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THE PUZZLE OF TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS: A THEORY

What Kind of Puzzle?

The paper departs from the recent debate and efforts of theorizing the bonds of association between Europe and America.

In positioning itself in relation to the debate waged, it sets out in the first place by viewing the relationship, in terms of theory, as socially constructed and hence focuses on the key narratives used in the coining of the relationship. Crucially, the relationship is not viewed as being fixed and having a stable essence but is instead regarded as changing and evolving over time. The question is not whether it is in crisis among other reasons because of internal strife (e.g. Kagan, 2003) or commonality is on the verge of breaking down owing to that the liberal order as a society of states is on its way of turning too pluralist in far expanding beyond its original base (e.g. Buzan, 2010). The paper argues instead that the strains relate first and foremost of reacting and adapting to pressures generated by a different constitutive thematization and driving logic. It departs from that a formidable shift has taken place in the sense that the main constitutive story underlying the relationship no longer consists of power politics.

More generally, security as an argument – as testified for example by the images pertaining to an ever expanding ‘zone of peace’ – has lost much of its previous centrality. For sure, it has not disappeared but is increasingly discussed in cooperative terms and has turned less central for the distinctions drawn and the unfolding of international relations at large. It is also premised on a different spatio-temporal matrix with the sphere spatially included growing far beyond the Atlantic one above all with the inclusion of the ‘rising powers’ into the story. Instead of being primarily premised on a logic internal to the transatlantic formation, it is embedded in a far broader constellation that is global in scope. Similarly, it is less distinct and hierarchic in temporal terms. It pertains, in this latter sense, increasingly to struggles and contests with various actors either lagging behind to such a degree that they might constitute and outside to the broader pattern of which also the transatlantic configuration is part or, for that matter, becoming more advanced threatening to surpass the transatlantic achievements. Being ahead is less given for the part of the Atlantic community than it used to be and therefore far more attention has to be devoted to staying in tune with developments in the context of globalization than was the case previously.

Such an alteration is the basic logic has been noted among others by Hamilton and Burwell (2009, 1) with the two authors claiming that “the world that created the transatlantic partnership is fading fast”. Whereas themes such as those of sovereignty, non-intervention, territoriality, diplomacy and

international law figured previously high on the agenda, the more recent discourse tends to pertain to issues such as democracy, rules of the market, human rights, rule of law and in some cases the duty to intervene. The new constitutive logic then implies that the international sphere has in some sense become more open and transnational but also premised on much more intrusive departures.

In general, the space created and freed by the demise of the power political story has been occupied by various narratives pertaining to globalization and different forms of liberal transformation. The new and increasingly dominant ones pertain to growth, progress and spreading out. They are either about the initially European international society first permeating a broader western sphere of political space and then reaching further out in order to gain a global prominence or more broadly about various cultures increasingly coming into contact and interacting with each other (Buzan, 2010). In gaining an increasingly dominant standing, the accounts also engulf the way the transatlantic bonds are conceived therefore also unsettling what has been there for quite some time. In short, the entrance of a new constitutive story brings with it rather different forms of transatlantic togetherness.

It undermines, in becoming increasingly hegemonic, various power political comprehensions of the transatlantic relationship as a configuration basically boiling down to an alliance or, for that matter, a 'security complex' (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). At large, there is far less space for narrating the Atlantic bonds as pertaining to balancing or purport the formation of transatlantic commonality as a way of maximizing national interests (cf. Forsberg and Herd, 22-24). It is no longer to be viewed as being in the first instance threat-driven and therefore also critically dependent on the assumed existence of external threats, and in the constitutive accounts there is far less focusing on military matters and material forms of power than has previously been the case over a rather long period of time.

The Constitutive Impact of Security

Applying the label of a security community in outlining the very essence of transatlantic commonality does not seem to fare much better. The story is then about togetherness commonality resting on shared values, cooperation bringing about interdependence and common institutions, albeit again security – in the form of efforts of taming and circumventing the security dilemma – figures as constitutive in impact. On the one hand the approach accepts the assertion underlying also the power political account of security figuring as the central constitutive argument in the construction of commonality as well as international political space at large and on the other hand it aims at escaping from and remedying the dilemma of security. Notably, the effort of opting out remains only partial in nature. It still resides as a particular form of security-speak in departing from the constant securitization inherent above all in the power political logic, although instead of subscribing to and joining the power political story the aim of the security community approach is to convert security into something unifying through processes of de-securitization and community-building.

