

# EUROPE'S MALAISE

The Long View

**Edited by** Francesco Duina  
and Frédéric Merand

RESEARCH IN  
POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

**VOLUME 27**

# EUROPE'S MALAISE

# RESEARCH IN POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

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RESEARCH IN POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY VOLUME 27

# EUROPE'S MALAISE: THE LONG VIEW

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# EUROPE'S MALAISE: INSIGHTS FROM COMPARATIVE AND HISTORICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE

Francesco Duina and Frédéric Mérand

## ABSTRACT

*How should we make sense of Europe's current malaise? Focused on the great recession, the European Union (EU)'s architecture, or diverging national interests, the literature offers useful economic, institutional, and political explanations. It is our contention that, however diverse, these works share one important limitation: a tendency to focus on rather immediate causes and consequences and not to step back with historical or comparative perspectives to gain a "longer" view of the dynamics at work. In this article, we begin by examining parallels between the EU's current conditions and the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Then, introducing the articles contained in this special issue, we raise research questions pertaining to long-term historical, social, cultural, economic, and political factors. Are the current challenges unprecedented or do they have roots or connections to past events and developments? Is there a European trajectory into which we can contextualize current events? Are there bright spots, and what do they suggest about Europe's present and future? To engage in such questions, the papers leverage the insights of historical and comparative sociology, as well as comparative politics. In so doing, they offer analyses that see the EU as an instance of state formation. They propose that a key dimension of tension and possible resolution is the classic problem of sovereignty. They grapple with the question of identity and institutions, exploring in that context the extent and limit of citizens' support for more Europe. And they delve into the nature of the nationalist and populist sentiments within and across European countries.*

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Europe's Malaise

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In *The World of Yesterday*, Stefan Zweig (1943) paints a continent that descends from 40 years of peace, prosperity, and cultural effervescence into war, ethnic hatred, intellectual decline, and physical destruction. Displaying fleeting moments of hope, Zweig's autobiography begins with the "world of security" and ends with chapters entitled "Dawn," "Incipit Hitler," and "The Agony of Peace."

Published posthumously, the book enjoyed renewed popularity in the wake of the great recession that began in 2008, when it seemed to describe a continent that was again on the verge of collapse. For social scientists, there is much to learn from *The World of Yesterday*. The long historical perspective, the powerful interplay of political, economic, and cultural forces, the clash of individual and collective trajectories, and the fragile horizon of European unification are fundamental to understanding Europe's past as well as its present. It is hard to avoid the feeling that Zweig describes the European Union (EU) of today, with centrifugal and centripetal forces, multiculturalism coexisting with xenophobia, and vibrant democratic movements with illiberal ones.

Zweig's very personal European crisis is caused by nationalism, militarism, and a sort of collective political irresponsibility. At its core, we find the dismantlement of Austria-Hungary, the place where he was born, preceded by a long agony and a growing loss of collective belief. Ulrich, the Viennese character in Robert Musil's *Man without Qualities* (1930–1943/1996), whose publication preceded *The World of Yesterday* by a decade, embodies the irony-filled and seemingly indolent collapse of a cosmopolitan project, "Kakania," as preparations for the emperor's 1917 jubilee are buried in the ashes of World War I. Another of Zweig's and Musil's contemporaries, Karl Kraus, called the Austro-Hungarian Empire a "laboratory of universal decline" (quoted in Reszler, 2001, p. 141).

Not surprisingly, historically minded social scientists have compared today's EU to Austria-Hungary, alike in their cosmopolitan, fragile separation of state and nation. Zielonka speaks of the EU as a "neo-medieval empire" (2006, p. 7) and Beck and Grande (2007, p. 2) evoke the "last" political "utopia." So, recently, we have other authors of literary fiction. In 2017, Robert Menasse (2019) won the *Deutscher Buchpreis* for his novel *The Capital*, in which he narrates the European Myth by playing with the themes and structure of Musil's rendering of the Habsburg Myth: rather than on the Emperor's 70th jubilee, the plot centers on the EU's 60th anniversary, an empty signifier that turns into a political-bureaucratic debacle.

