

# **Was Anybody Ever a Liberal Intergovernmentalist?**

**Joseph Jupille, University of Colorado Boulder**

**Craig Parsons, University of Oregon**

**EUSA 2022, version date 5/16/2022**

## I. Introduction

For three decades "liberal intergovernmentalism" (LI) has supplied the modal theoretical reference point about European integration. Andrew Moravcsik's seminal paper (1993) and pathbreaking book *The Choice for Europe* (1998, henceforth CFE) that developed and tested the theory have garnered over fourteen thousand citations. LI posits that "the broad lines of European integration since 1955 reflect three factors: patterns of commercial advantage, the relative bargaining power of important governments, and the incentives to enhance the credibility of interstate commitments" (CFE, 3). Later restatements characterize LI as the "contemporary 'baseline' social scientific and historiographic theory of regional integration—especially as regards the European Union" (Moravcsik, 2020, p. 2; also Moravcsik and Nicolaidis, 1999, p. 82 Moravcsik, 1999c, p. 173; Moravcsik, 2018, p. 1649; Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, 2019, p. 64). Moravcsik often positions it as articulating "the consensus view ... among political scientists and historians concerning the deeper causes of the evolution of European integration," such that "social scientific research on regional integration either confirms the theory or employs it as a 'first-cut' counterfactual model against which subsidiary puzzles, exceptions, and anomalies are defined" (Moravcsik, 2008, p. 158; also Moravcsik, 2018, p. 1649; Moravcsik, 2020, p. 3). In brief, LI has claimed theoretical hegemony in EU Studies.

Over the years LI has attracted many critics, as prominent scholarship does. One thread focuses on metatheoretical issues such as ontology (state-centrism, rationalism) or epistemology (positivism). A second emphasizes methodological and empirical problems, such as LI's interpretation of archival evidence (Lieshout *et al.*, 2004) and its broader historical claims (Trachtenberg, 2000). A third, which marries metatheoretical and empirical concerns, declaims LI's relative explanatory power, finding it wanting in the face of varieties of neofunctionalism-transactionalism (Sandholtz and Stone Sweet, 1998), institutionalisms of the historical (Pierson, 1996), rationalist (Tsebelis and Garrett, 2001) and

discursive (Schmidt, 2018) varieties, postfunctionalism (Hooghe and Marks, 2008) and countless other theoretical alternatives. Yet most of these critiques laud LI *as theory*. In one symposium, Fritz Scharpf, James Caporaso, and Helen Wallace respectively applaud Moravcsik's book as theoretically "disciplined," "sophisticated" and "robust" (Scharpf, 1999, p. 164; Caporaso, 1999, p. 161; Wallace, 1999, p. 165). Historian Marc Trachtenberg characterizes it as "wonderfully clear," and integration theorist Donald Puchala praises Moravcsik's "compelling" theory (Trachtenberg, 2000, p. 101; Puchala, 1999, p. 327). A 2018 evaluation by Mareike Kleine and Mark Pollack summarizes that LI has been challenged mainly on "its core assumptions, empirical claims, and normative implications" (Kleine and Pollack, 2018, p. 1496), while accepting that it serves "as a central, or even baseline, theory for our understanding of the EU" (p. 1504).

This paper critiques LI in its area of greatest perceived strength, as social scientific theory, using the evaluative standards of theoretical distinctiveness and coherence articulated by Moravcsik himself (Legro and Moravcsik, 1999). We argue 1) that LI never offered satisfactory theory on these grounds, 2) that it has deteriorated in respect of these standards as it has been defended and elaborated in the intervening quarter century (see also Marks and Hooghe, 2020), and 3) partly as a result, but also an empirical matter, it currently offers nothing like a "consensus" model of European integration. We do suggest, finally, that LI can be salvaged as a useful baseline theory for EU studies and international integration more broadly. LI should not be tossed out, but parameterized. The utility of a general baseline theory derives as much from what it does not do as from what it does: how far does its explanatory baseline go? LI has been relentlessly stretched in service of aggrandizing claims about its theoretical superiority and sweeping explanatory reach. Other scholars have not attempted to clean up these problems: contrary to the "consensus" characterization, we show that salient positive invocations of LI by other scholars are rare, and only employ LI concepts in selective or loose ways. We cannot find a

single empirically-based and positive evaluation of LI as a tripartite theory that does not come personally from Moravcsik.<sup>1</sup>

The paper first articulates simple criteria of coherence and distinctiveness to evaluate theories, drawn from Moravcsik's own work, and summarizes LI as we think its author would do. Next we evaluate the theory using the aforementioned evaluative standards. Then we assess invocations of LI by other scholars. Lastly, and again partly following Moravcsik's own guidelines, we sketch a more sharply delimited version of LI. We conclude by arguing that this reformulated theory could play a useful role for EU scholars of all theoretical schools.

## II. LI Theory

In a landmark critique of realist theorizing in international relations, Moravcsik and Jeffry Legro offer two key criteria for theoretical evaluation: coherence and distinctiveness (Legro and Moravcsik, 1999). Their discussion addresses broad paradigms like realism or liberalism, not variants within them like "defensive realism" or LI, but implies that the same criteria apply even more strongly to more concrete specifications. Theoretical expectations should be logically coherent—not permitting of contradictory conclusions—and also distinct from other extant theories' expectations in comprehensible and significant ways. Conceptual boundaries and specified empirical scope are necessary to generate falsifiable and consequential propositions (Moravcsik, 1997, p. 533, 541).

---

<sup>1</sup> We must acknowledge that this paper makes an uncomfortably deep critique of a single scholar. Severe critique is common in academia, but typically targets scholarly positions to avoid any *ad hominem* tone. We attempt to respect these norms, but as Hooghe and Marks also note (2020, p. 501), the challenge is that LI is an unusually personalized theory.

This section attempts to faithfully reproduce how Moravcsik presents LI, especially in CFE. He has variously labeled LI as an approach (Moravcsik, 1993), a paradigm (Moravcsik, 1995, p. 613), a framework (CFE, p. 21), or a theory (Moravcsik, 2020, p. 2), but we think the last label fits best. LI is built from component theories that respectively generate hypotheses about state preference formation, interstate bargaining, and institutional design, and posits that these components sum to a coherent and distinctive account of "why sovereign governments in Europe have chosen repeatedly to coordinate their core policies and surrender sovereign prerogatives within an international institution" (CFE, p. 1).

#### *A. Liberal theory of preference formation*

Relative to other theories of European integration and IR theory more broadly, LI's clearest innovation lies in its original "liberal" theorization of state preferences for international cooperation (Moravcsik, 1997). It begins from a general "bottom-up" model, wherein "the fundamental actors in international politics are individuals and private groups." Internal variation in the purposes and power of domestic groups directs states toward varying goals in IR, and the resulting "configuration of state preferences matters most in world politics" (Moravcsik, 1997, p. 513-17). This general model is "content-free," positing only that states aggregate societal concerns, but generates substantive expectations in variants that predict preferences in certain issue areas (Moravcsik, 1997, p. 524). For economically-centered domains like European integration, Moravcsik specifies a "commercial liberal" variant rooted in "the patterns of market incentives facing domestic and transnational economic actors" (1997, p. 529). Domestic groups' demands for policies like trade openness or regulatory cooperation reflect their positioning in an evolving structural landscape:

changes in the structure of the domestic and global economy alter the costs and benefits of transnational economic exchange, creating pressure on domestic governments to facilitate or block such exchanges through appropriate foreign economic and security policies... The greater the economic benefits for powerful private actors, the greater their incentive, *ceteris paribus*, to press governments to facilitate such transactions; the more

costly the adjustment imposed by the proposed economic exchanges, the more opposition is likely to arise... (Moravcsik, 2003, p. 171).

LI's older rival, neofunctionalism, posits a similar interest-group-driven model of demand for integration, but LI theorizes such demands more specifically (Haas, 1958; Sandholtz and Stone-Sweet, 1998; Parsons, 2000). Powerful and mobilized actors are typically producers, on whom policy choices often have concentrated effects (Moravcsik, 1993, p. 488; CFE, p. 36). They mobilize mainly in Ricardo-Viner-style sectoral coalitions, not Stolper-Samuelson-style "factor" alliances, due to constraints of asset specificity within the short-to-medium timeframe of typical policy debates (Moravcsik 1993, p. 488). Producers seek "direct, issue-specific consequences," not broad change in policies or institutions, but governments merge their preferences into larger goals and package them with side payments for sectors with contrasting preferences (CFE, p. 6). Simply put, "Groups articulate preferences; governments aggregate them" (Moravcsik, 1993, p. 483).

