Expert Comment

The EU and hegemony: The new medievalism revisited

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The European Union represents one of the most articulated and ambitious attempts to construct an international order that explicitly rejects power politics and hegemony as organising principles. Its unique political and institutional architecture aims to ensure that all member states, regardless of size or material capability, are equal. This same principle is extended to the emphasis on a multilateral international system rooted in the rule of law and institutions.

This paper argues that the EU’s search for ontological security – that is, its sense of self or the confidence in the continuity of the social world and its role within it – requires it to see itself as an actor that rejects hegemony, both internally and as an international actor. The paper argues that this leads the EU to see itself as a form of ‘new medievalism’, a political organisation that has no single political authority over a territory, with amorphous levels of government interacting to resolve policy questions.

The paper explores how this self-understanding has been challenged: both internally as some member states feel that major states, especially Germany have begun to impose their interests and will on others; and externally, as instability on its eastern and southern borders has led to increasing demands for it to use its material capability to change the behaviour of other actors, i.e., to be hegemonic. The paper concludes that material capability and power still matter in Europe, making it likely that the larger member states of the EU will try to use it.

Keywords: European Union; ontological security; hegemony; migration; normative power.
The European Union presents an interesting case for a discussion of hegemony and international order. Less than a state and more than an international organisation, it has few of the traditional instruments of material power, yet it is an important international actor, especially at a broad regional level. It has, right from the start in the immediate post-war period, rejected power politics and the very notion of hierarchy and hegemony in the international system. However, as it faces a series of tensions on its southern and eastern borders, and an American administration undermining the pillars of the transatlantic alliance, the EU is increasingly being drawn into a discussion about how it can define its strategic interests and develop the instruments to ensure it can influence the behaviour of other actors in order to protect and promote those interests.

The confluence of a decade-long economic crisis in many member states, Brexit, migration, and tensions between military powers has raised questions about whether the attempt to exert ‘normative’ power in order to create a rules-based multilateral order had not only failed but about the extent to which not being a hegemonic actor was a liability and not an asset. Had the time come for the EU to use its power to pursue its strategic interests and if so, with what possible consequences?

The question of hegemony is particularly vexing on two fronts for the European Union. On one hand, it increasingly wants to play a prominent role in international politics, especially at the regional level in a geographic space that goes from North Africa and the Middle East in the south to the Caucuses and the Balkans in the east. Its economic and political weight surely gives it the instruments to shape how order can be established in this ‘shared’ space and even to exert hegemonic power. Moreover, internally it is comprised of member states that differ significantly in terms of their material power, with nuclear powers such as France and the UK, along with industrial powerhouse Germany, clearly having the material capacity to exert hegemony over member states such as Malta or Estonia. On the other hand, the EU’s own sense of being, its fundamental principle that gives it meaning, embraces not only
an international order based on multilateralism and the rule of law but also a rejection of power politics and the very notion of hegemony, including and especially in relations between member states. This has led to an institutional architecture that has tried to minimise the disparity in material power between member states and a political consensus that conventional notions of power, sovereignty, and territory do not apply to the sui generis EU. This has been extended to the EU as a global actor. Rejecting realist notions of an international order necessarily riven by fear and uncertainty, the emphasis is on how the rejection of power politics and hegemony amongst member states can and should be the basis for international order.

The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it explores whether the EU presents a successful alternative form of international order that eschews notions of hierarchy and hegemony: Is a horizontal international system, devoid of fear and uncertainty as driving principles, possible? We will explore how arguments about the EU as a ‘civilising’ or ‘normative’ power have highlighted claims that its exceptional nature would be a model to be emulated on a scale much broader than the European continent. Secondly, and related, it argues that the answer to the first question is that the EU faces serious challenges to an ‘a-hegemonic’ approach to international order, including relations between its member states. It will use the concepts of the ‘new medievalism’ and ontological security to help illustrate the tension between the EU’s sense of self, rooted in a fluid and a-territorial understanding of political power, and the increasing demand to assert forms of material power to change the behaviour of other actors.

