

The Decline of the European Union: Insights from Historical Sociology

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Please do not quote these early ruminations

The euro and Ukraine crises, compounded with the rise of Euroskepticism, have led to a panic wave about the future of Europe as a zone of peace and prosperity but also about the European Union as a viable political experiment. This panic wave is encapsulated in the titles of a number of recent books, articles and op-eds written by eminent scholars: *The Decline and Fall of Europe*, by Richard Youngs; *Europe as a Small Power*, by Asle Toje; *The Coming Erosion of the European Union*, by Stephen Walt; *Europe crise et fin?* d'Etienne Balibar; *Europe, le continent perdu*, de Philippe Maystadt; or *The Decline of Europe*, by Walter Laqueur. Andrew Moravcsik must feel quite lonely these days with a cheery article entitled "Europe as superpower"...

Before we start cheering or lamenting the imminent downfall of Europe, a bit of historical perspective is needed. In *The End of the West*, David Marquand writes:

By 1913, Europe's share of global GDP was more than twice those of India and China put together. (It was twice that of the United States.) The British Empire covered one-quarter of the earth's land surface; the City of London was the linchpin of the world's first truly global market. The Russia Empire – not fully European, but ruled from its far-western capital in European St Petersburg – extended from Warsaw in the west to the Pacific Ocean on the east. France ruled vast territories in North and West Africa as well as much of Southeast Asia. Soft power mimicked hard power. French was the language of diplomacy and culture, German of philosophy, and English of political economy. Of the great transformative ideologies of the age, liberalism was a British invention, republicanism a Franco-Italian one, and socialism and national Franco-German ones. (Marquand 2011: 5).

Compared to that, the European Union is indeed in decline. In this paper, I propose to situate the EU's current predicament in the historical perspective of Europe as a political region. To do so, I

draw from historical sociology's theoretical insights and empirical findings, in particular those of Michael Mann and his study of the sources of social power. I conceptualize Europe as a node in four power networks of historically varying sizes: military, economic, ideological, and political. Based on rudimentary data, I argue that we are not witnessing a real decline of Europe as a region but a weakening of Europe's 400-year old global system of influence. Second, contrary to what current images of European crisis and marginalization suggest, this decline has been slow, gradual, and is not more pronounced than in the 1950s. Third, Europe remains a preeminent node in the world's economic, military, and especially ideological and political networks. It is not as big as the US, but it hasn't been for at least 50 years. It is declining relative to China, but it still surpasses it.

As we know, decline is not only an issue of objective indicators. So in the second part of the paper, I turn to the subjective dimension of how Europeans are expected to cope with their less-significant-than-thought but genuine decline. To begin to address this question, I argue that IR theory must again be complemented with the insights of historical sociology. This combination allows me to show that, while elites have pursued a fairly liberal strategy of retrenchment offset by strong involvement in global ideological and political networks, the rise of declinist language among intellectuals and right-wing politicians may fuel other strategies that will make Europe's transition to a "normal" political region more difficult.

Why talk about Europe?

Does it make sense to talk about Europe and the European Union at all? Can we collapse the historical experience and the current predicament of countries as diverse as the Netherlands, France, Spain, Poland and Greece? Europe's decline conceals complicated trajectories. Let's take Germany, France, Italy, and Belgium. Over the past two centuries, Germany went from continental hegemon to semi-sovereign state to trade superpower; France from imperial power to a struggling regional co-leader; Italy from cultural magnet to economic stagnation and political impotence; and Belgium from industrial powerhouse to relative marginality in world politics. According to the Correlates of War database, while Germany and France have fallen somewhat but remained in the top 10 in terms of economic and military rank throughout the past 100 years, Italy and Belgium dropped radically from the top 10 to first tier. These rough figures lead to two observations: on the one hand, these European countries did experience some decline in world power; on the other hand, at least in the case of Germany and France, decline has not been steady and is not that significant. This suggests that geopolitical decline is also a matter of perceptions and context, magnified by the current economic malaise in the case of Europe.

Still I think it makes sense to talk about Europe as a region, today represented by the EU, in the following sense. First, European countries undoubtedly share a common set of cultural and political practices that come from the continent's successive moments of division and pacification, of fragmentation and unification. Pomian and Barnavi (2008) divide this history in three episodes of unification interrupted by division and chaos: first, religious unity under Christianity in the Middle Ages; second, the spread of a common court culture and standards of civil society during the Enlightenment; third, economic and juridical integration after 1945. Few European countries do not pay tribute to this historical legacy. Even if national identity is paramount, Europe has meant and continues to mean something real as a political project.

Second, Europe has been historically constructed around a growing core of political authority that first expanded inside Europe and then outside Europe. David Marquand argues that the shifting division between West and East encapsulates what Europe is about, beyond the

various forms of political authority that Europe has taken (city-states, empires, nation states, etc.). For him, Europe is “west.” As Robert Bartlett has shown in his magisterial study, *The Making of Europe*, Europe started as a process of internal colonization that expanded the mental and geographical map of people living around the Low Lands and Northern France (i.e. in the Carolingian core) to include the Eastern, Northern and Southern fringes. Beyond religious belief, Europe came to encompass a common set of laws, habits, and institutions that were diffused by aristocratic elites, monks, and settlers. This is Europe as a practice. Of course, the “concept of Europe” came much later, with modernity. Echoing Gibbon or Montesquieu, Voltaire wrote: “Christian Europe could be regarded as a single republic divided in several states” (quoted in Anderson 2009: 476). Today, talking about “the EU” is a pretty good approximation, by which I do not mean Brussels institutions.