Other best-selling authors such as Jean-Philippe Toussaint (2019), a Belgian, and Aurélien Bellanger (2019), a Frenchman, also treat the EU as a baroque but damaged center of power. In *The USB Key*, Toussaint tracks the geopolitical and nostalgic travels of a European Commission official who feels he is spied on by Chinese cybersecurity experts, with the complicity of Eastern Europe. In *The Continent of Softness*, Bellanger recreates an Alpine duchy, half-Liechtenstein half-Davos, as it is taken over by a familiar group of enlightened businesspeople,

intellectuals, and scientists who try to restore Europe's glory in a miniature political laboratory.

We probably live in another long European crisis. Europe is struggling (Castells et al., 2017; Falkner, 2016). Its challenges include weak economic growth, demographic trends that undermine the sustainability of social and other programs, identity uncertainties, migration, populism, geopolitical tensions, Brexit, the EU's legitimacy crisis, the unfinished euro architecture, the EU's relationship with Turkey, and much more. Plenty of mainstream media commentators (see, for instance, Boffey, 2018; "The euro crisis," 2014) and academics (see, for instance, Ioannou, Leblond, & Niemann, 2015; Thompson, 2018) have described these problems. Some of the dynamics at work may encourage further integration, but others are undermining it. Some may even challenge the integrity of European nation states as we know them. Like Austria-Hungary, the EU is a "temporary turned chronic" (Rainer Maria Rilke, quoted in Reszler, 2001, p. 5)—a kind of political and cultural form that always seems on the verge of disintegration.

But there are also important differences from the twentieth century. Despite the rise of populism and the resurgence of nationalist sentiments, there are no stark divisions between European nations today. Barring the impact of a possible hard Brexit on Northern Ireland, physical borders are gone (but for temporary COVID-19 ones), military activity has been marginalized, and when political conflicts emerge they are channeled into deeply institutionalized structures in Brussels, the seat of the Council, and Luxembourg, the seat of the Court of Justice (see, for instance, Birchfield, Krige, & Young, 2017). So, the crises do not necessarily translate directly into the end of the established order. Rather, they continue in protracted form, with actors—at different local, national, and EU levels—taking stances and looking for answers. As van Middelaar (2019) has argued, the collective sense of political responsibility on the part of leaders is key to understanding how the EU survived the polycrisis. Here, the comparison with Vienna is clearly in Brussels' favor.

The location and contours of Europe have changed as well. France, Britain, Italy, and Belgium have lost their colonial empires. In Zweig's world, European affairs took place between Vienna, Milan, and Paris, with London looking in and Berlin posing a growing threat. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, Madrid, Barcelona, Dublin, and Warsaw became great European cities, as Europe's center of gravity moved to Berlin. Paris still matters, of course, and Brussels too, but the former as a shadow of itself and the latter in a reconfigured format as "The Capital," to quote Menasse's title. More importantly, the continent itself is no longer the center of the world. Without the assent of the United States, Europe can achieve little in economic and especially security matters. Depending on the issues at hand, the same can be said of China's cooperation. Russia retains an insidious influence and may even be a real threat for Eastern member states (Campbell & Hall, 2015). Today, Europe is a quarter of the world economy and less than 10% of its population: demographic trends almost guarantee that Africa and India will, in the decades to come, matter far more than they do today (Cookson, 2018). So, a struggling Europe appears to be also a less relevant Europe. A protracted malaise could very well be here.

How should we make sense of Europe's current conditions? Numerous explanations have been offered. We consider them below. But it is our contention that, however diverse, by and large they share one important limitation: a tendency to focus on rather immediate causes and consequences and not to step back with historical or comparative perspectives to gain a "longer" view of the dynamics at work. This is not to say that current interpretations have no merit: they certainly do, and no explanation would be complete without them. The point is rather to encourage also different kinds of analyses that offer the opportunity for broader contextualization and thus understanding. The objective of this special issue is to advance a set of such analyses.

We can start, then, by identifying the existing perspectives. Three are especially prominent.