The paper will be divided into three sections. The first will briefly discuss some of its core concepts: the new medievalism; ontological security; and the normative/transformative power of the EU. The second section will look at how some of these core concepts have been applied to the EU as a global actor as well as its internal structures. The third section
will look at how power and hegemony are emerging as central issues and challenges for the EU, not just materially but also ontologically.

The new medievalism and the search for ontological security

The EU continues to defy any easy categorisation, leading many scholars to argue that its sui generis nature rules out conventional concepts that have guided scholars of international relations and political science. The unique nature of the EU rests not so much in its institutional architecture – arguably a rudimentary federal system – but in its explicit rejection of power politics and hierarchy in relations between international actors, including those between its own member states. It may display many of the classic features of a middle power (Cooper, 1997) but what differs is that it has the capacity to be more than a middle power but chooses not to be. This is due not only to internal divisions that are an obstacle to defining common strategic interests and the generating of political will to pursue them but also to the cognitive and normative map that frames the EU’s understanding of the world: one that seeks to return to its medieval roots.

Over 40 years ago, Hedley Bull, writing in The Anarchical Society, listed the “new medievalism” as one of the possible models to challenge an international system based on states.

If modern states were to come to share their authority over their citizens, and their ability to command their loyalties, on the one hand with regional and world authorities, and on the other hand with sub-state or sub-national authorities, to such an extent that the concept of sovereignty ceased to be applicable, then a neomediaeval form of universal political order might be said to have emerged (Bull, 2002, pp. 246-247).

Bull did not believe that the decline of the state-based system and its replacement by a series of fluid, regional bodies was imminent but the medieval analogy did strike a chord with proponents of European integration.
In the medieval order, no single ruler was vested with supreme political authority (or sovereignty) over a particular territory or population. Authority was divided and shared both upwards and downwards, with multiple and overlapping sites of legitimate political rule. Anticipating what would later be called multilevel governance in the EU, the European medieval order did not envision the centralisation of political power. Despite the best efforts of popes and the Holy Roman Emperor, there was no recognition of a single universal, temporal power within a given territory. Indeed, the Catholic Church, which at times sought to exert ultimate authority across a fragmented Europe, found itself challenged at almost every attempt. On the juridical front, different legal orders (such as common law, customary law, and civil law), based on different Christian, German, and Roman traditions, co-existed and competed amongst themselves. With a weak or non-existent centre, even the administration of justice became a complex affair.

Proponents of European integration see (implicitly) the EU as the prototype of a new (medieval) international order. They see a number of developments that challenge a vertical organisation of political authority in the contemporary world. Private international violence, such as terrorism, has established itself as an unprecedented form of international power. The growth of international organisations has been unrelenting, as has been the transnational mobility of information, capital, technology, and individuals. These factors do not mean that the state will disappear; rather, it will have to share power in the international order with other domestic and supranational actors.

In the new medievalism, no actor can claim exclusive sovereignty or independent authority within a territory. The international order, which is becoming highly institutionalised, is organised around multiple centres of power, from micro-regions to states to macro-regions. In this order, regional aggregations are assuming many of the functions that were the domain of states in the past. This calls for new institutions that go beyond the state for coordination in managing conflicts, peacekeeping, and economic regulation. The EU is the
most advanced example of this development because it assumes importance as an
international actor even though it is not a state. New institutions, authorities, and economic
spaces have emerged but none are capable of imposing their will on the others; they co-
exist and compete just as they did in the old medieval order.

This ‘medieval’ understanding of the international order is central to providing the EU
with ontological security; that is, it provides practices, routines, and narratives that help
define ‘who’ it is and why it remains as a political community (Mitzen, 2006a; Steele, 2008).
The debate about the sui generis nature of the EU centres primarily on what it is –
confederal, post-modern, compound, federalising, etc. – more than on who it is and why.
However, as a social and collective actor, the EU may also seek out ontological security;
that is, practices, routines, and narratives that help define who it is and why it remains as a
political community (Mitzen, 2006a; Steele, 2008).

