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ABSTRACT
Existing theories of European integration offer little purchase on the problems facing the European Union today. New theories of disintegration are emerging, but they remain disjointed. The purpose of this comment is to suggest an overarching theoretical framework. This framework helps to structure the existing literature and to suggest new areas for research. It also helps to explain how integration and disintegration interact at different levels of aggregation.

KEYWORDS Brexit; disintegration; equality of opportunity; Gunnar Myrdal; integration

Introduction
The European project is not doing well. Although recent news has been more positive in terms of recovering from the economic crisis, it is hard to deny that the last decade presented a series of major setbacks. The challenge is to explain why this is happening and whether the many different problems the European Union (EU) is experiencing are somehow connected to the success the European project had in the past. Fortunately, a handful of scholars have started to fill the gap in our collective understanding (Eppler et al. 2016; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Jachtenfuchs and Kasack 2017; Jones 2012; Vollaard 2014; Webber 2014; Zielonka 2014). These scholars have focused on the forces behind disintegration.

Their starting point is that existing theoretical arguments – transactionalist, neofunctionalist, intergovernmentalist, institutionalist – are ill-equipped to go in reverse. Hence, these scholars have brought a new array of hypotheses and models into the mix. They draw attention to the interaction between hegemonic stability theory and domestic politics (Webber 2014), the dynamics of political community building (Vollaard 2014), and the competition for problem-solving authority in multilevel governance (Jachtenfuchs and Kasack 2017). Building upon a variety of often disconnected or only partial causal mechanisms, they create conceptual frameworks for operationalizing
The most powerful of these new theories is the postfunctionalist account proposed by Hooghe and Marks (2009) – with commentary by Schmitter (2009), Börzel and Risse (2009) and Kriesi (2009). Hooghe and Marks (2009) argue that neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism both trace back to functionalist origins that give pride of place to economic interests and pay little attention to identity politics or identity-based political mobilization. Such reasoning worked during the first three decades of European integration, when the project was primarily economic, and yet failed to account for the rising salience of European issues at the mass level once the European project transcended its economic origins. As a result, European integration has become entangled in a growing conflict between élites and masses over the appropriate jurisdictional architecture for Europe (Jones 2012). This conflict has unfolded in national elections and popular referendums that have more often constrained than enabled the integration process.

This work is important. Nevertheless, it remains incomplete. The purpose of this comment is to sketch a theoretical model inspired by Gunnar Myrdal (1956) that can help pull things together.¹ This model shares many features of the theories for political community building favoured by Vollaard (2014) (borrowing from Bartolini [2005]) and Jachtenfuchs and Kasack (2017). Nevertheless, it is easier than either of those works to operationalize in the manner favoured by Eppler et al. (2016).

Such operationalization can help us contribute to ongoing theoretical debates. For example, this theory shows how economic interests and identity politics have been intertwined throughout the European project and it helps us to understand why identity-based political mobilization was less important in some historical contexts than in others. In that way, the framework provides a pathway for reconciling the postfunctionalist account favoured by Hooghe and Marks (2009) with the empirical evidence generated by Hanspeter Kriesi and his colleagues (Hutter et al. 2016). It also helps to fold the postfunctionalist account as a mid-range theory into the larger body of scholarship on integration.

Finally, this theory allows us to connect the two levels of analysis deployed by Webber (2014) and to bring more coherence to the scenarios offered by Zielonka (2014). In this way, we are better able to interpret events unfolding at the present and to anticipate how they will develop in the future.

Given its short length, this comment is more of a manifesto than a demonstration. It is also only allusive in the sense that it does not develop and reference the many strands of literature it mentions in passing. The exposition has four sections. The first presents the model as a theory of integration and disintegration. The second shows how it can be operationalized empirically to explain how integration starts, how it changes pace, when it will stop, and
how it could move into reverse. The third introduces variation across levels of aggregation and issue areas while at the same time multiplying the patterns of interaction. The fourth concludes with what this model can help us learn about the present and the future. The goal of the theory is not to answer questions irrefutably, but rather to help structure empirical research.

**A cumulatively causal theory of integration and disintegration**

Integration is a process that brings things closer together in some respects; it has a kind of reinforcing momentum or feedback loop (which means it builds on its own success), and yet that momentum or feedback tends to exhaustion (meaning that the reinforcing mechanism that connects one success to the next diminishes over time or gives rise to ever-strengthening countervailing forces). These features are characteristic of complex system dynamics (Meadows 2008). The elements left out are (a) the purpose or function of integration and (b) the precise causal mechanisms that generate either reinforcing or balancing feedback loops.

