was able to grow during its early years might well transform into a politicized, conflictual one, unless the Community was perceived as relevant and responsive to the demands of wider segments of the population. Such developments, however, were "not likely to be felt in the years immediately ahead". Overall, it can be argued that second-generation neofunctionalist scholarship did take politicization rather seriously, ahead of many of the scholars who wrote about the Community in the decades thereafter without substantially problematising the issue (Puchala 1972; Hoffmann 1982; Taylor 1983; Wallace 1990; Keohane and Hoffmann 1991). It was over 20 years later when the first signs of popular discontent were manifested, in reaction to the Maastricht Treaty.

Third, one could argue that politicisation is a logical outcome of the dynamics of integration. With progressing functional integration, European/EU politics was bound to become politicised at some stage because national sovereignty would be increasingly "engaged". Hence, what we have now is the logical development of successful functional integration, for which neofunctionalists had hypothesized the relevant (spillover) processes. More generally, neofunctionalists have assumed crises to be a relatively normal feature, usually "produced by the very functioning of the integration process" (Lefkofredi and Schmitter 2015: 8; Schmitter 1970). While it was assumed that such crises exposed tensions, problems

or dysfunctionalities, it was usually argued that these would be resolved by additional integrational steps, though under certain conditions perhaps also result in some stagnation or 'spill-back' (Schmitter 1970; Niemann and Ioannou 2015).

Fourth, neofunctionalism assumes the prevalence of pluralist politics with multiple/diverse actors (Haas 1964: 68ff). In addition, it is a "transformative" theory (Schmitter 1970): actors may learn, which also implies that they might choose to take part in an integration process to which they (e.g., the public) had hitherto merely acquiesced. Insofar as politics involves choice and contestation, learning processes may lead to different directions being recommended or taken, not necessarily resulting in further integration as the learning outcome (Niemann 2006: 271).

Fifth, neofunctionalists assume that the European integration process can be driven by unintended consequences, as most political actors are incapable of long-range purposive behaviour but rather 'stumble' from one decision into the next as a result of earlier decisions. Decisions are normally taken with imperfect knowledge of their consequences and frequently under deadline-pressure (Haas 1970: 627). Some (over-)ambitious political decisions may fail to anticipate likely consequences and could lead to backlash (Schmitter 1970).

Sixth, while its critics have exaggerated neofunctionalism's predictive pretensions, neofunctionalists had already avoided talking about a political Community as possible end-state of integration from the early 1960s (cf. Haas 1960; Lindberg 1963: 6). Thus, set-backs and stagnation constitute processes within neofunctionalism's explanatory range.

Seventh, rather than any deterministic, automatic spillover, Haas (1968: preface) had argued that integration depended on certain conditions. Neofunctionalism has, nonetheless, lacked a comprehensive and refined delimitation of the concept of spillover, i.e. a specification of the conditions under which the integration process tends to progress (Keohane and Hoffmann 1991: 19-20; but see Niemann 2006). We argue that crises like Brexit, as hard cases, particularly lend themselves for specifying the conditions for spillover and integration.

3.   The UK in the EU and the Process Leading to Brexit

In June 2016 the British electorate narrowly voted to leave the EU – in some sense the culmination of the UK status as "awkward partner" (George 1991). When the UK had finally entered the EEC in 1973, it did so as a divided country. After only 30 months of membership, the British held a first referendum on staying within the Community or not (Young 1998). Even though the British economy prospered under EC/EU membership (Giles 2017), the British remained ambivalent towards the EU. While Prime Minister Thatcher pushed for the introduction of the single market, she demanded "I want my money back" in reference to Britain's budgetary contribution, cementing Britain's reputation for awkwardness (Smith 2017).