Drawing from its use by Giddens and international relations scholars, ontological
security refers to a sense of confidence in one’s identity (Berenskoetter, 2014; Giddens,
1991; Mitzen, 2006b). Giddens claims that ontological security, “[r]efers to the confidence
that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of
the surrounding social and material environments of action” (Giddens, 1990, p. 92).
Ontological security claims that social actors need basic trust in the continuity of the factors
that give them their sense of identity in order for them to have agency, set objectives, define
interests, and act strategically. This continuity is rooted in habit and routine (Giddens, 1990,
p. 98) as well as in the stability of the environment that defines an identity. Routines are
important in ordering the social world as they, “Serve the cognitive function of providing
individuals with ways of knowing the world and how to act, giving them a felt certainty that
enables purposive choice” (Mitzen, 2006b, p. 347).
In the face of perceived external threats and challenges, the EU has seemed incapable of acting not because it did not know what to do, but because it was not clear what it was and why it should act.

The European Union also seeks and needs ontological security. It has attempted to assume agency and exert political authority in a wider range of policy areas. In order to do so, it is increasingly called to provide a sense of self that spells out in whose name it acts and why. It may not necessarily claim a monopoly as an ontological security provider but it does need to generate a degree of surety about the continuity of its sense of self when it tries to act. For example, in facing the challenge of how to address questions about migration and borders, the EU needs to not only have an understanding of the physical organisation of territory but also one that gives meaning to those borders and who is to be excluded (Della Sala, 2017). As the case of the response to the migrant crisis has highlighted, creating a sense of self for the EU and for Europeans often clashes with the ontological security of member states. Europe may be returning to its medieval roots but the EU must contend with the very real possibility that Europeans and member states still see the world as organised around the modern principles of centralised political authority, with hard borders to keep sources of fear and uncertainty at bay.

The EU’s (new) medieval roots

Scholars may disagree about the reasons for its creation and over what it is but the EU, especially with the end of the Cold War, has been seen as representing a different kind of international order to the one constructed by realism. The EU was to be an order based on a rich and textured multilateralism that placed primacy on the rule of law rather than material capability. It was not just hubris that led European leaders and commentators to argue that the new century would belong to the EU (Leonard, 2005). This was fuelled by Europe’s post-war experience, especially Franco-German relations, of using economic integration as the
vehicle to enhance closer political ties and change the matrix of interests of member states. The structural constraints of the Cold War in Europe were glossed over to narrate the story of a project that had “surpassed realism” (Gilbert, 2003).

Not everyone shared in this belief of an international order free of power politics and geostrategic calculations. The dust had not yet settled after the crumbling of the Berlin Wall when John Mearsheimer warned of “going back to the future” in Europe. He warned that rather than ushering in a period of unbridled peace, the end of the Cold War would lead to multiple centres of power and power inequities on the continent and likely result in greater instability and likelihood of violence (Mearsheimer 1990). Mearsheimer may have anticipated developments that have led to greater fear and uncertainty in Europe but he was largely a lone voice in the 1990s, especially compared to the dominant, almost hegemonic, view amongst EU leaders and within EU studies that the end of bipolarism could only enhance the prospects for a thick institutional and normative order in Europe.

This belief that the EU was indeed the architect of an emerging order based on a thick institutionalism and normative foundation, more than fear and uncertainty, was captured in its first strategic review in 2003. Coming a decade after the formal introduction of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, it was titled “A secure Europe in a better world” and opened by claiming that, “Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free” (Council of the European Union, 2003, p. 1). Making arguments that seemed consistent with liberal internationalism, the strategic review, known as the European Security Strategy (ESS), claimed that the opening of markets and the spread of democratic values and institutions were responsible for a more secure and peaceful Europe. Moreover, this successful management of relations within Europe was the basis for an assertive role in international relations and in extending the model to shape a new international order. Interestingly, the relatively brief report (15 pages compared to 55 in 2016) only refers to strategy once, on the title page, while there are only three references to “European
interests”. This suggests a vision of the EU that was charting a course for itself as the architect of an international order far from the power politics and geopolitical calculations which had shaped the continent in the modern era (Della Sala, forthcoming).