Myrdal (1956) energizes his theory of integration with a liberal purpose. The goal, he argues, is to promote ‘equality of opportunity’. Obviously, it is possible to announce a range of other objectives for the architects or founders to want to achieve. Peace, justice and collective security top the list. The point for Myrdal is that ‘equality of opportunity’ feeds into a specific set of causal mechanisms. We can debate whether the architects of Europe really sought equality of opportunity. That is an empirical question to be judged on the back of memoires, oral histories and archival documentation. If we accept for the moment that equality of opportunity was a possible objective, then it is fair to consider where the pursuit of that objective would lead.

The promotion of equality of opportunity takes place through the main European institutions. In grand terms, we can think about the decision to create a framework that offers member states with different endowments a (relatively) equal voice in how decisions will be made. We can also think about the elimination of barriers or the promotion of common rules or norms. This is where most scholarship on European integration focuses. It is also where we see most attention from journalists. But it is hardly the end of the story.

Equality of opportunity should promote a more efficient allocation of resources; it should also lead to greater acceptance of the rules of the game by the different participants (which Myrdal [1956] calls ‘solidarity’). Moreover, those two responses to enhanced equality of opportunity should be mutually reinforcing. The more participants can focus on doing what they do best, the less incentive they have to oppose the rules that define the new arrangement; and the less time and effort participants expend
resisting the new arrangement, the more they can focus on doing what they do best.

The critical point is that these are positive and conditional claims rather than normative claims. The links between the extension of equality of opportunity and greater efficiency or acceptance can be empirically tested, as can the positive reinforcement between efficiency and acceptance. We can also empirically test (or debate) the operationalization of equality of opportunity, efficiency and acceptance.

I will emphasize this empirical ‘testability’ repeatedly as I present the model. The reason is to underscore not only that the model connects to the empirical world, but also that the causal mechanisms can fail in practice as well as in theory. Politicians can introduce institutions to promote equality of opportunity that might not lead to greater efficiency or that might give rise to politicization and conflict. This potential for failure is what makes the model more consistent with a world that displays ‘punctuated politicization’ (Grande and Kriesi 2016: 279) than a world that moves from ‘permissive consensus to constraining dissensus’ (Hooghe and Marks 2009).

If the promotion of equality of opportunity does lead to greater efficiency in the allocation of resources and greater acceptance of the rules of the game, then this combination of factors should promote economic prosperity. Again, this is not a normative claim. Rather, it is a reflection of the reality that not all efforts to extend equality of opportunity with be welfare-enhancing to the same extent (if, indeed, they turn out to be welfare-enhancing).

Assuming that the promotion of equality of opportunity does enhance prosperity, we can then look at ways to close the feedback loop. Groups with more income should experience a type of economic convergence. There is a strong form where the poorer members catch up to those that start with superior endowments. But the mechanism does not require such an extreme form of convergence to work. The differences among participants do not have to diminish in absolute terms; they could just become less important as the average-per-participant increases. Again, this is an empirical question. The answer is likely to depend upon the type of equal opportunity that was created (or how it was created) and the specific efficiencies that were nurtured as a result.

There is – at least potentially – a political dimension to this convergence as well. As the promotion of equality of opportunity results in greater prosperity which brings the participants closer together in economic terms, it should also create incentives for them to experiment with other forms of equal opportunity. To the extent to which enhanced prosperity relaxes material constraints on those who started off with the poorest endowments, it should create new priorities along the way (as in the transition from materialist to post-materialist political priorities). Once again, there is no tautology in these assertions. These are testable hypotheses. And where they are validated, the result is likely to
encourage greater efforts to promote equality of opportunity – which starts the cycle all over again.

This model for integration runs in the opposite direction just as easily. You can start by introducing discriminatory measures that restrict equality of opportunity. This would lead to a reduction in efficiency and a rise in potential conflict. The group as a whole would become less prosperous as a result. That does not mean the misery would be shared evenly. On the contrary, some would lose more than others, and this would create tension between the haves and the have-nots. In turn, this distributive conflict would create opportunities for further discrimination that could start the cycle all over again. This negative spiral contains much of the adverse politicization that Hooghe and Marks (2009) identify. The point to note, moreover, is that each step in this chain of reasoning can be tested both for the existence of a causal connection – say, between discrimination and inefficiency – and for the strength of the relationship. Myrdal’s (1956) theory sets out cumulative causal mechanisms that describe both virtuous and vicious cycles (Figure 1); only close examination of the empirical world can tell you which of these you are experiencing.

