The Treaty of Rome: Three Pictures

Manners, Ian

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In 2007 the European Union (EU) celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome establishing the European Economic Community. Fifty years after the signing ceremony on the 25th March 1957 at the Palazzo dei Conservatori on Capitoline Hill, Rome, it is rather difficult to say anything new or certain about the contemporary EU. There are, however, three ‘big pictures’ of the EU which can just be seen with sufficient critical distance if one takes a step backwards. These three pictures are only now coming into focus half a century after the signing of the Treaty of Rome and represent images of the ‘raison d’être’, ‘hybrid polity’, and ‘normative balance’ of the EU.

The last fifty years have seen a gradual evolution of the raison d’être of the EU, very much reflecting the global context in which it sits. Taking a broad view, the raison d’être of the EU can be abstracted as the pursuit of peace, prosperity and progress. Hence the immediate post-war and cold war periods 1950 to 1969 tended to focus on peace building amongst former enemies. Following the western economic crises of the 1970s, the period 1984 to 1992 represented a change of direction with a focus on market building and returning relative prosperity to EU citizens. Finally, the post-cold war period has seen the EU increasingly concentrating on progressively responding to more global concerns such as economic and developmental crises; migration and human rights; the environment and energy issues; conflict and terrorism, and global institution building.

Since the Treaty of Rome the EU has slowly and hesitantly developed into a hybrid polity which is ‘polycentric’. The EU is polycentric in nature because political power is shared by so many different political entities – hence the EU is regularly described in various contradictory ways such as ‘intergovernmental’, superational’, ‘multi-leveled’, or ‘regional’. The EU is primarily intergovernmental in the sense that it is the constitutive member states that confer competences on the EU, and it is the member states that maintain important roles for themselves through intergovernmental institutions such as the Council of Ministers and the European Council.

The EU is also supranational to the extent that its ordinary legislative procedure creates supranational law and that it has a number of supranational institutions within its hybrid polity. These supranational institutions include the European Commission, the Court of Justice, the Court of Auditors, and the European Central Bank. Finally, the EU is also transnational because the role and attention given to non-national and non-supranational institutions and actors within its hybrid polity. These transnational institutions include the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions, all of which represent local and transnational civil society, rather the member states or actors within its hybrid polity. The transnational aspect of the EU is given further importance through the treaty-based references to the principles of the United Nations Charter, in particular through the EU’s external actions. It is within the political context of its raison d’etre and hybrid polity that a normative balance is beginning to emerge within the EU. What the complexities of global interdependence over the past fifty years since the Treaty of Rome demonstrate is that the distinctions between EU internal policies and EU external actions are more permeated than they have ever been. In this world a European balance must be struck between the extremes of communist collectivisation and capitalist individualisation; between the brutalities of nationalistic and the problems of globalism. The EU’s normative balance...
reflects these shared experiences and collective memories of the last half-century, however diffuse. Hence while some member states share collective memories of the catastrophic effects of the second world war and ensuing cold war, others have experiences of brutal authoritarian rule, whilst others still have only recently emerged as modern economies.

However thin these collective experiences, they contribute to the emphasis placed on striking a balance between liberalism and socialism as dominant ideologies in post-cold war Europe. Within the EU, the emphasis placed on the liberal normative principles of freedom, democracy, rule of law, and good governance reflect the post-war experiences of creating free democracies and market economies. At the same time, the emphasis placed on social normative principles of human rights, equality, solidarity, and sustainable development reflect the post-war experiences of creating welfare states and mixed economies. Taken together, this normative balance reflects emerging EU politics in a 21st century more safely lived without an uncritical belief in any one ideology.

It has been argued that three big pictures are beginning to emerge of the European Union and the Treaty of Rome after 50 years. These are complex and contradictory pictures with little clarity and are clearly nowhere near being finished – indeed they never will be. Like most compound polities, the EU defies simplification and generalisation but that does not mean we cannot see some emerging clarity after fifty years. However it is equally important that there is engagement between those who either dismiss its importance, or overemphasise its monolithic appearance. Looking at the EU fifty years after the Treaty of Rome with a series of three big pictures helps to bring some colour and light to the impressionistic work of simple dichotomies that so often dominate the discussion of the EU. To conclude, it is worth returning to the words of another impressionist – Monnet (Jean) – who has also been regularly misrepresented:

One impression predominates in my mind over all others. It is this: unity in Europe does not create a new kind of great power; it is a method for introducing change in Europe and consequently in the world. People, more often outside the European Community than within, are tempted to see the European Community as a potential nineteenth-century state with all the overtones this implies. But we are not in the nineteenth century, and the Europeans have built up the European Community precisely in order to find a way out of the conflicts to which the nineteenth-century philosophy gave rise.