The European Union as an empire?

So there is both a practice (common manners, laws) and a social representation of Europe. The fact that different states have occupied that space does not make it less powerful. Europe has served as a cognitive and geographical framework for different imperial projects, some internal to Europe as the continent that we know today (Franks), others much wider but still based predominantly in Europe (Napoleon, Nazi Germany, EU) and others still resolutely global but built on a European core (colonial empires). As Doyle (1986) has shown, while most of these empires were metrocentric and based on sheer force, some were pericentric or based on the spread of ideas and institutions – the EU allegedly being an extreme example of empire by invitation.

The “Europe-as-empire” literature has become something of a cottage industry. In *Europe as Empire*, Jan Zielonka (2006) defines Europe as a neo-medieval polity “with a polycentric system of government, multiple and overlapping jurisdictions, striking cultural and economic heterogeneity, fuzzy borders, and divided sovereignty.” What Zielonka sees as a definition of today’s EU, Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande (2008) see as a cosmopolitan project to establish democracy beyond the nation state. In a more recent article, Gary Marks (2011) argues that government rests on a tension between scale and community. The European Union, like the Roman Empire or the Napoleonic Empire before it, are composite polities that provide public goods through size (the benefits of scale) while encompassing diverse and largely autonomous communities (parochial altruism). Marks defines empires “in the Roman sense of exerting *imperium* (power, authority) over a great territory containing diverse communities” (Marks 2011: 1).

I am less interested than Zielonka, Beck and Grande, and Marks in the internal composition of the EU than in the system of influence of which Europe is and has been the center. What I want to understand is whether, by how much, and how Europe’s system of influence has changed over the past few centuries. Of course, internal organization and external influence are related. It is no coincidence that much of Zielonka’s book deals with enlargement, a process by which Western Europe transformed first an enemy into an external zone of influence, and then a zone of influence into a inside member. But, like Harmut Behr (2007), I am more interested in developing a single understanding of the European region that can be applied continuously from the 17th Century to the 21st Century, while recognizing the fact that the nature, scope, and strength of the Europe may have changed along the way. Behr argues that there is a continuity between 19th Century European colonial empires and today’s EU in that both project their influence through “European standards of civilization,” and in particular the rule of law. The

EU does through enlargement and conditionality what colonial empires did through direct and indirect rule. In the following two sections, I propose conceptual tools to evaluate the extent to which Europe can be defined as a core that rules over peripheries through its dominant position in power networks.

What is and whose decline?

The literature on great powers, their rise and decline is often grounded in historical studies of empire (Doyle 1986). Drawing on comparative analyses, scholars have identified patterns and causes of imperial decline, such as decreasing economic and technological resources relative to those of rising powers (Kennedy 1987), unstable political structures due to the domination of a core elite over peripheral societies (Motyl 2001, Lachmann 2003), the evolution of trade networks (Chase-Dunn and Anderson 2005) or the irruption of new geopolitical factors (Grygiel 2006). Other studies focus on idiosyncratic historical cases, such as Great Britain (Douglas 2002, Simms 2007, Brendon 2008), Germany (Sked 2001), Russia (Longworth 2005), France (Martin 2005), Italy (Reinert 2010) or today the United States (Mann 2003).

These historical studies inform contemporary theoretical debates on power transition. In seminal contributions, Gilpin (1981, 2001) argues that the international system is characterized by a historical succession of hegemonic powers that concentrate most military and economic capabilities. To maintain its status, the hegemon has no choice but to dedicate an increasing share of its resources to defense expenditures, and fewer to economic development and innovation. Sooner or later this paves the way for the rise of secondary powers that fight for a redefinition of world order through hegemonic wars. This argument permeates two strands of literature: one dealing with power cycles and transitions, which shows the interrelation between the structure of world economy and leadership in world politics (Modelski and Thompson 1996, Tammen et al. 2000, Thompson 2008); the other dealing with wars fought by or against major powers as a consequence of changing economic conditions (Powell 1999, Copeland 2000, Levy and Thompson 2011).

Although the US's alleged decline has been a favorite topic of debate, Europe (to a much lesser extent the West) is where decline seems to be happening today. There are two "risks" involved in talking about the present and future of Europe. One is to be mesmerized by the economic rise of China, the growing assertiveness of Russia, or the dynamism of India. Using military capabilities as an indicator, realists tend to stress China's power transition and Russia's quest for strategic dominance. Using economic resources, liberals point to China, India, and perhaps Brazil and other emergent markets. But regardless of which indicator we use, Europeans are, and will remain for a long time, disproportionately richer, more educated, and better represented (through their language, their brands, their diplomats) than the rest of the planet. To borrow the Occupy movement's slogan, they are the 5% who retain 25% of world influence.