While the Maastricht Treaty saw the beginnings of a strong Eurosceptic group within the Conservative Party, much of the Labour Government under Tony Blair was marked by relative stability in EU-UK relations (Cini and Pérez-Solórzano Borragán 2016: 2). However, as the 2000s progressed, so the emergence of the right-wing populist UKIP posed problems, fostering further Euroscepticism. Despite not winning a single seat in the UK parliament until the 2015 general election, UKIP registered over 26 per cent of the vote in the European Parliamentary elections in 2014, creating considerable alarm among Conservatives that they would lose seats to UKIP. The threat of a divided party along with the rise of UKIP pushed Prime Minster Cameron to promise an In/Out referendum on British EU membership in his 2013 Bloomberg speech (Schimmelfennig 2018: 1163).

The subsequent inquiry analyses the extent to which neofunctionalist dynamics can account for Brexit, and also explains why several spillover dynamics did not unfold.

4.   (Core) Neofunctionalist Pressures Towards Remain

From the spillover pressures described in section 2, the focus here is on functional and political spillover even though cultivated spillover, insofar as it concerned the Commission, played its own particular role: rather than being proactive, the Commission took a back seat. It was, after all, seen by many Brexiters as part of the problem.

As neofunctionalists have argued, the interdependence of policy sectors/issues is a source of functional integration pressure and tends to prevent disintegration, as such disruption would be dysfunctional. Moreover, path dependencies make European integration a sticky process (cf. Haas 1958; Niemann and Speyer 2018). This section argues that – following such rationales – the British people would/should have realised that membership had more advantages than leaving the EU. Leaving can be viewed as a dysfunctional choice.

Economic repercussions of leaving the EU/ Single European Market (SEM)

When Britain joined the EEC in 1973, it was considered the 'sick man' of Europe whose economic growth lagged behind those of other Western European states (Giles 2017). Most economists agree that the SEM was a major factor in bringing economic success to Britain's EU membership. Nonetheless, those supporting harder Brexit scenarios, as many Brexiters appeared to do during the referendum campaign, were in favour of leaving the SEM in some way or other.

Those supporting Remain pointed to the potentially serious disadvantages that would arise, following the logic that the full potential of liberal (free) trade policies could only be achieved through membership of the single market. This was reinforced by the argument that the most important trade barriers today are non-tariff barriers, that even "deep" trade agreements like the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with Canada could not wholly overcome (Orefice 2017). The EU, Britain's most important trading partner, accounted for 43.4% of British exports and 53% of its imports in 2016. UK-EU trade is thus more than three times larger than that with its second largest trading partner, the US (Ward 2018: 3). All scenarios in the run-up to the referendum and since – from soft Brexit to no agreement – have been estimated to lead to a deterioration of UK-EU trade relations, with the UK losing more economically, the harder the Brexit (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2015; Dhingra et al. 2017). Without an agreement, WTO rules would apply. It would take the UK some time to absorb the losses and rebuild stable network of trade agreements with its trading partners. Moreover, when negotiating agreements with countries like the USA, the UK would be very likely to get a worse deal than as part of the EU, given its weaker bargaining position with a much smaller domestic market and no real alternative to no agreement being reached (Trommer 2017).

In addition, the SEM was held to have been important in attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) to the UK (Simionescu 2017). Leaving the SEM has been estimated to reduce the flow of FDI into Britain by 22 percent (Bruno et al. 2016). Moreover, the SEM was credited for having increased British competitiveness by forcing British firms to increase the level of innovation (Bloom cited in Giles 2017). Furthermore, it was argued that the free movement of people and workers had boosted the UK economy (Portes 2016). Many sectors such as agricultural, health care or construction relied heavily on (mostly low-skilled) workers from other EU countries (Bell 2016: 25). High-skilled workers from all over the world (including the EU) kept the financial sector and the City of London running.

