

Observations relating to Simon Hix and Stefano Bartolini's policy papers:

The right or the wrong sort of medicine for the EU?

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Simon Hix's contribution to the debate on the politicisation of the European Union rests on a distinction between constitutive politics and management policies (which the author describes as isomorphic issues). His policy paper comes down to the suggestion that the introduction of contestation in the decisional process would improve its performance. Stefano Bartolini disputes this, which he sees as a risk, if not a danger.

This approach seems simplistic in so far as the first author restricts politicisation to the emergence of a left-right opposition within the authorities belonging to the Union's "institutional triangle", which comes down to equating politicisation with polarisation.

Whilst I share, in the main, the reservations expressed by Stefano Bartolini, the thesis proficiently set forth by Simon Hix lays most open to epistemological criticism. On the one hand, supposing it proved correct, it could only apply to the running of the "community pillar". As a result, it would have no implications for the CFSP and the ESDP, both intensely politicised though left-right opposition does not come into it, nor for that part of the management of the "third pillar" which remains intergovernmental.

On the other hand, even within the framework of the "first pillar", Stefano Bartolini rightly observes (p.37) that the left-right distinction only has a bearing on isomorphic issues and presupposes that "the agenda has shifted from 'creating the market' to 'how much it should be regulated or deregulated'", which "betrays the rather one-sided expectation of the promoters of this perspective." (p.45). Now the aforementioned expectation is none other than the "Thatcherian" vision of European integration, as developed in her famous Bruges speech by the former British Prime Minister, namely that it is fitting to manage the regulation/deregulation policies, stopping short of further inroads into integration.

Simon Hix considerably swells the impact, even thus circumscribed, of the left-right divide, if not within the European Parliament, at least at the Commission and specifically at the Council. For the

Council's member's main preoccupation is less concerned with their political leanings than with the defence of the national interests they represent and/or their commitment to the pursuit or otherwise of European integration. This is amply demonstrated by the "Franco-German couple", the composition of which is never more effective than when the partners have different political persuasions!

To be sure, Simon Hix's thesis is not today without attraction for the reader, in so far as it accounts for the resistance to change, which leaves the Union's authorities content with the management of what is in place. Even though, in the context of the pluriannual budgetary forecasts debate, the confrontation did not so much set right against left than state against state. However, beyond present circumstances, which can be expected to be a passing phenomenon, it is liable to generate a serious misconception by neglecting the dominant political cleavage, which actually opposes the States who favour the status quo to those who aim to pursue and develop the integration process, the which pertains to politics of the highest order.

More damagingly still, apparently ignorant of research published in German, French and Italian, Simon Hix totally misconstrues History when he writes (p.5) that "Politics has been absent from much of the history of European integration." Whereas the history of its construction shows that the European Coal and Steel Community was essentially designed to make Franco-German cooperation irreversible. Furthermore, the Steering Committee for the United States of Europe created by Jean Monnet included the main political parties of the time; when they decided the institution of the European Council and the election of the parliament by universal suffrage at the same time, Giscard d'Estaing and Helmut Schmidt were taking a highly political decision. That is before mentioning a single currency apt to reinforce the EU position on the international stage.

To conclude, Simon Hix's thesis seems to owe less to political sciences than to assumptions arising from British party-political praxis. It rests on two unacceptable premises:

1. A regrettable confusion between politicisation and adversarialisation which brings down politicisation to a left-right debate, on the assumption that European political issues boil down to the running of existing policies. This excludes the hypothesis of advances in the integration process and of any constitutive politics, which may well reflect British thinking, in government and in the street, but is of little epistemological worth.
2. As Stefano Bartolini very properly observes (p.46) when he writes "The politicisation thesis discussed in this paper clearly derives implications and expectations from the historical experience of the nation state", a distinct propensity towards plagiarism . This amounts to recasting at EU level an approach no doubt suited to the nation state – in this case the United Kingdom – but impervious to the singularity of the subject under review.

These two flawed lines of thinking lead to questioning Simon Hix's working hypothesis as much if not more in the name of epistemology as in view of the risk a EU politicisation restricted to a left-right opposition would present for the running of the Union.

In fact, the fifty years History of European integration teaches us that its progressive politicisation can be measured at the pace and rate of Union integration and that the extrapolation of some national case of figures, such as adversarial politics, is more likely to foster misconception than to enhance the explanation.

Accordingly, it seems to me that Notre Europe's vocation should be rather to plough on the single furrow towards a progressive politicisation of the European Union traced by Jacques Delors and emblazoned in the concept of "Federation of nation states", than to explore avenues open on the basis of mere assumptions, be they shared by the successive governments and the public of a Member State!