Testing and building on the model

The model for integration and disintegration can be tested in three ways. Two of these have already been mentioned. We can ask whether the promotion of ‘equality of opportunity’ (however operationalized) was an intended or unintended consequence of the diplomatic efforts to engage in European integration. We can also ask whether we find any evidence that the promotion of equal opportunity in some specific way resulted in efficiency gains or greater acceptance, whether it made Europe’s economies more prosperous, and whether this in turn nurtured support for further efforts to promote equality of opportunity (or to engage in other ventures where further equality of opportunity was an unintended consequence).

![Figure 1](image-url)  
**Figure 1.** Integration and disintegration as a cumulatively causal model.  
Note: Each of the arrows is causal and can be subject to empirical testing.
This is an old and well-established research agenda – both in whole and in the various parts. Just think of F. Roy Willis’ (1968) classic, *France, Germany, and the New Europe*. Now think about the myriad estimates of the contribution the internal market has made to European economic performance. In fact, you can find the threads of this kind of argument running through much of the corpus of integration scholarship.

What the cumulatively causal framework adds to this rich empirical literature is a way of bringing the various arguments into a single frame of reference. It also suggests how we should examine the interaction between different lines of argument. These interactions give us a third way of testing the model empirically – by forcing us to look for correlations between greater market efficiency, for example, and increased support for European integration. If we find those correlations, we can ask whether there is evidence that the causal mechanism really runs through increased prosperity or greater convergence (as Myrdal [1956] argues) or whether it results from increased interaction whatever the consequences for aggregate economic performance (which is what transactionalist accounts of integration would imply).

In addition to offering empirical tests for both discrete and complex causal mechanisms, the cumulatively causal argument for integration helps to frame a research agenda. For example, it pushes us to look for evidence of diminishing marginal returns or other non-linear dynamics. Such dynamics are important because they help us understand why integration processes are so uneven – with sudden bursts of activity in some areas or time periods and lulls in others. These dynamics also help us to explain why integration may go only so far and no further. The limits could reside in the unwillingness of different groups to embrace equality of opportunity, they may result from the small impact of new initiatives on the use of resources or the co-operation of participants, or they may yield very little in terms of enhanced economic prosperity. As with any complex system, whatever is relatively scarce can emerge as a constraining factor.

This kind of analysis is useful for understanding how we move from one set of dynamics to the other. The two cumulatively causal mechanisms are not mutually exclusive and can (and probably do) coexist. Both integration and disintegration create losers as well as winners. Hence, the challenge is to understand why one pattern of cumulative causality might predominate. The process of integration might expand beyond a favourable political calculation of costs and benefits. This is the postfunctionalist hypothesis – and it has merits. Alternatively, the context may change around the integration process in ways that make once beneficial institutions seem less attractive either because they are ineffective or overly constraining. These are real world possibilities; the point of the model is simply to help us know where we should be looking.
The cumulatively causal model for integration inspired by Myrdal’s (1956) argument also gives us a window for examining either incomplete or contradictory initiatives. As mentioned, equality of opportunity is not the only motive that governments have to pursue cross-national integration. The pursuit of other projects may constrain the introduction of greater equal opportunity and it may also lead to greater discrimination. Governments may achieve less than they hoped in economic and political terms as a consequence; they may even trigger dynamics that will push in the opposite direction, as participants complain about unfair treatment. The point to note here is that Myrdal’s model is only partly limited to economic integration. Certainly, he focuses on market dynamics that connect efficiency to prosperity to convergence. But those dynamics can facilitate other forms of co-operation by providing additional resources to invest in common ventures or by revealing other shared values that can be promoted through co-operative endeavour. The reverse is also the case. As disintegration diminishes resources, other joint projects are likely to suffer, and as conflict strengthens attention to exclusive identities rather than shared values, joint projects may be abandoned.

Finally, this model for integration and disintegration shows us where to look for the influence of exogenous shocks, both positive and negative. A sudden economic downturn could have a powerful and negative effect on the willingness of countries to work together; the influence of a sudden burst of economic growth could be the reverse. Technological innovations might impact on the efficiency of resource use or the yield in terms of growth. By contrast, disruptive technologies might create inequalities that would increase resistance and therefore prove harmful to growth.

