

The dream of ever-closer union is over. We need to rethink the EU's model

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*The prize the EU offered – a single market offering opportunities to all – is increasingly at odds with people's lived experience, says **Henrik Scheller**. But despite Brexit, established parties continue to push for more integration. Likewise, academic thinking is struggling to escape the dream of ever-closer union. We must start asking ourselves which model of society and the market could win public support.*



The Brexit referendum has laid bare the peculiar interplay of integration and disintegration that has been a core feature of EU politics since at least the outbreak of the 2008 economic crisis. Yet, despite the message sent by the British people, the EU clings to its integrationist course.

The knee-jerk utterances of EU politicians and professionals following the referendum show an EU trapped by its own past. Cries of “Now more than ever!” and demands for more democracy and better implementation of the Stability and Growth Pact show the EU's unwillingness to contemplate new approaches. Last month's [State of the Union address](#) by European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker was a prime example of such thinking.

Likewise in academia, where integration is often interpreted as a one-way street leading to an ever closer union, many researchers continue to sweep aside the need to study and understand European disintegration. The reason for this is understandable: the existence of Article 50 of the Lisbon treaty, which allows nations to leave the EU, suggests that even disintegration can be seen as part of business as usual. Forms of “differentiated integration” have always been a hallmark of the union.



'Down with EU capitalism!' Demonstrators in Hamburg, March 2015. Photo: [Uwe Hiksich](#) via a [CC-BY-NC_SA 2.0 licence](#)

Nevertheless, something has changed. Brexit is a symptom of a condition present in almost all member states. Besides the rise of populist parties opposed to the EU, an increasing number of parties in government are half-hearted about the original idea of Europe.

Increasingly, member states feel bound only to national law. European-level laws and policies, which have created

and extended the common resources and institutions of the EU, are becoming bargaining chips used to support national claims. The Leave campaign in the UK referendum crystallised these claims: first, fear of foreign infiltration, fuelled by the EU's muddled response to the immigration crisis; second, the union's democratic deficit and lack of political accountability.

More surprising, though, was Brexit campaigners' promise that leaving would bring economic prosperity. This argument strikes at the EU's core brand: an economic and social model based on the single market. From the beginning, the union was driven by the pursuit of peace through a common market. But nearly a decade of crisis has shown that this model is not sustainable. The promise of social justice through equality of opportunity is at odds with the life experience of a growing number of people.

Growing inequality has created fear and dissatisfaction. With established parties – especially social democrats – advocating more integration, populist parties have taken up these fears, stoking economic nationalism. If the EU is not seen as a source of prosperity and economic security, this removes a major source of its legitimacy – all the more worrying, given the legitimacy of its institutions and processes has always been weak. The protests against transatlantic trade treaties show how deep public mistrust of the EU's economic model has become.

What does this mean for academia? European researchers are still failing to engage with what they previously struggled to imagine. Now the unthinkable has happened – even if Brexit is not guaranteed and the likeliest outcome seems a far-reaching free-trade agreement that will hardly be distinguishable from the status quo. For the academic community, the current state of the EU means that researchers must liberate themselves from ingrained ways of thinking to work towards more comprehensive explanations of European integration that take new realities into account.

This applies to both main strands of research on Europe. Approaches rooted in the orthodoxy of studying integration and its obstacles seem ill-suited to explaining the politicisation of various issues critical to the EU. However, approaches committed to empiricism and evidence-based methods, with the associated claim of scientific objectivity, are weakened by their failure to take account of the integrationist mindset, making them less likely to produce the findings and ideas needed to guide both politics and research in the EU's critical situation.

The EU needs a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of integration, based not only on the desired goal, but on the forces in politics and economic markets which are fuelling disintegration. The referendum showed that European researchers have to change their focus. They need to treat EU politics as a dynamic process made up of multiple levels of interacting integrative and disintegrative developments, themselves created by the interactions between markets and society.

To get to grips with the ability nations have to derail EU policymaking, researchers must ask themselves: which model of society and the market should the EU pursue to regain the consent of the people?

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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