The European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) in 2016 was met with a great deal of fanfare and anticipation. As one of its architects, Natalie Tocci, claims, the EU needed more than just the vision that characterised the ESS. The EU was in the midst of an “existential crisis” and it needed a strategy to not only heal internal rifts but also to provide the basis to act in an increasingly unstable international order and to give meaning to that action (Tocci, 2016, p. 462). Perhaps reflecting the bruising decade that had led to the EU’s “existential crisis”, the organising principle of the global strategy was to be “resilience”, taking guidance from recent emphasis on the ability of states and societies to withstand and adapt to crises (Chandler, 2012; Wagner and Anholt, 2016).

The emphasis on resilience was also seen as an attempt to distance EU foreign policy from the idealism of the ESS and to chart a more “pragmatic” course (Juncos, 2017). The EUGS was seen as an attempt to begin to operationalise the EU’s foreign policy by perhaps loosening the reins that resulted from an emphasis on the EU’s thick institutional and normative approach. For example, while the ESS had infrequent references to strategies and interests, nearly every page of the EUGS makes reference to one or both as the guiding principles for action.

The EU’s two strategic reviews also represent the development of scholarship on the EU as a global actor and its foreign policy. Starting in the 1970s with the notion that the EU could be a “civilian power”, many scholars largely perceived the fledgling foreign and security policy at the turn of the millennium as embodying “normative power” (Manners, 2002). The EU as a global actor embodied the values that were instrumental in defining its reasons for being and which gave purpose to its relations with other states: a post-sovereign polity that operated on the basis of shared interests and values more than on the basis of
clearly defined strategic interests backed by the security and defence architecture to realise them.

The notion of normative power gained wide currency in academic literature but by the time the EU began to reflect on a new strategic review, even scholarly research was taking a much more nuanced approach to foreign and security policy. Scholars began to ask if the EU could remain faithful to its liberal internationalist principles in a world that was increasingly reverting back to realist principles driven by geopolitical considerations (Krotz, 2009; Matlary, 2006; Smith, 2011; Zimmermann, 2007).

The notion of normative power Europe, so central to so many academic debates and the EU’s own narrative as a global actor, stands in contrast to many of the precepts of realism and geopolitics. Being normative means replacing the state “as the centre of concern” (Manners, 2002), promoting values, using persuasion instead of brute force in foreign policy, etc. (Whitman 2011).

However, the concept of normative power may be understood differently, looking to the functions it might serve in trying to craft a foreign policy for a union of sovereign states (Bickerton, 2011): that is, that the idea the EU is a benign global actor which behaves according to norms rather than interests serves as a lowest common denominator to mask the fact its member states have different interests and behave differently (Bickerton, 2011, p. 34).

The argument here is that the EU’s foreign policy is as much for internal consumption as it is for shaping the behaviour of other actors. It helps contribute to a biography of the EU that is consistent with relations between its member states, guided by a commitment to values and shared economic interests. The challenges arise, as they have in the last decade, when that biography needs to be reconciled with the need to make strategic decisions in parts of the world and with other actors who operate according to a realist logic and geopolitical considerations (Smith, 2011).
Academic scholarship, just like EU policymakers, has begun to find ways in which to reconcile a commitment to liberal democratic values, as well as internal policy differences and a fledgling foreign policy architecture, with the need to deal with an international order that is increasingly characterised by fear and uncertainty (Simón, 2013; Wagner, 2017).

One can take the medieval analogy one step further when talking about normative power Europe. The Catholic Church also represented a form of normative power that gave cohesion to fragmented territorial rule. The EU’s cognitive and normative map sees itself in the same benign role, as a simple vehicle for universal principles that are driving history: basic liberal democratic values; the protection of human rights; and liberal democratic institutions. Of course, this is a rather narrow view of medieval history and assigns a much more benign role to the Church than its bloody history suggests, but the point is not that no power tried to assert hegemony over medieval Europe but that there was an understanding of the Church’s role that denied it was anything but a normative power. This is not so different from the EU trying to derive a sense of self by denying that it has strategic interests which it tries to pursue through the use of material power and that it might want to extend some kind of hegemony over a wider political space.