The inability of stepping beyond securitization then implies that the security community-related accounts have remained on the scene, although increasingly vulnerable in face of the growing prominence allotted to the story of globalization as the core challenge. At large, the security community related thematizations seem to have lost in credibility as the dilemma which the stories aim of sorting out or at least remedying has to a considerable extent been downgraded as an issue. Surely it

is there also in the context of globalization, albeit it is not narrated as consisting of some hostile bloc or some specific enemy. The assumed global community is there predominantly for other reasons, and the occurrence of war-driven change and consequent break-down is taken to be very low in the current international context. It is rather argued that a transformation has been taken place regarding the meaning and forms of organized violence allowing other constitutive arguments to take over. War is arguably no longer its old self and instead there exists a mixture of civil war, ethnic strife, organized crime and (trans)national terrorism somewhere at the fringes of the present-day international system. Instead of bringing about profound lines of division, security has turned predominantly into an argument calling for unified efforts in the struggling against various ills and dangers. It undergirds security interdependence and is conducive to broad international cooperation reaching also far beyond the transatlantic relationship. Put differently, the transatlantic configuration no more stands out as clearly and exclusively as used to do but figures instead as one of the formations providing various security-related services.

Towards a Liberal International Order

Importantly, the liberal internationalist story – with stress on open markets, collective problem solving, progressive change and shared sovereignty – is no longer about ‘us’ and ‘them’ in a categorically divisive manner. It does not aim at the constitution of a strictly bordered inside, i.e. a realm separate from an inherently threatening outside as a sphere of anarchy and enmity. With external enmity as well as the existence of a clearly exterior realm in the first place in question, many of the theories used in the sphere of IR are up against serious difficulties, including some of those applied in accounting for the bonds of association between Europe and America.

The liberal story rather brings about, once turning hegemonic, a hierarchic order premised on the division between a core and its periphery. In being concentric rather than resting on clear lines of division, the configuration is spatially premised on far more inclusive moves than was the case in the context of the previous power political order. In other words, owing to the lack of a distinct outside, the constitutive difference is far more graded and less categorical in character and consequently the key contests and processes of identity-formation are about centrality and peripherality as well as superiority and inferiority.

Within such an inclusive order, otherness becomes far more digestible. As there is no clear outside to start with, otherness is no longer to be viewed and thematized as some categorical form of threat. Instead the discourse produces the others and the not-yet-fully-us as liminals (Rumelili, 2010). They are outlined as simultaneously other and like, i.e. as candidate countries, developing societies, economies in transition, emerging markets or post-conflict societies. Being on the edge, they are supposed to emulate the core through engagement in modernization, liberalization and abstention from ‘illiberal’, ‘authoritarian’ and ‘undemocratic’ tendencies in order to bolster their relative position within the overall order. Preferably they do so by consent but they can also be disciplined, if need be, by various forms of pressure premised on ‘conditionality’ and ‘democracy promotion’ or even coercion for example in the form of ‘conflict management’. The latter forms of constitution come into views particularly once the liberal order is regarded as expansive in character and thus organized around various efforts of controlling, regulating and intervening at the fringes of the overall configuration.

In any case, the standards set by the core position the not-fully-us on a trajectory of becoming. Being temporarily on such a trajectory, they validate the universalist and transformative pretensions underpinning the liberal order. At the same time, by always falling short of complete transformation, the not-yet-fully-us tend to remain second-best, incomplete and muted forms of those already at the core, albeit confirming at the same time the superiority and the exemplary nature of the core through their acceptance of their own perpetual state of becoming.

The fears invoked enabling the unfolding of the liberal international order do not pertain to some pre-existing and hostile outer sphere. Instead the worries tend to be about some actors at the fringes revolting against being pushed to the fringes of the system owing to its quite hierarchic and unicultural nature. The concept used in this context is very often that of ‘balancing’ or ‘counter’balancing’. They may resist being squeezed out with the liberal one remaining too closed and non-integrative for accommodation to take place or, if really serious, settle deliberately for anti-systemic policies. They may, in the latter case, endeavour at establishing an alternative system premised on a different logic. The so-called BRIGS (Brazil, Russia, India and China) are usually brought up in this context as potential aspirants of revolt and possibly even exit. China has in particular attracted attention, interest and analysis in regard to dissatisfaction and has been suspected of being interested in establishing its own set of bilateral and multilateral pacts (e.g. Kagan, 2008).