Again, none of these possible causal arguments is new to the model. The value added comes from highlighting how these arguments – all well-researched in the literature – slot into a single, coherent and testable theory of integration. They also show how that process of integration can move in reverse. In other words, the cumulatively causal model inspired by Myrdal’s (1956) work provides a frame that can help us use existing research on integration to understand the disintegration we are experiencing right now. I will return to this point in the final section.

Levels of aggregation

Before moving to the present, it is necessary to clarify where integration takes place and which level of analysis should take precedence. In his work, Myrdal (1956) was more interested in integration at the global and national levels than he was in European dynamics. Nevertheless, the cumulatively causal model he sketched for integration is scalable – and intentionally so. The same cumulative causal mechanisms can operate among individuals in a
single community, communities in a larger national society, nation states at the (macro-)regional level, and regions at the global level. At each level of aggregation, you can vary the units of analysis and yet the basic structure for the cumulative causal mechanisms remains the same.

This scalability is a powerful feature of the model for two reasons. The first reason is that scalability allows us to connect micro-foundations to macro-processes. This is useful to avoid the reification of group agency of the ‘what Germany wants’ variety; in the same vein, it facilitates the decomposition of national preferences into groups and individuals. It is often useful to assume that national preferences are exogenous, and yet such assumptions make it important to recognize how those preferences might change over time (and why).

The second advantage of scalability is that it draws attention to the interaction between levels of aggregation (Jones 2003). The basic question is whether what looks like a positive form of integration at any given level will have negative consequences for integration at other levels of aggregation. This kind of question will be familiar to students of Polanyi (2001), who start from the level of society and look for innovations at high levels (regional, global) to see whether they are consistent (embedded) or inconsistent (dis-embedded). The richness that comes from Polanyi’s (2001) work is his embrace of a wide range of norms and values that members of society might hold to be important. Since these values emanate from idiosyncratic or contextually specific social groups, it is easy to understand why Polanyi (2001) privileges the societal level.

Myrdal’s (1956) argument focuses more narrowly on ‘equality of opportunity’ and the specific causal mechanisms derive from that normative objective. Whether one level of aggregation is more important than another is an empirical matter. Wherever contradictions emerge, in the sense that efforts to promote equality of opportunity at one level results in discrimination or discriminatory disadvantage at some other level, the different cumulative causal mechanisms can compete for dominance. The results of the competition depend (empirically) upon the strength of the causal forces operating at the different levels of aggregation.

Writing in the mid-1950s, Myrdal (1956) argued that efforts to promote integration at the national level would thwart efforts to promote integration either in Europe as a (macro-)region or at the global level. His reasoning was consistent with Polanyi’s (2001) argument about the importance of social embeddedness and the political reactions that emerge in its absence. European countries used welfare state institutions for health, education, providential care and employment protection to promote equality of opportunity. They financed these institutions with taxes on goods, services, labour and capital. And they distorted market competition both domestically and internationally as a consequence. Hence, any effort to create equality of opportunity across
countries would require a massive and co-ordinated reform to the institutions that provide for equality of opportunity within countries.

Myrdal (1956) did not believe that sufficient support for welfare state reform existed; he was also sceptical that any process of integration across countries would survive the political backlash that would result from adjustments within them. It turns out that he underestimated the determination of national political élites to move forward with the creation of Europe and the willingness of national electorates to endure the adjustments that European project entailed. That does not mean Myrdal (1956) was wrong. The system dynamics worked in Europe’s favour for long periods, as during the early 1960s or the late 1980s; at other times, as during the 1970s and early 1980s, those dynamics also turned against Europe.

This interaction between integration at the European level and at the national level helps to reconcile the postfunctionalist argument about the politicization of Europe with the empirical record that such politicization has occurred sporadically almost since the start of the European project, that it has varied in intensity both over time and across countries, and that it defies easy categorization in terms of party identification or cleavage structure (Grande and Kriesi 2016). The problem is not so much one of identity, but of interests, institutions and values in the Polanyian sense (Jones 2006). At times, and opportunistically, political élites may try to use national identity as the basis for mobilization against Europe; they may also try to use ‘Europe’ as the basis for mobilization against domestic rivals. But that does not mean we should expect to see a fixed hierarchy of preferences for national versus European authority from one country to the next.