The argument was frequently made that withdrawing from the EU and exiting the Single Market would damage the British financial industry, one-quarter of whose revenue comes from EU related business. On leaving the SEM, UK-based finance companies would lose their passporting rights and face higher barriers to access EU markets (Oliver Wyman 2016). This would adversely affect several business operations (banking, asset management, insurance services), the ability to attract high-skilled non-British EU citizens to the City, as well as investment in the British financial sector due to the unclear economic circumstances after Brexit. More generally, many studies, including that of the UK Treasury, projected declining growth rates, adverse implications for the labour market, and negative effects on

public finances as a result of leaving the EU (UK Treasury 2016; Begg and Mushövel 2016; van Reenen 2016).

If the (potential) negative economic impact of Brexit were to be cushioned by a soft Brexit, this would entail certain (probably unwanted) political and economic costs, such as acceptance of EU migration, paying towards the SEM, and the continued jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice.

Repercussions in other policy areas

Neofunctionalists have pointed to the interdependence of polities, economies and societies across Europe. The neofunctional logic of integrative steps to meet common European problems implies that there are few areas not touched by EU membership. Brexit was seen by Remainers to have unfavourable repercussions in policy areas ranging from participation in aerospace projects and freedom of the skies (Lennon 2016) to water standards (Blunsdon 2016) and greenhouse gas emissions (Kerr 2016), from recognition of vocational qualifications to support for regional development (Di Cataldo 2016), from common(ish) asylum/migration policies to counter-terrorist policies and membership of agencies such as Europol (Walker 2016). In all these policy areas, problems were seen to be better dealt with at a broader (EU) level rather than at a narrow (country-level) scale. But in the specific context of the referendum campaign such complexities were inevitably lost (see section 4).

Path dependencies

EU membership has many (functional) path dependencies that make it sticky and exit costs high as the Remain camp sought to explain. The UK has incurred substantial sunk (i.e., irrecoverable) costs in order to adjust their institutions and policies to that of the EC/EU. The aquis communitaire is the result of several decades of painstaking negotiations on, and implementation of, many legal and technical details. This 'Europeanization' process has been long and costly (Bache and Marshall 2004). In addition, there are high costs involved in the renationalisation process, such as substantial administrative resources (Wright and Patel 2016), sub-optimal bargaining positions when negotiating new agreements (Centre for European Reform 2016: 48), and considerable costs with regard to the exit/divorce bill (Goodwin 2016). Both sunk costs of EU membership and costs of renationalisation would suggest exit to be the less rational option.

Political spillover pressures supporting Remain

Neofunctionalists have argued that elites would tend to support the integration process because they buy into these functional rationales/benefit from them. Broadly speaking, most of the British economic elites favoured membership, largely because of the reasons above. A large majority of polls by UK economic and trade associations indicated big majorities for Remain. Some 80% of the members of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), 77% of the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) members, 70% of TechUK members, 61% of EFF Manufacturers' Organisation members, and 60% of the members of the British Chamber of Commerce supported staying in the EU in spring 2016 (The Economist 2016).

The majority of trade unions were either in favour of Remain or took a neutral stance (Labour Research Department 2016). As for important sectoral interest groups, the National Farmers Union (NFU) was 'overwhelmingly' in favour at its Council level but nonetheless divided at local levels and so did not actively campaign (BBC 2016a). In addition, the vast majority of environmental interest groups supported continued EU membership (The Guardian 18/4/2016).

However, some interest groups that could be expected to support the Remain campaign either avoided or were largely prevented from taking a clear stance in favour of Remain – like several charities and NGOs, such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth who were accused of bias given that they had received some sort of EU funding (The Telegraph 7/5/2016), or were not really heard in the debate (as in the NFU's case). There are several reasons for this, the more important of which will be illustrated below.

5. Why Brexit Took Place: A Weakening of Neofunctionalist Rationales

The Politicisation of Brexit

Politicisation is here defined as the "increase in polarization of opinions, interests or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation" (de Wilde, 2011: 260), and may for our purposes may also be described as "the process by which the political conflicts unleashed by integration come back to shape it" (Hooghe and Marks 2006: 205). As Börzel and Risse (2009: 218; 2018: 85) among others have argued, the ongoing process of European integration has increased the salience of EU issues in the domestic political context as well as heightening levels of politicisation and mobilizing a wider range of actors. This also needs to be considered against the background of a fundamental transformation of political conflict around a cleavage created by the winners and losers of globalisation (Kreisi *et al* 2006).