### ECONOMIC STRAINS

There are scholars for whom the 2008 economic and financial crisis is largely to blame (Carl, 2017; Dyson, 2017). The great recession exacerbated negative developments stemming from the world economy (Hall, 2018). Internally, *within nation states*, poverty and growing inequality increased. Unemployment rates soared, while national governments experienced a slowdown in revenue intakes as debt and expenses grew. Austerity measures were put into place (Steinebach & Knill, 2018). Public programs for the vulnerable were reduced, further worsening living conditions. Europeans have felt strained since then. Social tensions have risen, pitting classes of citizens—the well-off who can benefit from transnationalism and the opportunities generated by European integration against those, with more limited abilities and resources, left behind (Fligstein, 2008).

A sense that public funds have been spent on the wrong priorities—including migrants or to prop up banks and struggling corporations—have made matters worse. The tensions have manifested themselves in political elections, where extremist populist, protectionist, and xenophobic parties—some cleverly adopting elements of progressive rhetoric to win even more votes from constituents such as women and gays—scored impressive victories across many countries and at the EU level the expense of traditional center-right and center-left parties (Duina & Carson, 2020; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2016).

The economic problems have also had negative *international* consequences. Austerity and economic disillusionments have led many to doubt the legitimacy of the European project (Blyth, 2013; Streeck & Elsässer, 2016). Spurred at times by populist leaders, citizens have questioned the motives of unelected Eurocrats and the spending of precious money for European projects of little relevance to their everyday lives (Lucarelli, 2015, p. 52). In the old EU countries, resentment has grown toward Eastern Europeans moving in search of better work, with negative consequences for support for European integration itself (Toshkov & Kortenska, 2015). In parallel, anger has spread among Southern debtor countries toward Northern creditor ones, as the latter have criticized the former for lacking fiscal rectitude (Hall, 2018; Matthijs & McNamara, 2015). In Germany, fears of a

“Transfer Union,” where northerners subsidize rescue measures for their southern neighbors, became a constant concern (Laffan, 2017, p. 140). The result of all these dynamics is a Europe pulling itself apart—something unlikely to be reversed until a new economic model is found to replace an exhausted post–World War II regime that appears to have run out of possibilities and promise.

## FAULTY EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS

For other scholars, European institutions are primarily responsible for the mess (see, for instance, Jones, Kelemen, & Meunier, 2016). This is perhaps the most common argument, at least in academic circles. The “long European crisis” (2000–2019) started with institutional bickering, went through economic travails, and ended in political conflict. After decades of steady and largely uncontested institutional development, the turn of the twenty-first century was characterized by ill-conceived decisions and disappointed expectations. Launched in 1999, the euro failed to produce a common economic policy while Schengen, which became community policy (but for the Irish and British opt-outs) in 1997, did not lead to a common migration policy (Crafts, 2014; Guiraudon, 2018; Maricut, 2017). The 2002–2003 European Convention did not convince governments to take a federal step, and ensuing referendums did not compel people to buy into the constitutional project (Glencross, 2009; Whitman, 2005). The economic and debt crises of 2007–2008 only deepened the mistrust of existing institutional arrangement, partly by highlighting the difficulties with which EU decision-making bodies can run into when trying to respond and partly by laying bare the limited democratic credentials of those bodies (Featherstone, 2016; Sen, 2012). While some authors defend the European Council as the ultimate repository of political responsibility among national leaders, the Commission and other unelected bodies such as the European Central Bank have become the targets of harsh criticism (van Middelaar, 2019; Vauchez, 2016).

The result of these institutional problems is a sense that the EU is an out-of-touch, byzantine, and in some cases outright harmful institutional creation. It is a place incapable of dealing with problems and, in fact, a space with mechanisms that actually induce tensions among nations. The recent spats over African migration into Italy, along with parallel migratory issues in Greece and Eastern countries such as Hungary, offer an example (Lavenex, 2001; Scipioni, 2018). The insistence on orthodox neoliberal approaches to the euro by EU institutions, the resistance to a genuine EU fiscal policy and pooling of sovereign debt, and the consequences of such stances for EU countries in need of more expansive budgetary and fiscal policies offer other examples (Matthijs, 2016; Matthijs & Blyth, 2018). For the most radical critics, the EU institutions create, rather than solve, crises, by an overemphasis on intergovernmental deals and “emergency politics” (White, 2020). This is shown most clearly in Costa-Gavras’ political thriller, *Adults in the Room*, a film that reenacts through Yanis Varoufakis’ eyes the clash between a democratically elected government and the “institutions” during the worst period of the Greek crisis. Even when they could in principle

serve as solutions, the institutions fall short of their potential (Caporaso, 2018). As a result, nations suffer and citizens wonder why, in the first place, the EU exists.