The same dynamics of politicization have often turned against integration at the local level. The institutions that constitute European integration are not the only ones that can be ‘socially disembedded’ in Polanyian terms. The welfare state can become disembedded as well, insofar as national institutions begin to discriminate at the subnational levels and to provoke conflict in local communities. There is a rich tradition of scholarship looking at these kinds of relationships between national institutions and local cohesion or resistance. This is the line of research that Bartolini (2005) uses to enhance our understanding of the European Union. That scholarship needs to be brought more coherently into the arguments we make about European integration. The scalability of Myrdal’s analysis helps to frame that connection and to suggest which variables and causal mechanisms are most relevant for empirical analysis.

What does this model tell us about the present?

Before the debate on European disintegration opened in earnest with the postfunctionalist account proposed by Hooghe and Marks (2009), it was
relatively easy to equate European integration with the European Union. Some writers, like Jan Zielonka (2007), emphasized the institutional diversity of the integration process, and yet the presumption that integration would lead to some kind of finalité politique centred on the European Union remained strong. Now that commitment is less certain. Zielonka (2014) has returned to the debate to suggest that the EU could lose its central role in any of three scenarios: it could collapse spectacularly; it could break down as an unintended consequence of misguided attempts to fix it; or it could suffer from sustained benign neglect under the guise of ‘muddling through’. The result would not be the end of ‘Europe’ or of European integration, but it would put an end to conceptions of Europe that place the EU at the centre of the project.

The cumulatively causal model presented above shows how discrimination (or inequality of opportunity) lies at the root of the disintegrative process. If there is some spectacular collapse, it will most likely result from the isolation of one-or-more member states from the rest of the Union. The British sense of self-isolation is one illustration of this dynamic; the forced isolation of Greece in the summer of 2015 is another. The danger in both cases comes from the possible precedent. If one member state can go down this route, how long is it before others will follow. Britain’s decision to leave the EU may not have that kind of demonstration effect. It is still too early to tell what will be the political or economic consequences of that development. The model can tell us where to look for reinforcing dynamics, but not how powerfully they will operate. That remains an empirical matter. The effective expulsion of Greece from the single currency in the summer of 2015 would have unleashed a different dynamic in terms of speed and magnitude. The structure of the causal mechanisms would nevertheless look very similar. European officials insist that they now have the common resources to contain such dynamics. That is an empirical proposition that has yet to be tested (and hopefully never will be).

Inequality of opportunity or discrimination also lies at the heart of the problem of unintended consequences. Here, we might use efforts to lower risk in the European banking system as an illustration. The banking recovery and resolution directive requires that a certain percentage of liabilities be bailed in before any financial institution is bailed out using taxpayer resources. This is a good general principle and yet it relies upon very different levels of adaptation from one member state to the next. It is widely perceived in those member states which much work hardest to adapt as inequitable as a result. This explains why Italians, for example, have lost so much faith in Europe’s banking union as a solution to their financial problems. It is at least partly why Italian scepticism of the European Union is increasing in more general terms as well.

The best-case scenario in Zielonka’s (2014) analysis is muddling through. As the cumulatively causal model for integration developed here suggests, such
benign neglect will not jump-start the European Union at the centre of the integration project, but it should not necessarily lead to its disappearance altogether either. Much will depend upon how the forces for disintegration and for integration operate across different projects and levels of analysis. That is why we are likely to wind up in the ‘polyphonic’ arrangement that Zielonka (2014) describes at the end of his volume.

A lateral shift in the focus of attention to some other form of integration is unlikely to arrest this dynamic. Europe’s leaders may decide to emphasize their common security or global leadership as opposed to promoting equality of opportunity. Such goals are important, and yet they are outside the cumulatively causal model outlined above. Hence, it is unclear how such goals will create positive feedback loops that will operate both politically and economically at different levels of analysis. It is also unclear how such a project would counteract the dynamics that we see in the cumulative causal model that centres around equality of opportunity in the positive sense or discrimination in the context of disintegration. We have made important steps in understanding disintegration, and yet there is still plenty of scope for further theorizing.

**Note**

1. Myrdal’s work has found wide acceptance in the fields of economic development and economic geography. It has also been cited in classic works on the economics of integration by scholars like Bela Belassa, Willem Molle and Loukas Tsoukalis. Nevertheless, it has not found wide use among scholars of European integration. James Angresano (1997) is a rare exception. The focus of Angresano’s analysis is on the transformation of Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. This contribution has benefited greatly from conversations I had with Jim more than 15 years ago about the broader relevance of Myrdal’s work to the European project (Jones 2003).

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**Notes on contributor**

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