Drawing on Grande and Schwarzbözl (2017), the politicisation of the UK referendum debate on EU membership is characterised by several features that include: (1) *The absence of an elite consensus on Europe*: while studies in most countries suggest that there remains an overwhelming elite consensus in favour of EU membership, Brexit marked the particularity of its absence in Britain. Despite the vast majority of economic and intellectual elites favouring Remain, political elites were split and the media by and large supported Brexit, especially the tabloids.

(2) *Divisions within the Conservatives and Labour*: the two biggest parties were split on the issue. On the part of the Conservatives, former Prime Minister, David Cameron, clearly underestimated the number of Brexiters within his own party (Shipman 2016: ch 9). While Cameron, his Chancellor, Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary favoured Remain, other key figures in the party including Boris Johnson, Michael Gove and David Davis were in favour of Leave. And even within the usually more Europe-friendly Labour Party, there was ambivalence and dissent both in parliament and in the constituencies. The Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn only cautiously backed Remain – giving the EU 7 out of 10 in one interview (BBC 2016b) – while inside the party an unofficial *Labour Leave* was formed.

(3) *Polarisation of public opinion – relatively weak support for Europe*: compared to most other member states, public opinion in the UK has always been rather unsympathetic towards the EU, even though, according to Curtice and Evans (2015), Eurosceptics had not previously been in a majority. While tied up with issues relating to the British economy and immigration, British history and identity, this lack of enthusiasm for the EU also involved an overall trust in the EU, visions about its future, and beliefs in the benefits of EU membership (Guerra & McLaren 2016).

(4) *Formation of a new polarising party*: the divisions among the established mass parties provided nourishment to a right-wing "challenger" on European issues which in turn alarmed and/or emboldened Eurosceptics in the main parties. UKIP's progress, especially in European Parliamentary elections (Ford & Goodwin 2014) while initially slow, burgeoned in 2009-2015 (from 12 seats in the EP in 2009 to 24 in 2014; from 3% of the vote in national elections in 2010 to 12.6% in 2015 – though this last led to only one seat in the House of Commons). Its leader, Nigel, Farage, proved charismatic, ensuring that the issue of European Union membership was highly politicised. He made much of the threat of Europe to national identity, with an appeal to emotion, memory and nostalgia that created problems for rational arguments.

As Hooghe and Marks (2006: 215) have suggested, politicisation tends to be 'powerfully shaped by nationalist reaction to perceived loss of community and national sovereignty', as a 'predictable reaction to Europeanization'. It can be viewed both as an analytical concept and as a political strategy (Grande and Hütter 2016: 5). In the UK, it was adopted as a strategy not only by UKIP but also by opponents of the EU among especially Conservative politicians.

Polarisation and politicisation are fostered by referendums not least through the simplification inevitable with a binary choice, whatever the complexities of the issue (Grande and Schwarzbözl 2017:

25-26). By putting the issue under a magnifying glass, referendums act as a catalyst for intensified media coverage. Voters tend to use referendums to punish governments with whom they are dissatisfied rather than simply expressing an opinion on the official question at issue (Hobolt and Brouard 2010). That referendums are usually held between elections, when dissent may be at its greatest, and that voters in favour of change are more likely to vote than those who are satisfied with (or indifferent toward) the status quo (Thompson 2016: 111), provided the Leave campaign with a certain advantage from the beginning, and made Cameron's decision to have a public vote a clear gamble (Shipman 2016).