LI also specifies conditions that may disrupt its core model. Even on standard trade issues to which the model applies most directly, groups' preferences may be weak, balance each other out, or send mixed signals due to cross-cutting intra-industry ties in trade or investment (CFE, p. 490). Policy options may have diffuse or uncertain effects, blurring their connection even to otherwise-clear group preferences (CFE, p. 488). Even given clear preferences, governments may face limits in responding to them. In particular, governments will "promote commercial interests until confronted with an intolerable fiscal burden or a conflict with strong regulatory preferences," or by the "particular balance" of other coalitional commitments (CFE, p. 37). In non-trade areas, most importantly monetary affairs, general political-economic theory recognizes that producers' preferences are often ambiguous. Thus LI relies on a secondary logic of "the macro-economic preferences of ruling governmental coalitions" (CFE, p. 3). Preferences regarding exchange-rate stability are especially difficult to predict, so LI takes as given "underlying domestic inflation rates and attitudes of governments about those rates" (CFE, pp. 41-49).

In sum, LI aspires to coherent and distinctive claims that national government preferences for European integration reflect pluralistic aggregations of their domestic groups' structurally-defined economic interests. It formulates more specific economically-focused expectations than the looser pluralism of neofunctionalists, and distinctively emphasizes the structural "stability and continuity" of preferences unfiltered by the effects of geopolitics, ideology, or unintended institutional feedback (CFE, p. 493).

### *B. Nash Theory of Intergovernmental Bargaining*

The middle panel of CFE's LI triptych offers a rationalist theory of intergovernmental bargaining over the terms of policy co-ordination, given the pattern of preferences explained in step one of the framework and the bargaining power derivable from it. Following Keohane and Nye, Moravcsik characterizes the arrangement of national preferences derived in the first step in terms of "asymmetric interdependence" – asymmetric because impacts (and thus demands, policies, behaviors) are highly differentiated within and between countries, and interdependence because what each set of actors does spills over into other economies. This, in turn, creates demand for policy co-ordination, which in the LI view is the basic fact of European integration. EU bargaining, then, entails negotiating agreement in response to the "policy externalities imposed by economic interdependence" (Moravcsik, 1993b, 494).

Unlike the liberal theory of preferences on the demand side, which Moravcsik originated, on the supply side he deploys an "off-the-shelf" bargaining model which Fabio Franchino has crisply described:

LI's understanding of interstate negotiations is firmly rooted in game-theoretic bargaining models. Above all, these models give pre-eminence to the value attached to disagreement. This factor drives the outcomes of negotiations in non-cooperative games of alternating offers, in cooperative games, where the best alternative to a negotiated agreement determines the Nash solution, and in spatial models of legislative bargaining, where the utility attached to the status quo determines voting behavior (Franchino 2013, 327, citations omitted).

Sovereign states will never accept any European agreement that leaves them worse off than their unilateral or other negotiated alternatives. And the more valuable EU agreement is relative to these alternatives, the more a state desires it, the more it will be willing to sacrifice to achieve it. Patterns of asymmetric interdependence not only define the content of group (and state) preferences, but also their intensity. All of this defines bargaining power, and, for LI, this shapes agreements over policy coordination.

Moravcsik assumes that EU intergovernmental negotiations are information-rich and relatively low-cost to transact (Moravcsik, 1993b, p. 498). In process terms, states will issue threats to exercise outside options (unilateral or otherwise), and these will be credible (and thus shape outcomes) to the extent that they reflect the real relative costs and benefits of the alternatives. (These will be known to all given plentiful information.) States will issue threats of exclusion with similar determinants and contours. Demands and concessions will follow the shapes of states' indifference curves. Substantive outcomes will track all of this. "Demand for cooperation [will] create its own supply," and "decentralized bargaining [will be] 'naturally' efficient" (Moravcsik, 1999a, p. 298).

### *C. Credible Commitments Theory of Institutional Choice*

Having formed preferences and made a bargain, the states at the center of LI take a final step by designing EU institutions aimed at making the agreement stick. LI leverages functional theories of international regimes (and other institutions) in explaining this part of the process. These begin with the nature of the strategic dilemma that states confront, and reason forward to what institutions might be used to solve it. As applied here, states choose institutions that fulfill needed functions. This involves the fact of institutionalizing cooperation at all (Axelrod and Keohane, 1985), the broad contours of institutions responsive to different kinds of dilemmas (Stein, 1982, 1990; Keohane, 1982, 1984; Snidal,



1985; Martin, 1992), and the specific design attributes written into treaties and wired into international organizations (Koremenos, Lipson and Snidal, 2001; Koremenos, 2016).

The kinds of economic issues that EU member states bargain over involve "mixed motives", including incentives to collaborate but also incentives not to. Trade liberalization agreements very clearly have these characteristics: every state is made better off by eliminating barriers to exchange, but each would also be made even better off if the others would reduce their barriers but it could maintain its own. Readers will recognize the Prisoner's Dilemma structure at work here.<sup>2</sup> Left to their own devices, states will promise to cooperate (by eliminating barriers) at the bargaining stage, but will not follow through on those promises when it comes time to deliver the (access to others') goods. Because all states face these time-inconsistent incentives, promised cooperation never materializes, and all remain relatively badly off, failing to harvest available gains from exchange.

Generically, such dilemmas call forth institutions that can aid or otherwise incentivize states to keep their promises. Thus, and as identified above, LI centrally claims that states design institutions "to enhance the credibility of [their] commitments" to each other (CFE, p. 3). Monitoring and enforcement take pride of place. To achieve these, LI states *delegate* authority to agents such as the Commission, the Court, or the European Central Bank (ECB) to achieve these gains from cooperation, and *pool sovereignty*, i.e., institutionalize ongoing collective decisionmaking, to enforce, implement, and put specific flesh on the bones of their grand bargains.<sup>3</sup> Member states pay assiduous attention to the

---

<sup>2</sup> CFE does not seem explicitly to invoke the prisoner's dilemma, though phrases such as "temptation [or incentive] to defect" (CFE, pp. 4, 9, 69) implicitly do so. Earlier and later formulations explicitly invoke it (Moravcsik, 1993b, p. 512; Moravcsik, 2018, p. 1655; Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, 2019, p. 69).

<sup>3</sup> Moravcsik doesn't clearly define pooling beyond saying it involves deciding future matters by QMV (CFE, p. 67). We like the definition provided by his dissertation advisors, who understand pool as "sharing the capability to make decisions among governments, through a process of qualified majority rule" (Keohane and Hoffmann, 1991, p. 7).

institutional details, and patterns of delegation and pooling show fine-grained variation across issue areas. There is also member state variation, depending on their specific preferences over cooperation in specific issues, including their relative spatial positioning. Institutions generally work the way member states intend them to, at least during an interstitial period of consolidation, before exogenous (especially economic) changes create new functional pressures, creating new preferences, calling forth the next grand bargains, and conjuring new arrangements.

*D. LI's overall claim: a coherent and distinctive baseline theory*

LI synthesizes these elements into "a tripartite explanation of integration—economic interest, relative power, credible commitments—[which] accounts for the form, substance, and timing of major steps toward European integration" (CFE, p. 4). Though its components are theorized separately, the expectations at the bargaining and institutional-choice stages are logically dependent on the theorization of preferences ("the first and most important stage of the LI framework" [Moravcsik, 2018, p. 1650]). Asymmetries in the intensities of states' preferences "define...to a very substantial degree...their relative power" in bargaining (CFE, p. 9). Institutional choices only make sense in terms of credible commitments to the extent that LI specifies states' preceding preferences for policy coordination to which they seek to commit (CFE, p. 21). Thus LI aspires not just to display the coherence and distinctiveness of each component but asserts that their synthesis produces a coherent and distinctive overall theory.