The other risk is to focus too narrowly on the institutions of the EU, as if the future of Europe depended entirely on the eurozone or the ability of the European Parliament to address the democratic deficit. Institutionalists, who are numerous among EU scholars, have exhibited that tendency. From a constructivist perspective, the loss of credibility of the European "model" is also problematic. Okay, EU institutions have not been good at preventing the indebtedness frenzy of some of its member states. But we should not confuse external influence with internal strength. As Russian peasants and Galician Jews can testify from their graves, great empires tend to be miserable places to live in for ordinary people. That is why it is important to distinguish the evolution of Europe (internally) from the evolution of Europe's system of external influence.

Compared to these two risks, thinking of the EU as a “region” that is centered on but not limited to Brussels and connected to the rest of the world through power networks presents a number of advantages. This perspective of historical sociology differs from IR theory in that it does not look only at military, economic or normative capabilities, but recognizes instead that power sources “entwine” and “generate overlapping, intersecting networks of power relations with different socio-spatial boundaries and dynamics” (Mann 1993: 9). From a historical standpoint, what we are witnessing right now is not China about to take over the world. It is not the marginalization of Europe either. But it is, probably, the last gasp of a power structure in which the rest of the world related to Europe as the center of the world. Europe’s central position has lasted longer in certain areas than in others: for example, European universities continue to attract a very large number of foreign students, suggesting that its ideological power remains strong. As we will see in the empirical section, Europe’s symbolic power remains stronger than most people think.

Another advantage of thinking in terms of networks is that there can be several dominant regions at the same time, and one’s growth does not mean that the others shrink. For example, in the first half of the 20th century, the USSR, the US, France, and the UK, all managed to expand their economic, political and ideological networks. To be sure, they did it at the expense of other actors. But the struggle to control power networks is not always a zero-sum game. Of course, the European Union, to the extent that there is one today, exists in the shadow of the “American imperium” (Katzenstein 2005). We have to recognize that.

Mann’s Sources of Social Power

As Gary Marks (2011: 15) writes, “There are more theories of imperial collapse than there are empires.” One sociologist has written extensively about empires, nation states, and other forms of political organization: Michael Mann. In his original IEMP model, he explains the rise and decline of these forms of political organization by looking at the scope and depth of the power networks that coalesced around them. Mann’s model is premised on the notion that societies are shaped by the constant struggle to control military, economic, ideological, and political power networks. The sources of power are the ability to control ideological, economic, military and political resources. Social and organizational networks “contain” power sources. Resources flow through these social and geographical spaces of interaction.

The main advantage of Mann’s model is to acknowledge that political organizations are constituted by different power resources that can be quite uneven. Controlling circuits of exchange and occupying a dominant position in important markets constitutes economic power. Military power is the organization of physical force in the form of concentrated coercion. Ideological (or symbolic) power is the ability to define reality, either in an immanent or in a “sociospatially transcendent” form, through norms, ideas, signs. Finally, political power is the ability to compel or persuade people to do what one wants; it can be outward facing (geopolitical) and inward facing (despotic or infrastructural). Extending Mann’s argument, I would say that lacking these sources of power means that you have little or no sovereignty in the sense that you are subject to control by others.

Mann makes two distinctions that are useful to understand the power that flows through these networks. First, he distinguishes extensive and intensive power: “Extensive power refers to the ability to organize large numbers of people over far flung territories in order to engage in minimally stable cooperation. Intensive power refers to the ability to organize tightly and command a high level of mobilization and commitment from the participants” (Mann 1986: 7).

Second, Mann makes a distinction between authoritative and diffused power. For example, a city-state is a form of political organization that thrives on small political power networks and extensive but fairly diffused economic networks. In the Middle Ages, ideological networks were spread out while economic networks were very narrow. And ideological networks (e.g. the Church) were not particularly authoritative. A nation-state is characterized by the overlap of ideological, political, economic and military networks, all fairly authoritative. An empire, finally, can be defined as resting on very extensive authoritative power networks (e.g. political and military) that are not necessarily matched by others (e.g. ideological and economic).

Thinking about the influence of Europe in terms of connections among people through military, economic, ideological and political networks gives us a better idea of the spatial contours of Europe's reach than formal relations of domination. What links different historical formations, in my view, is that Europe can be construed as the fuzzy center of a network of influence reaching to different peripheries. Methodologically, however, there are two challenges. The first challenge is to quantify and delineate the power that runs through these networks. The following section suggests a number of very rudimentary indicators in that regard.

The second challenge is to define what it means to be "at the center" of a network. Power networks have a core (called centrality in network analysis) and a periphery. We must distinguish what happens inside the core from what happens between the core and the periphery. I have argued elsewhere that what characterizes the EU is the extent of its economic and juridical networks, while political and ideological networks remain national. In that sense, the core of the European empire is dense economically but weak politically; the reverse is true, however, in relation to its periphery: as we will see in the empirical section, Europe remains a rather important node in global political and ideological networks, while its role in economic circuits of exchange has become more modest.