While today's levels of politicization of EU politics were almost impossible to foresee for early neofunctionalists, later works in this tradition took the issue more seriously, expecting that politicisation would most likely lead to a stagnation or disruption of integration in Europe (Schmitter 1970; Lindberg and Scheingold 1970: 278). However, if politicisation in neofunctionalism was meant to end with closer integration at best and stagnation at worst, with Brexit it has clearly taken a different turn. Whereas a number of the above factors have in various ways appeared in other member states, it is their coincidence in the UK that, arguably, makes Britain both an aberrant case and the extreme case for determining the limiting conditions for neofunctionalist logics/dynamics.

As further illustrated to some extent below, politicisation can be seen as an impediment to neofunctionalist spillover because: (i) the widened participation in the European integration process resulting from politicisation means that pro-European elites and epistemic communities can no longer rely on a 'permissive consensus' (cf. sections below); (ii) polarisation and the corralling of voters into extreme positions favour emotional rather than (functional-)rational arguments; and (iii) this emotionalisation was reinforced by the (tabloid) press.

Distrust of Elites, Experts and Epistemic Communities

Neofunctionalists emphasised the role of experts in identifying and legitimising functional rationales, depoliticising issues, and internalising conflicts. As experts often agree on the nature of problems and the technical means of resolving them, they approximate epistemic communities (Schmitter and Lefkofridi 2016; Niemann 2016: 40). For the neofunctionalist argument advanced in section 4, it is relevant first whether citizens' attitudes are based on knowledge, and second whether (functional) rationales registered substantially in the debate, for which experts could play a useful part. As for the first point, Britons are amongst the least knowledgeable on EU affairs among the EU-28 (Eurobarometer 2015). The results suggest that greater knowledge of what the EU does and how it works would have enabled less-educated people to make more informed choices on EU membership in the referendum (Hix 2015). Research confirms that "higher levels of political discussion […] and greater knowledge of the EU both appear to lead to more positive opinions about the EU" (Guerra and McLaren 2016: 363).

Second, populism and the new cleavage of European integration point to increased antipathy not only towards the EU, but also towards elites, especially technocratic elites and experts, who are seen as beneficiaries of globalisation as well as Europeanisation, out of touch with the daily lives of "ordinary people". In the UK this antipathy was successfully exploited by UKIP (Usherwood 2015). The party painted a picture of a growing gap between rulers and ruled, which undermined trust in the democratic system (Goodhart 2017). They were often assisted by the (tabloid) media, which helped nourish anti-elitist and anti-expert attitudes during the referendum campaign. Brexiter Michael Gove's assertion on Sky News that 'people in this country have had enough of experts' was widely and sympathetically reported by the tabloids (Gove 2016). While the quality press tended to defend experts, the tabloids frequently portrayed them as part of the elitist Brussels plot. Individuals including Nigel Farage with his column in the *Daily Express*, but also Conservatives like Boris Johnson (especially in the *Daily Telegraph*) saw themselves as, and were set up to be, figureheads against such Brussels elites (Startin 2015). Given the greater 'pull' of politicians, it is not surprising therefore that the press granted substantially greater attention to them rather than experts and academics despite the complexities and technicalities of the issue (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism 2016). In this climate of antipathy towards elites and experts, it is difficult for rational arguments – on which neofunctionalist logic is based – to be sufficiently perceived. Functional rationales thus give way to emotion and increasing hostility, perhaps even fear not just of further integration, but of membership itself.

The Role of the Media

The role of the media (in the process of challenging elites and epistemic communities) was not one that had been regarded as significant in European politics in the 1950s and 1960s, during the heyday of neofunctionalist scholarship. Neofunctionalists had spoken extensively about the (generally integrative) role of non-governmental elites (Haas 1958), in what was often later referred to as political spillover (Tranholm-Mikkelsen 1991). They were open about the various types of actors taking part in the integration process. In the light the changing media landscape and in view of the role of the media in heightening politicisation and contributing to a decline in the permissive consensus – which were hardly foreseeable in the 1960s – it is sensible to explore its role as a factor in political spillover.If we take the soft-rationalist neofunctionalist ontology to heart, whereby actors tend to maximise their interests, we can see why most British media positioned themselves against Remain: the media have an interest in selling news, which is easier through dramatic headlines, i.e., by polarising and simplifying opinion. Since EU-bashing had become traditional in British tabloids – welcomed by the majority of their readers and often encouraged by governments keen to scapegoat Brussels for any difficulties – toughening the tone against the EU was a rational strategy for most media outlets.