### **III. Theoretical Assessment**

Having summarized LI on its own terms, now we evaluate it critically. Before considering problems in each of its stages, first note some challenges in understanding Moravcsik's claims about the theory's overall "baseline." He has frequently specified that LI does not explain some features of today's EU.

These admissions could seem like laudable delineations of LI's baseline, if they were not so bewilderingly inconsistent with his many assertions of the theory's explanatory success.

The earliest major example was Moravcsik's recognition in 1993 that the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) presented an "anomaly," since "the decisions of the Court clearly transcend what was initially foreseen and desired by most national governments" (Moravcsik 1993, p. 513; also Moravcsik 2005, p. 363). More significant was the 1998 book's characterization of the Maastricht deal to create the Eurozone as its weakest case: "...it is unclear whether the economic benefits truly outweighed the costs for any single country...." (CFE, p. 470). Recently Moravcsik echoed that the Eurozone persists for path-dependent reasons that fall outside LI expectations, arguing that no state today "would enter EMU again...yet no country leaves" (Moravcsik, 2018, p. 20). Most remarkably, the book's conclusion offers the following counterfactual about likely outcomes had LI's hypothesized dynamics operated alone:

The likely outcome...would have been a trade arrangement closer to the free trade area repeatedly proposed by Britain, backed by a series of bilateral and global agreements on multilateral trade and investment...[with] only ad hoc bilateral arrangements for agriculture... [and] would likely have evolved toward consideration of [non-tariff barriers]... toward reduction of customs formalities... and toward service liberalization... Yet such policies—conducted on a bilateral, unilateral, or 'flexible' basis, as occurred among non-EC European countries—would likely have remained uneven, uncoordinated, and decentralized. Similarly, although monetary cooperation along the lines of the EMS would have been a likely response to the collapse of Bretton Woods and policy convergence after the two oil shocks, it is difficult to imagine a more ad hoc arrangement evolving in the direction of EMU or arranging the sort of financial side-payments required to integrate countries such as Spain, Portugal, and Greece into Europe (CFE, p. 471).

This seems to suggest that LI predicts a conventional free trade area in Europe, with some monetary coordination but not supranational institutions (presumably no majority voting or Parliament?), no strong legal system, no systematic Single Market project, no Common Agricultural Policy, no regional development funds, no euro, and different membership. We cannot understand how anything close to this counterfactual is consistent with Moravcsik's many summary statements about LI's achievements, like the 2018 pronouncement that the theory successfully explains today's EU—an outcome largely

defined by the features just listed—as "the only sensible way to manage concrete interdependence" (Moravcsik, 2018, p. 23). Which features of today's EU does Moravcsik think correspond to LI's expectations about how states manage interdependence? We simply cannot say.

Were these concessions separated from incompatible summary pronouncements, however, they might suggest a useful role for LI. They could highlight ways—apparently many—in which today's EU departs from the expectations of a sharper LI, achieving its aspirations to "distinguish rigorously between general and contingent phenomena" (CFE, p. 500). We return to this notion later, after showing that problems in each of LI's stages contribute to the incomprehensibility of its overall claims.

#### *A. Preference formation*

As Kleine and Pollack summarized not long ago (2018, p. 1496), theoretical criticisms of LI's commercial-liberal model of state preferences have argued mainly that LI is wrong to reject socially-constructed preferences (McNamara 1998; Parsons 2003; Zürn and Checkel 2005; Risse 2010) or to downplay electoral politicization (Hooghe and Marks 2009). LI's claims about preferences also attract major empirical criticisms, mainly arguing that Moravcsik's accounts "have been heavily interpreted to amplify economic factors, including above all, agricultural interests" (Hooghe and Marks 2020, 503). But the deeper problem with LI's first and most fundamental theoretical stage is that it never coalesced on its own terms, for two reasons. On its core terrain of trade-related preferences, it was never operationalized carefully enough to advance distinctive claims. On the non-trade terrain to which European integration extended over time, it never developed past a loose, "content-free" liberalism.

On trade issues, LI's Ricardo-Viner-style expectations are abstractly coherent. They only generate distinctive claims, however, when specified in empirical context—mapping the model onto interest groups' concerns and their translation into state preferences for European arrangements. Like with the perplexing counterfactual above, Moravcsik's claims about preferences generally blur amid

contradictory claims of explanatory success and empirical caveats. We agree with Hooghe and Marks that Moravcsik's interpretations *attempt* to "amplify economic factors," especially agricultural ones, but the result is better characterized as confusion than overstatement. Our Appendix offers several examples, but consider here the best-developed episode in the LI opus (further elaborated into a 106-page article: Moravcsik 2000a, 2000b): transmission of French farmers' concerns into government preferences to create and implement the European Economic Community (EEC).

To what degree does Moravcsik employ LI to argue distinctively that farmers' concerns informed French preferences for the EEC? No one disputes that French farmers' support for EEC ratification in 1957 was important, or that the leader who implemented it, Charles de Gaulle, faced pressure to promote agricultural exports. Moravcsik seems to claim more: acknowledging that French industry was "no more than cautiously and conditionally supportive" of the EEC format for cooperation, he argues that "the strongly positive position of agriculture was decisive" for French preferences (CFE, p. 110). Or does he? He also paraphrases a key French official, Robert Marjolin, that farmers "may have required a little encouragement from the government" to support the EEC, and cites another that winning farmers' support was "our big political success" (CFE, p. 112, 117). The government's challenge, he notes, was that "Farmers appear to have favored a long-term, bilateral arrangement with Germany...," and opposed supranational institutions (CFE, p. 112). France duly obtained bilateral contracts for the 12-year EEC transition period, alongside vague plans for a future Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), securing farmers' support for ratification. Given that all sources agree that Germany also preferred bilateral contracts over a CAP, though, is the claim that farmers pushed France to insist on the EEC, or that they were lobbied to endorse a less-preferred format that their government pursued for other reasons? We cannot tell, and LI's distinctiveness rides on this difference.

Moravcsik goes on to argue variously that French preferences for the EEC display the "primacy" or "predominance" of economic interests, or were "based as much or more on commercial interest as on

geopolitical interest or ideas," or to muse in another puzzling counterfactual that "...there is at least some reason to suspect that any government, perhaps even one with Gaullist participation, would eventually have promoted similar substantive goals—though perhaps not with the same institutional framework" (CFE, p. 116, 103, 120). If a Gaullist government would have sought a different framework, how should we then understand Moravcsik's later assertion that economic interests were "predominant and sufficient" to explain EEC implementation under De Gaulle, such that "Any other French government of the period would have sought the same objectives" (Moravcsik 2000a, p. 6; Moravcsik 2000b, p. 54)? He also notes that De Gaulle's geopolitical views played a "secondary, though not insignificant, role," and complains that critics misread the "essentially multicausal nature of my central argument" (Moravcsik, 2000c, pp. 121, 129). What does it mean to recognize other "significant" causes of French preferences that could not have changed their objectives? Pervasively careless language about causality robs LI of comprehensible distinctiveness even in its key trade-based cases.

In the non-trade areas that became increasingly important in European integration over time, careful readers of our summary will have already perceived that LI offers a loose liberal model that mostly takes preferences as revealed (see also Hooghe and Marks, 2020, p. 506). It posits that governments listen to domestic actors' "issue-specific" concerns—suggesting that government preferences for cooperation in particular areas will involve concerns about those areas, as opposed to displaying a hierarchy of concerns imposed by geopolitics (as realists suggest) or ideology (as constructivists sometimes suggest)—but otherwise offers no significantly constraining theoretical expectations. Again, in these areas it takes for given "macro-economic preferences of ruling coalitions" that reflect "attitudes of governments" about inflation and the "particular balance" of coalitional "commitments," in light of unspecified "intolerable fiscal burdens" and "strong regulatory preferences." In areas like monetary politics, this language seems consistent with practically any outcome at all, as long as policymakers talk about monetary policies as they formulate monetary policies. Or almost any

outcome: again, when Moravcsik applies this loose language to state choices in the EMU bargain at Maastricht, he grants that it is "unclear that the economic benefits truly outweighed the costs for any single country," while simultaneously asserting that "National preferences [for EMU]...were driven primarily by...enduring structural economic interests..." (CFE, pp. 470, 381). In later work, even this emphasis on structural sources of revealed preferences fell away as Moravcsik wrestled with non-commercial policy coordination and the apparent endogenous path-dependence of the Eurozone. By 2005 he suggested that "The essence of the LI position is not that economic issues dominate political ones" (Moravcsik 2005, p. 381 fn47), and by 2018 that the exogenous-structural sources of preferences were "not a major LI concern..." (Moravcsik 2018, p. 1666). These restatements explicitly pared LI's treatment of preferences back to the generic pluralism that it had never actually managed to surpass.

