

Douglas Webber, European disintegration? The Politics of Crisis in the European Union

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Douglas Webber, Professor of Political Science at INSEAD, has published the book «European Integration? The Politics of Crisis in the European Union» in which he raises the question whether the European Union is facing a process of disintegration as a result of the crises of the last ten years. It is not my intention to make an exhaustive summary of the book written by Webber. The objective is rather to focus on the findings made by the author that mark a turning point regarding the literature on integration existing to date.

The book is structured into seven chapters and can be divided into three parts. The first part, that covers chapters 1 and 2, includes an introduction and a theoretical revision of European integration and disintegration contributions. The second part, which includes chapter 3, 4, 5 and 6, provides an exhaustive analysis of the four recent crises at the European level –Eurozone, Ukraine, Refugee and Brexit–. The last part, chapter 7, focuses on the conclusion and a prediction about what will the next steps in the process of European integration be.

In the first chapter, Webber offers an original perspective to justify why the crises of the last ten years are different of those that took place previously, such as



the European Defense Community, the Empty Chair, the British Budgetary and the European Monetary System Crisis. According to Webber, the four recent crises imply a turning point because of their multidimensional character, their longevity, the unprecedented mass politization and the cost of inaction (p. 10).

In chapter 2, the author goes beyond the main theories of European (dis)integration. In a well-structured and clear text, Webber analyzes the existing literature and highlights three important findings. First of all, the available literature about European disintegration is practically non-existent in comparison to other fields of study regarding the European Union, except for the works of Volland (2018), Schmitter and Lefkofridi (2016), Rosamond (2016), Borzel and Risse (2018). Second, he opposes the widespread assumption that European integration is a dynamic, evolutionary and non-returning process, based on the belief of «an ever closer union». Third, he objects to the experts that they have missed an important variable, namely, the role played by Germany as a hegemonic force within the process of European Integration. Taking the aforementioned findings as a starting point, the book invites the reader to reconsider the foundations on which academic literature has settled in relation to the integration process.

The second part of the book covers the four main important crises. The author makes an exercise of concision that offers the reader a coherent whole. Chapter 3 focuses on the consequences that the Eurozone crisis has had regarding European Integration. In a brief and coherent approach, Webber examines whether the bail-outs and the different measures to deal with the crisis –the European Financial Stability Facility, the Fiscal Compact and the ECB Monetary Policy– have caused more integration or, on the contrary, have moved the process backwards. He concludes that the Eurozone crisis has not led to disintegration. The reason is that Germany, thought to be an active role in preserving the Euro, protected the stability and surveillance of the Eurozone.

The following chapter deals with the Ukraine Crisis. The author brings to light the main causes of the crisis as well as the difficulty of decision making from a European perspective because of the constant debate between supranationalism and intergovernmentalism. However, it is obvious that the author has a profound knowledge of the issue, Webber is very cautious when answering the question of whether the crisis has led to a greater degree of integration or whether has led to disintegration.

Chapter 5 provides a brilliant analysis about the impact of the refugee crisis. Meanwhile, most of the existing literature about the current migration crisis focuses on its consequences –the inability of the EU to assume the massive arrival of immigrants– Webber looks at the causes of the crisis in a very exhaustive way to conclude that the legal and institutional designs of the migration policies are key factors to understand the current situation. It seems clear in the analysis of the chapter that the Schengen crisis did not bring more integration. In fact, the decisive role of Germany is the variable that has prevented the collapse of the free movement policy.

The last chapter of the second part offers an in-depth analysis of Brexit Crisis. The author examines relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union from 1945 to the present, emphasizing on the vote that led to the withdrawal of the United Kingdom. Despite the fact that the consequences to the future of the European Union are still unpredictable –will the Brexit provoke a ripple effect or will it discourage those states that hesitate about its membership to the European Union– Webber considers that the Brexit Crisis «testifies most powerfully to the impact on European integration of domestic politics, of mass politization and political polarization

around EU issues» (p. 202). In this chapter, the author presents an insightful analysis of the relationship between the rise of Eurosceptic parties and the result of the 2016 United Kingdom European Union membership referendum. However, many questions are left unanswered, for example, what is the real possibility that Brexit has a domino effect or will Brexit imply a redefinition of the competence distribution of the European Union?

To conclude, the author focuses on his main two findings. The first one deals with the fact that the process of European integration is not necessarily irreversible. The second statement made by the author is based on the idea that the European Union's survival depends on a renovated coalition of states that drive the integration process. In this regard, Webber identifies three options: a rejuvenated Franco-German alliance –which seems to be the most feasible–, a Weimar alliance composed by France, Germany and Poland –that appears to be difficult because of the regime's drift towards authoritarianism of the ruling party “Law and Justice”– and a coalition of Germany and eight northern states –the least feasible option because of the difficulty in coordinating the interest of each state–. Despite the effort made by the author to analyze three possible alliances, a deeper reflection on what would be the necessary steps to materialize them would be convenient. However, this is understandable due to the fact that this reflection would deserve a separate book.

In a nutshell, Webber's contribution to the study of European (dis)integration is a timely, well-structured and pedagogical work. Through the book, Webber exhibits his deep understanding of the European Union as well as his analytical capacity to identify the most relevant events that took place in the past years that have determined the path of European integration. It is worth mentioning the wide review made by the author of the existing literature, with references in English, French and German, that constitutes an excellent source of information for those who want to achieve a better understanding of the European Union. However, the main achievement of the book is the fact that it fills a gap in contemporary literature because of its novel and in-depth analysis of the process of European disintegration.

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