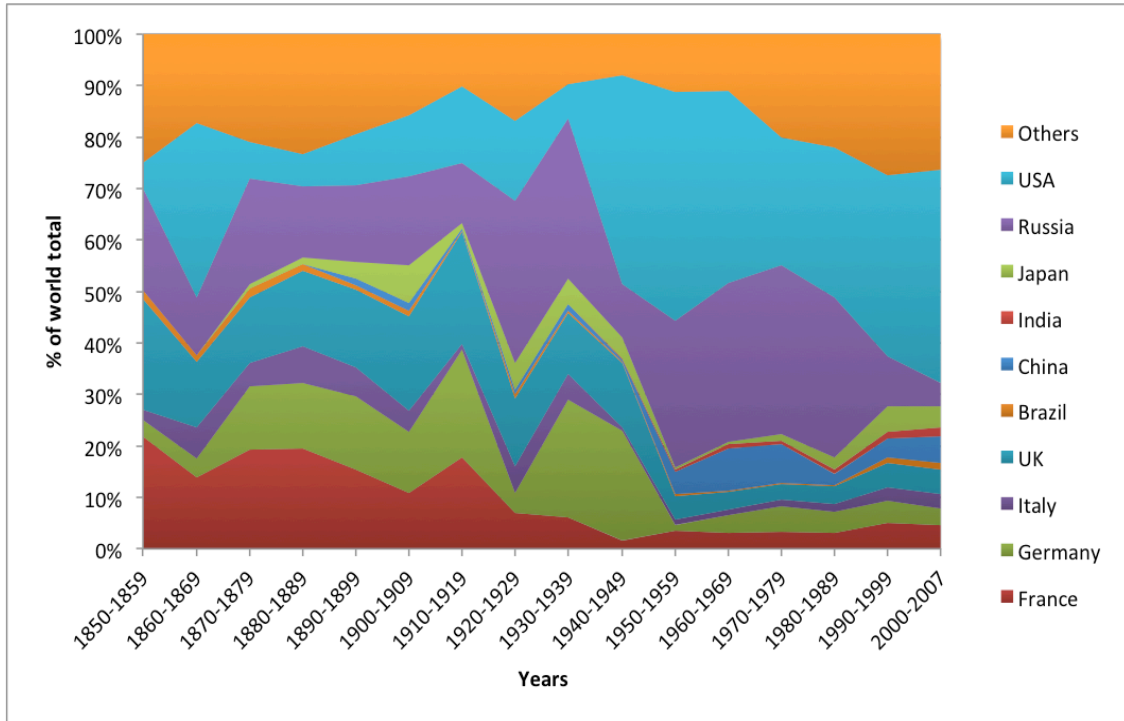
Locating Europe in today's power networks

In the following, extremely sketchy section, I begin to assess where Europe is located in today's power networks using Mann's IEMP model. I compare Europe (in fact mostly Europe's dominant four countries: the UK, France, Germany and Italy) to other regions and in time.

Military Power

Martin Shaw (2000) has argued that the military has become a global institution. Multinational operations have become the norm. Western militaries are highly interdependent and they often cooperate with their Russian, Indian and Chinese colleagues to address global challenges, for example piracy in the Indian Ocean. How central is Europe in this military power network? As the graph below shows, military expenditures have suffered a large decline for France and the UK relative to the mid-19th Century, when these two countries ruled most of the world. But they are stable since World War II. France and the UK remain two nuclear powers; they also retain expeditionary forces that are only surpassed (and by a large margin!) by the US. The combined military expenditures of European countries amount to 250 billion euros, roughly half that of the United States but still ahead of China. Although the latter is building up its defense capabilities, it does not have the global reach that the UK and France still do. Nor, despite occasional hype in the Pentagon, does it seem to have any interest in doing so. So although they are equally intensive in the sense that their armed forces are well prepared for territorial defense, Europe's military scope is more extensive than China's.