## *B. Bargaining*

*central claim: "the broad lines of European integration since 1955 reflect ... the relative bargaining power of important governments ..." (CFE, p. 3)*

*central argument: "European integration can best be explained as a series of rational choices by national leaders [which] responded to ... the relative power of each state in the international system ..." (CFE, p. 18)*

Nash Bargaining Theory forms a highly coherent theoretical edifice capable of generating crisply distinctive claims relative to other accounts of bargaining outcomes. Because LI borrows it, one would imagine that its account of intergovernmental bargaining would retain these desirable qualities. But even in its canonical formulations, it struggled to maintain discipline in this area, and these problems have only been exacerbated over the years. Here we sketch some key issues on each evaluative dimension.

### 1. Coherence

Bargaining models require careful ex ante specification of who the players are. But the LI *oeuvre* has opened itself to valid questions about which member states matter. Its 1991 progenitor seemed to

confirm the "dominance of the three largest states" (Moravcsik, 1991, 49). CFE's empirical focus on France, Germany and the UK has left many analysts with the impression that the conclusion holds in canonical LI (Franchino, 2013, p. 327 cites in support Finke 2009; Finke et al. 2012, 13; Slapin 2008, 2011). Moravcsik now says that "LI does not assume (and [CFE] never states) that only large states have influence," noting that "LI's core concept of asymmetrical interdependence implies that power may vary for reasons not directly related to size" (Moravcsik, 2018, p. 1654). First, while it's true that CFE never says only large states ever matter, its **central claim** does state that "the broad lines of European integration since 1955 reflect ... the relative bargaining power of *important* governments" (CFE, p. 3, emphasis added). What's more, one page after saying LI can go beyond large states, he finds it accounting well for the Eurozone crisis because "the ECB ... functions primarily as a representative of the interests of the more powerful member states: it cannot initiate major policy changes or address major crises without the approval of the more powerful member states in the European Council" (Moravcsik, 2018, p. 1655). To which member states should we be paying attention in attempting to apply LI?

Bargaining models also require specification of actors' informational circumstances. LI does so, postulating a bargaining environment featuring plentiful information and low transaction costs. At the same time, as we will discuss in the next section, much of the justification for institutional choices of delegation and sovereignty-pooling rest on high informational costs in everyday politics (Moravcsik, 1993b, 510 fn30). These claims turn logic on its head. Treaty bargains are complex omnibus packages intended to govern many issues over at least a medium term period. The substantive complexities and extended time horizons over which grand bargains are supposed to operate should entail relative high *ex ante* uncertainty. Everyday decisionmaking tends to be narrower, is often designed for shorter-term applicability, and often deals with more concrete problems. Tsebelis and Garret made this point some years back: "In the case of treaty bargaining, the threshold for complete information is even higher [than in everyday decisionmaking]—because the governments are making decisions that will have long



chains of effects into the indefinite future. If they do not know all relevant information about each other, ... or if they expect with some probability that shocks in the political environment will change the endowments of other actors, the strict complete-information assumption is unlikely to be very helpful" in the grand bargaining setting (Tsebelis and Garrett, 2001, p. 387).

Finally under this heading, LI's conceptualization of the bargains it purports to explain has been all over the map. What is the dependent variable? State policymaking has featured most consistently as the phenomenon to be explained by LI theory. We can think of the unit of analysis here as the state-decision or the state-policy. Indeed, a number of overall assessments from CFE talk about fifteen core observations, representing "choices for Europe" by the three countries studied across the five decadal episodes.

An alternative conception finds expression in the phrase "grand bargains". Recall that CFE's "primary goal" was "to isolate the most important determinants of a series of major decisions" (Moravcsik, 1999c, pp. 172-173). But what events qualify for "grand bargain" status? CFE addresses itself to five putative bargains, characterizing them as "treaty-amending" (CFE, pp. 1, 51, 53, 57, 60-61, 61 fn80, 479). Yet *three of his five cases do not meet this definition*: the Rome Treaties were original, not amending; the CAP was built through hundreds of discrete decisions encoded in secondary law over almost a decade; and the "snake in the tunnel" and the European Monetary System in the 1970s also left the treaties unchanged.

Beyond their legal form, how "grand" are these bargains, after all? The CAP decisions manifestly fail to achieve this status, though the prices of cereals and oleaginous fruits held great importance at the time. But the notion of "grand bargains" strains in another and independent way, and flows from one of the core tensions in Moravcsik's LI. Sometimes he seeks to downplay the importance of the EU and its degree of supranationalism to counter his theoretical rivals. This has found clearest expression in Moravcsik's analysis of how the EU relates to mass politics. In respect of the 1992 French referendum on

the Maastricht Treaty, he asserts that "nearly all of its provisions restate the status quo" and that the public's ambivalence reflected its "appreciation, largely correct, ... that nothing substantial was at stake" (Moravcsik, 1993a, pp. 46, 52). Subsequent work on the EU's putative democratic deficit and on the failed Constitutional Treaty of the early aughts has similarly downplayed the importance of EU bargains (Moravcsik, 2002, 2006). All of this contradicts CFE's claim that the EU's "uniquely rich set of institutions ... manifestly impinge on national sovereignty" (p. 67).

## 2. Distinctiveness

LI's internal incoherence undermines its distinctiveness vis-à-vis alternative theories, but this has separately declined over the decades as LI is stretched in service of its hegemonic ambitions.

Moravcsik, heartily criticized neofunctionalism for its lack of clear microfoundations, qualifying LI as "uniquely able to provide credible micro-foundations of EU decision-making, which even theories ostensibly critical of LI borrow" (Moravcsik, 2018, pp. 1648-1649, 1658). CFE's labeling of LI as a "tripartite rationalist framework" (CFE, pp. 473, 499), and the mention of rational choice in the statement of its basic claims, paint the basic micro picture (see also Moravcsik, 1993b, p. 480). But more recent formulations have placed LI on "quasi-rationalist foundations" (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig 2019, p. 82) and invoked bounded rationality (Moravcsik 2018, p. 1665), suggestive not only of the informational limitations and uncertainty which have long been present in the theory, but also now "cognitive limitations" and constraints around the "availability of reliable theories of cause and effect" (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig 2019, p. 65). Far from offering a unique set of microfoundations, LI now finds itself indistinguishable from any other theory of integration.

A main set of theoretical rivals to LI since its articulation have questioned its materialism. Recall that in canonical LI, "the crucial factor [defining bargaining power] is asymmetrical interdependence, that is, the uneven distribution of the benefits of a specific agreement" (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, 2019,

p. 67). This materialism reduces ideas to "transmission belts for interests [which are] ... endogenous to other underlying factors" (Moravcsik, 1999b, p. 675). In CFE, he also assigned persuasion to the supranationalist or neofunctionalist school (CFE, p. 466), emphasizing exogenous preferences centered on material interests. Yet, in the face of constructivist, discursive, ideational, and other critics, Moravcsik has recently suggested that deliberation, informal norms, and consequential discursive practices are all part of LI (Moravcsik, 2018, p. 1657). LI is said to offer a positive explanation of "informal deliberative norms as intergovernmental means to promote efficient bargaining" (Moravcsik, 2018, p. 1657). Its once plausibly-distinctive account of bargaining now overlaps with the core claims of what have stood as key theoretical alternatives.