**Hegemony rears its head**

The EU may be done with hegemony but hegemony may not be done with Europe. Even before a series of crises raised questions about the future of European integration, doubts were beginning to emerge that the benign view of power within and outside of the EU was perhaps not holding up. Enlargement into parts of the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries, beginning in 2004, was premised on the principle that these states and societies needed to become “European” before being allowed to join the club. Normative power was now also “transformative” power, that is, the capacity to change societies so that they too could embrace the principles and institutions of liberal democracy and market capitalism.
(Grabbe, 2015). While proponents of European integration saw enlargement as part of a
democratic wave free of strategic interests and expressions of hegemony, others saw it as the “empire” wolf in sheep’s clothing (Zielonka, 2007).

The more recent tensions between eastern and central European member states such as Hungary and Poland underscore the extent to which this process of extending central pillars of European policy to other parts of Europe is far from complete. The Commission has repeatedly tried to intervene in the domestic politics of some member states when it has felt that these clash with European ‘values’. This is never seen as the imposition of some external model for how to organise social and political life but as the rules to which the member states signed up to, rules which are simply the transmission of ‘universal’ principles. The challenge the EU faces is that there needs to be consensus that the application of rules – whether they apply to economic governance or respect for liberal democratic principles – does not represent the imposition of some dominant view, which almost always means the views of some more powerful member states over others.

This attempt to extend a hegemonic model of governing is not limited to those states that are more recent arrivals to the EU. The economic crisis in the Eurozone that started in Greece in 2010 and then spread amongst southern member states was not simply a case of some member states not being prepared for global financial turbulence. It was also a debate over the basic economic principles and social policy objectives of macroeconomic governance (Pisani-Ferry, 2006).

Right from the start, the process of creating an economic and monetary union was about convergence, but in the direction of economic liberalisation and the commodification of large parts of social life (Cafruny and Ryner, 2003). In the domestic politics of some member states, such as Italy, the debate became one of how to overcome or resist German hegemony over governance of the Eurozone. While Germany and northern European member states insisted that public finance rules be strictly adhered to, other macroeconomic
governance rules that affected Germany directly, such as those that governed capital account surpluses, were ignored repeatedly, further fuelling political rhetoric about German “hegemony” (Bulmer, 2014).

One of the arguments that denied hegemony within the EU was always that there was no single member state that had the material power to exert its will on the others. Germany might be the Union’s largest economy but its share of the EU’s GDP (in 2016) was 21%, which compared with the UK’s at 16%, France at 16%, and Italy at 11%. This is different from cases such as Mercosur or the Eurasian Economic Union, which are dominated by the economic weight of Brazil and Russia, respectively. Germany had always gone along with the narrative that it was a member state like all the rest and that its national interests were perfectly aligned with the aims of creating an ever-closer union. Even as pressure grew for Germany to be more assertive, with Poland’s foreign minister remarking at the heart of the Greek financial crisis that he feared German inaction more than anything else, it remained a “reluctant” hegemon (Paterson, 2011).

There is nothing new about discussion of Germany’s central role in shaping the development of European integration. There has always been the view that there was a French-German directorate that drove the integration process (Webber, 1999). What is different about the current discussion is that it is taking place within a broader debate about the role of hegemony in European integration, both within and outside the EU’s borders. The demands for the EU to be more assertive as a global actor have grown incessantly since the Russian intervention in Crimea and the arrival of the Trump presidency. It becomes harder and harder to sustain the claim that EU foreign policy will be driven by universal principles when it begins to take steps to promote strategic interests. For instance, the EU and its member states have entered into agreements with Turkey and different Libyan factions to stem the flow of refugees across the Balkans and the Mediterranean. This has brought numbers down dramatically but has done little to support the claim that the EU is a
different kind of global actor, as normative concerns about the human rights of migrants have disappeared from the migration discussion.