This section makes two arguments: first, the Leave campaign was represented to a significantly higher degree in the media than that of the Remainers. Only a few newspapers, usually read by the better-educated and better-off, clearly favoured Remain, i.e., the *Financial Times*, an economically-liberal business newspaper which sold 199,000 copies daily, and *The Guardian*, a politically-liberal newspaper with 179,000 copies daily, along with the now on-line only *Independent*. *The Times* was largely neutral. The *Daily Telegraph* and the majority of tabloids strongly supported the Leave campaign. The Pro-Leave camp was therefore able to rely on a much wider readership: the nationalist and conservative *The Daily Express* sold around 421,000 copies a day, the *Daily Mail*, targeting readers from the political right and conservative wing, sold around 1,548 million copies daily, while the influential *The Sun* sold around 1,755 million copies per day (Ponsford for *PressGazette* 2016). The result was that the coverage gap between Leave and Remain was about 4:1 in favour of the Leave campaign (Loughborough University 2016; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism 2016). Nor was TV news reporting without bias. According to one study, Conservative and UKIP politicians together received four times more coverage than all other parties combined. The latter's comparative neglect by the broadcast coverage considerably diminished Remain's capacity to influence traditional Labour areas. It has thus been suggested that 'broadcast news has *not* been impartial, viewing the EU through a negative lens' (Cushion and Lewis 2017: 211).

Second, the Leave's media campaign was very effective – using simple, catchy, mainly positive messages, presenting often misleading claims as factual evidence. One of the most important issues addressed by Remainers was the economy, portraying an exit from the EU and the Single Market negatively, i.e. with pessimistic forecasts, which was criticised by Brexiters as scaremongering and subsumed by them under the simple slogan of 'Project Fear' (Cini and Pérez-Solórzano Borragán 2016: 6). The Leave side both criticised EU 'rule' and suggested a significantly more up-beat outcome (Levy, Aslan & Bironzo 2016: 33). Leave campaigners criticised the EU as an over-regulating bureaucratic 'monster' threatening Britain's sovereignty and 'Britishness', while painting a rosy picture of post-Brexit Britain and Britain's global position (e.g. *Daily Mail Online* 22/6/2016). They thus managed to convince different social groups with a simple 'Take Back Control' message, especially over immigration, which was open to multiple interpretations without the need for further detail. At the same time, Brexiters could promise an alternative future to the "Leave patchwork of parliamentary fundamentalists, elderly nostalgics as well as large sections of the discontented working poor" (Delaney 2016: 1).

The Leave campaign was undertaken in favourable conditions: (I) a post-truth (media) era: Banducci and Stevens (2016: 22) suggest that the Leave's campaign especially, was characterised by "selective engagement with information and outright resistance of facts that may run counter to one's beliefs". Some tabloids even went so far to deliberately misinform the public: for example, *The Sun* held that the Queen backed Brexit even though Buckingham Palace claimed this to be a distortion (*The Sun* 8/3/2016). (II) The Leave campaign was also able to benefit from the British public's long-term political socialisation – most British newspapers had employed a Eurosceptic frame – priming its readership with anti-EU

attitudes (Berry 2016: 14). During the campaign, tabloid media were able to rely on a majority of readers to continue their Eurosceptic, pro-Leave positions rather than reconsider them. Firmstone (2016: 36) looks specifically at how the Leave-supporting media emphasized the cleavage between political and intellectual elites on the one hand, and the electorate on the other. This anti-establishment approach effectively undermined the traction of expert's functional arguments. (III) The "hard" Euroscepticism expressed by the tabloids was received by an electorate characterised by the lowest level of knowledge on the EU among member state populations (Hix 2015; Startin 2015: 317), a factor conducive to Eurosceptic attitudes