Yet the conclusion tends to be that the current liberal international order is quite robust in nature. The pressures for the contenders to profoundly reshape its rules and institutions are taken to remain modest with the system being easy to join and hard to overrun (Ikenberry, 2008, 23). It is claimed that those at the margins have good reasons to accommodate themselves to the existing order rather than to revolt and abandon it. Arguably, the current order has a coalition-based leadership rather than being based on the dominance of a particular state, the processes and outcomes are those of give-and-take rather than being given and dictated and the rising states also benefit from the predictability and the rule-based nature of the system. It is thus in their interest to work within rather than outside the established order (Ikenberry, 2008, 25-6). There are, as noted by Buzan (2010, 25), no competing universalism on the scene and the “subglobal interstate societies are primarily concerned with maintaining their distinctiveness at the subglobal level, not trying to remake the global level in their own image”.

From Physical Force to Ontological Safety

Both the inclusive nature of the current-day international order and the consequently declining importance of arguments pertaining to security-as-violence present IR-theory with a problem: how to account for Atlantic commonality? Constructivist theorization appears to have the advantage of neither viewing the unifying bonds as given and somehow fixed in essence. Yet it is also to be noted that the constructivist efforts of accounting for the nature and the dynamics of the relationship have for various reasons remained quite focused on security as a key constitutive argument. The Hobbesian and Schmittian lingers around. Moreover, they have paid scant attention to the moves of inclusion growing in importance at the expense of those related to exclusion the key moves both within and outside Atlantic commonality boiling down to contest about relative positions or noted, in this context, the altered and connecting rather than isolating impact of borders.

The transatlantic relationship has turned less distinct in being first and foremost embedded in a broader international and liberal order, this then calling for a far more thoughtful elaboration of the linkages between identity and security. It is less outstanding and specific as it comes into being similar to many other configurations through the construction of benign and complementary difference, i.e. as a core surrounded by its edges. The core positions and anchors a broader and concentric constellation in spatial terms and it is also seen to be temporally ahead of the entities remaining at the fringes. Progress rather than the need to be secured stands out as the main constitutive departure and is viewed as consisting of movement away from the fringes towards the core. Put differently, safe identities can be gained through progress without drawing on security as a departure. The key dynamics are seen as consisting of contests pertaining to centrality versus peripherality as well as superiority struggling with inferiority. Yet it is also to be noted that these two positions do not figure as categorical opposites but appear rather in a graded manner, this then also softening their relationship.

As noted above, the struggle for relative positions is constitutive of the liberal order as a whole, and it is to be noted that the same departures are equally present within the transatlantic relationship as such. In other words, the dynamics and constitutive moves are basically similar within and outside the transatlantic configuration. The previous division into the realm of amity with security inside and other one of enmity still branded by the lack of security is no longer there as identities are now being formed basically through the parties concerned positioning and defining themselves in view of the benign difference present within the transatlantic constellation as well as the liberal order at large being similarly premised on benign and complementary forms of difference.

This then also implies that there are fewer possibilities and less need for aspiring at ontological safety than used to be the case by emphasizing the threatening and categorical otherness of the outside and playing that otherness against the assumed similarity and amity prevailing on the inside.

One Specific Analysis

This change is also evidenced, in one of its aspects, in the recent study by Shapiro and Witney (2009) on the dynamics of the transatlantic relationship. They argue, in the first place, that there is different America in a “post-American” world and that there should also be a “post-American Europe”. In short, the EU member states should “shake of the attitudes, behaviours, and strategies they acquired over decades of American hegemony”. They have to do this, the authors claim, in order to be able to adapt to a changing and relatively less important relationship with America “working to replace its briefly held global dominance with network partnerships that will ensure that it remains the ‘indispensable nation’” (p.7). Instead of being submissive and pursuing strategies of seduction by appealing to history, closeness, joint values and other unifying qualities, Europeans should approach America with “a clear eye and a hard head”. They should not be inhibited by fears that the playing of a more independent role would cause a transatlantic policy clash (p.14). In other words, they should increasingly be themselves and comprehend that a display of difference – in being benign and complementary in character – strengthens rather than weakens the bonds underlying commonality.