A final aspect of declining distinctiveness relates to the context within which bargaining takes place. In CFE, Moravcsik argued that "Treaty amendments are subject to essentially no procedural constraints," though noting by way of "one" exception that "under the Treaty of Rome a simple majority of governments can vote to call an intergovernmental conference to discuss amendments, but the result must still be approved unanimously" (CFE, p. 61). Of course, this involves not one exception, but two, because unanimity is a procedural constraint, even if it applies as a deep institution of the Westphalian system rather than a formal provision of EU law. And the IGC requirement is actually exceptionally important. Moravcsik has said, as a crucial underpinning of his whole approach (in contrast to a geopolitics approach), that "joint gains are presumed to exist – otherwise negotiations would not take place" (CFE, p. 61). Yet such an assumption would only hold under Pareto conditions, when every actor must agree to open the gates to a treaty revision. As it stands, fifty percent minus one member states might well stand to lose from grand bargaining. And there is an unstated third procedural parameter that LI denies but that holds great import in the iterative EU: the status quo *ante* of the existing treaty will continue to prevail in the absence of agreed changes. Institutional theory already includes such variables (Pollack, 1997), and standard bargaining theory similarly emphasizes the critical importance of

the reversion outcome in shaping negotiations (see also Moravcsik, 1992, pp. 55-59; Moravcsik, 1993b, p. 500).

### C. *Institutional Choice*

*central claim: "the broad lines of European integration since 1955 reflect ... the incentives to enhance the credibility of interstate commitments." (CFE, p. 3)*

*central argument: "European integration can best be explained as a series of rational choices by national leaders [which] responded to ... the role of international institutions in bolstering the credibility of interstate commitments. (CFE, p. 18)*

In this section we apply the coherence and distinctiveness tests to LI's account of institutional choice, elaborating one major problem under each heading.

#### 1. Coherence

##### a. the cooperation problem

As the epigraphs show, LI explains EU institutional choices in terms of the need for credible commitments. Actors have an incentive to promise cooperation at the bargaining stage but then defect when it comes time to honor the deal, so find themselves caught in prisoners' dilemmas. Specifically, LI treats the institutional choice of delegation most consistently as serving the need to lock in bargains and prevent renegeing on agreements, which of course makes reaching them in the first place possible. The second type of choice modeled in CFE, pooling, is sometimes also identified as helping with lock-in (Moravcsik, 1993b, p. 514; Moravcsik, 1995, p. 612; Moravcsik, 2008, p. 168).

Yet even in CFE, and certainly across the broader sweep of the development and defense of LI, Moravcsik's characterization of the underlying strategic dilemma has varied quite widely. At one point, he characterized credible commitments as central to only one variant of LI (Moravcsik, 1995, p. 621), which we had never known had variants. But the clearest companion dilemma, which in many instances swamps the prisoner's dilemma as a matter of concern for EU member state, involves a game of

"coordination with distributional consequences", which has historically gone under the name of "Battle of the Sexes". This cooperation problem differs in many critical ways from the prisoner's dilemma, especially in terms of how institutions might help with it. Here, they may serve an *agora* (convening) function and may facilitate strategies of reciprocity through repeated play (extending the shadow of the future). There is some case for institutions here, but not a particularly strong one, and it has little to do with credible commitment. Moravcsik has thus adduced a series of drivers about institutional choice beyond the need for credible commitments, which stand as *ad hoc* additions to LI's "basic claim" and "basic argument". Some of these interrelate, but in what follows we identify a number of somewhat distinct claims emphasizing not strategic dilemmas at all, not the locking in of existing bargains, but further future movement and pursuit of substantive goals.

b. extend or elaborate agreements

Often in the LI *oeuvre*, including in CFE, institutional choices are explained in terms of states' desires to extend or elaborate agreements, again as distinct from a credible commitments logic of enforcement (Moravcsik, 2008, p. 159; Moravcsik, 2008, p. 168; Moravcsik, 2018, p. 1655; Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, 2019, p. 69). This especially applies to pooling rather than delegation (CFE, p. 69, Table 1.4; CFE, p. 76). It is important to note that there can be a credible commitment or lock-in logic operating here, as when Moravcsik talks about delegation and pooling as "strategies designed to precommit governments to a stream of future decisions by removing them from the unilateral control of individual governments" (CFE, p. 73). But we suggest that this conflates different orders of problems. The precommitment is one thing, and this gets down to the ability of EU institutions to actually constrain future choices. This is orthogonal to the substantive aspect, which speaks to what outcomes would come about if the institutions worked. As we will see below, drawing on Moravcsik's own extensive research, QMV does not work to shape future substantive outcomes if QMV does not work, i.e., if

procedural agreement does not actually stick. At the same time, all instrumental preferences over rules do not necessarily indicate that commitment problems are driving institutional choices.

c. substantive policy preferences

Often in the LI *oeuvre*, including in CFE, institutional choices are explained in terms of states' preferences over substantive outcomes, which are not cooperation dilemmas at all, but just desires. Moravcsik took this stance early on: "intergovernmentalist theory views the decision to adopt qualified majority voting or delegation to common institutions as the result of a cost-benefit analysis of the stream of future substantive decisions expected to follow from alternative institutional designs. For individual Member States carrying out such a cost-benefit calculation, the decision to delegate or pool sovereignty signals the willingness of national governments to accept an increased political risk of being outvoted or overruled on any individual issue in exchange for more efficient collective decision-making on the average" (Moravcsik, 1993b, pp. 509-510). "Ceteris paribus," he sums up, "the less attractive the status quo and the greater the expected gains from increased co-operation, the greater the corresponding incentive to pool or delegate" (Moravcsik, 1993b, p. 510). States will make their choices based on the "expected influence of institutional reforms on the realization of substantive interests. This is, for example, generally the case with decisions about majority voting on specific [495] economic policies" (Moravcsik, 1993b, pp. 494-495). Sometimes substantive benefits have seemed to supplant concern for credible commitment: "*While existing regime theory focuses on the risk of defection, the major concern of EC states tends to be the risk that the consequences of the agreement, even if all comply, will turn out to be less advantageous for key domestic groups than expected*" (Moravcsik 1993b, p. 517, emphasis added).

Substantive motivations stand logically distinct from credible commitments, though they sometimes merge and mingle, as when Moravcsik says toward the end of CFE, "national positions [on institutional choice] track substantive goals – as predicted by the credible commitments view" (CFE, p. 486). Here, we

see confusion between credible commitments, which are about locking in substantive bargains already agreed to, and just generating favorable policies, which in themselves have nothing to do with credible commitments.

d. assessment

LI's theory of institutional choice is supposed to be about credible commitment, per the self-identified "central claim" and "central argument" of *The Choice for Europe*, which expresses the approach in canonical form. Yet we have identified a great many "LI" drivers of institutional choice beyond concern for credible commitments. The theory has stretched itself far beyond the plain meaning of the words it uses to describe itself. In the end, LI finds itself claiming credit for any and all instrumental institutional choices, which of course deprives it of any claim to distinctiveness relative to bog-standard rationalism in this area. We next turn to another demonstration of distinctiveness problems.

2. Distinctiveness

In 1998, the conclusion to CFE took great pains to distinguish LI from historical institutionalism within all three of the tripartite categories. Here we focus on the HI claim that EU institutions exhibit path dependence. We begin by noting that Moravcsik contradicted himself within a year in discussing how LI and HI relate. In CFE, he claims not to address claims that state preferences may be endogenous to a "path-dependent process of prior integration" (CFE, pp. 14, 80). A year later, he argued that CFE's "case studies [were] none the less deployed to conduct a preliminary test of more dynamic 'historical institutionalist' (HI) claims (Moravcsik, 1999c, p. 175). It is said in CFE that HI and LI differ in terms of whether path dependence is unintended and/or undesired, with HI putatively requiring that it have both of these qualities, and LI suggesting that it not have them (Moravcsik, 1995, p. 625). Here is a summary contrast of rival accounts from CFE:

Structural economic trends underlying national preferences – trade liberalization, agricultural subsidization, capital mobility, regulatory harmonization, macroeconomic convergence—do *not* appear to have been induced by prior decisions ... It was the *deliberate triumphs* of European integration, not its *unintended side-effects*, that appear to have increased support for further European integration. This is the key point of divergence between historical institutionalist theory and the tripartite 'liberal intergovernmentalist' interpretation advanced here. For most governments, inducing economic modernization—even with unpleasant side-effects—was the major purpose of European integration (CFRE, pp. 490-491, emphasis original).