Simplified, biased coverage shot through with *post-truth* distortions received by an already ill-informed, Eurosceptic readership made it largely impossible for (neo)functional arguments to register with the majority of the electorate. Thus, the media, rather than acting as agents of spillover, instead helped foster an anti-European and anti-elite climate that contributed substantially to the referendum outcome.

Short-Time Horizons and Unanticipated/Unintended Consequences

Neofunctionalists have assumed that the European integration process is driven by both intended and unintended consequences and that long-term purposive behaviour is difficult, because decisions are taken with imperfect knowledge of their consequences and frequently under time pressure. Politicians are often more concerned with the effects of their decisions on possible re-election than with long-term collective outcomes (Haas 1970: 627; Pierson 1998: 38). But neofunctionalism did *not* stipulate that unintended consequences would always lead to further integration. Schmitter (1970), for example, argued that (over-)ambitious political decisions might fail to anticipate likely consequences and thus lead to backlash.

There are probably many unintended consequences that led to the Brexit vote, but two important issues are explored further here. First, from an economic point of view, supporting the migration of low-skilled workers from Central and Eastern Europe to the UK made perfect sense for the Blair/Brown governments after the 2004/2007 Eastern enlargement for several reasons. It was expected that numbers would be low, that low-skilled workers would integrate quickly, and that offering free movement would cement relations with the new member states (Portes 2016). Although their integration into the labour market was relatively smooth and most economists consider the UK to have benefited substantially from intra-EU migration (ibid.), there have been unintended and (in the view of many Brexiters) undesirable consequences. Many British low-skilled workers, who already perceived themselves as losers from globalisation, tended to see migrants as a threat: they feared migrants would take their jobs, and condemned them for exploiting British social services, especially the (already stretched) National Health Service. As the number of extra-EU migrants rose, there was an increase in xenophobic attitudes that took in all 'foreigners' (Rzepnikowska 2018). For UKIP and the Brexit campaign, with posters of long queues of potential migrants and the scare-story of an unstoppable Turkish membership on the horizon, with the prospect of 15 million Turks seeking work in Britain (Shipman 2016), the answer could only be to leave the EU. Migration thus became a centrepiece of the Brexit campaign.

Second, Prime Minister Cameron's decision to include a referendum on EU membership in the Conservatives' 2015 general election manifesto was not intended to lead to Britain's exit from the EU, but rather to ensure a more united Conservative Party and stem the loss of nationalist/populist votes from the Tories to UKIP (Schimmelfennig 2018: 1162-1163). Newspapers would later publish articles on 'How Cameron accidentally sacrificed the EU' (translated from Lapido 2016) just to protect his career. An unanticipated consequence of the decision, though, was "a campaign about Europeanness [that] brought to the fore severe tensions within Britishness" (Foster 2016: 105). The full force of politicisation, media campaigning and distrust in elites/experts – all of which Cameron seems to have underestimated or naively ignored – were unleashed by the referendum.

6.   Conclusions

With the UK withdrawing from the EU, critics of neofunctionalism saw themselves confirmed that the theory could no longer explain European integration and should therefore be finally declared obsolete or out-of-date (Foster 2016: 105). Others, looking at other recent crises, such as Hooghe and Marks (2009) have argued that we are now in a post-functionalist period, while still others have suggested neofunctionalism can explain some but only some more technical elements of continued integration (e.g. Börzel & Risse 2018). We hold that neofunctionalism still has considerable relevance, even in the case of Brexit, an extreme (perhaps the extreme) case of disintegration, because (1) the theory still points to critically important variables that can help to explain processes that may lead to further integration but also possible stagnation or varying forms of cooperation; (2) a number of neofunctionalist arguments were used by Remainers which may still be relevant for the EU27 and even perhaps for the future UK-EU relationship; (3) Neofunctionalism is a dynamic theory in the sense that a specification of the conditions of spillover can usefully delimit its scope of application and thus be seen as an exercise in revising the theory.