However, the two authors still remain quite conventional in their analysis in the sense of departing from that America is the provider and Europe the recipient of security. Rather than questioning such a stance and the way the Atlantic relationship is usually brought about with security as the decisive argument, they call for intensified European efforts and agency in the military sphere in order for a more equal companionship to unfold. No effort is being made in their analysis to go beyond the usual security-centered approach and employ the options opened up by the increasing strength of the story pertaining to progress within a liberal international order. In their analysis ontological security remains firmly attached and seen as a derivative of physical and material security. The latter is prioritized over the former with identity being discussed as a subject of security and without identity having any standing of its own, the way out of security has – as noted by Rumelili (2008, 1) – to be through security. The outside of the relationship devised – in contradiction to the story underpinning the liberal international order – in terms of pointing to the existence of formidable external dangers. Such dangers are still taken to remain in place within the transatlantic relationship and subsequently the identities forget boil down to and rest on the significance allotted to issues of security. Interestingly, the overall constitutive story grounding the transatlantic relations displaces considerable change in the analysis presented by Shapiro and Witley, although there appears to be a duality present in their depiction in the sense that the classical and more power policy related one is also furnished with constitutive power. It has not been pushed aside by the increasingly hegemonic status of the liberal internationalist story but has retained at least some of its strength.

This drawing in parallel on two rather different accounts – one liberal and the other power political in character – obviously weakens the explanatory power of the analysis carried out.

The tension could be settled by utilizing the option of an escape and an exit beyond security, i.e. an option that is in principle already there with progress as an alternative. However, the interests and ability – as exemplified by Shapiro and Witney – to exploit it have not been there, at least not yet, in the sphere of IR-analysis pertaining to Atlantic commonality. The road chosen has not been one of providing ontological and identity-related safety with an autonomous position. It has not been furnished with a place and a meaning distinct from security as a key constitutive argument. Instead, the approach used has been one of downgrading its autonomy by viewing ontological safety as a derivative of ever-present security. This is also what the ‘security community’-related thematizations have been about, albeit security has then viewed as grounding rather cooperative and integrative relationships. The step from de-securitization to non-securitization still remains to be taken.

And more broadly, the disaggregation of ‘security-as-being’ from ‘security-as-violence’ that has been increasingly present in various studies aiming at explaining transnational communities (Abizadeh, 2005; Kinnvall, 2004; Mitzen 2006; Steele, 2005) has still to reach and cover also the transatlantic sphere. So far it remains out of sight as to the efforts of accounting the Atlantic bonds, albeit the increasing strength of the liberal international story also in that sphere compels such a disaggregation to be applied in the not so distant future.

Concluding Remarks

Most efforts of theorizing the transatlantic bonds still rest on essentialist views and are thus unable from the very start to view the relationship as changing and evolving. Constructivist approaches fare, as such, much better but tend to entail an emphasis on similarity rather than difference as the key constitutive move. Moreover, they seem to be stuck with security seen as the main formative argument. Identity and security constitute central points of departure also in constructivist analysis, and identity has in general become increasingly viewed as independent from security, albeit that approach and distinction has not yet reached the theorizations of the bonds between Europe and America.

The effort in this paper has consisted of opening up space in order for such a move to become conceivable. The inspiration needed for probing the gaps and fissures in various constitutive accounts has derived from liminality theory – without being too explicit on this – with this then being complemented by a theorization of various processes pertaining to identity-formation in the sense of ontological safety.

It has been pointed out that the shortcomings of the traditional, power political theorizations are in a number of ways glaring in face of the increasing prominence of the stories pertaining to a liberal international order as also constitutive of the transatlantic relationship. The shift clearly entails a downgrading of security as a key concern underlying Atlantic commonality and it opens space for the elevation of very different departures such as the one of progress to enter the driver's seat. Arguably, the shift paves further ground for de-securitization, albeit it also opens the option of non-securitization with identity being liberated from its previous dependency and derivative position. In short, the gaining of ontological safety in the context of the transatlantic configuration is within reach also through an escaping of security and the paper provides, more broadly, elements of theory for such moves to become credible and conceivable within the sphere of IR-theory.

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