Graph 1. Military expenditures as a % of total world expenditures, 1850-2007

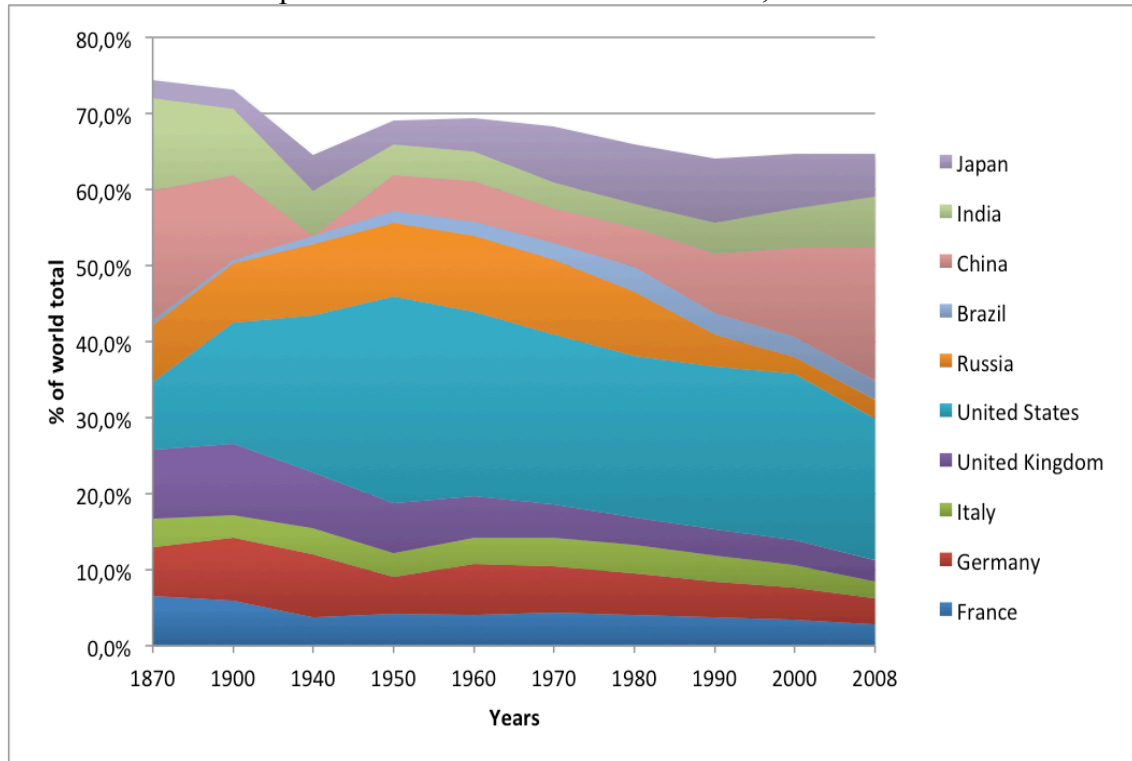


source: *Correlates of War*

Economic Power

Europe has often been described as an economic giant and a political dwarf. Although the current crisis should certainly lead us to qualify its giant status, some degree of caution is required. Europe remains by large the second biggest market in the world. It is still the home of about a fourth of Fortune 500 headquarters. London and Frankfurt occupy strategic positions in world financial markets. This means that Europe occupies a key position in the global supply chain (unlike, say, Brazil or Japan). Also, a bit of historical perspective is needed. Graph 2 shows that India and China's GDP were larger than Europe's until the 18th Century. The European share of global GDP has declined relative to the 1870 but so have India's and China's! The biggest winners of the 20th Century are the United States and Japan. The biggest loser is Russia. It is hard to see a long-term trend for other countries. Trade deals used to be struck between the US and the EU. They now have to include China as well, but a deal without Europe remains impossible. Europe's economic power is extensive. All in all, Europe's position in circuits of exchange is declining in relative terms, but it remains central. True, London and Paris no longer dominates world markets through conquest and the imposition of economic dependence, i.e. intensive economic power. It lost that status with decolonization.

Graph 2. GDP as a % of total world GDP, 1870-2008



source: *Correlates of War*

Ideological Power

To what extent does the rest of world continue to look at the world with European eyes, using European categories, norms, or ideologies? As the formidable influence of the English language suggests, it is hard to disentangle European influence from American influence. And clearly, the rising phenomena of nationalism (itself a European invention) and religious fundamentalism are curtailing the symbolic power of Europe. Still, as Table Nobel prize shows, the UK, France, Germany and Italy boast 27% of Nobel Prize laureates (for approximately 5% of world population). Turning to Table 1, and if we exclude English which is no longer a European language, French and German remain by far the most frequently translated languages, followed by Russian and Italian. Although growing, Chinese and Arabic still lag behind Danish, Latin and Czech.

Table 1. Top 20 original languages of books translated in the world,1800-2009

		1800-1850	1851-1875	1876-1900	1901-1925	1926-1950	1951-1975	1976-2009	Total
1	English	1	7	1	17	337	1086	1174965	1177863
2	French	4	2	7	7	59	333	212273	213097
3	German	0	3	8	5	68	298	195639	196403
4	Russian	0	0	0	1	109	464	100664	101812
5	Italian	1	5	3	1	3	54	65117	65251
6	Spanish	0	0	0	0	7	77	51755	51929
7	Swedish	0	0	0	1	0	23	35061	35109
8	Japanese	0	1	0	9	126	164	24682	25282
9	Latin	0	1	0	1	1	22	18964	19014
10	Danish	0	0	0	0	1	7	18686	18702
11	Dutch	0	0	0	0	1	23	18353	18401
12	Greek, Ancient (to 1453)	2	0	2	0	13	54	18953	17095
13	Czech	0	0	0	0	0	13	15914	15940
14	Chinese	0	0	0	0	16	2998	12556	18584
15	Polish	0	0	0	0	4	26	14010	14070
16	Norwegian	0	0	0	1	4	11	11953	11985
17	Arabic	0	0	0	0	3	56	11632	11750
18	Hungarian	0	0	1	0	1	16	11199	11235
19	Portuguese	0	0	0	0	0	18	10944	10980
20	Hebrew	1	0	0	1	3	45	9838	9938

