PUBLIC LECTURE

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WHICH EUROPEAN UNION? EUROPE AFTER THE EURO CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

The book by Sergio Fabbrini, Which European Union? Europe After the Euro Crisis puts forward an argument for interpreting the European Union (EU) from a comparative perspective. The aim is to bring Stein Rokkan to Brussels, that is to interpret the structuring and functioning of the EU according to the basic analytical concepts of the literature on comparative politics. Which European Union? not only repositions the EU in a comparative context, but also conceptually innovates the tool-kit of comparative politics. Based on a reinterpretation of the literature on comparative federalism, the book conceptualizes two species of the ‘federal political system’ genus, i.e. federal states arising from the disaggregation of previously unitary states and federal unions arising from the aggregation of previously independent states. In the world of established democracies, the latter concerns countries such as the USA and Switzerland, whereas the former concerns all the other democratic federal systems, with Canada probably somewhere in the middle. Since the EU is closer to the federal union genus, the book shows the inadequacy of interpreting it on the basis of the statist approach to federalism that continues to be predominant in Europe. Using the ‘most similar cases’ strategy of comparative analysis, the book presents a systematic comparison of the EU with the US and Swiss federal unions, showing similarities and dissimilarities between them. Owing to their genetic formation, federal unions are internally divided on sectional rather than partisan lines. They are unions of demographically asymmetrical states and nationally/linguistically/culturally differentiated citizenries, unions that cannot easily accommodate centralizing processes of representation and decision-making. Indeed, they are structured around multiple (although different) systems of separation of powers and function according to sectional or territorial rather than partisan divisions. Indeed, the Left vs Right axis has limited regulatory capacity in federal unions, as shown by the cleavage, within the Eurozone, between Southern and Northern member states, not between Social Democrats and Christian Democrats, as it has been in federal states. However, contrary to the other two federal unions, the EU lacks an agreed constitutional document to regulate and resolve disputes emerging from interstate or sectional divisions. According to the book, the lack of a constitutional pact in the EU has generated the most significant differences between the latter and the other federal unions, making the future of the EU highly fraught, if not uncertain.
The second (analytical) innovation of Which European Union? concerns the future of integration process. Contrary to the predominant view on European integration, namely that all EU member states will move in the same direction although at different speeds, the book analytically calls into question this teleological approach. The book shows that the EU is the outcome of several compromises between states with different if not opposing views on the very purpose of integration. At least three different perspectives have accompanied the EU’s structuring: the economic community, the intergovernmental union and the parliamentary union. According to the first view, the EU should be a market regime with limited impact on national sovereignty; according to the second, the EU should evolve as a federation of national governments, whereas according to the third, the EU should develop in coherence with the parliamentary-federal model. The book allocates each of these views to a group of EU member states, showing the institutional and policy features of the compromises introduced to keep them within the same legal order. The euro crisis has dramatically altered the structure of the compromises institutionalized between the 1992 Maastricht Treaty and the 2009 Lisbon Treaty. The euro crisis has deepened the distance between the non-euro-area and euro-area member states, a distance epitomized by the approval of intergovernmental Treaties including mainly the latter states. At the same time, the euro crisis has also called into question the compromise built within the EMU between a supranational monetary policy and an intergovernmental economic policy. However, what makes the identification of the three perspectives interesting is their critique through a detailed comparative analysis. The book deconstructs the entire sui generis edifice built around the EU by the main theories of European integration (such as neo-functionalism, intergovernmentalism and constructivism). Finally, the book’s analysis also has also policy implications. It argues that a new European political order is necessary to deal with the consequences of the crisis. The new order should be based on an institutional differentiation between member states interested only in market cooperation and those advancing towards a genuine economic and monetary union. Such a differentiation would allow the latter group to recompose their (intergovernmental and parliamentary) perspectives into an original model of political union, conceptualized as a compound union of states and citizens. At the same time, a revised framework of the single market, where all European states can participate, should be agreed.

Sergio Fabbrini is Director of the School of Government and Professor of Political Science and International Relations at the LUISS Guido Carli University of Rome, where he holds the Jean Monnet Chair. He is also Recurrent Visiting Professor of Comparative Politics at the Department of Political Science and Institute of Governmental Studies, University of California at Berkeley. He has published fourteen books, two co-authored books and fourteen edited or co-edited books. His most recent publications in English include Compound Democracies: Why the United States and Europe Are Becoming Similar , 2nd edn (2010) and America and Its Critics: Vices and Virtues of the Democratic Hyperpower (2008).