## UNCOMPROMISING NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

A third set of scholars recognize the institutional problems but place the blame on member states unwilling to work together to achieve joint solutions to problems that require international cooperation. If the economic and monetary union cannot be completed, the responsibility lies within Berlin that refuses to share risks and Rome that engages in irresponsible fiscal policy (Hopkin, 2012; Matthijs & Blyth, 2018). If migration cannot be communitarized, it is largely because several governments, mostly but not only in the East, oppose immigration in and of itself (Geddes, 2018). These are not momentary disagreements that can be easily resolved. Driving them are strong political forces, social cleavages, and cultural disagreements across—and often within—nation states. What happens at the EU level is a reflection of those factors.

This is thus more than what EU scholars would call an intergovernmental account of how Europe works (Moravcsik, 2018). That account sees governments reach meaningful EU agreements on important problems, and those agreements as always reflecting Pareto-optimum outcomes that maximize participants' interests. The reality instead is that European countries have a difficult time agreeing on anything substantive in the first place. And driving their positions are more than rational calculations of costs and benefits. Pride, catering to particular domestic constituents, poor foresight, uncertainty about things, and emotions shape positions and choices. Brexit in this regard—starting with David Cameron's ill-conceived referendum bluff that he expected would result in a "Remain" victory—serves as a powerful illustration (Glencross, 2016; O'Toole, 2018). The tensions in the Franco-German alliance, with Macron not only pushing for grand European plans that include shared sovereign bonds and Berlin resisting but also offering no concrete alternatives, offer another (Horobin, 2017). Italy's turns to Russia and China, as it reacts in frustration to economic, budgetary, and migratory problems, offers a third (Johnson, 2019; Siddi, 2019).

Europe is suffering because Europeans cannot get along. If once, perhaps in a small EU, they knew how to coordinate and function together, today national interests seem to prevail. The results are a growing list of unresolved problems, suboptimal policies, and mutual distrust.

## WHY WE NEED COMPARATIVE AND HISTORICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE

These three perspectives on Europe's malaise—economic, institutional, and political—have clear merits. They zero in on salient and pressing causes and consequences. Yet, they share the tendency to adopt rather immediate standpoints in terms of what matters. Their time horizons are limited, and comparative

assessments are rare. Arguments are made by “stepping into” the details of European affairs, rather than “stepping out” of them to gather a broader perspective on the continent’s evolution. Does Europe’s experience have parallels in other parts of the world, and what might we learn about its problems by looking beyond its borders? Are the current challenges unprecedented or do they have roots or connections to past events and developments? Is there a big picture that we should keep in mind as we interpret Europe’s malaise? Is there a European trajectory into which we can contextualize current events? Are there bright spots, and what do they suggest about Europe’s present and future?

The purpose of this special issue is to engage in precisely such questions. For that, the contributors make use of the tools of historical and comparative sociology and of comparative politics. They offer analyses that see the EU as an instance of state formation—unique not only in some respects but also with parallels in other experiences in Europe in earlier times and projects in other continents. They propose that a key dimension of tension and possible resolution is the classic problem of sovereignty: how authority and resources are pooled or distributed among constituent parts of a body politic. They grapple with the question of identity and institutions, exploring in that context the extent and limit of citizens’ support for more Europe. And, among many other themes, they delve into the nature of the nationalist and populist sentiments currently defining politics within and across European countries not as momentary expressions of dissatisfaction but as the result of long-term economic and cultural displacements.