Neofunctionalism is still relevant and useful even if the politicisation of 'Europe' needs to be taken even if more seriously than perhaps it has in the past (though see Lefkofridi & Schmitter 2015 or Schmitter & Lefkofridi 2016). While many of its critics have exaggerated neofunctionalism's predictive pretensions, neofunctionalists themselves, from the early 1960s, have been hesitant to talk of a possible end-state. The theory allows for unintended consequences but was ambivalent about whether these would always lead to further integration. As a pluralist and transformative theory, it assumes multiple and diverse actors that may learn, which also implies that they (e.g., citizens) may choose to take part in a process of increasingly deep functional integration (affecting their life-worlds) to which they had previously merely acquiesced. While earlier neofunctionalists may have feared that policy-making might ultimately have to take place in a more conflictual climate, they might be forgiven for not having predicted the decline in mass organisations such as the trade unions, or the rise of Eurosceptic parties/movements able to turn a permissive consensus into a 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe and Marks 2009).

Examining new conditions and new actors in the light of some of the early claims, such as those relating to the permissive consensus, allows us to explore what modifications might be appropriate without emptying the theory of its coherence and explanatory logic. An issue central to that exploration is the question of specifying the factors conditioning spillover dynamics. Certainly, one can identify several neofunctionalist pressures that pushed for Britain to remain an EU member: the functional rationale relating to the benefits of the single market, the economic costs of leaving it, the benefits of other policy areas such as internal security or climate change, and the adverse repercussions likely to result from leaving the EU; and other path dependencies that make membership sticky and renationalisation therefore costly. Many interest groups and political elites were therefore strongly in favour of remaining within the EU.

However, spillover may not occur under certain (countervailing) conditions: (I) when issues are highly politicised and opinion polarised, debate tends to move beyond (functional) rationality to a more emotional level with more unpredictable consequences. (II) When the bulk of the media campaigns against membership in a simplified manner, often framed in a biased and (sometimes) misleading way, any assessment of the detailed costs and benefits becomes difficult as benefits and functional logics can hardly register. (III) When citizens have only limited knowledge of the EU, when successive governments have done little themselves to explain European policy, and when experts/epistemic communities are distrusted, understanding the complexities of the pros and cons of membership again becomes problematic. As Niemann (2006) suggested, (functional) spillover rationales have no in-built automaticity but are only persuasive if actors perceive them as such. (IV) When certain integrational policies are perceived to overstretch the adaptation capacity of societies/economies (or politicians gamble on referendums for party reasons), countervailing forces maybe unleashed. (V) When the debate is not only one of domestic politics but when "Brussels" itself becomes the problem, the

supranational institutions, one of the main agents of European integration, cannot play any substantive role. An important neofunctionalist dynamic (cultivated spillover) is thus taken out of the equation.

Several studies suggest that the Brexit referendum was a wake-up call for other European countries, with positive attitudes towards the EU having increased (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2017; van Kessel et al 2020), a trend confirmed by Eurobarometer data. Whether this trend continues and Brexit remains an aberration, and whether this implies that one of the earlier neofunctionalist assumptions may eventually be (at least partly) fulfilled – i.e. that politicisation leads to greater citizen involvement and support for integration (rather than stagnation and exit) – remains to be seen and will be subject to further research. In addition, the seeming utility of neofunctionalism, the tentativeness of parts of the preceding analysis (e.g., when do unintended consequences tend to have a disintegrative impact), and the potential for further refinement of neofunctionalist theory, suggest that there is considerable scope for further research emanating from this paper.

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