So, in 1998, unintended consequences sharply differentiated HI and LI. Indeed, a "fundamental weakness" of the neofunctional approach (including its modern expression in HI) "lay in its aspiration to trace dynamic endogenous effects (incremental feedback, unintended consequences, and the resulting change over time) without a baseline theory of exogenous constraints (state economic interests, political constraints, and delegation)" which LI supplied (CFE, p. 15). By twenty years later, we learn that "unintended or unwanted feedback does not in itself disconfirm LI theory" (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, 2019, p. 81). Whatever may once have distinguished these approaches in terms of path dependence has now evaporated.

#### *D. Tripartite*

We will not rehearse an assessment of the coherence and distinctiveness of the tripartite synthesis, because in this case the composite inherits the pathologies of the constituent parts.

#### **IV. Was Anybody Else Ever a Liberal Intergovernmentalist?**

Moravcsik has described LI as the "**consensus** view" held by political scientists and historians (Moravcsik, 2008, p. 158), arguing that "few scholars still dispute [LI's] leading role ... in theorizing EU history" (Moravcsik, 2018, p. 1648). Slightly differently, he now claims for LI status as "the contemporary



'baseline' social scientific and historiographic theory of regional integration" (Moravcsik, 2020, p. 2).<sup>4</sup>

Yet, to the extent that the foregoing critique has merit, achievement of such status would be puzzling.

Are these claims correct? In this section we evaluate them.

#### A. *Consensus*

If we cannot understand what LI's creator thinks the theory can explain, could it be true that "most" other scholarship on integration "either confirms the theory or employs it as a 'first-cut' counterfactual model...," as he asserted recently? We do not see this in the literature. Other scholars almost never employ LI as a theory in substantive and empirical ways, even as a counterfactual foil.

To survey LI's use in the field, we scrutinized the first thousand works listed by Google Scholar that cite its key article-length presentation (Moravcsik, 1993) and the first thousand citations of CFE. Both have many more citations—respectively 4760 and 7655 as of May 2022—but this process captures the most salient work because Google sorts works by their own citation count.<sup>5</sup> We coded them into groups that fully apply LI (using its three-stage logic as a baseline theory to explain empirics), apply part of LI empirically (one stage, or more selective related expectations), invoke LI concepts loosely or abstractly, or simply reference or discuss LI. For the first two categories we coded LI-confirming, mixed, or LI-disconfirming conclusions.

Our findings overlap with those of a 2018 survey by Daniel Naurin, though we interpret them slightly differently. Naurin looked at LI citations in scholarship on the Councils of the EU. He found that LI is the

---

<sup>4</sup> This is not a new claim. Other assertions of "baseline" status occur *inter alia* at Moravcsik and Nicolaïdis, 1999, p. 82; Moravcsik, 1999c, pp. 171-173; Moravcsik, 2008, p. 159; Moravcsik, 2018, p. 1649; Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, 2019, p. 64; and Moravcsik, 2020, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> For Moravcsik 1993, the first 1000 includes all English-language sources that themselves attract at least 23 citations. For CFE, the cutoff is 52 citations.

most widely-cited theory, but that most references were abstract, with "few examples...that explicitly aim to test hypotheses derived from LI" (Naurin, 2018, 1534). Among the 70 most cited articles in his set, Naurin found 8 that test any LI expectations.<sup>6</sup> He concluded that "the status of LI as a baseline theory is confirmed in the Council literature more by implicit (and perhaps somewhat grudging) consent than overt support" (Naurin, 2018, 1539).

We are more interested than Naurin in LI as a "baseline theory," and on our reading both his data and our own disconfirm that role for LI. We can only code *one* article in Naurin's set, Eising 2000, as applying LI as a three-stage theory to some empirical evidence (with mostly disconfirming results). Our broader sweep finds a total of three other works in the full-application category (all from one of us).<sup>7</sup> Many more works involve partial applications, especially with respect to bargaining. As we detail in the Appendix, however, most just loosely test one or two LI-related implications—big-state dominance in bargaining, negligible influence for supranational agents, interest-group relevance to governments—rather than applying LI as a baseline model even of this one stage of the theory. Moreover, while some offer mixed conclusions, we find *none* that mainly confirm even selective LI implications. Even if they did, confirming one stage of a three-part theory could not speak to its utility as an explanatory baseline. Not only are Moravcsik's headline claims consistently about LI's theoretical contribution as a whole, but as we noted earlier, the three stages are logically interdependent. Hard bargaining by itself is not evidence for LI as a baseline theory, since it is perfectly imaginable between governments whose preferences have nothing to do with structurally-informed economic preferences of domestic groups. Similarly, evidence that actors are concerned about the credibility of commitments is trivial without a

---

<sup>6</sup> Eising 2002, Tallberg 2010, Beach 2004, Miklin 2009, Mayer 2008, König & Slapin 2004, Lindgren & Persson 2008, Stacey 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Parsons 2002, 2003, 2010. Our coding is generous, since this work finds LI's preference-stage hypotheses to be so strongly falsified that it does not closely evaluate LI's subsequent stages.

distinctive account of the content of the commitments: any act to sign a treaty is an attempt to nail down commitments, by definition.

Our "loose invocations" group includes the most positively-phrased references to LI. Consider two leading examples. Frank Schimmelfennig's work on Europe's eastern enlargement suggests that LI "accounts plausibly for most of the enlargement preferences of the member states," though other theories better explain the outcome.<sup>8</sup> He then argues only that member-state preferences seem broadly *rational*, however, without testing more specific expectations about preferences. Similarly, Schimmelfennig's finding that in recent EU crises, "LI expectations fit the broad pattern of preferences, negotiating behavior, and outcomes reasonably well," overlays modest claims that member-state positions reflected their various economic concerns, not any evaluation of LI-theorized preferences.<sup>9</sup> Just as abstract is LI's role in the "failing forward" theory of Erik Jones, Daniel Kelemen, and Sophie Meunier. Their "fusion of liberal intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism" hypothesizes that major EU bargains fit LI expectations of lowest-common-denominator (LCD) deals, but that such deals generate dysfunctionalities that invite further integration à la neofunctionalism.<sup>10</sup> Their synthesis is abstractly intriguing, but they do not actually evaluate LI expectations about any particular deal. If they did, they would presumably note that the key deal behind the Eurozone crises they address—for EMU—is not even characterized by Moravcsik himself as an LCD bargain among LI-style national interests. This paragraph's examples and others in this category in our Appendix make contributions in their own rights, but not as applications of LI as a theory, let alone confirmations.

---

<sup>8</sup> Schimmelfennig 2001, 47.

<sup>9</sup> Schimmelfennig 2015, 179.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, Kelemen and Meunier 2016.

In sum, scholars tend to invoke LI in formalistic, partial or diffuse ways. They almost never apply it as a full-fledged theory that could identify a distinctive baseline in European integration. This is unsurprising, since current formulations of LI do not actually specify a coherent and distinctive baseline that could function as a "'first-cut' counterfactual model."

### *B. Baseline*

We are clearer on what a baseline theory should *not* be, and that is one whose key variables enter first into our explanatory equations, getting credit for explaining variance which would also be accounted for by alternative theories in a multivariate setting. This sort of stepwise procedure inflates the putative explanatory power of the priority variables, leaving only residual variance to competing factors. Moravcsik himself has condemned this arbitrary practice as "methodologically biased and theoretically incoherent" (Moravcsik, 1997, p. 516), condemning IR scholars who treat their preferred approach "as an exclusive baseline," noting that "the result is not just incomplete analysis. It is omitted variable bias that inflates the empirical support for new theoretical propositions due to the exclusion of (correlated) [rival] ones" (Moravcsik, 1997, p. 538; see also Legro and Moravcsik, 1999, pp. 51-52; Legro and Moravcsik, 2000, p. 191).