We note that these sorts of analyses have by and large been absent from scholarly debates. Despite their long-standing interest in state formation, historical and comparative sociologists have devoted little attention to the EU. There is, to be sure, important, even if limited, scholarship on the sociology of the EU (Saurugger & Mérand, 2010), which includes the role of identity, migration, and social mobility (Delanty & Rumford, 2005; Favell & Guiraudon, 2011). But with the notable exceptions of Stefano Bartoloni’s *Restructuring Europe* (2005), Perry Anderson’s *The New Old World* (2009), and more recently Kathleen McNamara’s *Politics of Everyday Europe* (2015), few authors have inscribed the EU into the evolving political, cultural, and demographic structures of the European continent or have sought to compare events in the EU to those happening elsewhere. Indeed, the tendency among scholars of the EU has been to treat it as a case *sui generis*.

The truth, of course, is that historical and comparative sociology has much to offer here. Despite various schools of thought within it, its starting point has generally been that any social phenomenon—including cases of state building—is seldom truly unique. Instead, it often exhibits characteristics and dynamics found elsewhere: it “belongs” to, or at least has correspondence to, a broader set of cases (Ragin, 1981; Rezaev, Starikov, & Tregubova, 2015). These can be across space (as in other geographies) or time. This is primarily because, in line with a more fundamental sociological insight, of two reasons. First, in many cases phenomena follow certain patterns and laws. Revolutions, for instance, while certainly different from each other, also share certain triggers or causes and lead to a certain range of likely outcomes (Tiruneh, 2014). States throughout time, in turn, have wielded



certain powers, such as despotic and infrastructural (Mann, 2008). And former colonies retain certain ties to their former controlling powers (Brysk, Parsons, & Sandholtz, 2002; Larson & Aminzade, 2008). Second, and relatedly, any given social phenomenon is inevitably embedded in broader political, cultural, religious, and other contexts, which, themselves, share similarities and patterns with other such contexts elsewhere. It follows that, even if the phenomena in question were truly distinct, they are responding to potentially rather similar forces.

The same can be said if we were to turn to comparative politics (Mahoney, 2007). Few scholars working in that field have taken the EU, as a whole, as the unit of analysis to be examined against other cases. The traditional approach is to compare countries. Recent scholarship has certainly challenged that a number of scholars have begun comparing the EU to other regional organizations, such as Mercosur in South America and ASEAN in Asia (Börzel & Risse, 2016; Duina, 2006; Hofmann & Mérand, 2012; Sbragia, 2008). Yet, these analyses, too, tend to eschew the broader contexts by focusing rather narrowly on the technical aspects of integration—typically, similarities and differences in specific institutional designs. The reality is that the analytical and methodological underpinnings of comparative politics hold much promise for making sense of Europe’s current conditions. Similarly to historical and comparative sociology, a central assumption of comparative politics is that observable outcomes in one setting are seldom unique outliers that have nothing to do with outcomes in other settings. Even if differences abound, cases “speak” to each other in so far as what may be learned about one can be applicable to another (O’Neil, 2018).

The focus of comparative politics is, by definition, narrower than that of comparative and historical sociology: it is more limited to political matters—such as power-related institutions, voter behavior, political parties, and do so on. There is also a stronger tendency toward the study of the formal dimensions of political life and toward more quantitative approaches. But none of this should be seen as a detraction. There is much to be gained by comparative analyses of the formal political dimensions of the EU and Europe vis-à-vis the political dimensions of other regional efforts or other sorts of political entities (including nation states). The benefits could include a demystification of the EU as so unique that it defies understanding, a broader understanding of the possibilities for its evolution, a clearer sense of what may be ailing it, and a fuller sense of what solutions might be possible.

The articles in this volume engage in precisely these sorts of analyses. Taken together, they offer a “long view” on the current European condition that counterbalances the more immediate conclusions gained from the existing dissections and analyses.

## INSIGHTS FROM THIS VOLUME

We can begin with Brendan O’Leary’s contribution. His argument dissipates the conceptual fog over the basic architecture of the EU that has engulfed scholarly debates for decades and has prevented observers from making sense of the EU’s various struggles and successes. O’Leary rejects the notions that the EU