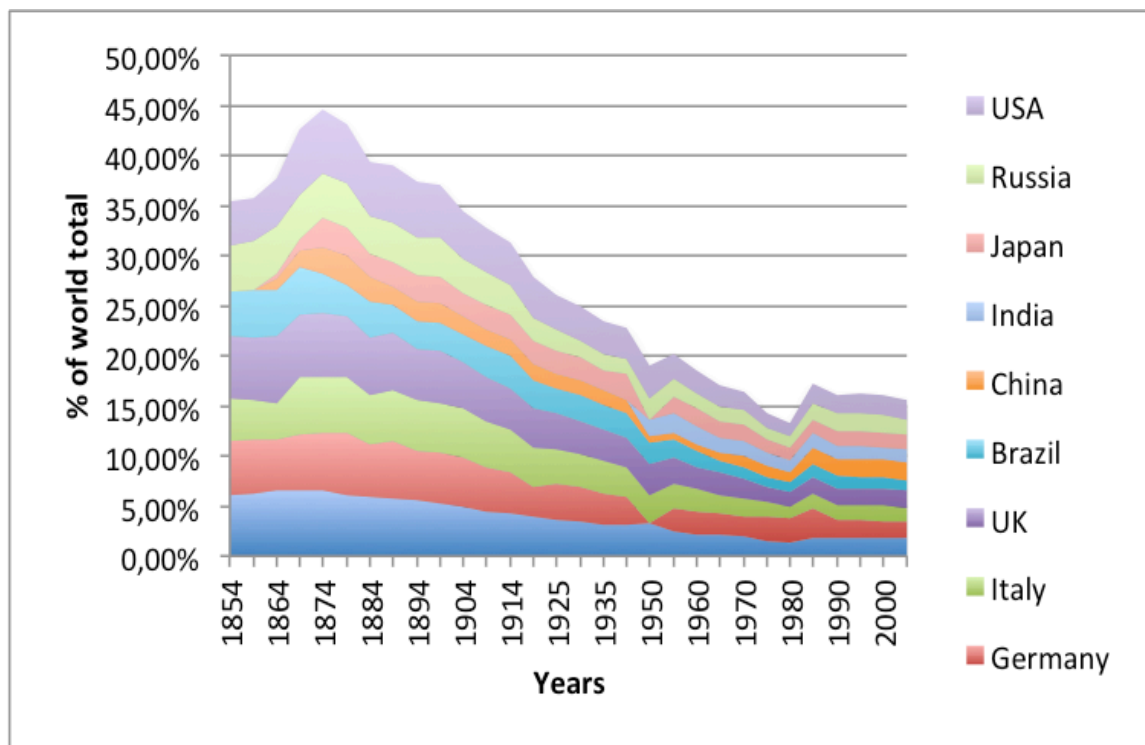
Source: UNESCO, Index Translationum – World bibliography of translation, <http://www.unesco.org/xtrans/>

Behr writes that: “Three general features underlie the politics of ‘standards of civilization’: first, the general self-perception of European states as those who authoritatively define the standards; second, regulations which define different steps and paces of cooperation between European and non-European states; and finally a geopolitical model projecting a world order with European states at the centre and zones of less politically developed states at the peripheries” (Behr 2007,240). This, to me, seems to characterize well the position of “Europe” in the world from the 16th Century to the 20th Century. The question we may ask is how much remains of it. Despite recent upheavals, the nation-state system, bureaucracies, legal systems, educational systems and so forth were all modeled after Europe’s (Meyer et al. 1997). This will have a lasting although diffuse influence.

Political Power

Measuring political power is trickier. What is an indicator of international influence in power networks? Although they do not always like to brag about it, Europeans have engineered more regime change in the past 10 years than the US. We can think of Eastern European countries but also countries like Greece, Libya (with US support) or Côte d'Ivoire. Although Europeans lament that they had nothing to do with the Arab Spring, the reality is that countries like Tunisia and to a lesser extent Egypt are moving in the direction pushed by Europeans over the past 20 years. A large number of former French and British African colonies, but also Bosnia, are still client states. Europe still has more authoritative political power than is usually recognized.

At a more innocuous level, the Correlates of War Diplomatic Exchange data set captures diplomatic representation at the level of *chargé d'affaires*, minister, and ambassador between members of the Correlates of War interstate system. The dyadic data describe the level of extensive diplomatic exchange. Table Diplomatic Exchange shows that the percentage of global diplomatic exchanges in which France, the UK, Germany and Italy participated has decreased somewhat since the 19th Century, but it has remained largely stable since the end of World War II. More interestingly, this declining share has not benefited countries like China or Brazil, but small countries. In other words, Europe's decline has been cause arithmetically by growth in the number of member states. The same is true of international organization membership. Share of the membership of international organization has decreased since the 19th Century, but has been fairly stable since the 1950s. Since 1945, West European countries have held approximately 27% of the permanent and rotating two-year terms at the UN Security Council.



How will Europe Manage its Decline?

To summarize the previous section, Europe is no longer *the center* of the world. But it is still a pretty important one. People often say that, although Europe's power is still strong in absolute terms, it is declining fast in relative terms. What these people fail to realize is that Europe's power remains disproportionate in relative terms. Compared to the early 20th Century, it has certainly declined relative to, say, China. But compared to the 15th Century, it is much bigger. But then, in 1750, China was the world's greatest military and economic power. Another way to summarize this point is to say that, although Europe represents only 5% of the world's population, it still populates 25% of the world's power networks. In other words, Europe remains *a central node* in the world. The discrepancy is such that it makes sense to keep talking about a European as a sort of power. This region may continue to decline a long time before Europe's influence becomes commensurate with its demographic importance.

The question, however, remains as to how Europeans will cope with this transition, with potential impacts for their neighbors and global governance. Since times immemorial, decline has had a geostrategic or military signification – decline meant the imminent threat of being taken over, looted, and killed. Up until World War I, losing land resources and demography were understood as the main predictors of military decline. In International Relations theory, geopolitics and realism emphasize that world politics is a matter of relative gains and losses: whatever one's situation, any increase in the neighbor's material and human resources is bad omen. Up to a limit, of course: as Thucydides argued, territorial overstretch can also be the cause of one's demise.