Somewhat bafflingly, in the very same papers in which he condemns this practice, Moravcsik claims it for his preferred liberal IR theory. He rightly criticizes "the nearly universal presumption among contemporary IR theorists that 'systemic' theories like realism and institutionalism should be employed as an analytical 'first cut, CFE with theories of 'domestic' preference formation brought in only to explain anomalies" (Moravcsik, 1997, p. 516). He then proposes precisely "the reverse: [that] Liberal theory is analytically prior to both realism and institutionalism because it defines the conditions under which their assumptions hold" (Moravcsik, 1997, p. 516). "It follows," he thinks, "that in any multicausal synthesis with realist and institutionalist theory— that is, any analysis that remains open to the possibility that

variation in state preferences, as well as power and institutions, might influence state policy—liberal theory enjoys causal priority" (Moravcsik 1997, p. 543). In addition to the problems that he himself had already identified with such an approach, this claim involves a *non sequitur par excellence*.

Notwithstanding all of this, Moravcsik has regularly claimed just this sort of privilege for LI, which he asserts stands as "the indispensable and fundamental point of departure for any general explanation of regional integration (Moravcsik, 1995, p. 611), a "'first-cut' counterfactual model against which subsidiary puzzles, exceptions, and anomalies are defined" (Moravcsik, 2008, p. 158; Moravcsik, 2020, p. 3; Moravcsik 2008, pp. 158-159; Moravcsik 2018, p. 1649). So, what should a baseline theory be?

### 3. What a Baseline Theory Should Be

"The real problem is not simply the use of ad hoc arguments to patch anomalies, but the systematic use of arguments from existing alternative paradigms" (Legro and Moravcsik, 1999, p. 54). Despite the serious problems with LI's current presentation, we believe the theory can and should be salvaged. If reformulated and applied more rigorously, it can play a "baseline" role that will be useful to EU scholars of all theoretical persuasions.

The utility of baseline theories in an epistemologically-diverse discipline is a big topic for a short section, but our view is fairly simple. Useful explanatory theories propose distinctive and empirically-debatable accounts about why certain outcomes came about. The more such theories prioritize parsimony and generality, the more we can call them "baseline" theories: relative to other theories that seek fuller or more contextual accounts, these ask what variation in outcomes they can capture while limiting themselves to an especially discrete and stylized toolkit. Baseline theories might compellingly capture a large range of variation or might quickly hit empirical limits, but either way they are useful when applied in forthright ways. As Karl Popper argued, in a core insight that stands despite much epistemological change since his day, we learn just as much (or more) when abstractly-plausible

accounts fail to pan out empirically as when they find support.<sup>11</sup> Scoping out how much we think certain dynamics are *not* operating is integral to exploring what we think *is* going on.

It is just this sort of role that Moravcsik originally sought for LI, arguably, and which it could still achieve. He aimed to connect three kinds of existing theory, each quite parsimonious and general, into a logically-complete and distinctive account of regional integration. He announced intentions to specify falsifiable hypotheses at each stage and test them empirically against the best-available alternatives. Though problems arose in operationalizing this scheme, an abstractly-plausible baseline theory is visible amid these ambiguities. The core commercial-liberal model of preferences is coherent with respect to trade-related areas. It lacks similar expectations about preferences on other issues, but could conceivably append a model of societal preferences for exchange rates and monetary policy.<sup>12</sup> LI's model of bargaining as a function of relative power and intensity of preferences could generate coherent expectations given a plausible attempt to measure those two conditions systematically. A coherent version of LI's credibility-based theory of institutional choice must drop any notion of "lock in," and requires theorization that could match certain credibility problems with certain institutional commitments, but this does not seem impossible.

Moravcsik's own empirical qualifications imply that this tighter LI baseline might not capture much variation in EU outcomes, but that finding would nonetheless be useful for all sorts of EU theorists. It could suggest where and when EU outcomes departed from what we might have expected in a world shaped strictly by a certain model of general political-economic considerations. For other scholars who work within more positivistic or "modern" epistemologies—those who debate LI directly in causal-

---

<sup>11</sup> Popper Conjecture and Refutations And KKV, "a negative result is as useful as a positive one; both can provide just as much information about the world" (1996:105).

<sup>12</sup> For a survey of options, Steinberg and Walter 2013.

explanatory terms—the retooled theory could provide a sharp contrast to highlight and delineate other dynamics. In our view, this kind of rigorously distinct LI narrative should even be useful for scholars with more post-positivistic commitments. As one of us has argued elsewhere, while "modern" scholars may eschew debate with post-positivists who do not share their pursuit of theoretical correspondence to empirical "truth," the post-positivist side of this divide should actually be more open to such engagement.<sup>13</sup> If we drop any correspondence theory of truth, then all theories become subjective accounts that aim to tell (rather than prove) distinctive stories about the world. Theorists do so by highlighting features of action, discourse, and other conditions that count as part of their distinctive narrative and not (or less so, or differently) for other imaginable narratives. If LI offered a more clearly distinctive narrative—true or not!—it could be interpreted as a useful contrast to whatever other genealogical or discursive tales such scholars wish to tell.

## **V. Conclusion**

Liberal intergovernmentalism can play an important role in future scholarship on the EU and other instances of international cooperation, but not without significant modifications. We hope colleagues will take on that reformulation. Until they do, it is regrettably important for younger scholars to see just how deeply its problems run. Rather than showcasing a bold grand theory whose evidentiary or epistemological limits we can usefully debate, existing LI scholarship does not even formulate comprehensible explanatory claims.

The cautionary tale of LI represents a collective failure to which we ourselves have contributed. Our own past work has criticized LI, sometimes quite strongly, but mostly by questioning its evidence,

---

<sup>13</sup> Parsons 2015.

substantive focus, or selective logical quibbles. We only decided to explore a full, deep evaluation in response to Moravcsik's recent reassertions of the theory's supposed dominance in the field. We were then genuinely and repeatedly surprised to find just how often we could not understand what LI was actually claiming to predict or explain. We now see that we accepted some of what was asserted *about* LI without putting in sufficient effort to evaluate how those assertions panned out in theoretical and empirical substance. It does not reflect well on our collective scholarly practices that a theory with such ambiguous claims could become the most-cited work in the field. But therein lies the hope of a cautionary tale: with greater awareness, perhaps the next generation can do better.



## REFERENCES

- Axelrod, Robert, and Robert O. Keohane. 1985. Achieving Cooperation Under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions. *World Politics* 38, 1 (October): 226-254.
- Caporaso, James A. 1999. Toward a Normal Science of Regional Integration. *Journal of European Public Policy* 6 (1): 160-164.
- Cowles, Maria Green, James A. Caporaso, and Thomas Risse, eds. 2001. *Transforming Europe: Europeanization and Domestic Change*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Finke, Daniel, Thomas König, Sven-Oliver Proksch, and George Tsebelis [et al.]. 2012. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Finke, Daniel. 2009. Challenges to Intergovernmentalism: An Empirical Analysis of EU Treaty Negotiations since Maastricht. *West European Politics* 32 (3): 466-495.
- Franchino, Fabio. 2013. Challenges to liberal intergovernmentalism. *European Union Politics* 14 (2): 324-337.
- Garrett, Geoffrey. 1992. International Cooperation and Institutional Choice: The European Community's Internal Market. *International Organization* 46, 2 (Spring): 533-560.
- Haas, Ernst B. 1958. *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social and Economic Forces, 1950-1957*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Head, Keith, and Thierry Mayer. 2021. The United States of Europe: A Gravity Model Evaluation of the Four Freedoms. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 35, 2 (Spring): 23-48.
- Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks. 2020. Is liberal intergovernmentalism regressive? A comment on Moravcsik (2018). *Journal of European Public Policy* 27 (4): 501-508.
- Jones, Erik, R. Dan Kelemen and Sophie Meunier. 2016. Failing Forward? The Euro Crisis and the Incomplete Nature of European Integration. *Comparative Political Studies* 49 (7) 1010-1034.
- Jupille, Joseph, and James A. Caporaso. 2022. *Theories of Institutions*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kahneman, Daniel. 2011. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Keohane, Robert O. 1982. The Demand for International Regimes. *International Organization* 36, 2 (Spring): 325-355.
- Keohane, Robert O. 1984. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Keohane, Robert O., and Stanley Hoffmann. 1991. Institutional Change in Europe in the 1980s. In *The New European Community: decisionmaking and institutional change*, ed. Robert O. Keohane and Stanley Hoffmann (Boulder, CO: Westview Press), 1-40.
- King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994
- Kleine, Mareike, and Pollack, Mark A. 2018. Liberal Intergovernmentalism and Its Critics. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 56 (7): 1439-1509.
- Koremenos, Barbara, Charles Lipson, and Duncan Snidal. 2001. The Rational Design of International Institutions. *International Organization* 55, 4 Autumn): 761-799.
- Koremenos, Barbara. 2016. *The Continent of International Law: Explaining Agreement Design*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Krasner, Stephen D. 1991. Global Communications and National Power: Life on the Pareto Frontier. *World Politics* 43 (April): 336-366.
- Legro, Jeffrey CFE., and Andrew Moravcsik. 1999. Is Anybody Still A Realist? *International Security* 24, 2 (Fall): 5-55.