What is increasingly evident in the EU is that some rather evident cleavages are emerging, which revolve around the major powers in the EU: Germany and France. Brexit has also contributed to the sense that the internal equilibria that guaranteed a more fluid and amorphous distribution of powers, with shifting alliances, is giving way to a constant search to find a way to balance or limit Germany’s central role in the European project.

**Conclusion**

The current debate about hegemony and the EU highlights some of the tensions facing the future of European integration. Proponents of integration are calling for bold and ambitious steps to be taken to complete the economic union and put in place the pillars of a political union, with a central fiscal policy and decision-making structures to govern it. However, some of the member states that support this view, such as France and Italy, are reluctant to sign up to a union which is seen to be dominated by economic principles and institutions favoured by Germany (and its northern European allies). More importantly, any decision-making structures introduced into the EU which threaten the delicate balance between large and smaller member states, between different geographic areas or even political equilibria, will be seen as a threat, not just to the institutions but to the very idea of European integration.

The EU works insofar as it is possible to believe that no single member state exerts hegemonic power over the others and that the EU is a different kind of international actor. Both these premises have come under pressure in recent years and what is threatened is the EU’s sense of self as an a-hegemonic actor. The challenge it faces is that it needs to be more hegemonic if it is to deliver the public goods it promises (economic, environmental, and internal security) but it loses its reason for being if it is openly hegemonic. The challenge
coming from what have been called the illiberal democracies is that they are provoking the EU to behave exactly as the hegemon that they claim it to be.

What lessons might we draw for our understanding of hegemony from the EU’s experience? First, even if the EU did not try to exert influence on a regional or global basis, its member states would try to do so. The Libyan intervention (and regime change) in 2011 was strongly backed by the UK and France despite a lack of consensus within the EU and opposition from member states such as Germany and Italy. Germany’s continued pursuit of large energy projects with Russia, such as Nord Stream I and II, despite strong opposition from some of its neighbours, is just one of many examples of how it is hard to convince other international actors that somehow the EU and its member states are different kinds of actors who are no longer interested in power politics and only committed to transmitted liberal democratic principles that reject any notion of exerting some kind of hegemonic power. This suggests that regional blocs will struggle to emerge as hegemonic or even a-hegemonic models in contrast to great powers.

Second, the ontological security of the EU may clash with that of its member states and this threatens the long-term future of the integration project. The EU needs to have a sense of self that rejects the imposition of values and interests on member states or even other international actors. Maintaining this sense of self was not a problem when EU institutions did not have to make strategic or redistributive decisions. Economic and monetary union did not lead to the organic convergence that its founders hoped for and the stated position of representatives of EU institutions is that centralised structures need to be created. This suggests that regional integration projects can only go so far without some form of hegemonic bloc driving the process.

This leads to a third point. Despite the EU’s medieval narrative, power continues to be concentrated within Europe, perhaps increasingly so. The history of the EU has been as much about trying to use European integration as a way to curtail the material power of
larger European states as it has been about pursuing economic interests or pursuing the federal ideal. Fourth, proponents of an idealised view of the European project tend to downplay the importance of the role of the United States in pushing for closer cooperation and of the Cold War in maintaining a relative balance amongst member states. The end of the latter and gradual retreat of the former has not led to the emergence of an ever closer and more horizontal union. Rather, as Mearsheimer forecast, it has exposed the great discrepancies in material power of different member states, differences that can no longer be masked over by the narratives of a normative, exceptional power.

It would be hard to argue that the EU represents a counter-argument to hegemony in the international system. It has tried to put in place an institutional and political architecture for it to define its strategic interests and pursue them in a wider region that it considers its ‘neighbourhood’. Internally, states still pursue their interests and while no one state is hegemonic, some states are seen to dominate over others. In many ways, the EU is very much like the Catholic Church at times during the medieval period, denouncing temporal power but all the while looking for ways to increase it and exert it against others.

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