Two developments that altered state elites' understanding of decline occurred in the second half of the 20th Century. First, technology gradually replaced demography as the main predictor of a country's military fate. Second, and relatedly, economic power acquired preeminence alongside military power. For most realists, prosperity is essential to maintaining military strength; despite their military investments, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union lost out to the US's economic dominance. For liberals, the importance of the economy under capitalism means that absolute gains may end up mattering as much as relative gains: why should the US care if Japan or China are becoming richer, so long as Americans are also improving their lot while maintaining their security? Studies of the UK have demonstrated that record levels of economic growth can accompany military decline (Supple 1994, Clarke and Trebilcock 1997).

Now, how can/should political entities respond to decline? In IR, decline management has been approached mostly as a rational response to the evolution of the international system. By and large, the arguments are realist, with some liberal caveats, and they overwhelmingly deal with hegemonic powers, especially the UK in the 19th Century and today's United States. The literature suggests three stylized ways of dealing with decline.

The first strategy is preventive war. Copeland (2000) argues that dominant powers fight wars against rising challengers because they anticipate decline, which may be due to failing economic and technological structures at home, diminished economic power despite military domination, or a general weakening due to arms race or to the cost of maintaining an alliance. He describes the outbreak of World War I, with the Austria-Hungarian invasion of Serbia orchestrated by Germany, which aimed to drive a rising Russia into the conflict. The literature on deterrence theory also suggests that major powers initiate wars to maintain their reputation for toughness, i.e. to avoid signaling weakness and a sense of decline to their rivals (Schelling 1966, Morgan 1977). A variation on that argument is found in Go (2011), who shows that the UK's and the US's accompanied their military and economic decline by last gasps of imperial expansion.

A second, alternative strategy is retrenchment, that is operating a “graceful decline” in order to postpone it or attenuate its effects (MacDonald and Parent 2011). This strategy may rely upon internal or external balancing. Internal balancing includes cutting defense expenditures or increasing military efficiency. If sustained over the long term, such military restraint can lead to appeasement and isolationism, that is, acknowledging decline (Preble 2009). Economically, internal balancing also includes promoting technological or energy innovation (Modelski and Thompson 1996). External balancing may take different forms (Dueck 2006): proceed to “offshore balancing”, i.e. shift foreign policy burdens to alliance partners or regional powers (Bacevich 2002, Walt 2005, Layne 2009); retreat from overseas military involvements; redefine some foreign policy issues as less critical (Art 1998); and re-form alliances that are more favorable to the dominant power (Kupchan 2011). External balancing too can lead to appeasement, that is, the settlement of disputes with asymmetrical or unilateral concessions. While many view appeasement as a sign of weakness, others regard it as a rational strategy to reduce threats and hostility, buy time, and postpone decline (Treisman 2004, Ripsman and Levy 2008).

Although, from the perspective of world order, retrenchment sounds like an attractive strategy, there are impediments and constraints, of which two will be mentioned. First is the structure of international trade. According to Lobell (2003), if a hegemon faces liberal rising powers, it is likely to cooperate and devolve hegemony to regional powers (external retrenchment) in order to safeguard its commercial and fiscal interests. This is so because a liberal challenger will strengthen the political weight of domestic liberal interest groups. Alternatively, however, an imperial challenger with mercantilist economic policies will likely be confronted by the hegemon, which will foster conflict and impede graceful decline. Second, Legro (2005) stresses the importance of dominant collective ideas that act as “cultural barriers” to a rationalist strategy of retrenchment. The rise of a challenger may not lead to a foreign policy reorientation of the hegemon if no new collective idea emerges on how to deal with this situation. Studies have used the case of British decline to highlight decision makers’ misinterpretations, and their refusal to admit decline (Friedberg 1988, McKenzie 1998, Heinlein 2002).

Preventive war and retrenchment suggest that there are rational tools available to manage decline. For the EU, preventive war is an extremely implausible option. Retrenchment is much more likely. Arguably, it started with decolonization and has been pursued quite systematically by Germany and EU institutions, but it is much less attractive to France or the UK which remain important actors in global military and political networks. A last strategy turns away from material capabilities and sheds light instead on the power of ideas. Soft power, defined by Nye (2004) as one’s ability to get what it wants through attraction rather than coercion or payments, relies upon three resources: culture, values, and policies, as long as those are seen as legitimate. In terms of strategy, soft power translates into public diplomacy and branding (Cowan and Cull 2008, Gilboa 2008, Osgood and Etheridge 2010, Pamment 2012). More broadly, states seek to maintain their reputation and status, for example portraying themselves as “overachievers” because they invest heavily in public goods and international institutions (Volgy 2014). This last strategy enjoys currency among French and British leaders, but also among Europeanists and European policymakers, who like to talk about Europe’s civilian power, normative power, smart power, etc.

Bringing Domestic Politics and Culture Back In

The problem with retrenchment and soft power is that a growing number of Europeans want none of it. This opens up the question of whether domestic politics and culture matter in defining a political region's strategy of decline. While they acknowledge the crucial importance of international systems, historical sociologists have put greater emphasis on domestic structures. The decline management strategy of state leaders cannot be read off the structure of international relations. A trading nation such as the Netherlands, whose bourgeoisie is embedded in global economic networks, will not deal with decline in the same way as the political elite of a former imperial system, such as Austria which withdrew from most power networks. Spruyt (2005), for instance, compares declining empires that have experienced soft transitions (UK, Soviet Union) with others that had to face colonial wars and strong domestic opposition (France, Portugal, the Netherlands). He explains these differences by the number of domestic veto players: the more diffuse the domestic political structure, and the greater access pro-empire hard-liners have to veto points, the less peaceful the transition. These people are located in world power networks that affect their decisions.