- Lieshout, Robert CFE., Mathieu L.L. Segers, and Anna M. van der Vleuten. 2004. De Gaulle, Moravcsik, and The Choice for Europe: Soft Sources, Weak Evidence. *Journal of Cold War Studies* 6, 4 (Fall): 89-139.
- Lindberg, Leon. 1963. *The political dynamics of European economic integration*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press
- Lindgren, Karl-Oskar, and Thomas Persson. 2008. The Structure of Conflict over EU Chemicals Policy. *European Union Politics* 9 (1): 31-58.
- Marks, Gary, Liesbet Hooghe, and Kermit Blank. 1996. European Integration from the 1980s: State-Centric v. Multi-Level Governance. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 34, 3 (September): 341-377.
- Martin, Lisa L. 1992. Interests, Power, and Multilateralism. *International Organization* 46, 4 (Autumn): 765-792.
- Moravcsik, Andrew, and Frank Schimmelfennig. 2019. Liberal Intergovernmentalism. In *European Integration Theory*, 3rd edition, edited by Antje Wiener, Tanja A. Börzel, and Thomas Risse, 64-84. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moravcsik, Andrew, and Kalypto Nicolaidis. 1999. Explaining the Treaty of Amsterdam: Interests, Influence, and Institutions. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 37, 1 (March): 59-85.
- Moravcsik, Andrew, and Milada Vachudova. 2003. National Interest, State Power, and EU Enlargement. *East European Politics and Society* (February): 47-57.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 1991. Negotiating the Single European Act: national interests and conventional statecraft in the European Community. *International Organization* 45 (Winter): 19-56.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 1992. *National Preference Formation and Interstate Bargaining in the European Community, 1955-1986*. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 1993a. Idealism and Interest in the European Community: The Case of the French Referendum. *French Politics and Society* 11 (Winter): 45-56.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 1993b. Preferences and Power in the European Community: A Liberal Intergovernmentalist Approach. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 31, 4 (December): 473-524.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 1995. Liberal Intergovernmentalism and Integration: A Rejoinder. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 33,4 (December): 611-628.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 1997. Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics. *International Organization* 51, 4 (Autumn): 513-554.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 1998. *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power From Messina to Maastricht*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 1999a. A New Statecraft? Supranational Entrepreneurs and International Cooperation. *International Organization* 53, 2 (Spring): 267-306.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 1999b. Is something rotten in the state of Denmark? Constructivism and European integration. *Journal of European Public Policy* 6 (4): 669-681.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 1999c. *The Choice for Europe: Current Commentary and Future Research: A Response to James Caporaso, Fritz Scharpf, and Helen Wallace*. *Journal of European Public Policy* 6 (1): 168-179.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 2000a. De Gaulle between Grain and Grandeur: The Economic Origins of French EC Policy, 1958–1970 (Part I). *Journal of Cold War Studies* 2 (2): 3–43.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 2000b. De Gaulle Between Grain and Grandeur: The Political Economy of French EC Policy, 1958–1970 (Part 2). *Journal of Cold War Studies* 2, 3 (Fall): 4-68.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 2000c. Beyond Grain and Grandeur: An Answer to Critics and an Agenda for Future Research. *Journal of Cold War Studies* 2, 3 (Fall): 117-142.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 2001. Bringing Constructivist Integration Theory Out of the Clouds: Has it Landed Yet? [Forum debate]. *European Union Politics* 2 (2): 226-249.

- Moravcsik, Andrew. 2002. In Defence of the 'Democratic Deficit': Reassessing Legitimacy in the European Union. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40 (4): 603-624.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 2005. The European Constitutional Compromise and the neofunctionalist legacy. *Journal of European Public Policy* 12, 2 (April): 349-386.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 2006. What Can We Learn from the Collapse of the European Constitutional Project? *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 47 (2): 219-41.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 2008. The European Constitutional Settlement. *World Economy* 31 (1): 157-182.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 2018. Preferences, Power and Institutions in 21st-century Europe. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 56, 7 (November): 1648-1674.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 2020. Liberal Intergovernmentalism. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia, Politics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1065.
- Parsons 2010
- Parsons 2015
- Parsons, Craig. 2002. Showing Ideas as Causes: The Origins of the European Union. *International Organization* 56 (1): 47-84.
- Parsons, Craig. 2003. A Certain Idea of Europe. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Pierson, Paul. 1996. The Path to European Integration: A Historical Institutional Analysis. *Comparative Political Studies* 29, 2 (April): 123-163.
- Popper, Karl. 2002 [1963]. *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Puchala, Donald J. 1999. Institutionalism, Intergovernmentalism and European Integration: A Review Article. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 37(2): 317-341.
- Sandholtz, Wayne, and John Zysman. 1989. 1992: Recasting the European Bargain. *World Politics* 42, 1 (October): 95-128.
- Sandholtz, Wayne, and John Zysman. 1989. Recasting the European Bargain. *World Politics* 42 (October): 95-128.
- Sandholtz, Wayne. 1992. ESPRIT and the Politics of International Collective Action. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 30 (March): 1-21.
- Sandholtz, Wayne. 1993. Choosing union: monetary politics and Maastricht. *International Organization* 47 (Winter): 1-39.
- Sandholtz, Wayne. 1996. Membership Matters: Limits of the Functional Approach to European Institutions. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 34, 3 (September): 403-429.
- Scharpf, Fritz CFE. 1999. Selecting Cases and Testing Hypotheses. *Journal of European Public Policy* 6 (1): 164-168.
- Schimmelfennig, Frank. 2001. The community trap: Liberal norms, rhetorical action, and the eastern enlargement of the European Union. *International Organization* 55 (1): 47-80.
- Schimmelfennig, Frank. 2015. Liberal intergovernmentalism and the euro area crisis. *Journal of European Public Policy* 22 (2): 177-195.
- Schmidt, Vivienne. (2018) 'Rethinking EU Governance: From 'Old' to 'New' Approaches to Who Steers Integration'. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 7, pp. 1544-1561.
- Shepsle, Kenneth A. (1995) 'Statistical Political Philosophy and Positive Political Theory'. *Critical Review*, Vol. 9, Nos. 1-2, pp. 213-222.
- Slapin, Jonathan B. 2008. Bargaining Power at Europe's Intergovernmental Conferences: Testing Institutional and Intergovernmental Theories. *International Organization* 61, 1 (January): 131-162.
- Snidal, Duncan. 1985. Coordination Versus Prisoners' Dilemma: Implications for International Cooperation and Regimes. *American Political Science Review* 79: 923-942.
- Stacey, Jeffrey. 2003. Displacement of the Council via informal dynamics? Comparing the Commission and Parliament. *Journal of European Public Policy*

Stein, Arthur A. 1982. Coordination and Collaboration: Regimes in an Anarchic World. *International Organization* 36 (2): 299-324.

Stein, Arthur A. 1990. *Why Nations Cooperate: Circumstance and Choice in International Relations*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Steinberg and Walter 2013

Stone Sweet, Alec, and Wayne Sandholtz. 1997. European integration and supranational governance. *Journal of European Public Policy* 4 (3): 297-317.

Trachtenberg

Tsebelis, George, and Geoffrey Garrett. 2001. The Institutional Foundations of Intergovernmentalism and Supranationalism in the European Union. *International Organization* 55, 2 (Spring): 357-390.

Wincott, Daniel. 1995. Institutional Interaction and European Integration: Towards an Everyday Critique of Liberal Intergovernmentalism. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 33, 4 (December): 597-609.