This suggests that the choice of a decline management strategy is not limited to, as realists would have it, increasing military capabilities, forging alliances or collapsing; or, as liberals would have it, becoming competitive or falling into poverty. There is a menu of options to deal with global shifts in the balance of powers. Of course, the menu is limited by international, domestic, and cultural factors. International factors include, for example, the possibility to rely on economic relations, veto power in international institutions, and religious or ideological affinities with other powers to maintain a simulacrum of power status. Among domestic constraints, one immediately thinks of nationalism, whose strength may make it significantly more difficult to engineer a peaceful transition to a diminished status (Hall and Malesevic 2013). Turning to culture, an interesting example is provided by marriage, which up to the 18th Century offered a dynastic strategy for kings to manage decline.

A key point to make about the EU, in my view, is that, in contrast to other declining powers, domestic politics will matter a great deal in this equation. Even in more homogenous political entities, there are strong reasons to believe that decline does not mean the same thing for elites and ordinary people. It is interesting to note that, while IR theorists from Huntington and Kennedy to Wohlforth and Walt are focused on the question of the US's declining power in the world, Hall and Lindholm's (1999) sociological essay scarcely mentions international standing when answering the question of America's future prosperity and cohesion. What they fear instead is the impact of inequality on the social fabric. In relatively peaceful regions, managing geopolitical decline may mean accepting its reality and focusing instead on the domestic issues that people care about.

If geopolitical decline is irrelevant in most people's lives, couldn't trying to stave it off actually prove perilous? From Vladimir Lenin to Hans-Ulrich Wehler, there is a rich literature on imperialism as a way to divert the working class from domestic struggles. Decline-driven aggression could also be analyzed as the outcome of class struggles or, in the language of critical geopolitics, of a discourse about place and space that serves a socially situated stratum. Much as a country's military success does not necessarily translate into the people's material betterment, intellectuals and right-wing parties often use declinist language to lambast the working class's or the peasantry's alleged laziness, or the elite's lack of patriotism. In the mouth of Mancur Olson or Eric Zemmour, "decline" is a "wake-up call", a rhetorical weapon to strengthen the traditional

elites in the face of domestic challenges. There is, in this line of thought, an attempt to transform class warfare into culture wars, using the fear of decline as an excuse.

Culture is a fundamental dimension in this complex picture. The feeling of decline by contemporaries (rightly or wrong) is almost inevitably accompanied by a cultural and intellectual crisis, or at least a period of “soul-searching.” The search for the causes of decline becomes a debate over decadence, of which romanticism is the best European illustration. Edward Gibbon famously attributed the fall of the Roman Empire to the corroding impact of Christianity and the disappearance of civic virtue, including in its martial dimension. Tongue in cheek, one could argue that Roman elites managed their decline by frequenting saunas and indulging in orgies (Satyricon). Of course, the debate may not be grounded in empirical reality: didn’t Oswald Spengler write the *Decline of the West* precisely when Europe was at the apex of world power? Conversely, the cultural and artistic reputation of an empire such as Byzantium may be at its highest precisely when its military and economic power is in decline (Hilsdale 2014). Here, decline management has something to do with what Goffman would call “impression-management”: how do elites try to keep up appearances or reinvent one’s national identity even as they feel the earth moving under their feet?

We do not understand very well how ideological networks play in decline management. Current debates in the EU suggest that the perception of ideological/cultural decline matters because it signals a loss of standing and reputation in the world order, that is, a declining social status. Lebow (2009) argues that states are not only motivated by their appetite, but also by a quest for spirit, i.e. prestige and glory. Since symbols matter, the perception of decline alone collides with this quest for status (Paul et al. 2014). Several publications that deal with identity in IR include a concern for power decline and its perception, the heritage of the past (e.g. wars, empires) and the representation of rival powers in the definition of a state’s role and foreign policy (Doty 1996, Ferguson and Mansbach 1996, Neumann 1996, Reus-Smith 1999, Farrell 2005, Guillaume 2011, McCourt 2011). The key question here is whether the mismatch between reality and perception generates conflict. Russia is an illustration of such a mismatch. Is such a scenario thinkable in the case of the EU?

Conclusion

Arguably, Europe is experiencing its first geopolitical decline since the fall of the Roman Empire. Of course, the EU still possesses world influence that is disproportionate with its share of the population. And so far, Europe has declined fairly gracefully, not engaging in conflicts with its neighbors or retreating from global power networks. The dominant strategy on the part of European elites has focused on soft power, that is, on retaining a privileged position in ideological networks to compensate for the loss of centrality in military and economic networks. However, the role of domestic politics and culture in shaping future strategies of decline management is not well understood. The past decade has strengthened a pessimistic *Zeitgeist* that is increasingly at odds with the EU’s objective position in global power networks and the political elite’s liberal strategy to cushion the transition to a less central position. Whether this may have an impact on Europe’s relations with the world is an open question.

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